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C.F.O. JOURNAL is devoted to the field study of birds in Colorado. Articles and notes of scientific or general interest, and reports of unusual observations are solicited. Send manuscripts with photos and drawings to: Mark Janos, 860 Sharpe Circle, Delta, CO 81416. Send rare bird reports to: C.F.O. Official Records Committee, c/o Zoological Collections, Denver Museum of Natural History, City Park, Denver, CO 80205.

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Cover Photograph: Red-backed Hawk in Gunnison, Colorado,
September 9, 1987 by Brian K. Wheeler.

BREEDING BIRD ATLAS UPDATE

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After the extensive report on the 1987 Breeding Bird Atlas field work which appeared in the Fall and Winter 1987 C.F.O. Journal, this month's report must look forward to 1988 field work. A late report adds a high species block: Ruby Ebright found 77 species in the Salida West block. Four of the five blocks with the most species include towns: Boulder, Salida, Eagle, and Craig.

In 1987, while we worked in 220 blocks of the 1800 blocks in Colorado, we completed only about 5%--not enough to accomplish our objective of completing the Atlas in five years. Field workers have two objectives for 1988: to complete many of the blocks started but not completed in 1987, and to complete a substantial set of new blocks.

Commitments look encouraging, even in a number of the Atlas Regions along the edge of the state. To succeed with this daunting project, many Colorado field ornithologists will have to travel a fairly long ways from their homes. They will find some fascinating places to explore and perhaps find some surprises.

Early returns from 1988 field work include good numbers of confirmations, employing Used Nests from last season. Paul Opler explored eight blocks east of Fort Collins during March, and found enough old nests to confirm 10 different species. These included Cliff and Barn Swallows which nested under bridges over irrigation canals: during breeding season the high water levels in the canals do not permit bridge inspections. He found a Say's Phoebe nest, distinctive in itself, which also had an addled egg left in it; the measurements matched those cited in the literature.

Other reports in 1988 include two Spotted Owls calling in Mesa Verde National Park, one, perhaps, in an Atlas priority block, and a Red-tailed Hawk building a nest in April at Yampa.

On a field trip into the Grand Junction block, Rich Levad employed 15 Audubon members to learn and to confirm. A pair of

Solitary Vireos had frequented one Cottonwood grove, he said, but he failed to confirm them; Rich felt the nest might be visible. Joe Hall looked above his head and said, "Is this it?" Voila--one more confirmation. Then one of a pair of Golden Eagles flew into a six foot long stick nest on a cliff across the Gunnison River, confirming the 22nd species (of 57) in that block.

The C.F.O. Convention in Lamar will feature several trips into Atlas priority blocks. If you haven't picked a block, several Regional Coordinators will attend, and if you feel you would like field instruction, they will offer that as well.

Plan to atlas at least one block in 1988!

ATLAS REGIONAL COORDINATOR CHANGES

Region H: Bill Kaempfer, 850-20th St., San Marco North, #702, Boulder 80302. Telephone, 492-4486.

Region M: Coen Dexter, 560 29½ Road, Grand Junction 81504. Telephone, 241-9531.

Region A & B are combined, with John Toolen as Regional Coordinator. Region K is disbanded, with the blocks absorbed into Regions G (Dick Schottler), N (Toni Brevillier), and R (Rosie & Jim Watts). Beth Dillon moved to Fort Collins, but continues to act as Regional Coordinator for Region T (Baca County and eastern Las Animas County).

[Editor's Note:

This upcoming summer, Phillips University plans to offer a pair of birding workshops at its field campus located in the San Juan Mountains of southcentral Colorado. The Colorado Field Campus has enjoyed many years of specialized summer programming for the traditional college student. Recent years have seen the expansion of short courses and related opportunities for non-traditional learners.

The first course, Field Ornithology (June 11-18), is a week-long workshop designed for the semi-novice birder who seeks instruction for enhancing field identification skills.

The second course, Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas Survey (June 19-25), is designed for more experienced birders who qualify for Elderhostel programming. Specifically, individuals (or one member of a couple) must be sixty years of age or older. You will participate in the first year of a four year project to study the breeding birds of priority blocks in the San Luis Valley. Persons interested in these programs and desiring additional information should contact:

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A RED-BACKED HAWK IN COLORADO

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The discovery of an unusual-looking hawk at Gunnison, Colorado in late August 1987 proved to be a frustrating identification for Colorado birders. It was initially identified as an adult White-tailed Hawk (Buteo albicaudatus) although the first puzzled observers noted a rusty back and more white on the lower face than White-tailed Hawk. The White-tailed Hawk label stuck for nearly a week until I pronounced it as a probable adult female light-morph Red-backed Hawk (Buteo polysoma) of South America.

Speculation quickly arose from authorities outside of Colorado as to whether it was a Red-backed Hawk or a virtually identical species, the Variable or Gurney's Hawk (Buteo poecliochrous), also of South America. The main difference is size, although there is also a fine difference in outer primary lengths which is extremely difficult to see in the field. B. poecliochrous is considerably larger than any Swainson's Hawk (Buteo swainsoni). The Gunnison bird was the same size as an adult female light-morph Swainson's Hawk with which it was often seen perched and in flight. On October 15 and 16, 1987, I spent considerable time researching B. polysoma and B. poecliochrous at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. I compared them to Swainson's and White-tailed Hawks, and the measurements proved that the Gunnison bird was a definite adult female Red-backed Hawk.

