



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 6/2013:

A FEW SITES IN UTAH, COLORADO AND KANSAS

Petri Hottola (University of Oulu, Finland & Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies)

As a part of a 'triangle tour of the USA' (Alaska, Colorado, Puerto Rico) in summer 2012, I flew to Denver on the 23rd of June. A circle trip to a number of birding sites in Utah, Colorado and Kansas followed, before a return in Denver on the 28th. The idea was to look for eight target species/subspecies: White-tailed Ptarmigan, Greater Sage Grouse, Gunnison's Sage Grouse, Dusky Grouse, Lesser Prairie-Chicken, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Black Rosy-Finch and Brown-capped Rosy-Finch. For Greater Prairie-Chicken there was not enough time, June not being the easiest season for neither this species nor for some of the listed ones. I did, however, eventually score with all the eight, some more easily than some others.

The variety of mammals was surprisingly good, too, not to mention the various relics of 'Wild West' (e.g. in Leadville, plains), great sceneries and good people met on the road. What is more, this was a particularly exciting week in Colorado. There were several forest fires on loose, including a major one in Waldo Canyon, and one could not fully predict their effect on travel routes and timetables. The Waldo Canyon fire was the most destructive one in the state's history. It burned 62 km² of forest and could be seen in the horizon during the return drive. It was also a week of record temperatures, up to F 112 (+44.4 C) on the hot southeast plains, in the Las Juntas – Lamar region.

LOGISTICS

My car was rented at National, at Denver International Airport, where their station was located relatively far from the arrivals. Out of a row of available cars, I chose a Toyota Corolla with New Mexico plates, for reliability and low fuel consumption. The rental cost USD 274 for the six days (€35 per day), everything included. Each site could be visited with ease by the sedan. Petrol was also cheap in Colorado, mostly under USD 4 per gallon. It was great to be able to buy the petrol at regional chains with character, such as Love's and Loaf'N Jug.

Interesting situations occur on the highways. Close to Puebla, leaving a Loaf'N Jug station, I was confused by the complicated junction and took my time turning left. A lady behind me got agitated, overtaking me rather fast and entering a four lane interstate to the right. We met again in the next junction. She had just collided with a pick up there, having been unable to stop fast enough in red lights, and was just about to start a discussion with its driver, another lady. The lights turned green when I passed them, towards Lamar. I could understand why she got agitated in the first place. It is nevertheless advisable to stay calm on the highways, whatever happens.

DENVER INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT DEPARTURES					
Departing To	Airline	Flight	Gate	Time	Status
Los Angeles	US AIRWAYS	7593	B83	9:07A	On Time
Lubbock	UNITED	6085	B61	9:45P	Now 10:00 PM
McCook	UNITED	7250	A63	7:10P	Delayed
Medford	US AIRWAYS	7129	B86	8:00A	On Time
Miami	BRITISH AIRWAYS	2405	A47	11:50P	On Time
Miami	BRITISH AIRWAYS	2399	A47	7:50A	On Time
Milwaukee	SOUTHWEST	4002	C32	7:35A	On Time
Minneapolis	DELTA	932	C42	6:00A	On Time
Minneapolis	FRONTIER	1110	A26	7:00A	On Time
Minneapolis	DELTA	1606	C38	7:40A	On Time
Minneapolis	US AIRWAYS	7111	B54	8:53A	On Time
Minneapolis	AIR FRANCE	8651	C38	9:10A	On Time
Minneapolis	FRONTIER	7142		9:30A	On Time
Minneapolis	UNITED	7316		9:30A	On Time
Missoula	UNITED	5521	B82	8:15A	On Time
Montrose	US AIRWAYS	7663	B82	10:00P	On Time
Montrose	US AIRWAYS	7666	B77	8:23A	On Time
Nashville	SOUTHWEST	2424	C31	7:35A	On Time
New York-JFK	jetBlue	98		12:55A	On Time
New York-LGA	Copa Airlines	8254	B29	5:53A	On Time
New York-LGA	FRONTIER	506	A33	7:00A	On Time
New York-LGA	UNITED	2677		8:15A	On Time
New York-LGA	US AIRWAYS	8204	B27	8:38A	On Time
Newark	US AIRWAYS	6892	B26	11:53P	On Time
Newark	TAP PORTUGAL	7354	B31	5:56A	On Time
Newark	US AIRWAYS	6469	B26	8:42A	On Time
Oakland	SOUTHWEST	1896	C41	8:20A	On Time
Oklahoma City	US AIRWAYS	7209	B59	7:58A	On Time
Oklahoma City	SOUTHWEST	3210	C39	8:40A	On Time
Omaha	SOUTHWEST	561	C28	9:55P	Boarding
Omaha	US AIRWAYS	7132	B71	8:32A	On Time
Ontario, CA	SOUTHWEST	1508	C47	9:40P	Boarding
Ontario, CA	US AIRWAYS	6481	B20	10:37P	On Time

