

Colorado

Grouse and Rosy-finches

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Participants

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Chestnut-collared Longspur

Day 1 No matter how efficient the airlines are nowadays, travelling is certainly the most stressful and tiring day of any trip, but when we met the group at Denver International Airport at 7:30pm they were all in high spirits and ready to go! James and I secured the rental vans, loaded everyone up and headed north to Fort Collins in light rain. The drive took about 75 minutes and by the time we checked everyone into their motel rooms, everyone was ready to call it a day, get some rest and shake off the jet-lag, because the following day the real fun was about to begin.

Day 2 We met at 6:45am and while loading up the vans the group had nice looks at Eurasian Collared-doves, Killdeer and Western Meadowlark. We had breakfast at a local fast food restaurant and purchased lunch items for later in the day, as a long day lay ahead with no lunch facilities in the Pawnee National Grasslands, our major birding destination of the day. As we made our way east towards the Grasslands, James stopped to view a large landfill on the north side of the road close to Ault. The landfill provided nice looks at well over a hundred Franklin's and California Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds before we continued our trek to the Pawnee National Grasslands. The Grasslands comprise 193,000 acres of short-grass prairie, a vast area crisscrossed by dirt roads that intersect one another throughout. We travelled a few of these roads for our target birds: longspurs, Mountain Plover and several species of raptor. As we made our way out onto the prairie, we were treated to nice looks at Vesper Sparrows, Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks. We also got terrific looks at the mammals one would hope to

encounter out on the prairie: Pronghorns, Black-tailed Prairie Dogs and Black-tailed Jackrabbit. After another few miles we came to a location that James had scouted on previous trips for Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs. Both were present during our visit and we didn't have to walk a great distance out onto the prairie to get superb and prolonged looks at these stunning birds in their breeding plumage. We were also able to witness their flight displays and song – spectacular! As we continued travelling, we came across additional Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Swainson's Hawks, Red-tailed Hawk and American Kestrels. We also had a brief look at a Ferruginous Hawk, plenty of Loggerhead Shrikes and an out of place Sage Thrasher that provided the group with incredible views. We looked extensively for Mountain Plover but just couldn't come up with one during the morning hours, though little did we know that we'd have plenty of success later in the trip. After having lunch at the Crow Valley Campground, we tried a couple more roads within the Grasslands and came upon a soaring Golden Eagle (the first of many for the trip) which later stooped down at a jackrabbit, only narrowly missing it. We then headed east for a long drive to Wray, Colorado for a 4pm meeting with Bob Bledsoe, the owner of the Bledsoe Cattle Ranch. His 100,000 acre ranch is home to about 100 Greater Prairie-chicken leks. Bob has a small number of leks that he very generously makes available to the public for viewing (by prior arrangement only). We arrived a little after 4pm and everybody from the tour was asked to come into Bob's office and have a seat. Bob likes to talk about his ranch, his family and the prairie-chickens on his ranch. He is also very interested to know where everyone is from, what they do for a living, their favourite bird etc. After the meeting Bob took the group out to the lekking area where we would be going very early the next morning. This was actually a good move, not only were we likely to see some Greater Prairie-chickens today, but getting to know the roads now in the daylight hours was key for a stress-free drive tomorrow morning in the dark. On the way out to the lek area we encountered a nesting Great Horned Owl with two owlets, Burrowing Owl, Say's Phoebe, White-crowned Sparrows and more Horned Larks. All of these birds and many more would be seen again the following morning. We were also treated to 35 Greater Prairie-chickens as we approached the lek. We had great looks, but the real show would be tomorrow at dawn. After identifying our target location for the morning, we found our route off the ranch, headed into Wray and checked in to our motel for the night. Walking into town for dinner provided views of Chimney Swifts along the way, followed by a nice meal at the local Downtown Grill. It had been a great first full day of the trip and we retired early, ready for a pre-dawn start the following day.

Day 3 It was 32 degrees Fahrenheit in the pre-dawn gloom when the group gathered, but at least it wasn't windy. We arrived at the Greater Prairie-chicken lekking area just as it was getting light. We positioned the vans for the best viewing conditions and waited for the prairie-chickens to arrive. While we waited, we heard numerous Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks calling all around us. As it started to get light, the prairie-chickens started moving in all around the vans – the 'old woman cackling' calls and 'whooping' noises were just incredible as the short-grass prairie in front of us filled with jousting, displaying and battling prairie-chickens, often at point-blank range. It was a privilege to have access to this natural wonder, one of the true spectacles of the avian world. After about 90 minutes we slowly departed the lek area as most of the birds had started to disperse. Ring-necked Pheasants and Burrowing Owls had also been seen during the lekking hours and, as we left, we had a further opportunity to explore the ranch area. We had numerous White-crowned Sparrows, two adult and two young Great Horned Owls, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler (Myrtle race), Chipping Sparrow,

