

BIRDING ABROAD

COLORADO 13-23 APRIL 2015

The objective of this tour was to explore one of the great mid-West states in early spring, a time of year which provides one of North America's great birding spectacles as several species of grouse, often secretive birds throughout most of the year, gather on their traditional lekking grounds and undertake their amazing courtship displays. Set against the magnificent backdrop of the Rocky Mountains and desolate vistas of the prairies, Colorado also provides much more in terms of birding and wildlife, as this report illustrates. The tour was organised and led by Lance Degnan and Nick Whitehouse of Birding Abroad, with team members comprising Gary Dayes, Richard Drew, Stephen Elliott, John and Jane Hartley, Denis and Dorothy Jackson and Martin Limbert.

Monday 13 April The group met in the early afternoon of 13 April at London Heathrow airport and we were soon aboard the British Airways direct flight to Denver, Colorado. Landing some nine hours later around 7 pm we were quickly through US immigration where impressive photographic murals immediately brought home that we were somewhere different as they displayed native North American Indian tribes which only 150 years ago had their homelands in various parts of the state. After collecting our two people carriers, we set off for Georgetown, a gateway town to the Rocky Mountains, but it quickly became dark as we arrived at our hotel an hour or so later, meaning no birding was possible on day one.

Tuesday 14 April A pre-breakfast stroll around the hotel area produced our first Mountain Chickadees, several American Robins and American Crows, a couple of Steller's Jays and a cracking male Evening Grosbeak singing in the top of a tree – sadly the only one of the trip. After a traditional American cooked breakfast at a local cafe, we made the steep drive up mountain roads to the Loveland Pass nestled at an altitude of nearly 12,000 feet. Our target species was the White-tailed Ptarmigan, the only true pure white ptarmigan in winter plumage, but despite our best efforts at scanning the snow slopes we were unable to locate any birds.



A couple of Northern Flickers and Pine Siskins, a pair of Red-tailed Hawks and several Turkey Vultures soaring above the valleys were some reward, but of course being in North America, more or less every species was of interest. Our next stop was in the small town of Silverthorne to view a well known winter bird feeding station provided by local residents. Here we enjoyed great views of about 75 Brown-capped Rosy-Finches and a single Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch but we couldn't quite clinch the third and scarcest of the triumvirate, the Black Rosy-Finch.



Other species in nice supporting roles at or near the feeders were a single male Pine Grosbeak, six Cassin's Finches, a couple of Dark-eyed Juncos, four Pygmy Nuthatches, more Steller's and a single Grey Jay. Both Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers joined the fray, as did two Abert's Squirrel's before we decided to respect the privacy of the residents and move on. Our drive took us north through Kremmling, where we had a brief lunch stop, and watched more Red-tailed Hawks displaying and a group of 12 White-throated Swifts soaring around the nearby bluffs. The weather was fine and sunny helping to show off the stunning scenery. Continuing on over the continental divide at Rabbit Ears Pass to Steamboat Springs we paused roadside at various intervals for nice views of both Golden and Bald Eagles and several American Kestrels, before descending into the broad Yampa Valley. Here we quickly located several pairs of Sandhill Cranes, including a group of some 16 birds, some of which gave us a brief dancing display. A few Tree Swallows were on the move skimming the riverside cottonwoods which were just coming into bud and we had our first views of several Red-winged Blackbirds which frequented small roadside marshes and Western Meadowlarks perched and singing on fence posts. It had been a long drive (a theme of the tour), and by early evening we checked in to our hotel in Craig.

