

Camp Colorado by Jake Cvetas

This summer I was lucky enough to have the experience of going to a young birder's camp, Camp Colorado. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and one that I will surely never ever forget. All the campers were extremely knowledgeable about birds, photography, field sketching, conservation, habitats, and other wildlife. Our leaders shared insight into many areas such as photography, sketching, and audio recording to help us improve in those respective fields. The atmosphere was welcoming and everyone just clicked. We all had the same sense of humor.

Day 1 - Arrival

As I arrived at the Denver International Airport on July 6th, which was our scheduled meeting place, I couldn't find any counselors. I began to worry a little, but then I heard something interesting. There was a Northern Cardinal singing inside the airport! I quickly looked around and I realized that one of the counselors, Raymond VanBuskirk, was making the call to draw young birders in. And as it happened it drew another young birder and myself to the group. Once we had collected everyone, we piled into the vans to head to the YMCA of the Rockies, our home base for the next week. We marveled at the amount of Swainson's Hawks there were along the highway, and we watched a Bald Eagle fly by. Once we reached the Rockies, we were simply amazed by the sheer massiveness of the mountains. It's truly one of a kind. As I hopped out of the van at the YMCA, I immediately got 2 lifers: Black-billed Magpies were flying around, and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds were buzzing around us.



Me and my roommates, aka the Big Dipper Squad

Day 2 - Wild Basin

The next day marked the first day of hardcore birding. We headed to the Wild Basin area of Rocky Mountain National Park to search for American Dipper. Between frequently checking the fast moving river, we enjoyed great views of Townsend's Solitaire, Red-naped Sapsucker, and MacGillivray's Warbler. It was a little bit of a slow morning, so we began to turn back around and walk back to the vans. Almost defeated, I checked one last view of the river, and to my surprise, there was an American Dipper! I called everyone over, and soon everyone was getting great views and pictures of the young bird. We watched the bird for the better part of 20 minutes, watching him do the signature dipper walk, bending at the knee and dropping down with every step, and diving into the rough river and appearing further downstream with a mouthful of invertebrates, successful. We returned to camp shortly after that encounter, but we didn't stop birding. We birded around the camp, finding 2 young male Williamson's Sapsuckers, a Dusky Flycatcher, a Green-tailed Towhee, and came face-to-face with an extremely cooperative Yellow-headed Blackbird that walked within 3 feet of us. Everyone with a DSLR camera to an iPhone got incredible pictures of the bird. Some even took selfies with him.



American Dipper and Yellow-headed Blackbird

Day 3 - Endovalley

The following morning we woke up bright and early and headed into RMNP again. This time, we went to the Endovalley area. We first went to a waterfall where Bill Schmoker told us the story of how a reservoir in the mountains broke in the middle of the night and dumped all of its water into the small towns in the valley, completely flooding them. The evidence of this was everywhere. There were stacks of boulders along the river, which flows haphazardly between them. There was also evidence that a bridge once stood over the slower part of the river, but it was nowhere to be seen. Here we found an American Dipper, a Townsend's Solitaire, a Steller's Jay, a nesting Warbling Vireo, and a nesting pair of Red-naped Sapsuckers. We continued on in Endovalley to a clearing with a few trees where counselor, Jennie Duberstein, had conducted breeding bird surveys back in the late '90s. Those very aspens were still there and still housed cavity nesters such as; Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Red-naped Sapsuckers, and Tree and Violet-green Swallows. We then packed back into the vans to head to the next stop. As we had just began to drive up the road, a camper yelled, "Dusky Grouse!!!!" We immediately pulled over and ran back down the road where we were greeted by an adult female with 5 little chicks. All 6 of them provided incredible photo-ops, the adult even stood on a rock for 20 seconds or so. She seemed to brag, "Look at how magnificent I am!" All the while people were stopping and asking what we were looking at. They seemed a little disappointed when we told them it was a grouse (even though I have no idea why they would be). When we returned to camp, we were treated to a bird banding demonstration. The volunteers banded a Dark-eyed Junco, Cassin's Finches, Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, and even House Sparrows. Towards the end, a Northern Goshawk crashed the party causing an all-out mad house of birds rushing out and birders rushing in to see it. We then watched it get mobbed by Common Ravens and fly once around the camp grounds, and then disappear.



