

Colorado

Grouse and Rosyfinches

2–12 April 2014

Participants

Heather Collett

Bob and Kath Foskett

Steve and Jeanne (JK) Gent

Ray Grace and Helen Heyes

Jim Hamilton

John Hawcroft

Andy Merritt

Tony and Celia Sawbridge



Greater Prairie-chicken

Courtesy of Ray Grace

Leaders James Smith and Peter Lansdown

Day 1 There are good ways and, shall we say, ‘interesting’ ways to start a trip. For Pete, Heather, Ray and myself, this one started with a bit of a sinking feeling as we arrived at Heathrow Airport to be told that, due to a late incoming plane, the airline had re-routed us and we would now be taking three flights instead of two and arriving in Denver not at the planned 8.50pm, but three hours later at midnight. After virtually sprinting through immigration, customs and the baggage re-check at Philadelphia to catch our first connection by the skin of our teeth, I think we were more than a little delirious (in both senses) to arrive in Denver (in a snowstorm) and finally catch up with the trip – well, James at least, the rest of the group having sensibly decamped to bed hours ago. By 2am we were finally in our rooms and ready to hit the sack – only to be up again in about four hours’ time for breakfast! We’re a hardy bunch – and it’s amazing what you can shrug off when you’ve got a whole trip still to look forward to.

Day 2 Feeling surprisingly alert, we gathered in Denny’s for breakfast before hitting the road. Today was basically a driving day, with most of the birding done from the vans en route to our base for the night in Holly. And it felt good to finally get some birding under our belts. Common birds seen from the vans, not just today but on most days, were Western Meadowlarks perched on roadside fence posts, Horned Larks, Black-billed Magpies, Canada Geese and flocks of Common Starlings. We also picked up several American Kestrels, some stunning looks at Northern Harriers, our first Red-tailed Hawks of the trip, a single Swainson’s Hawk, a number of Ring-billed Gulls and a small party of Franklin’s Gulls. A couple of roadside stops to scan pools started our duck list off with half a dozen or so Canvasback, Northern Shoveler, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Mallard and Green-winged Teal. A little way farther down the road, our van screeched to a halt to check out ‘three white things in a field’, which turned out to be our first two Snow Geese of the trip and a Ross’s Goose. Further stops today added two Long-billed Curlews, a couple of Killdeer, our first stationary views of Mourning Doves, a male and female Lark Bunting and a Say’s Phoebe sitting on a fence. After a long day on the road it was a relief to arrive in Holly. While waiting for James to check us all in, we birded the car park area and added first a seething mass of grackles on a stump over the road that was clearly being used as a feeder, then half a dozen or so American Robins hopping around on the pavement, a couple of American Kestrels perched in a tree behind the reception office and, on a wander behind the rooms, Heather spotted a Blue Jay. The Miles Court Hotel was a little gem of a place to stay: the rooms were spacious and immaculate, it was lovely and

quiet and the lady owner even came out to chat to us, showing us pictures of the Lesser Prairie-chickens (more on those tomorrow) on her laptop. I think we were all a bit sorry only to be there for one night. We ate that evening in just about the only dining place in town – a tiny little place with about four tables and a coffee machine. Considering that we packed it out, the service was great – and Pete did eventually manage to get the machine to give him a cup of coffee before we left, I think!

