

## **SPRINGTIME IN THE ROCKIES**

This is an account of a trip to COLORADO in late May when the ice and snow begins to melt and life returns to the mountain tops for their brief summer.

Arriving at Denver we picked up the rental car and drove north on I 25 to the small towns of Greeley and Ault at the threshold of the vast Pawnee grassland. Here, at the very edge of the great plains, it is not difficult to imagine the Indians living with the vast herds of bison on this short grassy land. Sadly, of course, none of this remains today but the land seems haunted by ghosts and the memory of one of the greatest ecological crimes ever perpetrated by the greed of western "civilization". In this area today there are, neatly laid out in blocks, many miles of dirt farm roads that stretch out, seemingly for days on end, under the "big sky".

There are birds in great numbers and LARK BUNTINGS - the state bird - are particularly numerous but incongruously prone to being killed by the infrequent traffic. Roads are the favourite habitat for McCOWN'S LONGSPUR. Sites are found here for the less numerous and very smart looking CHESTNUT COLLARED LONGSPUR and the enigmatic MOUNTAIN PLOVER. In addition there are nesting FERRUGINOUS HAWK, WESTERN KINGBIRD, BREWER'S SPARROW, YELLOW HEADED BLACKBIRD and BURROWING OWL. Where small pools occur they can attract WILSON'S PHALAROPE, in particular, at this time.

The nearby, and somewhat larger, town of Fort Collins has many interesting areas of diverse habitat that are worthy of a visit to see the more common US species.

To the west soar the great Rocky Mountains. There are several entry points but the one we chose was alongside the lovely Cache la Poudre River to Cameron Pass. This fast flowing mountain stream is ideal for the AMERICAN DIPPER and a pair was found feeding young under the Mountain Park bridge. In the lower stretches NORTHERN PYGMY OWLS were heard occasionally during the day although they proved difficult to see - no I exaggerate - they were impossible! At higher altitudes the distinctive "whistling kettle" sound of the male BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRDS pierced the tranquility and sky blue MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRDS skillfully hawked flies from fence posts bringing to mind the old Indian legend explaining how they came to be given the colour of the sky by the Great Spirit.

Cameron Pass (10276 ft.) in the snow on a crisp, sunny, day in spring is idyllic. The only sounds came from the air traffic and a solitary singing TOWNSHEND'S SOLITAIRE. The pale, leafless aspen groves, clumped together like ghostly woods among the dark pines, were home to RED-SHAFTED FLICKERS. The colours of these birds was considerably enhanced by the underlighting effect of the snow on their pinky underwings. There was unfortunately a little too much snow to allow a search for the resident BOREAL OWLS. Had the snow been cleared, or melted, from the campsite road then it would have been worthwhile. I was beginning to wish that I had invested in some snow shoes or at least had a couple of tennis rackets handy.

From Cameron Pass it is only a short drive down into the North Park and the modest (not to say 'one horse') little town of Walden (elev. 8500 ft.). Here there are a couple of motels and good home cooking (and a surfeit of political rhetoric when the lady is in the mood) at the Coffee Pot. Near the town is the Arapaho wildlife area and lake.

Here I strolled about for hours with a friendly coyote as my only companion. The entire area is covered with sage brush against the backdrop of the Medicine Bow mountains to the east.

It comes as no surprise that this area is reputedly the 'best in the west' for SAGE GROUSE. Several leek sites are known with perhaps the best being at Colemont, a few miles south of Walden. Lecking, so they say, is best viewed from about 5.30.am (still dark) but with patience and a little luck birds may be seen amongst the sage during the day also.

It is advisable not to leave a vehicle as this can lead to crouching by the grouse. It will be a long time before they take a peek if that happens.