Barn Swallows, Brewer's Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds and two Lark Sparrows among the highlights. We stopped back in Wray to have a mid-morning breakfast at a riverside café. As we were heading into the café, a group of thirty Turkey Vultures and two Broad-winged Hawks were caught on the early-morning thermals and began to make their way to destinations unknown. After breakfast we slowly made our way towards Garden City, Kansas – our base for the next two days. During our journey to Garden City, we stopped several times to explore areas in Nebraska and Kansas. Our first stop was not long after we left the café in Wray, as we encountered nine Wild Turkeys beside the road, nicely adding to our gamebird list. A short time later we found ourselves crossing the state line into Nebraska. Although the time spent in Nebraska was relatively short, we did come away with some nice sightings. On a dirt road off the main highway we came across a White-tailed Prairie Dog town, which hosted a beautiful Burrowing Owl. A little further down the road at a historical marker, we had nice looks at a Cliff Swallow colony, Eastern Bluebird, Vesper Sparrow and Red-tailed Hawks. I must make mention of the scenery in eastern Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas: it is “flat”. That's not a negative statement; the vastness of the short-grass prairies, the ranches and farm fields is mind boggling and is in deep contrast to the majestic mountain terrain we would encounter on the second half of the trip in central and western Colorado. By early afternoon we found ourselves in the great state of Kansas! We started by checking out the location of the Lesser Prairie-chicken lek to see if anything drastic had happened to the overall landscape since James's visits in previous years, and it had not. While in this area we came across some nice birds including Gadwall, Blue-winged Teal, Brown Thrasher and an unexpected Townsend's Solitaire along with Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawks, Eurasian Collared-doves and Mourning Doves and a great flock of over two hundred Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Once we entered Garden City, we came across a nice group of Great-tailed Grackles, checked into our motel and had a nice dinner at a nearby restaurant.

Day 4 Another early departure saw us leaving the hotel at 4:45am for a Lesser Prairie-chicken lek east of Dodge City. Lesser Prairie-chickens are declining in much of their range and are subsequently getting harder and harder for the general public to see. Part of the issue is getting access to lekking areas, as many of the private ranches that actually support Lesser Prairie-chicken leks do not want birders, photographers or anyone else on their land, not even for a fee! After a long drive we arrived at around 6:30 am and found our target birds instantly! Everyone had good, prolonged scope views of four Lesser Prairie-chickens. They put on a great show for almost two hours! Several of us photographed the birds, and I think most of us came away with nice pictures. While watching the Lesser Prairie-chickens, other notable birds included several Grasshopper Sparrows and Eastern Meadowlarks, both new to the trip and the latter an indication that we were transitioning into species associated with the eastern US. Delighted with another fabulous lekking experience, we took our time back-tracking and birding the dirt roads that we had driven through early in the morning when it was still dark. This provided some excellent birding for the rest of the morning. Along these roadways we encountered more Grasshopper Sparrows, Song Sparrow, Northern Bobwhite (heard only), Northern Harrier and a nice group of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers. Along one road, we came upon an old, abandoned farmhouse with a lot of trees and bushes around the property, making it somewhat of an oasis in the middle of the open terrain. Here we added Lark Sparrows, Spotted Towhees, Eastern Phoebe, Cedar Waxwings, Ash-throated Flycatcher (a nice find by James) and perhaps the most exciting find, three Barn Owls inside the farmhouse! Exciting because we barely poked our heads inside the house, mostly just to see what was left inside, and out they came, getting at least one of us with the “white stuff” if you know

what I mean. After the farmhouse we kept birding the dirt roads until we stopped at what can best be described as an old tree nursery. We stopped here because there was an odd-looking Red-tailed Hawk that was very light on the back and head. It might have been a different race, but it is inconclusive at the time of writing. Anyhow, there was a lot of activity here, so we decided to get out for a few minutes and check it out, and we were glad we did. This area was simply loaded with sparrows! We found thirty plus Harris's Sparrows, twenty plus White-crowned Sparrows, twenty Chipping Sparrows, three Clay-coloured Sparrows, Field Sparrows and ten Lark Sparrows, along with House Wrens, Baltimore Oriole and large flocks of migrating Blue Jays. As it was approaching noon, we headed north looking for somewhere to eat. We found a little café on the outskirts of town and had lunch. I had suggested to James the day before that if we found ourselves with a little extra time, we might consider checking out Cheyenne Bottoms National Wildlife Refuge, which was about an hour north and east of Pratt. Cheyenne Bottoms is a famous migratory stopover for waterfowl and shorebirds on the central flyway. There had been some recent reports of early Hudsonian Godwits and American Golden-plovers moving through the refuge, so we decided to give it a go and, again, we were glad we did. This was the first time Birdfinders had visited the area, purely because the tour had to drive further into Kansas to see Lesser Prairie-chicken, but it did provide a wonderful opportunity to visit Cheyenne Bottoms, a site which would otherwise be missed on a grouse tour. Upon arrival we found the refuge to be full of waterfowl and shorebirds. Our list included Pied-billed Grebe, Eared Grebe, Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants (nice spotting by James), Snowy and Great Egrets, Great Blue Heron, American Bittern (fabulous looks), White-faced Ibis, Snow Goose, Canada Goose, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Blue-winged Teal (one hundred plus), Cinnamon Teal, Northern Shoveler (one hundred plus), Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck (one hundred plus), American Coot (four hundred plus!), Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, Killdeer, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Marbled Godwits, Baird's Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher (one hundred plus), over sixty brilliantly-plumaged Wilson's Phalaropes and stunning views of Yellow-headed Blackbirds. We finished up at Cheyenne Bottoms with a long drive back to Garden City for dinner at our local favourite restaurant!

