



## Colorado Grouse Trip Report 2025

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On our tour of grandeur through the prairies, sage steppe, foothills to mountains and plateaus-a-plenty, we rounded our way through the diverse ecosystems of Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska. Bird behavior is a main theme of this tour, and our roaming band of birders and guides were in search of lekking grouse throughout the open lands along our adventure, ultimately encountering them all at the height of their breeding season: Gunnison and Greater Sage-Grouse, Lesser and Greater Prairie-Chickens, and Sharp-tailed Grouse. We also encountered regional specialties like battling Dusky Grouse, a pair of Mountain Plovers, singing and diving American Dippers, and all three species of Rosy-Finch: Black, Gray-crowned and Brown-capped. A few rarities were also spotted along our birdy road-trip, including Glossy Ibis and Cassia Crossbill. The mammals throughout the diverse landscapes didn't disappoint either, with a diverse spread that included Elk, American Bison, Yellow-bellied Marmot, Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep, and a Red Fox with its three kits. Each day of Eagle-Eye's 2025 Colorado Grouse tour was loaded with breathtaking and exciting moments, whether it was the scenery, incredible lek encounters or along our memorable drives.

### Day 1:

Our group met in our Denver hotel lobby after our various departures, arrivals and last-minute binocular adjustments were made. We were out of the gate with laughs, smiles and the exchange of our big birding plans for the next twelve days. We headed to a Fifties-styled diner walking distance from our hotel meet-and-greet where we further talked birds, travels and personal stories. Great-tailed Grackles made an evening fly-by as a pair of Eastern Cottontail Rabbits munched away on turf grass in our parking lot. Our plans were in place for the following day and we all broke away to our respective rooms to get rest... something very important on this trip, especially!

### Day 2:

We had a semi-early start our first morning in Denver, and after our breakfast we headed straight for the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, a massive 15,000 acre eco-restoration

project where we encountered many species of mammals and birds including Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Say's Phoebe and our first Swainson's Hawks and Burrowing Owl of the trip. As we further cruised, we came upon a pack of six Coyotes, with two more that were trotting by two American Bison with their hours-old young. The ponds and lakes were loaded with waterfowl, and a pair of Killdeer and the American Coots at close range were a fun study. With a long drive to Oakley, Kansas up next, we decided to depart and start heading east toward the land of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken. Along the drive, our eyes feasted on roadside Red-tailed Hawks, American Kestrels and Western Meadowlarks galore. After lunch, we cruised the dirt farm fields of Lincoln County, Colorado and came up with not one, but two Mountain Plovers nearly alongside the road! These mid-continent beauties, nicknamed "Prairie Ghosts" by farmers for their near-invisibility, nest on the high dry plains out here in the West. This near-threatened shorebird isn't always an easy get, so we gave our thanks and gratitude and kept trucking eastward. We finished our day birding the Oakley Water Treatment Plant where we were delighted to see Ring-necked Pheasant, both Blue and Green-winged Teal and Lesser Yellowlegs, among many other species. We checked into our rooms and headed off to bed to recharge for day three and to dream of Lesser Prairie-Chickens, our first grouse target of the tour.

### **Day 3:**

We woke up dark and early and headed straight our meeting point, coffee and breakfast in hand. We met our gracious host, Stacy, farmer, conservationist and all-around good guy at a local gas station. We then followed him to his multi-functional barn, where a coffee and snack spread, bathroom and a lot of interesting information about the land and lek were. Stacy was a very knowledgeable and generous guy, and before we all knew it it was time to head for the blind. Arriving in the dark and situating ourselves inside of his state-of-the-art blind, we began to take in and meditate on the silence and ultimately the sounds of the prairie waking up. Vesper Sparrows started singing first, and then the bubbling Western Meadowlark song, followed by the croaks and coos of our target bird, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken. As the first light began to crack the horizon, a cattle skull began to almost glow as we watched a lekking male stand and begin its ancient dance. This skull was at about dead-center of the bare lek, with shorter grasses surrounding, and for what seemed like miles around. A dozen males were in full displaying, with a pair of Greater Prairie-Chickens out on the far corners of the lek boundary. The differences in the use of the spaces at the lek between the two species provided an interesting study, and it really set our tour off to a jaw-dropping start.