Bald Eagle

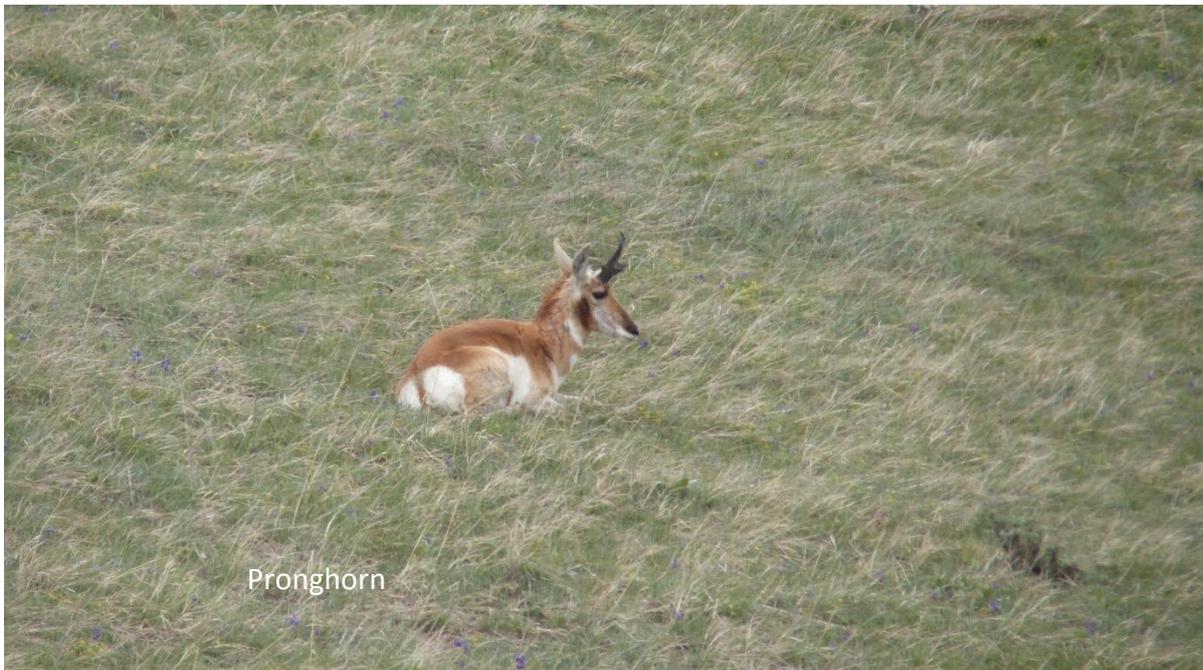


Wednesday 15 April This morning we were all up well before sunrise for an escorted tour to the first lek of the trip, that of the Sharp-tailed Grouse. The weather had worsened overnight with intermittent sleet and in the dark our guide had some difficulty erecting and pegging down the frame tents which were to be our temporary hides. But once done we huddled into the two hides and as dawn broke and the light improved, we witnessed the lek at close quarters - in fact we could not be closer with birds actually surrounding us at times and views down to just three feet! Some 70 birds in total were present, the males holding their wings out, tail up and moving around in synchronised clockwork fashion uttering clicking noises which drew in the females. It was a quite bizarre scene, which each of us enjoyed both for the spectacle of the birds' behaviour and the lovely subtle colourations of the birds feathering and purple air sacs. We thanked our very hospitable host and returned to the hotel for a well earned breakfast.



Displaying male Sharp-tailed Grouse

The rest of the morning was spent exploring various areas in the Yampa Valley. The river provided nice views of four Belted Kingfishers, whilst keeping out of the wind were a couple of Say's Phoebe. *Hirundines* were on the move with one small reservoir holding 300 Tree Swallows, a Cliff Swallow and two more familiar Barn Swallows, whilst *Icteridae* were represented by a handful of Brewer's Blackbirds and Common Grackles. American Robins were fairly numerous and we enjoyed views of several Mountain Bluebirds. A track into mixed sage brush and farmland proved productive as we encountered a nice group of 20 + Vesper Sparrows with a single White-crowned Sparrow and also a track side Brewer's Sparrow, the latter testing our identification skills. For the mammal list, a Yellow-bellied Marmot was seen, the only one of the trip. More nice views were had of Sandhill Cranes on their breeding grounds, the day's count coming to 25. After a brief cafe stop, we climbed back over the continental divide and headed into the North Park 'inter-mountain' wilderness. Scanning the vast open vista, we encountered a Rough-legged Hawk, several Northern Harriers, our first two Swainson's Hawks of the trip, with the afternoon producing five Golden Eagles in total. We were also on the look-out for mammals and managed to locate our first Pronghorns, this quite beautiful beast (very antelope like if not a true antelope) being the second fastest mammal on Earth.



