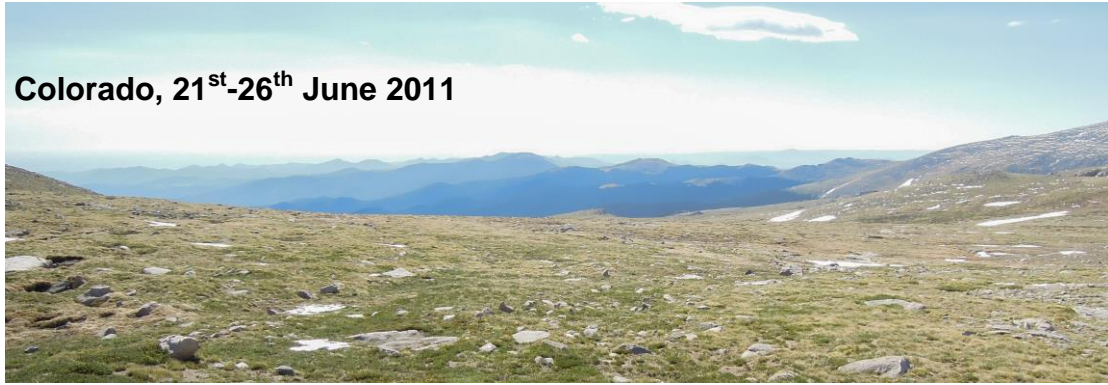


Colorado, 21st-26th June 2011



A conference in Colorado Springs in June 2011 enabled me to do my third spot of North American birding in less than 12 months, following trips to Santa Barbara a few months earlier (when I took in various southern California sites including Salton Sea) and in June 2010 for the previous edition of the same conference when I had two great days bracketing the conference, seeing California Condors on Hwy 1, and some wonderful birding in the Sierra Valley with a Sacramento Audubon group.

As previously, the trans-Atlantic ticketing rules forced me to stay on for a Saturday night. The conference itself concluded on the Thursday with workshops on Friday and Saturday. I had a commitment to participate in a Saturday workshop, but this left all day Friday and most of Sunday (because of the late night departure from Denver) available for birding. While Colorado is justly famous for the so-called *Chicken Run* – the chance to see many localized and fabulous lekking gamebird species of the American Plains – June is too far beyond prime-time of April for this to be realistic, even for just a couple of the species. I did some local birding around Colorado Springs early morning and evenings, and used free days for some mountain birding and for plains/grasslands, giving me a range of habitats and a gratifying total of 30 lifers in not much more than two days' birding.

21/6

My first birding of the trip came on the evening of 21st when after the conference I headed for the Garden of the Gods, a spectacular set of rocky outcrops on the outskirts of Colorado Springs, only a few miles from the conference site.



Almost the first bird seen was a fabulous lifer **Prairie Falcon**. **White-throated Swifts** and **Violet-Green Swallows** wheeled around the rocks and I managed two more lifers in just a short space of time, **Gray Vireo** and

Black-headed Grosbeak. Other birds here included **Turkey Vulture**, **American Kestrel**, **Rock Dove** (perhaps the real deal?), **Western Scrub-jay**, **Rufous-sided**

Towhee, House Finch, White-crowned Sparrow and Black-billed Magpie.