Day 3 And so to the start of the serious business. At stupid o'clock the next morning we emerged from our rooms clad in more layers than an Antarctic expedition to be met by Fred and his yellow school bus – our transport-cum-hide for the Lesser Prairie-chicken lek. With a few other people already on the bus, we climbed on board and set off, with Fred giving us a running commentary on the plan. First stop, a little way out, was a bush stop for anyone who needed it. Second stop, much closer, was to drop the windows down so that we didn't make too much noise doing it at the site itself. Then we stopped, turned the bus lights out and waited. For me, it was a joy to just sit and listen to the little contact calls of other birds that gradually turned into more of a chatter and try to pick something out of it all – the something turned out to be a Grasshopper Sparrow trill, heard just once, but it made me smile. Then the prairie-chickens started to vocalise and after a little while we began to pick out the dark, moving shapes of the birds. My highest count was ten, and they were fairly distant, but the dark shapes gradually became lighter and the colours revealed themselves. We cautiously swapped places in the bus and someone kindly set up a scope near to the front, which we all had a peer through. An American guy on the bus with us spotted a Vesper Sparrow on the ground fairly close, which was a nice bonus. We stayed until the birds had finished before slowly moving away to a spot where Ray could take a picture of Fred and the bus in the habitat without causing any disturbance. It was while we were here that James picked up some Chestnut-collared Longspurs calling and we had a flock of about ten or so birds flying off. Fred dropped us back at the hotel to pick up our vans and then we made our way to his place for breakfast – biscuits, sausage and eggs washed down with coffee, all eaten in one of the old farm buildings. It was fascinating to hear Fred and his wife Norma talk about the prairie-chickens and the fact that none of their children seemed to be interested in taking over from them, so I guess if you want to see the spectacle, you need to get in quickly! After eating, we wandered around the grounds and added a couple of nice birds to the trip list – a couple of Curve-billed Thrashers sitting on a mini tanker and a White-eyed Vireo working its way through the spindly trees at the back. Reluctantly leaving Fred and Norma's place, we hit the road again, this time heading for our next overnight destination – Gunnison. From the vans today, in addition to the seemingly ubiquitous but always lovely Northern Harriers and Western Meadowlarks, we picked up a couple of Loggerhead Shrikes and the first Turkey Vultures of the trip together with great views of a 'Harlan's' Red-tailed Hawk, which we stopped to admire for a while. Other roadside stops added Wood Duck, Gadwall and Common Merganser to our duck list, a couple of Great Blue Herons, a single American Coot, some of our only views of Double-crested Cormorant on this trip, a nice, if slightly distant, kettle of American White Pelicans, a handful of Tree Swallows, flight views of a Belted Kingfisher, our first Golden Eagle of the trip, a couple of Townsend's Solitaires and a huge white mass, which at first appeared to be distant gulls but turned out, with the aid of scopes, to be a large flock of Snow Geese. A garage stop also brought us our first House Finch of the trip in a tree in the corner of the forecourt. Celia was also particularly delighted when we picked up first one, then a second Burrowing Owl, and we stopped to watch these endearing little birds for some time. The last birding stop today was a recce visit to the Gunnison Sage-grouse lek site on Waunita Hot Springs Road. The birds can be found here at any time of the day and we were hoping to catch a glimpse before the main event tomorrow morning. We had no luck with the grouse, but we did pick up our first views of the beautiful Mountain Bluebird, several of which flitted from post to post alongside the vans, reasonable views of the red-shafted form of Northern Flicker and prolonged scope views of a perched Rough-legged Hawk – a bird that became one of the stars of this trip, with sightings of one or more birds on multiple days. Another night, another motel – and another good one! Coming, as it did, on the back of the Miles Court Hotel, the Rodeway Inn in Gunnison had a fair bit to live up to, and it didn't disappoint. Again, the rooms were big, well-appointed and had coffee machines – always handy when you're trying to wake yourself up for a pre-dawn lek...

