

# Tropical Birding Tours

*Colorado: Photo Tour*



## Tour Guide: Ben Knoot

The photos in this report were photographed by guide Ben Knoot unless otherwise stated.

## *Tour Introduction*

Colorado...well known for its stunning landscapes, freezing cold temperatures and of course, a myriad of winter activities and sports. What the ordinary person may not be aware of though is that Colorado in April is a bird photographers paradise, known for many amazing species but none trumps the family of chicken and chicken-like birds that this tour targets over this fast paced and packed 7-days.

The tour starts in Denver. Several lakes and parks offered some excellent photo opportunities before our first major destination to photograph some mountain birds at a feeder set-up. Both stops were excellent as we headed into town for lunch. After a quick bite, we searched and successfully found a big target for the morning, high up in the mountains at 12,000ft, our first chicken of the tour, successfully photographed and photographed well! We then left up towards Craig for our first grouse species. After an amazing morning here, we left towards Walden, a famous location for probably the most famous grouse in the world. With two nights here, we got our fill of both mountain birds and the stunning grouse that call this wondrous little area home. While in Walden, we also had and took advantage of a great night-time photo opportunity. Leaving Walden is always a sad occasion. Such wonderful birds, lovely food and just an amazing time but we were off to Wray for our first prairie chicken of the tour. Though the morning was utterly cold and windy we had some lovely light and great action. Now..this next stop was an alternate to the original itinerary but I just had to cook up this fantastic morning just days before the tour began. We had an amazing opportunity to photograph the rarest prairie-chicken of the bunch. So, we headed off in the flat, windy and rolling hills of Kansas. So happy to announce that we had an amazing photoshoot with this sadly dwindling species. On the way back to Denver, we stopped up at a local hotspot I like to go to for shorebirds, ducks and other weird migrants that might appear. After a great shoot here I decided we had just enough time (really to avoid the rain) for one last "chicken-like" bird. With the rain threatening and wind whistling, we picked up our last bird and headed into Denver. What a trip!

If you that last paragraph a read, you might have noticed I didn't mention any species. Well...that's because I want you to keep on reading and check out what we did each day! Read below and enjoy some of the photos that were captured on tour by both myself and the clients! Enjoy!

### *Itinerary*

April 15th	Day 0: Arrival Day
April 16th	Day 1: Denver to Craig via Loveland Pass, Night in Craig
April 17th	Day 2: Craig to Walden, Night in Walden
April 18th	Day 2: Walden, Night in Walden
April 19th	Day 3: Walden to Wray, Night in Wray
April 20th	Day 4: Wray to Scott City, Night in Scott City
April 21st	Day 5: Scott City to Denver
April 22nd	Day 6: Flexible Day around Denver
April 23rd	Day 7: Departure from Denver

## *Tour Summary*

### *Day 0 (Arrival in Denver - April, 15th)*

The tour began this evening with an introductory dinner and there are no planned outings.

### *Day 1 (Denver to Craig via Loveland Pass - April, 16th)*

We started the day by looking for one of our hardest targets, the **White-tailed Ptarmigan**. Unfortunately, **Loveland Pass**, our destination for this bird was incredibly windy and was having a minor blizzard. Though I searched and searched I could not locate our bird. The photo below is from a previous tour but is an example of what you can possibly see on this tour.



White-tailed Ptarmigan (2021) - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



We continued on to our next stop for the morning, a small backyard feeding station located around [St. Mary's](#). Here we photographed, [Pine Siskin](#), [Dark-eyed Junco \(all 5 races\)](#), [Mountain Chickadee](#), [Cassin's Finch](#), [Brown-capped Rosy Finch](#) and a very cute [Fox Squirrel](#).



Fox Squirrel - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Mountain Chickadee - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Dark-eyed Junco (pink-sided) - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Dark-eyed Junco (gray-headed) - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Pine Siskin - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

We continued on to see if we could find some of the more desirable water birds and there, on a beautiful neighborhood pond, we found one of our targets, the splendid **Eared Grebe**. They weren't in the most pristine plumage but there was a gentle snowfall and birds in close proximity so we ended up getting some nice images.



Eared Grebe - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Eared Grebe - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

After this fun shoot, we took the long journey towards [Craig](#). During the drive, we didn't make any significant stops. We grabbed lunch on the road and before we called it an evening, we drove over to the lek site to set up my pop-up blinds. These blinds are necessary for several of the lek locations. They allow us to get close to the birds, while maintaining cover and most importantly, without disturbing the birds. Once we had the blinds set, we took the drive back to Craig, grabbed a nice dinner and went to bed. We had an early evening to maximize our sleep for our early morning lek visit.