Day 5 Today was a travel day with no need for a pre-dawn departure, and meeting up at 7 am went down well with everyone! We had breakfast at the motel, packed up and headed west back to Colorado. For the first few hours of our journey we had quite a cross wind (30–40 mph) that pushed the vans around a bit, but as the day went on, the winds subsided a little. Despite the strong winds out of the north, the temperatures still reached the 70s Fahrenheit. Once we crossed the state line back into Colorado, James began checking large prairie dog towns for Mountain Plover, as they have overlapping habitat. It wasn't long before Angela's sharp eyes in the lead van found a Mountain Plover that was sitting on a nest not too far from an extremely busy road. We decided not to get out here and risk disturbing the plover and the safety of the group alike, but everyone got fine views from the vehicles. Along Route 50 we were fortunate to come upon some fine roadside birds. The first was a nice Long-billed Curlew and the second was a stunning breeding-plumage Lark Bunting – fairly common in season but this one was decidedly early. We also had two more encounters with Mountain Plover along with dozens of Western Meadowlarks, Horned Larks and American Kestrels. After a bit more driving, our next stop was the Queens Reservoir in Kiowa County. This large reservoir had the potential to provide a diversity of waterfowl, grebes and shorebirds – it didn't disappoint. It was still quite windy when we stopped, so we positioned

ourselves around the vans to minimize the wind as best we could. The reservoir had a nice collection of birds including Eared Grebes, our first Western and Clark's Grebes of the trip, over sixty American White Pelicans, Great Blue Heron, Snow Goose and Ross's Goose, Gadwall, Northern Shovelers, Common Merganser and Ruddy Ducks. This area was also pretty good for raptors: Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk and Swainson's Hawks were all seen here. American Coot was also present in good numbers together with American Avocets, Killdeer, Western Kingbirds, Say's Phoebe and Yellow-rumped Warbler (Audubon's race). This area also gave us our first Black-billed Magpie of the trip along with American Crows and Common Ravens. Our last stop of the day was at Pueblo Reservoir, primarily for Scaled Quail. The quail eluded us but little did we know that better times were coming for us with that particular species! The reservoir was quite large, with boating, fishing and camping the main recreational activities. We added some new species for the overall trip list, namely Northern Mockingbird and Broad-tailed Hummingbird. Luckily, the boat traffic was minimal, leaving a huge flotilla of grebes undisturbed, and we counted 132 Eared Grebes and over 375 Western/Clark's Grebes along with nice overhead views of Franklin's and Ring-billed Gulls and twelve American Pipits! We made our way to our hotel in Canon City and rounded off our day at a fine local Steakhouse.

