



**COLORADO: LEKKING GROUSE, ROCKY MOUNTAINS
AND OPEN PLAINS**

6 – 17 APRIL 2020



Sage Grouse is one of our targets on this trip.

Colorado offers one of the most spectacular North American birding spectacles with the spring lekking season of several grouse species. Churring, gurgling, prancing males strut around their chosen lek, competing with other males to see who can get selected by a mate. Along with this spectacle are the stunning Rocky Mountains and rolling grass prairies that hold an abundance of bird life. Mixed in with these are the cottonwood canyons and pine forests that give us a variety of great habitats to go birding in. Good food, roads, and lodging make for a comfortable and easy trip through this fantastic wilderness.

This trip can be combined with our **A Texas Spring and Whooping Cranes 2020** tour.

Itinerary (12 days/11 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Denver

You arrive at the Denver airport. There will be introductions and an orientation about our upcoming trip. We will do some local birding as time allows.

Overnight: Comfort Inn, Denver airport

Day 2. Denver, Genesee, Allenspark, Loveland Pass, Kremmling, Rabbit Ears Pass

We will start the day with some birding at a Genesee Park at the edge of Denver. Some of the targets here are various rosy finches, **Cassin's Finch**, **Pygmy Nuthatch**, **Steller's Jay**, **Clark's Nutcracker**, **Mountain Chickadee**, **Red Crossbill**, and possibly **Evening Grosbeak** should be seen here, as well as **Dark-eyed Junco**. We will drive over the mountains through Allenspark, looking for **Mountain Bluebird**, **Townsend's Solitaire**, and **Two-barred** (White-winged) and **Red Crossbills**. We will also stop at some open rivers for **American Dipper**. Then we will also do some birding at Georgetown, checking feeders for all three of the local rosy finches. We'll then drive from Georgetown to the Guanella Pass to check for **White-tailed Ptarmigan** before retreating from this high elevation back to Georgetown. If we don't have luck here we'll take Route 6 over the summit of the Loveland Pass to give us another chance for **White-tailed Ptarmigan** and possibly **Brown-capped Rosy Finch**. We'll descend down the mountains toward the Dillon Reservoir and check for waterbirds before moving north through Silverthorne. Along Highway 9 to Kremmling there are some good puddles for ducks and open areas for **Prairie Falcon**. We'll have a brief stop at the Green Mountain Reservoir, which could yield **Barrow's Goldeneye**. In Kremmling, if there are still recent sightings at some feeders in town, we will check them out for rosy finches and other birds. Another brief stop, at Rabbit Ears Pass, will give us further chances to search for mountain bird species. Among the spruce, pine, and aspen we might find **American Three-toed Woodpecker**.

Overnight: Rabbit Ears Motel, Steamboat Springs

Day 3. Walden for Sage Grouse lek, Hayden

We'll grab a quick breakfast and head east to look for **Sage Grouse** on their lek. We'll need to leave early to make sure we are set up before sunrise, when the birds come onto the lek. From our vehicles we'll be able to watch the spectacle of these amazing birds strutting around, inflating air sacs, and fanning tails to attract a female. From here we'll continue north to Walden, visiting the Delaney Butte Lakes and the Walden Reservoir; we'll be able to find some wintering

ducks here. We'll retrace our steps west, birding to Hayden with stops at Catamount and Hahn's Peak lakes.

Overnight: Rabbit Ears Motel, Steamboat Springs

Day 4. Hayden for Sharp-tailed Grouse, Black Mountain for Dusky Grouse

We'll start the day with a check of the **Sharp-tailed Grouse** lek. We should be able to park off the road and get a good look as these birds lekking away the morning. From here we'll head to Yampa Tailwaters Preserve to check for the many species of waterfowl like **Ring-necked Duck**, **Common Merganser**, and **Blue-winged** and **Cinnamon Teals**. We'll check Boxelder and Narrowleaf Cottonwood, which hold plenty of songbirds along a two-mile trail. We head back to Craig, birding along the way, with a stop for some lunch. We then drive north along Highway 13, birding along the way. We'll end up late in the afternoon north of Craig at Black Mountain in the Routt National Forest, checking for **American Three-toed Woodpecker** and **Dusky Grouse** lekking in the road. There are also several **Sage Grouse** leks along highway 13 that we can check if we've missed them earlier.

