

2012 WildWings Colorado grouse tour report

By tour leader, Dick Filby

Well, yet again we saw all the lekking grouse this year, and very well, plus virtually all other major target species, and many more besides! Also, we had a great mammal tally with 31 species in total. The weather and road conditions were fine, and we had a great team of enthusiastic participants. I am indebted to Gordon for contributing so many great photos taken on the trip. They are published on the WildWings website in the trip reports section, look for the documents named "Colorado Tour photo gallery". Reliving the tour through the write-up and the photos, makes me look forward even more to do it again next year. I can't wait!

Saturday

Everyone (with the exception Gordon) arrived into Denver in the evening and transferred to the airport motel for the overnight stay. Although I'm sure that Gordon probably wished his flight wasn't six hours late, at least he slept well on the non-stop flight from London and was able to get additional rest at the motel before we left.

Sunday

Rising at a modest hour we had breakfast and set off for the Pawnee Grasslands. The weather was fine, the drive straight-forward, and before long we made our first birding stop at a roadside pond. The long list of birds present included Pied-billed Grebes, Great Blue Heron, a pair of Blue-winged Teal, a drake Canvasback, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Ducks, Lesser Scaup, Buffleheads, and a female Common Merganser. A Cliff Swallow skimmed the roadside field opposite. Shortly after, as we approached the Pawnee Grasslands we saw the first (of many) Pronghorns. These elegant antelopes are always a joy to see, and these were no exception, close to the road in nice early morning light. Thence we headed onto the grasslands themselves and straight to a favoured spot for Chestnut-collared Longspurs. Within minutes of arriving we were watching a stunning male in the telescopes – an auspicious start with one of the harder-to-see target species of the trip. This was soon followed with excellent and prolonged views of one of the many great mammals to be seen on the trip: Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel. Two of them scampered around very close to the van, allowing for many good photos. Soon afterwards, after our first Loggerhead Shrikes of the trip, and then a Gray Fox, we were watching two Mountain Plovers in the 'scopes, without us having to walk more than five paces from the van. These splendid birds, although right out in the open, blend in so well to their habitat that they can be surprisingly difficult to spot on many occasions, but that was not the case today! Then, as we headed towards a picnic lunch, the first Golden Eagle of the trip flew along the ridge north of the road and although it did not afford great views, by the trip's end we were to see many more, some of them spectacularly well!

After lunch we concentrated on getting good views of McCown's Longspurs and were not disappointed, seeing tens of them coming in to drink at a trackside pool, and even had some on the track itself, very close to our mobile hide – i.e. the van. Along with them we saw scores more Horned Larks, we had already seen 100's in the morning, and unexpectedly, a splendid male Lapland Longspur (aka Lapland Bunting), in full breeding plumage. That made a total

of three species of longspurs for the day –including males of all three species in full breeding plumage. A real treat, especially as the Lapland was the first ever seen on the WildWings Colorado tour.

We then headed east, for our appointment the following day with our first lek of the trip: Greater Prairie-Chickens. As we drove we saw our first two Swainson's Hawks, a couple of Northern Harriers, several more Red-tailed Hawks and a couple of American Kestrels. Best perhaps though was the stop for a Great Horned Owl. The birds had abandoned the nest tree that I was familiar with, but they had relocated to a much closer, roadside tree, that afforded us great views of both the male and female.

After an early dinner, for those that did not head straight to bed, we searched unsuccessfully for Eastern Screech Owls at dusk. However we did see another Great Horned Owl and a Belted Kingfisher, and the "owlers" still managed to get to bed fairly early, ahead of our pre-dawn start.

Monday

We headed out in the pre-dawn darkness with our guide to the Greater Prairie-Chicken lek to which we had exclusive access. We entered the hide, set up scopes and cameras, and awaited the show. Soon, out of the darkness, we could the first sounds of the males as they started to display. Chicken-like clucking, and the eerie booming sounds filled the air as they inflated their throat pouches and exhaled, and was joined by the calls of Burrowing Owls, until one of the owls sounded the alarm and all fell silent for several long minutes. As we strained our eyes, the first light of day helped the sinking moon to illuminate the lekking ground, and with the birds starting to call again, we could make out their silhouettes as they squared off against each other. As the light grew better we were eventually getting fantastic views and, for those with longer lenses, great photos too, not just of the incredible Greater Prairie-Chickens, but also of five Burrowing Owls. Everyone agreed it was truly an unforgettable show and well worth the effort of the early start. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the activity diminished and the females left, leaving the males to realise that their chances were over for this session and all that remained was for them to indulge in some one-to-one sparring. Eventually this too diminished and it was time to leave. We were soon enjoying breakfast before heading south in search of more birds whilst en-route to our next lek tomorrow: Lesser Prairie-Chickens.

Our guide took us to two places to look for Northern Bobwhites, but though he had seen coveys at both sites several times in recent weeks, we could not find any today and he figured that the birds were now settling down to breed and were becoming much more secretive. However, our first Vesper Sparrow of the trip, perched up right by the van, a couple of Great Horned Owls, a pair of Killdeers, and some splendid Wild Turkeys, including displaying males, were all greatly enjoyed.

Our next stop was the dam at Bonny State Park. Unfortunately this site is in severe decline due to the Kansas authorities suing Colorado for payment for the water, with the result that Colorado decided to pull the plug, quite literally. The reservoir only had a tiny puddle of water left in it, and by next year's trip, will likely not be a stop for waterbirds at all. We managed to see quite a few species, but all were rather distant and the decline of the habitat meant that we did not enjoy our visit anything like as much as in previous years. However, headline birds still included ca.20 Sandhill Cranes, American Avocets, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Baird's Sandpipers, a couple of Franklin's Gulls in splendid breeding plumage, our only American Herring Gull of the trip, along with lots of Ring-billed Gulls. We had our picnic lunch and headed on south, towards our next lek.

