

2010 CFO Convention Trip Report  
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My heart has always been with the prairie. The bird-life may be simple compared to thick woods or wetlands, but displaying longspurs and singing sparrows never fail to captivate my eyes and ears. For this reason, I was particularly excited to attend the 2010 CFO convention in Fort Collins. The convention provided ample opportunities to bird the sun burnt prairie of the Pawnee National Grasslands. Although trips were offered in mountainous habitats, I visited the Pawnee on three of the four convention days.

The most exciting species for me was not a prairie bird at all but one I had seen many times on visits to Florida. The first day of the convention, while driving on one of the many desolate dirt roads of the Pawnee, a small bird flitted by our caravan of wind-blown birders. It hopped about on the side of the road and our cars continued to roll past the bird. At first, the bird's active flitting behavior and pumping motions reminded me of a Rock Wren, which can be found in unexpected habitats during migration. Upon binocular inspection, the rusty crown and yellow wash, accompanied by vigorous tail pumping, identified the bird as a Palm Warbler. What a stroke of luck to have run into this bird as it rested on the prairie, a brief stop on its journey from the southern U.S. to its breeding grounds up north. The group watched the bird as it foraged in the road. Finally, it flew out into the prairie with a short *chip!*

I also thoroughly enjoyed the field trip led by Ted Floyd to The Nature Conservancy's Phantom Canyon Preserve northwest of Fort Collins. The Phantom Canyon Preserve, sandwiched by private land, is surrounded by barren landscape occasionally speckled with stands of pinion or stunted ponderosa pine. Hogbacks of red rock rise up parallel to the road, the ribs of the land. Looking out at the foothills, one would never guess that the land suddenly drops off into a precipitous canyon carved by the Cache la Poudre River. Led by Nature Conservancy staff, our group hiked into the canyon where we found Golden Eagle nests, as well as eagles soaring at eye level as we watched from the slope side. In the lush canyon bottom, we found Lazuli Buntings, Yellow-breasted Chat, and a loan merganser rafting down the river. We stopped in the shade of a three-hundred year old juniper tree. Not far, our guide explains, are teepee rings. "Imagine, this tree was here when Native Americans occupied the canyon. They probably picked its berries or used its bark." The gnarled tree also hosts a Lazuli Bunting as it bursts into song.

CFO conferences, however, offer more than binocular experiences. They offer a chance to meet unique individuals in the birding community, to reconnect with old friends, and to associate with a variety of personalities. I particularly enjoyed being in the presence of sharp and experienced birders who were able to share their knowledge concerning identification. For instance, I recall looking at Empidonax flycatchers at Crow Valley with a trip leader as he patiently explained how to tell Dusky from Hammond's from Cordilleran. Hammond's Flycatchers, he explains, have a more hunched appearance, in addition to a shorter tail and longer primary projection. The tail on this bird is longer and it lacks the characteristic teardrop eye ring of a Cordilleran. After walking through a process of elimination, we arrive at the likely identification of Dusky Flycatcher.

I also enjoyed Craig Benkman's crossbill presentation. I found the evolution of crossbills particularly interesting. Compared to other bird species, the evolution of crossbills took place in

a short span of time. Their evolution is tightly linked to the evolution of conifer cones. For instance, in locations with high squirrel populations, cones have developed larger, harder to break, scales on the attached end of the cone because squirrels always start on that end when feeding. Crossbills feed on the hanging end of cones, where the scales are smaller. The shape of certain cones thus indicates joint evolution based on squirrel and crossbill populations. I have always known that the strange beak of the crossbill is specially designed for breaking open cones. But I never realized just how sophisticated the engineering of the beak is. Special muscles enable the beak to move laterally. After wedging their curved, finely pointed beaks in between the scales, the lateral motion peels the scale off. I could talk forever about all the aspects of the crossbill that I found fascinating. The presentation added a satisfying research aspect to the conference.

I thank the CFO for supporting my desire to attend the conference and for granting me a portion of their youth scholarship funding. The conference was an exciting experience and I learned so much, not only from the recreational birding but from the paper presentations and stump the chump photo quiz discussions. I also learned a lot from creating the t-shirt design. The opportunity to design a t-shirt has further developed my skills in representing birds accurately, as well as being the first flat piece of artwork I have sold. Thank-you again for a week of unique and fun experiences!