Overnight: Rocky Mountain Inn, Craig

Day 5. Craig, Rifle, Fravert Reservoir

We'll continue south from Craig onto Route 13, looking for waterfowl, especially **Cinnamon Teal**, along the way. At Meeker we'll head west towards Rio Blanco Lake to check for loons and other waterfowl and then drive south along Route 5 through this wonderful wilderness area, checking for birds along the way. Just north of Rifle we'll rejoin Route 13. We'll have lunch in Rifle, then a stop at the Fravert Reservoir to look for **Pinyon Jay**, **Juniper Titmouse**, and **Bewick's Wren**. There is a very good pond that has lots of waterfowl and both **Red-winged** and **Yellow-headed Blackbirds**. We might see **White-throated Swift** flying about as well. At Coal Creek Canyon we'll pass the Cameo power plant and head into open juniper country, where we get a chance to look for **Chukar Partridge**, **Say's Phoebe**, **Rock Wren**, and **Black-throated Sparrow**.

Overnight: Super 8, Grand Junction

Day 6. Grand Junction, Blue Mesa Reservoir, Crested Butte

We start the day with the breathtaking views from Colorado National Monument. Just a few of the target birds here include **Gambel's Quail**, **Juniper Titmouse**, **Western** and **Mountain Bluebirds**, and a possibility for **American Grey Flycatcher**. We'll check a few of the local reservoirs near Delta for **Western** and **Clark's Grebes** along with a bevy of ducks, and we'll also scout the cattails for rails and **Marsh Wren**. Then we proceed to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park's Rim Drive road. Here we have another chance to find **Dusky Grouse**, sometimes seen displaying atop picnic tables! This road offers outstanding views of the canyon. We'll make our way on the South Rim Drive to the visitor center for some great looks at the canyon. While we may have already seen these species elsewhere, other possibilities here include **Golden Eagle**, **California Scrub Jay**, **Violet-green Swallow**, **Clark's Nutcracker**, and **Green-tailed Towhee**. You'll also need to keep your eyes open for **Mule Deer**, **Bobcat**, **Grey Fox**, and **Yellow-bellied Marmot**. Our final main destination for the day is the Blue Mesa Reservoir. This area may hold lots of waterfowl, some gulls (**American Herring** and possibly **California Gulls**), shorebirds, **Barrow's Goldeneye**, **Sage Thrasher**, and **Vesper Sparrow**. Get to bed early tonight!

Overnight: Quality Inn, Gunnison

Day 7. Gunnison

Today we'll head for the **Gunnison Grouse** lek. Things you need to know: We will be departing the hotel around 4:45 a.m. as we have to be parked and set an hour before sunrise, as the birds get there quite early. Once at the viewing area, there is no leaving the cars (no bathroom breaks!) until the birds are finished with their displays, perhaps three hours after sunrise. No morning coffee! There is a simple bathroom at the site, and we should be able to use it upon initial arrival and at the end. Also expect cold temperatures. Over the past years, low temps have ranged from 22 to 33 degrees Fahrenheit (only one year was it in the 30s). We'll be going back to the hotel after we leave here – you may want to sneak out a blanket or two. Bring some of those hand and/or foot warmers (Hot Hands). No flash photography is allowed here either. Other species we may see while enjoying the grouse are **Swainson's Hawk**, **Horned Lark**, **Western Meadowlark**, **Brewer's Blackbird**, and maybe a **Gunnison's Prairie Dog**. After a late breakfast we'll drive to Crested Butte to check for rosy finches. These rosy finches are all based on snow. If it is snowing in the mountains it'll bring the finches down to the feeders. Otherwise there is only a low chance of seeing them; so we will keep an eye on the weather forecast. We'll spend a couple of hours up here checking local feeders and have some lunch before driving back to Gunnison. In Gunnison there are a few areas to check for **Great Horned Owl**, **Black-billed Magpie**, **Lewis's Woodpecker**, **Townsend's Solitaire**, and others, before retiring back to our accommodation for the night.