The drive was typified by the long straight roads across the prairie, passing vast wheat and corn fields, with Horned Larks, often numerous, being virtually the only birds. Occasionally we passed Black-tailed Prairie-Dog colonies, and at one there was a Burrowing Owl on show. A roadside Great Egret was a new bird for the tour! Before long we were in the Cimarron National Grasslands and arriving at our motel for the night. We had arrived with enough time to grab a bite to eat and, for those who wanted, the chance to head out to the Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek before dusk; everyone opted to do so. We saw four birds at the lek, but they were not displaying. On the drive back to town we saw two more Great Horned Owls to round off an excellent day. Early to bed, we were eager to see the Lesser Prairie-Chickens display in the morning.

Tuesday

Some overnight rain was not heavy and had not turned the side roads into the skid pans that it could have done, but it had, unusually, caused fog to form. In town it was not very dense, but by the time we got to the lek it was pretty thick. Not too however to see an Ord's Kangaroo-Rat that crossed our path, clearly visible in the headlights. As we squeezed into the hide before first light, we hoped that the rising sun would burn the fog off quickly. The air was filled with the sounds of Horned Larks singing, soon to be replaced by Western Meadowlarks and the sounds of the Lesser Prairie-Chickens displaying. At first we feared that the fog was too dense to see them, but suddenly we spotted them in full display, right on the edge of visibility. Whilst less than ideal on the one hand, we thoroughly enjoyed this privileged and atmospheric scene, and with the aid of the scopes were able to see the extensive yellow combs and purple throat sacs of the males. Some one and a half hours after sun-up the activity had died down and we left for breakfast, seeing some Lark Buntings at the roadside before joining those in the group that had elected for a lie-in rather than the pre-dawn start. Afterwards, as we headed for some nearby ponds we saw yet more Lark Buntings, so everyone got to see them, before we enjoyed four Black-crowned Night-Herons, four American Avocets, three splendid Eared (Black-necked) Grebes in full breeding plumage, Double-crested Cormorants, a good selection of ducks including Blue-winged Teal, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Buffleheads (the males are so dramatic), and Ruddy Ducks in their native land.

After two days of long drives, we looked forward to the much shorter drive today, and our ranch home-stay. En route we enjoyed some Chihuahuan Ravens, close to the road and then soaring over us calling, our first warbler of the trip – an Orange-crowned, and at the same spot, a splendid covey of Scaled Quail that performed very well for everyone. After a lunch stop, where we saw yet more Great-tailed Grackles, we later had prolonged views of a Ferruginous Hawk circling right over the van, allowing everyone to get a great look and photos too.

Arriving at the ranch we settled into our rooms and had a drink and home-baked cookies before heading out birding. Our late afternoon excursion could not have been more idyllic, with great birding accompanied by dramatic skies and scenery in near calm conditions. Nearby thunderstorms avoided us and bird highlights included a pair of Wood Ducks, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Phoebe, Say's Phoebe, a pair of Mountain Bluebirds, a Townsend's Solitaire, Canyon Towhee, at least two Rufous-crowned Sparrows, and great views of Canyon, Rock and Bewick's Wrens. We prepared dinner at the Ranch, and for those who wanted, we went out briefly in search of mammals and Western Screech Owls. We were unsuccessful in finding any owls, but we did see a Swift Fox and a Striped Skunk.

Wednesday

For those who wanted, we headed out at dawn for some pre-breakfast birding. Nearby, at the top of a small canyon, a Gray Fox slipped out of the gulley and disappeared off through the Juniper trees, and a couple of Pinyon Jays flew in and landed nearby. Canyon and Spotted Towhees were both seen, and further down we had scope views of yet another Rufous-crowned Sparrow, singing up high on a bush. At a bridge over the stream, we had an Orange-crowned Warbler, and an Audubon's form Yellow-rumped Warbler, as well as a Downy Woodpecker and, nearby, a Northern Flicker excavating a nesting cavity. The best was come shortly afterwards as we headed back towards the ranch for breakfast: A Greater Roadrunner crossed in front of the van, and then stopped amongst the rocks just feet away from the van, giving us great views and even some photos too.

Back at the ranch I popped my head out of the door at breakfast only to spot a Ladder-backed Woodpecker close to the buildings, which was then watched in the nearby scrub by those who followed it. They were also able to find the two Great Horned Owls that nest behind the ranch. All too soon it was time to say goodbye to our gracious hosts and head west, towards the mountains and our next lek, Gunnison Sage-Grouse. The Ranch stay, as always, was far better than staying at another small town motel, and was much appreciated by all.

Pausing at a lake favoured by passage waders, we found a Baird's Sandpiper, half a dozen Snowy Plovers, 25 Black-necked Stilts, a Lesser Yellowlegs, several Killdeer, plus our first Western Grebe, and scores of beautiful, summer-plumaged Eared Grebes (known to us from the UK as Black-necked Grebes of course). We had lunch at a site further down the road, chosen because it is a good site for Curve-billed Thrashers, and only a few yards off our route. Whilst searching for the thrashers, we were entertained by several Pronghorn, and, when they emerged from hiding under the cactus, several Scaled Quail too. Not bad for a supporting cast, plus we were finally rewarded with a Curve-billed Thrasher sitting out in full view. Time to head to the mountains!