Making our way around the Arapaho Wildlife Refuge and later the nearby Lake Walden, we enjoyed good looks at various American duck species including 50 American Wigeon, 20 Cinnamon Teal, 100 Green-winged Teal, 20 Canvasbacks, 25 Redheads, 10 Ring-necked Ducks, 80 Lesser Scaup, three Buffleheads as well as many Pintail, Gadwall and Shoveler. American Coot numbered over 80 and grebes were represented by two Pied-billed and eight Western, whilst a group of some 50 American White Pelicans were on an island also occupied by groups of Franklins and California Gulls. A superb lone Ferruginous Hawk soared above us. The dates of our trip were slightly early for the main wader passage, but we nevertheless saw three Greater Yellowlegs, a Long-billed Dowitcher, 12 American Avocets and a handful of Killdeers. Evening meal was taken in Walden's only open restaurant before we retired to our hotel to prepare for another early start.

Thursday 16 April A pre dawn drive south of town saw us in position in our vehicles at the lek of our second grouse species of the trip, the Greater Sage Grouse. The males are large almost 'bustard like' in proportions and put on a great if slightly grotesque display, fanning their tails and inflating their bare skinned chest air sacs, as the whole bird convulses producing quite weird booming and gurgling noises. The plumage details could be studied at close range as some birds walked straight passed our parked vehicles. Some 50 males came to the lek, but just a couple of females with local birders believing that the fine early spring weather had resulted in them already having mated and settled to nest. Another very memorable lek display was complete.



An excellent breakfast was taken in a local cafe before we had another look at Lake Walden for good views of the wildfowl, grebes, gulls, pelicans, 35 Double-crested Cormorants and two Great Northern Divers. Our onward journey then took us south east towards the Cameron Pass, where we paused at the Moose Visitors Centre, enjoying close views of birds around the feeders including 70 Brown-capped and a single Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch, plus at least 50 Dark-eyed Juncos, 18 Cassin's Finches and both Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees. The bright and sunny weather seemed to draw more birds in and with groups coming and going so it was difficult to get an accurate count. After a while another Brewer's Sparrow and a few Vesper Sparrows had joined the assembly, and when the time came to leave we really had to drag ourselves away such was the quality of the bird watching on offer.



Vesper Sparrow



Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch at the Moose Visitor centre

Our route then continued east along the stunning Cache la Poudre river and as the weather turned to snow, a winter wonderland scene began to surround us - quite magical, but also a timely signal for us to descend from the mountains and away from the worsening road conditions. Boulders mid-river provided views of at least four American Dippers, whilst Dark-eyed Juncos and American Robins were common along the road producing day counts of 200 and 90 respectively. Small groups of Mule Deer were a regular feature of the day in these parts. We eventually arrived at our hotel on the outskirts of Fort Collins by late afternoon, when the snow had turned to persistent rain at this lower altitude. Nevertheless a few of the group endured a rather wet and brief excursion to a nearby lowland lake. Here 150 Western Grebes were joined by a single Clark's and two Slavonian Grebes. The bordering cattail marsh produced seven Yellow-headed Blackbirds amongst the commoner Red-winged, as well as a good mix of Common and Great-tailed Grackles. We enjoyed a pleasant evening meal at a nearby restaurant before retiring for the night.