Day 6 We started the day off at a reasonable hour – 6:30am – and loaded up and drove off to a location where James said Scaled Quail had recently been reported. Sure enough, about ten Scaled Quails put on a sensational show. The same thicket also produced Canyon Towhee, Curve-billed Thrasher and Harris's Sparrow. After a quick stop in town to repair a puncture in one of Scott's tyres, we headed west and made a few stops along the road that turned out to be quite good. One stop yielded our first but rather brief Pinyon Jay along with Clark's Nutcracker, House Finches, Dark-eyed Junco, Violet-green Swallows and a beautiful Mountain Bluebird. As we continued along Route 50, the highway would "hug" the river at times, giving us the opportunity to stop and look for American Dipper. Our efforts paid off on one of those occasions where folks in the lead van spied one on the many exposed rocks along the river; bonuses were a Spotted Sandpiper, Mountain Chickadee and a Yellow-rumped Warbler (Audubon's race). From this area we took a more northerly direction to the town of Buena Vista. Our target bird in this small town was the very elusive Lewis's Woodpecker, one of which had been reported four or five days earlier. We gave the city park a walk through; no Lewis's Woodpecker, but we did have nice looks at Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Black-capped Chickadees, Yellow-rumped Warbler (Myrtle race) and Northern Flicker (Red-shafted). We had lunch at a local Subway and then cruised through the town and some backroads to continue our pursuit of the Lewis's Woodpecker. Although we never caught up with it, the trip didn't lack other nice birds to look at: Mountain Bluebirds, Cassin's Finch, Woodhouse's Scrub-jay, Pinyon Jays and Tree and Northern Rough-winged Swallows. We also had a family of Mule Deer. We left Buena Vista and headed back south to Route 50 where we continued our westward trek towards Gunnison. The route took us up and over Monarch Pass, where there was the potential for Canada Jay, Pine Grosbeak and even American Three-toed Woodpecker. However, the day was quite breezy with squally snow showers, and while some of the group did manage to hear a calling American Three-toed Woodpecker, overall the weather played a key role in limiting our success at this location. As we came off the pass we came upon our next stop – the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Area – the only site open to the general public from which to view Gunnison Sage-grouse. We arrived in the late afternoon, primarily to scout out the area for the next morning and then continued west into Gunnison to check into our motel and have a wonderful dinner at Garlic Mike's Italian Restaurant.

Day 7 Another early departure – this time for Gunnison Sage-grouse. We arrived just as it was getting light, set up our scopes and started to scan the ridge for lekking Gunnison Sage-grouse. As soon as we started to scan (quietly), we noted an immediate problem along the ridge – two Golden Eagles were sitting slap-bang in the area where the sage-grouse should have been! We knew the grouse would be a no-show if the eagles continued to sit there, and the eagles did just that and never moved! Aside from the Golden Eagles, there were Mallards, American Pipit, Yellow-headed Blackbird and over fifty Elk. The complete absence of any Gunnison Sage-grouse was bordering on a catastrophe for the tour but James had previously noted a potential route into the hills that looked good, just in case of such a problem at the main lekking area. We loaded up and started to explore. The track appeared to go into the middle of nowhere, but the habitat looked great for the sage-grouse. As we made our way, we encountered Vesper Sparrows, a handful of Brewer's Sparrows and several Sage Thrashers. A little further down the track and BOOM! – Neil spotted a female Gunnison Sage-grouse in the sage next to a large rock! Everyone got on the bird before she hopped up onto the large rock where everyone got tremendous views and photos. This was the closest I'd ever seen a Gunnison Sage-grouse and she put on an extended show before flying off. After that we headed back to the motel for breakfast, packed up and headed out to our next destination: the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. This is a beautiful park with tremendous scenery, deep canyons and nice birding. On the way to the park we passed several Black-billed Magpies, Bald Eagles and Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawks. Once we arrived at Black Canyon we had tremendous views of Green-tailed and Spotted Towhees, Orange-crowned Warbler, three Virginia's Warblers, several Woodhouse's Scrub-jays (formerly Western Scrub-jay), White-throated Swifts, Fox Sparrow (Slate-coloured form), Clark's Nutcracker, Cooper's Hawk and Common Ravens. Our other target grouse for the day was Dusky Grouse. Black Canyon is a good spot for them, but despite extensive searching, we could not locate one on this day. Later in the trip we would try multiple spots for Dusky Grouse again, but as it would turn out, this would be our only miss on all the grouse we were looking for in Colorado. From the Black Canyon we travelled up in elevation to the Grand Mesa, over ten thousand feet above sea level. The temperatures were certainly on the chilly side although not bad, but winter was still hanging on to this part of the world. The ground was still deep in snow and every lake was frozen over! However, there was bird life up here: a not-so-cooperative Canada Jay made a brief appearance for some of the group and we also had Northern Flicker (Red-shafted), Red-breasted Nuthatches, Mountain Chickadees and Dark-eyed Junco (Grey-headed). After a brief stay, we descended the Grand Mesa and headed for our motel in Grand Junction, checked in and had dinner at a nearby Mexican Restaurant.