The Arapaho lake has several duck species, including, RUDDY DUCK, PINTAIL, BLUE-WINGED TEAL, AMERICAN WIDGEON, REDHEAD, MERGANSER and LESSER SCAUP. There are also YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRDS, SAGE THRASHERS, VESPER SPARROWS, PIED-BILLED and EARED GREBES as well as migrant and resident waders. The surrounding hills make excellent habitat for PRAIRIE FALCONS and GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE. MUSKRAT and COYOTE were frequently seen.

From Walden the road south eventually branches off west to the aptly named Rabbit Ears Pass - though going west you will wonder why - on the great divide (elev. 9426 ft). At the junction to the west is Clear Lake over which hirundines were swooping and chasing unseen insects.

Nothing strange in that you might think except that the lake was solid ice ! Opposite the lake a FLAMMULATED OWL was calling for at least 15 minutes but could not be found. A little nearer to the pass and a pair of GRAY JAYS were alongside the road. On the other side of the pass the road drops quickly and suddenly spring has sprung with trees and flowers in bloom and it even felt warmer. At a left hand bend was Timbers Condominiums and it was here that the only RED - NAPED SAPSUCKERS of the trip were seen.

Returning and crossing back over the pass ( this way the ears can actually be seen) we began a rather dull and uneventful long drive to the ski resort of Dillon. On the way however we did see "real" cowboys, some extraordinary "wash-out" hills and an innocuous little stream called the Colorado River!- "great oaks from little acorns" seemed appropriate. It was hard to credit that this was the same river as the one that created the Grand Canyon many miles to the west in Arizona.

Dillon is a major resort and there was plenty of snow a little higher up so there were inevitably plenty of skiers. The melt period was referred to by the locals as the muddy days. From our point of view Dillon provided easy reach to two major high passes where there was a reasonable chance of finding WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN and BROWN-CAPPED ROSY FINCH but only if there was not too much snow. By now we already new that the snow was lying 'deep and thick and even' all over the mountains at a time when, in normal years, it was usually gone, or at least would be melting. Undaunted, the first pass was visited shortly after our arrival. Well! it was open but the blizzard was a bit too severe for birding! There was a WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW pluckily braving the elements but that was all. The following day the weather was more settled so I walked up higher than the pass to about 12000 ft, puffing a bit! Actually I was exhausted and just reward was provided

by a ROSY FINCH and great views of the cute chinchilla-like PIKA, but alas no Ptarmigan, a condition that was to become commonplace.

The search continued over the next few days extending out to Guanella Pass where, although there was plenty of evidence of Ptarmigans, the deep snow prevented access to most of the best habitat and reluctantly the search had to be abandoned. Some skiers I met did see some birds that were flushed by their dogs. They were able to confirm that they were still in the snow white plumage of winter. At Guanella Pass the most common species was the robust FOX SPARROW. The pass is also used as a migration route and a MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE actually entered the car through an open side window and had to be evicted from the rear seat!

It would be wrong to think that these high passes would be devoid of birds, quite the contrary. MARMOT and BEAVER are also much in evidence. Typical birds were SPOTTED SANDPIPER, NORTHERN PYGMY OWL, AMERICAN PIPIT, CASSIN'S FINCH, RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET, TREE SWALLOW, MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD, STELLER'S JAY, BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD, AMERICAN DIPPER, TOWNSHEND'S SOLITAIRE and several more.

From Dillon we motored south, through Breckenridge, across South Park to the old Midland scenic route east of Buena Vista. Here, in total solitude, with the snow capped Collegiate Range to the west, we added several new species to the trip list, notably, VIRGINIA'S WARBLER, EVENING GROSBEAK, BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE, SCRUB JAY, BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLER and on the drive to Colorado Springs there were INDIGO BUNTINGS on the farm fences.

Upon reaching this area it is hard to resist driving up to the top of Pike's Peak (elev. 14110 ft) - the highest paved road in the US and incidentally the lifetime highest point for me with my feet still on the ground.

Birds are not great but a stop at Glen Cove produced CLARK'S NUTCRACKERS, STELLER'S JAYS, YELLOW RUMPED WARBLERS and MOUNTAIN CHICKADEES.