*Lesser Prairie-Chickens* © David Pitrak



*Lesser Prairie-Chicken eye combs* © Joel Stone



*Lesser Prairie-Chicken © Joel Stone*

*Video: Lesser Prairie-Chicken fighting on lek © Alan Collier*

On our way out of the ranch, we had brief but great looks at two different pair of nesting Burrowing Owls! A pure delight and quite the send-off. We returned to town for a delicious, relaxing breakfast before we headed out north towards Wray, where we'll be staying. We birded Scott State Park late morning, and had fantastic moments with Cooper's Hawk, a mated pair of Wood Ducks, a female Belted Kingfisher along with her bank-side mud burrows, and her neighbors the Northern Rough-winged Swallows. A half-dozen Yellow-rumped Warblers were feasting in the oaks and elms on our way out. It was a great spot to break up the drive and stretch our wings.. er, legs. We continued north to Wray where we met with Bob, rancher and owner of the next morning's lek location. We sat and talked birds, the threats they face, and how he has been helping fix it. We went over the plan for the morning, had a delicious dinner in downtown Wray, and hit the hay, for another pre-dawn start awaited us.

#### **Day 4:**

We rose before sun-up and headed to Bob's lek location, a mile or so out off of a county road smack-dab in the middle of a corn field. As we arrived at the blind, a vintage horse trailer converted into quite the shelter, we saw a few Greater Prairie-Chickens already beginning to assemble in the large opening surrounded by taller grasses, and then hillsides. While scanning the hillside as the first light came through, a Short-eared Owl skimmed the horizon and disappeared just as quickly as it popped up. Then almost immediately, the music and flights of the Greater Prairie-Chicken filled the air. Larger in size than that of the Lesser, the Greater Prairie-Chickens seemed to let their size speak for themselves as we all took note of their more subtle, less aggressive ways of guarding their bit of territory within the lek itself. We had one male literally two feet away from the blind, practicing to itself before heading out to dance and hopefully get attention from a visiting female. What an

experience!



*Greater Prairie-Chickens © Joel Stone*



*Greater Prairie Chicken © Joel Stone*

Video: Greater Prairie-Chicken displaying © Alan Collier Also, a total of seven Burrowing Owls and a nesting Great Horned Owl gave amazing views as day four unofficially became Owl Day. Our

adventure took an interesting turn on the way out, and after we all packed and loaded the tires in with corn husks, we pushed our van out of the sand and back on track.



*Burrowing Owl © Alan Collier*

After a nice breakfast and a gallon-and-a-half of coffee, we headed back to Colorado with our next target in our scope. Our drive to the Pawnee National Grasslands yielded a few Northern Harriers and many other roadside raptors. As we arrived, the wind was wickedly whipping, but it didn't keep the birds away. A surprise Western Kingbird in the parking lot made a quick appearance, and high-flying migrating Franklin's Gulls and American White Pelicans really put on a show for us. The numbers of Horned Larks, however, was nothing short of astonishing. They were seemingly everywhere, and provided us a great study of their size, shape, flight calls and songs. After lunch, we made it to Fort Collins where we checked into our rooms before heading out for a bit of birding at Prospect Ponds Natural Area. The towering cottonwoods and winding creeks of this riparian zone provided shelter from a rainstorm for Great Egret, Hairy Woodpeckers and a nesting pair of Great Horned Owls! Black-capped Chickadees, Common Mergansers and Blue Jays were paired up and their behaviors were really something to see as we waited out the misty showers. We decided to call it a good day, and after dinner and more showers, we headed for sleep and an easier-paced day ahead filled with eastern birds and rarities.

## **Day 5:**

We take advantage of our non-lek mornings, especially snowy ones, so we rested well and had a nice, slow-paced morning with House Finches, Mourning Doves and American Crows all singing their hearts out at breakfast. We got word of a Glossy Ibis a half-an-hour south in Loveland that was congregating with a group of White-faced Ibis, so we drove straight to the spot. The snow-covered field and its broken irrigation line created an interesting habitat for waders and shorebirds alike. After some sorting, we found the Glossy and chatted about Ibis identification before finding Greater Yellowlegs working the pond edge and Wilson's Snipes and Killdeer popping up out of the snow!



