

Colorado: Spring on the Prairies | Trip Report May 21-27, 2023 | by Peter Burke



Guide: Peter Burke and participants: Pam and Jean



With just two participants on this tour, we knew we were in for a special week! Our good luck started even before the first bird was found when our rental vehicle was upgraded from a Toyota Forerunner to a Cadillac Escalade – brand new and very fancy. Peter met Jane at her hotel near Denver International Airport and they spent a pleasant day together birding their way up to Fort Collins, where they met Pam who drove from western Colorado. After a nice dinner in downtown FOCO, we got to bed early to prepare for our first of six magical days on the Colorado Prairies!

We found 134 species of birds plus 9 mammals and 3 reptiles/amphibians. Details are below.

eBird Trip Report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/132842>

Sun., May 21 Denver | Rocky Mountain Arsenal | Boulder | Fort Collins

Our Naturalist Journeys Colorado Prairies tour got off to an excellent start in the morning when Peter met Jean at her hotel just west of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. Within minutes the two were birding, finding a nice intermediate-plumaged Swainson's Hawk perched right beside the road. There were quite a few Western Kingbirds about, certainly not the last we'd see of that species! Jean was happy to see a Black-billed Magpie and then a Rock Wren launched into boisterous song, but in spite of considerable searching, remained out of sight.

Other nice birds at the Arsenal included several of Colorado's state birds, Lark Bunting, so handsome in flight. At least two Grasshopper Sparrows could be heard singing their high pitched, buzzy songs in the tall



grass – we’d have a better chance to study these out on the Pawnee. Two pairs of Lark Sparrows were quite cooperative along the fence line. There was also a very large American Bison that was quite close, providing great photo opportunities. Perfect start!

Next we headed up to Boulder where the mountains were unfortunately shrouded in smoke from fires in Canada. We visited Teller Lake #5 where Yellow-headed Blackbirds were noisily staking out territories. Pied-billed Grebes were also vocalizing, their haunting, cuckoo-like songs always a surprise. A male Great-tailed Grackle performed in a nearby cottonwood and a Marsh Wren was singing excitedly from the reeds. A few miles north is the unassuming Lagerman Reservoir. Despite its small size and decidedly agricultural visage, this is one of the top migrant traps in Boulder County. A quick scan yielded a smattering of ducks, but 10 Redheads were an interesting find, as was a lone Ruddy Duck. American Avocet and Killdeer both breed here and watching the recently hatched Killdeer chicks was a delight.

After stopping for Tacos in the Town of Lyons, we waked the nearby Old Saint Vrain Road and found a pair of Common Mergansers working the small river there. Violet-green Swallows nest on the cliffs here, and they were joined by Cliff, Barn and a few Northern Rough-wingeds, providing a nice chance to study the different swallows. Every now and then a few noisy White-throated Swifts joined in as well. Our final sighting here was a pair of recently fledged Great Horned Owls – a bit too far for photos, but nice to see in the scope.

With that, we made the short drive north to Fort Collins to meet Pam. The three of us had a nice dinner in town and then turned in early to be ready for an early departure!

Mon., May 22 Pawnee National Grassland | Jackson Lake | Andrick Ponds

We left in the dark, giving us time to arrive at our first location just after sunrise to witness the larking displays of longspurs and buntings and just listen to the sounds of spring on the prairies. Driving the county roads, we were the only car in sight for most of the morning and the air was sparkling with the songs of Western Meadowlark, Lark Bunting, Horned Lark, Western Kingbirds and quite a few Grasshopper Sparrows. In time we found a few Chestnut-collared Longspurs, their jet-black breasts gorgeous in the morning light. A bit further up and we found a Think-billed Longspur who somehow snuck in behind us.



The sun rose blood-red in the east, further evidence of the continued presence of smoke in the air. As the light increased, we found several Swainson’s Hawks, most light morphs, perched on telephone poles and fence posts. We also found two different Rough-legged Hawks – a surprise at this time of year when they should be on their breeding territory in northern Canada! Outside of Ault we located a pair of Burrowing Owls in a small prairie dog town. Then we drove west into the town of Briggsdale where Peter has had luck finding the “ghost birds” of the prairies: Mountain Plover. It took at least 30 minutes, but suddenly one, then two, appeared. Ghosts! We took our time enjoying these elegant shorebirds, lifers for both Pam and Jean. Before we left, we took a moment to get great scope views of a notoriously difficult to see Grasshopper Sparrow, this one perched up and singing his heart out.