Day 8 There were no leks to try for today, so we were up and out at the leisurely hour of 6:30 am. As I was opening the van, several members of our party found a group of eleven Gambel's Quails along with two Western Kingbirds and a fleeting Baltimore Oriole – not a bad way to start the day! Our ultimate destination was Steamboat Springs but, like every other travel day, there were many nice locations to check out along the way. We headed to Coal Canyon hoping for Chukar – non-native but certainly ABA countable. The canyon reminded me of the canyons I've birded in Arizona, with Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Golden Eagle, Say's Phoebes, Western Kingbirds (5), Grey Vireo (2), Juniper Titmouse, Rock Wrens, Canyon Wren, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Black-throated Sparrows, Lark Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco (Slate-coloured), Green-tailed Towhee and two Black-throated Grey Warblers. Next, we travelled down another small road off the main

highway called Estes Gulch. This area produced nice views of Red-tailed Hawk, Bewick's Wrens, Grey and Ash-throated Flycatchers, Northern Rough-winged Swallows and another Black-throated Grey Warbler. After Estes Gulch we continued to the small town of Meeker where we had a nice lunch at the Meeker Café. From here, James decided to follow up a report of some Barrow's Goldeneyes that would be (roughly) along our route to Yellow Jacket Pass. We found ourselves on yet another well-travelled dirt road where we came upon more Western Meadowlarks and, yes, more Golden Eagles offering great views! We eventually found a small, high-elevation lake and, remarkably, the Barrow's Goldeneyes were still there – nine birds to be exact. There was a nice mixture of males and females with a couple of female Common Goldeneyes hiding out in the flock. Also present were American Wigeon (six), Cinnamon Teal (six), Lesser Scaup (three), another Golden Eagle and two Bald Eagles soaring overhead, a flyover Evening Grosbeak, Violet-green Swallows, Yellow-headed Blackbirds and a Lesser Yellowlegs. As we continued to make our way to Steamboat Springs, we stopped along the way to scan the terrain and came upon three more Golden Eagles, a Killdeer sitting on eggs and a nice look at a Sandhill Crane. We spent the night in Steamboat Springs and had dinner at a local sports bar with the hockey playoff game blasting out on all the televisions. The bar was filled with ruckus and crazy Colorado hockey fans, so going through the nightly checklist just wasn't going to happen! The environment must have made some of the tour members feel a little homesick for a good football game.

Day 9 Back on the hunt for grouse! We departed our motel at 5:00 am in a chilly 30 degrees Fahrenheit, but at least it wasn't raining or snowing! We arrived at a known lekking area and immediately found thirty plus Greater Sage-grouse. The birds put on a fantastic show for the next thirty minutes with tails fanned out, air sacs inflated and making indescribable vocalizations. After the grouse rather suddenly departed, we headed for some distant ponds that seemed filled with waterfowl and, remarkably, while driving there, we came upon more Greater Sage-grouse right along the road, and later discovered another Sage-grouse lek with twenty plus birds! The distant pond again became the focus and was filled with a nice assortment of waterfowl and shorebirds: Blue-winged Teal, Cinnamon Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal (American), Canvasback (six), Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Eared Grebe, American Coot, American Avocet, a very cooperative Least Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitchers. We also had a calling and displaying Wilson's Snipe, Willet (western), California Gull, Common Raven, Song Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird and Brewer's Blackbird. We headed to Walden for breakfast, just in time apparently, as during our drive it started snowing quite heavily, at times covering the roads. We ultimately made it to Walden (the so-called Moose Capital of the World) and had a wonderful breakfast. Now I've been here a couple of times over the years and never seen a Moose in the Walden area, but I'm happy to say that would change later in the trip. After breakfast we took a short ride to Walden Reservoir where the visibility was not the best as it was still snowing, though not as intensely as it had been earlier. Here we had a lot of the same waterfowl as earlier in the morning but numbering hundreds more. A few additions were Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser, Marbled Godwit (49) and lots of American White Pelicans. After the reservoir we headed east to the Moose Visitor Center in Walden. Not only is it a nice visitor centre, but they actively feed the birds here. The trip up to the visitor centre was a slow but steady drive, as the roads were a little snow-covered and when we pulled into the parking lot, it was completely covered by several inches of recent snow. As a result, we basically had the centre to ourselves. We had wonderful looks at our first rosy-finches of the trip – all Brown-capped Rosy-finches. Also at the feeders were dozens of Dark-eyed Juncos (Grey-

headed race), Steller's Jays, Cassin's Finches, Mountain Chickadees, Fox (Slate-coloured) and Song Sparrows, Red-winged Blackbirds and Pine Siskins. We headed back to Walden through snow flurries and the lead vehicle had brief but brilliant views of a perched Northern Goshawk. After a short break due to heavy snow flurries we continued west towards Hayden. James had two locations up his sleeve for Sharp-tailed Grouse. The first was along a highway where James got his first Sharp-tailed Grouse a few years ago. It was a nice enough spot, but the traffic was a little intense. The next location was about twenty-five minutes away in the middle of peaceful and quiet rolling hills – a perfect location for Sharp-tailed Grouse! While there we had calling Sandhill Cranes, one of which eventually flew right by us, Swainson's Hawks, Mountain Bluebirds, Cinnamon Teal, Wilson's Phalaropes and an Eared Grebe. We then headed back to Steamboat Springs, which looked even prettier in the fresh snow. This evening we avoided the local sports bar for a quieter steakhouse down the road where we could at least hear each other and go over the daily checklist. On an interesting note, our waiter was off to the UK in a week or two, and got some good insights from our group on where to go during his visit.

