

Gunnison Trip

It had been several years since I had driven through the mountains to or through Gunnison, Colorado. During the 1980s I did it many times. Parts of the route I had visited more recently. I almost never make a special trip to see a particular bird species, but I had never seen the Gunnison Sage Grouse, a rare and endangered species living only in the wide Gunnison valley. One of my university students lived there and was associated with habitat studies for that bird. So he arranged a viewing opportunity. I watched the weather and chose 28 and 29 April 2015 for the trip. It was just after fresh snow on the high mountains but clear skies and roads for excellent viewing of the scenery.

Part of the trip crosses South Park, a high and wide mountain valley, about 3 km above sea level.



Parts were still covered with snow. In several places snow fences, a few meters high, were erected to cause blowing snow to fall into snow drift piles and lessen the amount of snow accumulating on the highway beyond.

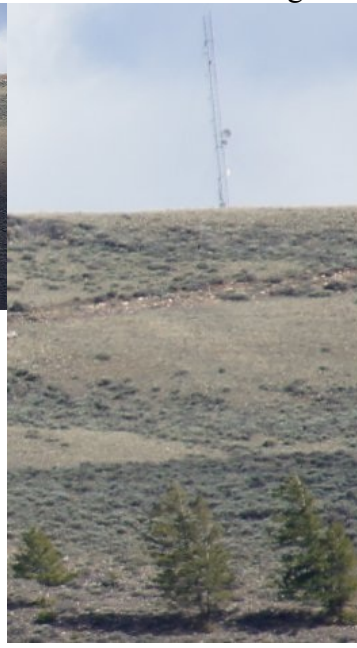


The snow fences in these photos are behind the snow drifts. The posts in the foreground hold wire fences to contain the cattle that graze on these grasslands.

After passing through South Park I stopped at an overlook of the Collegiate Range, a line of mountains on the west side of a rift valley whose 4 km high peaks are named after major universities in eastern America. The photos on the next page show views on both days of the trip.



Another purpose of the trip was to get a photo of the radio tower south of Gunnison that I had designed and helped set up in the early 1990s. There are many towers on that hilltop. A brief story of my role is on my web site and I needed to supplement it with photos (<http://www.edholroyd.info/Radio/MoreStations.htm>). The large W on the small mountain top is for Western State Colorado University in Gunnison. In the larger photo notice the three trees on the right side. Above them is “my” tower that is shown in the enlargements.



The next morning I got up before 4 AM and my student took me to the viewing site in total darkness before sunrise. This photo of the Gunnison Sage Grouse is from the internet. It shows the male fluffing



his feathers behind the female bird.

The viewing site was a small building in which we sat silently. There was frost on everything in the field. The next views show inside and outside. My student was in the middle.



We had to remain far away from the birds, making them hard to see. Successive enlargements near the centers of these views revealed the birds by their movement. Compare the two aligned views in the lower right. The grouse are the dark spots in the lower image. That is all that I could achieve with my 300 mm lens. My student gave me three tail feathers from birds. The ruler is about 15 cm (6 inches) long.

Later that morning I photographed some other birds, mostly at a nearby pond.



Song Sparrow



Western Grebe



Pied-billed Grebe

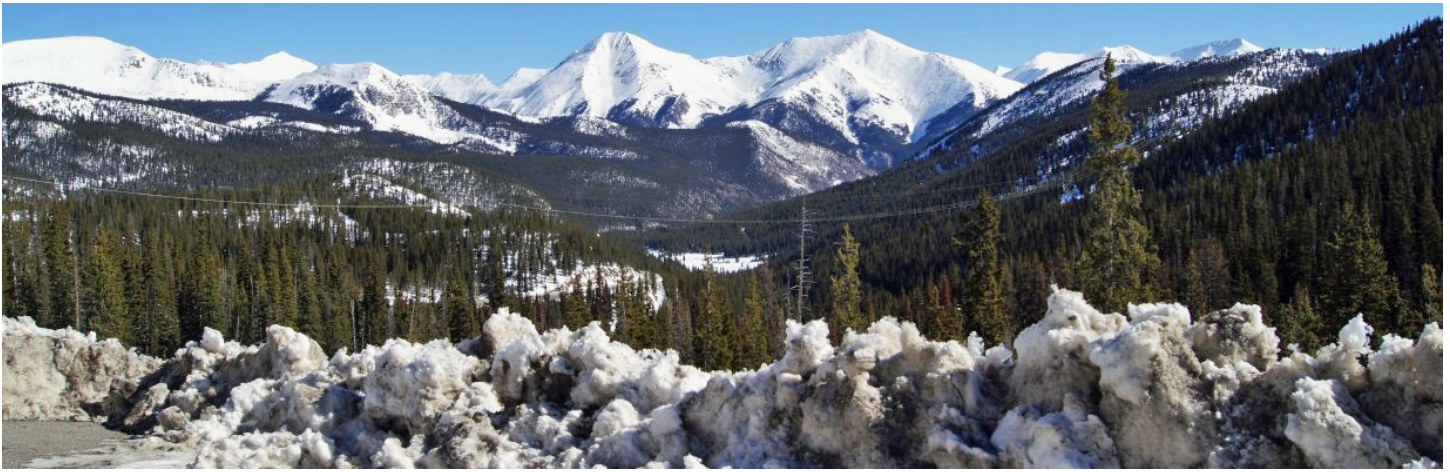


Ring-necked Duck male



Ring-necked Duck female

They were relatively far away and so these photos are somewhat fuzzy.



The trip home went over Monarch Pass. The piles of snow in the foreground were cleared from a parking lot beside the highway at the summit of the road. The power line draped across the view is for the ski center and chair lifts.

As there is more space on this page, here are some more bird photos. The magpie is almost identical in markings to the magpie that is common in China but is a slightly different species.



Mountain Bluebird



Mountain Bluebird

Ed Holroyd
18 June 2015



Black-billed Magpie