*Wilson's Snipe in snow © Alan Collier*

Black and Turkey Vultures were roosting on a nearby silo, mixed flocks of Tree and Barn Swallows swooped overhead all while Common Ravens, Red-tailed Hawks and a Bald Eagle soared above. Our first grebe of the trip, a Pied-billed, was also in Cattail Pond, alongside Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and others. It was a fantastic stop, and as we cruised the farm fields we encountered a Red Fox at her den with three kits! We all got some great looks before they hopped and hid away. Minutes later, we hit a huge migratory flock of Mountain Bluebirds foraging in the snowy corn stubble on the other side of the road. We parked and sat in awe as a hundred or so picked away and worked their way up the hillside. The agricultural hillsides turned to rocky hillsides as we made our way to Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. We had a delightful time birding here, with Prairie Falcon, Black-billed Magpie, Rock Wren and Hermit Thrush all making their appearances. Flocks of American Robins were foraging in the parking lot, all while a pair of American Kestrels were copulating directly above them on a spruce top.



*Mountain Bluebird © Joel Stone*

We worked our way to Horsetooth Reservoir and another network of waterways, picking up Western Grebe, Osprey and a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers as the snow came down. We ended our birding day at Running Deer and Cottonwood Hollow Natural Areas where Great Blue Herons, giant Blackbird flocks and five Northern Harriers did not disappoint! After an amazing dinner, we called it and headed to our rooms for some much needed rest.

### **Day 6:**

We had another “normal” start to our day, meaning coffee and breakfast and bird talk post-dawn. We left Fort Collins and headed up the Poudre Canyon. Here we were all able to see the landscapes really shift from foothills to mountains, with steppes and plateaus abound. Our drive produced a pair of Wild Turkey, Golden Eagle, Steller’s Jay, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and our first American Dippers of the trip!



*Steller's Jay © Gord Holton*

We encountered a Hairy Woodpecker and seven Song Sparrows at one little creek pit-stop which provided top-notch viewing. We hit a cloud of hundreds of Dark-eye Juncos at one point, reminding us of the stages of migration and the roles elevation play within. We stopped at the Moose Visitor Center, where we struck-out of moose but where the feeders were really busy with a bevy of bird activity. Northern Flicker, Cassin's Finch and Pine Siskin were calling and working the seeds and peanut butter feeders. A highlight was seeing Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees side-by-side, providing our group with a great opportunity to see and hear differences in their biology. We had a nice, sit-down lunch and then hit the road to Walden. After checking into our hotel rooms, we made it out to the Walden Reservoir where we encountered quite the avian spread! Immediately upon arrival we were met with Snow Geese, American Avocets, stunning Marbled Godwits and a flock of feeding California Gulls. We further explored the grounds and had Double-crested Cormorants fishing, a striking, lone Common Loon in full breeding plumage all while Eared Grebes and American White Pelicans foraged nearby. The numbers and diversity of waterfowl was incredible, and we were all very pleased and thankful for such an experience!



© Gord Holton

With an early start looking for Greater Sage-Grouse at our gracious contact Ken, we headed in for dinner a bit early, but not before spotting Sandhill Cranes and Violet-green Swallows working a beautiful hillside in the waning evening light, which was quite the way to end our day.

### **Day 7:**

We arrived at our lek site before sunrise, and the sounds of the sagebrush really put the morning into perspective. The blowing wind, songs of Vesper and Western Meadowlarks, and the scream of a Coyote all give way to the digital, liquid popping songs and sounds of the Greater Sage-Grouse. Very heavy on the bass and smoother and brighter on the high notes, the display and “song” of this particular grouse is a truly one-of-a-kind experience. The lek was huge, and with a counted 144 individual males present, breathtaking.



*Greater Sage-Grouse lek © Gord Holton*



*Greater Sage Grouse © Joel Stone*



*Greater Sage-Grouse © Joel Stone*

Whenever a female flew in, the intensity would grow so rapidly and vividly, that other species were also taking note. The coyotes in the distance kept moving on, but a determined Northern Harrier was actively hunting these large galliformes to no end. Loggerhead Shrikes and a Sage Thrasher were also out for their respective prey, and after the sun was beginning to get high, the grouse dispersed to the hills. Our first elk were in the hills too, before heading into the shadows and cover for the day. Our drive out was very birdy too, adding Woodhouse's Scrub-jay, Pinyon Jay, Cinnamon Teal, Spotted Towhee and Bewick's Wren to our total. We dined for lunch and then started our drive to Craig, where it looked like we'd have enough light to search for Dusky Grouse. Birding along the way, however, was very fruitful, and we were able to see many familiar species but in higher numbers. After a delicious pizza dinner in Steamboat Springs, we made the decision to drive up some hillsides in search of the elusive "Blue" Dusky Grouse of forests of higher elevations. We spotted a Prairie Falcon and some Sandhill Cranes as White-crowned Sparrows darted across the road. Then, suddenly, two dark forms practically rolled out of a ditch, wings locked and squared-off face to face. "DUSKY GROUSE!" we screamed and the van careened safely to the side, parked, and we carefully exited and waited. We all stood in awe for what seemed like hours as the two males displayed, both visually and territorially, fought bill-to-bill, and then dispersed nonchalantly. One individual even came a couple of feet from one participant, which is characteristic of these forest dwelling grouse, interestingly enough.