Initial reports from birders who had seen the Gunnison bird were puzzling to me because they said that the bird did not look exactly like adult White-tailed Hawks illustrated in available field guides. This was strange because adult White-tailed Hawks have very little plumage variation. Also unusual was the fact that the bird was at 8000 feet elevation while White-tailed Hawks are low elevation birds.

On September 8, 1987, Joe Harrison and I made the trek to Gunnison to study and photograph this bird. Our first of many encounters with the bird that day was in late morning when it soared moderately high overhead. Two points struck me as being odd. First, the inner eight primaries lacked the distinct dark

gray found on the underside of the wing in all adult White-tailed Hawks. Second, the wing was very broad at the junction of the body--much too wide for White-tailed Hawk. We received a remarkable view of the bird in early afternoon when it perched next to an adult female light-morph Swainson's Hawk on a haystack. What I saw totally blew my mind. No North American raptor has a solid rufous back.

From that moment on, I was totally frustrated. I thought the bird was relatively small for a White-tailed Hawk. I initially thought that, if it was a White-tailed Hawk, then it had to be a male as female White-tailed Hawks are always much larger than Swainson's Hawks. I thought that perhaps it was one of the other subspecies of White-tailed Hawks from South America. However, I couldn't remember what the exact differences were from the Texas subspecies B. a. hyposodius.

The morning of September 9, 1987 found me poring over Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the World by L. Brown and D. Amadon (McGraw Hill, 1968) at the Denver Museum of Natural History. White-tailed Hawk was out. Then bingo! The Red-backed Hawk seemed to align perfectly in markings and size. The possibility of it being a Variable Hawk was ruled out on the basis of size. At the American Museum, the largest Red-backed Hawk female had a 420 mm. wing chord while female Variable Hawk had a 460-470 mm. wing chord. A large female Swainson's Hawk has a wing chord of 415-420 mm. and a large female White-tailed Hawk has a 450 mm. wing chord. Since the bird in question was the same approximate size as the female Swainson's Hawk seen in optimal viewing conditions, there was no way the bird could be as large as either the White-tailed or Variable Hawks.

Although superficially similar to each other, the Red-backed and White-tailed Hawk are easily separable. I have found eight major points of difference between the two species. In the following list, the Red-backed characteristic is given, followed by that of the White-tailed Hawk in parentheses:

1. Limited dark on the upper cheek. (Extensive dark on the side of the face).
2. All rufous scapulars and inner scapulars on back. (Rufous on the lower back and outer scapulars only).
3. No rufous on upperwing coverts. (Small rufous area on the upperwing coverts).
4. Broad wings at body-wing junction. (Pinched in and narrower-winged at the body-wing junction).

5. More or less uniformly-colored underwing. (Darker inner eight primaries).
6. White uppertail coverts; dark lower back. (Extensive white on uppertail coverts and lower back).
7. Soars and glides on fairly flat wings. (Soars and glides with a strong dihedral, much like a Swainson's Hawk).
8. Rufous markings on outer edge of the sides of the breast, best seen in flight running along the armpit of the wing. (Mostly white in this area).

The Red-backed Hawk is a South American species never before seen north of Colombia. It is basically a moderately high elevation bird of grasslands, but it is also found at low elevations and on some islands. Plumages are highly variable, ranging from the light-morph, such as the Gunnison bird, to very dark. Adult male light-morph birds have white bellies and are gray on their backs or with some rufous. Adult females have white bellies and rufous back. Red-backed Hawks show little or no migration.

There is considerable speculation as to the origin of the Gunnison bird, nothing of which can ever be proven. In my opinion, after studying slides, I find it highly unlikely that this bird was ever in captivity. This bird showed no signs of having been in a captive situation. The bill hook was not overgrown, the cere was not damaged and there was no sign of leg abrasion caused by jesses. Plumage features prove that the bird had been exposed to nature's elements for at least a year. There was no unusual feather breakage from abrasion, and no fault bars or stress marks in the feathers which would indicate diet alteration and stress. The bird was clearly an efficient hunter and had been healthy for some time.

The bird was in considerable molt, and even old feathers did not exhibit fault bars. The plumage showed evidence of sun bleaching or fading of old feathers by sunlight typical of all wild birds exposed to the elements for a considerable time. The plumage, including the sun bleaching, was identical to four wild adult female light-morph specimens collected in South America which I examined at the American Museum of Natural History. This strongly argues for a bird that had been in the wild for a long time. The truth may never be known but nonetheless is very interesting.



Red-backed Hawk in flight near Gunnison,
Colorado, September 9, 1987 by Brian K. Wheeler

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF GUNNISON'S RED-BACKED HAWK
(Buteo polyosoma) AND WHY IT'S NOT A NATURAL VAGRANT

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On 9 September 1987, Davis W. Finch and I observed a Buteo that we concluded was almost certainly a Red-backed Hawk, Buteo polyosoma. We both have extensive field experience with this species and its nearly indistinguishable congener the Puna Hawk, Buteo poecilochrous, in their natural ranges in South America, where we've led birdwatching tours and conducted ornithological research for more than a decade.

