

Greater
sage-grouse



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COLORADO PARKS & WILDLIFE

Watching Grouse, Prairie-Chickens & Ptarmigan



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GREATER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN BY © NOPPADOL PAOTHONG

Colorado's Grouse, Our "Spring Chickens"

Whimsical, charming, fascinating — and most of the year elusive — Colorado's grouse strut their stuff in a spectacular show each spring. From the impressive courtship dance of prairie-chickens on the Eastern Plains to the more restrained display of white-tailed ptarmigan on the highest mountaintops, these ground-dwelling, chicken-like birds are a delight to see.

Dusky grouse



© KEN ARCHER



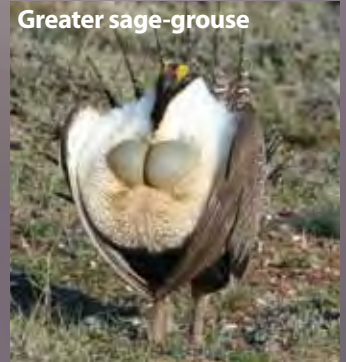
Greater prairie-chicken

© NOPPADOL PAOTHONG

Spring isn't the only time to look for grouse, but in other seasons you may have to search just a little harder. Walk enough trails in the mountains and it's likely you will see dusky grouse striding across a subalpine meadow or roosting in a tree just above your head. Though white-tailed ptarmigan live on the treeless tundra, they too, can be difficult to spot. To the hiker or snowshoer who fails to notice them until they fly, ptarmigan seem to erupt from the ground beneath one's feet.

Watching grouse perform their annual displays is becoming increasingly popular among birdwatchers. Grouse may lack the bright colors or dramatic flight displays of other birds, but these "spring chickens" put on a show that outshines them all.

Greater sage-grouse



© KATHLEEN TADVICK

Sharp-tailed grouse



© NOPPADOL PAOTHONG

A Grouse's Life — A Ritual for Every Season

Spring — Showtime

When winter warms into spring, grouse gather in groups on ancestral courting grounds called “leks.” There, males dance and display to attract potential mates. The same “dancing” grounds may be used by generations of the same species. Males arrive first and begin to compete for dominance and establish their territories on the lek. The older, more dominant males win the prime spots in the center of a loose

circle of birds. Dominant males will do most of the mating. The females arrive and walk through the lek, setting off a chain reaction of dancing and displaying among the males.

Prairie-chickens and sage-grouse fan their feathers, pirouette and inflate colorful neck sacs that wheeze and pop. Sharp-tailed grouse

fan their wings, bow forward and point their tails skyward. The dances performed by these grouse are among the most impressive wildlife displays in North America.

Dusky grouse and white-tailed ptarmigan are less theatrical. Individual males display within their own, widely dispersed territories rather than on communal leks. In an attempt to attract females, dusky grouse clap their wings, hoot, strut and expose a patch of red skin on their necks. Ptarmigan call and strut, flashing swollen red combs above their eyes. Whether the dance is performed alone or in a group, the displays of male grouse are meant to establish dominance and impress females. Hens that select a flashy dancer are likely to be choosing a strong and healthy mate.

Female and male greater sage-grouse



© KATHLEEN TADWICK



Greater sage-grouse hen

© NOPPADOL PAOTHONG

After mating, male and female grouse don't stay together. The female finds a well-hidden spot to make a nest. She scrapes a depression in the ground, lines it with grass or leaves, and lays an average of 10 eggs. Eggs hatch in about three weeks.

Greater sage-grouse nest



© KATHLEEN MAWHINNEY

Summer — Family Time

Grouse chicks hatch completely covered in downy feathers and with open eyes — ready to leave the nest within hours. They follow the hen as she forages, learning what to eat and how to avoid danger. She shows them food but they feed themselves. The chicks can fly short distances when only a week old — an adaptation that helps them escape predators that prey upon these ground-dwelling birds.

Week-old sage-grouse chick



© KATHLEEN MAWHINNEY

Greater prairie-chicken



Fall — Preparation Time

Unlike many birds, grouse are not migratory, and can be found year-round in Colorado. In autumn the birds may move to other habitats in higher or lower elevations, following the availability of nuts, berries, seeds, insects and other food. Finding adequate food is essential this time of year because the chicks are still growing and all the birds must gain fat reserves in preparation for the coming winter. Depending on the species, broods of chicks may stay together for up to three months until they acquire their juvenile plumage and disperse. For white-tailed ptarmigan,

White-tailed ptarmigan during molt



preparation for winter includes a molt — replacing brown feathers with new white plumage. These white feathers will conceal them in their snowy habitat and provide optimal insulation. A dense mat of stiff “snow-shoe” feathers on their feet will help them walk on top of the snow.