Day 4 Which, funnily enough, is exactly what we had to do again this morning! We met at the vans at 4.30am and retraced our steps to the Gunnison Sage-grouse site. Arriving in plenty of time, we parked the vans in what was left of the narrow, walled parking area and waited. We had a rough idea of which direction we were meant to be looking in after a brief chat with the warden, but it still felt a bit like searching for needles in a big haystack for a while as we strained our eyes in the dark to make out anything against the snow. If you pick up one skill on this trip, though, it's the ability to spot a grouse-sized silhouette from varying distances and in differing degrees of darkness – from burnt-charcoal grey to merely murky dishwater greige (insert your own one-liners here about a certain infamous book title if you wish – I'm being good and resisting)! At last, we picked up the outline of first one bird and then a group of three together at the very back of the site against the hillside. As the light improved, and after what seemed like an age, one bird landed fairly close to the vans and allowed us to get good views. None of the birds we saw were displaying and we later discovered that, possibly due to predation from coyotes and eagles (both of which we saw on our visit), the lek had moved a bit farther along the valley and we couldn't see it from our position. However, we did watch the close bird for some time and at about 7am (a fairly standard winding-up time for all the leks we visited) we saw a large flock of birds some distance ahead of us flying away to disperse. With the main event over and the birds gone for the day, we got out of the vans and wandered around to see what else we could rustle up. Our first Dark-eyed Juncos (the grey-headed form) of the trip put in an appearance in a small bush and we had further views of the flickers and Mountain Bluebirds seen yesterday, but not much else seemed to be about, so we headed back to the motel for a great self-service breakfast in the reception area. The drive today would take us, ultimately, to Steamboat Springs, but I think for all of us the day will forever be remembered as 'the feeder day'. One of the target families for this trip is the rosy-finches, and in a year with a hard winter they can be seen in large numbers at garden feeders. As we had seen a fair bit of snow since our arrival in Denver, we were hopeful that luck would be with us. We had a site in Silverthorne to aim for and after following Angelina's (James's satnav) decidedly convoluted route, we somehow found ourselves on what I think was the right road. We crawled along, peering into various gardens on the lookout for feeders, and here I must apologise to everyone in our van if my exclamation was a little ... ahem ... over-exuberant! In my defence, when you're suddenly faced with a stunning male Evening Grosbeak at eye level on a feeder just a few yards in front of you, and you've never seen one before, I defy many birders to remain calm. It's one of those lifers that will forever be carved into my memory – a real treat and bird of the trip for me by some way. From that beginning, things just got better and better. Over the road from this house was another garden with even more feeders and we spent a mesmerising time flitting between the two. It's hard to do the experience justice with mere words, and perhaps you had to be there, but it was undoubtedly one of the most memorable events of the whole trip – like being in the middle of a big fall. First of all came Brown-capped Rosy-finches, which were dripping from the feeders, the trees and the roof in the bigger garden, then a female Hairy Woodpecker (followed later by a male), two or three Pygmy Nuthatches, several Mountain Chickadees, quickly joined by a couple of Black-capped, more Evening Grosbeaks (both male and female), numerous Pine Siskins, Dark-eyed Juncos, a lovely male Downy Woodpecker, Cassin's Finch, Steller's Jay, a single Clark's Nutcracker, a small number of Grey-crowned Rosy-finches, including one stunning Hepburn's form with the almost completely grey head, and Black Rosy-finch – the latter eventually seen by everyone I think after leading us a bit of a merry dance. Respect and big thanks must go to Jim at this point for chatting to the owner of one of the houses, who came out with his dog to see what was going on. I think Jim's donation of some money towards his bird food costs was a wonderful and inspired gesture. With three of the target birds for the trip ticked off in such spectacular fashion, and with grins spreading from ear to ear across our faces, we headed on to the Steamboat Hotel in Steamboat Springs – our base for the next three nights.

Day 5 We had a relatively civilised start this morning – a 5am meet-up! Our first target for the day was Sharp-tailed Grouse, and the lek for this one was apparently visible from the roadside. We parked in the designated spot and walked a little way back to stand on the brow of a hill. The instructions were to watch