Overnight: Quality Inn, Gunnison

Day 8. Gunnison to Pueblo

If we had no chance with the **Gunnison Grouse** the day before, we can rise early and try again, but if we did have luck we'll head east towards Pueblo. On the road to Pueblo we will stop for birding at Monarch Pass to look for more mountain bird species. There is a parking lot from which you will see some unbelievable scenery. As we descend the east side, we will keep an eye out for **Clark's Nutcrackers** and crossbills. There are also some spots to look for **Band-tailed Pigeon**. Other stops along the route will be where there are open rivers - to look for **American Dipper**. **Bighorn Sheep** are a possibility as well. Next, we will make a couple of nice stops in Cañon City Tunnel Drive; this gives us a chance for **Rufous-crowned Sparrow**, **Rock Wren**, **Canyon Wren**, and possibly **Black Phoebe**. Cañon City River Walk has some nice riparian habitat for a large variety of birds like **Western Bluebird**, **Lesser Goldfinch**, **Audubon's Warbler**, and the red-shafted morph of **Northern Flicker**. This is a great place to eat if the weather is good. After lunch we'll continue east to a dry scrub area and the Pueblo Reservoir. Some of our target birds include **Scaled Quail**, **Burrowing Owl**, **Loggerhead Shrike**, **Juniper Titmouse**, **American Bushtit**, **Curve-billed Thrasher**, and **Canyon Towhee**, with lesser possibility of **Western Barn Owl**, **Lark Bunting**, and **Ferruginous Hawk**. We could also see some species of gulls and water birds at the reservoir.

Overnight: Quality Inn, Pueblo.

Day 9. Pueblo to Elkhart

Now we leave behind the Front Range and enter the Eastern Plains, going all the way into Kansas. The Cimarron National Grasslands are the destination there, but first we will be driving through grasslands along Highway 109 south of La Junta. **Prairie Falcon**, **Swainson's** and

Ferruginous Hawks, and **Long-billed Curlew** are some of the birds we can see along this stretch of highway. We'll drive through the Cottonwood Canyons to look for **Lewis's Woodpecker**, **Woodhouse's Scrub Jay**, **Chihuahuan Raven**, and **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**, as well as several species of sparrows. We will continue to the **Lesser Prairie Chicken** blind near Campo, and we should see some of the birds on their lek. Other birds we may encounter in the area include **Scaled Quail**, **Cassin's Sparrow**, and longspurs.

Overnight: El Rancho Motel, Elkhart

Day 10. Lesser Prairie Chicken lek, drive to Bledsoe Ranch for Greater Prairie Chicken, Wray

We can return to a different **Lesser Prairie-Chicken** lek if we didn't get satisfactory views the night before. If we skip the blind, we can bird some back roads northwest of town for a variety of sparrow species like **Cassin's**, **Brewer's** and **Grasshopper Sparrows**. There should be lots of **Swainson's Hawks** too. We'll need to head north now, as we've got a long way to go today. We'll stop in Lamar for lunch and continue north to Wray, birding along the way at Wray State Fishing Unit for a variety of migrants. Eventually we'll head to a **Greater Prairie Chicken** lek to watch their evening performance.

Overnight: Sandhillier, Wray

Day 11. Pawnee National Grasslands

This area of grassland is mixed, with short buffalo grass, which is good for **McCown's Longspur** and **Mountain Plover**, and the taller grass for **Chestnut-collared Longspur**, and there is a possibility for **Long-billed Curlew** and a late **Lapland Longspur**. **Ferruginous Hawk**, **Prairie Falcon**, **Say's Phoebe**, **Burrowing Owl**, and **Golden Eagle** are often found here, and while traversing these rolling hills and prairie dog towns we'll keep an eye out for **Pronghorn** too.

Overnight: Comfort Inn, Denver

Day 12. Departure

We'll head to the airport today for our departure.

Please note that the itinerary above cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Duration: 11 days
Group Size: 4 – 8
Date: 6 – 17 April 2020
Start: Denver
End: Denver

Price: US\$4359 per person sharing, assuming 4-8 participants
Single supplement: US\$775

Price includes:

Meals

Accommodation

Transport

Guiding fees

Price excludes:

Flights to and from Denver

Personal insurance

Alcoholic beverages

Gratuities

Laundry service

Personal expenses such as gifts