



Colorado 2024: Prairie Chickens, Grouse & More

April 1-11, 2024 (11 days)



White-tailed Ptarmigan by Stephan Lorenz

Trip report compiled by Tour Leader: Stephan Lorenz

Tour Summary

We covered 2,650 miles on this journey through breathtaking Colorado with some slices of Kansas and Utah. The top three birds as chosen by participants were Greater Sage-Grouse, White-tailed Ptarmigan, and Lesser Prairie-Chicken. In addition to the spectacular grouse, we recorded a wide variety of ducks, raptors, corvids, woodpeckers, and finches. A good selection of mammals added to the excitement plus the never-ending landscapes of the Rocky Mountains. Local cuisine added to the enjoyment of this grouse adventure.



Greater Sage-Grouse by Stephan Lorenz

We started the tour with a midday meeting in Denver where the majority of the group gathered at a hotel near the airport and the remainder were promptly picked up at the airport. From Denver, we drove south towards Colorado Springs where we stopped at the beautiful Garden of the Gods Park, which protects spectacular formations of reddish sandstone. These dramatic cliffs are favored by Prairie Falcons and Claudia spotted one in the scope after some diligent scanning. We enjoyed great studies of the bird perched on the cliff. Other notable species included great views of a vocal Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, a mewling Spotted Towhee, and an inquisitive Bushtit. We also noted the only White-throated Swifts of the tour here. We continued south towards Pueblo and made a brief stop in a section of prairie before town. Here we were rewarded with excellent close views of a single Mountain Plover, a welcomed specialty species of the tour. The welcome dinner in Pueblo tasted great and we then retired to the hotel after an exciting first afternoon of the tour.

We started with an early breakfast and then carried on toward the foothills west of Pueblo. Here we soon found the first “chicken” of the tour, the intricately marked Scale Quail. One of the birds came close to check us out, offering incredible photo opportunities. We also added Say’s Phoebe, Canyon Towhee, and Curve-billed Thrasher among common species. We then commenced the lengthy drive east towards Kansas but paused at two reservoirs along the way and this rewarded us with numerous waterfowl and best of all a Clark’s Grebe that showed very close to the shore. The rest of the day we continued east and eventually reached Oakley, Kansas in the early evening. We had a home-cooked dinner at the local country club and then retired in preparation for the early start the next day.



Scaled Quail by Stephan Lorenz

This was an early morning as we traveled to a remote ranch to witness the fascinating display of the endangered Lesser Prairie-Chicken. It proved to be one of the best displays of this rare bird that we have seen with two dozen birds stomping, jumping, hopping, running, circling, and every movement in between all the while hooting and booming. At least two GreaterXLesser hybrids were noted among the group. Despite a Northern Harrier doing its best to disturb the birds, the males kept returning for more activity, what a morning! After a hot breakfast, we headed back west into Colorado and then

north, making a strategic stop for longspurs and we found several flocks of Thick-billed Longspurs totaling nearly 1,000 individuals, several offering good scope views. We then tackled the rest of the journey toward Wray but were interrupted by a nesting Great Horned Owl. A Chestnut-collared Longspur that flew across the road clued us into an area that held a small flock of these pretty longspurs. We met the local rancher who graciously allowed us to see the prairie-chickens and learned a lot about the local area firsthand. The dinner in Wray was as tasty as always.



Lesser Prairie-Chicken by Stephan Lorenz

Another early start saw us out on the prairie north of Wray where a dozen Greater Prairie-Chickens whooped, pranced, and danced while four Burrowing Owls looked disinterested in the show. A fast-flying Prairie Falcon eventually ended the show, but the birds rallied one more time, offering great photo opportunities as they scurried about the grassland with air sacs inflated. On the way out, a Sage Thrasher on a fence post was a nice surprise. After breakfast, we drove north and stopped near Haxtun. Here we added numerous ducks and a small group of lingering Cackling Geese. In the late afternoon, we entered the dramatic Rocky Mountains along I-70 and soon reached the beautiful town of Silverthorne surrounded by snow-capped mountains on all sides. We had a bit of time to spare before dinner and used it to track down a group of Barrow's Goldeneyes on a nearby wetland, what an exciting finish to the long day.

