

# FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES

## KANSAS - UNBELIEVABLE! (AND A LITTLE BIT OF COLORADO)

APRIL 25 - MAY 3, 2009

### TRIP REPORT

#### WHOOPIING CRANE! PRAIRIE FALCON! LESSER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN!

Well, folks, we did it again! Another fantastic, and totally different trip to Kansas this spring. We outran tornadoes, hail and pestilence. We avoided floods, withstood the wind and cold and managed to see a huge number of wonderful birds every day. Here's how it all went down.

**Day 1:** Under overcast skies, cold and windy, we birded Pawnee Prairie Park, near the Wichita Airport, seeing a mid-continental mix of eastern and western birds. Clay-colored, Lark and Harris's Sparrows sat next to Lincoln's, White-crowned and White-throated. Both morphs of Yellow-rumped Warblers flitted about with their Orange-crowned cousins. Eastern and Western Kingbirds perched side-by-side. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers hung their long tails over airport fence wires. The weather made it pretty quiet and the forecast was even worse, so we put the pedal to the metal and headed across the vast Great Plains landscape of western Kansas. Violent weather surrounded us and I kept a lookout for the funnel clouds that had been predicted. Marble-sized hail pelted the van at one point, making quite a racket. Our next stop was the almost (now) non-existent town of Greensburg, which had been obliterated by a giant tornado two years before. The town had dedicated itself to rebuilding and true to its name, was going to do everything "green", to become the first town in the USA that was completely environmentally oriented. Now if they could just get anyone to live there. We peered into the Deepest Hand-dug Well in the world, but the giant meteorite that had been picked up and tossed a quarter-mile by the tornado still had not been replaced. The oddest thing was a dead Barred Owl just across the street! Continuing westward, we actually outran the storm and had a delightful and sunny picnic lunch at Meade Lake State Park. There were quite a few birds around, including Bullock's and Baltimore Orioles, but the best had to be an Eastern Screech-owl we called in and then found perched in a juniper. Say's Phoebe was another good find, sitting on a roadside stalk along the

ever-flattening horizon. Due to recent heavy rains, instead of being few and far between, roadside puddles were everywhere, so it was hard to find concentrations of water birds at very many of them. We stopped at Liberal, Kansas (home of “Dorothy’s House”) for a visit to the McCoid Lakes and sewage lagoon. The water was the highest I’ve ever seen, with no edge for shorebirds at all. Even the road we usually drive on was mostly under pea-green fluid. Because of the deeper water, however, different birds were present - more dabbling and diving ducks and the best one - Western Grebe. Continuing on toward southwest Kansas, driving through old stubbly corn fields and bright green winter wheat, Ring-necked Pheasants darted in and out. I don’t think there’s any place in Kansas where you can stand for 10 minutes and not hear a pheasant squawking! Numerous Swainson’s Hawks gracefully sewed lines in the sky. Western Meadowlarks had now completely replaced their eastern counterparts. We finished the day with a quick run to the birder-friendly Elkhart sewage lagoons. Welcomed by the “Toid Boid”, this set of six polders is always very birdy and at this time of year, the occupants change every day, making a daily visit a good idea. We were well-rewarded, with dozens of Black-crowned Night-herons, Wilson’s Phalaropes, White-faced Ibis, Baird’s Sandpiper, Black-billed Magpie, and many “peeps”.