Winter — Survival Time

When winter grips the state, grouse gather in flocks, finding safety in numbers. They move to areas that offer food and shelter from winter snow, cold and wind. In some years, severe conditions can kill large numbers of birds. Sage-grouse shelter under big sagebrush and feed on the leaves and buds. Prairie-chickens feed on the seeds of grasses, other plants and on waste grain in farm fields. Dusky grouse roost and feed on conifer needles in stands of Douglas fir and lodgepole pine, sometimes sheltering under the snow. Ptarmigan feed on willow buds and seek cover under willow shrubs and in deep snow. Sometimes their presence is revealed only by their inky black eyes and bills, which contrast with their white environment.

White-tailed ptarmigan in winter plumage



Greater Sage-Grouse
(*Centrocercus urophasianus*)
Size: 22–28 inches long



© NICK CLEMENT

Description: *Male:* Large and plump with streaky gray-brown plumage, black belly, prominent white ruff and collar, yellow combs over the eyes, black throat, and long, spiky, pointed tail. Distinctive, thin, upright feathers known as filoplumes on top of neck. Yellow air sacs on chest surrounded by white feathers.
Female: Smaller than male. Lacks eye combs, neck ruff, collar, filoplumes and air sacs.

Habitat: Sagebrush shrublands.

Greater sage-grouse are the largest grouse in North America. Males can weigh more than five pounds and hens two to three pounds. True to their name, they are dependent on Colorado's sagebrush shrublands. They shelter beneath sagebrush bushes, building their nests and feeding on sagebrush leaves and buds.



Sage-Grouse

Viewing Highlights: Imagine a group of birds the size of barnyard chickens, all bobbing and strutting this way and that, inflating air sacs on their chest like beach balls, then releasing the air with a resonant “pop” until the place sounds like a bubbling pot of stew. That’s the scene at a sage-grouse lek, or dancing ground, when spring courtship is in full swing in late April and May.

Gunnison Sage-Grouse
(*Centrocercus minimus*)
Size: 18–22 inches long



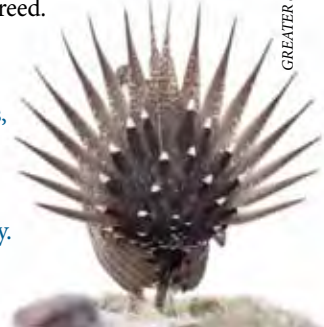
© HELEN H. RICHARDSON/THE DENVER POST

Description: Up to a third smaller in size than the much more numerous greater sage-grouse. *Male:* Plump with streaky gray-brown plumage, black belly, long tail with distinct white feathers, prominent white ruff and collar with feathers longer and thicker than in greater sage-grouse. Black throat and yellow combs over the eyes. Yellow air sacs on chest surrounded by white feathers. Filoplume feathers extending from the back of the neck are much longer and thicker than on the greater sage-grouse. *Female:* Smaller than male. Lacks eye combs, neck ruff, collar, filoplumes and air sacs.

Habitat: Sagebrush shrublands.

Once considered the same species as the greater sage-grouse, genetic studies now show that the Gunnison sage-grouse is really a different bird. The Gunnison sage-grouse is found only in a few isolated areas in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. The two species are not found in the same locations, they behave differently during courtship and they do not interbreed.

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE INSET PHOTOS BY © NOPPADOL PAOTHONG



Dusky Grouse

(*Dendragapus obscurus*)

Size: 20 inches long



© JONATHAN COORS



Description: *Male:* Blue-gray with plump body, long neck, smallish head and orange-yellow eye combs. Red, fleshy air sacs on neck ringed by white feathers. *Female:* Mottled brown with pale belly.

Habitat: Mountain coniferous and aspen forests, mountain shrublands, timberline.

Viewing Highlights: Many high-country hikers know this grayish, mountain grouse for its seemingly “tame” behavior; it often feeds or roosts without apparent concern for nearby hikers or observers. Formerly known as blue grouse, the dusky’s docile nature and habit of “freezing” rather than flying has earned it the nickname “fool hen.” While other grouse are rarely glimpsed, except during their showy spring courtship display, dusky grouse are frequently seen throughout the year. The dusky’s breeding display is much less dramatic than that of other grouse. The male hoots and struts, claps his wings and spreads his neck feathers to expose a patch of red skin ringed by white feathers.