Dusky Grouse

Day 4 - Camp Colorado Challenge

The next day marked the second ever Camp Colorado Challenge (or big day). It also marked our earliest wake up call. We left camp right at 4:30 a.m. We arrived at Pawnee National Grassland right at 7:00 where our leaders quickly picked out a Mountain Plover in an agricultural field. As we were driving through the grasslands, we stopped at a wooded riparian habitat and picked up a Great Horned Owl and a Bullock's Oriole, along with a couple of Loggerhead Shrikes. As we entered the birding loop, we were greeted by tons of Grasshopper Sparrows and Lark Buntings. We stopped to watch a pair of Swift Foxes play around, and a Short Horned Lizard crawl beneath our feet. We stopped because an American Avocet began to circle around our van, clearly very territorial. At this same stop, we observed 7 young and 1 adult Burrowing Owls just milling about. We began to run out of time, so we had to hightail it to the longspur spot, making only a stop for Brewer's Sparrow. When we got to the longspur habitat, Jen spotted a Ferruginous Hawk soaring above the grassland. After admiring the hawk, we heard a McCown's Longspur and went to investigate. We found one male tirelessly displaying, he would fly up, then sort of kite down, singing the whole time. After watching him for a while, it was time to head back to camp. On the way there, we stopped at a reservoir to pick up both Western and Clark's Grebes. We began to create a list of birds we could pick up quickly just around camp to boost our total for the day once we got to the mountains. The campers were given a mere 45 minutes to dash around camp trying to add as many birds as we could to the day list. We were absolutely mad, running from place to place, trying to find birds we had seen earlier in the week. As time expired, we began to craft the list. As everyone added in a few more species, the count was in: 93 species!!!! We had beaten the record set last year by 4 species.



Horned Lizard

Day 5 - Alpine Tundra

The following day was probably the most anticipated of the entire camp. Mostly due to the fact that the habitat that we were about to observe was completely unlike anything we had ever experienced. Yep, you guessed it, we were heading up to the alpine tundra! As we started gaining elevation, we immediately started to see a change in the habitat. We could clearly make out the tree line above us, at approximately 11,600 feet above sea level. As the anticipation built, we took a break to look for Clark's Nutcrackers. Almost immediately as we stepped out of the van, we were greeted by a very close Clark's Nutcracker. After that, we continued on until we reached the Alpine Visitor's Center, which located at 11,796 feet above sea level, is the highest visitor's center in the national park system. We began our hike just down the trail from the visitor's center, where there are no trees and all the plant life is no taller than an inch or two. Once we started to hike, we realized that it was extremely difficult to walk and talk at the same time. Most of us had never experienced elevation like this, it was a completely new experience. A little ways down the trail, after scanning many rocks in the side of the mountain, Raymond shouted out that he had found a moving rock, a White-tailed Ptarmigan! All of us rushed to the scopes to get a look at this stunning bird. After viewing it for a few minutes, all of a sudden the bird squawked once, then flew down the mountain and landed on the trail! And to our amazement, another bird popped up right next to it! This pair did not seem to mind our presence there at all. They came within 20 feet of us! Everyone had amazing views and people got amazing pictures of the birds. But the excitement of the tundra didn't end there. We then headed down the road to check a patch of snow right next to a cliff to look for a specific type of very hardy finch. When we hopped out of the vans and faced the gusting winds, we immediately spotted 3 Brown-capped Rosy-Finches! They put on quite a show, allowing fairly good looks (besides the male, he was determined to hide his very colorful feathers). Later in the evening, as we were listening to Ted Floyd, someone said that they saw a raven land in the tree outside the window. We all turned to look and to our surprise it was a Northern Goshawk! We all rushed outside to get a quick look and a few shots before it took off. Ted later said that it was the second time his talk had been left to go see a bird.



Clark's Nutcracker and White-tailed Ptarmigan

Day 6 - Hummingbirds

Unfortunately, the following day was the last day of birding. We headed to a place called Rabbit Mountain to search for some birds that we hadn't seen yet like Lazuli Bunting and Canyon Wren. However, this location probably was the biggest surprise of the trip. As soon as we exited the vans, we were greeted by a singing Canyon Wren, a Yellow-breasted Chat, and a few Lazuli Buntings, instant success! As we continued our hike, we were treated to great looks at Spotted Towhees and Lark Sparrows. We even saw a Red-tailed Hawk carrying a snake in its talons! Since it was very hot outside, we didn't linger too long, and some were pretty quick back to vans. In fact, I was sitting in the vans getting a drink of water when Jen Brumfield shouted out that she was currently looking at a Golden Eagle! We all rushed to peer through the scopes to see a bird that absolutely dwarfed the Red-tailed Hawk that somehow was trying to attack it. After a few minutes, we noticed that the scopes were pointed in two different directions, there were two birds! The second bird was being chased by a Peregrine Falcon. (What's up with these Golden Eagles getting chased by smaller birds?). Next we went to the famous Fawn Brook Inn, which is famous for their collection of hummingbird feeders on their property. There were 10 feeders, and every single one was being used all the time. This mass food resource was being put to good use. There must have been 100s of hummingbirds in the area coming to these feeders. The owner said that they go through 70 lbs of sugar each week. But the real reason we came was to find a few different species of hummingbirds. Sure enough, there were a few Rufous Hummingbirds circulating through. About 15 minutes in, Jen and Raymond shouted out that they had a Calliope Hummingbird! I ran over to them, but the tiny hummingbird was gone. About 15 minutes later, another small hummingbird showed up, but it was just a Broad-tailed Hummingbird without a tail. We had been there for just about an hour when Jennie told us that we could only stay for about 5 more minutes, the anticipation was building. 10 minutes had gone by from when Jennie gave us a warning when a tiny hummingbird flew in and landed on a feeder allowing for very good looks at the very small bill, short tail, and a much smaller body. Success!



