COLORADO BIRDING TOUR – GROUSE LEKS & ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIRDING ADVENTURE

05–15 APRIL 2027
04–14 APRIL 2028
03–13 APRIL 2029



The stunning display of (Greater) ***Sage Grouse*** *is a real highlight of the tour.*

Overview

Colorado offers one of the most spectacular North American birding spectacles

With the spring lekking season of several grouse species including the stunning **Gunnison** (Sage) and (Greater) **Sage Grouse** and the ever declining **Greater** and **Lesser Prairie Chickens**. Churring, gurgling, prancing males strut around their chosen lek, competing with other males to see who can get selected by a mate. While this trip is a more focused "chicken run" of sorts, there are plenty of other amazing bird species to be on the lookout for. These include a nice mix of both migrants and long staying species such as **Black**, **Grey-crowned**, and **Brown-capped Rosy Finches**, **Barrow's Goldeneye**, **American Dipper**, **Williamson's Sapsucker**, **Pinyon Jay**, **Bald Eagle**, and the list goes on and on! Both spring and fall migration in Colorado are amazing and we time this trip perfectly for the spring leks and arrival of spring migrants on their journey to breeding grounds.



Greater Prairie Chicken *is one of the many fantastic grouse species we should encounter on this tour.*

Along with the amazing bird and wildlife spectacles, are the wide assortment of fantastic habitats providing jaw-dropping scenery throughout the tour. From the stunning Rocky Mountains and rolling grass prairies to the cottonwood canyons and pine forests, the trip is never lacking a stunning view along the way. This great diversity of habitats provides us a refreshing new locale each day and with it a differing bird and wildlife community. The National Audubon Society and Colorado Birding Trail do a fantastic job here to help preserve the pristine habitats and help encourage folks to get out and experience nature with their birding festival in March and other community programs.

Our birdwatching tour of Colorado combines Rocky Mountain and prairie (grassland) birding. Indeed, this tour encompasses the magnificent region where the high Rockies rise majestically from the Great Plains. This combo (and our small group size) differentiates our tour. In the text here, we list a few of the key target birds including lekking grouse, altitudinal migrants and other specials, but you can also read our trip reports to see full details of what we see on this tour.

This tour begins in the mile-high city of Denver, visiting its various pristine birding locations before heading west and up into the dizzying heights of the Rocky Mountains. Up here, the search is on for the tricky **White-tailed Ptarmigan** and rosy finches. We continue onwards for our first few leks of the trip and then head southwest to Grand Junction and Gunnison, birding along the way in hopes of seeing treats like **Mountain Bluebird** and **Clark's Nutcracker**. From here we head east and into the lowlands and grasslands of southeast Colorado with a brief dip into Kansas for **Lesser Prairie Chicken**. We complete our large "chicken loop" of Colorado in the northeast corner at the Pawnee National Grasslands, a premier birding spot, with **Thick-billed** and **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** and **Mountain Plover** amongst the many targets.

This trip can be combined with our **Texas Spring and Whooping Cranes Tour**, which immediately precedes it, and with our **Florida Peninsula and Specialties Tour** following it.

Due to the extremely limited availability and access to some of the leks, this itinerary is subject to run in a slightly different order while still visiting all of the locations and destinations.

Detailed Itinerary (11 days/10 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Denver

Arrival at the Denver airport will be followed by introductions and an orientation about our upcoming trip. We will do some local birding as time allows and prepare for what will surely be a fantastic tour full of beautiful birds and scenery.