The drive down is more riveting, and demands the highest concentration - oblivion stretching out in front at every bend. Several stops along the way enable brake checkers to see how hot they have become. Presumably if they are too hot they stop you going any further.

The Colorado Springs wildlife area consists of three sites on the southbound I-25 towards Pinon.

Here, and at Pueblo, there is good accommodation at more favourable rates than at Colorado Springs. The first area is at junction # 125 which is a good site for the most unusual charcoal coloured LEWIS' WOODPECKER. We also saw YELLOW-BREASTED CHATS, WESTERN WOOD PEWEE and YELLOWTHROAT here.

At junction # 123 we found WESTERN TANAGER, LAZULI BUNTING, BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK, EASTERN KINGBIRD and WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH.

At junction #122 the habitat is mainly marshy and new species for the trip were CINNAMON TEAL, RED-HEADED WOODPECKER, WOOD DUCK and SWAINSON'S HAWK.

The areas to the west of Pueblo on hwy. 96 are worth a visit. First encountered is the Pueblo Reservoir and the nearby Pueblo SWA. The reservoir is fed by the already

substantial Arkansas River which of course has an awful long way to go before it joins the Mississippi let alone reaches the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana.

The SWA has streams and bushy habitat. The common species here were NORTHERN ORIOLES, LARK, BREWER'S, VESPER and CHIPPING SPARROWS, WESTERN MEADOWLARK, LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE and WESTERN KINGBIRDS. There were also EASTERN KINGBIRD, BLUE GROSBEAK, LAZULI BUNTING, SAY'S PHOEBE, BROWN and RUFOUS-SIDED TOWHEES, KILLDEER and ROCK WREN all of which adds up to a very reasonable day's birding in my book!

Farther west, the road forks. The south fork from Wetmore leads directly into the Wet Mountains and Custer County (now where have I heard that name before?). Eventually this lonely road reaches the tiny town of Westcliffe and forks north to De Weese Reservoir. However, well before that, the view of the magnificent Sangre de Cristos has grabbed all the attention and demands a photo stop.

These beautiful mountains rise out of the Wet Mountain Valley in a series of snow capped peaks of approximately equal height to the eye, however Crestone Peak is the highest at 14294 ft. It is said that these mountains are red in the morning sun and that is how they were given their name (Blood of Christ).

At the De Weese Reservoir we caught a glimpse of two PINON JAYS which I have found to be one of the most difficult species to locate in the breeding season. Also here were several BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRDS, PEREGRINE and very little else so we decided to try the roads through the Wet Mountains on our way back to Pueblo.

First we tried to tackle Ophir Creek and Greenhorn. These are desperately lonely places and the snow lay deep in parts. At one point we came across an isolated "homestead" in the forest where a trapper was hanging out his pelts, his wife was spring cleaning and the kids were playing in the yard! and I swear I saw 'John Boy' in the rocking chair on the back porch talking to Mary Ellen. Talk about a time warp, and they were quite surprised to see us too!

Eventually the risk of getting stuck in snow or of going completely and permanently "off road" altogether became too great so we gave up. There had been huge numbers of AMERICAN ROBINS and FLICKERS in amongst the Aspen groves on this trip and later on the Siloam road we saw 6 EVENING GROSBEAKS and at the SWA there was a flock of 10 AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS and a CANYON WREN.

Returning from Pueblo to Denver we re-traced our route to Colorado Springs. At 123 this time were 3 RED-HEADED WOODPECKERS and a COMMON NIGHTHAWK. In the Manitou Cliff Dwellings a CANYON WREN exploded into song and the nearby Garden of the Gods was an excellent setting for some spectacular aerobatics from the WHITE-THROATED SWIFTS and VIOLET GREEN SWALLOWS. It was much the same at Red Rocks near Denver where the amphitheater was being prepared for the group "Ten Thousand Maniacs"! - a small four piece string ensemble I believe! This far out of town they can make as much noise as they like. Avian gems here included breeding WHITE-THROATED SWIFTS and CLIFF Swallows in a cave near the tunnel. Incidentally I can confirm that the former can fly upside down, in fact they seem to do so quite often. Also 2 PRAIRIE FALCONS put in an appearance in addition to a BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK.