DENVER INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT DEPARTURES					
Departing To	Airline	Flight	Gate	Time	Status
Ontario, CA	SOUTHWEST	272	C35	6:30A	On Time
Ontario, CA	SOUTHWEST	2608	C43	8:20A	On Time
Orange County	FRONTIER	262	A44	8:10A	On Time
Orange County	US AIRWAYS	7699	B63	8:38A	On Time
Orange County	SOUTHWEST	745	C30	9:00A	On Time
Orlando	UNITED	2533		6:45A	On Time
Orlando	SOUTHWEST	337	C33	7:20A	On Time
Orlando	Copa Airlines	2634	B18	7:33A	On Time
Orlando	UNITED	872	B44	8:10A	On Time
Pasco	US AIRWAYS	7648	B83	9:55P	On Time
Philadelphia	UNITED	2625		12:45A	On Time
Philadelphia	UNITED	2682		7:05A	On Time
Philadelphia	SOUTHWEST	449	C37	8:25A	On Time
Phoenix	SOUTHWEST	1501	A51	8:15P	Delayed
Phoenix	UNITED	2687	B18	5:55A	On Time
Phoenix	SOUTHWEST	1052	A53	6:00A	On Time
Phoenix	UNITED	2632		7:55A	On Time
Phoenix	FRONTIER	851	A28	8:07A	On Time
Phoenix	SOUTHWEST	2608	C43	8:20A	On Time
Phoenix	SOUTHWEST	803	A53	8:30A	On Time
Phoenix	US AIRWAYS	7593	B83	9:07A	On Time
Pierre	UNITED	7316		9:30A	On Time
Pierre	UNITED	7316		9:30A	On Time
Portland,OR	US AIRWAYS	6571	B42	10:12P	On Time
Portland,OR	SOUTHWEST	3037	C47	6:00A	On Time
Portland,OR	SOUTHWEST	3781	C41	7:20A	On Time
Portland,OR	SOUTHWEST	1529	C45	8:20A	On Time
Portland,OR	FRONTIER	791	A42	8:29A	On Time
Portland,OR	US AIRWAYS	6071	B28	8:32A	On Time
Pueblo	UNITED	7181		7:00A	On Time
Pueblo	UNITED	7182		9:30A	On Time
Quito, EC	BRITISH AIRWAYS	2399	A47	7:50A	On Time
Rapid City	UNITED	5054	B88	10:00P	On Time

Fig. 1. Some departures at the busy Denver International Airport, the majority on time.

I stayed at various motels on the way, the American motel being a supremely convenient choice for a traveling birder. Chain establishments were, however, avoided. Instead, I preferred the privately owned old motels with character. Fortunately, there were many available in the region. Oftentimes, my motel neighbors were bikers on the road. There were thousands of them around in June, varying from lawyers, who had a break from their office routines, to more outlaw style gangs. No problems with these fellows or a Boise City (out of all places...) prostitute met at the motel parking area. Great bikes, pretty biker babes and guys with some rough character.

