

# The Great Chicken Run 2023: Colorado and Kansas

*A trip report by Richard Thomas and Sarah Thomas*



*Lesser Prairie-chicken, Kansas.*



*Greater Sage-grouse, Coalmont*



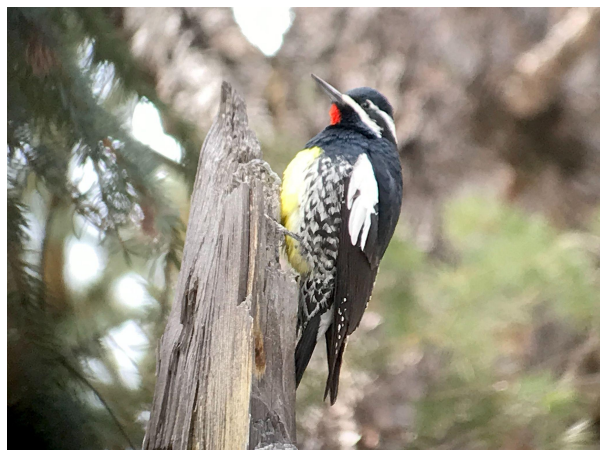
## Introduction

This report covers a two week trip myself and my wife Sarah undertook to Colorado (plus a brief foray into Kansas) from 17th April–1st May 2023 focused on seeing the region’s “chickens”—namely Greater Sage-grouse, Gunnison Sage-grouse, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Greater Prairie-chicken, Lesser Prairie-chicken, Dusky Grouse, and White-tailed Ptarmigan. All except the last two can be seen at well-known lek sites, with April being the key month.

We also had a number of other target species, including the three forms of Rosy-finch, Mountain Plover, plus four woodpecker species. Overall we were very successful, seeing the majority of our target species. It followed our previous US birding trips to Cape May, Texas and California where we had seen a good selection of the country’s avifauna.



*Lewis's Woodpecker, Buena Vista*



*Williamson's Sapsucker, Almont*



*Rosy-finches, Silverthorne. Photo by Sarah Thomas*

## Planning

Thanks to the many contributors to eBird—consulting their records is an essential element of any trip planning and trip adaptation during your visit. Note that although some eBird records give co-ordinates to precise sightings locations, others are far less useful in giving co-ordinates for general areas or e.g. the centre of a nearby town rather than where the bird was actually seen. Particular thanks to JoAnn Riggle, who kindly allowed us to visit her bird feeders to see the wintering Harris's Sparrow. Thanks also to Joe Tobias who confirmed the location of the Greater Prairie-chicken lek, to John Sweeney who put us onto a nearby Williamson's Sapsucker site, and to Mike Edgecombe, whose Colorado visit led by Dick Filby overlapped with our own and who kept us informed of their sightings as they too travelled around the State. Finally, special thanks to Pritam Baruah, whose two trip reports on birding Colorado proved invaluable. These are available from Cloudbirders at:

[cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=BARUAH\\_ColoradoKansas\\_04\\_2022.pdf](https://cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=BARUAH_ColoradoKansas_04_2022.pdf) and [cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=BARUAH\\_Colorado\\_04\\_2021.pdf](https://cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=BARUAH_Colorado_04_2021.pdf)

Viewing of some of the grouse lek sites should be arranged well in advance as they get popular and booked up. In particular, viewing of the very rare Gunnison Sage-grouse is now heavily managed to reduce disturbance to the birds. From 2024 (limited) public viewing of the lek is unlikely to be possible. Organised visits to view the lek can be arranged through the Gunnison Sage-grouse Conservation website at: <https://siskadee.org/> where you can book a space in the viewing trailer for a fee. At the time of our visit, the Sisk-a-dee Director, Pat Magee, had an overview of this process. Note there are closed periods during the lekking season when no viewing is possible, so plan your chicken-run based on when you can see the birds. Lesser Prairie-chicken is now very rare indeed in Colorado, so to view this species you will need to visit one of the lekking sites on private ranches in Kansas. More information here: <https://www.visitoakleyks.com/lesser-prairie-chicken-viewing> I booked our places by contacting Jim Millensifer ([jhmillensifer@gmail.com](mailto:jhmillensifer@gmail.com)) in early January. Even by that date there were only three possible dates left for us to see the birds. Viewings take place from late March into early May. Once we had fixed dates for the above two species (21st and 30th April respectively), the rest of the trip was planned around them. If visiting Kansas, note that it is on a different time zone to Colorado, being one hour ahead—making it a very early start for the leks indeed! Prior to our visit, I plotted all the lek sites and sightings of particular target birds on Google maps which we could access and update as we travelled around. These could be downloaded from eBird as csv files and uploaded straight into Google Maps.



*Greater Prairie-chicken, Brush*



*Dusky Grouse, Boulder. Photo by Sarah Thomas*



## **Paperwork**

Many visitors to the US can apply online for a visa waiver known as an ESTA at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/> NOTE: on the homepage there is a statement saying that CUBA has been added to the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism and that if you have visited there you are not eligible to apply for an ESTA but should instead apply for a regular visa. Confusingly, however, the actual ESTA application form does not list Cuba as one of the US recognised State Sponsors of Terrorism. The application process is otherwise straightforward and our ESTAs were granted within 48 hours. Although we printed them out, we were never asked for them and they appear to be linked electronically to your airline ticket and US immigration services.

