

## **The Great Colorado Chicken Hunt April 3<sup>rd</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> 2008**

*(Notes from an illustrated talk)*

Chickens are what the Americans call Grouse. You can see 7 varieties in Colorado, plus two Quail, not to mention introduced Chukar and Pheasant. In early Spring the grouse are lekking which makes them easier and more enjoyable to see – snag is they do it around dawn and the weather is still very cold at this time of year.

How we did we get on to this trip? – saw it in a Wildings brochure – but full, and not running in 2010 – looked at local USA operators – found Jaeger Tours run by an ex-Brit Adrian Binns – a few emails and it was all booked. (Jaeger Tours is now part of Wildside Nature Tours)

So off we went, R with a really terrible cold, possibly the worst I have ever had. Could hardly breath or swallow – just fine for an air flight and birdwatching at high altitude!

Colorado has a big range of habitats - mountains, foothills and prairies – and a range of climates from east to west and north to south. Which is why you can get so many varieties of grouse.

Route – up into the Rockies, then through high passes and valleys, then to the drier west, then south back over the mountains and then out into the prairies.

The first morning dawned cold and clear and we set off straight up into the Rockies to a picturesque pine-clad area full of holiday homes. And why were we going there? To look at bird feeders of course! Our main destination was the Fawn Brook Inn – famous in these parts for the quality of birds at the feeders. So we stood in the cold, trying not to fall over on the icy car park and for us, it was like being children in a sweet shop. Every bird we saw was new! We immediately got excited about the first birds we saw – Dark Eyed Juncos – three different sorts - plus the local Rockies version, Pink Sided Junco. All very boring for the locals but new to us and made more interesting by the 4 subspecies, each of which has male and female versions, which all looked completely different – being pretty well in the centre of the USA all the races seemed to be together here. We also learnt about the local Siskin – the Pine Siskin – much less interesting than ours. And a local nuthatch – the Pygmy Nuthatch which really is very small. Then the target birds – the Rosy Finches. We waited for an hour or so and then they turned up. First Brown Capped Rosy Finches - we also saw Grey Crowned, Black and Hepburn's – the last being a possible split. These birds are hard to see in the breeding season as they nest very high up each in different areas of the Rockies, so seeing them in winter on feeders is a better bet, though even then not easy or reliable. So that was a good way to start – some of the most difficult birds out of the way. We hadn't yet seen Pine Grosbeak so we headed further up the road looking at all the feeders – we eventually struck gold – on one set were some cracking birds – Clark's Nutcracker, Steller's Jay (the local Rockies race with the white stripes on the face) and the local Magpie – I think there is rumour of it being split from ours – we certainly thought it looked more elegant, it was quieter, and the tail seems longer

We then travelled back down from the mountains and through lower hilly areas and pine forests looking for woodpeckers and nuthatches. Good area for mammals. Every time we saw ducks on a pond we screeched to a halt seeing a number of species. Later the same day we were back high up high in skiing areas looking for our first grouse – the White Tailed Ptarmigan – not aptly named as the whole bird is white. We were looking for a completely white bird on completely white snow. We did not have a pass to go tromping through the snow to find them – but we couldn't have done that anyway as the snow was very deep. It was very deep everywhere, and hadn't thawed much at all. So we scanned with a telescope from the road looking for any movement or a beady black eye. Much to my complete amazement Adrian found one – hard to see even with a scope but we eventually persuaded ourselves that it was one as it subtly changed shape from time to time!

We stayed that night in Georgetown, once a big silver mining town but now mostly holiday homes. More feeders meant that we were out early birdwatching around the streets. Then we

were off over a beautiful pass, very snowy and frozen, but we did manage to find a 3 Toed Woodpecker – a desirable bird for us now it has been split from the European one. Then along a beautiful swampy valley – called a Park locally - saw a female moose and youngster. Main target was the big semi-frozen lake at Windy Gap for waterbirds and gulls. Luckily not windy when we were there. We found Barrow's Goldeneye, also California Gulls and the ubiquitous Canada Geese – but somehow better in their proper environment. (and they build breeding platforms for them!)

Now it was up and over the great divide again to an area of high bleak plains and the Arapaho Wildlife Refuge. We drove in here, got stuck in the mud, decided to go no further and had lunch which, every day, was bought in the morning at a local Safeway.

