

Birding Trip Report: Eastern Colorado & Western Kansas
Prairies and Prairie-Chickens
22, 23, 24 April 2022 – By Pritam Baruah



Lesser Prairie-Chicken, Smoky Valley Ranch, Western Kansas

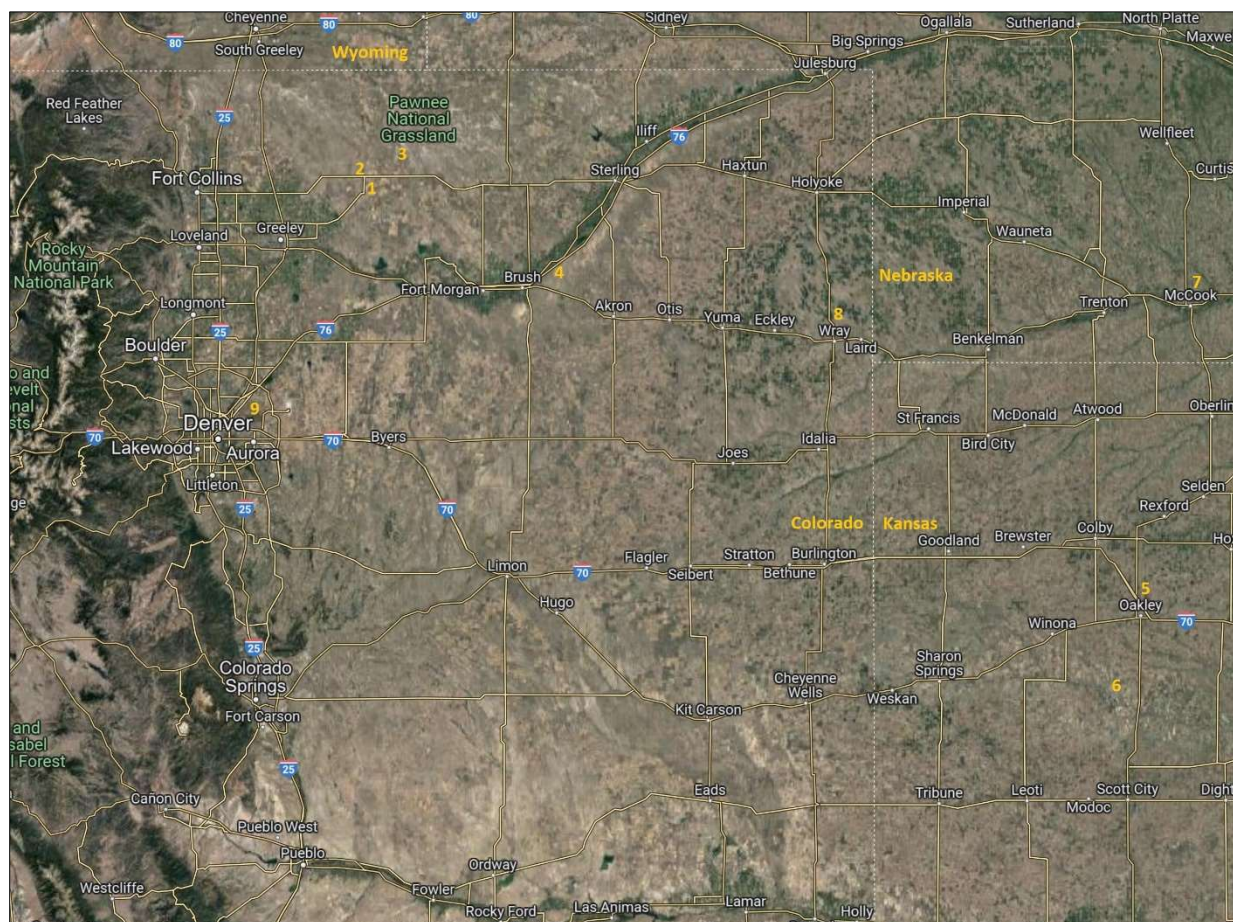
Colorado holds 7 highly sought after North American chickens and all of them are usually covered by traveling birders in a single trip. But due to travel duration constraints I decided to break up the 7 into two groups – 5 that are found in Western CO (White-tailed Ptarmigan, Dusky Grouse, Greater Sage-Grouse, Gunnison Sage-Grouse, Sharp-tailed Grouse) and 2 that are found in Eastern CO (Lesser Prairie Chicken, Great Prairie Chicken). Last year in April I visited the Rockies in Eastern Colorado and found all 5 targets, among a host of other goodies. Check out the trip report in this link: [Western Colorado Birding Trip Report \(cloudbirders.com\)](https://cloudbirders.com/2021/04/22/western-colorado-birding-trip-report/). That left the two Prairie-Chickens, which can be covered in a shorter long-weekend trip, such as this one.