**Day 2:** This was the longest day of the trip, starting with a van call at 5:15 AM to sneak out to the Lesser Prairie-chicken blind in pitch darkness. With temperatures in the upper 30s, under a perfectly clear and impressively starry sky, I loaded everyone into the small viewing blind to wait for dawn and an opportunity to see the LPC males performing on their lek. Clucking, wing-rattling, stamping and engaging in small tete-a-tetes, we could hear them before seeing the birds. At last, we could see the displaying chickens, strutting their stuff - lowering their heads, raising tail and pinnae feathers toward the sky, drooping wings, they pranced around, occasionally getting into skirmishes with their neighbors while competing to be selected by a watching female. Before everyone completely froze, we returned to the motel for hot coffee, breakfast and a change of clothes. The skies had now completely clouded up and were threatening once again. We took a quick spin (like a phalarope) through the sewage ponds, then visited the sand/sage area to find skylarking Cassin’s Sparrows and buzzing Grasshopper Sparrows. Then we drove north through the Cimarron National Grasslands and west across the wide prairie, crossing into the southeast corner of Colorado where the road turns to dirt. As always, we found Burrowing Owls in Black-tailed Prairie-dog towns, hordes of Horned Larks on the dusty road and Long-billed Curlews patrolling their nesting grounds, along with a breeding-plumaged Lark Bunting. Chihuahuan Ravens began appearing as we continued west, nesting in old windmills. Pronghorns watched us carefully from a distance. Now cholla cactus dotted the ground and then there were hills! in the distance as we approached the picnic ground at Carrizo Canyon. We had outrun the storms again and enjoyed a sunny day, although rather cool. Lunch brought very close looks at Rock Wren, a huge snapping turtle in the small creek 100’ below, White-throated Swifts and a soaring Golden Eagle above the nearby cliffs. We descended into the canyon for a circular drive through western paradise. Very few birders ever set foot here. In fact, beyond the people who live in this remote canyon, I’ve never seen anyone else here. All the land is privately owned, but the road is public. Carrizo Creek perennially winds through the relatively flat valley, naturally irrigating the ranchers’ crops and fields. From a birding point of

view, this corner of Colorado is unique, because many western species reach their easternmost limits here, making it very exciting, since we never know what we'll find. This year produced a VERY special array of western birds. Flocks of sparrows continually burst from the roadside edges, including one Rufous-crowned. A pair of Canyon Towhees sang and flitted among the lower boulders lining the steep canyon walls. Looking up toward the golden-colored cliff tops, the sky was as clear and deep a blue as could be, and it didn't hurt to have nesting American Kestrels soaring above us. Then the sky came to earth, as a pair of Mountain Bluebirds perched close by atop a juniper. At one point, a Prairie Falcon shot across the sky and the cliff edge, showing its pale underside and black "armpits". In a cottonwood grove, a male Summer Tanager showed brilliant crimson among the newly emerging green leaves. A solo Mississippi Kite, a study in grays, perched nearby in perfect light. Ash-throated Flycatchers, a family of Bewick's Wrens, Common Bushtit and Cassin's Kingbirds continued to grace us with their western presence. Then the cascading song of a Canyon Wren liquidly flowed down the cliffs to greet us and we were able to call it in for a close look at my favorite western singer. We saw Wild Turkeys of the bronze-backed Rio Grande' race at almost every turn. At the ranch house, a Black-chinned Hummingbird cooperatively came to their feeder. As we reluctantly left the canyon to begin the long drive back, a Golden Eagle almost crashed into the van, dropping its prey by the side of the road. This mammoth of the air then perched on a nearby post, glaring at us, waiting for our departure to recapture its family's next meal. This was THE major highlight of the entire trip for many participants, yours truly included. As the sun set, we stopped at Point of Rocks, a wagon gathering place on the Cimarron Fork of the Santa Fe Trail. Illuminated by the late slanted light, it was easy to see the deep 150 year-old ruts made by the thousands of Conestoga Wagons that had passed by this spot, going from St. Louis to Santa Fe. It was a poignant moment, as we put ourselves back in those days and tried to imagine what it was like.