Friday 17 April No early rise today – hooray! However the weather had not improved overnight and the forecast was for yet more rain during the day. Undeterred we set off for the Pawnee National Grasslands about an hour east of Fort Collins where fortunately the rain eased for brief periods allowing us to do some birding both from the vehicles and outside. The first speciality we encountered was McCown's Longspur, with several small groups totalling approximately 160 birds feeding on the (just about drivable) dirt tracks across the grasslands as well as a few males in song flight. The cry went up when four Long-billed Curlews flew over, these birds like many species nesting on the prairies facing worrying population declines. A handful of Northern Harriers were noted, and at least two Burrowing Owls showed. Horned Larks were very common and careful scanning through the longspurs and associated Vesper Sparrows produced a Savannah Sparrow. A close coiled rattlesnake was viewed with some caution and this provided the days highlight for some but was less welcomed by its discoverer!



rattlesnake on the Pawnee Grasslands

Later the group enjoyed the spectacle of four Coyotes running through a herd of Pronghorn and trying, probably in vain, to split off a weaker member of the herd. The wet weather seemed to put off a better showing from the prairie dogs, but at least one was noted, thought to be of the White-tailed variety. By lunch time we had to move on, and no doubt the damp weather meant we hadn't seen the best of the Pawnee, but we had at least managed most of our target species. A fine cafe lunch sitting amongst real working 'cowboys' was then taken before we moved further east out to the small eastern prairie town of Wray, set amongst rolling sandhills and coarse grasslands. Fortunately the weather improved and by the time we reached Wray and checked in to our hotel, it was sunny again. Several Turkey Vultures soared overhead and a flock of 30 American White Pelicans flew over taking advantage of the brighter conditions.

The early evening was spent at the Wray museum where an interesting presentation was given on the conservation efforts to support the Greater Prairie Chicken, our next grouse quest. The small museum also held various interesting exhibits on the life of the early western settlers and the ancient tribes which inhabited these parts long before the arrival of Europeans. After a meal at a local restaurant we retired for the night.

Saturday 18 April Waking early, the weather was dry and calm, perfect in fact for an escorted tour to the lek of the Greater Prairie Chicken. Native North American Indian mythology has it that these birds taught all the other birds how to dance. Pre-dawn we were in place in the large trailer style hide with its comfortable double row of seats and the blinds went up. There was nothing but darkness and silence for a few minutes and then the unmistakable rather haunting 'cooing' sounds of the males as they walked in from surrounding land to their age-old lekking grounds. Then as the twilight disappeared and sunrise brought light, we watched quite spellbound as the males performed their rituals and sparring bouts. The birds were close, 18 males in all, and we all enjoyed their strutting performances and admired their subtle plumage tones and air sac coloration.



Double click on John's video below to see the Great Prairie Chicken in action! also captured on the photograph above



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Once all had seen enough we were taken for breakfast at one of the local ranches which support the conservation programme. A walk around the farmstead was fruitful, with good number of White-crowned Sparrows, single Chipping and Lark Sparrows, House Finch, Brown-headed Cowbird and Loggerhead Shrike.

We then returned to our hotel, where after refreshing ourselves, we set off again, travelling south along the eastern flank of the state across wide open prairie, close to the state border with Nebraska and then Kansas. Drought conditions for several years had left the land quite arid with Bony reservoir, our first port of call, holding only a tiny percentage of its full water capacity. Here though the swampy margins held good numbers of Blue-winged Teal, a few 'drumming' Wilson's Snipe (nice to compare the actions and sounds to our own Common Snipe in the UK) and three displaying pairs of Northern Harriers. A dozen or so Northern Rough-winged Swallows hawked for insects, and single Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and Eastern Phoebe showed well. Several Wild Turkeys put in a welcome appearance, adding to our 'game bird' list, and a drive to the massive dam, now largely redundant, yielded nice views of two Rock Wrens. North American Porcupine and American Badger were sadly recent road kills, but reminded us of the rich mammal variety living in the area, whilst a Western Tiger Swallowtail dazzled in the sunlight. Short stops during the drive south produced species such as Spotted Sandpiper, more Loggerhead Shrikes, six Burrowing Owls and at least 50 Swainson's Hawks, with many of the latter congregating on the ground in one area of fields, which we believed was to avoid a violent thunder storm that we also managed to skirt at one stage. By early evening we arrived in the small town of Holly, just north of the Comanche National Grasslands, where we checked in to out motel, and had an evening meal nearby.



