Colorado: Prairie Chickens, Grouse & More (11 days)



Greater Prairie-Chicken Photo Stephan Lorenz

Colorado combines spectacular scenery and a variety of habitats with the largest diversity of native grouse and quail species found anywhere in North America. Our journey takes us from the eastern prairies, which are home to Greater and the endangered Lesser Prairie-Chickens, to the western sagebrush plains which harbor one of the last remaining populations of the critically endangered Gunnison Sage-Grouse and the equally stunning but more numerous Greater Sage-Grouse. In between, we visit the foothills east and west of the Rocky Mountains to look for Scaled and

Gambel's Quails, Sharp-tailed and Dusky Grouse, and the introduced Chukar. We also venture to the high elevations above the tree-line to search for the difficult White-tailed Ptarmigan, still in its immaculate alabaster plumage during this time of year. In addition to the “chickens”, the prairies hold Mountain Plover, Thick-billed and beautiful Chestnut-collared Longspurs, while the foothills and higher elevations harbor a wide variety of Rocky Mountain specialties. The pine forests at middle elevations are home to such sought-after species as Pinyon and Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jays, Clark’s Nutcracker, Lewis’s Woodpecker, Williamson’s Sapsucker, Juniper Titmouse, and American Dipper. Boreal forests at higher elevations support American Three-toed Woodpecker, Steller’s and Canada Jays, Mountain Chickadee, and Pygmy Nuthatch. Feeders can attract an incredible array of winter finches with Gray-crowned, Black, and Brown-capped Rosy-Finches often present in large mixed flocks, while Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, Cassin’s Finches, and Red Crossbills add to the diversity. Other highlights we will search for in the sagebrush habitats include Sage Thrasher, and Sagebrush and Brewer’s Sparrows. Lakes and reservoirs along the way will offer a wide selection of waterfowl with around 20 species possible, including Barrow’s Goldeneye, and these bodies of water also harbor Clark’s and Western Grebes. The open landscapes and rocky cliffs are excellent for raptors and we can expect to see a dozen species. This tour is also superb for mammals with two dozen species possible, ranging from the massive Moose to the diminutive Least Chipmunk to round out one of the finest birding adventures in North America. Photographic opportunities of birds, other wildlife, and scenery are exceptional on this tour.



Greater Sage-Grouse Photo Stephan Lorenz

Note: ***The exact itinerary will depend on lek availability and weather conditions, while we will visit all the sites mentioned below the order may vary. Also, lek visits necessitate early starts and we expect to be in the field between five and six am on most days.***

Tour at a Glance

Day 1	Denver Airport to Pueblo Night: Pueblo
Day 2	Pueblo to Kansas Night: Oakley, Kansas
Day 3	Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek and Oakley to Wray Night: Wray, Colorado
Day 4	Greater Prairie-Chicken lek and Wray to Silverthorne Night: Silverthorne
Day 5	White-tailed Ptarmigan and Silverthorne to Gunnison Night: Gunnison
Day 6	Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek and Crested Butte area Night: Gunnison
Day 7	Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park Night: Grand Junction
Day 8	Colorado National Monument and Grand Junction to Craig Night: Craig
Day 9	Sharp-tailed Grouse lek and Craig to Walden Night: Walden
Day 10	Greater Sage-Grouse lek and Walden to Denver Night: Denver
Day 11	Departure day

Day 1: Afternoon arrival at the Denver International Airport (DIA) and transfer to Pueblo for the night. Depending on available time there may be a birding stop at a local reservoir or prairie site. We will then enjoy a welcome dinner.

Day 2: In the morning we will bird in the arid foothills west of Pueblo to search for Scaled Quail. Other species possible here that are unlikely to be seen elsewhere during the tour include Curve-billed Thrasher and Canyon Towhee. We will then travel east towards Kansas with stops at various reservoirs and lakes along the route and depending on water level these could hold a variety of waterfowl and Clark's and Western Grebes. If water levels are low, shorebirds could be present and we will keep a lookout for Baird's Sandpiper and Wilson's Phalaropes among Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, American Avocets, and Black-necked Stilts. As we traverse the eastern plains on our way to Kansas, we will also be on the lookout for a variety of raptor species, particularly Rough-legged and Ferruginous Hawks.

Day 3: We will visit a Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek early in the morning and we can study one of the most endangered native grouse in the country at close quarters. Listening to the booming and cackles predawn and watching the silhouettes morph into prancing and dancing prairie-chickens as the sun rises is one of the most memorable birding experiences in North America. After

breakfast, we return to Colorado where we scour the shortgrass prairie for Mountain Plover, Thick-billed and Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and have chances for Prairie Falcon and Burrowing Owl before ending our day in northeast Colorado.



