



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Colorado sightings enrapture 3 birders

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**James F. McCarty**  
Plain Dealer Reporter

Like a trio of dharma bums, my teenage sons and I set out on a birding tour of Colorado for spring break, driving more than 2,000 miles in a Pontiac rental car, sliding through snow in the mountains, splashing through puddles in the foothills and leaving plumes of dust on the dirt roads of the state's vast and sparsely inhabited grasslands.

I don't think Jack Kerouac was a birder. No matter, I'm pretty sure he would have had a merry time palling along with us as we logged 135 species of Western specialties while reveling in one of our country's most majestic settings.

We typically awoke well before dawn, grabbed a breakfast and birded almost nonstop until dusk. Lunch was sometimes nuts, trail mix or yesterday's muffins. Nights were spent at the kind of mom-and-pop motor inn that is disappearing faster than prairie chickens in America. More on that later.

Our plan called for a broad loop across the eastern half of Colorado, beginning and ending in Denver. We kicked it off at the Pawnee National Grasslands, swung toward the reservoirs along the Kansas border, dropped down into the Comanche National Grasslands in the southeast part of the state, then high-tailed it back west for a run into the mountains.

We packed our bags expecting spring weather, only to be greeted by the return of winter.

Winging it, we layered our clothing for long forays through the farm fields and ponds outside Greeley. For Ohio birders, these common areas held an embarrassment of riches, including cinnamon teal, snow goose, American avocet, yellow-headed and Brewer's blackbirds and a familiar old friend, the great-horned owl.

Pawnee is 775,000 acres of emptiness - a monotonous panorama that arouses an uncontrollable urge to escape in most people. But it's Disney World for birders.

It's hard to take a step along a dirt road without kicking up a bird. Most were horned larks. But often, pheasants would flush, vesper sparrows would perch on the barbed-wire fences, or a raptor would swoop by. Northern harriers dominated, but rough-legged and Swainson's hawks, including a dark-phased bird, also appeared. A burrowing owl was a nice surprise and a cooperative photo subject for my son Kyle.

Son Bret made our day complete when he spotted a boldly marked sparrow-sized bird on the road: a male chestnut-collared longspur in breeding plumage. That bird, in turn, introduced us to a flock of hundreds of longspurs feeding in the short-grass plains and occasionally moving about in huge dark clouds.

Prairie chickens are everyone's target birds. A predawn drive into the breeding grounds of the greater prairie chickens north of Wray was almost guaranteed to provide up-close views of these disappearing birds. We were able to flush six chickens roosting along the farms roads but couldn't find them at leks, where they perform their mating dances.

We hoped to have better luck at the Campo lek of the Comanche grasslands, where scarcer lesser prairie chickens reside.

The warmth and sunshine of the Comanche territory seemed to perk up the birds, with awesome sightings of mountain plover, long-billed curlew, prairie falcon, Mississippi kite, Say's phoebe, canyon towhee, ferruginous hawk and another burrowing owl that left us hooting in celebration of our good fortune.

Included among our best finds was one of the nation's top birders, Pete Dunne of Cape May, N.J., who had spent the previous three days at Comanche with his wife, Linda, while on the road to a prairie chicken festival in New Mexico. Dunne is probably our leading birding ambassador and a genuine nice guy.

If only the prairie chickens had been as agreeable. An early-morning visit to a blind at a lek left us chickenless. A U.S. Department of Wildlife naturalist said the brutally heavy snows of winter had devastated the chickens.

The Wet Mountains chain of the Rockies provided us with a shocking change of habitat and birdlife. Light-headed from the altitude but invigorated by the cool air south of Pueblo, we were dazzled by a pair of evening grosbeaks and a red crossbill in adjoining trees, Clark's nutcracker, mountain bluebirds and pygmy nuthatches.

Unknowingly, we had saved the best for last. Teaming with former Akron resident John Vanderpoel, one of the country's leading bird videographers, we spent two days birding his new home territory of Boulder County and Rocky Mountain National Park.

Vanderpoel was the perfect host, leading us to red-naped and Williamson's sapsuckers, brown-capped rosy finches and white-faced ibis.

The least we could do was to play the roles of perfect guests.

Vanderpoel mentioned several times that during his big-year success of 504 species spotted in 2004, he had failed to see a Northern goshawk - one of our most desirable raptors and a resident of the national park.

My sons and I had scouted a frosty mountain meadow the morning before and were thrilled by a goshawk's appearance. We told Vanderpoel we would do our best to find the bird for him but were initially unsuccessful.

Undeterred, we hiked up a closed section of Trail Ridge Road, where we spotted an accipiter hawk screeching high above but couldn't determine whether it was a goshawk or its smaller cousin, a Cooper's hawk. We watched it until it flew off, chalking it up to an unknown.

No more than a minute later, a burly gray hawk flashed in front of our eyes 20 yards away - a spectacular Northern goshawk! The red-eyed raptor made several passes as if to say, "How could you dare confuse me with a Cooper's hawk?"

That was the best way imaginable to top off 10 days of birding glory in Colorado.

To reach Jim McCarty:

[jmccarty@plaind.com](mailto:jmccarty@plaind.com), 216-999-4153

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