At the time of our visit, a declaration regarding your COVID vaccination status was also needed. We were sent a link to download a PDF for this by our airline (British Airways). We also took print outs of our NHS COVID vaccination records but were never asked to show them.

If visiting the Gunnison Sage-grouse lek, new rules mean you have to have a valid Colorado State Wildlife Access pass for at least the day of your visit (again, we printed ours out although we were never asked to produce evidence we had them). Full instructions on how to purchase these were provided by the Sisk-a-dee organisers (see planning above).

## **Flights**

We flew direct from Heathrow to Denver with British Airways.

## **Money**

Credit cards are widely accepted and we generally paid for accommodation and fuel with these and other living expenses with dollars cash.

## **Car hire and driving**

We booked through Opodo and paid in advance for a rental car from Avis for a total cost of \$1010. This was rather expensive but we wanted a car with all wheel drive (AWD). Although you can request this, there's no guarantee that's what you'll actually get: however, on the icy and sometimes snowy roads in the mountains the AWD system on the Mazda we had was needed. Picking up the hire car was tedious to say the least: the shuttle bus from the airport to the car hire point was efficient, but there was a (very) long queue and it took about 90 minutes to get to the desk (by which time it had gone dark outside). Once served, you'll probably be asked if you want to include e-toll payments with your booking—at a cost of about \$11 per day. There is no need to do so (unless you plan to use the eastern Denver ring road on a daily basis!). Other roads with tolls are only for one Express lane, and even on these we only saw one actually operational—the others had Toll Waived signs on the dedicated Express Toll lane. Note you can set up Google Maps to give you toll-free routes only. To pick up the car, you need a driving licence with your photo on it (not just a paper one), your passport and the credit card you booked the car with.

Driving in the USA is easy—the roads are very wide and drivers aren't particularly aggressive. You give way to traffic on roundabouts. Turning right on red lights is permitted and when



turning left at lights you may have a dedicated green arrow or simply wait for a gap in the oncoming traffic once you are on green. There are occasional “all way Stop” junctions where every car arriving stops, then you proceed in the order in which you arrived at the junction—a surefire recipe for road rage if such systems existed in the UK. There are numerous Stop signs at pretty well all junctions. Failure to Stop is considered a serious offence, even though you can often see there’s nothing coming from miles away: just get used to ruining your fuel economy. Speaking of which, fuel is cheap by UK standards—around \$3.40 per (US) gallon at the time of our visit. When refuelling, if you have a non-US credit card, simply go into the petrol station and pre-pay using your card. Any unused amount will be refunded to your card. Note there are double fines if caught speeding in School or Road Work areas. Speed limits change frequently but are generally around 25–40 mph in built up areas, 65 mph in rural areas and 75 mph on Interstate Highways.

### **Internet**

Although all hotels had free Wifi as standard, we chose to buy a local SIM card from a Walmart store for \$20 with 3GB of data on it (apparently SIM cards are more expensive at the airport). Make sure your phone is unlocked so you can accept the local SIM.

### **Navigation**

Google Maps works very well. We brought with us a Vanmass Car Phone Holder that we hooked into the dashboard air vents so the phone effectively became a SatNav. Each night we loaded up the GPS co-ordinates for the next day’s birding sites, usually based on our eBird searches that evening.

### **Food**

Our diet wasn’t great: we bought cereal for breakfast (although breakfast was provided at some motels, it was often not available until way after we’d left to go birding), snacks and tomatoes and cheese to have with rolls at lunchtime and in the evenings tried to find a restaurant that sold something vegetatrian. Several times we ended up with pizza, buying a large one and eating half between us that night and the remainder the following evening. (Almost all motels come with a microwave in your room to reheat pizza, which is also useful if hot water is not provided as none we stayed in included a kettle: we brought travel mugs with us to make up tea for during the day).

### **Accommodation**

We pre-booked all our accommodation for the first week of the trip and the fixed date for the Lesser Prairie-chicken lek in Kansas at the end through Booking.com (apart from the Antlers Inn, Walden, which we booked direct through their website as it didn’t appear on Booking.com) but kept things flexible towards the end of the trip so we could adapt the itinerary based on what birds we’d missed/had been reported on eBird during our visit. This allowed us to return to the mountains for another go at Dusky Grouse after missing it near Montrose.

Motels cost in the region of \$70-80 per night. Easily the best value was the Chaparral Motor Inn, Burlington, at just \$53 which also included a decent breakfast. For the record the places we stayed in were:

Motel 6, Denver Airport  
Luxury Inn & Suites, Silverthorne (2 nights)  
Days Inn & Suites by Wyndham, Gunnison  
Black Canyon Motel, Montrose (2 nights)  
Traveler Inn, Craig  
Antlers Inn, Walden  
Super 8 by Wyndham, Greeley  
Rodeway Inn, Fort Morgan  
Millennium Harvest House, Boulder (2 nights)  
Annie Oakley Motel, Oakley  
Chaparral Motor Inn, Burlington

### **Climate**

It was a very late spring and Colorado had record snowfall over the winter. Consequently it was extremely cold with deep snow in the mountains—especially so at Loveland Pass and at the Gunnison Sage-grouse lek, ca.  $-9^{\circ}\text{C}$ , while we had snow on a couple of occasions (e.g. at Black Canyon NP and Silverthorne). Bad weather—ideally snow—is needed for Rosy-finch activity at bird feeders (at Silverthorne at least). Towards the end of our visit things had warmed up considerably, especially in Denver where it was short-sleeves weather on our last day there.