It was not long before our first unscheduled roadside stop. This one was not for birds however, but for three Bighorn Sheep, grazing amongst the rocks just above the road, and allowing us excellent views. Behind us, the Arkansas River tumbled eastwards towards the plains, whilst above us, an ever changing vista of forests, valleys and snow covered peaks. As the Chaffee County sign said "**Now this is Colorado**".

We headed up, past Monarch ski area and over Monarch Pass, 11,312 feet, the roads remained dry and the views a constant and ever changing wonder. The road drops into the Gunnison Basin and before long we were checking in at our motel close to Gunnison itself, and heading out to early dinner, and early to bed.

Thursday

An early rendezvous with our guide saw us driving out to a hide well before dawn. Once settled in with scopes and tripods all set up, we opened the shutters and waited for first light to reveal the lek. Sure enough, the Gunnison Sage-Grouse were present out on the pasture in front of us, and with scopes we could make out their display quite clearly as the light improved. However, as is the norm with this species these days, they left early, flying off in a group as if disturbed. We could not see what might have caused it, but it was nothing to do with us, and as the hide is several hundred yards from the lek, not really likely either. Nearby we looked for Gunnison Prairie-Dogs, and although we could see their burrows, unfortunately they were not active at this early hour. Back at the motel we enjoyed breakfast before setting off in search of Sage Thrashers.

We succeeded in easily seeing singing Sage Thrashers at my favourite site, right next to the road, before we headed up to the spectacular Black Canyon. Here the waters of the Gunnison River have carved an extremely narrow gorge,

deeper than the Grand Canyon. We were fortunate with the weather which was also dramatic, and the frequent snow showers meant that Dusky Grouse were going to be easier to find. Sure enough, before long, Gordon spotted one, and then Janet another, both displaying at very close range. We don't always see this dramatic grouse here, and have to resort to one of several "back-up" sites. Not this trip! After having our fill, we headed along the South Rim Drive of the National Park, whilst the snow squalls allowed us glimpses of the scenic splendour. After turning around at the far end, we paused at the Painted Wall parking area. Walking the few yards down to the overlook, the full view revealed itself only at the last moment, as we peered over the edge to see the Gunnison river tumbling over 2,000 feet below us. It was almost straight down. Then, the snow starting falling again, rising vertically on the updrafts out of the canyon into our faces so we beat retreat to the van and headed into the visitor's centre for some retail therapy. Suitably satiated, we headed to nearby Delta for lunch at Confluence Park.

On the main lake at Confluence Park, a lone Snow Goose lingered from the small wintering group. Unfortunately it had fishing wire attached to it, but when an adult Bald Eagle appeared over the tree, the Snow Goose soon demonstrated that it was still strong and took to the air and flew strongly for over a mile with the eagle in hot pursuit. Keeping low initially, it then climbed much higher, evading its pursuer with a series of turns and manoeuvres afforded to those who want to avoid their last moment. The eagle gave up on that idea of lunch and headed off in search of easier pickings.

We headed to one of my favourite birding spots of the region, Fruitgrower's Reservoir. En route we stopped at a favoured haunt of Lewis's Woodpeckers, and sure enough, three awaited us in the roadside trees and on the telephone poles. We had excellent view of this gaudy, bizarrely coloured bird, and they posed for camera and telescope alike. Soon after, at the reservoir, we were enjoying a plethora of wetland birds including a small party of Sandhill Cranes performing a noisy flyby, singing Marsh Wrens right next to the road, scores of Western Grebes, including some giving their bizarre calls and indulging in their dramatic, ritualistic water dances. With them we managed to find a pair of Clark's Grebes, whilst in the shallows there were a pair of Marbled Godwits.

As we drove up onto the Grand Mesa, passing through the Gambel Oak shrublands that cloak the lower slopes, up through the Aspen forests, and on to the higher elevations, where we were soon above 10,000 feet and into the Spruce/Fir forests of plateau. Snow lay deep in the forest and open meadows, tho' not as deep as usual, this having been a fairly dry winter. Some years the snow lies still 6-8ft deep or more in April! The weather however was decidedly wintry and determined to thwart any prospect of some late afternoon birding, with snow squalls driven by a stiff breeze sending us straight to our accommodations for the night, spotting a rather large Porcupine atop a Gambel Oak as we arrived. After an early supper, with improving conditions, most of us opted to head out in search of owls. We were soon rewarded with great views of a Northern Pygmy-Owl calling from a leafless Aspen right over our heads! Further along we tried for Northern Saw-whet Owl, without success, before some of the party called it a night. The rest continued in our quest for Boreal (aka Tengmalm's) Owl. After some perseverance we glimpsed one flying across the road in front of the van, but could not relocate it. Wanting better views we moved on, trying several more spots until finally a calling bird revealed itself. We even managed to get the scope on it, as we illuminated it with a red flashlight beam to avoid disturbing it too much. Add another couple of Porcupine sightings and what a great evening it had been!

Friday

Rising a little later today, we headed out at dawn. The road was still covered in an inch or two of snow from last night, but the weather was fine and calm, if a tad chilly (a few degrees below freezing). With virtually no traffic, it

was an idyllic setting for some high altitude forest birding. Before breakfast we saw singing Fox Sparrow, several delightful Pine Grosbeaks, Cassin's Finches, a Gray Jay that came to steal crumbs, and an American Three-toed Woodpecker that we found as we heard the tapping as it peeled bark off a spruce tree in the peace and quiet of the calm morning.

As we packed to leave after breakfast, a couple of Red-naped Sapsuckers showed very well near the front door, a Porcupine scurried by, a Colorado (or Least) Chipmunk was in shrubs, and finally as we were just about to set off, a couple of Yellow-bellied Marmots appeared. We hadn't driven more than a couple of hundred yards before pausing for views of a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel and another couple of Yellow-bellied Marmots. The mammal list was expanding fast!