Scaled Quail Photo Stephan Lorenz

Day 4: The Greater Prairie-Chicken lek we visit on a large ranch is often one of the most active of the entire tour. We can hope for more than two dozen birds performing their age-old ritual all around us. After this unforgettable morning, we head west towards the magnificent Rocky Mountains with select birding stops along the way to look for additional prairie species. We will settle in for the night in beautiful Silverthorne, nestled among the snow-covered high peaks of the Front Range.

Day 5: We start early to look for one of the most elusive and difficult grouse species native to Colorado, the White-tailed Ptarmigan. This species thrives at high elevations above tree-line year-round and during April remains in its immaculate all-white plumage. We will spend the morning combing the area around the snowy Loveland Pass seeking this marvelous bird and during past tours, we have had great success. After breakfast, we will spend time birding around Silverthorne, which is an excellent place for all three species of rosy-finches, Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Merlin, and even Canada Jay, Pine Grosbeak, Red Crossbill, and Barrow's Goldeneye are rare possibilities. We will then travel south towards the Gunnison area, a high elevation basin supporting sagebrush flats. Along the way, we will stop to look for Lewis's Woodpecker, Red-naped Sapsucker, Pinyon and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays, and the scarce American Three-toed

Woodpecker at one of the higher mountain passes. We will settle in for the night in the small town of Gunnison surrounded by vast expanses of sagebrush and rugged mountains.

Day 6: One of the earliest starts of the tour will take us to the only available Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek in the world. Here we arrive pre-dawn to witness the display of one of North America's rarest birds. Viewing conditions vary based on the number of birds present and weather conditions, but we can expect good scope views. After a well-earned breakfast, we head into the mountains north of town to look for American Dipper, rosy-finches, Red Crossbills, and other high-elevation species. We will spend a second night in Gunnison.

Day 7: After breakfast, we continue west towards the scenically stunning and little-known Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park where we search for the tricky Dusky Grouse. The scrub oaks here are also home to Fox "Slate-colored" Sparrow and Spotted Towhees, while Golden Eagles and Prairie Falcons are possible from any of the dramatic overlooks. After a full morning here, we continue towards Grand Junction with possible stops at various lakes and wetlands.



White-tailed Ptarmigan Photo Stephan Lorenz

Day 8: A slightly later start will see us driving west towards the impressive Colorado National Monument. Here we seek the distinctive Gambel's Quail and can also find a selection of species more typical of arid habitats like Black-throated Sparrow, the uncommon Juniper Titmouse, Bewick's and Canyon Wrens, Western Bluebird, White-throated Swift, and Violet-green Swallow. Time permitting we may head further west to look for Sage Thrasher and Sagebrush Sparrow before stopping in at a sandstone canyon to search for the introduced Chukar, a species that can

prove very difficult at times. For the remainder of the day, we travel towards Craig with stops along the way for any interesting wildlife. This area of Colorado is sparsely populated and mammal sightings are frequent.

Day 9: From Craig, we head east early in the morning to look for Sharp-tailed Grouse on their traditional display grounds. The birds tend to move around a large area and we will carefully scan open fields near brushy woodland to find these birds as they do a stomping display and raise their name-sake tails. The area here is also excellent for Sandhill Cranes and waterfowl. For the remainder of the day we travel north towards Walden, one of the least populated areas of Colorado. We will spend the late afternoon birding around Walden Reservoir to look for American White Pelicans and California Gulls that are just arriving and a wide variety of waterfowl.



Mountain Plover Photo Stephan Lorenz

Day 10: The final lek of the tour is also one of the most memorable. The flat top of a gentle ridge is the display ground of the impressive Greater Sage-Grouse, the largest member of the family in North America. Up to 100 birds can be present with males puffing up their chests and letting go of volleys of loud pops while shivering their wings. Often dozens of females wander through the lekking ground and males move constantly, offering incredible photo opportunities. All this display activity takes place in front of a stunning backdrop of snow-covered mountains. From Walden we start the return journey towards Denver, stopping along the way for Barrow's Goldeneye or other species we may still need. We celebrate the adventure with a final dinner in Denver.

Day 11: This is a departure day and the hotel includes breakfast and a shuttle service. Flights home can be booked any time on this final day.



Brown-capped Rosy-Finch Photo Stephan Lorenz