My route in Colorado went first to Rocky Mountains National Park, Rabbit Ears Pass and Hayden, and then to Vernal, Utah, via Dinosaur. The next day was spent at Leidy Peak, Utah, before a retreat to Craig in Colorado. The third day started in Hayden and continued to Kremling, Dillon, Vail, Leadville, Buena Vista and Monarch Pass to Gunnison. After a morning in Gunnison, a long drive to Puebla, Lamar and Campo followed, with a final leg to Boise City, Oklahoma Panhandle. From there, I moved to Elkhart, Kansas, for a full day. After another morning there, a drive back to Denver followed, via Richfield Road, Lamar, Raven Alley, Great Plains Reservoirs and Kit Carson.

In Vernal, I stayed at the Sage Motel (USD 59, single with breakfast) with a nice manager of Indonesian origin. The place was along a busy street but the basic room was peaceful enough for a proper rest. In Craig, my choice was the Bear Valley Motel (USD 54) for a small but tidy room. In

Gunnison, I had a spacious second floor room at the ABC Motel, which had a helpful Polish lady in charge. In Boise City, the motel room was only USD 45 per night at the Longhorn Motel. In Elkhart, I had my best room of the trip for USD 65, at the Los Ranchos Motel. All these places were quite ok. Only the first night in Vernal was reserved beforehand, in the Internet. There is no real need for room reservations in a region with a plenitude of highway accommodations, especially in the small towns with regional character. I would not stay in Aspen even if it was free for me.

I bought my food mostly at supermarkets. Finding food that is not downright harmful to one's health can be a problem in the United States. Fast food joints are not really a solution in that sense. For pizzas, one needs to import spices such as oregano, one of the basic pizza ingredients. From a European point of view, Safeway was a tolerable choice if nothing better was available. City Markets were clearly better, both in terms of quality and the variety of products, and package sizes. A solo traveler does not need family size servings to have a meal on the road.

In Elkhart, the staff of the Moore's Supermarket carried one's groceries all the way to the car. This was the first one for me, ever. Places like Elkhart preserve some of the (good) old times, with their relaxed pace of life and customs already forgotten in the urban areas. I guess that people who live like that are called redneck drop outs in a modern society. For me, it was a pleasant experience. Ohh, the lazy hazy days of summer in Kansas...



Fig. 2. Heavy traffic on the Lamar – Boise City highway, from Colorado to Oklahoma Panhandle.

BIRDS AND SITES

UTAH

Leidy Peak

Part of the Uintah region, next to the Colorado border and Dinosaur National Monument, Leidy Peak was a great Internet discovery. www.utahbird.org/counties/uintah/LeidyPeak.htm had some interesting information for birders. There is a road access from Vernal (for details, see the [www-page](#)), all the way up to tree limit and prime habitats for both White-tailed Ptarmigan and Black Rosy-Finch, via Ashley National Forest. At the site, there was no disturbance by people. The walk to the right site was both short and easy.

The final drive from Highway 191, north of Verna, I was, however, a bit longer than estimated by [utahbird.org](#), 26 miles, and the driving directions a bit more sketchy than anticipated. I had, however, no problems in locating the trailhead at Hacking Lake. Leaving the highway, one should drive straight on until a valley of grasslands is reached. In there, it is first left and then right, signposted to Hacking Lake. Another sign points to the correct way towards the end. Ignore junctions to Summit Park and Big Park.

The downside of the site is the fact that solo hikers do occasionally disappear on the Uinta Mountains, for a number of reasons. Encounters Grizzly Bears may be among them. It pays, therefore, to look around when up on the mountains by oneself, even though it was just a kilometer or two away from a trailhead parking area. I did not see anybody or any large animals at Leidy Peak. Instead, I spotted a cute Pika. They live in scree habitats.