### **Itinerary**

April 17th. Depart UK arrive Denver  
April 18th. Prospect Park - Genesee Mountain Park - Loveland Pass - Wildernest  
April 19th. Eagle - Lake Creek Village Wetlands - Silverthorne Sewage Ponds - Wildernest  
April 20th. Buena Vista - Monarch Pass - Gunnison  
April 21st. Gunnison Sage-grouse lek - One Mile Campground Almont - Black Canyon NP  
April 22nd. Black Canyon NP - Lower Spring Creek  
April 23rd. Black Canyon NP - Grand Mesa - Powderhorn Ski Area - Craig  
April 24th. County Road 27 (CR27) Sharp-tailed Grouse lek - CR46B lek - CR80 - Walden  
April 25th. Coalmont Greater Sage-grouse lek - Walden Reservoir - State Forest Moose Visitor Centre - Arapaho Bend Natural Area - Briggsdale  
April 26th. Pawnee Grasslands - Brush  
April 27th. Brush Greater Prairie-chicken lek - Pawnee Grasslands - Green Mountain  
April 28th. Sites around Fort Collins (Mesa Reservoir, River's Edge Natural Area, Edora Park, St Vrain State Park)  
April 29th. Walden Lakes - Arriba - Oakley  
April 30th. Stacy Hoeme's Ranch for Lesser Prairie-chickens - Arriba - South Republican SWA - Burlington  
May 1st. Burlington - Lakeland Lake - Belmar Lake - Denver Airport



## Daily accounts and sites visited

### April 17th

Arrive Denver. Immigration surprisingly swift and friendly. Shuttle bus to Avis where a tedious 90 minute wait to get to the counter to pick up the hire car. Overnight in the rather forgettable Motel 6.

### April 18th

After a somewhat noisy night (people arriving and leaving outside all night), drove to Walmart to stock up with supplies and buy a local SIM card. Drove to Prospect Park (39.77459, -105.12707) where a redhead Hooded Merganser was our only record of this species all trip (despite several attempts to find males reported on eBird). On to Genesee Mountain Park (39.7027, -105.29297), a known stake-out for Williamson's Sapsucker. Despite several hours trying could only find Northern Flickers (it later transpired nobody had seen the sapsucker in 2023 by this date, the birds being late arriving, apparently because of the late spring). Decided to try our luck with White-tailed Ptarmigan at Loveland Pass (39.66273, -105.87931) (where the road had reopened following heavy snow earlier in the week). The altitude (3,655 m asl, ca. 12,000 ft) made it tough walking at Loveland but we quickly located a male Ptarmigan near the trail to the west of the pass (ca. 39.66331, -105.87996). While watching the bird, it ran towards me and stopped to feed about 3 m from my feet! Drove to Wilderndest and visited the feeders on both Spring Beauty Drive (39.622280, -106.096913) and Elk Thistle Drive (39.621857, -106.096193). The owners of both houses were very friendly but we saw few birds of interest save for a single Brown-capped Rosy-finch.



*White-tailed Ptarmigan, Loveland Pass*

## April 19th

Visited JoAnn Riggle's house near Eagle where she'd set up seats in the garden so we could watch the hundreds of birds (mainly icterids and finches) visiting her feeders. A Red-naped Sapsucker was quickly seen, followed by the highly desired Harris's Sparrow that was wintering there and had acquired much of its summer plumage. JoAnn told us of a nearby Bald Eagle nest that we visited and saw the birds just as it began to snow quite heavily. Afterwards we visited Lake Creek Village Wetlands where there was no sign of any Hooded Mergansers, but we did see our only American Pipits of the trip. Tried Silverthorne Sewage Ponds (39.666951, -106.087651; viewable from Blue River Parkway) for male Hooded Merganser—without luck—then revisited both feeders in Wildernest. Given the ongoing snowstorm, things were very different today. Both feeders had 100s of Rosy-finches attending them—the majority Brown-capped, but also including several Grey-crowned birds and a single Black. A good result thanks to the weather! The owner at the Elk Thistle Drive feeders told us that such weather was essential to encourage the Rosy-finches to visit.



*Harris's Sparrow, Eagle*



*Rosy-finches, Silverthorne*



*Song Sparrow, Eagle*



### **April 20th**

En route from Silverthorne to Gunnison we stopped off at Buena Vista, an eBird-identified site for Lewis's Woodpecker and quickly found one in the leafless trees at 38.84489, -106.13895. Carried on to Monarch Pass (38.49923, -106.32735), a known stake out for American Three-toed Woodpecker. It was rather unpleasant birding given the cold wind, wintry showers and numerous noisy vehicles passing. We concentrated on the (marginally less windy) south side of the pass but despite several hours searching, didn't find the woodpecker. There was some compensation for me in the form of the only Canada Jay of the trip (which Sarah unfortunately missed) and our only Clark's Nutcracker of the trip. Drove to Gunnison.