*Dusky Grouse © Joel Stone*

It was quite the high note to end the day on, so we headed back to the rooms and rest in time for our Sharp-tailed Grouse lek in the morning.

### **Day 8:**

Our Sharp-tailed lek morning started before sunrise, again to ensure safe distance as not to disturb these delicate birds. We approached each lek experience with utmost care and caution, and this morning was no different. Our guides set up a makeshift blind attached to the van for great views and photographs and to create a buffer between us and the displaying birds. The birds used a small two-track road as their main stage if you will, and the taller surrounding sage held the bulk of the birds. Their display was hands-down the showstopper of the tour to our group, as their dancing and singing in unison and their ability to stop and start on a dime was something many of us had never seen before!



*Sharp-tailed Grouse © Joel Stone*



*Sharp-tailed Grouse © David Pitrak*

Video: Sharp-tailed Grouse displaying © Alan Collier

Video: Sharp-tailed Grouse on lek © Alan Collier

Seven Greater Sage-Grouse were displaying on a distant sunny hillside as well, and out of nowhere a Northern Harrier swooped in a few feet above the van and started harassing the Sharpies

incessantly, perching nearby to keep close watch. The grouse would fly or retreat into the tall grass, but within minutes they were back to displaying and defending their territories, waiting for a female to fly in. After another fantastic lek experience in the books, we made a pit-stop at Ken's house on the hill for coffee, conversation and to share stories. The private land owners like Ken are doing a lot for the birds and their lands they need, and it's these land owners that also make this trip possible. We said our goodbyes and thank-yous, we headed back to town for more coffee, breakfast and plans of more birding. With our drive to Grand Junction taking some time, we birded along the way, seeing nesting Golden Eagles, hunting Prairie Falcons, and picking up White-throated Swifts at Colorado River State Park. Before dinner, we traveled up Colorado National Monument and birded what we dubbed "Raptor Ridge," an incredible peak for migration that we just stumbled into. Soaring Red-tailed Hawks came over first, followed by Turkey Vultures, but highlighted by a young American Goshawk and adult Peregrine Falcon! As we were just about to head back down a Clark's Nutcracker flew to a distant tree crown, calling and defending its probable territory. A truly wonderful sight to see! Wyoming Ground Squirrels were around almost every corner on our way back down, and the songs and calls of Spotted Towhees and Mountain Chickadees filled our ears. Woodhouse's Scrub-jay and Pinyon jays flew over the road as we pulled over to an area riddled with snags and dead trees with clear woodpecker cavities. We heard them first, and then suddenly small flocks of Lewis's Woodpeckers started to fly and perch right in front of our van! We had an amazing half-hour watching them come and go, hawking insects and disappearing into the pines.



*Lewis's Woodpecker © Alan Collier*

We headed to check-in and then to a delicious dinner before a handful of us went to the Ela Wildlife Sanctuary with owls on our minds. It didn't take too long before two separate pair of Western Screech-owls were calling and checking us out, with one coming right over the road...and then our heads! It was an exceptional experience, and we decided we would come back the following morning to hopefully see one roosting in a sunny Sycamore cavity.

## **Day 9:**

After a solid rest and breakfast, we indeed started our birding day back at the Ela Wildlife

Sanctuary. No owls for us today, but nesting Hairy Woodpeckers, Great Blue Herons and Cooper's Hawks were great consolations. We had astounding looks at a migrating Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Cedar Waxwings and Bushtits rounded out our nice wetland walk. With another longer drive ahead to Black Canyon of the Gunnison, we hopped in the van and headed down the road. We made great time, and the National Park was breathtaking and a whole lot of fun. Bird-wise, we had much better looks at White-throated Swifts and Violet-green Swallows that were working the ridge we were on, and a pair of Clark's Nutcrackers came extremely close, providing a few of us with incredible views of this cool corvid.