We started early and set out for Loveland Pass. At nearly 12,000 feet this was the highest elevation we would reach during the tour. We scanned the snow-covered slopes in all directions and after some time spotted a single White-tailed Ptarmigan in the distance. We repositioned and then all of us enjoyed fabulous views of this bird, still in pure white plumage, one of the best birds of the trip. We descended and had a Canada Jay fly across the road in front of us. After breakfast and checking out, we visited a set of productive feeders that added Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Steller's Jay, Clark's Nutcracker, White-breasted and Pygmy Nuthatches, Gray-crowned and Brown-capped Rosy-Finches, and Cassin's Finch. Heading south along a very scenic stretch of highway we reached Buena Vista for lunch. After the break, we quickly tracked down the stunning Lewis's Woodpecker and after searching found a mobile flock of Pinyon Jays. We reached Gunnison in the evening after crossing the snowbound Monarch Pass. Here we had a quick pizza dinner at the hotel in preparation for the early morning the next day.



Pinyon Jay by Stephan Lorenz

This was the earliest start of the tour and we reached the blind well before sunrise. The temperatures were relatively mild and we enjoyed the display of no less than twenty Gunnison Sage-Grouse, a critically endangered species. Several of us commented that the views exceeded expectations and we could scope the dense nape plumes and barring on the tail as several males strutted along. The hot

breakfast back at the hotel was welcome before we headed to the Crested Butte area with a stop for American Dippers along the way. In Crested Butte, we encountered a good amount of fresh snow that made it challenging to get around, but a feeder held a pair of Pine Grosbeaks plus many chickadees and finches. We stopped for lunch at a local favorite and some continued during the afternoon to explore the Tomichi Creek Basin. Here we had wonderful encounters with Golden Eagles, Swainson's Hawk, and many Mountain Bluebirds. Dinner in Gunnison was delicious as usual as we dined at a local favorite in a historic building.



American Dipper by Stephan Lorenz

We enjoyed a slightly later start before heading out. The first stop was in town where we quickly ticked a Red-naped Sapsucker before heading further west. We spent the rest of the morning exploring the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park where the best finds included Wild Turkey, Williamson's Sapsucker, a pair of Juniper Titmice, Western Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, and Fox "Slate-colored" Sparrow. We had lunch in Montrose and then continued to Fruitgrowers Reservoir which offered good views of Western Grebe and many other waterbirds. The drive across the Grand Mesa was spectacular for scenery, but only held Evening Grosbeak towards the far side and not the hoped-for woodpeckers. We carried on to Grand Junction for the night.

Another later start saw us on the edge of town where Gambel's Quail showed well in the scope. A lengthy drive towards the Utah border was required before we scored great studies of Sagebrush Sparrows. After lunch, we made our way into the arid canyons north of Grand Junction where we quickly found two pairs of the introduced Chukar. Here we also found a pair of cooperative Rock

Wrens before we had to carry on. A fortuitous stop due to road construction drew our attention to a side canyon well south of Craig where we found several rosy-finches and a Canyon Wren. We then tackled the longer drive to Steamboat Spring where we arrived for dinner.



Sharp-tailed Grouse by Stephan Lorenz

After an early start, we arrived west of Steamboat Spring and enjoyed the display of a handful of Sharp-tailed Grouse in the scope and later obtained even closer views of several individuals. The grouse display ended abruptly when a Peregrine Falcon flew in at full speed pursuing one bird over a ridge. After breakfast back in Steamboat Spring, we explored the nearby ski area where we had close studies of Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, chickadees, and various other finches. On the way to Walden, we found Rough-legged and Swainson's Hawks. Some of us set out after dinner to Cameron Pass where we heard two Boreal Owls calling in the distance.

The final lek of the trip was one of the most spectacular. We watched two dozen Greater Sage-Grouse display close to the vehicles on the sagebrush steppe. After a delicious hot breakfast back in Walden, we visited the reservoir where we noted 13 species of waterfowl, including elegant Canvasback. Close studies of Franklin's and California Gulls were also appreciated. We then crossed the Rocky Mountains for the last time and near Cameron Pass finally found a pair of American Three-toed Woodpeckers. The final birding stop of the tour at Rocky Mountain Arsenal Wildlife Refuge got us distant views of the hoped-for Ferruginous Hawk. We concluded the tour with a celebratory dinner in Denver.

Trip List (139 species): <https://ebird.org/tripreport/216556>



Evening Grosbeak by Stephan Lorenz



Mountain Plover by Stephan Lorenz



Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay by Stephan Lorenz



Greater Prairie-Chicken and Burrowing Owl by Stephan Lorenz