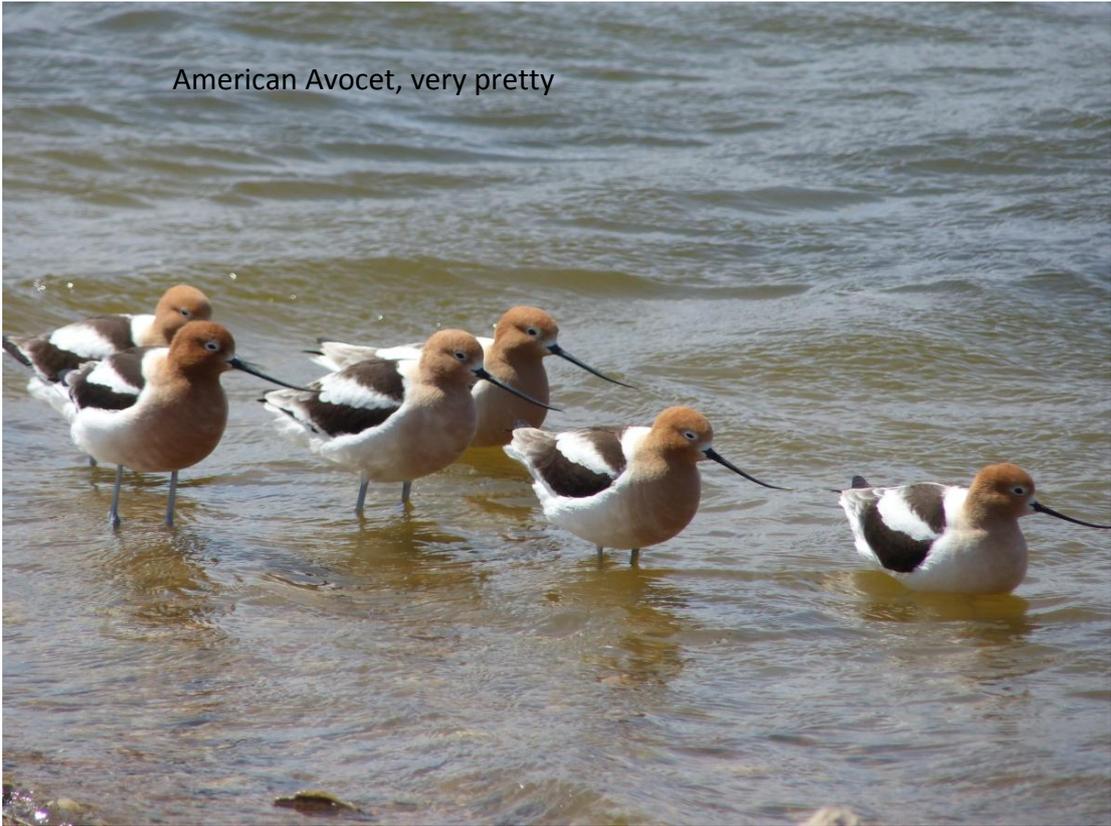
Swainson's Hawk

Sunday 19 April We were up early again, and boarded Fred Dorenkamp's old yellow school bus for another escorted visit, this time to the lek of the Lesser Prairie Chicken. Compared to their 'greater' cousin which are now doing well, the Lesser is really struggling with a significant population decline perhaps warranting imminent declaration by the Federal Government as officially 'endangered'. The bus served as our hide, and good views were had of six males, performing their ritual, which we noted differed in several ways from the Greater. Plumage wise, the air sac coloration was a rich reddish orange, contrasting with the orange of the eye combe, again a key distinguishing feature. A few small Eastern Cottontails (rabbits) were seen on the outing. A welcome and friendly cooked breakfast was enjoyed in the barn at Fred and Norma's farmhouse, where they recounted how the drought is affecting not just the birds but many farming communities and livelihoods in this part of the state. Long may Fred and Norma, both now in their 80's, continue to host visiting birders from all over the world.