Violet-green Swallow



Prairie Falcon

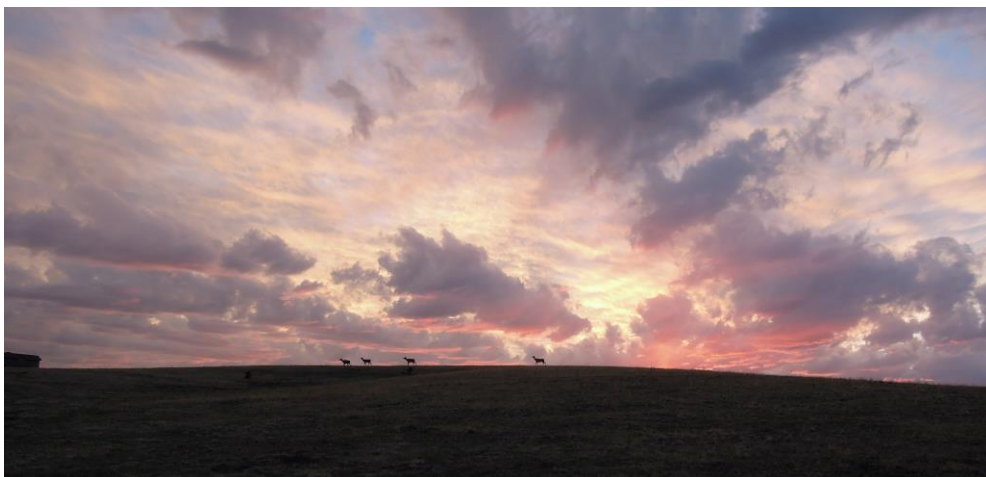
22/6

The following morning I rose early and put in a stint up Old Stage Rd before the first conference session started at 9am. It was not the most bird-filled experience, but I have had much longer trips for fewer lifers. **Warbling Vireo** and **Broad-tailed Hummingbird** were new, but star of the show was a **MacGillivray's Warbler**, definitely making the trip worthwhile. Other birds added to the trip list were **Stellar's Jay**, **Dark-eyed Junco** and **Yellow-rumped Warbler**.

23/6

The final morning of the conference I went with Ryan Farrell, fellow vision researcher with whom I first banded in Rio 2007, back to the Garden of the Gods. **Violet-green Swallow** posed beautifully for my first quality digi-scoped shots with the Coolpix P300 (bought at LHR on my way out here, and used with a custom made adaptor constructed from an old soft-drink bottle and some black insulation tape). My hope was to find a Canyon Wren but **House Wren** was as close as we came, with a breeding pair located in a hole in the rock face. **Blue-gray Gnat-catcher** was a smart lifer. Up at the café for breakfast we watched the hummingbird feeders for a while, noting a juv and adult **Black-chinned Hummingbird**.

That evening I drove with Lourdes Agapito up to Green Mountain Falls where Black Swift has been reported and then to Crags Campsite where I'd heard Gray Jay's are sometimes seen. No such luck for me on either count. Nonetheless it was a pleasant drive, great to catch up with Lourdes, and I did still score one lifer, a **Cordillera Flycatcher** at the falls and added **Red-naped Sapsucker** to the trip list at the campground. A stunning sunset was our backdrop for the first part of the journey back to Colorado Springs.





Digging for gen had led me to the Colorado Birding Society website, and I contacted the authors, Richard Stevens and his wife Rebecca Kosten for gen that I hoped would help me make the most of my full day off birding. Rebecca responded with lots of very useful information about various targets and potential itineraries, but also suggested that Richard may be willing to come out with me. This was all very last minute – 11pm the day before my proposed trip I received her message and responded – but in spite of being away on a trip and in the end not picking up my message until 2am, Richard was still willing to go out with me if we could rendezvous at a Burger King in suburban Denver at 6am.

So it was that I pulled up shortly before the arranged meet and soon afterwards Richard and I were powering up the I70 and then the 103 through stunning mountain scenery on our way to Mt Evans.

I had two main targets in mind for this part of the day, and I did not have to wait long for the first. Once we'd crested the tree-line I drove slowly, and periodically stopped, both of us scanning the meadows and patchy snow. Just shy of Summit Lake we pulled over to the side of the road and wandered a few hundred metres across the alpine meadow. We found not one but two **White-tailed Ptarmigan**, target number one in the bag already. An **American Pipit** as I returned to the car well satisfied, added a further lifer.



White-tailed Ptarmigan (m)



White-tailed Ptarmigan (f)

We now drove the remaining km or so to Summit Lake, close to the top (unsurprisingly given its name) at more than 3900m, and walked around the edge to a saddle with an incredible view back down to the north-west. The hope was that my second target, Rosy-finches, would come down to the edge of the lake as they often do. Disappointingly we saw no Rosy-finches, despite walking some distance and then waiting for around an hour. So, no birds, but a Colorado Bighorn Sheep and a Mountain Goat enlivened proceedings. Then high up on a crest a **Rock Wren** popped up and began to sing. This was the highest altitude Richard had ever seen one.