Now why go to Western Kansas for Lesser Prairie Chicken? – because it is almost extinct in Colorado. It's tragic! Even more tragic is that it is almost extinct in 4 of the 5 states it was found in. Western KS happens to be the last stronghold of this species now. Thankfully the population in these parts, confined mostly to just a handful of well managed ranches, has been increasing. Smoky Valley Ranch is where I went to.

➤ Logistics

This trip was all on flat roads over vast prairies, so I rented a regular sedan (Kia K5) at the Denver airport. I later realized I should have rented a heavier car because the winds were so strong that my car was almost toppled out of the highway several times. This was a hardcore trip, so I ate breakfast and lunch while driving, for which sandwiches and pizza were suitable. Roads are excellent throughout and the extensive road network enables flexibility in your itinerary (check itinerary & diary). A spotting scope is essential.

➤ Map & Places



Map 1: Eastern Colorado & Western Kanas. Annotations: ©Pritam Baruah. Map Data: ©Google.

The table below has a brief description of the main birding sites and the main birds that were recorded there. The full list of birds can be found in the ‘Trip List’ section. Read diary for more details.

1, 2, 3	Pawnee National Grasslands, CO	Large area (781 sq km) of short grass & mixed scrub prairie at the border of Wyoming in two blocks. There is a so-called “Birding loop” (2) in the west-block: bounded by CO14 – Co Rd 69, 96, 77. All other Co Rds in the west-block are great too (beware of road quality, could need high clearance 4x4). Excellent for prairie species including the goodies below. Tiny town Briggsdale (1) is centrally located and can be good for species such as Mountain Plover & Sage Thrasher. The area in the east-block, west (3) of the ghost town of Keota is usually good for Mountain Plover (check the Black-tailed Prairie Dog Town).
		Recorded: Chestnut-collared, Thick-billed (McCown’s), Lapland Longspurs, Mountain Plover, Rough-legged Hawk
6	Smoky Valley Ranch, KS	A working ranch managed by Nature Conservancy with the goal of protecting the Lesser Prairie Chicken. Other great prairie species possible here if continuing birding after the lek experience. Midway between Oakley & Scott City. This is a managed tour , inaccessible independently.
		Recorded: Lesser Prairie Chicken
5	Oakley, KS	Small town to stage your Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek visit in the SVR. Scott City, further south is another option (other ranches nearby with leks).

4	Brush, CO	Alternate place for Greater Prairie Chicken, apart from Wray (CO) & McCook (NE). Not well known and I found this place on eBird while looking for spots that would save me driving time from Denver. (40.292252357710666, -103.43422162319769) Recorded: Greater Prairie-Chicken
9	Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Reserve, Denver, CO	Contrary to its name, there are no mountains here, just prairie, scattered trees, and small lakes. Good spot for waterfowl and open country birds. Recorded: Waterfowl
7	McCook, NE	Not visited. Awesome managed viewing of Greater Prairie-Chicken Leks.
8	Wray, CO	Not visited. Traditional spot for Greater Prairie-Chicken. Leks are off Hwy 385 north of town. Some leks are independently viewable but the managed viewings organized by the Wray Chamber of Commerce with the help of Kitzmiller Grazing Association are the best. Sells out very quickly so check their website for next year's dates.