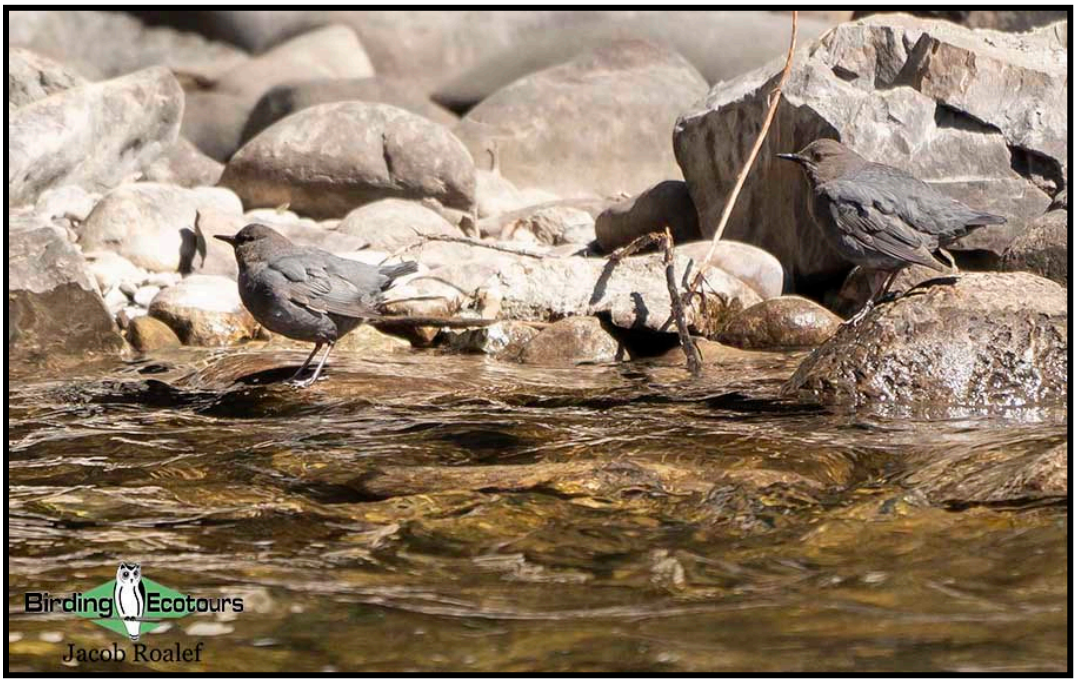
Overnight: Denver, Colorado

Day 2. Genesee, Loveland Pass, Silverthorne

Today will be jam-packed as we work our way out of Denver towards Steamboat Springs in the northwest. The morning will kick off with some birding at Genesee Mountain Park on the edge of Denver. Some of the targets here include **Cassin's Finch**, **Pygmy Nuthatch**, **Steller's Jay**, **Clark's Nutcracker**, and **Williamson's Sapsucker**. As we cruise through the mountains towards Loveland Pass, we will be sure to watch out for species like **Mountain Bluebird**, **Townsend's Solitaire**, **Two-barred** (White-winged) and **Red Crossbills**. We will also keep our eyes peeled on the fast-moving rivers and streams for **American Dipper**. Eventually, we will make it to the Guanella Pass, our first stop in search of **White-tailed Ptarmigan**, before retreating from this high elevation back to the small town of Georgetown. If we do not have any luck here, we'll take Route 6 over the summit of Loveland Pass (weather permitting) to give us another chance for the elusive **White-tailed Ptarmigan**. We'll descend down the mountains to the town of Silverthorne where we will drive the roads, searching for feeders and seeds in hopes of spotting great birds including all three species of rosy finches, **Black**, **Grey-crowned** and **Brown-capped Rosy Finch**. Along

Highway 9, towards Kremmling, there are some good bodies of water for ducks and open areas to scan for **Prairie Falcon**. We'll have a brief stop at some of the open water areas along the way, which could yield the stunning **Barrow's Goldeneye** and other great waterfowl species. Finally, we will arrive in Steamboat Springs, our home for the next two nights.

Overnight: Steamboat Springs, Colorado



*The charismatic **American Dipper** is always a fan favorite.*

Day 3. Coalmont for Sage Grouse lek, Hayden

This morning we will get up early, grab a quick breakfast and head east to look for (Greater) **Sage Grouse** on their lek in the Coalmont area. Leaving early is critical to ensure 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 in search of some wintering water birds. In the afternoon, we'll retrace our steps west, birding to Hayden for our first chance to spot **Sharp-tailed** and **Dusky Grouse**. After dinner, it is back to the hotel for the evening in Steamboat Springs.

Overnight: Steamboat Springs, Colorado

Day 4. Hayden, Black Mountain, Grand Junction

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 at these birds lekking away in the morning. From here, we'll head north of Craig to Black Mountain in the Routt National Forest, checking for **American Three-**

toed Woodpecker and **Dusky Grouse** lekking in the road. We'll continue south from Craig onto Route 13, looking for waterfowl along the way, especially **Cinnamon Teal**. 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 and make a quick stop at the Fravert Reservoir to look for **Pinyon Jay**, **Juniper Titmouse** and **Bewick's Wren**. There is a good pond here that hosts a variety 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**. We'll make it to Grand Junction for dinner and our hotel for the evening.

Overnight: Grand Junction, Colorado

Day 5. Grand Junction, Blue Mesa Reservoir, Crested Butte

We start the day with the breath-taking 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**.



Woodhouse's Scrub Jay *can be seen in Gunnison National Park.*

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**, **Woodhouse's Scrub Jay**, **Violet-green Swallow**, **Clark's Nutcracker** and **Green-tailed Towhee**. We'll also need to keep our eyes open for some amazing mammals such as **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 in preparation for our early start to Day 6!