Leaving the park we next set off up Bear Creek stopping first at a little roadside park at Idledale where LESSER GOLDFINCH and BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD were found.

Later at O'Fallon Park we found RED CROSSBILL, PINE SISKIN, HOUSE WREN and a superb WESTERN TANAGER. Carrying on up to the 103 we were expecting to see some *empidonax* flycatchers but were disappointed. However, for consolation, we did see a further pair of GRAY JAYS, HAIRY WOODPECKER, YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER and DARK-EYED JUNCO.

The final destination of this trip was Mt. EVANS where the road was open as far as Summit Lake. Beyond this the road was blocked by a large, road sized boulder that had fallen from the mountain in the winter. At the tree line both TOWNSHEND'S SOLITAIRE and FOX SPARROW were found. At the lake itself the feel was decidedly arctic, it was freezing and a stiff wind was blowing AMERICAN PIPITS across the ice like skaters. Quite accomplished skaters they were too. What the attraction for these birds was I cannot imagine. There were about 30 of them in all on the frozen lake. Nearby on a scree slope little PIKAS were entertaining and we were comprehensively mugged by a flock of goats on the way back down to Interstate 70. Interest at Genesee was provided by a small herd of captive buffalo. WESTERN TANAGER, and WESTERN BLUEBIRDS were also found here.

The Rocky Mountain National Park was finally cleared for access on 28th May. The huge snow falls had put this opening in some doubt but every effort was made to open up for the spring holiday. Being one of the first cars in, I was amazed at the height of the drifts standing like ice canyons with the road at the bottom. I was told that some were ten or more metres high! Strangely, one of the first birds seen at the highest altitude was a migrant COMMON NIGHTHAWK swooping over the snow.

Much time was again spent in not finding those pesky Ptarmigans (situation normal!) but lots of AMERICAN PIPITS and JUNCOS did appear. At the popular picnic areas STELLER'S JAYS were doing what they do best when humans and food invade the mountains i.e. beg, borrow and steal.

This niche was equally well filled by RAVENS and the "we'll just sit on your head" CLARK'S NUTCACKERS at the Ridge Road. Here finally we found a flock of 20 BROWN-CAPPED ROSY FINCHES.

Other park birds seen included yet another pair of GRAY JAYS, MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRDS, WHITE-CROWNED SPARROWS and BLACK-BILLED MAGPIES, the latter seeming to be rather larger than the UK version.

But I must admit it was the animals that really stole the show. At Sheep Lake the traffic came to a standstill for the flock of BIG HORN SHEEP crossing the road. Herds of ELK were plentiful and occasional groups of MULE DEER could be found in the roadside woods where there was shade from the sun on the first warm sunny day of summer.

It is rather strange, the reverence that is given to these sheep, which apart from the obvious appendages are pretty unremarkable - certainly not, I would have thought, remarkable enough the cause a mile long traffic jam.

Nowhere near, for example, as remarkable as the Mountain Goat which is capable of reaching ridiculously isolated parts of sheer mountain faces. In fact they always appear to be so far from safety that their imminent plunge to death is surely a mere formality.

Suddenly, and almost imperceptibly the whole ambience had been transformed. Just like the 'Mudda Fadda song' after the rain stops.

Everything was new. Birds were in song, winter coats were peeling off the deer, marmots were frisky, trees were in leaf, streams were flowing faster and faster still, flowers were blooming in lush, green fields, mosquitoes were stabbing every living thing and the whole human race was suddenly wearing shorts and revealing ivory skinned legs.

Yes summer had arrived in the mountains! and I, somewhat reluctantly, and completely against the flow, went home.

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