Spotted Towhee

Day 7 - Departure

On the final day of camp, we enjoyed a final breakfast together before everyone departed for the airport or got picked up by their families.

We reminisced about all the good times and shared a few last laughs.

But most importantly we all exchanged contact information so we can keep in touch.

I think the thing that surprised me the most about this camp was the sheer number of young birders! Everyone that I met was extremely skilled and knowledgeable about so many different things. I am just so thankful for the incredible experience and I would definitely recommend this camp to any young birder just because of the great people and atmosphere.

ABA Blog Entry for more photos: <http://blog.aba.org/2015/07/highlights-from-2015-camp-colorado-a-photo-video-essay.html>

Flickr for more photos: https://www.flickr.com/photos/jake_cvetas/

Species Totals

Canada Goose	20	
Wood Duck	4	
Gadwall	1	
Mallard		50
Ring-necked Duck	10	
Ruddy Duck	1	
White-tailed Ptarmigan	2	
Dusky Grouse	6	
Western Grebe	75	
Clark's Grebe	5	
Double-crested Cormorant	21	
American White Pelican	14	
Great Blue Heron	2	
Great Egret	2	
Black-crowned Night-Heron	1	
Turkey Vulture		6
Osprey	1	
Golden Eagle	2	
Northern Goshawk	2	
Bald Eagle	1	
Swainson's Hawk	10	
Red-tailed Hawk	12	
Ferruginous Hawk	1	
Sora	1	
American Coot		1
American Avocet	3	
Killdeer	3	
Mountain Plover	1	
California Gull		1
Rock Pigeon	5	
Band-tailed Pigeon	26	
Eurasian Collared-Dove	3	
Mourning Dove		12
Great Horned Owl	1	
Burrowing Owl		8
Common Nighthawk	7	
Chimney Swift		1
White-throated Swift	22	
Broad-tailed Hummingbird	197	

Rufous Hummingbird	3	
Calliope Hummingbird		1
Belted Kingfisher	1	
Williamson's Sapsucker		5
Red-naped Sapsucker	10	
Downy Woodpecker	2	
Hairy Woodpecker	5	
Northern Flicker	8	
American Kestrel	6	
Peregrine Falcon	1	
Prairie Falcon	2	
Western Wood-Pewee	4	
Dusky Flycatcher	2	
Cordilleran Flycatcher		6
Say's Phoebe	2	
Western Kingbird	43	
Eastern Kingbird	2	
Loggerhead Shrike	4	
Warbling Vireo		4
Steller's Jay	5	
Blue Jay	4	
Black-billed Magpie	33	
Clark's Nutcracker	6	
American Crow	10	
Common Raven	19	
Horned Lark	119	
Tree Swallow	16	
Violet-green Swallow	57	
Barn Swallow	15	
Cliff Swallow	24	
Black-capped Chickadee	1	
Mountain Chickadee	23	
Red-breasted Nuthatch		1
White-breasted Nuthatch	3	
Pygmy Nuthatch	5	
Canyon Wren	1	
House Wren	11	
American Dipper	3	
Golden-crowned Kinglet	1	
Ruby-crowned Kinglet		1

Mountain Bluebird	12	
Townsend's Solitaire	6	
Swainson's Thrush	1	
Hermit Thrush	3	
American Robin	76	
Gray Catbird	1	
Brown Thrasher	1	
Northern Mockingbird		1
European Starling	10	
American Pipit		7
McCown's Longspur	5	
MacGillivray's Warbler		5
Yellow Warbler	5	
Yellow-rumped Warbler	22	
Wilson's Warbler	1	
Yellow-breasted Chat	1	
Grasshopper Sparrow	31	
Chipping Sparrow	4	
Brewer's Sparrow	5	
Lark Sparrow	8	
Lark Bunting	126	
Dark-eyed Junco	22	
White-crowned Sparrow	10	
Lincoln's Sparrow	7	
Green-tailed Towhee	3	
Spotted Towhee	6	
Black-headed Grosbeak	3	
Lazuli Bunting		3
Red-winged Blackbird		2
Western Meadowlark	58	
Yellow-headed Blackbird	18	
Brewer's Blackbird	6	
Common Grackle	33	
Brown-headed Cowbird	4	
Orchard Oriole		1
Bullock's Oriole	6	
Brown-capped Rosy-Finch	4	
House Finch	31	
Cassin's Finch	8	
Red Crossbill	4	

Pine Siskin	28
Lesser Goldfinch	1
American Goldfinch	1
House Sparrow	13

Total: 123 species