Overnight: Gunnison, Colorado



*The **Black Rosy Finch** is arguably one of the prettiest North American birds.*

Day 6. Gunnison

Today we will head for the Endangered (IUCN) **Gunnison** (Sage) **Grouse** lek. Things you need to know: we will be departing the hotel around 4:45 a.m. as we must 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 (-5 to 0 Celsius). We'll be going back to the hotel after we leave here – you may want to sneak out a blanket or two. Hand and foot warmer packets are always a good idea as well. 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 will 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: Gunnison, Colorado

Day 7. Gunnison to Pueblo

If we had no luck with the **Gunnison** (Sage) **Grouse** the day before, we can rise early and try again, but if we did have luck we will 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 Nutcracker** and **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.



Bighorn Sheep *are a possibility on this tour too.*

Next, we will make a couple of nice stops on Cañon City Tunnel Drive for a chance at **Rufous-crowned Sparrow**, **Rock Wren**, **Canyon Wren**, and **Black Phoebe**. Cañon City River Walk has some nice riparian habitat for a large variety of birds like **Western Bluebird**, **Lesser Goldfinch** 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**. We could also see some species of gulls and water birds at the reservoir before settling into Pueblo for the night.

Overnight: Pueblo, Colorado

Day 8. Pueblo to Oakley

Now we leave behind the Front Range and enter the Eastern Plains, going all the way into Kansas with Oakley, Kansas being our final destination. First, we will drive through stellar grasslands with **Prairie Falcon**, **Swainson's** and **Ferruginous Hawks** and **Long-billed Curlew**. A few planned stops near the town of Lamar will hopefully net us a few nice species such as **Lark Sparrow**, **American Avocet**, **Snow Goose** and **American White Pelican**. Finally, we will cross the state border and start ticking birds for our Kansas state list (if you're into that sort of thing) before we settle in for the night in Oakley.

Overnight: Oakley, Kansas



*We will also visit a **Lesser Prairie Chicken** lek.*

Day 9. Lesser Prairie Chicken lek, Wray

This morning we will be up and at it early again, this time to get on site for the incredibly special **Lesser Prairie Chicken** leks. This species has been decreasing at an alarming rate but luckily a few populations are still maintaining in this area, and, with support from the local folks, hopefully they can begin increasing again. We may encounter other nice species while enjoying the leks

including **Horned Lark** and **Burrowing Owl**. From here we will head north, back into Colorado. We may arrive in the Wray area with enough daylight to search the Wray State Fishing Unit for a variety of migrants and we may potentially hit the lekking area for a shot at **Greater Prairie Chicken** to hopefully enjoy their evening performance.

Overnight: Wray, Colorado

Day 10. Greater Prairie Chicken lek and Pawnee National Grasslands

This morning we will visit the **Greater Prairie Chicken** lek for another chance to see these amazing birds do their display. From here, we will head to the amazing habitat of Pawnee National Grasslands. This area of grassland is mixed with short buffalo grass, which is good for **Thick-billed Longspur** and **Mountain Plover**, and the taller grass for **Chestnut-collared Longspur**. There is also a possibility for **Long-billed Curlew**, a late **Lapland Longspur** or a flock of **Sandhill Cranes**. **Ferruginous Hawk**, **Prairie Falcon**, **Say's Phoebe**, **Burrowing Owl** and **Golden Eagle** are often found here, and while traversing the rolling hills and prairie dog towns we'll keep an eye out for **Pronghorn** (Antelope) too. Eventually we will call it quits and head back towards Denver and the airport.

Overnight: Denver, Colorado



*There will be many chances to see the curious **Burrowing Owl**.*

Day 11. Departure

Today marks the end of our journey. We will head to the airport for our departure and the conclusion of an amazing tour. To continue the fun, be sure to check out our **Florida Peninsula**

and Specialties Tour which follows this one or perhaps you will enjoy our **Texas Spring and Whooping Cranes Tour** immediately preceding Colorado.

Please note that the itinerary 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. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling or other factors.

Tour Details

Duration:	11 days
Group size:	4–8
Dates:	05–15 April 2027 04–14 April 2028 03–13 April 2029
Start:	Denver
End:	Denver
Prices:	US$ 5,459 per person sharing, assuming 4-8 participants (2027) US$ 5,590 per person sharing, assuming 4-8 participants (2028) US$ 5,760 per person sharing, assuming 4-8 participants (2029)
Single supplements:	US$ 954 (2027) US$ 980 (2028) US$ 1,050 (2029)

Price includes:

Meals/Water
Accommodation
Transport
Guiding fees

Price excludes:

Flights
Personal insurance
Alcoholic beverages
Gratuities (please see our tipping guidelines blog)
Laundry service
Personal expenses such as gifts