We soon had the Colorado River on our list as we headed into the Grand Junction area. Our first stop was at a friend's house where feeders attract a good variety of species. We soon saw one of our major target species, the delightful Gambel's Quail, perched up on a pile of thoughtfully placed wood cuttings in a ravine behind the house. These retiring birds can be so much easier to see when they have a site with free food. We also saw our only Lesser Goldfinches of the trip at the feeders. Nearby we searched for Western Screech-Owls at several locations, including in a nestbox where I had seen one only two weeks earlier, but alas there were none to be found. We did however find a White-winged Dove, this is a very rare species in Colorado, but seems to be on the increase, although nothing like as swiftly as the introduced Eurasian Collared Doves which have spread like wildfire across the US in the past decade. Low over some pools we saw a large group of White-throated Swifts, freshly arrived migrants, and a Musk Rat that swam across in front of a Beaver's Lodge.

We moved on to the Colorado National Monument, with its spectacular rock formations on the edge of the desert. In addition to the wonderful scenery, we found our targets here: the dramatically patterned Black-throated Sparrow, and the recently split Juniper Titmouse. Also we heard more Pinyon Jays, and had great views of a Spotted Towhee and a couple of Bushtits. On last year's tour we happened upon Colorado's first ever breeding pair of Black-chinned Sparrows here, just after their discovery, and as we saw today, at least one had returned this year. We still had not given up on Western Screech Owl, so continued the search, visiting a couple of houses where they have been seen recently until we finally succeeded as one poked its head out of a nestbox for us. Perseverance pays!

We headed along I70 eastbound back towards the mountains near the Continental Divide, seeing an occupied Osprey nest en-route, and then pausing for some eye-to-eye views into a Bald Eagle nest, on the banks of the Colorado River, as we looked across from the river bluff opposite. Late afternoon we were at the motel in Carbondale and heading across the road to the diner. Afterwards we searched in the nearby Pinyon-Juniper forests at dusk for Northern Saw-whet Owls, and after a while, we heard one, calling persistently. However it did not reveal itself, and we headed to bed.

Saturday

We stopped at my house on our way up to Snowmass to pick up some spare waterproof/windproof over-trousers for a couple of folks who had forgotten to bring them, and 8 pairs of ski-goggles. By the time we got to Snowmass, it was, aptly enough, snowing hard. The promised change in the weather had arrived! Good news because it had been a very difficult this spring to see any Rosy-Finches, and we needed all the help we could get. We drove down the private road to my friends' house and the flakes started to fall hard and fast. Our hosts were away, but had, as usual, graciously allowed us to keep the feeders out, hoping they were not wrecked by the earliest rising Black Bears, which

are already out of hibernation in mid-April. They tell me that the best time to see the bears on their property is when there is a pot of peach jam on the stove, late summer. I have never seen one in April! My wife, Denise had driven the 40 mile round trip several times in the last week to keep the feeders filled, using 25lbs of sunflower seed at a time. It was not in vain. At least 100 Evening Grosbeaks greeted us, along with up to 40 Brown-capped Rosy-Finches. At times the birds were thicker than the falling snow! We had terrific views of this amazing spectacle, watching the birds from just a few feet away as they fed frenetically, fleeing into the trees whenever they thought they heard an alarm call, but pouring back down to feed within a few seconds. In order to try for more Rosy-Finches, we put plan "b" into operation: we were going to ride the chairlift at the ski-area, to get to where the ski company had a feeder up at 10,620 feet, a 10 minute ride that climbs over 2,000 from start to the top of the hill. Well, with the breeze and the snow, we donned our waterproof, windproof outer layer and ski-goggles, broke open the hand-warmers, and stepped onto the chairlift. Rising above the forest and the ski-runs that divide it, it was a dramatic ride, and a WildWings tour first! We were whisked up to the top of the hill, and within minutes the weather was clearing, revealing the true extent of the views. As soon as we disembarked we could already see a large flock of Rosy-Finches in the trees and on the sunflower seed on the ground. There were about 100 birds, and being habituated to the skiers and snow-boarders, allowed us very close approach. Whilst all were Brown-capped Rosy-Finches, the Colorado near-endemic, and we could find neither of the other species with them, never-the-less, it was worthy of celebration as we knew of nobody else seeing any Rosy-Finches in recent days. The out-of-state Gray-crowned and Blacks had already headed north, earlier than usual, and the Brown-capped had mostly moved up into the breeding territories, onto the tundra above tree-line, which was relatively free of snow for the time of year. Within minutes the weather was clearing, revealing the nearby mountains, dominated by Capitol Peak, 14,130 ft, Snowmass Mountain 14,092 ft, and Mount Daly, a mere 13,300 ft, all of which were viewable from the picture windows in the restaurant as we sipped our hot chocolate. As we rode back down the chairlift, we passed in and out of the swirling low clouds, enjoying a different aspect of the view, but it did not feel cold or windy, especially as we were suitably dressed. We then rode up in an enclosed Gondola car to the other side of the ski-area, where there was another feeder. After getting off the gondola, we stepped onto a moving walkway (aka 'magic carpet') in a Perspex tunnel – all very surreal at nearly 10,000 feet in the forest! Arriving at that feeder we were greeted by a splendid pair of Pine Grosbeaks, soon followed by a Hairy Woodpecker, and then, briefly a Gray Jay and a couple of Steller's Jays. Whilst we were enjoying the birds, this was the beginner ski area, and children under 4 were learning to ski.. Now if only I had learnt at that age!