➤ Itinerary

I wanted a flexible trip so all that I confirmed pre-trip were the plane tickets, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek managed viewing with Jim Millensifer of Oakley, KS (jhmillensifer@gmail.com), the motel room for Friday night and a rental car at the Denver airport. I was unable to reserve a spot for the Greater Prairie-Chicken lek at McCook, NE because the availability did not line up on consecutive days. Furthermore, the Wray Chamber of Commerce dates were booked out. In general, availability of managed viewings for both species is quite limited and back-to-back bookings for consecutive days is inconvenient (sometimes impossible depending on dates opened by the respective authorities). Just before the flight from SFO to DEN, I booked a room in Wray, CO for 23rd Sat to facilitate an independent search for Greater Prairie-Chickens on 24th Sun morning (off US Hwy 385, north of Wray), but I cancelled it on 22nd Fri night because I decided to prioritize the Mountain Plover, a bogey mega for me (I did not see it on Fri). My idea was that if I get the MOPL the next day (23rd Sat), then I will return to far-east CO very early morning on 24th Sun to try for GRPC. And if I don't get the MOPL on 23rd Sat, then I will continue looking for it on 24th Sun, hence skipping GRPC for a later visit. I calculated that if I was able to wrap up my targets by 24th Sun morning then I would be able to spend some relaxing time in Denver on 24th Sun evening, which I was rather looking forward to. Thankfully, that is what transpired.

Day	Date	Summary	Night
1	22-Apr Fri	San Francisco to Denver, arrive 4:15 am. Drive to Pawnee National Grassland (Co 69, west-block) via Greeley (1:20 hr). Birding till 2 pm. Drive to Greeley for lunch (30min). Drive to Oakley, Kansas (4:20 hr).	Kansas Country Inn
2	23-Apr Sat	Leave for Smoky Valley Ranch at 4:50 am (30 min). Back to Kansas Country Inn. Rest for 2 hours (less than 2 hr sleep last 2 nights combined). Drive to Pawnee National Grassland (Co 100, east-block, 4:30 hr). Birding in nearby Briggsdale.	DoubleTree by Hilton, North Denver
3	24-Apr Sun	Early morning drive back east to short grass prairies north-east of Brush, CO (1:10 hrs). Drive back west to Denver. Checkout & lunch. Birding in Denver: Heron Pond Natural Area and Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge till 6:15 pm. Midnight DEN to SFO.	

➤ Diary

In general, only the first occurrence of a species is noted in this diary – note that this usually coincides with the locality where it is considered a specialty. Species names are noted in **bold** only once. However, some species are in bold more than once only for special context. Some widespread and common species are not noted in this diary. Most species are encountered in multiple locations and the totality is covered in the trip list section.

• 22-Apr [Fly San Francisco to Denver, birding Pawnee National Grassland, to Oakley (KS)]

I took the 1:00 am non-stop Frontier Airlines flight from SFO to DEN and reached at 4:15 am. Flight wasn't particularly cheap, and I had to pay additional for carry-on and checked luggage – so much for a “discount airline”. Couldn't sleep in the flight at all because of the nearby presence of a prolific snorer. Last April I had booked Enterprise for my rental car and they were late to open their rental center (5 am scheduled). So, this time I booked Avis, which is supposedly open 24 hours. Formalities were super-fast, and I was out driving my Kia K5 by 5:15 am. I was surprised at how nicely appointed and pretty the sedan was. A quick stop at a convenience store for some supplies and I was off to Pawnee National Grassland (1:15 hrs away). I was feeling doughnuts (is there a better combo than birding and doughnuts?), so I decided to stop at a Winchell's Donut House location in Greeley, a far-northern suburb of Denver. A working (driving) breakfast later I found myself in the so-called “Birding Loop” at the Pawnee National Grassland.