Just up the road is the Crow Valley Campground. With its tall cottonwood (and sometimes running water, but not this visit) Crow Valley is a legendary migrant trap. A short walk turned up over half a dozen Swainson’s Thrushes, Western Wood-Pewee, Warbling Vireo, Brown Thrasher, Yellow-breasted Chat and both Orchard and Bullock’s Orioles. Several flycatchers were found including Willow, Least and Hammonds, and Western Kingbirds were literally everywhere. As we enjoyed a picnic lunch, a Common Nighthawk flew in and perched on a branch right in front of us! Wow!

On the road to Jackson Reservoir, we stopped at a few playas – seasonal wet areas on the prairies – where we found a pair of American Avocets and a few ducks. Jackson Lake wasn’t particularly birdy, so we didn’t stay long, but nearby Andrick Ponds was great. Here we found a pair of Wood Ducks and Pam noted what turned out to be a male Cinnamon Teal that flushed as we attempted to get the scope on it. A Ring-necked Pheasant would call out occasionally as we found a Common Yellowthroat, Bullock’s Oriole, Eastern Kingbird, Downy Woodpecker and others. Dinner was in Fort Morgan and then we continued east to Sterling, our home for the next two nights.

Tues., May 23 Prewitt Res. | Cottonwood SWA | Tamarack Ranch SWA

After breakfast in the hotel, we headed out to Prewitt Reservoir to see what was around. By this point it was clear that songbird migration was largely over, but the breeding birds were thankfully putting on a show. We tallied over 100 American White Pelicans out on the water. Two Yellow-headed Blackbirds were a good find here, especially since Pam hadn’t had the chance to see them on the first day. A singing male Orchard Oriole



is always a treat, though they were surprisingly numerous on this trip. The only two warblers here were Yellow and a Common Yellowthroat. A quick check of the ponds just southwest of Prewitt produced the rarest duck of the week – a nice adult male Canvasback that eBird flagged as rare, so we dutifully photographed him for the reviewers. We did have a flyby Bald Eagle here, not a rare sighting by any means, but this year they are simply not around in numbers, I fear because of avian flu. Next, we visited the Cottonwood SWA, an unassuming little area that can attract migrants if you hit it right. We found a Wild Turkey who, when she saw us, took off at a good trot right through the irrigation ditch. A singing Blue Grosbeak was nice to see, but the best bird here was a nice male Lazuli Bunting.

Returning to the town of Sterling, Jean and Pam opted for a takeout lunch from Jimmy Johns, which we ate in Columbine Park. The idea was to catch a Mississippi Kite flying around the park, but we didn't see any. In fact, none had yet been reported for the area, so perhaps it was just a bit early for them here?

After lunch we visited Tamarack Ranch SWA where we found both a Swainson's and a Red-tailed Hawk and a Great Horned Owl. Two Red-headed Woodpeckers were nice, and as we would soon see, not a rarity at this location! We found a Red-shafted Northern Flicker, then an "Orange-shafted" hybrid, not uncommon in Colorado where both red- and yellow-shafted occur. We also had our first Great Crested Flycatcher here, which represents the western limit of their breeding range. Otherwise it was the usual suspects, though Jean found a Northern Cardinal, another eastern species that just extends its breeding range to eastern Colorado. This would be the only one for our tour, so good spot Jean!

Wed., May 24 Tamarack Ranch SWA | Red Lion SWA | Little Jumbo Res.

We started this morning back at Tamarack en route to Red Lion. But we stopped at a bridge over the South Platte when Peter spotted an Eastern Phoebe. This area turned out to be quite birdy, so we took our time and eventually identified 25 species. A Belted Kingfisher flew over and a pair of Great Crested Flycatchers were active. Jean found a Baltimore Oriole, a nice eastern vagrant. Orchard and Bullock's Orioles meant we had three oriole species right from the bridge! A pair of Downy Woodpeckers came in close, as did a Warbling Vireo. Nice stop!