a 'grassy knoll' (no, we didn't see any dodgy-looking characters with rifles ... well, we didn't see any rifles anyway), which sounded a bit vague, but sure enough we soon picked up some movement on the top of a ridge some way ahead of us. Within no time, we were treated to a wonderful display of numerous males scuttling at each other, wing flapping, flying a few yards and starting again. We had some great views through the scopes, and after missing out on any display activity from the Gunnison Sage-grouse yesterday, it felt good to be back on track with the leks. Having heard Sandhill Cranes for some time while watching the grouse, we decided to walk down the road a bit and see if we could see them. They turned out to be more distant than they sounded, but we did get reasonable scope views. Not long after setting off again, a roadside stop produced Song Sparrow, our first Cinnamon Teal of the trip, Northern Pintail, a Peregrine and the great 'Cackling Goose' that wasn't! After a successful start, we headed back into town for breakfast and, in the process, ticked a large flock of very obliging Cedar Waxwings from the restaurant window. Suitably refreshed, we hit the road again. Other roadside pond stops today added Redhead, Common Goldeneye, a couple of Pied-billed Grebes and two Yellow-headed Blackbirds in amongst the Red-wingeds. Also from the vans, we had much closer views of a couple of Sandhill Cranes, which Ray managed to photograph. Next stop today was a recce to the Greater Sage-grouse site, which also held possibilities for Dusky Grouse. We spent some time trying in vain for a glimpse of a Dusky before slithering the vans farther along the slippery track to get closer to the Greater Sage-grouse vantage point. We found the site, but, despite spending some time scanning the whole area multiple times, our only sighting was a displaying Golden Eagle and we headed back to the vans in a flurry of snow. It seemed our luck was in with eagles today, as our next sighting gave us a lovely close comparison of Bald and Golden Eagles in the air together. The two birds soared over our heads for some time, and after going through a bit of a thin patch it was great to have something to look at again. This called for lunch! However, as it was a Sunday, Hayden seemed completely closed, so we headed into the slightly bigger town of Craig, all the while checking out garden feeders to see if we could run into another rich seam of activity. Sadly most of them were empty, and I think the chances of the hummer feeders being visited at this early stage in the season ranged from extremely slim to non-existent! A garage/provisions/loo stop this afternoon gave us more Evening Grosbeaks, mostly females this time, over the road in a tree and a good chuckle over the healthy state of a previous customer's digestive system (you had to be there!). Next up was a visit to Elkhead Reservoir, where we drove from one vantage point to another around the site, picking up a smattering of new birds for the trip. We started with a raft of Common Mergansers – not new, but certainly in greater numbers than we'd seen previously. Then came a lovely single Common Loon and a small group of Western Grebes against the distant shoreline. Driving away from the reservoir and up into the scrubby hillside beyond, we picked up our first Western Scrub-jay of the trip and then found a clump of bushes that was dripping with Cassin's Finches – another bird that proved surprisingly common on this trip, popping up in ones and twos in many different locations. A little way farther on, we came across a small house with a couple of feeders outside and stopped to have a scan. More Cassin's Finches sat on the feeders and we picked out a handful of American Goldfinches skulking in a bush. After a few minutes, Tony sneaked out to try and get a bit closer for a photograph. At which point the dulcet tones of the lady homeowner were heard to echo across the valley 'CAN I HELP YOU?' (in case you hadn't gathered, dear reader, it was not an offer you would want to take her up on!). Not surprisingly, Tony shot back into the van and we scarpered rather more quickly than we might have done!

Day 6 Opening the batting today was our first early-morning attempt at the Greater Sage-grouse. In much brighter conditions than we'd had yesterday, we parked the vans and stood at the side of the road keeping our fingers crossed. At one point Celia spotted something at a fair distance, which was almost certainly a sage-grouse, however, as the light started to come up, we had no further sightings. We did have a Golden Eagle sitting on the ground behind us, numerous corvids and flyovers by a couple of Sandhill Cranes and a Peregrine, but when the usual 'packing-up' time of 7am came and went, we decided to have another try for the Dusky Grouse back down the track. Sadly, we had no luck with that either, but we did pick up our first Spotted Towhees of the trip, very obligingly sitting on the tops of bushes and singing, a couple of Black-capped Chickadees and a Greater Sage-grouse heroically and completely unintentionally flushed