It was unusually quiet and warm. My main targets here were Chestnut-collared and Thick-billed Longspurs but there was no sign of them. There were plenty of newly arrived **Vesper Sparrows** though. **Brewer's Sparrows** were conspicuous too, although much less numerous than Vesper. Found some **Chipping Sparrows** too, and surprisingly, quite a few **Rock Wren**. I birded around the loop and other Co Rds within the reserve. It was a struggle to find any activity at all, let alone the longspurs until I reached a farm on Co Rd 73. Traveling south towards 104, constantly scanning through the windows of my car, I saw a large flock of small ground-hugging birds at a pen from where the cows had moved on, leaving behind semi-dried dung deposits. On careful scanning I found the first of my targets – several exquisite **Thick-billed Longspur** (also called McCown's Longspur). Males in full breeding plumage and females were present. The dung also held a few **Lapland Longspurs** in non-breeding plumage. This plumage is not remotely comparable to its breeding plumage. A **Swainson's Hawk** and a **Rough-legged Hawk** also soared nearby. The owner of the farm found my scoping a bit suspicious, which was fair enough, and showed up in his ATV to enquire. My explanations were accepted, and he even gave some tips on a bird he sees in his property – not surprisingly he was describing the ubiquitous Horned Lark. I was still missing the Chestnut-collared, so I continued exploring. I hit 96 and turned right, traveling westwards. A little distance into it, I saw an SUV slowly coming from the opposite direction. Expecting them to be birders (who else would be slowly roaming a grassland in an SUV!) I stopped and so did they. It was a birding couple from UK, and as if the heavens got generous, the ecstatic couple revealed that they had a huge mixed flock of longspurs up ahead. Some very precise directions followed and soon I was enjoying a large flock of longspurs, including the **Chestnut-collared Longspur**, on a patch littered with dried up cow dung. All the while I was keeping a lookout for Mountain Plover but couldn't find any.



Then it was lunch time. I went back to Greeley to pick up a large pizza and ate half of it while on the long drive to Western Kansas. Now being from California, I had no idea how wild the weather can get in the prairies. I also had no idea that winds can be so dangerous that lightweight cars (and high back vehicles like tall semis) can be swept out of the highway. I drove calmly, trusting my tight grip on the steering and hoping for some favorable luck. Visibility was often going down to zero, so I was not sure how favorable my luck was, but my grip held strong. When I reached Oakley (Kansas) 4:30 hours later, I felt quite lucky that I was not dead in a pile on the side of a remote Kansas highway. I quickly hogged up the remaining pizza, did some research for the next day and went to sleep. And then the next ordeal started.

At 12:45 am I woke up to my phone blaring an “extreme tornado risk” alarm. Apparently, there are tornadoes all over the area and I was stuck in a flimsy building, which was shaking violently. Again, being from CA, I only saw these terrifying things on TV and never dreamt of facing them. I could not come out of the room because it opened to the outdoors and the weather outside was too dangerous. I knew I had to get to a “tornado shelter” (a way of life in these parts), but I didn’t know if the motel had one – not that I could get to one because I was stuck in my room. So, I waited on my bed, hoping that the tornados would not sweep us away and contemplating if a miracle can salvage the chicken dance viewing which was coming up in just a few hours. At 3:45 am the loud sporadic alarms stopped, and the weather magically cleared. I took a nap for 45 mins and at 4:45 am Jim Millensifer knocked on my door – the viewing was still on, and I heaved a sigh of relief.

- **23-Apr [Smoky Valley Ranch (KS), drive to Pawnee National Grassland, to North Denver]**

At 4:55 am all birders booked into this morning’s viewing followed Jim in their cars as he drove us to the Smoky Valley Ranch. We parked our cars about a mile away from the lek and Jim drove us in batches in his pickup truck and deposited us into the dilapidated remains of a vehicle that used to be a trailer or half a bus or something like that. This was our hide. We began hearing **Lesser Prairie-Chickens** arrive at the lek well before 6 am. Straining through our binoculars in the dark we could see that they had already started to dance. As the light came on, we were treated to one of the best shows in the entire world. Today there were 10 males and 2 females at the lek. Attendance at any given lek varies as there are at least 10 active leks in the ranch and birds move from one lek to another, but it is highest in early April. After we were satisfied, Jim drove us back to where our cars were parked. I drove back to Oakley and decided to sleep for 2 hours because I got less than 2 hours sleep the last two nights combined.