Red Lion doesn't look like much, but it is a known shorebird hotspot and even though shorebird migration generally falls from the last week of March to early May, we came across a good selection of shorebirds, though they were unfortunately a bit distant. Careful scanning revealed at least 40 Least Sandpipers and over two dozen Long-billed Dowitchers. A late Greater Yellowlegs was a surprise, and there were six Wilson's Phalaropes and three Black-necked Stilts as well. Other birds from this location included Snowy Egret, Bell's Vireo, a Swainson's Hawk and a Yellow-headed Blackbird, pointed out by Pam.

Little Jumbo Reservoir also turned out to be a great stop. Some persistence with the scope paid off with nice views of a singing Bell's Vireo. We had terrific and close looks at both Orchard and Bullock's Orioles, and a singing Warbling Vireo was kind enough to allow us to view it in the scope. But the star of the show was a handsome Yellow-billed Cuckoo that seemed to enjoy his time in the scope!

We finished up the day by visiting a few playas on our return to Sterling. Near Sedgwick we found 11 Wilson's Phalarope, this time close enough to really enjoy. They were joined by three White-faced Ibis and a smattering of teal and shovelers. Over by Julesburg we found another seven Wilson's Phalaropes and an American Avocet. With the sun low in the sky, we made it back for an early dinner.

Thurs., May 25 Stalker Lake | Hale Ponds | Simmons SWA

We left our hotel at 5 a.m., navigating the county roads to a Prairie Chicken lek sight that Peter had researched. The lekking season runs from late February to mid-April, so we knew our chance of seeing this species was low, but nothing ventured... The chilly air and utter stillness over the landscape was haunting. A distant rooster was crowing, part of a rising chorus that included songs from Grasshopper Sparrows, Cassin's Sparrows, larking Lark Buntings, Blue Grosbeak and Western Meadowlarks. In the distance, Peter heard lekking Prairie Chickens, but sound carries on the prairies, and even with careful scoping there was no sign of them. We did happen upon a Great Horned Owl perched on the side of the road, then noticed two more, one of which posed for photos!

We returned to our hotel for breakfast and then visited Stalker Lake, a small community park that doesn't get much use beyond the occasional picnic or fishing outing. But anywhere there is water on the plains, you can be assured of finding birds, and that was certainly the case for our visit. A quick scan of the lake turned up a pair of Western Grebes, Ruddy Duck, American Wigeon and a Gadwall. Pam made a nice spot when a drake Wood Duck made a flyby, but never landed. Chimney Swifts also passed overhead and a Killdeer



sounded off. Then Pam found a beautiful Black Tern that made a few passes along the far bank of the lake before disappearing as mysteriously as it had appeared. A late migrant to be sure, and the only one we would see on the tour!

On land it was the usual suspects, but we had some close encounters with a few. Lark Sparrows were stunning as always, Eastern and Western Kingbirds were flashy, a Warbling Vireo was singing energetically and eventually perched in the open. Two Brown Thrashers were in full song mode, as were a few American Goldfinches. When the maintenance guy showed up to mow the grass, we took that as a sign to move on.

Our next stop was Hale Ponds, a small wetland section of the South Republican River with large, mature Cottonwoods. Woodpeckers were our primary targets here, and we soon found a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers, we would go on to find over a dozen at this location. A Yellow-shafted Flicker was found, and then another hybrid Yellow-shafted x Red-shafted. With some work, we eventually located a Red-bellied Woodpecker and got it in the scope. Eastern Colorado is the western extent of this species' range.

Other birds of note included a pair of Eastern Bluebirds making short flights across the meadow and perching just long enough for us to scope them and note the rufous throat that separates this species from Western Bluebird, that have a blue throat. A small flock of Cedar Waxwings took flight, their high pitched, buzzy flight songs giving away their presence. A pair of active Great Crested Flycatchers worked the fields, perching low, and were joined by a handsome Lazuli Bunting.

After lunch, we made a quick stop at Simmons SWA in hopes of finding migrants. This location showed up as an eBird hot spot, but in truth was little more than a stream crossing on a remote county road in the Colorado Sandhills. It was clear that the stream had recently flooded, but apart from a few birds coming in to bathe in a puddle, there was little of note bird-wise.