*Clark's Nutcracker, Monarch Pass. Photo by Sarah Thomas*

### **April 21st**

Early (04:30) meeting with Blake, who led us to the Gunnison Sage-grouse viewing trailer along with about a dozen other participants. This is next to the (currently still?) public viewing layby at (38.463828, -106.611810) although it has the big added advantage of being slightly higher than car viewing and thus you can actually see the distant specks that are displaying Gunnison Sage-grouse. We saw about 30 in all, but a coyote soon flushed the birds and the (distant) spectacle was over by about 07:30. Outside the trailer, a Sage Thrasher was song flighting, an unexpected (at this stage of the trip) bonus tick. One of the participants, John Sweeney, told us of a nearby Williamson's Sapsucker site at One Mile Campground, Almont. We parked near the Taylor River bridge (38.727105, -106.762203) and Sarah soon saw a woodpecker on the opposite side of the river. This we tracked down along a stream in the North Bank Campground (38.730011, -106.758892) and proved to be a male Williamson's Sapsucker. We also birded the south side of the river by walking the road for some time, but pairs of Townsend's Solitaires and American Dippers were the only birds of interest. We later met John there who managed to see the sapsucker exactly where we had. He had just returned, empty handed, from Crested Butte, where eBird indicated there had been many Rosy-finch (and Evening Grosbeak) sightings during the winter, mainly along Blackstock Drive (38.8142913, -106.8838681). We pressed on to Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and paid the \$30 per car entrance fee (for up to seven days). Although the

visitor centre closes quite early (16.30), with this permit, the Park is open 24/7 allowing for early morning and late evening visits. We had heard that the main target here—Dusky Grouse—had not been seen since early in the month (in previous years, displaying males had been easy in the campground), and that at least three crews had dipped already in 2023. This was largely put down to the main location for the species—High Point—not being accessible due to snow along the South Rim Road. We were delighted, therefore, to learn at the entrance gate that the road to High Point had just been opened for the first time in 2023 that day: Dusky Grouse success was (almost) guaranteed! Indeed, High Point car park, and the first 200 or so metres of the trail that leads from it to Warner Point were covered in Dusky Grouse droppings—those actually in the car park were very fresh indeed. We stayed till dusk but had no sightings of the bird. Overnighted in nearby Montrose.



*Gunnison Sage-grouse (yes, the views are that awful)*



*Chipmunk, Almont. Photo by Sarah Thomas*

### **April 22nd**

Up early to get to High Point just after first light (after a slow crawl along South Rim Road during the ongoing snow shower). Checked the car park and the first 200 m of the Warner Point trail. Returned to the car park to find fresh Dusky Grouse footprints in the snow, leading out of the picnic area and down South Rim Road! A bird must have made them minutes after we had first been around the car park. Aaagh! Surely we'd have better luck the next day... We then visited all the viewpoints along South Rim Road—some were really spectacular, then headed off to the dry juniper woodlands along Dave Wood Road (38.38456, -107.94034). Spent hours birding along and around Spring Creek Canyon Trail and eventually found our target bird—Juniper Titmouse. Returned to Montrose to prepare for battle once more with Dusky Grouse the following morning.



*Dusky Grouse footprint in the snow...*



### **April 23rd**

Arrived at High Point car park pre-dawn and waited in the car for a Dusky Grouse to appear. Needless to say a vehicle arrived and parked exactly where the grouse had emerged from the previous day. I politely asked the occupants to keep the noise down, which they did, but unsurprisingly no Dusky Grouse appeared. Gave up about 09:30 and headed north towards Craig, our next chicken-lek site (Sharp-tailed Grouse). En route, we stopped at the Grand Mesa County Line Ski Trailhead car park, which was just accessible off the main highway down a snowy entrance track (39.027938, -108.031657), where the Edgecombe crew had seen a pair of American Three-toed Woodpeckers the day before (at ca. 39.028869, -108.028972). On a glorious calm, bright, crisp sunny day it didn't take us long to walk through the deep (compacted) snow and find a Three-toed Woodpecker. Red Crossbill flocks were here too. Drove the short distance to Powderhorn Ski Resort where eBird records earlier in the winter (none more recent than mid-March) indicated Evening Grosbeaks and Rosy-finches had been attending feeders on Grove Road. Although the Ski Resort was closed, to our delight the feeders along Grove Road were still active outside an occupied house (39.069457, -108.147134) and there we found 14 Evening Grosbeaks along with three Red-naped Sapsuckers. Continued to Craig.



*Evening Grosbeak, Grove Road*

**April 24th**

Early (04:30) start to a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek along County Road 27 (CR27, 40.408694, -107.146834, distant lek viewable at 40.405361, -107.158861). John Sweeney had told us this was the place to go as the more reliable site at CR46B was closed owing to snow. Although Sarah saw one grouse in flight, the cold wind and viewing distance made us give up at 06:00 and decide to chance our luck with the CR46B site. After a 30 minutes (snow free) dash there, we quickly found one Sharp-tailed Grouse up a tree at around 40.559055, -107.007169. Although we could hear a lek on the hill beyond, we couldn't see the birds. Fortunately, four birds were displaying along CR46 at 40.555239, -107.001977 and we were able to enjoy them displaying over the next hour or so. Left for CR80, a reliable site for Dusky Grouse at about 08:30. These are found on the first hill along the road but it was blocked by snow about a mile before the hill so we walked up there and spent several hours looking, unsuccessfully, for Dusky Grouse. Just over the brow of the hill, there was some brief excitement when Sarah spotted a grouse, but it was a Sharp-tailed. In the late afternoon we drove to Walden, checking out the Coalmont Greater Sage-grouse lek site on the way where we found one male next to the road.