*Clark's Nutcracker © Alan Collier*

We found a herd of Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep at the McCabe Lane Wetlands where California, Ring-billed and Franklin's Gulls were loafing about. A migrating Swainson's Hawk closed out our day, for an early start in search of Gunnison Sage-Grouse was the following morning. We had another fine meal and departed for our rooms, rest and relaxation.



*Bighorn Sheep © Joel Stone*

## **Day 10:**

Our final lek morning was a cold one, with temperatures below freezing during most of our stay in the blind. Gunnison is one of the coldest towns in Colorado, so knowing this only proved even more how hardy and relentless these Sage-Grouse and other regional critters really are. Our interpreter who we met and followed to the blind had given us a somewhat bleak but honest look into their struggles and reality, and it didn't take too long before distant dark dots began to drift into the distant sagebrush line. The Gunnison Sage-Grouse was here, and for many of us on the trip was our first time being with them and their home landscape. A newer species described to science in 2016, the longer tail feathers and head plumes of these extremely localized birds were something to see in the sage-coated landscape. Coyotes and elk carried on their mornings in the distance, and a lone mallard and Wilson's Snipe made passes along the river. As the sun hit the ridge, the birds departed for their day roosts like clockwork. This was also our cue to thank our guides and get back in the van for coffee, breakfast and more birding. After a satisfying stop at a local cafe, we headed out of town and into the mountains. As our day progressed, we visited many campgrounds, ultimately finding singing American Dippers, a pair of Canyon Wrens, Townsend Solitaire, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Red-naped Sapsucker! We had an earlier dinner, and before we all said our goodbyes for the evening, an Evening Grosbeak flew overhead, calling "Jeer! Jeer!" Another wonderful way to end a solid day on the birding trail.

## **Day 11:**

Our final full day of birding started out similarly to how our evening ended the previous night. Evening Grosbeaks flew overhead, with one landing close to the parking lot, providing great views for those that were out. Our rests and breakfasts were ample, and with Rosy-Finches on our minds we headed back toward Denver. Some of the most beautiful scenery was on this route, and we pulled over in Monarch Pass and Loveland Pass in search of White-tailed Ptarmigan while taking in the gorgeous mountain landscape. American Pipts were foraging in the snowy mountain washes, with Pine Siskins and Cassin's Finches moving overhead in short bursts throughout our relentless

scanning. We didn't encounter any Ptarmigan, so we decided to head to the Silverthorne area for lunch and hopefully Rosy-Finches. A local bakery was a great stop for soups, sandwiches and drinks before our journey back up the mountain. We arrived in the community best known for keeping stocked feeders all winter, a favorite hang out for finches and other overwintering birds here. It didn't take too long before we had a decent flock of Brown-capped Rosy Finches, with one juvenile and one adult Black Rosy-Finch mixed in. Further down the street, a lone Gray-crowned Rosy finch was picking seeds off a melting snowbank, while a Pygmy Nuthatch looked on.



*Brown-capped Rosy-Finch © Alan Collier*





*Rosy-Finches at feeders* © Joel Stone

So many birds were working the area, that when a trio of Crossbills showed up, we immediately assumed they were Red Crossbills. A local birder who had showed up a few minutes after us had recorded them, however, and showed us their different calls and their differences. Cassia Crossbill with the bird he had in mind, so we exchanged information to get confirmation once he sent the recordings along to the Finch Research Network (fast-forward weeks later - they were indeed Cassia Crossbills! Thanks, Luke!) With our birding list bulging and our birding minds blown, we headed down and out to the city of Denver where we checked back into the hotel where it all started. A beautiful dinner filled with laughs, memories and smiles all around the table capped a very successful tour. We all came together because we love birds, and this group most definitely proved that! We said our goodbyes, exchanged last minute jokes and headed our separate ways.

## **Day 12:**

The tour ended today, with all participants and guides happily departing Denver full of new and exciting stories, memories and experiences. Many people came together to make this tour a success. I'd like to thank Stacy Hoeme, Bob Bledsoe and Ken Bekkedahl for sharing your knowledge and perspectives, stewarding the land and wildlife in your respective styles and for the opportunities and experiences you provide to countless others.



*Our Group*

[Colorado Grouse tour 2025 eBird list](#)