With no sign of rosy-finches at Summit Lake we walked back to the car and drove to the ski resort of Silverthorne, where a friend of Richard has a house and keeps a set of feeders well stocked. This was well worth the drive, as I added several nice birds in a very short space of time. Although I did in fact score a **Brown-capped Rosy-finch**, only one came to the feeder for a short time, and it was a juvenile in dull, all-brown plumage. So in the end this hoped-for lifer turned out to be a bit of a disappointment. However other good birds here included **Red Crossbill**, **Band-tailed Pigeons**, both **Downy** and **Hairy Woodpeckers**, both **Red-breasted** and **White-breasted Nuthatches**, **Pine Grosbeak**, **Pine Siskin**, and **Cassin's Finch**. Star of the show with the Rosy-finch failing to live up to its billing was an inquisitive **Clark's Nutcracker**.



From here we headed, via a Subway lunch, to Echo Lake (Clear Creek) where we wandered unsuccessfully in search of grouse or American Three-toed Woodpecker. Richard added a pair of Lincoln's Sparrow to the day list when a pair was flushed from the close to the head of the trail, but I got only un-tickable views and we were unable to relocate them. At the lodge we scored a **Broad-tailed Hummingbird** and **Wilson's Warbler**, before making a plan for a few more targets on the way back to Denver.

One of my targets, having missed it in my previous alpine birding in the Sierra Valley in CA was **Williamson's Sapsucker**. With this in mind Richard guided me to Genessee State Park, just off the I70 on the way back to Denver, where we parked near the top of a hill and climbed to the top to explore. A particular dead tree was said to be a favourite, but it was not until we walked down below the carpark that we hit the jackpot. We picked up a smart yellow, black and red male in a tree by the road, just a few hundred metres below the carpark and followed it as I tried unsuccessfully to get a decent unobstructed photo. As we watched we realized that nearby was a female, coming and going from a new nest hole and soon enough the male went to join it. Keeping down low on the far side of the road to avoid disturbance, we watched their regular feeding pattern for about 20mins.





Green-tailed Towhee

Final stop of the day was Jefferson Open Space. Here **Green-tailed Towhee** and **Mountain Bluebird** were the stars. We walked some of the trails trying unsuccessfully to find a Dusky Grouse, with a distant **Western Wood-pewee** providing my last digi-scoping opportunity as the sun set.

It had been an excellent day filled with amazing scenery and high quality birds.

Bird of the day was undoubtedly also the first: White-tailed Ptarmigan. I was deeply grateful to Richard who had come out with just a few hours' notice and helped me find this a several others species that I otherwise would have struggled to get.

26/6

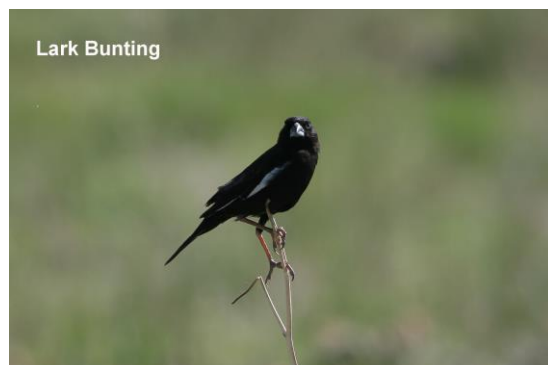
Saturday I was occupied with work the whole day, but my flight from Denver was not until early evening on Sunday, leaving me all day for some further birding. Though I would love to have tried a cut-down version of the chicken run, I felt that the only realistic possibility was Gunnison Sage-grouse, but this would have involved 4 hours driving just to get to the site with no guarantees (and another 4 back). I decided against this low probability option and discarded the other grouse/chicken possibilities. Instead I opted to drive north of Denver to bird Pawnee National Grasslands looking for sparrows and longspurs – a change of scenery from the mountains on Friday and also perhaps a little easier to do solo.

To get there at a reasonable hour – not too long after dawn – required a very early rise in my hotel in Colorado Springs, but around two hours later I grabbed some breakfast in Greeley and drove the final few miles to the grasslands and pulled up at my first birding spot, the Crow Valley Campground near Briggsdale. I drove and walked around a bit, noting **Mourning Dove** and **Western Kingbird**, while a **Brown Thrasher** by the creek was a new bird for me. A female Oriole, seen briefly, went down as “orchard or bullock’s”. I didn’t stay here long as I was anxious to spend time in the grasslands proper. I had started at the eastern edge of the planned itinerary so that I could work my way west along Rd 96 with the sun at my back, finishing the day close to the interstate that would take me back to Denver airport.