Field Notes

We watched this hawk in Gunnison County on the Allen Ranch, County Rd. 8, approximately two miles north of the intersection of Highway 135 to Crested Butte and the Ohio Creek Road. From 5:15 to 7:00 p.m., we observed the raptor with Zeiss 10x40B binoculars (SA), Bushnell 10x50 Custom binoculars (DWF), and a Questar field model telescope with 40x and 64x lenses (both of us). The following notes are from 80 yards with the Questar at 40x, with the bird at and below eye level:

- head: gray crown, with dull mark of darker feathering passing through eye. Light line, one eye-diameter wide, above and behind the eye on both sides. Bill small and black. Cere ivory. Forehead gray. Hindcrown blends from dark gray into bright rust on nape.
- body: underparts white. Entire interscapular area (the mantle) bright rust. Folded wings dark slate. Scapulars, at junction of wing and body, orange. All feathers look fresh. No wear on flight feathers or tarsi.

We gained additional information by using the 64x lens of the Questar, also at 80 yards:

There is no hooded effect. The orange tone of the back curves around into the axillar region. The tail is white with a black subterminal band. Outermost tail feathers are faintly barred with gray. Primaries are black. The flanks are barred faintly with gray. Tarsi are yellow and toes are black. The eye is dark brown. There are no apparent abrasions on the tarsi. There are two generations of feathers in the wing coverts: brown and slate gray. The secondaries are white-tipped. Lores are pale. The rust color of the mantle is mottled with pale intrusions on each feather.

We were able to make flight observations with the Questar at 40x (yes- we've had a lot of practice doing this!), and with 10x binoculars at 40 feet overhead:

Tail white, uppertail coverts white, lower back slate gray, upper back rust. No orange shows on upper wing. Secondaries and tertials gray with dark bars. Underwing coverts pure white, contrasting with gray flight feathers. Molting the innermost secondary on the right wing. Evenly molting the third rectrices. When the bird was directly overhead, primaries showed the first short, second and third almost the same size but third very slightly longer, thereby forming the point of the wing, and fourth and fifth shorter. Wings broad, slightly pointed, tapered near the body.

We were also able to get an excellent idea of the relative size of this hawk, as it was repeatedly seen perched on the same 8-inch diameter fencepost with, and on adjacent posts to, an adult normal-phase Swainson's Hawk. We saw this numerous times at eye level with both binoculars and the Questar at 40x and 64x. In every respect, this bird appeared identical in size to the Swainson's Hawk.

Identification Discussion

Firstly, in almost every respect, this was an adult hawk. Those plumage conditions that point to a last molt before achieving fully adult plumage are the faint barring of the outer tail feathers and the two generations of feathers, brown and gray, on the wing coverts. Certainly the immaculately white underparts, head pattern, nearly immaculate tail, and strongly rufous and gray back suggest adulthood. That reduces the identification choice to three species: White-tailed Hawk (Buteo

albicaudatus), Red-backed Hawk (Buteo polyosoma) and Puna Hawk (Buteo poecilochrous), another name for which is Variable Hawk (aha! a hint of problems to come!). Considering we are in southwestern Colorado, the White-tailed Hawk seems the most likely candidate. Its range is from southern Texas, with vagrants northward and westward, throughout lower elevations to central Argentina, although it is essentially nonmigratory. However, it is ruled out absolutely by the rufous mantle and lack of rufous on the lesser wing coverts. In each of the three subspecies of White-tailed Hawk, the lesser wing coverts and scapulars are rust-colored but not the interscapular region, also called the mantle of upper back. So much for the most logical alternative.

Since Davis and I knew we were dealing with either Red-backed or Puna Hawk, we took great pains to study the bird as closely as possible. These two species are highly variable in South America, extremely similar, and their ranges overlap greatly. In fact, there is some doubt among taxonomists as to whether they are indeed different species. This is one of the more difficult field identification challenges in a continent renowned for tough identifications. We have had to tell so many frustrated tour participants that Red-backed and Puna Hawks are impossible to separate in the field unless we're south of northwestern Argentina (then it must be Red-backed Hawk), over 3000 meters in the Andes (odds are on Puna Hawk the higher one gets), below 3000 meters in western South America (almost certainly Red-backed Hawk), or in a very dark color phase (apparently Puna Hawk never occurs in this phase). Since we don't care much for identifying birds by coin toss, we usually don't get these to species. The only times my identifications have been certain for one form/species over the other at the intermediate Andean elevations and latitudes have been when I've collected the bird while undertaking ornithological investigations, and then the only two reliable external characters tell the story. These are the greater size of Puna Hawk (length from 500-600 mm. as compared to 460-560 mm. for Red-backed Hawk), and the wing formula of Puna Hawk wherein the third primary is shorter than the fifth, whereas in Red-backed Hawk it is equal or longer. The greater size of Puna Hawk is reflected in an average wing chord length of 427 mm. (range 418-483 mm.) as compared to 384.6 mm. (range 350-427 mm.) in Red-backed Hawk. (Note: all measurements are from Blake 1977).