*Sharp-tailed Grouse, County Road 46*



### **April 25th**

Up early (04:00) to get to the Greater Sage-grouse site at a leisurely pace through the overnight (ca. 5 cm) snow to the Coalmont lek (40.5465243, -106.440112). The rules are very clear here that you must arrive in the dark and stay in your car to avoid disturbing the lekking birds. We were one of four vehicles there that day. Up to 13 males were displaying close to the road, affording superb views of their remarkable performance—a fantastic experience and a highlight of the trip. We left when things had quietened down around 08:30 and went back to Walden for breakfast then visited Walden Reservoir, which had plenty of wildfowl but no Hooded Mergansers. Afterwards we headed east, stopping at the State Forest Moose Visitor Center (40.51143, -106.0102) which had active feeders at the back. Plenty of birds there but no sign of any Canada Jays that had been recently reported. Carried on east, pausing for lunch in Fort Collins at Arapaho Bend Natural Area (40.5406652, -105.0056291) where 2 Great Northern Divers and a Slavonian Grebe were seen. Afterwards, although the weather was closing in, we decided to try for the Mountain Plovers recently reported at a traditional site for the species—the fields south of Briggsdale School (40.631550, -104.323230). Despite strong winds and heavy rain, Sarah quickly located a bird song-fighting over the fields that landed close to the car. Delighted with our luck, and in spite of the weather, we decided to check the nearby fields for the species now known as Thick-billed Longspur along CR89. We quickly found about 20 Thick-billed Longspurs at 40.648403, -104.222774 so drove to our hotel at nearby Greeley.



*Greater Sage-grouse, Coalmont*

## April 26th

A relative lie-in until 07:00 then, after a leisurely breakfast, headed for the Pawnee Grasslands. Our main target left there was Chestnut-collared Longspur. Normally this species is a lot more numerous than Thick-billed Longspurs in the area. However, eBird was showing remarkably few records from 2023 and only one of them in the Pawnee Grasslands. From earlier research, I knew that CR104 was a reliable site for the species so, after a stop for a Ferruginous Hawk, we started at the west end of CR104. The grassland to the south of the road is unfenced and there are no signs saying you can't walk into it. Wherever the habitat looked suitable (Chestnut-collared is said to prefer slightly longer grass than Thick-billed), we explored on foot. It didn't take long to find two pairs of Chestnut-collared Longspurs at about 40.737628, -104.505940 which allowed close views. Shortly afterwards, about 300 m further east along CR104 we found at least two pairs of Thick-billed Longspurs. With the Pawnee Grasslands specialities under our belts we carried on east to check out the lek site for tomorrow's chicken: the Greater Prairie-chickens near Brush. There are up to three leks along the dogleg road that cuts through the grassland from underneath Highway 76 (40.333802, -103.471237) and the dogleg at 40.291607, -103.434427. Again from eBird (and messages to Joe Tobias), we knew that there was an active 2023 "hilltop lek" viewable to the east of the road at 40.307136, -103.452519. During the afternoon, while driving the dogleg roads we saw no fewer than 4 Greater Prairie-chickens although all were in flight, each taking off close to the road. Overnighted it in Fort Morgan.



*Chestnut-collared Longspur (upper) and Thick-billed Longspur (lower), Pawnee Grasslands*



## April 27th

Another early (04:45) start to watch up to 7 lekking Greater Prairie-chickens perform their comic display at the above mentioned site. Hugely entertaining and mesmerising, with the birds sometimes fluttering up into the low bushes but mostly giving their manic laughter calls and booming with their neck tufts raised. Magic. The previous night we had revised our itinerary so we could double-back towards the mountains to the west to resume our battle with Dusky Grouse. eBird had enabled us to identify several promising locations, two of them close to Boulder and one of them—Green Mountain West Ridge Trail—where an aggressive bird had followed and even flown at the observers. This sounded too good to be true. We therefore headed back west (stopping briefly at St Vrain State Park where a small flock of Bonaparte's Gulls flew in and circuted the main lake), then through Boulder and up into the mountains along the steep, winding Flagstaff Road. There is a fee to park along this road, but once you get to the Green Mountain West Trailhead, the fee to park zone ends and there are several free parking places on the south side of the road (39.983072, -105.323936). Once there, after about an hour's walk gaining height gradually, the track began climbing steeply to where the eBird pin had been dropped—right on the mountain summit! A couple of Mountain Chickadees entertained us there—one even landing on my outstretched hand—but it was cold and windy while the rather exposed habitat didn't look that suitable for a Dusky Grouse. By now it was late afternoon and we decided to walk slowly back to the car, checking carefully for any grouse. At around 39.982483, -105.313817 Sarah brilliantly spotted a Dusky Grouse sat motionless on the forest floor. We carefully approached the bird and watched it for several minutes from about 30 m range, after which it stood up and walked slowly away from us into the forest. Fantastic—Dusky Grouse at last under the belt! Overnighted at the rather grand Millennium Harvest House Motel.