**Day 3:** Packed up and hit the sewage ponds again. First American White Pelican! Then off to Middle Spring, an oasis on the Santa Fe Trail. Surrounded by cottonwoods, you can never tell what might be found in this small patch of wetness on the usually dry prairie. Our best find was a Barn Owl, which flushed from the trees twice for our viewing pleasure. Then we headed northeast toward Great Bend, our home for the remainder of the trip. We stopped at a giant wind turbine farm and learned bunches about this means of producing electricity from the wind. It didn't mention how many birds get whacked by the poles and blades. Then it was Dodge City for a picnic lunch not far from Boot Hill, entertained by a pair of kestrels nesting in a nearby tree. Our next "cultural" stop was the world's largest feedlot, just outside of Dodge. When they say, "get out of Dodge", this must refer to the downwind side of these stinking cattle emporiums. The air is so foul here that when we got hit with the first downwind blast, I thought I would puke. The nearby upwind (that day) golf course actually has giant fans lining the fairways to blow the stench away. I'm not making this up. Then on to Fort Larned, a real (restored) fort that was built to both service and protect the travelers along the Santa Fe Trail. We were able to wander freely through all the buildings and displays that recreate life on the frontier in the 1860s, and be warmly greeted by a Nine-banded Armadillo waiting for us at the van.

**Days 4-7:** Operating out of our HQ in Great Bend, we were only about 10 miles southwest of Cheyenne Bottoms WMA and about 30 miles northwest of Quivira NWR, two of the best birding areas in the country and both recognized by the Ramsar Convention as Wetlands of International Importance. Unfortunately, there had been so much rain in the past week that almost all of Quivira was closed, due to flooding. Cheyenne Bottoms was very flooded, but their roads are elevated and the primary ones on the dikes of the main pools were drivable. Secondary dirt roads were like chocolate pudding and couldn't be attempted, even in a rental vehicle. As one ranger at Quivira pointed out, "if you want to try getting in on the north side, you better have a tow truck following you." So we birded the Bottoms the first day, taking time for a drive to Stafford for lunch at The Curtis Cafe'. This funky old-time joint has twelve foot walls covered from floor to ceiling with old jigsaw puzzles that the original owner liked to put together and then hang up. They make all their food from scratch and the pies are mouthwatering good. Not to mention the fried chicken and chicken and home-made noodles. Did I mention the rhubarb pie? Quivira was impassable, so we returned to the north side of the Bottoms in the PM. Each day was like this, trying to pick where it was least wet, where we could get into different areas to see more birds. By the end of the week, Quivira had partly cleared, making access to some of it possible.

Karl Grover, Manager of CB, favored us with an excellent slide presentation on April 30, detailing the history of the Bottoms, its natural hydrology and the problems it has had maintaining its water levels ever since the introduction of center pivot irrigation about 30 years ago. They are the things that make those big round crop circles you can see when you fly over the western plains. Karl also explained how the Bottoms is managed to create the best habitat for wildlife during each season.

Although the water levels were very high at CB, birds were fairly plentiful. As the CB biologist explained, "it's hard to have shorebirds when there isn't any shore". We saw mixed flocks of Marbled and Hudsonian Godwits, with over 60 birds at a time. Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers were most numerous, but there were huge numbers of American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts. Perhaps the slightly deeper water suited them well. Thousands upon thousands of Long-billed Dowitchers, rapidly probing the underwater mud for munchies, filled every shallow nook and cranny of the place. Thousands of Wilson's Phalaropes spun and whirled, whipping up the mud into a shorebird soufflé'. Dozens of Yellow-headed Blackbirds lit up the marsh grasses like light bulbs, flashing their white wing patches when they flew. As the back roads dried, we were able to get into some of the upland sections of the WMA and the Nature Conservancy areas, allowing us to get great looks at Upland Sandpipers sitting on roadside fence posts right next to the van.

We visited the Barton County Landfill for what else, gulls, and found a hoard of the most beautiful pink-breasted Franklin's Gulls you could imagine. We even picked out a rare inland Laughing Gull from the swarm. We visited Wet Walnut Creek Dam, the main source of water for the Bottoms, and found quite a few singing Dickcissels.