Day 10 We departed Steamboat Springs at 5:15 am and headed out to Hayden in heavy rain. We had two destinations for the day. The first was closer but located along a busy highway; the second was out of the way but would have less traffic. We decided to try the second location first, as the possibility of no traffic in heavy rain seemed more reasonable. Upon arrival we made our way out onto the dirt roads, by now getting very muddy and slippery! We got to our destination, positioned the vans and scanned the hillside through the rain and foggy windows. Nothing was stirring. After about twenty minutes we regrouped and headed out to the other lek alongside the highway. As we arrived, we could see a small contingent of grouse on the hillside. We drove past, turned the vans around and positioned them above the lek. By this time the rain was letting up, so we were able to get out and get our scopes on three Sharp-tailed Grouse! Nice looks were had but because they were repositioning themselves, we never got great looks at their legendary spinning courtship displays. However, the birds were seen and we would get to witness their courtship antics a few days later in the tour at another lek that cropped up unexpectedly. We headed to Kremmling for breakfast at the 'other' Moose Café. It was here I learned what a Moose Cake was – a gigantic pancake the size of a dinner plate! After breakfast we scanned the beautiful cliffs that were present at the back of the café. In past years, James had seen Prairie Falcon from this location, but not today. However, we did pick up a nesting Peregrine Falcon that had probably displaced the Prairie Falcons. During our visit we had fly-by Golden Eagle, Swainson's Hawk, Common Raven, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-rumped Warbler (Myrtle race) and Song Sparrows. After brunch and some birding in Kremmling, we were off to Silverthorne, one of the top ski resort areas in Colorado. Here we would focus on finding more rosy-finches, which had recently been reported in the Silverthorne community of Wildernest. En route we came upon a huge female Moose and a one-year-old calf. This dynamic duo was making its way slowly around the neighbourhood, lurching on the local trees and saplings. These two certainly stole the show with the members of the group who piled out of the van and stayed at a safe distance enjoying these majestic mammals. We refocused on rosy-finches and before long found an active feeder along one of the many streets in the development. The feeder had a really nice variety of birds: Brown-capped Rosy-finches and Pine Grosbeaks, one of which was a stunning male, several Red Crossbills, Mountain Chickadees and Pygmy Nuthatches, Pine Siskins and a Downy Woodpecker. After we finished in Silverthorne, we made our way up to Loveland Pass. The pass is especially known for hosting our last "chicken" of the trip: White-tailed Ptarmigan. As we began our climb

on Interstate 70, the clouds grew darker and it started to snow again! Now, the top of Loveland Pass is almost 12,000 feet above sea level and as we made our way up the mountain, I noticed the Loveland Ski area was still open but the snow kept getting heavier and heavier. Surprisingly, the road remained in great condition despite the near white-out conditions we experienced from time to time during the drive. As we arrived at the top of the pass, to my delight the parking lot had been ploughed earlier in the day, so we were able to find a couple of parking spaces close to the snow-covered trail. At the top of the mountain, bitter cold and horizontal snow were going to be just a couple of the challenges in looking for a white bird on fresh white snow! Certainly, things didn't seem overly promising to start with, but never say never! As soon as the snow had started to let up a bit, David got out of the vehicle and spotted a ptarmigan right away up the hill. Unfortunately, it turned out to be to be a rock that wanted to be a ptarmigan, but this happens to all of us occasionally. David quickly regrouped by turning around and finding a small group of the real thing slowly working their way up the hill towards us. We stayed with these fantastic winter-plumaged ptarmigans for the next hour or so. At times they got within ten feet of some of the members of the group and collectively we probably took thousands of photographs of these six White-tailed Ptarmigans, the most any of us had seen at Loveland Pass. On the way back to Steamboat Springs we stopped off at the Blue River for American Dipper (great looks), and other roadside stops provided tremendous views of White-faced Ibis and Belted Kingfisher. We also stopped at the Wolford Reservoir where the lead van spotted a beautiful Prairie Falcon sitting on top of a telephone pole. The falcon stayed long enough for everyone to get nice views through the scopes. We then ended our day with dinner in Steamboat Springs at the nice, subdued steakhouse.