First stop was just a few km along Rd 96 at 40.682864N, 104.354266W, a small parking spot and information board. In the oblique morning light with a backdrop of the Rockies, the area had a particular wide-open, uncultivated beauty, the grasslands dotted with thistles and other wild flowering weeds, small cacti and alive with the songs of larks and sparrows. The chunky and smart **Lark Bunting** was one of my targets and they were quite common and showy as I ventured off-road on foot. **Brewer’s Sparrow** and **Cassin’s Sparrow**, both lifers, posed on fence wires, while a **Killdeer** pottered around on the road edge.



Brewer's Sparrow



Lark Bunting

After half an hour or so I had got some decent images of the Lark Bunting and wandered up and down the road and trekked a little way into the grass. There was still plenty of avian activity to keep interest, but my most-wanted had not yet put in an appearance. Just as I was thinking of moving on to try another spot a little further down, a pair of sparrow-sized birds materialized on the southern verge of the road not far from the parking place. First impressions raised my confidence that this was something new and different, and as soon as I landed bins on one of them, I realised I was now onto my first **McCown's Longspur**. I reached for the camera but two record shots later they flitted off south of the road never to be seen again.

Now, re-energised by this encounter and the knowledge that my target was around, I grilled the grasslands to the north hoping to find more and get better images. Fifteen minutes later I located another McCowns' creeping amongst the grass and thistles. Maybe it was the time of day, but soon afterwards it started making display flights and I enjoyed fantastic views (if mediocre images) of this desirable bunting, white



unders marked with a smart black cravat, and sparrow-like cryptic and nondescript back and wings punctuated by a striking chestnut wing-bar.

I continued slowly west along Rd 96, enjoying the fresh morning air and the various grassland species making use of the fence-posts for singing (**Western Meadowlarks** and **Horned Larks**) or lookouts (**Burrowing Owl**) were common. **Lark Buntings** remained abundant and I found my first **Grasshopper Sparrows** as well as more common **Cassin's Sparrows**. A



hawk on an electricity pylon had me hoping for Ferruginous. Sadly it was only an immature **Red-tailed Hawk**.

I found another site for **McCown's Longspur** on rd 63 where a bird sat up on top of a bush and I stopped to try and improve my photos (sadly my work was below par and despite the bird cooperating, my pics were blurred) before finding my way to a track north from rd 94 where Rebecca had said Mountain Plovers were being seen. I left the car and wandered around, overcoming the nervousness I was feeling from the nearby popping of rifle fire. Shooters were a fairly regular sight, and it was clear that Sunday in the grasslands is an opportunity for Americans to exercise their

masculinity and 2nd amendment rights by firing guns. Before long I'd found a few gorgeous **Mountain Plover**, and over the next 20mins stalked them to try and get decent photos.



Mountain Plover

My next target involved a bit of a drive to the western edge of the grasslands where I was hoping for Chesnut-collared Longspur. My gen suggested the field at the corner of Hwy 85 and Weld County Rd 114. I first drove to the park office, some 10km away since officially one is supposed to get permission to enter, but there was no one at the office (it was a Sunday after all). **Northern Mockingbird**, **Loggerhead Shrike** and **Eastern Kingbird** were all found around the office making the detour sort-of worthwhile.

I returned to the field, parked next to the Highway and walked SE through the field. A fox and a hare enlivened the walk. After 15min and several hundred metres I locked onto an LBJ that seemed good for my target and followed it without bins til it dropped into long grass. Bugger! As I walked forward a stunning **Chestnut-collared Longspur** burst from the grass and flew a short distance before once again dropping into the long grass and melting away. Smarter than the McCown's the male Chestnut-collared has a similar black and white face, but has a black belly and sports a striking collar of rich chestnut on the nape. Having located at least one territory I now spent time trying to get better views and photographs. I succeeded with the former, but not the latter.