out of the bushes by Heather – giving the rest of us nice fly-by views, but sadly not Heather herself. A wander down the track added some nice views of chipmunks, a group of American Robins working their way along the tops of the distant bushes and a skyline silhouette of a single grouse perched up in a bush with its back to us. Straining our eyes to get anything on it at all through the scopes, we eventually ruled out the hoped-for Dusky Grouse and concluded that it was another Sharp-tailed Grouse. It wasn't until a little later that we realised some of the party were not with us. Andy had decided to persevere at the sage-grouse site and James had gone back to give him a hand. After wandering about a bit to get different viewpoints, they located not only the distant Greater Sage-grouse lek (or what was left of it by that time) but also another, closer group of displaying Sharp-tailed Grouse! With mixed fortunes for the group so far, we headed off to Moose Visitor Centre, where we understood there were some feeders. Given our stunning success with feeders a couple of days ago, this sounded like a plan! The centre is in the Colorado State Forest and the roads today were at a higher elevation and lined with conifers (and snow), so we stopped several times en route in the hope of picking up Pine Grosbeak, but to no avail. The visitor centre certainly lived up to its name, with a full-size stuffed moose greeting us in the reception area! However, the feeders were somewhat disappointing, giving us only one Pine Siskin perched on a pile of bird seed and dozens of Dark-eyed Juncos – mostly the grey-headed form, but with one pink-sided amongst them. The only other thing of note we picked up here, apart from some information from the lady behind the desk, was a nice look at a Steller's Jay in a tree on the edge of the car park as we headed back to the vans. We spent some time driving along forested roads and stopping to check for Pine Grosbeaks, or anything else that might be about. The 'anything else' included some nice sightings of a handful of Red Crossbills, a couple of which were landing on the snow in front of our van as we drove along, and a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches. Next stop was a place called Cameron Pass, where a lovely little bubbly stream gave us views of first one, then a second American Dipper – definitely one of JK's highlights. Also in the area we had really nice views of a displaying Northern Goshawk, but if there were any around, the Pine Grosbeaks remained stubbornly out of sight. Our other sortie today was to a place called Delaney Butte – another Greater Sage-grouse site. We were obviously much too late in the day for any lekking activity, but we decided to check it out anyway in the hope of bumping into some grazing birds. We parked the vans and set off down the little track towards the railway sleeper that we understood marked the edge of the viewing area. Now there's a lesson to be learned here folks – if you see a track which is mostly clear but has one small patch of snow, do not assume, as some of us idiots (myself included) did, that said patch of snow is merely an inch or so deep and you can walk straight through it. That must have been one impressive dip in the track – we sank up to our knees! Dragging ourselves out and onto the large expanse of sage, we pottered around for some time, but despite finding plenty of 'evidence' of the birds' presence in the area, some of which seemed at least relatively fresh, we had not so much as a glimpse of a grouse. Our last evening meal in Steamboat turned out to be a bit of a restaurant crawl! After two consecutive nights at the local Mexican, we decided to try something different and checked out several options from James's phone list of eateries in the area. The first of which was closed and the second turned out to be a burger bar teeming with families and noisy teenagers! If that in itself wasn't enough to put us off, I think James's comment that many family restaurants in the States are 'dry' sent some of the party scurrying back to the vans! In the end we managed to find a small Chinese place and squeezed in just before closing time.

Day 7 First thing this morning, armed with Andy and James's new info from yesterday, we returned to the Greater Sage-grouse site for one last shot at the lek. We dropped some of the group off at the Dusky Grouse spot and carried on down the now spookily familiar track. After walking a few yards off the road and onto a slightly higher bit of ground, we set up the scopes and waited. Sure enough, we finally got our classic lekking Greater Sage-grouse – spiky tails, white neck pouches and all! They were very distant and kept close to the edge of the sage, which meant that every so often we would lose sight of them altogether, nonetheless it was wonderful to connect at last with this declining species doing what we came to see it do. After missing out on the flying bird yesterday, it was also great for Heather to catch up – it was her bird of the trip. Vying for our attention all the time we were watching the sage-grouse were some very