Day 11 Another travel day and it was snowing again! Even though we had seen all the possible grouse (except the elusive Dusky), it's never a bad thing to get more looks at some of those you've already seen. So we loaded up the vehicles and hit the road in heavy snow showers around 5:15 am. Did I mention that it was snowing – AGAIN?! We headed east over Rabbit Ears Pass, just like we had on previous mornings, but this time it was really snowing, and I mean REALLY SNOWING! We headed up the pass and I was personally very happy to follow the plough truck up the mountain. Once we got up to the top and it levelled out a bit, the plough truck turned around and left us, heading back down the mountain towards Steamboat. Alone in white-out conditions, it's fair to say that it was a little bit of a white-knuckle drive as we navigated the top of the pass and descended toward Walden. Thankfully, when we reached the other side of the pass, the conditions eased a little bit and we pushed on towards the lekking grounds but arrived much later than anticipated at the Greater Sage-grouse lek. On the plus side, white-out conditions made Moose easy to spot in the willow scrub and we saw no less than seven on the way to the lek! When we arrived at the lek, no Sage-grouse could be seen. It seemed like they had either left or never showed at all today because of the snowstorm...or had they? We started driving away and I spotted a head peeking out of the snow-covered sage bush. It was a Sage-grouse! We stopped and scanned and found five more birds. It seemed they were just hunkered down in the sage because of the overnight snowstorm. After a few minutes they all started to take off; we only saw five at first, but over 18 exploded out of the snow-covered sage! The birds had simply buried themselves under the sage and continued to feed, but refrained from lekking. Our second, self-found lek discovered days ago was active, with a few birds half-heartedly displaying, but the snow had quietened them down from their normal morning routine. We headed back towards Walden for breakfast at the Moose Creek Café once more, but not before finding a nice group of Mountain Bluebirds and a Sage Thrasher looking for food in the snow alongside the road. We had not driven back to the Walden

area ‘just’ for another look at Greater Sage-grouse, although it wasn’t a bad reason. Our target species for the day were more rosy-finches, especially Black and Grey-crowned. James had found another report worth following up in the Walden area, seemingly indicating a site hosting all three species of rosy-finch! After breakfast, and prior to looking for the rosy-finch feeding station, we decided to have another look at Walden Reservoir, as it was just down the road and the weather was much better than on our previous attempt. There were thousands of ducks on the reservoir, most of which we had encountered days before but we added Greater Scaup to the list, with American White Pelicans, Western and Eared Grebes and American Coots also present, and it was fun to see Marbled Godwits forging through the snow along with Willets (western race), Franklin’s and California Gulls, Killdeer and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. After we finished up at Walden Reservoir, we set off to the rosy-finch feeding station, or so we thought – the actual address was way out in the middle of nowhere! We travelled on dirt roads for many miles until we literally came upon the first house on the right. We got out and surveyed the scene, where there was a small feeder somewhat hidden behind a couple of spruce trees. We were careful to stay on the road and not infringe on the homeowner’s privacy and were able to scope several Brown-capped Rosy-finches (sixteen), Cassin’s Finches (twelve), Dark-eyed Juncos (Grey-headed race) and Steller’s Jays. Away from the feeders, one of the group picked out a beautiful Red-naped Sapsucker that ended up being our only one of the trip. As a couple of the group members and I continued to watch the feeding station, James took most of the group up the road to look at another potential feeding station. After a few minutes, the homeowner came out of her home and waved us over. We introduced ourselves and told her we were enjoying the feeding station, especially the rosy-finches. She gave us permission to enter her yard and stay if we would like; she even re-filled the feeders for us. It turned out she runs a rehabilitation centre at her house for both birds and mammals. The day we were there she was rehabbing two Golden Eagles and we were able to peer through the door and get a pretty good glimpse of these massive birds up close. While we scanned through the Brown-capped Rosy-finches, we also enjoyed watching Least Chipmunks travelling back and forth from the feeders, darting in between the Red-winged Blackbirds. James found a rather shy Lincoln’s Sparrow hiding out under a large rock near the feeders and a Peregrine Falcon made a fly-by. We decided to back away from the feeders for a little while, hoping more rosy-finches might come in. Eventually, another incursion of rosy-finches popped in, and this time a nice male Black Rosy-finch sat atop a spruce tree and gave exceptional views to everyone! We continued to search for a Grey-crowned Rosy-finch but, sadly, never turned one up. By mid-afternoon it was time to head to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where we arrived in good time for dinner at the local steakhouse.