### **Day 2 (Craig to Walden - April, 17th)**

We woke up well before dawn and drove back to the lek site where we had set the pop-up blinds the night before. As we pulled into the site and entered the blinds, we didn't have to wait long to hear our subjects for the morning. Throughout the perfect, windless morning, over 20 **Sharp-tailed Grouse** males and several females performed their lekking rituals and fought to impress the females and defend their lekking patch. Lek rules dictate that you wait for all of the birds to disperse before leaving the blinds or the lekking grounds. So, we waited until about 8 o'clock and once the birds left their lek site, packed up the blinds and went into town for some food before hitting the road to our next location.





Sharp-tailed Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Sharp-tailed Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Sharp-tailed Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Sharp-tailed Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Sharp-tailed Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Sharp-tailed Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



We continued on towards Walden, making a very important stop in the [Hayden Valley](#). The light was harsh and the weather was warm and sunny. Just when I had all but given up, I spotted our subject lounging around a small group of trees. We spent the next 20-minutes or so photographing a beautiful displaying male **Dusky Grouse**. When we arrived in Walden, we had a few hours to kill so we visited a feeding station in the mountains. We were able to capture **Cassin's Finch**, **Black-capped Chickadee**, **Mountain Chickadee**, **Red-winged Blackbird** and **Dark-eyed Junco**. We called it a night and prepped for our early morning with the Greater Sage Grouse.



Dusky Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Cassin's Finch - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

**Day 3 (Walden Area - April, 18th)**

The morning was spent in an incredibly cold, dark and most unfortunately windy **Greater Sage Grouse** lek. Even though the morning was slow, we came away with some decent photos. The photo below is from a year ago as an example of what is possible on this tour.



Greater Sage Grouse (2021) - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

For the afternoon shoot, I took the group to the same feeding station as the afternoon before. We added **Pine Grosbeak** and **Brown-capped Rosy-finch** to our galleries before heading over to a small lake for more waterbirds. Here we able to have a great photoshoot with a breeding group of **American White Pelican**. Called it another early evening for our second morning on the lek.



American White Pelican - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Pine Grosbeak - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

***Day 4 (Walden to Wray - April, 19th)***

We made one last effort and visited the **Greater Sage Grouse** lek. We were met with much of the same weather. Unfortunate but such is weather. Below is another photo from last year as an example of what is possible on this tour.



Greater Sage Grouse (2021) - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

After our morning shoot, we ventured towards Wray. This is a bit of a longer drive so we didn't stop along the way except for a few opportunistic photos and of course a delicious lunch. Once we arrived in **Wray**, we met with our host and after his introduction we ventured out to the lek and again, set up our pop-up blinds. After about an hour wait, our subjects began flying in and made their way to the lekking site. We spent an hour or so photographing a group of **Greater Prairie Chicken** and a surprise female **Ring-necked Pheasant**. We had a great afternoon, moved the blinds to the other side of the lek and returned to town for dinner and an early evening.





Greater Prairie Chicken (all) - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot







Greater Prairie Chicken - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Greater Prairie Chicken - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

***Day 5 (Wray to Scott City - April, 20th)***

Another visit to the **Greater Prairie Chicken** lek in the morning gave us some great opportunities. We spent a few hours here and then took the very long drive to **Scott City Kansas**. When we arrived in the afternoon and after an hour or so to organize our things and relax, we visited **Lake Scott State Park**. Here we found some cool birds like **Wild Turkey**, **Brown Thrasher**, **Northern Flicker**, **Lark Sparrow**, and **Blue-winged Teal**.



Greater Prairie Chicken (all) - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Wild Turkey - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Brown Thrasher - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

***Day 6 (Scott City to Denver - April, 21st)***

The morning was incredibly windy but even so, the **Lesser Prairie Chickens** and our last lek of the trip were very active. A group of about 20-30 birds were actively chasing and displaying to each other.



Lesser Prairie Chicken - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

Now normally what we do from here is we take our time going back to Denver, hitting multiple parks and small ponds on the way. However, on this occasion, we were forced to hurry back to Denver as this particular area of Kansas was hit with tornado warnings and incredibly powerful winds (70mph straight winds), making photography extremely difficult. When we arrived in Denver, though the winds had calmed significantly, we were still dealing with 35mph + speeds which again, just made being outside miserable. We tried a couple of spots, all left us relatively without any great photos. So we just decided to call it a day, grab an early dinner and get ready for our last day tomorrow. Because we missed White-tailed Ptarmigan on the first day, we decided to give that a go on the last full day.



**Day 7 (Flexible Day around Denver - April, 22nd)**

Well, another unfortunate weather event closed down the pass so getting to the Ptarmigan was not possible. Instead, we decided to check some local parks and with the high winds persisting we really couldn't do that much. Tough but weather is unpredictable. After the day concluded, we grabbed a nice dinner and called it a trip.

**Day 8 (Guest Departures - April, 23rd)**

Guests departed this day or the next.