We moved westward following the Arkansas river valley and calling at John Martin reservoir and various other waters along the route. Two late lingering 'white geese' tested our ID skills – we eventually considered them to be Snow Geese of the smaller 'lesser' variety. A good assortment of wildfowl included small numbers of American Wigeon, Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal together, Redhead and Canvasback, Lesser Scaup and Ruddy Duck with several Great Blue Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets and a group of eight White-faced Ibis. A male Eastern Bluebird was at the very western edge of its range. Sandbanks at Lake Cheraw held 21 Marbled Godwits, 40 American Avocets, two Snowy Plovers, three Forster's Terns with gulls represented by 25 Franklins, 50 Ring-billed and a single American Herring. The dry borders to the lake were home to a covey of Scaled Quail, yet another game bird for the tally and another Wild Turkey.

American Avocet, very pretty



Our final site of the day was on the high plateau east of Pueblo, where the short grasslands produced excellent views of a pair of breeding Mountain Plovers, a much sought after and lovely species for visiting birders. A few Sage and Curve-billed Thrashers were also seen in the same area which was home to a strong prairie dog community, with some 80 Black-tailed being noted.

The much sought after Mountain Plover



By early evening it was time to locate our hotel on the outskirts of Pueblo and enjoy a nice freshly cooked pizza meal (and with no early start a welcome beer or two) at a nearby restaurant.

Monday 20 April A lie-in by recent standards, but by now the 'early to bed' and 'up early' routine was fairly engrained, and we set off after breakfast, westward again, having enjoyed a family party of House Finches in the hotel car park as we loaded up the vehicles.



A walk in the local town park was fruitful with a close Great Horned Owl, Red-breasted Nuthatches and our first few Yellow-rumped Warblers of the trip. The run-off ponds downstream of Pueblo reservoir dam produced eight Wood Ducks, whilst the main water itself held two Pied-billed, three Slavonian and 70 Western Grebes and five Buffelheads. Overhead 140 Franklin's Gulls and 50 Cliff Swallows looked to be on the move, whilst in the scrub nearby were six Scaled Quails and singing Curve-billed and Sage Thrashers.

We moved on to a gorge just west of Canyon City, where we hiked a trail through scrub covered red sandstone cliffs. Here singles of Rufous-crowned Sparrows and Canyon Towee were noted as well as a couple of stunning Broad-tailed Hummingbirds displaying and sitting on overhead telegraph wires. A Sharp-shinned Hawk dashed through the gorge and 12 White-throated Swifts soared overhead.

Our journey then took us over the Rockies again via a cafe stop at Monarch Pass, altitude 11,373 feet, where there were two Black-capped Chickadees and then down alongside Tomichi Creek and the wilderness which surrounds the Gunnison basin. Several Mountain Bluebirds were seen and a few wildfowl were noted at roadside pools, with a distant lone stray white goose considered to be a Ross's. We checked in to our hotel which bordered the Gunnison River and visited a splendid steakhouse restaurant for our evening meal.

Tuesday 21 April Up early for the last time, we were taken on an escorted visit to the lekking area of the Gunnison Sage Grouse. This very localised bird was only recognised as a separate species a few years ago from genetic, morphological and behavioural studies. We had exclusive use of the hide, and watched the valley bottom and more distant moorland slopes as daylight began to illuminate the area. In total some 20 birds were seen, mostly quite distant though telescopes which enabled much detail to be seen and with the help of our guide we noted the distinguishing features of this much sought after bird. Our grouse quest was almost complete! Singing Song Sparrows near the hide provided some added entertainment.