In the beginning, I followed the main Uinta Trail but took then a short cut straight towards the summit, well visible from the trailhead, scanning the slope with my telescope at a close distance. Black Rosy-Finches were pretty and common, particularly around patches of melting snow. The other common passerines included American Pipits, Horned Larks, Mountain Bluebirds and White-crowned Sparrows. A White-tailed Ptarmigan could be heard calling in the distance, but this was not the best location for it.

The summit itself is steep and covered by scree, even though easy to climb for such a high mountain. Lower down on the right, however, where the Uinta Trail goes, there is a large grassy ridge with downhill scree, among which more White-tailed Ptarmigans were found, first calling close and finally also seen, frozen in anticipation among the rocks, only few meters away. They are not easy to spot in the strong winds prevalent at this altitude (3.600 meters above the sea level), being of the same color as the scree, in their summer plumage.



Fig 3. The scree slope on the north side of Leidy Peak, a White-tailed Ptarmigan territory.



Fig. 4. An Australian hiker had disappeared on the Uinta Trail. Leidy Peak summit on the back.

Ashley National Forest

The road to Leidy Peak runs through some nice coniferous forest in the Ashley National Forest. On my return drive, several stops were made to play mp3 recordings, with a hope to spot an American Three-toed Woodpecker, a Black-backed Woodpecker (rare) or a Dusky Grouse, each of which is possible there. I scored with the first species at Siddoway Creek (signposted), when an ATTW arrived, eager to defend its territory against the intruder. Gladly, I let it win. Creeks with dead trees are good for woodpeckers, and also for grouse. In regard to mammals, Wapitis, White-tailed Deer, Golden-mantled Squirrels and Mountain Cottontails were seen.



Fig. 5. Siddoway Creek at Ashley National Forest: a site for American Three-toed Woodpecker.

COLORADO

Rocky Mountains National Park

Too many people, to say the very least, and the constant traffic jam up and down were a stressful experience for a birder who had just traveled through the night from Nome to Anchorage to Denver. Estes Park was good for provisions on the way, but otherwise I focused on the area between the Alpine Visitor Center and the trailhead in the left hand bend uphill, where the road starts to descend. The trail was followed for 150 meters. Horned Larks, Mountain Bluebirds and

White-crowned Sparrows, but also a Brown-capped Rosy-Finch, my target species! Having seen it, I left for the long drive to Vernal, Utah.

Rabbit Ears Pass

The pass is a stake-out for American Three-toed Woodpecker, with records of breeding birds just a week or two prior to my visit. Several good habitats and traditional sites for the species were checked out in the early afternoon but without success. I probably was late, the chicks already had left the nest and the time of the day was not ideal, either. Fortunately, the woodpecker was seen at the Ashley State Forest.

Dinosaur National Monument

The access road is good for Greater Sage Grouse. Before Dinosaur (320 inhabitants, petrol), I turned right uphill, towards the monument, scanning the roadsides while driving slowly. In fact, so slowly that a passing car with rangers stopped to ask if I had a mechanical problem! I did not, but soon spotted a party of three Greater Sage Grouse in their summer attire, basking in the late afternoon sun. This was a release, as Arapaho National Grassland could now be written off my route and timetable, leaving more time for the rather difficult off season search for Lesser Prairie-Chicken, at the end of the journey (see Cimarron National Grassland).



Fig. 6. A Greater Sage Grouse at Dinosaur; drab but nevertheless an impressive bird, well camouflaged in its sage environment.