Chestnut-collared Longspur

A **Grasshopper Sparrow** posed



Horned Lark

on a fence when I got back to the car. My plan now was to drive back up into the mountains in the hope of finding a Townsend's Solitaire, a target bird from Friday that I had not supposed difficult but which had eluded us. I bombed south on the interstate hoping to do a loop through Estes Park before heading to the airport. A very windy road and heavy traffic that I had not factored in started to concern me: I was creating a problematic rush to the airport if I carried on, so I abandoned the plan without scoring the Solitaire. A brief stop yielded nice photos of a **Broad-tailed Hummingbird** and I headed back down the road, onto the slow-moving interstate with all the other punters heading back to Denver after a weekend away.



Systematic List

Goldeneye	Echo Lake, 24/6
Killdeer	PNG, 26/6
Mountain Plover	5, corner 63 and 94 near concrete wall
Turkey Vulture	
Swainson's Hawk	prob on Hwy 85 nr Fort Collins
Red-tailed Hawk	imm., PNG, 26/6
American Kestrel	
Prairie Falcon	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
White-tailed Ptarmigan	2 on Mt Evans, 24/6
Band-tailed Pigeon	7-8, Silverthorne, 24/6
Rock Dove	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
Mourning Dove	
Burrowing Owl	5+, PNG, 26/6
White-throated Swift	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
Broad-tailed Hummingbird	towards Estes Park
Black-chinned Hummingbird	Garden of the Gods (café), 23/6
Northern Flicker	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
Red-naped Sapsucker	Campground, 23/6
Williamson's Sapsucker	m+f, Genessee Park, 24/6
Downy Woodpecker	Silverthorne, 24/6
Hairy Woodpecker	Silverthorne, 24/6
Eastern Kingbird	PNG, 26/6
Western Kingbird	PNG, 26/6
Western Wood-pewee	Jefferson Open Space, 24/6
Cordillerean Flycatcher	Green Mountain Falls, 23/6
Horned Lark	common, PNG, 26/6
Violet-Green Swallow	Garden of the Gods, 23/6
Tree Swallow	
Western Scrub-jay	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
Stellar's Jay	Old Stage Rd, Colorado Springs, 22/6
Clark's Nutcracker	Silverthorne, 24/6
Black-billed Magpie	
White-breasted Nuthatch	Silverthorne, 24/6
Red-breasted Nuthatch	Silverthorne, 24/6
Pygmy Nuthatch	
Rock Wren	Mt Evans, 24/6
House Wren	Garden of the Gods, 23/6
Western Bluebird	
Mountain Bluebird	Jefferson Open Space, 24/6

Loggerhead Shrike	PNG, 26/6
Northern Mockingbird	PNG, 26/6
Brown Thrasher	Crow Valley Campground, PNG, 23/6
American Pipit	Mt Evans, 24/6
Gray Vireo	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
Warbling Vireo	Old Stage Rd, Colorado Springs, 22/6
MacGillivray's Warbler	Old Stage Rd, Colorado Springs, 22/6
Yellow-rumped Warbler	Old Stage Rd, Colorado Springs, 22/6
Wilson's Warbler	Echo Lake, 24/6
Black-headed Grosbeak	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
Green-tailed Towhee	Jefferson Open Space, 24/6
Rufous-sided Towhee	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
Grasshopper Sparrow	PNG, 26/6
Brewer's Sparrow	PNG, 26/6
Cassin's Sparrow	PNG, 26/6
Chipping Sparrow	
Dark-eyed Junco	Old Stage Rd, Colorado Springs, 22/6
White-crowned Sparrow	
Chestnut-collared Longspur	PNG, 26/6
McCown's Longspur	PNG, 26/6
Lark Bunting	PNG, 26/6
Western Meadowlark	common, PNG, 26/6
Red-winged Blackbird	
Brown-headed Cowbird	Garden of the Gods, 21/6
Oriole sp.	orchard or bullock's, Crow Valley Campground, 26/6
Western Tanager	towards Estes Park, 26/6
Pine Siskin	Silverthorne, 24/6
Red Crossbill	Silverthorne, 24/6
Pine Grosbeak	Silverthorne, 24/6
Brown-capped Rosy Finch	imm. or f., Silverthorne, 24/6
House Finch	
Cassin's Finch	Silverthorne, 24/6

70 species

30 lifers