By the end of the week, I decided to give Quivira another try. We drove the paved roads on its perimeter, seeing what we could find. I tried one dirt road, but had to stop when a small overflow river cut a narrow erosion path across the road. Suddenly, we saw two humps in the road and it dawned on us that these were two carp swimming through the new cut and across the road! I mean, why did the carp cross the road? I should have been more careful when I saw the diamond-shaped yellow “Carp Crossing” sign. It was cold and the wind was howling when we came across a nice congregation of shorebirds huddling at the edge of a flooded roadside ditch. There was a White-rumped Sandpiper and a few Stilt Sandpipers in the mix. Along the road, we picked out a Canvasback in a field puddle. After lunch at Joan’s (“Jo-Ann’s - That’s purt near the edge of town”, said a Stafford old-timer), we headed back toward Great Bend and found a wonderful pair of Cinnamon Teal in another flooded depression. A minute later, right after I said “this is a good spot for Blue Grosbeak”, we found a beautiful male that cooperated magnificently with requests for a better look. Red-headed Woodpeckers periodically flew between the cottonwoods to the telephone poles. We checked out the north end of the refuge on the way back and found that we could (just barely) get in there with the van and see what we could find in the Big Salt Marsh, the best birding area at Quivira. The wind was blowing so hard, I decided not to even try for rails, but to come back in the morning when the forecast was for 45 degrees, but less windy. After an early supper (at Braum’s, where some people had ice cream for an entree, followed by ice cream for dessert), we went for an early evening spin at CB to look for owls. While I stepped inside to get ice for the cooler, participants who were standing outside at the van had the extreme pleasure of seeing a low-flying pair of Whooping Cranes soar right over head! These rare birds were very late migrants and represent nearly 2% of the world wild population. Near CB HQ we found a Barn Owl, first flying around and then perched in a nearby tree, permitting lengthy full frame scope views as it carefully watched us. An American Bittern by the side of the road almost completed the day, but a Mule Deer bouncing (literally) up a hill like it had springs in its legs definitely impressed everyone. A huge flight of pelicans, floating in elegant undulating V’s, caught the last of the evening light as they soared to the Bottoms for the night.

On Saturday morning, we returned to the northern wet marshes of Quivira a try to see if we could scare up a Black Rail. It was very cold and there was way too much water in its favored area, so I didn’t have much hope to find one. No luck, unfortunately. However, we found compensation by having a trio of Virginia Rails almost walk across our feet and a Sora actually fly about 50 feet along the side of the road when Mr. Smalley and myself returned to get the van. About four American Bitterns were “thunder pumping” and flying around and a Least Bittern popped out of the marsh two times as it continued to call. Common Yellowthroats called, “wichita, wichita”, as they do in Kansas, and snipe winnowed in the distance. Snowy Plovers skittered all over the sandy road and I had to be careful not to run one over. Many participants thought being out in the marsh and hearing all these wonderful sounds was a highlight of the trip. After another delicious lunch at the Curtis Cafe’ (cinnamon cream pie - yummm), we continued birding at the Bottoms, including a visit to the just-opened Kansas Wetlands Education Center. We reported our good finds and learned of a rare Brant just north, near the town of Hoisington. The rains finally got us, but not before we saw the Brant. A

farewell dinner at Montana Mike's (where we had previously celebrated Roger and Sam's birthdays) was followed by a grand ice cream finale at Braum's.

**Day 8:** Relaxed start and a leisurely drive back to Wichita for flights home.

All in all, this was a great trip to what has become one of my favorite birding destinations anywhere. We saw 180 species, above average for the tour, and included quite a few new ones, especially at Carrizo Canyon. Almost all the birds we saw were in full breeding plumage, making it a real delight to have the pleasure of their company. Speaking of which, the entire group was great, got along perfectly and tremendously enjoyed each other's company. What could be better?

We'll be taking a break from this tour next year after five years in a row, since we're doing the Florida Tour in April and the Warbler Tour in May instead. However, if there is enough interest, the trip will be reinstated in 2011. I would certainly enjoy that! Let me know if you'd like a copy of the Species List for this tour and I will be glad to send one along.

Best wishes,

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