Dusky grouse

© DONALDMITONES.COM

Sharp-tailed Grouse

(*Tympanuchus phasianellus*)

Size: 17–18 inches long



© CONNIE YOUNG

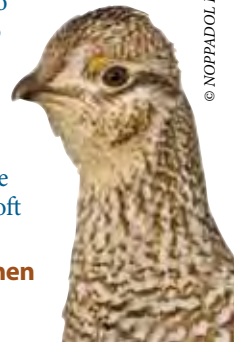


Two subspecies of sharp-tailed grouse live in Colorado. The Columbian sharp-tailed grouse mainly inhabits northwestern Colorado, and the plains sharp-tailed grouse — currently classified as a state endangered species — is found in northeastern Colorado.

Description: Brownish plumage on back, white spots on wings. Black chevrons on buff chest. White tail is wedge-shaped with protruding central feathers. *Male:* Yellow eye combs and purple air sacs on neck. *Female:* The same general coloration except for less pronounced yellow eye combs, no purple air sacs on neck, and smaller in size than the male.

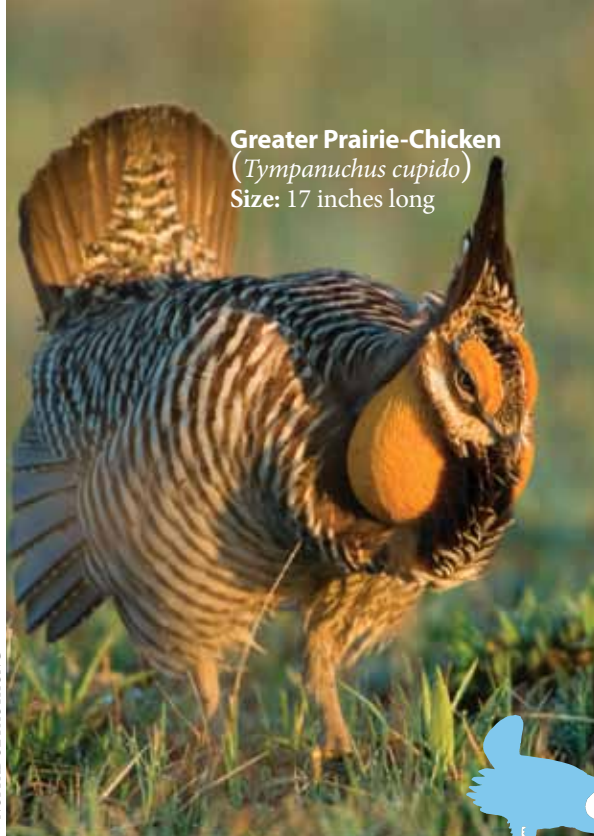
Habitat: Shrublands of oak, serviceberry and sagebrush, wet meadows, aspen forests, riparian areas, agricultural land.

Viewing Highlights: From late March through May, sharp-tailed grouse gather on communal dancing grounds where the males perform a courtship display to attract females. They extend their wings and raise and fan their trademark “sharp” tails into an inverted “V” shape. Lowering their head until their entire body is horizontal to the ground and their sharp tails pointed to the sky, the birds bow and dance. In a display called a “flutter-jump,” they patter their feet, cackle loudly and jump three to four feet high in the air while rustling and vibrating their wings. They inflate purple air sacs on their necks and emit a soft “boom” or “coo.”



Sharp-tailed grouse hen

© NOPPADOL PAOTHONG



Greater Prairie-Chicken
(*Tympanuchus cupido*)
Size: 17 inches long



Description: Mottled buffy and brown plumage with black barring; pale undersides with brown barring, yellow comb over eyes. *Male:* Orange-yellow neck sacs and ornamental neck feathers erect like horns during courtship. *Female:* Shorter neck feathers and lacks neck sacs. **Habitat:** Sandsage prairie and rangeland of the sandhill country; adjacent agricultural land.