Back at the bottom of the hill, we discarded a few outer layers and drove to a nearby river bridge, where we found American Dippers were nest building underneath on a beam inaccessible to predators. Needless to say, we got great views of them on the streamside rocks as they picked, washed and cleaned various leaves and twigs before taking them up to their new (and unseen by us) home.

Next we joined up with a couple of friends, one of whom, Linda, had kindly agreed to take us into a private local reservoir that she has permission for. Thanks Linda! Making our way down the short track to the dam wall, we were pleased to see about 30 Barrow's Goldeneye, including displaying males as well as females, amongst the hordes of waterfowl that also included a summer plumaged Common Loon (Great Northern Diver), equally stunning Eared (Black-necked) Grebes, as well as Cinnamon Teal, Lesser Scaup, Buffleheads, and a host of more familiar ducks too. Also, a Beaver glimpsed as it swam towards its large and well constructed lodge just offshore, but it was not seen sufficiently well to be added to the trip list.

By now it was lunchtime, and my wife, Denise, had agreed to host, whilst we would also be able to relax, use the facilities, and enjoy the birds at our feeders. She had prepared a "brunch feast" of waffles, fresh fruit: mango, banana, strawberries; Mixed berries, yoghurt, cheesy potatoes, scrambled eggs, sausages, homemade bread, toast,

proper tea (PG Tips), and, of course, a gallon or two of coffee. Biased I may be, but we all consumed a fair helping or two, and I'd say she did a brilliant job: Thanks Denise! Filling a box with homemade cookies, we set off for the Yampa Valley – our next destination, and our next grouse-lek: Sharp-tailed Grouse. En route we spotted another summer-plumaged Common Loon, before we drove up a long and not too muddy track up into the hills to a spot where we had a couple of small hides set up. They were still standing (and hadn't blown down in the winds) and we noted where to park the van in the pre-dawn darkness, and how to find them from there. Whilst doing this we actually saw three Sharp-tailed Grouse eyeing us from the top of some nearby Gambel Oaks.. Well, that was the species "on the list", but we had better ideas about seeing them lekking at close quarters. What a privilege! Satisfied that we knew where to come in the morning we left, checked in, had dinner and headed to bed soon after dark.

Sunday

It was back to the rising early bit, and before first light we were in position at the hides. After a short wait, we began to hear the sounds of "Sharpies" on the lek, and just a few feet away. They were very close! Clucking, wing-whirring, foot-stamping, the lek was getting underway and it was still almost pitch black! Slowly as the light improved, we could begin to make them out, but the weather was not helping us: the larger hide that had been set up for us had a fine mesh screen, and the other much smaller hide, has open slits. Neither are ideal when you have driving snow "in your face". The weather was not encouraging the females to show up early this morning either, so we had plenty of males facing each other off, one to one, sparring for quite some time, before the action really got going. Once that happened, we were treated to a real close up of one of the most bizarre of all the grouse-leks. I liken the Sharpies to clockwork toys on caffeine – their display dancing is frenetic and totally crazed. Safely hidden in the hides, the birds were seemingly oblivious to our presence, but were sometimes as close as 20 feet or even less. I was thrilled to again be able to offer this privileged viewing to everyone, and thanks to the landowner too without whom it would not be possible. It is also a benefit of having a really small group, as any more would have made the hides far too cramped to use. As it was we just managed with 6 – thanks to Janet for volunteering for a lie-in! As we left, the previously dry track was now a sticky and slippery mess. Everyone's boots were caked in thick clay, and the drive down was a slow and careful one. After breakfast we saw our first Prairie Falcon of the trip, and a few fly-over Sandhill Cranes, before heading up and over the Continental Divide again at Rabbit Ears Pass (9,426 ft), and then again at Muddy Pass (8,772 ft). Dropping down into North Park, the high inter-montane plateau of central northern Colorado, we soon spotted several Rough-legged Hawks (Buzzards), and stopped to get truly excellent views of birds repeatedly over the van. In these more remote parts of Colorado, traffic is rarely an issue, and we scarcely saw another vehicle on the road whilst we were watching these magnificent raptors, nor any more on the rest of our drive into Walden. It was still several hours till sundown (the best time to look for Moose, so for those who wanted there was some free time (nap time?) whilst I drove out to the private lek to check the state of the track etc. Everything was fine, although a Greater Sage Grouse had obviously perished on the lek as we found it's remains. The snow showers continued, giving us some very atmospheric shots of a Merlin perched on a roadside fence. Early dinner was followed by a drive in search of Moose, and taking the advice of the person we get access to the lek from, we met with instant success: two moose, that we were able to drive up fairly close to in the "mobile hide" i.e. the van. It was still early, and most of the group elected for the chance to go to bed very early, but not before we had stopped to 'scope our second Prairie Falcon of the day, in the wonderful evening light.

Departing the motel, Gordon and I headed out to the lek to see what was going on, as Greater Sage-Grouse often lek at dusk. Well sure enough, around 15 showed up and we were treated to some displays as the light faded. Along

the road on the way back we saw two White-tailed Jack-Rabbits. Back in town, the snow set in again in earnest, so before bed I brushed it off the van and laid some towels on the windscreen to save it from getting too iced up.