We felt that if we could make a concrete judgement of the size of this raptor in addition to seeing the wing formula from

below, we could venture an identification. Otherwise, we would have to leave it as either species, as we have so often in the past in South America. Seeing the bird in direct comparison to Swainson's Hawk, the length of which ranges from 470-550 mm., with average wing chord length of 383.6 mm. (range 362-406 mm.), effectively eliminates Puna Hawk from consideration. Certainly Puna Hawk would have impressed us as larger and bulkier than the Swainson's Hawk, both perched side-by-side at eye level and in flight. This size comparison combined with the observation of relative primary lengths as the bird flew 40 feet directly overhead, makes us 99% certain we were watching a Red-backed Hawk. Whew!

Discussion of the Bird's Origins

I know this bird well from the lower elevations and the higher latitudes of the Andes, particularly from Peru south to Tierra del Fuego. Knowing what I do of its natural history and behavior, it is inconceivable that it is a natural vagrant. Red-backed Hawk is completely nonmigratory, so much so that the individuals that are permanent residents in Colombia have never been observed in adjacent Panama, much less farther north. There is no evidence that either Red-backed or Puna Hawks even move altitudinally, as do a certain percentage of Andean species. They seem to be tied to home ranges permanently, are essentially non-social, and have no migratory tendencies whatsoever. A bird that doesn't migrate and that lives where there are no marked seasonal fluctuations in either climate or food supply is biologically incapable of behaving in such a fashion as to accumulate the necessary fat reserves to survive the many thousands of miles from even northern South America to Gunnison. In short, it wouldn't know how to migrate successfully even should it- outlandish thought- be impelled to.

I've heard the suggestion that it "hooked up" with a Swainson's Hawk in Peru or Bolivia during the austral summer and moved back north with it. This is also inconceivable, involving the far-fetched assumptions that there would first be an interspecific attraction, and second that a sedentary bird would survive migration with a species that feeds up beforehand on the wintering grounds before performing a virtually nonstop migration to southwestern North America, where it begins feeding again for the first time after flights of tremendous distance.

So I feel that the bird's biology alone precludes successful completion of an incredibly atypical migration. The most telling feature of this bird, however, was its tameness. In

Davis's 38 years and my 18 years of watching raptors closely, neither of us has ever seen a wild Buteo as tame as this. Not only were we able to approach within twenty feet of the perched bird, I've heard stories from other birdwatchers and from local ranchers of being able to stand at the base of the telephone pole on which the hawk was perched without disturbing it. This argues well for it having recently been caged and become accustomed to people. Indeed, in captivity, it could also have become accustomed to the proximity of other species of hawks, which would explain its bizarre behavior of perching on the same post with a Swainson's Hawk. A less telling argument for captivity is the uneven wing molt, often but not always a sign of irregular biorythms and diet in captivity.

I imagine that this raptor was captured in South America, smuggled to the U.S., or more likely, Mexico or Panama, and purchased by a raptor fancier. Both of these countries have large trades in captive birds. It could have escaped either in northern Mexico, or more probably since it doesn't migrate, in the southwestern U.S. Since it is an illegal raptor to possess, no one is likely to report it missing. Also, it could have been living in the wild for quite a while undetected. Someone may even have purchased the bird in immature plumage, when it looks like many Buteo species, and have been extraordinarily surprised when it molted into a Red-backed Hawk.

It's wonderful to think that this hawk may be roaming through this little-birded corner of the southwest. Certainly the sagebrush high desert of Gunnison County is remarkably similar to the arid steppes of the eastern Andean region, especially of central and southern Argentina. When the snows came in October this year, perhaps it moved just far enough south to survive, and will return this spring to the richly rodent-endowed hayfields of the Allen Ranch (no relation to me). This Red-backed Hawk, even if escaped from captivity, is an exciting addition to Gunnison's avifauna. Nothing would astonish or delight me more than to have it unequivocally proved to be a wild vagrant, but I'm afraid that all logic argues against that.

References Cited:

Blake, Emmet R. 1977. Manual of Neotropical Birds, Volume 1: Spheniscidae (Penguins) to Laridae (Gulls and Allies). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 674 pp.

NOTE: The illustration on the dust jacket of this volume is an excellent depiction of Red-backed Hawk that is almost identical to the Gunnison bird. The major difference is grayer hindcheeks, an area that was immaculately white in the local bird.

Dunning, John S. 1982. South American Land Birds: A Photographic Aid to Identification. Newton Square, PA: Harrowood Books. 364 pp.

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Meyer de Schauensee, Rudolphe. 1970. A Guide to the Birds of South America. Wynnewood, PA: Livingston Publishing Company. 470 pp.

NEWS FROM THE COLORADO BIRD REPORT

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This is the first of a planned series of articles about the birds, the people, and the recent events centering around the Colorado Bird Report. The Colorado Bird Report (CBR) is sponsored by Denver Field Ornithologists and its purpose is to provide timely information about the occurrence and location of uncommon birds and bird phenomenon in Colorado and adjoining areas via a recorded telephone message. You can hear this message by calling the CBR at 303-423-5582.