Lesser Prairie-Chicken
(*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*)
Size: 16 inches long



Description: Mottled buffy and brown plumage with black barring, paler undersides with brown barring, yellow comb over eyes. The lesser prairie-chicken is very similar in appearance to the greater prairie-chicken, but is paler overall; the male's air sacs, inflated during mating display, are a deeper color. *Male:* Red-orange neck sacs rather than orange-yellow. Ornamental neck feathers erect during courtship. *Female:* Same general coloration but lacks the neck sacs and ornamental neck feathers. **Habitat:** Sandsage prairie characterized by short and mid-height grasses, sagebrush and yucca.

Prairie-Chickens

Viewing Highlights: Greater and lesser prairie-chickens look very much alike; their names describe only a slight difference in size. Because the birds are found in different parts of the state, the best way to determine which bird you see is by location.

From March through mid-May, each species of prairie chicken returns again to their ancestral lekking or "booming" grounds. Males arrive before dawn to compete for a territory. Their specialized head feathers erect like horns on their heads and they drum their feet, turning left and right in their traditional dance. The sacs on their necks swell like balloons, then the air is suddenly squeezed out with a popping wheeze. A lek full of strutting, "booming" males sounds like an orchestra warming up. Plump, feathery males strut and spar while the hens meander through the lek and select a mate. As the sun gets higher, the birds take their leave for the day, but return during the last hour before sunset in order to dance again.

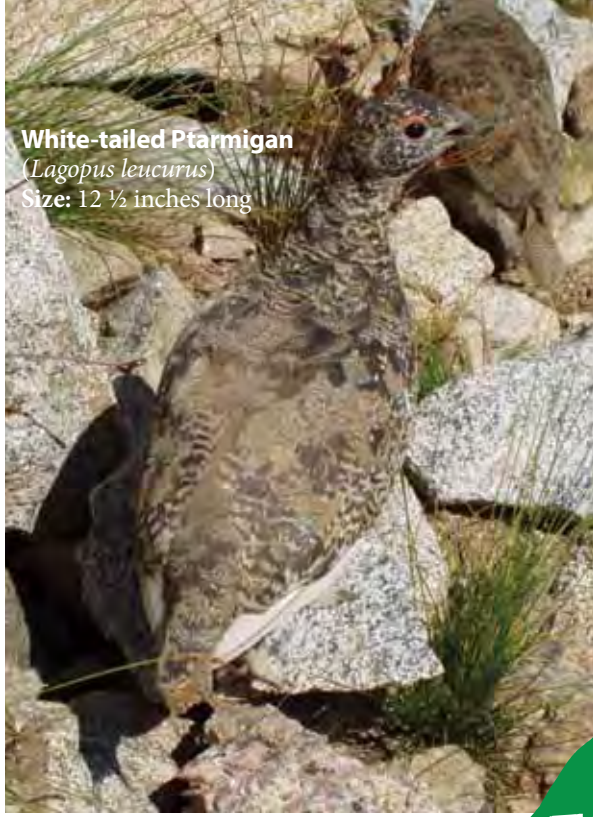


Greater prairie-chicken male and female

White-tailed Ptarmigan

(*Lagopus leucurus*)

Size: 12 ½ inches long



© KEN KEHMEIER



Description: (Both sexes) *Winter plumage:* Snow white. *Summer plumage:* Mottled brown; (males keep a white chest and belly). When the bird is molting, it has a mix of white and mottled brown plumage. Half the size of the sage grouse, the white-tailed ptarmigan is the smallest member of the grouse family.

Habitat: Alpine tundra; moist, rock-strewn meadows in summer and nearer willow thickets in the winter.

Viewing Highlights: Ptarmigan blend seamlessly into the alpine landscape, making them almost impossible to spot until you are almost on top of them. Sighting ptarmigan is often a matter of luck and vigilant attention to movement. If you are lucky enough to see one, watch from a distance; ptarmigan can be sensitive to disturbance. Male ptarmigan become slightly more conspicuous throughout the mating season, flashing swollen, red combs above their eyes. Courtship begins mid-April, amid the first alpine wildflower blooms. Ptarmigan displays are the most subtle of the grouse species, as ptarmigan pair bond for the entire season, if not for longer. Males return to preferred territories, announcing and defending them with a cackling call. Their dance — a bow, a strut and a chase — serves to strengthen the bond between the pair prior to mating.

Grouse on the Decline

I have also met with great numbers of Grouse, or prairie hens as they are called ...

From the journal of Meriwether Lewis, 1805

Grouse populations have declined steeply in the 200 years since the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Once numerous enough to provide food for Native Americans and settlers, grouse, like the wild landscapes they inhabit, are disappearing. Today scientists see grouse as barometers for the condition of native landscapes. Much of their native habitat has been converted for planting crops, grazing livestock, or for human development.