Monday

I set my alarm especially early, cleaned off the snow and ice from the van, and called the rest of the group that we would leave a few minutes early if possible, as the drive would be a bit slower than normal. The van handled the conditions well, we saw a White-tailed Jack-Rabbit, and right on time we arrived at the lek. Carefully positioning the van in the dark, in the featureless and now snow covered plain, we settled down. Within seconds we could hear the Greater Sage-Grouse displaying in the pitch black. It was still over half an hour until first light, one and a half hours until sunrise, these birds were already on the lek, and, as usual, by arriving very early we had avoided disturbing them. Through the binoculars, as the light increased, and with the benefit of the snow covered ground, we were first able to make out silhouettes, and then fantastic detail on the birds. Greater Sage-Grouse are perhaps the most regal (and largest) of all the grouse, and prefer to walk onto the lek, rather than fly. Most of the females, and some of the males, wait until it is light enough to see before moving onto the lek, and one of the latest males to arrive walked in right past the van, pausing for several minutes to display just a few yards away. We were very privileged! He then flew to join the main throng who were about 80-100yards away. We counted at least 46 males and 8 females, with perhaps more unseen in the nearby sage, when a Golden Eagle arrived, flying in from the north, and all the birds flushed off, flying off strongly to the south (unsurprisingly)! The eagle was unsuccessful, and settled down on a nearby mound. We left too, after taking a few more photos of the snowy and evocative scene, with its backdrop of snow covered peaks in every direction. Heading back to town, we picked up those who had opted for a lie-in and went to the National Forest visitor centre to view their bird feeders. With the fresh snow their Brown-capped Rosy-Finches had returned after an absence of several weeks. There were also many Pine Grosbeaks, Cassin's Finches, and a large flock of very noisy and boisterous Red-winged Blackbirds. We then headed back for breakfast and set off south for the final leg of our adventure, after a quick look at the reservoir and its breeding California Gulls.

Heading south across a beautiful, freshly snow covered "North Park", with the high mountains to cross yet again, we were pleased it was sunny and the road conditions were fine, the strong Colorado sun having not only melted the snow, but, aided by the crazily low humidity that is normal here, they were already dry! Our first stop was to watch a roadside colony of Wyoming Ground Squirrels, swelling our mammal list to new heights, before stopping for another Rough-legged Hawk (Buzsard). Then, a big surprise: Four Long-billed Curlews in the snow covered pasture, close to the road! We turned round and stopped close to them getting spectacular views in the scope, and some half-decent photos too. Later, after a sightseeing moment in Rand, we then stopped to watch a Northern Goshawk as it soared with prey in its talons. Next stop was to watch some more Barrow's Goldeneyes at a favoured spot to find them late in the season, before they move up onto the "Flattops Plateau" to breed. The drive was a scenic as any of the trip, indeed one of the best. However, before long we were checking in at Georgetown, having lunch, and then setting off for the "roof of Colorado", above tree-line, to the summit of Loveland Pass. Here we were truly atop the Rocky Mountains, and the views were simply fantastic, with the snow covered peaks alternately shrouded by cloud or bathed in afternoon sunshine, the winding road laid out beneath us like some model. At 12,000 feet we scanned from the car park for our quarry, White-tailed Ptarmigan for some time, without success. A skier and two dogs set off along the ridge, before skiing down to the road far below. The dogs ran this way and that, but we saw nothing. On his return to the car park we asked if he had seen any. He said his dogs often flush them, but not this afternoon. I took my scope and with Gordon we headed up the ridge to search further afield. It was not long before Gordon spotted two! The group set off up the slope and it was not long before we were enjoying magnificent views in the scope. The birds were only a few yards away, and carried on feeding as if we weren't there. The only time they

seemed concerned was when a Raven flew over. The setting could not have been more spectacular, and it was also nice to not be watching them from the car park! As a bonus a couple of Brown-capped Rosy-Finches flew over too, but we had seen them far better at Snowmass. Back in Georgetown we had a celebratory dinner with a glass of wine and a beer or two. With everything having fallen into place, we still had a last full day to enjoy, without having to revisit any critical site.

Tuesday

After breakfast we set off for the foothills, our first stop being Genesee Park. This Ponderosa pine forest has a lot of great birds, and we were soon enjoying most of them! Brown Creeper gave itself up in the tree limbs over our heads, Western Bluebirds, gaudy and showy were well appreciated, the Williamson's Sapsuckers simply stunning, three species of nuthatch: Pygmy, Red-breasted and White-breasted, all showed well – the latter at a friend's house, singing Dark-eyed Juncos, and some noteworthy mammals were too, with a very showy Abert's (Tassel-eared) Squirrel being the star. Two Elk were well photographed, and the herd of (domesticated) Bison allowed very close views in their pasture. Well, they were behind an 8ft fence! Good job as we were distracted by a singing Brown Creeper over our heads.

Lunch was followed by a visit to Red Rocks Park, a very scenic series of outcrops, and again a place with birdfeeders. A relaxing hour was spent here, with great views of Western Scrub-Jays, Dark-eyed Juncos, tantalising glimpses of a possible Prairie Falcon, plus a family of American Kestrels, and several White-throated Swifts.

Continuing our journey towards the airport, we made an opportunistic stop at a partially drained city park lake, spotting several Fox Squirrels as we approached, and scores of American Avocets on the mudflats. The next lake, as is often the case, held some lingering Hooded Mergansers! Hurrah! This is one of my regular spots to find this much desired species in the spring, the males are so dramatic and as always we thrilled to the great views. We took a short walk and saw some nesting Double-crested Cormorants, our first Blue Jay of the trip, and several Yellow-rumped Warblers of both the white-throated "Myrtle" form, and the yellow-throated "Audubon's" form. One last stop before our hotel had us watching a couple of "staked out" Harris's Sparrows, here right at the western edge of their wintering range. Never an easy bird to find even in winter, it is not surprising that we had never seen this species before on the grouse trip, so this was especially pleasing, and a new bird for most people on the trip. A very successful conclusion to a very successful trip! By dusk we had nearly finished dinner and it was early to bed for all.