After returning for breakfast we visited the Neversink Trail just west of town near our hotel, watching breeding White-breasted Nuthatches, Northern Flickers and a pair of American Dippers already taking food to their young in a nest under a bridge. A stop at a small hamlet with feeders on the road to Crested Butte produced a nice male Red-naped Sapsucker which showed well in the trees, and many Dark-eyed Juncos. As we left the Gunnison area a dozen or so Sandhill Cranes were noted spread across the river valley. Another stop at the Monarch Pass cafe produced a couple of Clark's Nutcrackers flying over the car park.

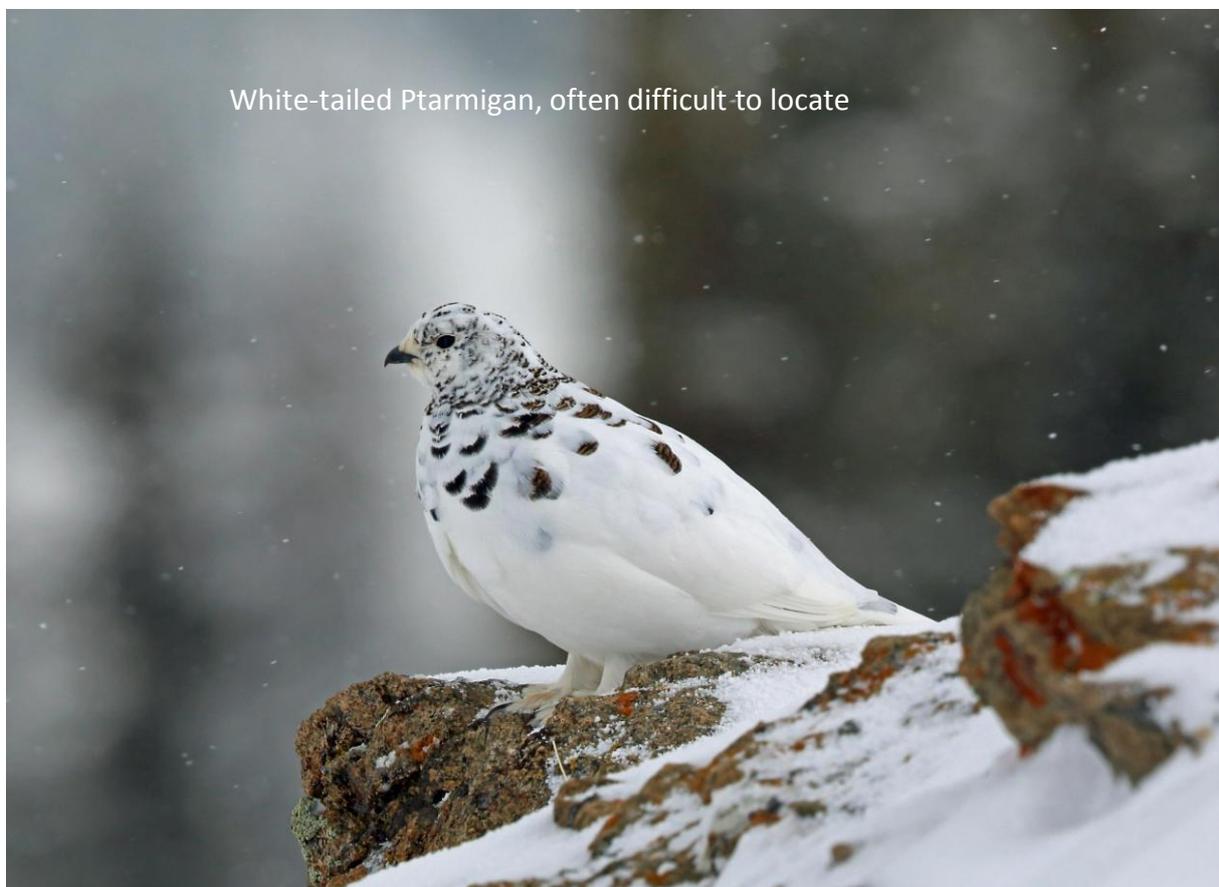
Our next stop was an area of pinyon/juniper (or P/J) habitat near to Buena Vista. Here a pleasant walk in a different setting provided new species for the trip including two Ruby-crowned Kinglet, three Western Scrub-Jays, three Bushtits and a Clark's Nutcracker as well as at least 30 Mountain Bluebirds. A total of 100 Red Deer and 50 Mule Deer was noted during the day.