January 1988 was good for some of our "rare" winter regulars. Greater Scaup were found on schedule by Duane Nelson for the 5th consecutive winter at Prospect Pond in Wheat Ridge Greenbelt. Barrow's Goldeneyes were found in average numbers, with an unusual pair found by Coen Dexter in Grand Junction. John Rawinski reported up to 15 Bald Eagles begging to be photographed at Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge, an annual treat for those hardy enough to visit this beautiful area. By late December, all the lakes were frozen and the only spots for gulls were the power plant reservoirs which are kept open by warmed water from the plants. At Valmont, one such reservoir in Boulder, Peter Yacki found a Glaucous Gull and Randy Pullen found a Black-legged Kittiwake. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were found in several areas this winter. Joe Mammoser reported the most reliable one wintering in Fort Collin's Grandview Cemetery. Eastern Bluebirds spent the month in Denver's Bear Creek Park and were seen along with Mountain Bluebirds by a DFO field trip in Boulder on January 16th. Is this species becoming more common in eastern Colorado? A Varied Thrush was found in Karl Stecher's backyard in Denver in January, down from four reported during the last two weeks of December. The big surprise was a ratty looking Curve-billed Thrasher coming all month long to a Denver feeder. Front range birders were getting so used to the Bohemian Waxwings and Swamp Sparrows that by January, they weren't even being reported. Denver's "Tuesday Birders" found a Golden-crowned Sparrow in Waterton Canyon, which stayed into February. January had lots of Rusty Blackbirds in Longmont and Fort Collins, and an amazing six Great-tailed Grackles were found in Grand Junction by Coen Dexter.

The best part of operating the CBR is that each day is a potential "Christmas" with the possible gift of a rare bird being found. Such was the case on Saturday morning, February 6th, when Paul Opler called from Fort Collins to say that Kevin Cook had just refound an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull reported by Tom Gatz to Ron Ryder the day before. Christmas had arrived in February! This European gull was at Hamilton Reservoir, another power plant cooling lake, the only unfrozen body of water between Cheyenne and Boulder. The Lesser Black-backed Gull had the good sense to stay put for three weeks, allowing many birders from around the state a chance to closely study the second state record of this bird. On January 30th, Bill Howe had reported a sub-adult male Surf Scoter at Hamilton Reservoir, and by February 7th, birders looking for the gull had rediscovered this duck, as well as a female Black Scoter and a sub-adult male White-winged Scoter. With a Barrow's Goldeneye and all three Mergansers present also, some birders reported seeing every winter duck on the CFO checklist here with the exception of Harlequin Duck and Oldsquaw. The three scoters were seen all month, but not always without difficulty as they dived in white caps raised by the frequent windstorms which often greeted visiting birders at Hamilton Reservoir.

Birders looking for a Brant at Lower Lathom Reservoir south of Greeley in February were truly on a Wild Goose Chase. This goose was found by Joe Mammoser and would hide in with flocks of up to several thousand Canada Geese, and was seen by only three other birders in the three weeks it was observed. The searchers didn't come away empty-handed however, as the Lower Lathom Wild Goose Chasers (as they were to be known) found all five species of geese ever recorded in Colorado, including both color phases of the Snow Goose.

March was a slow month except for one weekend where an unusual natural phenomenon occurred which caused a great concentration of gulls on some lakes in Boulder and other cities. The long cold winter had frozen lakes by late December, and they remained frozen with ice thickness exceeding a foot until early March. When the lakes finally thawed, it was discovered that much of the aquatic plant life had died over the winter, and many of the fish which depend on the oxygen that the plants supply had also died. The dead fish floated to the surface, and the gulls descended to feast. Dick Schottler and Bill Brockner were at Walden Pond in Boulder on March 12th looking for a Barrow's Goldeneye and a Glaucous Gull reported by Bill Kaempher, when they realized that the huge immature gull they were looking at was a Great Black-backed Gull! Although found only for the next

two days, Boulder played host to no less than seven gull species that weekend, including numerous Thayer's and Glaucous Gulls. Huge swarms of gulls were reported at Baseline Reservoir, Walden Pond, and Teller #5 Reservoir, all in Boulder, and at Prince #2 east of Boulder. I later found out that a reliable observer saw a Lesser Black-backed Gull in a large swarm of gulls at Duck Lake, South of Fort Collins on March 10th. The news media reported that huge fish kills at Jackson Reservoir in eastern Colorado attracted a record 64 Bald Eagles this same March weekend. Could these gulls and eagles have moved north with the "freeze line", hopping from lake to lake and feasting on the plentiful dead fish as each new lake thawed?

I would like to thank each person who reported a bird to the tape; you are the reason the CBR is such a success. I particularly like some of the regular reports I get to listen to on the tape, such as Dave Leatherman's. His skills include those of a master photographer who not only is an expert at identifying birds, but can also identify insects, herbs, and trees as well. Dave's reports always include several trees I couldn't identify without looking at my tree book. Dave has also perfected a master scheme for finding and reporting birds in Grandview Cemetery in Fort Collins. Evan Hannay gets the award for the best site descriptions when he submits a report. I can always go to the exact rock he was standing on when he saw the bird he's reporting. For the last year, Scott Seltman has successfully kept us informed on major migrational waves and interesting sighting in western Kansas. Scott correctly alerted us to last fall's unprecedented sparrow influx, and to two different Short-eared Owl waves. I am always delighted to get one of Scott's information-packed reports, not only because he is such an accomplished birder, but because he is doing such a great job of telling us what is happening way out east. Scott has proven to many of us that it is not true that if you travel east from Burlington, you will soon fall off the edge of the world.