*Dusky Grouse, Boulder. Photo by Sarah Thomas*



### **April 28th**

With Dusky Grouse sorted, we effectively had a “free day” before our long drive to Kansas. Following some eBird research we decided to try some of the sites in the Boulder and Fort Collins areas where several waterfowl species of interest had been reported in recent weeks. Given these are mainly winter visitors, we didn’t hold out much hope any would still be present—and indeed that turned out to be the case. Nevertheless, we did visit the small Edora Park that held four “Canada” Geese. Two of these were “regular” Canadas, another one was a little smaller with a dark throat line looked good for a “Lesser” Canada Goose while the last one was clearly smaller with a white neck ring and had everything about it to suggest it was a (Richardson’s) “Cackling” Goose. Left thoroughly convinced Canada Goose taxonomy is up the spout and that it’s all one species with a lot of variation within it. An extended visit (\$10 per car entry fee) to St Vrain State Park produced nothing more interesting than a Great Northern Diver and 7 Forster’s Terns. A surprise at Greenlee Preserve (39.997046, -105.114183) was a male Broad-tailed Hummingbird. Stayed at the Millennium Harvest House Motel again.

### **April 29th**

After a quick visit to the rather pleasant birding location of Walden Ponds in Boulder (40.044253, -105.1867721, where a Snow Goose had been reported the day before), we hot footed it east again to arrive late afternoon in the town of Oakley, Kansas, where we stayed in the paper-thin walled Annie Oakley Motel. En route we pulled over at Arriba Rest Area and checked the fields just to the south along CR63 where we soon found a pair of Mountain Plovers viewable just to the west of the road at about 39.271193, -103.269412. Up to 5 had been reported in the area on eBird several days earlier. Readjusted our alarm clocks to Kansas State time for the super early (03:30 local time, 02:30 Colorado time) start for the last of our chicken leks: Lesser Prairie-chicken.



*Mountain Plover, Briggsdale*

**April 30th**

Awoke early and drove to Healy where we met Stacy Hoeme, who took us and 8 others to the hide on his nearby ranch where up to 10 male Lesser Prairie-chickens put on a superb display. One female also visited the lek but didn't mate, while a late arriving male had orange cheek patches and appeared to be a Greater x Lesser Prairie-chicken hybrid. Stacy then took us on a tour of his ranch, showing us a Ferruginous Hawk breeding cliff (where the male flew around for us) and several Burrowing Owls. After leaving Stacy, we drove slowly back west as far as Burlington. We then drove the short distance north to South Republican SWA where we spent the afternoon and early evening. An interesting wet area just north of a parking area at ca. 39.601272, -102.218334 held Swamp Sparrow and several waterbird species. Overnighted it at the excellent value Chaparral Motor Inn.



*Lesser Prairie-chicken, Hoeme Ranch, Kansas. Photo by Sarah Thomas*

**May 1st**

Drove into Denver (via Arriba where the pair of Mountain Plovers were still in the field at 39.271193, -103.269412) and tried two sites: Lakeland Lake (39.6931431, -105.1181316, where a pair of Hooded Mergansers and a full summer plumaged Harris's Sparrow had been reported the day before) and Belmar Park (39.704310, -105.085301, where a local birder told us drake Hooded Mergansers were often present). Drew complete blanks at both so headed to the airport, dropped off the hire car and caught the flight home, arriving the following day.