Hayden

For current grouse leks and other grouse-spotting site directions in Colorado, see the information at www.coloradobirdingsociety.net16.net/grouse.htm or other available Internet sources. The Hayden site for Dusky Grouse (L in the center, across the river, right at a T, CO Rd 80 across a hill, L at a Y-crossing, to Co Rd 80A, past a water hole on the left, up to the top of the ridge) is a bit restricted, with no access to the off road private lands. I nevertheless scored with a single agitated male, after two visits (late afternoon, sunrise at 5.45 AM) and lots of mp3 play. The brush had plenty of birds, including Western (proposed Woodhouse's) Scrub Jays, a Virginia's Warbler, Bullock's Orioles and Western Bluebirds, and mammals such as Golden-mantled Squirrels, Least Chipmunks (many, a great fun!), a White-tailed Jackrabbit, Wapitis and White-tailed Deer.



Fig. 7. A Golden-mantled Squirrel at Hayden, Colorado.

Kremling Reservoirs

There are large reservoirs of water along the Highway 40 at Kremling, easily spotted from a car. A short stop is likely to produce Western Grebes, American White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants and wildfowl. At the Kremling petrol station, I happened to meet a veteran of US birding who had around 730 species on his national list.

Monarch Pass

It is another high altitude coniferous area for American Three-toed Woodpeckers, some of which had been seen at a certain rest area only few days prior my arrival. I did not see them, however.

There is plenty of forest with dead trees on the Colorado mountain ranges, apparently as a consequence of climate change, and the woodpeckers have a lot of habitat to roam around. Nice forest, though, and worth a few stops on the way; Mountain Chickadees and Pine Siskins. On the way there, south of Buena Vista, a colony of White-tailed Prairie-Dogs was discovered along a random side track. The species had also been further north, along the Highway 40 (Victory Way).

Gunnison

The prime areas for Gunnison's Sage Grouse are Waunita Springs (originally Juanita Springs, named by the Spanish, is my wild guess...?), during the spring lek season, and the Gold Basin Road (CR38), in summer. The latter site appeared to be quite reliable. Turn left after the airfield, and drive the road up to an obvious Y-fork at M9. Late in the afternoon, four GSG arrived in the riparian grassland at the fork. Driving back to Gunnison, a roadside party of 14 birds was spotted only two miles before the highway. The CR38 is great for birding and mammal-spotting in other ways, too. Desert birds such as Sage Thrashers and Green-tailed Towhees occurred.

My mammal list for Gunnison area included Black-tailed Prairie-Dog, Golden-mantled Squirrel, Least Chipmunk, Richardson's Ground Squirrel, Desert Cottontail, Mountain Cottontail, Whitetail Jackrabbit, Pronghorn and White-tailed Deer. Along the Arkansas River, on the way to east, a Colorado Chipmunk was added to the list at a rocky slope.



Fig. 8. Two White-tailed Deer walk on the dry terrain of the Gold Basin Road, Gunnison.



Fig. 9. Gunnison's Sage Grouse in their summer attire; notice the widely striped tails.



Fig. 10. An alert Least Chipmunk at Waunita Hot Springs, Gunnison.

Rocky Ford SWA

Another site close to Las Juntas, after Puebla. Rocky Ford was the place of my early lunch break in a rather hot weather. An Orchard Oriole, a Warbling Vireo, a Common Yellowthroat (!) and a Black-headed Grosbeak were added to the trip list there.

Lakes Holbrook and Cheraw

These saline lakes are perfect stops in the mid-day heat, between Las Juntas and Lamar, because the species they have may be observed any time of the day. Both lakes had a number of egrets, herons, waterfowl and shorebirds, easy to observe with a scope. Among them were 350 American White Pelicans, 50 Redheads, Ruddy Ducks, Western Grebes, 26 American Avocets, breeding Black-necked Stilts, a Greater Yellowlegs and a California Gull, for example.

Bent's Old Fort

It is historical site with a marshy wetland on the way to Lamar, along the old highway. Contrary to all odds, a Black Rail was actively calling early in the afternoon, in stifling +44 C heat!

Lamar

As expected, a few Mississippi Kites were spotted soaring high above the city park.



Fig. 11. Love's petrol station in Lamar, with current petrol prices per gallon. Back to the 60's...