Fri., May 26 **Wray Airport | Pawnee Buttes | Crow Valley Campground | Maxwell Natural Area**

We decided to make one more try for Prairie Chicken this morning. Why not? On the advice of a local, we made the short drive to the Wray Airport, well, right through the airport, but hey, we had permission, right? We didn't hear or see any Prairie Chickens, but we did hear a few Common Nighthawks ping in the still morning sky. Then Pam pointed out a large bird hover hunting in the fields that turned out to be a Short-eared Owl – a very nice find!



Another lovely hotel breakfast before we checked out and packed the truck for our journey west to the Rocky Mountain foothills. We decided to stop at Pawnee Buttes on our return in hopes of finding Prairie Falcon or Golden Eagle. We had a nice drive through scenic landscapes, but strong winds (and locked bathrooms!) meant this would be a short visit. Pam may have spotted a Golden Eagle returning to one of the Buttes, but it was quickly out of sight.

We took another turn around the Crow Valley Campground, which was on our way, and found a few nice birds. A Plumbeous Vireo was active around the parking lot. A short walk through the dry creek area turned up a Gray Flycatcher, I late migrant, as well as a more expected Dusky Flycatcher and Western Wood-Pewee. Common Nighthawks were roosting in the cottonwoods, making occasional calls to give away their locations.

After lunch in downtown Fort Collins, we retrieved Pam's car and then made our way to the Maxwell Natural Area, situated at the base of a dam that forms Horsetooth Reservoir. Our goal here was Green-tailed Towhee, but dark clouds and menacing thunder were quickly moving in, and when the winds picked up we knew it was time to go.

After driving south to Boulder and checking into the Marriott hotel, not without some minor drama(!), we enjoyed our final dinner together at a nice gourmet pizzeria just off the Pearl Street Mall.

Sat., May 27 **Boulder Areas**

The Marriott served up a very nice breakfast for our last day of birding. It was a beautiful crisp morning, and with the smoke cleared by yesterday's weather, we could finally appreciate the snowcapped Rocky Mountains! Bobolink was our first target, and Peter took us to some hay fields southeast of Boulder where, after quite a bit of searching, we eventually found a few males on territory.

Our next stop was the iconic Chautauqua Park, nestled at the base of the Flatirons. On such a sunny Saturday morning, the park was abuzz with activity, but we found both of our target birds in short order at the base of Gregory Canyon. First up was a bold, singing male Virginia's Warbler with a crisp, white eye ring and flashy yellow chest. A bit higher up, we found MacGillivray's Warbler, the western counterpart to Mourning Warbler, but with a bold, broken eye ring. Success!

Next we made a short drive up Flagstaff Mountain where we were greeted by spectacular views of the Continental Divide. Such a gorgeous sight! Our final stop was Skunk Canyon, a trailhead on the south side of



town with extensive brush surrounded by mature Ponderosa Pine. Here we found Black-headed Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting (on a nest!) Western Tanager, Pygmy Nuthatch, Steller's Jay, Broad-tailed Hummingbirds and more. A singing Yellow-breasted Chat was a nice find, and uncharacteristically cooperative as we were able to get it in the scope. Spotted Towhees were thick here, but alas not Green-tailed! A territorial male Virginia's Warbler was singing just above us as Violet-green and Barn Swallows coursed the valley.

We enjoyed lunch at a local favorite spot, then said our goodbyes as Pam was set to brave the I-70 weekend traffic, and Jean had an early morning flight home.

Photo Credits: Western Meadowlark (Jean Reger - JR), Pronghorn (JR), Group Photo (Peter Burke - PB), Birding (PB), Violet-green Swallow (PB), Rough-legged Hawk (PB), Sun rising through smoke (PB), Broad-winged Hawk (PB), Rough-legged Hawk (PB), Burrowing Owls (PB), Common Nighthawk (PB), American Avocet (PB), Lazuli Bunting (PB), Selfie! (PB), Great Horned Owl (PB), Little House on the Prairie (PB), Jean & Pat (PB), Spring on the Prairie (PB), baby Killdeer (PB), Prairie Rattlesnake (PB), Wray Museum (PB), Western Meadowlark (JR), Bison (JR), Anything for the perfect shot (JR), Prairie Dogs (JR), NEEDS ID (JR), Pronghorns (JR)