### **Systematic list of species recorded**

**Cackling Goose** – 1 Edora Park 4/28

**Canada Goose** – common

**Wood Duck** – total of 4 lakes around Boulder/Denver and South Republican SWA 4/30

**Gadwall** – common

**American Wigeon** – fairly common

**Mallard** – common

**Blue-winged Teal** – widespread

**Cinnamon Teal** – pairs Prospect Park 4/18, South Republican SWA 4/30, Belmar Lake 5/1

**Northern Shoveler** – common

**Northern Pintail** – pair Walden Reservoir 4/24

**Green-winged Teal** – fairly common

**Canvasback** – 10 Walden Reservoir 4/24 & 4/25

**Redhead** – ca. 100 Walden Reservoir 4/24 & 4/25

**Ring-necked Duck** – 20 Lake Creek, 30 Walden Reservoir 4/24 & 4/25

**Lesser Scaup** – 30 Walden Reservoir 4/24 & 4/25, several lakes around Boulder/Denver

**Bufflehead** – widespread: maximum 50 St Vrain SP 4/28

**Common Goldeneye** – small numbers lakes around Boulder/Denver, maximum 10 St Vrain SP 4/28

**Hooded Merganser** – 1 redhead Prospect Park 4/18

**Goosander (Common Merganser)** – fairly common, mainly along rivers

**Ruddy Duck** – 50 St Vrain SP 4/27 & 4/28

**Gambel's Quail** – 1 flew across road on drive from Montrose to Craig

**Ring-necked Pheasant** – 1 Kansas Prairies, 1 north of Burlington 4/30

**Greater Sage-Grouse** – 1 male Coalmont 4/24, 11 males lekking, 8 females Coalmont lek 4/25

**Gunnison Sage-Grouse** – up to 30 males lekking near Gunnison 4/21

**White-tailed Ptarmigan** – 1 male Loveland Pass 4/18

**Dusky Grouse** – 1 (young?) male Green Mountain 4/27

**Sharp-tailed Grouse** – up to 8 including 4 lekking males CR46, 1 CR80 4/24

**Greater Prairie-Chicken** – 4 near Brush 4/26 with 7 males lekking and 3 females 4/27

**Lesser Prairie-Chicken** – 10 males lekking, 1 female near Healy 4/30

**Presumed Greater x Lesser Prairie-chicken** 1 male near Healy 4/30

**Wild Turkey** – 2 Green Mountain 4/27, 1 Kansas prairies 4/30

**Great Northern Diver (Common Loon)** – 2 Arapaho Bend Natural Area 4/25, 1 St Vrain SP 4/28

**Pied-billed Grebe** – 1 Prospect Park 4/18

**Slavonian (Horned) Grebe** – 1 Arapaho Bend Natural Area 4/25

**Eared Grebe** – ca. 30 Arapaho Bend Natural Area 4/25, 20 St Vrain SP 4/28, 1 Denver 5/1

**Western Grebe** – small numbers lakes around Boulder/Denver, maximum 10 St Vrain SP 4/28

**Double-crested Cormorant** – common

**American White Pelican** – common lakes around Boulder/Denver, ca. 50 Walden Reservoir 4/25

**Great Blue Heron** – widespread

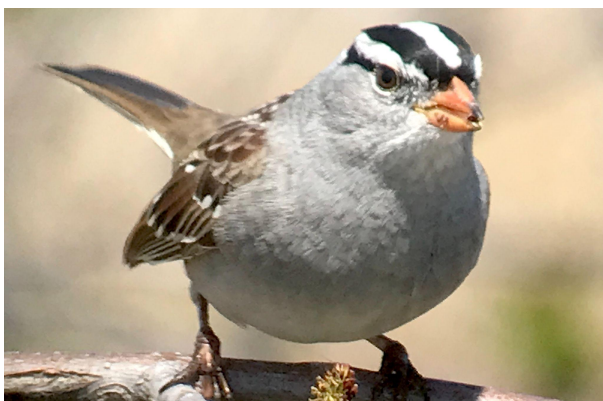
**Great Egret** – 1 Prospect Park 4/18



**Snowy Egret** – 6 Prospect Park 4/18  
**Black-crowned Night-Heron** – 1 River's Edge Natural Area 4/28  
**Glossy Ibis** – 1 Pawnee Grasslands CR104 4/26  
**White-faced Ibis** – 1 South Republican SWA 4/30  
**Turkey Vulture** – common  
**Osprey** – widespread at waterbodies  
**Bald Eagle** – pair near Eagle 4/18. Small numbers at several waterbodies  
**Northern Harrier** – fairly common around Hayden/Walden area  
**Cooper's Hawk** – 1 Black Canyon 4/23, 1 CR80 4/24, 1 Kansas prairies 4/30  
**Swainson's Hawk** – fairly common in prairies  
**Red-tailed Hawk** – common  
**Ferruginous Hawk** – 1 Pawnee Grasslands 4/26, 1 Kansas prairies 4/30  
**Golden Eagle** – 3 Spring Creek Canyon Trail 4/22, 2 Pawnee Grasslands 4/26  
**American Kestrel** – common  
**Prairie Falcon** – 1 Pawnee Grasslands 4/26  
**American Coot** – widespread at waterbodies  
**Sandhill Crane** – fairly common around Hayden/Walden area  
**Killdeer** – common  
**Mountain Plover** – 1 Briggsdale 4/25, pair Arriba 4/29 & 5/1  
**American Avocet** – 10 Arapaho Bend Natural Area 4/25  
**Greater Yellowlegs** – 2 Pawnee Grasslands 4/27, 4 South Republican SWA 4/30  
**Willet** – 1 Walden Reservoir 4/25  
**Long-billed Curlew** – pair Walden 4/24, 1 Kansas prairies 4/29  
**Wilson's Snipe** – displaying bird Boulder 4/28, 1 South Republican SWA 4/30  
**Wilson's Phalarope** – 3 Arapaho Bend Natural Area 4/25  
**Bonaparte's Gull** – 12 St Vrain SP 4/27  
**Mew Gull** – 2 2CY birds Arapaho Bend Natural Area 4/25  
**Ring-billed Gull** – 3 (2x2CY, 1x3CY) Oakley 4/29  
**California Gull** – 2 Walden 4/24, ca. 30 Walden Reservoir 4/25  
**Caspian Tern** – 2 Arapaho Bend Natural Area 4/25, 1 River's Edge Natural Area 4/28  
**Forster's Tern** – 7 St Vrain SP 4/28  
**Rock Pigeon** – common  
**Eurasian Collared-Dove** – common  
**Mourning Dove** – common  
**Burrowing Owl** – 3 Kansas prairies 4/30  
**White-throated Swift** – 1 CR80 4/24  
**Broad-tailed Hummingbird** – male Greenlee Preserve 4/28  
**Belted Kingfisher** – 1 Prospect Park 4/18, 4 Eagle area 4/19, 1 St Vrain SP 4/28  
**Lewis's Woodpecker** – 1 Buena Vista 4/20  
**Williamson's Sapsucker** – 2 males One Mile Campground 4/21  
**Red-naped Sapsucker** – 1 Eagle 4/18, 3 Powderhorn Ski Resort 4/23  
**Downy Woodpecker** – 2 Eagle area 4/18, 1 Wildernest feeders 4/19, 1 Boulder area 4/29  
**Hairy Woodpecker** – 4 Eagle area 4/18, 4 Wildernest feeders 4/19  
**American Three-toed Woodpecker** – female Grand Mesa 4/23  
**Northern Flicker** – common  
**Say's Phoebe** – fairly common Boulder area