Comanche National Grassland

East of Campo, extreme SE Colorado, the plains of Comanche National Grassland are good for the endangered Lesser Prairie-Chickens which can be seen at their leks in early spring. I went there late in the afternoon and stayed till sunset, in the vain hope to spot one of them crossing the many rural tracks. The lek site was also checked. No luck, however, with the target species.

I did nevertheless enjoy the short visit. There were no people around, but millions of large grasshoppers in their mating frenzy, and Texas Horned Lizards and Ornate Box Turtles feasting on

them. My travel book, read at airports and on board of planes, happened to be S. C. Gwynne's *Empire of the Summer Moon*. The Comanche history made the grassland alive in a special way.

Among the birds, the numerous Common Nighthawks, active also in sunshine, caught the eye, together with Loggerhead Shrikes, Blue Grosbeaks, Rufous-capped Sparrows, Cassin's Sparrows and Chihuahuan Ravens, not recorded on the previous days. The mammals included White-tailed Deer, a White-tailed Jackrabbit, a Black-tailed Jackrabbit and Desert Cottontails.



Fig. 12. Leaving the Comanche National Grassland, Colorado; a haven for grassland species.

Raven Avenue

A side trip on my way back to Denver. Not really worth the dust and effort; the Chihuahuan Ravens and a few waterfowl at the Blue Lake (Clark's Grebes, Long-billed Curlews, California Gulls) were seen. I should have been there early in the morning but this was not possible because of time restrictions.

Great Plains Reservoirs

All but one of the reservoirs were dry and empty in June 2012. Breeding and migrating Long-billed Curlews were seen, though, and a few wildfowl such as Blue-winged Teals and American Coots.

KANSAS

Cimarron National Grassland

CNG is a large grassland reserve right next to Elkhart, a continuation of Comanche National Grassland in Colorado. There are two well-known Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek sites and I focused my search for the species in their vicinity. It was soon found out that the Grasslands Road D area was more promising for the purpose, with an ample water source with interest for birds and mammals, and a possibility to park one's car next to it, as a hide with a view to the water. In the shade of the vehicle, windows open, many hours were spent waiting for the prairie-chickens, in the F 110 conditions which made even the birds to pant.

Horned Larks were very common in the grasslands, together with Common Nighthawks, Western Meadowlarks and Lark Sparrows. The odd visitors to the water hole included a Long-billed Curlew (1+14 on migration), Eastern Kingbirds (2) and a Bobolink, among others. One of the resident Cliff Swallows was albinistic, with a snow-white head. Swainson's Hawks were particularly common at the Cimarron Grasslands (several recorded also south of Lamar). Mississippi Kites were seen also in the town of Elkhart, by the El Ranchos Motel. Pronghorns and White-tailed Deer came to drink, and two Black-tailed Jackrabbits were seen in the general area. Grasshoppers were more than abundant also at Cimarron Grasslands and turtles had no problems to find a meal.



Fig. 13. A pair of Common Nighthawks at the Grasslands Road D, Cimarron National Grassland, Elkhart, Kansas. Dozens of them came to drink at the water hole.



Fig. 14. A pair of Horned Larks at the Road D water hole.

No Lesser Prairie-Chickens? No, not at the Road D site. As a curious twist of fate, I saw one at another location. On the 28th of June, I had already given up the species and just driven across the grassland reserve on the highway towards Richfield, when a Lesser Prairie-Chicken suddenly flew across the road and landed on an open agricultural field next to the highway. Fortunately, the lorry behind me was not too close when I stepped on the brake, happy and amused when contemplating on the previous day at the Road D waterhole. It was great to score in the end, so unexpectedly.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The United States is a huge nation with rich biodiversity. It cannot be grasped on a visit or two and there always is another direction to travel to. I am happy I made the trip but regret not visiting Colorado earlier. Together with the neighboring states, it is an affordable destination with good infrastructure and plenty to see.