Summary of the status of Colorado grouse:

Greater sage-grouse — considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Gunnison sage-grouse — once lived throughout southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah, but now limited to seven remote sites. Considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Dusky grouse — By far the most abundant grouse in the state. Population is currently stable.

Plains sharp-tailed grouse — currently classified as a state endangered species, has all but disappeared from parts of its former range. In northeastern Colorado, re-introduction efforts are underway.

Columbian sharp-tailed grouse — classified as a species of special concern.

Greater prairie-chickens — once a Colorado endangered species; populations have rebounded due in large part to partnerships between Colorado Parks and Wildlife and private landowners.

Lesser prairie-chickens — considered a threatened species in Colorado.

White-tailed ptarmigan — populations are currently stable, but the alpine willow habitat they depend upon is degraded by the increasing volume of high-country recreation and by overgrazing by large elk herds.



Greater prairie-chickens

© NOPPADOL PAOTHONG

Grouse Hot Spots

Colorado's diverse landscape supports seven grouse species — more than any other state. They live in a variety of habitats — grasslands, shrublands, mountain forests and alpine tundra.

Though the birds are strong fliers, they spend much of their life on the ground, foraging for food. Some species will roost in trees. Wherever you search for grouse in Colorado, you're likely to find them!

Greater Sage-Grouse

Sage-grouse display in late April and May. Weekend guided tour packages to see grouse are offered in Walden. For information on dates and costs call the Walden Chamber of Commerce at (970) 723-4600 For general viewing information call the Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) Steamboat Springs office at (970) 870-2197 or the Craig Chamber of Commerce & Sportsmen's Information Center at (970) 824-5689.