Day 12 James didn’t feel completely satisfied with the looks the group got of the Sharp-tailed Grouse on our rainy morning in Hayden and no one disagreed. So, as luck would have it, he found another lek in Wyoming less than an hour from the motel. It would mean another early departure, but everyone was on board and we headed for a location north-east of Cheyenne. We arrived around 6am and immediately found the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek containing about fifteen birds. It wasn’t too far out into the field, but through the scopes everyone had great and prolonged looks at their whirling, wind-up-toy-like display. We concentrated primarily on the grouse, but numerous Western Meadowlarks were singing and displaying along with an unexpected Upland Sandpiper that called a couple of times before going silent for the rest of our stay. After the Sharp-tailed Grouse dispersed out onto the prairie, we headed back to Cheyenne to a place called the Hereford Ranch, the oldest cattle ranch in America. A small section of the ranch is like an oasis out in the

middle of the prairie. Around the main houses and barns there is an extensive area of trees and brush, and a large stream runs through the compound. We had flyover American White Pelicans, Great Blue Heron, Red-tailed Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Mourning Dove, Belted Kingfisher, Northern Flicker (red-shafted), Say's Phoebe, Barn, Tree, Northern Rough-winged, Bank (Sand Martin) and Cliff Swallows, House Wren, American Robin, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and a couple of unexpected Pygmy Nuthatches. The real treat was the views of the thrushes and warblers that were migrating through the ranch to breeding grounds much farther north. We had excellent looks at Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes, along with stunning breeding-plumage Yellow-rumped Warblers of both races. An Orange-crowned Warbler put on a nice show along with Chipping, Lark, Song and Lincoln's Sparrows. It was around lunchtime when we departed from Hereford Ranch, made a quick stop at the local Subway for lunch and then headed north-west to Laramie, Wyoming for raptors and longspurs. After about an hour we found ourselves on a remote dirt road on the outskirts of Laramie. As it turned out, this road would end up being the highlight of the trip in terms of raptors! It started out a little slow, but three McCown's Longspurs really put on a show right next to, and on, the road itself. From here we would encounter many raptors over the next several miles: Turkey Vulture, Golden Eagles (8), Northern Harriers, Red-tailed Hawk, incredible views of Ferruginous Hawks (5), both light- and dark-morph Swainson's Hawks (8), American Kestrels (6) and a Peregrine Falcon. Besides the raptors, Common Ravens were almost always present along with a Loggerhead Shrike or two. The few prairie ponds that we came upon during our travels yielded beautiful views of American Avocets, Wilson's Phalaropes, Willet (western race) and many Tree Swallows. By late afternoon we headed back to Cheyenne, a longish drive but no one really minded as our day had ended on such a high note. Dinner was at a steakhouse in Cheyenne.

Day 13 On this, our last day, we got up early as we had done throughout the tour, this time heading for Poudre Canyon in Colorado, about an hour from our motel in Cheyenne. James had seen some recent reports of Dusky Grouse at this canyon, so we decided to give it one last try for what would end up being the nemesis grouse of the trip. Along the way to Poudre Canyon we encountered American White Pelican, Turkey Vulture, Bald and Golden Eagles, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Osprey, American Kestrel, Feral Pigeon, Mourning and Eurasian Collared-doves, Black-billed Magpies, American Crows and Common Ravens. When we arrived at the parking lot for the canyon trail, we were greeted by the metallic trilling of Broad-tailed Hummingbirds. We crossed the road and a foot bridge and headed up the trail hoping to find the grouse. The grouse didn't want to cooperate but we did find some pretty cool birds to end the trip with. During our hike we found another American Dipper, Common Merganser, a gorgeous male Western Tanager, Plumbeous Vireo, Bushtits, Blue Jay, Steller's Jays, Spotted Towhees, Pygmy Nuthatches, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, Townsend's Solitaire and a pair of Sharp-shinned Hawks performing a courtship display over the canyon. We needed to get back to Cheyenne to allow everyone in the group time to get ready for their long trip home. However, once back at the motel, there was a nice distraction in the form of a tiny pond that had been discovered by group members the day before and held a nice selection of birds. Canada Goose, Mallard, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal (American), Blue-winged Teal, Killdeer, American Avocets and Solitary Sandpiper were all present here, and the last bird we added to the tour list was a stunning male Bullock's Oriole! With everyone packed up, we headed for lunch in Fort Collins, Colorado and then headed south to Denver for the airport. We arrived with time to spare and said our goodbyes to a wonderful group

of people. James and I returned the vans and headed to our motel for the night before we departed (early once more!) the next day for home in New England. We ended the 2019 Birdfinders Grouse and Rosy-finch tour with an incredible 200 species of birds, 18 species of mammals, 3200 miles travelled and a lifetime of memories! I want to thank first and foremost the tour participants; their tremendous sense of humour, sharp eyes and overall good nature made for a most memorable trip. And finally, a huge thank you goes out to the leader, James P. Smith, for putting together a brilliantly led and planned trip.

Scott D. Surner

Mammal List

Moose
Elk
Mule Deer
Pronghorn
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Mountain Cottontail
Coyote
Red Fox
Least Chipmunk
Golden-mantled Squirrel
Red Squirrel
White-tailed Prairie Dog
Black-tailed Prairie Dog
Porcupine
Muskrat
River Otter
Yellow-bellied Marmot
Feral Horses