A lot of birds that are reported on the tape are found on regular DFO field trips. The Tuesday Birders are also solid contributors from the Denver Area. Aiken Audubon in Colorado Springs has an official rare bird phone system operated by Cindy Lippincott and Toni Brevillier. If a good bird shows up, they call it into the tape, and conversely, I call them about rarities elsewhere in the state. This system is also in effect with the active west slope birders, as well as those in Pueblo and Fort Collins.

So when you are out there minding your own business and out pops the first Black-shouldered Kite you have ever seen in your neighborhood, call 303-423-5582, and share your find with the rest of us.

RECORD COLORADO BIG DAY, SPRING 1987

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We awoke around 3:00 a.m. and met outside our motel rooms. Bill stated, "The cold front hasn't arrived yet." We had been watching a cold front for three days as it slowly moved toward northern Colorado, and we predicted its arrival for May 17th, on a Sunday. We were trying to outguess the weather, which everyone knows is a tricky business, especially in eastern Colorado. Our hope was for an upslope of sorts to cause a fallout of birds for our Big Day 1987!

The purpose of a Big Day is well stated under the Big Day count rules prepared by the American Birding Association Rules Committee. It states that a Big Day count is a single team effort in which the primary objectives are (1) to identify as many bird species as possible during a single day, and (2) to strive to have all team members identify all species recorded.

Our Big Day team consisted of myself, Bill Prather and his son, John. Big Days have long been big events in eastern states as well as Texas and California, but have been rather slow to catch on in interior western states. This may be partly due to the fact that in these areas there are few or no "hot spots", areas where one can walk into the woods and see and hear 75 species in less than an hour. You have plenty of birds in a state like Colorado but they are very spread out. Our group figured that the optimum time to do a Big Day was spring, on any one day between May 14 and May 19.

Our team planned for this one-day effort for weeks in advance, making route changes according to the best spots that year, finding the best shorebird spots and checking lakes for the harder-to-find ducks and possible straggler species. We also pre-scouted mountain areas to see where the Dippers were nesting, to see if the Western Bluebirds had returned to the same meadow, and to check if Scrub Jays were going to be hard to find again. Every possible species was examined to see what the odds were of getting it on our route.

When I plan a Big Day, I divide all the species into four groups. Group A are birds which are easy to get and require no special plan, for example Mallard. Group B are also easy birds

that are guaranteed but do require a special plan or stop, for example Upland Sandpiper. Group C are birds that I feel we should get but can be tough either because they are localized on our route or because they might have just arrived in the spring. Examples of these are Golden Eagle (localized) and Blue Grosbeak (late spring arrival). Group D birds are those that we have only a 50/50 chance of adding on our route and so can't count on, for example Sage Thrasher. Some species that could be guaranteed are disregarded because they are simply too far off our route to take the time to add. We prefer to do a closer area where two or three species are possible rather than go off our route too far to get one guaranteed species. Although arguable, I feel it is better to start a Big Day in Colorado on the plains and end up in the mountains.

Our route was divided into five areas: three in the plains, one in the foothills, and the last area in the mountains. A time schedule was important and had to be followed; otherwise we would find ourselves running out of time towards the evening. I would literally have to tear the group away from some areas when the time was up.

Back on May 17, 1987, the cold front hadn't arrived yet. However, after calling in Eastern Screech Owls for species number one, the winds shifted and we could see the dark stormy clouds building towards the north. Here came our front! Would it help us or wipe us out? By the time we finished area number one, we could see that the front was helping us with shorebirds but not with songbirds. We easily found our pre-scouted Spotted, Least, Baird's and Stilt Sandpipers along with Long-billed Dowitchers and Wilson's Phalaropes, but to our surprise we also found Semipalmated Plover, Greater Yellowlegs and Pectoral Sandpiper. We hadn't found any of these three on our pre-scout days. We also saw harder to find stakeouts such as Black-crowned Night-Heron, Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal, Canvasback, Common Nighthawk, Bank Swallow, and Bobolink. Here we found all but two of the fifteen duck species that we saw on our Big Day, missing only Ring-necked Duck and Bufflehead. The only real miss at area one was Common Barn Owl and we already had 86 species as we headed out.

After a gasoline stop, we headed west into the prairies for more stakeout stops. We easily found Ferruginous Hawk, Golden Eagle, Burrowing Owl, Rock Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, Brewer's Sparrow and both McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs. At a localized riparian area, we had an impressive list of residents and migrants. We had our best fallout of the day here as we got

Least Flycatcher, Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Gray Catbird, Lincoln's Sparrow, and a Red-eyed Vireo that John turned up. But our rarest bird of the day we all practically stepped on--a Whip-poor-will, seen well twice by all of us. The C.F.O. Records Committee has been sent details of this bird. We had no misses at all in area two and we left there with 113 species.

Next we headed southward for area three, which is mainly a long series of small to large lakes. At this point, we were all in good spirits. We were even more hopeful when, on our first stop, we turned up both Snowy and Cattle Egrets and just a short while later were looking at Black-necked Stilts and Red-necked Phalaropes. All four of these species were excellent Big Day birds. Our stakeouts went well as we tabbed Pied-billed Grebe, White-faced Ibis, Bufflehead, Lewis' Woodpecker, Marsh Wren and Savannah Sparrow. One miss was a Northern Harrier. We also missed a staked out Indigo Bunting because of a hard rainstorm in the area. We left area three at 2:15 p.m. with 127 species.