We then drove north via historic Leadville and on to Georgetown the base for our final night. A brief walk around the village produced great views of a pair of Fox Sparrows, not always an easy bird to see. Our last evening meal was taken in a rather lively local restaurant for such a small quaint town, but with a few laughs as ever over a drink or two.



Fox Sparrow, a decent record in mid April

Wednesday 22 April Though this was our last day, we endeavoured to make it a full one with plenty of birds and wildlife. The Rockies had sustained very heavy snow fall whilst we had been touring the state, but today the minor roads were all open again, and so we ventured one more time to the summit of the nearby Loveland Pass. Could we pull it off and in the brief time available finally manage to see White-tailed Ptarmigan? Careful scanning again and again over the snow slopes produced several American Pipits, fly over rosy-finches but our luck seemed to be out. One by one we returned to the vehicles in the parking lot, and we were ready for moving off when the cry went up from Gary "I've got one". We reassembled and there amazingly were two White-tailed Ptarmigans, one completely snow white in colour, the other beginning to show some summer plumage on its head. The birds were chasing around but then settled to shelter under stunted mountain junipers protruding from the snow. The white bird blended almost perfectly with its surroundings and it was easy to see why many birders simply do not see these birds. A fantastic and hard earned conclusion to our mountain birding.



Back on the interstate highway into Denver we paused at a couple of look-outs to check for Bighorn Sheep, which surprisingly had eluded us so far on the trip. Again luckily we managed to spot three of these wonderful animals on a hillside, the information board almost directing us where to look!

Bighorn Sheep, watch out for those horns!



A brief stop was made at the Genesee Mountain Park alongside the interstate, where we enjoyed nice views of Chipping Sparrows, Eastern Bluebird, both White and Red-breasted Nuthatches, Pine Siskin, and a medium sized *accipiter*, probably a Cooper's Hawk.

Finally we made our last stop at Barr Lake, just north-east of Denver, and conveniently close to the international airport. Here a pleasant stroll in sunny warm weather produced a further five Yellow-rumped Warbler including both Myrtle and Audubon's forms, House Wren, many Red-winged Blackbirds, Great Northern Diver, five Slavonian Grebes and ten Franklin's Gulls. The last birds viewed through our telescopes were a pair of Bald Eagles at their nest, the heads of the recently hatched young protruding up above the nest and with this species being the national bird of America, it was both a fitting end to the trip and a sign that spring and new life was emerging across this vast land.

It was time to load the vehicles for the short drive to the airport. The trip had achieved its objectives with the key grouse species seen at their leks, as well as a wonderful supporting cast of birds and other wildlife bursting into life as spring began to warm the Rocky Mountains and the prairies. All tour groups will say this is a tiring trip with long road journeys

and many early starts. That is of course true, but the rewards are memorable moments amongst some of North America's finest birds, wildlife and scenery.

McCown's Longspur, Pawnee National Grasslands, a highlight of every trip to Colorado



Big thanks to all our American guides and hosts for helping us make this such a great trip. Also to Stephen Elliott, John Hartley and Nigel Voaden for letting us use their photos, all taken on the trip April 2015.

Lance Degnan and Nick Whitehouse. Birding Abroad