Basically, my plan for the rest of the day was to find the Mountain Plover, a much-needed bogey bird. So, I started driving back west towards Pawnee National Grassland. There are several spots in that area where the bird was seen recently. On the way I picked up brunch at a Starbucks in Colby (KS) and stopped at some ponds near Brewster (KS) to check out what’s interesting. I found plenty of water birds and a **Yellow-headed Blackbird**, a species that was just beginning to arrive in these parts for breeding. I stopped for lunch (Subway) and gas at the small town of Akron, CO. After that I drove straight to Co Rd 100 west of the ghost town of Keota within the east-block of the Pawnee National Grassland. Mountain Plovers were reportedly breeding among the Black-tailed Prairie Dog town on the south side of the road but I could not find any even after diligent scoping for at least 2 hours from inside my car. This was probably because of the constant strong dust winds. The winds prevented me from coming out of my car too. The one time I came out (in a burst of irrational enthusiasm no doubt), it was difficult to remain standing and my scope+tripod was blown away.

I then continued to my next location – the harvested corn field south of the high school at Briggsdale. There were recent reports of 4 in that field and a pair of birdwatchers who were with me during the LEPC lek viewing had seen it there yesterday. So, I was hopeful. But the winds only got stronger, and I could not find any plovers in the first hour. Time was running out and in desperation I planned that I'll wait for any break in the wind and playback its song when it got quiet during the break. It took another 20 minutes for the break to arrive and when I played the tape, a **Mountain Plover** responded instantly and flew in from 100 meters away. It landed 10 meters from my car and gave me great views. It was still feeding when I had to leave.



I had already booked a hotel in a northern suburb of Denver for the night, and it was too late to cancel without penalty and relocate somewhere closer to Greater Prairie-Chickens. The original plan was that if I didn't get the plover today, I would return here tomorrow. Since this was not necessary anymore, I now had the liberty to try for the Greater Prairie-Chicken independently tomorrow morning. I ate a monster calzone for dinner and finally got a good night's sleep.

- **24-Apr [Drive to Brush (CO), back to Denver, birding in Denver, Fly Denver to San Francisco]**

Last evening I had looked up recent reports of **Greater Prairie-Chicken** on eBird and found that there are 3 active leks north-east of Brush (CO) off I-76 on Co Rd 50. This area would save me one hour of driving when compared to Wray (CO). So I had set up alarm for 4:15 am, calculating that I would reach at 6:00 am – plenty of time to check out the birds. But the alarm did not go off and when I woke up, I was horrified to see 5:15 am on the clock. Evidently, I had set up the alarm for 4:15 am on Saturday and today was Sunday. I literally jumped out of bed and rushed to my car and drove like a mad man to the aforementioned leks. The three leks were within a 10 minute stretch of road. I reached the first lek at 6:40 am and it was inactive – possibly because of a Swainson's Hawk sitting on a fence post nearby. I continued to the 2nd lek and saw one male run away into the brush and then no more activity. I continued to the 3rd lek and finally lucked out – there were 5 males dancing there. No females could be seen. In the field the GRPC looks almost identical to the LEPC but they sound very different and



dance very differently too. One male flew away 5 mins later at 6:55 am. The other 4 danced continuously till 7:10 am and then intermittently till 7:40 am. All 4 left the lek together at 7:50 am.

I drove back to the hotel in Denver and rested a bit, opting for a 1 hr late checkout. After that I went to the Heron Pond Natural Area for a leisurely birding stroll. Then I had a delicious lunch at a Denver vegan institution – City O’City. After that I went to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge for another leisurely birding stroll and finally went to the airport for my return flight. (*Additional pics on last page*).