Then we hit area four and we were in for harder times. The same cold front that helped us on the plains hurt us in the mountains. Area four is in the foothills and covers from about 6000-7000' in elevation. Bird species were getting to be hard to find. It wasn't raining or snowing but it was cold and the birds were quiet and not very active. Finding our stakeouts in area four was tough and took extra time. We had a hard time even finding a Lazuli Bunting! However, we did find White-throated Swift, American Dipper, Virginia's Warbler and Evening Grosbeak. Some stakeouts missed were Scrub Jay, Canyon Wren and Indigo Bunting. We left area four about 4:30 p.m. with 143 species.

Area number five, our mountain area, started out in what seemed to be a footrace. We ran back across a golf course to add a Song Sparrow to our list (while they were playing golf!), then we raced back to our vehicle. I'm not sure who won the footrace but we added Song Sparrow, a bird that we missed last year. We also found American Crow and Common Raven in this same area. Birds were still inactive and hard to find in area five. Bill knew exactly where the hole was in a tree where Western Bluebirds were nesting and there we saw a female sitting at the entrance hole. We would have missed it otherwise. Stakeouts found in area five were Ring-necked Duck, Red-naped Sapsucker, Western Tanager, Fox and White-crowned Sparrows, and Cassin's Finch. We also found Wilson's Warbler and Pine Grosbeak, surprises which we did not really expect to get. Stakeouts missed here were Williamson's Sapsucker, Hammond's and Dusky Flycatchers, and White-breasted Nuthatch. We also found out that it was possible

to miss a Townsend's Solitaire on a Big Day. We left area five with 161 species which topped our state record of 160 set on May 15, 1986. After dark, on our way home, we heard Sora, Virginia Rail, and Poorwill to finish at 164 species. We also tried for American Bittern and Great Egret after dark but failed. Our Big Day started at 3:00 a.m. and ended 20 hours later at 11:00 p.m.

Why do people do Big Days? Challenge, fun, something to do, and to see how many birds you can get are a few of the reasons that I've heard so far. This certainly isn't the sort of thing that every birder enjoys doing. It's a whole day of constant motion (19 to 24 hours), eating while driving, keeping track of a time schedule and a check list, and planning every stop, though adding and taking away stops as the day goes on according to birding needs. You look for team members who are as dedicated to this marathon as you and I've been fortunate to find two excellent team members. They are very skilled, alert and know their bird songs. Indeed, it often seems that it's more of a goal to hear birds than to actually see them on a Big Day. Also, a good Big Day driver is important. He must know every stop and road on the route. A good driver like Bill can manage to make good time when we get behind and also make things exciting along the way!

The question comes up--How many species can one really get on a Big Day in eastern Colorado? I believe that on a fallout day in mid-May, it would be possible to get 175-185 species on our route. It is arguable, but I think that a group in southern Colorado could get even more. Our route has no Pinyon-Juniper habitat, nor do we get any desert birds that are possible in southeastern Colorado.

I'm glad we only do one Big Day a year because they are truly exhausting for everyone involved. They certainly have their rewards as well as humor, as when I tried to help Bill (the driver) open his Pepsi, while driving 60 m.p.h. down a gravel road, while no one held the wheel!

Birds missed that we expected to find were Western Sandpiper, Common Barn Owl, Williamson's Sapsucker, Western Flycatcher, Gray Jay, White-breasted Nuthatch, Canyon Wren, Townsend's Solitaire and Indigo Bunting.

Birds not expected, but found, were Cattle Egret, Black-necked Stilt, Whip-poor-will, Eastern Phoebe, Red-eyed Vireo, Wilson's Warbler and Pine Grosbeak.

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C.F.O. WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN FIELD TRIP 2/20/88

Bill Prather
13810 Weld County Rd. 1
Longmont, CO 80501

Four C.F.O. members gathered at Steve Bouricius' house in Peaceful Valley for the field trip. Steve provided some of his delicious coffee cake while we watched feeder birds such as Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches and "White-winged" Juncos just outside the windows.

After a short drive to the Brainard Lake trailhead, we were off on cross-country skis. The sky was clear above and the sun was out but strong winds blowing across the Divide filled the air with sparkling snowflakes. After traveling through the beautiful deep woods for a while, we stopped for food and water and were charmed by Gray Jays that took peanuts and grapes from our hands. Continuing on, we reached the willow carr at the west end of Brainard Lake. Here Steve instructed us to spread out and search.

A short time later, we found seven White-tailed Ptarmigans. We watched from a distance until the birds relaxed and began feeding again. Then we slowly moved closer. The birds allowed us to approach as close as 5-10 feet and we all savored watching them. We moved along with them for a time and observed as two of them quickly dug themselves into a soft snow drift up to their necks.

Later, back at the house, we watched more feeder birds and saw some of Steve's excellent bird pictures. One participant observed a Three-toed Woodpecker at close range before it quickly flew away. It was a fine day of birding and friends. We hope to see you on the next C.F.O. trip.