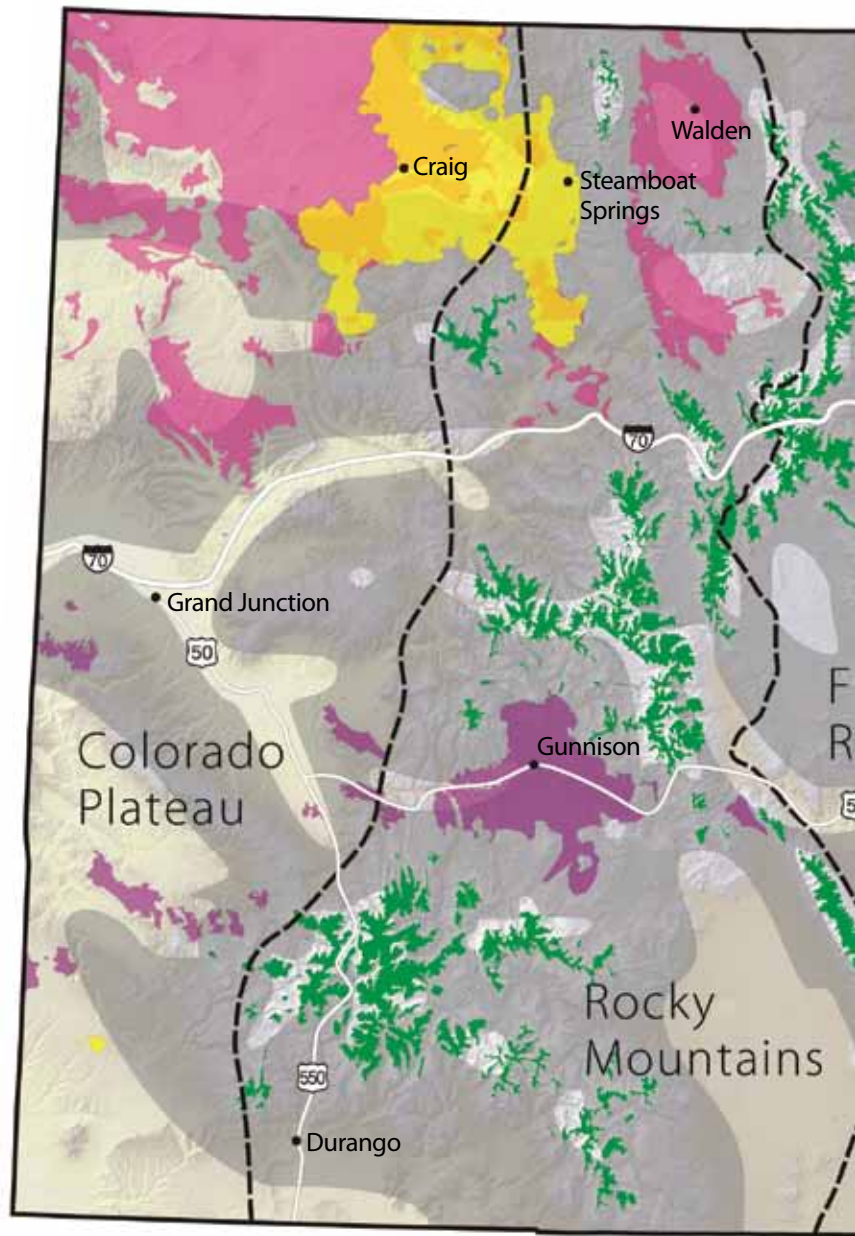
Sharp-tailed Grouse

Mid-April through mid-May is the time to see sharp-tailed grouse in the Yampa Valley. For information call the Steamboat Springs CPW office at (970) 870-2197 or the Craig Chamber of Commerce & Sportsmen's Information Center at (970) 824-5689.



Gunnison Sage-Grouse

Opportunities to view Gunnison sage-grouse are limited because of their limited population. It is critical that viewing be done responsibly. For information, contact the CPW office in Gunnison at (970) 641-7060, or the Monte Vista office at (719) 587-6900. Best viewing is from early April to early May. One public viewing site. For info on using a viewing trailer at this site, contact www.siskadee.org or call (970) 641-3959.



White-tailed Ptarmigan

Watch for ptarmigan year-round on alpine tundra throughout the central mountains. Colorado offers plenty of high-country trails, and several mountain passes offer roadside access to the alpine environment (including Rocky Mountain National Park, Pikes Peak, and the Mount Evans Road).





Dusky Grouse

Watch for dusky grouse throughout the central mountains, spring through summer, at forest edges where aspen meet sagebrush, subalpine meadows and creek bottoms. Mid-summer through late fall, look for dusky grouse at or above timberline, or in subalpine forests, especially where you see an understory of



whortleberry or wild blueberry. In winter, you'll find dusky grouse in Douglas-fir/lodgepole pine forests. Contact the Craig Chamber of Commerce & Sportsmen's Information Center at (970) 824-5689 or the CPW office in Steamboat Springs, (970) 870-2197, for more information.

Greater Prairie-Chicken

In Colorado, most greater-prairie chickens live on private land in the northeastern counties of the state.

Guided viewing trips are offered through the Wray Chamber of Commerce from late-March to mid-April. Call (970) 332-3484 or go to www.wraychamber.net.



Lesser Prairie-Chicken

Early March through mid-May is the time to visit the one lesser prairie-chicken lek accessible on public land, located 12 miles east of Campo on the Comanche National Grassland. Be sure to call the U.S. Forest Service Carrizo Ranger District before your trip to confirm that the viewing area is open and the blind is available. It's a self-guided tour but reservations are required for the viewing blind, which holds four people.

You may view from the blind or view from your vehicle. For information, directions and rules, visit www.fs.fed.us/r2/psicc/recreation/sight_seeing/lesser.shtml. For viewing blind and lek information call the Carrizo Ranger District at (719) 523-6591. Call the CPW office in Lamar, (719) 336-6600 for more information. For guided tours of leks located on private ranches, contact Arena Dust Tours in Granada at (719) 734-5226 or visit www.arenadusttours.com.



For more information about grouse viewing and other wildlife viewing sites in Colorado, visit the Colorado Parks and Wildlife website at cpw.state.co.us/viewing and the Colorado Birding Trail site www.coloradobirdingtrail.com.

Viewing Tips

Follow these tips to ensure a positive viewing experience without disturbing the birds.

- **Always watch from a distance.** For a close-up view, use binoculars or spotting scopes, and use a telephoto lens on your camera.
- **Resist the urge to approach birds.** Grouse-family birds often seem “tame” because at first they may not show obvious signs of stress. Causing the birds to flush — to run or fly away — can be particularly harmful. In spring or summer, eggs or chicks can be left unprotected; in winter even a short flight uses needed energy reserves.
- **Learn to be a vigilant viewer, watching for both contrast and movement in your surroundings.** Grouse seem to hide in plain sight. When they sense danger, they scurry to protective cover or stay perfectly still — relying on the camouflage of their plumage for protection. Birds may flush from cover at the last moment causing a flurry of whirring wings that can startle and confuse predators. It has startled many wildlife watchers as well!
- **Leave pets at home.** Even the best behaved dog can stress, harm or kill a grouse before you know what’s happening.