Wednesday

After a leisurely breakfast, we dropped off those staying on in Colorado (for the rest of the day, or for two more days) at the car rental office, and then, for those heading for flights this morning, we dropped them off at the airport. After making our goodbyes, we made our separate ways. Thank-you all who joined me this year, I am really glad that you all enjoyed it so much, that it went almost perfectly and that you were still raving about it all the way to the very end. I for one can't wait to do it again next year. If you are kind enough to recommend it to your friends, or happen to be reading this because you are interested in doing it yourself, then I recommend registering soon, because already, as of late April 2012, we have bookings for the 2013 trip.

Dick Filby

Species List 2012

GREAT NORTHERN DIVER

Gavia immer (Common Loon)

PIED-BILLED GREBE

Podilymbus podiceps

EARED (Black-necked) GREBE

Podiceps nigricollis

WESTERN GREBE

Aechmophorus occidentalis

CLARK'S GREBE

Aechmophorus clarkii

AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN

Pelecanus erythrorhynchos

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT

Phalacrocorax auritus

GREAT BLUE HERON

Ardea herodias

GREAT EGRET

Ardea alba

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON

Nycticorax nycticorax

SNOW GOOSE

Chen caerulescens

CANADA GOOSE

Branta canadensis

WOOD DUCK

Aix sponsa

GREEN-WINGED TEAL

Anas crecca

MALLARD

Anas platyrhynchos

NORTHERN PINTAIL

Anas acuta

BLUE-WINGED TEAL

Anas discors

NORTHERN SHOVELER

Anas clypeata

GADWALL

Anas strepera

CINNAMON TEAL

Anas cyanoptera

AMERICAN WIGEON

Anas americana

CANVASBACK

Aythya valisineria

REDHEAD

Aythya americana

RING-NECKED DUCK

Aythya collaris

LESSER SCAUP

Aythya affinis

COMMON GOLDENEYE

Bucephala clangula

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE

Bucephala islandica

BUFFLEHEAD

Bucephala albeola

HOODED MERGANSER

Lophodytes cucullatus

COMMON MERGANSER (Goosander)

Mergus merganser americanus

RUDDY DUCK

Oxyura jamaicensis

TURKEY VULTURE

Cathartes aura

OSPREY

Pandion haliaetus

BALD EAGLE

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

NORTHERN HARRIER

Circus cyaneus

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

Accipiter striatus

COOPER'S HAWK

Accipiter cooperii

NORTHERN GOSHAWK

Accipiter gentilis

SWAINSON'S HAWK

Buteo swainsoni

RED-TAILED HAWK

Buteo jamaicensis

FERRUGINOUS HAWK

Buteo regalis

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK

Buteo agopus (R.-legged Buzzard)