It was very exposed up here but there were some good birds – Sage Thrasher, Sage Sparrow and we were looking for Golden Eagle. Adrian said “look on the power poles” – we didn't believe him as they never perch on power poles in the UK – but there it was! On a power pole – admittedly a very tall power pole. And we also saw most of the things they eat – prairie dogs, ground squirrels and skunks. To go with the Scottish scenery, and the Golden Eagle, we now saw a big herd of the local version of Red Deer – Elk. Now the reason for going to these cold, high, windy plains was to find Greater Sage Grouse. These are really big birds – must be similar to a female Capercaillie. We went out in the evening – without Peter who had now subsided with my cold – as there was a faint chance they might be displaying. We slipped and slithered in the van up a muddy track, the snow started to fall, it was getting dark, and suddenly, much to our amazement, there they were - right next to the track. They threw their heads back, stuck out their fluffy white chest with khaki coloured air sacs and made little popping noises. They were quite beautiful. And they were fantastically well camouflaged against the half dead sage brush – but how they get into breeding condition when there appears to be nothing to eat is a mystery. Actually, we looked this up in HBW and it's all very interesting. Next morning we intended to go back but a heavy snowfall overnight meant that the track would be impassable to our bus – so Peter never saw them.

As I said the next morning was very snowy and also very beautiful. Despite the weather there plenty of migrants around – especially Sandhill Cranes, which look somewhat out of place standing on the snow. There were plenty of Coyotes around as well – we never were sure how to pronounce their name - very visible in the white landscape – a tired crane would be a good meal.

Our next destination was to look for Sharp Tailed Grouse. We were worried about whether they would be lekking in the heavy snow, and if they were, whether we could get to them on the snowy roads. Our problems were solved when we met Ron. We bumped into him coming out of the Ladies – us that is – he asked us if we were birdwatchers (bins round neck a bit of a give-away) we said yes, he said “Come over to my place, I've got Sharp Tailed Grouse in the garden.” We introduced him to Adrian and we decided to go for it. Ron had built a huge log cabin up in the hills and as we approached it looked promising. Plenty of Red Winged Blackbirds in the bushes, chipmunks under the feeders and then – yes, there they were, STG grouse in the trees! Not a very spectacular grouse, but we had excellent views as they fed just outside the window. We made plans to come back in the morning to see them lekking, which apparently they do just by the garage!

Meanwhile, we set off up a very muddy track to a coal mine, where we met a new contact of Adrian's from the mining company, who was very confident we would see STG and also Blue Grouse. Suffice to say, we didn't. Conditions were dreadful, P stayed in the van, being ill, R walked up the road, the others walked through deep snow and none of us saw anything much at all!

And the next day it was snowing heavily so we were unable to get up Ron's dirt track to see the lekking STG. We tried an alternative road to a known lekking site but when the only vehicles we could see were 4WD and they were in the ditch we tentatively did an 18 point turn and gave up. Luckily the rest of the days programme was down low on the dry side of the mountains where we visited a dry valley which was our target location for the Black Throated Sparrow and Chukar Partridge. While the others were scanning the hillsides for Chukar we

concentrated on the other birds - for example the Mountain Bluebirds – and it was even quite warm!

We then moved on to an area of houses and orchards where we searched every tree for Lewis's Woodpeckers and every brush pile for Scaled Quail. Having not found either, we stopped by a house which used to belong to a friend of Adrian and used to be good for birds. Adrian asked the new owner if we could come in to look for the Lewis's Woodpecker which used to nest there - a typical hospitable reply – “Yes come on in all of you – it's on this tree now, see!” And there it indeed was perched on one of the ubiquitous cottonwood trees. An amazing bird – it catches insects in the air and only “woodpecks” to make holes for breeding. The house-owner then mentioned that there was a Great Horned Owl in the conifers somewhere – after a bit of a search we found it – it was huge! Later we saw quite a few on the nest – right out in the open using one of the few trees available.

Other birds we found in areas with houses were this Curve Billed Thrasher, which is really a southern desert bird and right on the edge of its range here, and we eventually found a Scaled Quail true to form in a brush-pile.

Our next destination was Gunnison. This is the Black Canyon of Gunnison – very impressive scenery where went to search for Blue Grouse. They are solitary and although they have a display which involves a far carrying boom they do not lek – however they are not usually too difficult to find. However, we failed to find one and again the deep snow restricted our access somewhat.

But the main attraction of Gunnison is the Gunnison Sage Grouse, recently split from the Greater Sage Grouse. This was our first organised “lek viewing” - we got up at 4.00, had a very minimal breakfast with definitely no coffee, dressed in every item of clothes we had, then picked up our guide at the motel. We drove in the dark along dirt tracks to the hide, which was a converted shipping container with two rows of seats. We got ourselves comfortable and the front flap was opened. It was still very dark but soon started to get slowly light and we could just make out small dark shapes running around in the far distance. They never got close but we could see OK through our scopes. It was very cold, the ground was frozen hard but there was a surprising amount of bird activity especially when the sun started to melt a few patches of ice. We had to wait till all the birds had departed before we could go – there was a cheer when the last one flew off! We were frozen! P did not come – possibly quite a good decision. And the lack of coffee – well there were no toilets and we were in the hide for over 2 hours in freezing conditions .....