vociferous and much closer displaying Sharp-tailed Grouse. We didn't need the scopes for these and had some fantastic views through bins. Thoroughly satisfied with the morning so far, we headed back down the track to pick up the others, who, sadly, had not had the kind of success we had enjoyed. Despite much searching, Dusky Grouse was a complete no-show and we had to chalk it up as one of those that we were destined not to see this time. And so to Kremmling, where we had a very leisurely brunch before spending some time scanning the cliff face behind the café for Prairie Falcon (and scouring the bushes in the vain hope of finding the Harris's Sparrow which had, apparently, been in the area earlier in the winter). After several false alarms with Feral Pigeons and bird-shaped rocks, we finally connected with a Prairie Falcon sitting on the cliff face. At first it was against the skyline and slightly fuzzy with the heat haze (we had to peel off at least two layers today!), but then it obligingly dropped down so that it was against the cliff face and we had much clearer views. (In not-such-good news, Harris's Sparrow remains mythical!). Our next target today was White-tailed Ptarmigan up on Loveland Pass. In glorious sunshine and after a fairly successful morning so far, we set off in high spirits. Unfortunately, as we arrived, a great barrier across the road announced that the pass was closed. Pulling into the car park for one of the skiing areas, James got out to go and quiz an official on how long the closure would last and whether we had any hopes at all of getting up on the pass that day. It turned out that the machine they used to mitigate avalanche risk had exploded the previous day, critically injuring one worker and seriously injuring another. Without the machine they could not risk opening the pass, so our plans were scuppered. (On a happier note, it was great to hear after the trip that Tony and Celia went back in a hire car on the day the rest of us departed and found and photographed the bird. Fingers crossed for similar good fortune for Jim when he does the Colorado and Wyoming trip later this year.). With a massive queue of traffic waiting to head through the Eisenhower Tunnel, there was nothing for it but to stop at Starbucks and come up with an alternative plan. James scoured the local bird information hotline for any news and came up with a report of a Fox Sparrow that had been visiting the feeders at Red Rocks Caverns' visitor centre. I'm not sure whether it was the possibility of a Fox Sparrow or that magic word 'feeders' that was the bigger draw, but we set off in that direction! Red Rocks is certainly an impressive sight, and I could have spent hours there photographing the rock formations, but our objective today was some birds. As soon as we pulled up in the car park, Heather shouted 'swifts!' and, sure enough, we had our only three White-throated Swifts of the trip overhead as we got out of the vans. Heading down to the feeders, we picked up more of the usual suspects: numerous Dark-eyed Juncos (this time including Oregon and Slate-coloured forms), Spotted Towhee, Western Scrub-jays and House Finches. An American birder standing close by told us that a Canyon Wren had been reported, but he hadn't seen it. We spent some time looking and listening, but we didn't connect with one either. We did have a Downy Woodpecker at the back of the garden area, brief views of White-breasted Nuthatch and a Song Sparrow singing and visiting the bird table, but nothing more of note. Just two more things from the vans today before we arrived at our motel in Fort Collins: first up a pair of beautiful ornamental Bald Eagles on a nest that had us going for a little while and then a definitely not ornamental Osprey sitting on top of a nesting platform – our first and only one of the trip.

Day 8 With no leks on the agenda today, we had breakfast in Denny's or The Waffle House and assembled at the vans at a positively civilised 7am. This morning's drive took us through the Pawnee National Grassland to hunt for longspurs and Mountain Plover – and boy did we have to hunt! For the longest time, every small bird that moved turned out to be a Horned Lark and every bigger bird turned out to be yet another Western Meadowlark. We did get some nice photos of the former, but anything remotely resembling a target bird completely eluded us. At last we made a breakthrough and pinned down our first McCown's Longspurs. They were distant, but with scopes we did see all the features on one obliging bird in particular, with others performing their parachuting display flights in the area. Moving on to check out some slightly longer grass for Chestnut-collared, we had less success. James heard some and we had one or two distant fly-by parties but sadly no stationary birds. Pete did pick up our first Sage Thrasher of the trip here, however. As for Mountain Plover, well, all I can say is that the bird's reputation for being difficult is not misplaced! Despite scouring what felt like every inch of the grassland until our eyes hurt, we failed to connect with any – another one for another day. And so we set off towards Wray for our appointment with Bob Bledsoe, the

owner of the ranch on which we would spend tomorrow morning watching Greater Prairie-chickens. Roadside stops en route provided our only American Wigeon of the trip and increased our tally of Gadwall, Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, American Coot and Killdeer, while a garage stop added another, and first of the trip for some, Blue Jay. We arrived a little early at Bob's office, but were ushered in and given a talk about the ranch, the crops grown, the ultimate destination of the beef (Japan) and, of course, the prairie-chickens. Bob also asked us a little about our backgrounds and what our favourite bird was (I don't think I can whittle mine down to a top five, let alone a top one!). Then, having chosen the traditional grassland habitat site with fewer birds over the cultivated site with more birds, we followed Bob out onto the ranch to get our bearings for the early-morning visit tomorrow. As we approached the site, we had a couple of Brown-headed Cowbirds sitting on a fence and our first views of a couple of fairly distant prairie-chickens crouching low in the grass – it seems that some of them hang around the area during the daytime well after the lekking activity is over. Once at the site, Bob moved the two resident pick-up trucks into position and advised us to park the two vans in between them in the morning. It was a very surreal experience to stand on the very lekking ground that we would be watching tomorrow and pick up prairie-chicken feathers. We also chatted to Bob about our lack of Mountain Plovers and he gave us a few pointers for places on the ranch where they had apparently been seen; he also mentioned Northern Bobwhite, and we tucked the information away for the morning. Wray is not exactly a metropolis and so the motel for tonight was a little more basic than some we'd stayed in, but we did have a good meal in a restaurant recommended by Bob. (Note to anyone thinking of doing the trip: Bob's judgement was that the steak was great, the fish less so – he wasn't wrong.)