© KATHLEEN TADVICK

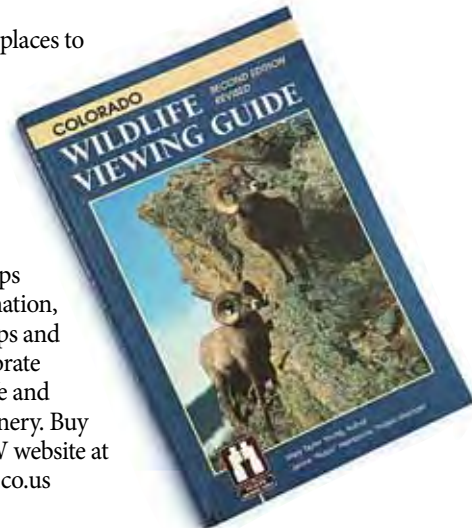
Comply with “lek-visiting etiquette” to ensure you do no harm.

If you visit one of the leks accessible for public viewing, it is critically important that you follow these general guidelines to ensure species’ reproductive success. Contact the specific site you wish to visit *before* you go, to learn about local regulations and conditions.

- **Arrive at a viewing site well before dawn,** *before* the birds gather. Never drive out into the dancing grounds. Always turn off vehicle headlights before they shine across the lek.
- **Watch from a viewing blind.** If no blind is available, use your car as a blind. Turn your engine and headlights off and leave them off until the birds have left. Human shapes *will* disturb the birds; a parked car rarely elicits stress behaviors.
- **Stay quiet and still.** Activities such as talking, moving, opening or closing a car door, or “clicking” a photo *will* disturb the birds and disrupt mating, and may flush the birds off the lek.
- **Appreciate natural events.** It’s not unusual to see a predator approaching the birds. Allow natural events to take their course; don’t try to warn or “rescue” the grouse.
- **Stay on site until after the birds leave.** Departing early could disrupt the grouse’s mating.

Colorado Wildlife Viewing Guide

Discover the best places to watch wildlife in Colorado with this guide to 201 prime wildlife viewing spots. Detailed descriptions of each site, updated color maps and access information, helpful viewing tips and color photos celebrate Colorado’s wildlife and awe-inspiring scenery. Buy online at the CPW website at wildlifestore.state.co.us



What You Can Do To Help Grouse

• **Comply with grouse-viewing closures and restrictions designed to protect breeding and wintering areas.** Small populations and extraordinary sensitivity make some species vulnerable to disturbance and harm, especially on leks and during winter conditions. Practice exceptional caution and responsibility when viewing grouse. (see “Viewing Tips.”)

• **Let local communities know you care about grouse populations.** Wherever you travel to watch grouse, tell the businesses in the community what the experience means to you, and show them your support by spending money locally.

• **Help protect grouse habitat.** Learn more about how threatened habitats can be conserved and sustained. Speak up and offer financial support.

• **Give to the nongame check-off** on the Colorado state income tax form.

• **Buy a Habitat Stamp.** For only \$10.25, your purchase helps protect essential wildlife habitat and includes the Colorado Search and Rescue fee. Habitat stamps are available at:

- cpw.state.co.us
- (800) 244-5613
- CPW offices
- Most sporting goods stores



Greater sage-grouse on lek

Colorado's Wildlife ... It's Something to See!



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Greater sage-grouse



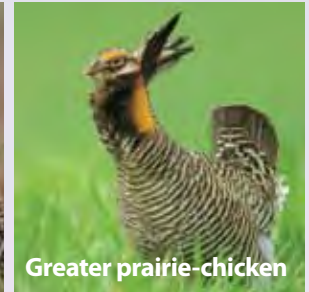
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Gunnison sage-grouse



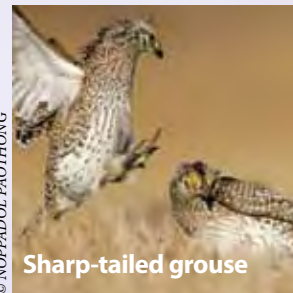
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Lesser prairie-chicken



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Greater prairie-chicken



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Sharp-tailed grouse



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White-tailed ptarmigan



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Dusky grouse