**Loggerhead Shrike** – 1 Pawnee Grasslands 4/26, 3 Kansas prairies 4/29 & 4/30  
**Canada Jay** – 1 Monarch Pass 4/20  
**Pinyon Jay** – 6 Eagle 4/28, 1 near Buena Vista 4/20  
**Steller's Jay** – fairly common at mountain feeders  
**Blue Jay** – fairly common Boulder, Denver, South Republican SWA  
**Woodhouse's Scrub-jay** – fairly common Black Canyon NP 4/21–4/23  
**Clark's Nutcracker** - 1 Monarch Pass 4/20  
**Black-billed Magpie** – common  
**American Crow** – common  
**Common Raven** – common  
**Horned Lark** – common in prairies  
**Tree Swallow** – common over large waterbodies  
**Violet-green Swallow** – 1 Lakeland Lake 5/1  
**Northern Rough-winged Swallow** – 1 Boulder area 4/28  
**Bank Swallow** – 1 Boulder area 4/28  
**Barn Swallow** – fairly common  
**Black-capped Chickadee** – common  
**Mountain Chickadee** – common in mountains  
**Juniper Titmouse** – 1 Spring Creek Canyon Trail 4/22  
**Bushtit** – fairly common Spring Creek Canyon Trail 4/22, also Black Canyon 4/21  
**Red-breasted Nuthatch** – fairly common Monarch Pass 4/20, Grand Mesa 4/23  
**White-breasted Nuthatch** – 2 Genesee Mountain Park 4/18, 2 Wilderdest feeders 4/19  
**Pygmy Nuthatch** – fairly common in mountain pines  
**Rock Wren** – 1 Brush 4/26  
**House Wren** – fairly common  
**Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** – 1 Kansas prairies 4/30  
**American Dipper** – pair One Mile Campground 4/21  
**Ruby-crowned Kinglet** – 1 CR80 4/24, 1 Greenlee Preserve 4/28  
**Western Bluebird** – 2 Genesee Mountain Park 4/18  
**Mountain Bluebird** – fairly common along roadsides Montrose to Walden  
**Townsend's Solitaire** – pair One Mile Campground 4/21, 1 Black Canyon 4/23  
**American Robin** – common  
**Sage Thrasher** – 1 Gunnison 4/21, 1 near Craig 4/23  
**Brown Thrasher** – 2 Kansas prairies 4/30  
**European Starling** – common  
**American Pipit** – 2 Lake Creek Village Wetlands 4/19  
**Lapland Longspur** – 1 Pawnee Grasslands 4/26  
**Chestnut-collared Longspur** – 4 Pawnee Grasslands 4/26  
**Thick-billed Longspur** – 20 Pawnee Grasslands 4/25, 4 Pawnee Grasslands 4/26  
**Orange-crowned Warbler** – 1 CR80 4/24, 3 Boulder/Denver area  
**Yellow-rumped Warbler** – fairly common Boulder/Denver area  
**Black-throated Gray Warbler** – 1 Black Canyon 4/21 & 4/23  
**Green-tailed Towhee** – 2 Black Canyon 4/23  
**Spotted Towhee** – fairly common, especially at Black Canyon  
**Chipping Sparrow** – 2 CR80 4/24, 1 Kansas prairies 4/30  
**Vesper Sparrow** – fairly common in prairies

**Lark Sparrow** – 3 Kansas prairies 4/30, 3 Arriba 4/30  
**Savannah Sparrow** – 1 Kansas prairies 4/30  
**Song Sparrow** – widespread  
**Swamp Sparrow** – 1 South Republican SWA 4/30  
**White-throated Sparrow** – 1 South Republican SWA 4/30  
**Harris's Sparrow** – male Eagle 4/18  
**White-crowned Sparrow** – fairly common Boulder/Denver area  
**Dark-eyed Junco** – common in mountains. Mainly the “Gray-headed” form, but “Pink-sided” birds at Black Canyon  
**Red-winged Blackbird** – common  
**Western Meadowlark** – common in prairies  
**Yellow-headed Blackbird** – 1 Eagle 4/18, 2 Arapaho Bend Natural Area 4/25, 2 St Vrain SP 4/28  
**Brewer's Blackbird** – 10 Walden area 4/24, 10 State Forest Moose Visitor Center 4/25  
**Common Grackle** – common  
**Great-tailed Grackle** – fairly common in prairies  
**Brown-headed Cowbird** – 1 Eagle 4/18, fairly common in prairies  
**Gray-crowned Rosy-finch** – at least 3 Wildernest feeders 4/19  
**Black Rosy-finch** – 1 Wildernest feeders 4/19  
**Brown-capped Rosy-finch** – perhaps 500 or more Wildernest feeders 4/19  
**Purple Finch** – common at feeders  
**Cassin's Finch** – common at feeders  
**House Finch** – fairly common  
**Red Crossbill** – several flocks Grand Mesa 4/23  
**Pine Siskin** – common at feeders  
**American Goldfinch** – fairly common Boulder/Denver area  
**Evening Grosbeak** – at least 11 male, 3 females Powderhorn Ski Resort 4/23  
**House Sparrow** – common



*White-crowned Sparrow, Boulder*



*Snowy mountain road. Photo by Sarah Thomas*