Day 9 There are good ways, 'interesting' ways and spectacular ways to end a trip. To describe today's main event as good or merely 'interesting' would be to do it a serious injustice – it was one of those joyous, almost unbelievable times in birding when you feel like pinching yourself to make sure you're not dreaming. At about five o'clock we were back in position on the ranch, where we spread ourselves out among the two pick-ups and the two vans and waited. In no time at all we could hear the birds – the predominant sound is not something I could even hope to describe in words (Sibley describes it as oooa-hoooooom), but it continued throughout the display and, once heard, I don't think you could ever forget it. As the light started to improve a bit, we had our first views of Greater Prairie-chickens strutting their stuff. At much closer range than we had been to the Lessers (or any other lekking birds), we sat enthralled as about half a dozen males put on an incredible show for the two female birds (although if I'd been trampled on by two scrapping males quite as much as the dominant female was, I think I'd have dumped both of them!). It was difficult to imagine while watching them at such close quarters just how rare these birds are, and it was an absolute privilege to share their world for a couple of hours. With the display over for the day, we decided to follow Bob's leads on the few species he'd mentioned the day before. We headed down towards the clump of trees that he'd indicated and began to search. En route, I picked up a small covey of Scaled Quail, which sadly flew before most people got onto them on the ground. Not entirely surprisingly, we never did see a Mountain Plover in the area, but we did pick up some nice birds for the trip. A group of White-crowned Sparrows flitted around a fallen tree, giving us the best views we'd had, a Great Horned Owl was seen briefly in a tree and then in flight and a covey of Northern Bobwhite flew over our heads. The only other birding place of note in the vicinity is a place called Bonny Lake State Park, and this was our last stop before heading back to Denver. The park was absolutely bone dry and seemed seriously misnamed, but we worked the various tracks anyway, picking up one or two nice little additions to the list. An Eastern Phoebe called, allowing us to track it down; a Northern Cardinal also called, but we never did manage to find it; a couple of Townsend's Solitaires showed fairly well, as did a few American Robins hopping along the tracks in front of us; finally, and arguably the star of the show, we had our only warbler of the trip – a single Myrtle-form Yellow-rumped Warbler. Well, OK, that wasn't quite 'finally' – our last bird at the site, spotted as we started to drive away, was about as different as it's possible to get. From small, perfectly formed and colourful, we swung to precisely the opposite in the form of a party of Wild Turkeys walking through the tall grass beside us. As tends to be the way with final drives on any tour, the drive back to Denver was a relatively quiet and reflective affair.

However, we had one other nice little surprise waiting for us at the motel before packing the bins away. As James was checking us all in, a cry went up from those outside the vans and we jumped out to see three lovely light morph Swainson's Hawks circling over our heads. It was a bird we hadn't seen since the beginning of the trip and it seemed fitting to have come full circle.

Day 10 Finally, after clocking up well over 2000 miles, it was time to head back to the airport and go our separate ways – but not before some members of the group witnessed the human equivalent of the prairie-chicken lek at the motel. Two guys were apparently seen having a blazing row, with a naked woman in between trying to break them up! (To the best of my knowledge, they didn't trample on her though!) The trip was primarily about grouse and rosy-finches and we'd had storming success with all three of the latter and most of the target gamebirds. Some of the incredible spectacles we witnessed on the tour will live long in my memory and I'm sure the memories of everyone else who was there. Some of the scenery was spectacular – after months of hard snow, we had some real winter wonderland landscapes as well as the softer, rolling tranquillity of the prairies – and the weather was kind to us (to anyone thinking of doing the trip, my advice would be to pack everything from short-sleeved T-shirts to thick jumpers and thermals). Many thanks must go to James and Pete for their sterling leadership, good humour and adaptability in the face of one or two unavoidable 'Acts of God' and to my fellow participants for their good company, eagle eyes and banter throughout the tour. May we meet again somewhere down the road, and may that road be as full of birds as the one in Silverthorne!

Day 11 Arrival back in London at the end of the tour.

Helen Heyes