So then it was along another beautiful valley up over another pass, failing to find Grey Jay, and then to some big lakes. Lots of good birds - Clarks, Western, and Eared Grebes and plenty of waders plus Pelicans, Snow and Ross's Geese and Killdeer.

Our next destination was the Prairies, but there were several areas there for which we required a Colorado Division of Wildlife permit. We had met up on the very first evening to get our passes in, of all places, Wal-mart - like an extremely big Woolworths. I had a temperature but I had to go – you had to apply in person even if that person felt like death warmed up! We had to go to the Hunting section where you buy guns and get Hunting permits! When we eventually managed to rouse an assistant, the process took ages – about 5 minutes per person - they took all our details including weight and had to invent a Social Security number for us – 000000001 seemed to work!

And then it was away east into the Prairies – very flat landscapes and big skies, like East Anglia, Australia or Argentina. We wanted to see Lesser Prairie Chicken the lek site was – closed. Luckily we had had warning of this and Adrian had managed to book a slot at another nearby site, over the border in Kansas. However, we stopped here to try and call up Cassin's Sparrows – however they had more sense than to be here in the howling gale – most of the American Sparrows are migratory and they probably hadn't arrived yet. There were some other good prairie birds though – Ferruginous Hawk, Mountain Plover and loads of Long Billed Curlew.

We had lunch at Campo at the café - this was a wonderful place – as different from the MacDonalds and Wendies as it is possible to get. The walls were covered with witty notices and it seemed to be the centre of Campo life and we loved it. We booked a table for breakfast the following morning and headed off to into Kansas.

The next morning we followed directions to the lek in the dark along the grid-style dirt roads and parked the bus where we could all see. As it got light, there they were all running around like clockwork toys. And as the sun came up it made their inflatable eye brows - I suppose the technical term is wattles - look like little flames! These birds were about 100 yards away and we had good views. When they started to fly off we carefully departed and they completely ignored us. Then we had our very welcome breakfast at the Campo Café – which included biscuits and gravy (for which read scones with white sauce), bacon, eggs, pancakes, syrup and huge quantities of coffee.

Ed, one of the group members, kept in touch with the world with his Blackberry. He kept an eye on all local sightings and twice we did a little twitch – once to find a flock of Cedar Waxwings which had some Bohemian Waxwings with them – the rest of the bus wanted the Bohemians and we wanted the Cedars!! They were on the cherry tree just outside the library just like it said on the web! We also went to a house in Steamboat Springs rumoured to have a Varied Thrush on the feeders – it did, and even better, Pine and Evening Grosbeaks too – and a cup of hot chocolate from the very friendly owners!

We next drove from the far south to the far north of the state to a small community called Wray. This community has really got its act together when it comes to chicken viewing – you have to book a place in advance and then you go to the museum the night before for a briefing and an optional look around the museum. (And to purchase souvenirs!) We took the picture of the stuffed prairie chicken here just in case as the lek viewings are never completely reliable – it only needs an eagle to fly through just as they are getting started and it will all be over. We were picked up the next morning at 4:30 from the only motel, in a yellow school bus and driven up frozen and rutted tracks to the viewing area. Another converted container, so again no drinks before leaving! Same routine, except they kept the flaps down for a long time as it was very cold – so we sat in the darkness and dozed! Gentle sound of snoring. Then flaps up – and there they were, much closer than any of the others. Lots of them and lots of females too. As well as strutting around, they made popping noises and mad cackles, also rapid little stampings on the ground. And then (and this is the best bit of all) off to a ranch for breakfast.

We next set out to the Pawnee National Grasslands to find our two remaining prairie birds – McCowns and Chestnut Collared Longspurs. This involved driving along grid patterned dirt roads some of which were very slippery with melting snow – we succeeded with the Longspurs but Adrian also succeeded in slipping off the road in the van and there was nothing for it but for us to push it back up out of the ditch on to the road! Now very muddy we set off on our final quest for a few remaining birds. We explored various scrubby areas looking for a much-wanted bird – Long Eared Owl – which was a lifer for most in the bus. On the way we saw Northern Harrier and very many migrating American Robins – then Adrian eventually found one, lurking. Still it made everyone very happy!

On our last morning we went back up into the Rockies to try and find Pygmy Owl and Grey Jay – two birds which had eluded us. We didn't find them but it was a beautiful sunny day and a lovely walk.

We covered about 2,700 miles, saw 166 species of which 88 were lifers, had some awful meals and very good company.