Species list:

White-tailed Ptarmigan	Black-capped Chickadee
Downy Woodpecker	Mountain Chickadee
Three-toed Woodpecker	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Gray Jay	White-breasted Nuthatch
Steller's Jay	Dark-eyed (white-winged) Junco
Clark's Nutcracker	

-----GENERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS-----

CFO/DMNH CLINICS

The Colorado Field Ornithologists and the Denver Museum of Natural History are sponsoring three weekend clinics in 1988. They are:

- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|---|
| -June 4 and 5 | Colorado Warblers | by Peter Gent,
president CFO |
| -Sept. 3 and 4 | Colorado Shorebirds | by Ronald Ryder,
professor
emeritus of
Biology, CSU |
| -Dec. 10 and 11 | Colorado Hawks | by Brian Wheeler,
illustrator
of the new
Peterson's
<u>A Field Guide</u>
<u>to Hawks</u> |

All clinics will consist of a half day presentation at the Denver Museum of Natural History in City Park, Denver on Saturday followed by field trips to local areas on Sunday.

The first clinic will be aimed at beginning and inexperienced birdwatchers and will concentrate on Colorado's breeding warblers. On Saturday, June 4, the presentation at the Museum will be from 1:00-5:00 p.m. On Sunday, June 5, the field trip will be from 6:00-12:00 a.m. visiting Barr Lake and/or Wheatridge Greenbelt. For further details, call either the Denver Museum of Natural History at 370-6353 or Peter Gent at 494-1750.

-----CONVENTION ANNOUNCEMENT-----

1988 C.F.O. ANNUAL CONVENTION

The 1988 Colorado Field Ornithologist's Annual Convention will be held during Memorial Day weekend, May 28-30 in southeastern Colorado. The convention will begin at Lamar Community College in Lamar on Saturday, May 28. For those arriving early, there will be field trips on Saturday morning to the Two Buttes area south of Lamar and to the reservoirs in the Lamar area. The paper session will begin at 1:30 p.m. on Saturday and the afternoon activities will conclude with a business meeting. The first day's activities will close with a banquet on Saturday evening.

Sunday will feature all-day field trips in Baca County. We will explore both the east and west portions of the Dry Cimarron River and we will go into the Cottonwood Canyon area in the afternoon. Monday will feature further birding in the morning in Cottonwood Canyon and will close with a trip to the mesa country south of Kim where we will try to find nesting Hepatic Tanagers.

Southeastern Colorado is a treasure store of unusual Colorado birds and many typical "southwestern" birds breed here. Besides Hepatic Tanager, we will look for Mississippi Kite, Scaled Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Cassin's Kingbird, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Chihuahuan Raven, Curve-billed Thrasher, Brown Towhee, and Grasshopper, Cassin's, and Rufous-crowned Sparrows. One should feel confident that most of these species will be seen on the field trips. As always, part of the excitement of birding this unique Colorado area is the real possibility of finding rarities. Please plan to join us for what should be a very exciting birding experience.

Dormitory housing will be available at Lamar Community College on Friday and Saturday nights at a cost of \$6.00 per night per person. Sunday night will feature camping and owling in Cottonwood Canyon for those who wish, or overnight stays at Springfield motels. The registration fee for the convention is \$5.00 and the banquet will cost an additional \$10.00 per person.

Further details and a registration form will be mailed soon. It will be important to make housing and banquet reservations prior to May 13th. Call Vic Zerbi at 303-945-6017 for additional information.

C.F.O. Journal Back Issues Available

Toni Brevillier sends word that she has copies of many back issues of the C.F.O. Journal. There are very few of some of these issues available and many are out of print. Availability is on a first-come first-served basis. This is a great chance to fill in gaps in your collection or to read some of the recent history in Colorado birdwatching. She has the following volumes and numbers on hand (those not listed are not available):

#10 Nov 1971 (oversize)
 #11 Mar 1972 (oversize)
 #12 Jun 1972 (oversize)
 #13 Sep 1972 (oversize)
 #14 Dec 1972 (oversize)
 #16 Jun 1973 (oversize)
 #17 Sep 1973 (oversize)
 #18 Dec 1973 (oversize)

#29 Winter 1977
 #30 Summer 1977
 #31 Fall 1977
 #32 Winter 1978
 #33 Spring 1978
 #34 Summer 1978

Vol 12 #4 Fall 1978

Vol 13 #1 Winter 1979

" #2 Spring 1979

" #3 Summer 1979

" #4 Fall 1979

Vol 14 #1 Winter 1980

" #2 Spring 1980

" #3 Summer 1980

" #4 Fall 1980

Vol 15 #1 Winter 1981

" #2 Spring 1981

" #3 Summer 1981

" #4 Fall/Winter 1981

Vol 16 #1 Spring 1982

" #2 Summer 1982

" #3 Fall 1982

" #4 Winter 1982

Vol 17 #1 Spring 1983

" #2 Summer 1983

" #3 Fall 1983

" #4 Winter 1983

Vol 18 #1 Spring 1984

" #2 Summer 1984

" #3 Fall 1984

" #4 Winter 1984

Vol 19 #1/#2 Spring/Summer 1985

" #3 Fall 1985

" #4 Winter 1986

Vol 20 #1 Spring 1986

" #2 Summer 1986

" #3/#4 Fall/Winter 1986

Vol 21 #1 Spring 1987

" #2 Summer 1987

" #3/#4 Fall/Winter 1987

---Back issues #10 through #34 are available at a cost of \$3.00/issue. All others listed are available at a cost of \$2.50/issue.

---Please include postage of \$1.00 each for the oversize issues (#10 through #18) and \$.50 each for all others.

Make checks payable to C.F.O. at:

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