GOLDEN EAGLE

Aquila chrysaetos

AMERICAN KESTREL

Falco sparverius

MERLIN

Falco columbarius

PRAIRIE FALCON

Falco mexicanus

PEREGRINE FALCON

Falco peregrinus

RING-NECKED PHEASANT

Phasianus colchicus

DUSKY GROUSE

Dendragapus obscurus

WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN

Lagopus leucurus

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE

Centrocercus urophasianus

GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE

Centrocercus minimus

GREATER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN

Tympanuchus cupido

LESSER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN

Tympanuchus pallidicinctus

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

Tympanuchus phasianellus

WILD TURKEY

Meleagris gallopavo

NORTHERN BOBWHITE

Colinus virginianus

SCALED QUAIL

Callipepla squamata

GAMBEL'S QUAIL

Callipepla gambelli

AMERICAN COOT

Fulica americana

SANDHILL CRANE

Grus canadensis

SNOWY (KENTISH) PLOVER

Charadrius alexandrinus

KILLDEER

Charadrius vociferus

MOUNTAIN PLOVER

Charadrius montanus

BLACK-NECKED STILT

Himantopus mexicanus

AMERICAN AVOCET

Recurvirostra americana

GREATER YELLOWLEGS

Tringa melanoleuca

LESSER YELLOWLEGS

Tringa flavipes

LONG-BILLED CURLEW

Numenius americanus

MARbled GODWIT	HAIRY WOODPECKER	WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH
<i>Limosa fedoa</i>	<i>Picoides villosus</i>	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>
BAIRD'S SANDPIPER	AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER	PYGMY NUTHATCH
<i>Calidris bairdii</i>	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>	<i>Sitta pygmaea</i>
LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER	NORTHERN FLICKER	BROWN CREEPER
<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	<i>Certhia americana</i>
FRANKLIN'S GULL	EASTERN PHOEBE	ROCK WREN
<i>Larus pipixican</i>	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>
RING-BILLED GULL	SAY'S PHOEBE	CANYON WREN
<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	<i>Sayornis saya</i>	<i>Cartherpes mexicanus</i>
CALIFORNIA GULL	HORNED LARK (Shorelark)	BEWICK'S WREN
<i>Larus californicus</i>	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>
AMERICAN HERRING GULL	TREE SWALLOW	MARSH WREN
<i>Larus (argentatus) smithsonianus</i>	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>
FERAL (ROCK) DOVE	BANK SWALLOW (Sand Martin)	AMERICAN DIPPER
<i>Columbia livia</i>	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>
EURASIAN COLLARED DOVE	CLIFF SWALLOW	WESTERN BLUEBIRD
<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>	<i>Sialia mexicana bairdi</i>
MOURNING DOVE	BARN SWALLOW (Swallow)	MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD
<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	<i>Sialia currucoides</i>
WHITE-WINGED DOVE	GRAY JAY	TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE
<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	<i>Myadestes townsendi</i>
GREATER ROADRUNNER	STELLER'S JAY	AMERICAN ROBIN
<i>Geococcyx californianus</i>	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
WESTERN SCREECH-OWL	BLUE JAY	SAGE THRASHER
<i>Otus kennicotti</i>	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	<i>Oreoscoptes montanus</i>
GREAT HORNED OWL	WESTERN SCRUB-JAY	CURVE-BILLED THRASHER
<i>Bubo virginianus</i>	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>	<i>Toxostoma curvirostre</i>
NORTHERN PYGMY OWL	PINYON JAY	LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE
<i>Glaucidium gnoma</i>	<i>Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus</i>	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>
BURROWING OWL	CLARK'S NUTCRACKER	(European) STARLING
<i>Athene cunicularia</i>	<i>Nucifraga columbiana</i>	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL (H)	BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE	ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER
<i>Aegolius acadicus</i>	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>	<i>Vermivora celata</i>
BOREAL (TENGMALM'S) OWL	AMERICAN CROW	YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER
<i>Aegolius funereus</i>	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	<i>Dendroica coronata coronata (Myrtle)</i>
WHITE-THROATED SWIFT	CHIHUAHUAN RAVEN	YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER
<i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i>	<i>Corvus cryptoleucus</i>	<i>Dendroica coronata auduboni (Audubon's)</i>
BELTED KINGFISHER	(Common) RAVEN	SPOTTED TOWHEE
<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>	<i>Corvus corax</i>	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>
LEWIS' WOODPECKER	BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE	CANYON TOWHEE
<i>Melanerpes lewis</i>	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	<i>Pipilo fuscus</i>
RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER	MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE	RUFIOUS-CROWNED SPARROW
<i>Sphyrapicus nuchalis</i>	<i>Poecile gambeli</i>	<i>Aimophila ruficeps</i>
WILLIAMSON'S SAPSUCKER	JUNIPER TITMOUSE	BLACK-CHINNED SPARROW
<i>Sphyrapicus thyroideus</i>	<i>Baelophus griseus</i>	<i>Spizella atrogularis</i>
LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER	BUSHTIT	VESPER SPARROW
<i>Picoides scalaris</i>	<i>Psaltriparus minimus</i>	<i>Pooecetes gramineus</i>
DOWNY WOODPECKER	RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH	LARK SPARROW
<i>Picoides pubescens</i>	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>

BLACK-THROATED SPARROW*Amphispiza bilineata***LARK BUNTING***Calamospiza melanocorys***SAVANNAH SPARROW***Passerculus sandwichensis***FOX SPARROW (Rocky Mtn form)***Passerella iliaca schistacea***SONG SPARROW***Melospiza melodia***HARRIS'S SPARROW***Zonotrychia querula***WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW***Zonotrychia leucophrys***DARK-EYED JUNCO***Junco hyemalis***LAPLAND LONGSPUR***Calcarius lapponicus***CHESTNUT-COLLARED LONGSPUR***Calcarius ornatus***MCCOWN'S LONGSPUR***Rhynchophanes mccownii***RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD***Agelaius phoeniceus***WESTERN MEADOWLARK***Sturnella neglecta***BREWER'S BLACKBIRD***Euphagus cyanocephalus***YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD***Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus***GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE***Quiscalus mexicanus***COMMON GRACKLE***Quiscalus quiscula***BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD***Molothrus ater***BROWN-CAPPED ROSY-FINCH***Leucosticte australis***PINE GROSBEEK***Pinicola enucleator***CASSIN'S FINCH***Carpodacus cassinii***HOUSE FINCH***Carpodacus mexicanus***PINE SISKIN***Carduelis pinus***LESSER GOLDFINCH***Carduelis psaltria***AMERICAN GOLDFINCH***Carduelis tristis***EVENING GROSBEEK***Coccothraustes vespertinus***HOUSE SPARROW***Passer domesticus***MAMMALS****EASTERN COTTONTAIL***Sylvilagus floridanus***MOUNTAIN COTTONTAIL***Sylvilagus nuttalli***BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT***Lepus californicus***WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT***Lepus townsendii***Least/Colorado Chipmunk spp***Tamias spp***YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOT***Marmota flaviventris***WYOMING GROUND -SQUIRREL***Spermophilus elegans***GOLDEN-MANTLED GROUND-SQUIRREL***Spermophilus lateralis***THIRTEEN-LINED GROUND -SQUIRREL***Spermophilus tridecemlineatus***ROCK SQUIRREL***Spermophilus variegates***WHITE-TAILED ANTELOPE-SQUIRREL***Ammospermophilus leucurus***WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE-DOG***Cynomys leucurus***BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE-DOG***Cynomys ludovicianus***ABERT'S SQUIRREL***Sciurus aberti***FOX SQUIRREL***Sciurus niger***PINE SQUIRREL (Red Squirrel)***Tamiasciurus hudsonicus***ORD'S KANGAROO-RAT***Dipodomys ordii***COMMON MUSKRAT***Ondatra zibethicus***COMMON PORCUPINE***Erethizon dorsatum***COYOTE***Canis latrans***SWIFT FOX***Vulpes velox***GRAY FOX***Urocyon cinereoargenteus***RACCOON***Procyon lotor***MINK***Mustela vison***STRIPED SKUNK***Mephitis mephitis***ELK***Cervus elaphus***MULE DEER***Odocoileus hemionus***WHITE-TAILED DEER***Odocoileus virginianus***MOOSE***Alces alces***PRONGHORN***Antilocapra americana***MOUNTAIN SHEEP (Bighorn Sheep)***Ovis canadensis*