➤ Trip list

1	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	
2	Cinnamon Teal	<i>Anas cyanoptera</i>	
3	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>	
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas chlypeata</i>	
5	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	
6	American Wigeon	<i>Anas americana</i>	
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	
8	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	
9	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>	
10	Canvasback	<i>Aythya valisineria</i>	
11	Redhead	<i>Aythya americana</i>	
12	Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>	
13	Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>	
14	Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>	
15	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	
16	Hooded Merganser	<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>	RMA NWR
17	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	
18	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	RMA NWR
19	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	
20	Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>	
21	Ring-necked Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	Common in SVR, KS
22	Greater Prairie-Chicken	<i>Tympanuchus cupido</i>	Brush, CO
23	Lesser Prairie-Chicken	<i>Tympanuchus pallidicinctus</i>	Smoky Valley Ranch, KS
24	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	
25	Eared Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	
26	Clark’s Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus clarkia</i>	
27	Mountain Plover	<i>Charadrius montanus</i>	Briggsdale, just south of the school
28	Solitary Sandpiper	<i>Tringa solitaria</i>	
29	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea Herodias</i>	
30	Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	
31	American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>	
32	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	
33	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	
34	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	
35	Cooper’s Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>	
36	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>	

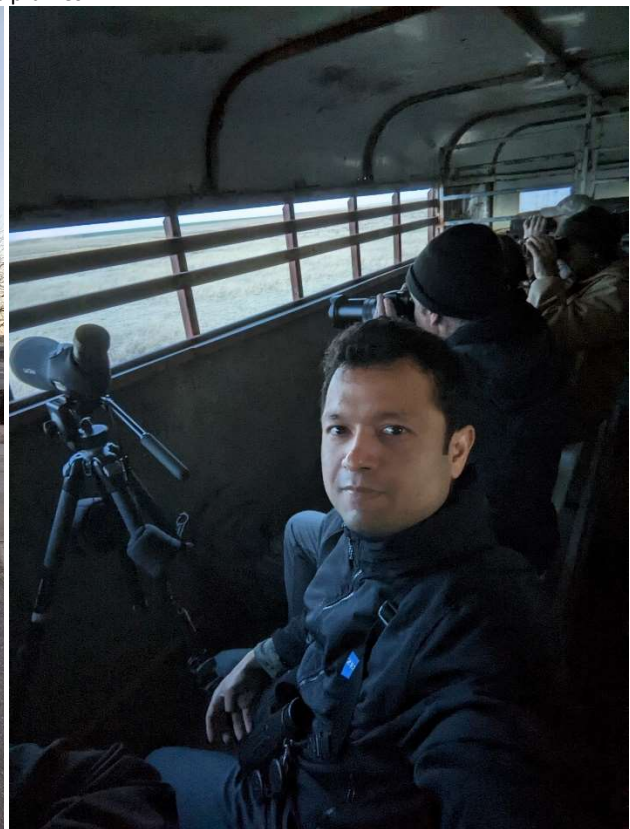
37	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	
38	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	
39	Rough-legged Hawk	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	1 close to I-70, 1 in PNG
40	Swainson's Hawk	<i>Buteo swainsoni</i>	Common at Pawnee NG
41	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	
42	Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>	
43	American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	
44	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferous</i>	
45	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>	
46	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	
47	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>	
48	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaidura macroura</i>	
49	Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>	
50	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	
51	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	
52	Say's Phoebe	<i>Sayornis saya</i>	
53	Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>	
54	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	
55	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	
56	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	
57	Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	
58	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>	
59	Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>	Common in the prairies
60	House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	
61	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	
62	Mountain Bluebird	<i>Sialia currucoides</i>	
63	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	
64	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	
65	House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>	
66	American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>	
67	Lapland Longspur	<i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>	Pawnee NG. Near cow dung deposits.
68	Chestnut-collared Longspur	<i>Calcarius ornatus</i>	Pawnee NG. Near cow dung deposits.
69	Thick-billed Longspur	<i>Rhynchophanes mccownii</i>	Pawnee NG. Near cow dung deposits.
70	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	
71	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>	
72	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>	
73	Vesper Sparrow	<i>Poocetes gramineus</i>	Common in the prairies
74	Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>	Pawnee NG
75	Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>	Pawnee NG
76	Yellow-headed Blackbird	<i>Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus</i>	Brewster WTP
77	Western Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i>	
78	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	
79	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>	
80	Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>	



Endless prairies



Picking up donuts at 6 am for birding



Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek viewing

END