

Since I've returned from Madagascar, I've had a mammalwatching itch that I've attempted to scratch. The addition of a thermal scanner to my gear arsenal has been great, and I've been on a few productive night hikes and drives since. I need a more powerful flashlight and camera to photograph these animals at night, however. Something to look forward to! Here are the results of my birding and mammalwatching adventures in Nebraska and Colorado.

- Tuesday, March 17

- I left LaGuardia very early and arrived in Denver around 10:00 am MDT. After securing my rental car from ACE, I drove northeast to the Pawnee National Grassland. Following [this](#) informational packet, I took the 21-mile dirt-road route through the patchwork of state, national, and private lands, searching for mammals and birds. I was fortunate to spot two different herds of **Pronghorn** (*Antilocapra americana*) in the distance. I saw five bird species: hundreds of horned larks (*Eremophila alpestris*), a flock of European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), a few western meadowlarks (*Sturnella neglecta*), a pair of killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*), and one ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*). It was a lovely drive!



- This might be a good location for a long drive with the thermal scanner, but I wasn't staying nearby, so I continued to North Platte, NE. There are very few, if any, accommodations in the area, but I'm assuming this means that more wildlife may be present. The drive to Nebraska was easy along I-70, and I checked into my simple room at the Days Inn by Wyndham for the night.

- Wednesday, March 18
  - I woke up around 5 am to join my tour group at the North Platte Visitor Center. After parking our cars, we loaded onto the Dusty Trails bus and waited to be briefed by our tour leader, Dusty. He has lived in this area his entire life and knows the land intimately. His company began leading horseback riding tours, and soon diversified into bird tours. Even though thousands of sandhill cranes pass over the town every year, I was surprised to learn that Dusty was the first to start running tours. Soon, he began taking people to a greater prairie-chicken lek. This is why I had come to Nebraska. I'm not sure where I first learned about these beautiful animals, but ever since, I have wanted to see them in the wild. Surveying Google Maps satellite data, it seems there are very few suitable habitats for these animals. I do not think these people realize how special this place is, and I hope that these tours will encourage preservation of the area and an economic infusion into the region.
  - Dusty has quite the setup! We drove 45 minutes west from North Platte and went onto some private lands in Sutherland, NE. We arrived at the lek, or ceremonial mating ground, of the prairie-chickens before they arrived, pre-dawn. While Dusty and his wife assembled photo blinds for some of the other clients, I silently cursed myself for not bringing my thermal scanner out into the dark. He had said that there were badgers and other predators of the prairie-chickens out in this habitat, a big target species for me! Anyway, after the blinds were assembled, we loaded into one of the two bus blind setups that Dusty has created. They are perfectly positioned so that, while looking out one side of the bus, you can watch the male chickens dance. All the seats have been removed, replaced with stools, and counters installed on the lek-facing side. There are two port-o-potties outside for your use as well.
  - As the sun rose and we all silently settled into our seats, seven male greater prairie-chickens (*Tympanuchus cupido*) came careening into view. Their lek was on top of an active prairie dog town, though it was too early for any prairie potato activity. We watched the male chickens dance for about three hours as they tried to get the attention of the two females that came into the lek. The males truly transform themselves when they are dancing. Their pinnate feathers that look like ears stand straight up off their necks, their bright orange throat sacks inflate, they stick their tails up in the air, and quickly stomp their feet in a little area of the lek. Accompanied by the dawn chorus of western meadowlarks and horned larks, we could loudly hear the "booming" calls of the male prairie-chickens. It was an amazing experience, and even though I started to get a little bored at the end, I almost hoped we had stayed longer to see the prairie dogs wake up.
  - Regardless, we quickly and quietly unloaded from the bus blinds and loaded back into the transport bus. Our tour leaders started the engine, spooking the birds, and disassembled the photo blinds. All of the photographers loaded up their equipment and got onto the bus. Dusty informed us that other tour companies will stay until the birds leave the lek naturally in the middle of the day and that if he were to do this, he would have to set up a griddle and feed the tour

members. The granola bars and coffee sufficed for me in the morning. As we left the lek, I was happy to see more chickens fly over the road in the direction we had just come from.



- We continued to the Sutherland Reservoir to look for some aquatic birds as Dusty imparted his agricultural and ranching knowledge to us. Distant pelicans and cormorants were not particularly interesting, unfortunately. Dusty told us how the region's industrial history has created the ponds and reservoirs that serve as wildlife management areas that line the interstate. The water table is only about three feet below the topsoil, and as this layer is dredged up to create an interstate overpass, a pond forms from the groundwater. After the dirt is removed from the small tract of private land, riparian habitats form, attracting birds and wildlife. They are probably conservation easements for these companies, but I don't know for certain - an interesting dynamic nonetheless.
- Upon returning to the visitor center, I was trying to figure out what to do with the rest of the day. I need to charge my camera battery, and I wanted to download and upload my pictures. I stopped into the kitschy Fort Cody Trading Post and Museum and looked for souvenirs before returning to my hotel room to relax. I soon got back on the road and went for a hike at Lake McConaughy State Park. The terrain in this part of the state surprised me, with slot canyons and pines on rolling hills. I came here hoping for a prairie dog town, but did not find one. I did see 10 bird species, but no lifers. More effort in looking at waterfowl might've produced one, but I did not bother.
- I drove back to North Platte on county back roads, hoping to stumble upon a prairie dog town on the side of the road, but had no luck. This was a little discouraging as Dusty said that they were "all over the place," but I had seen them on the side of the road near the Denver Airport, so I knew I'd have another chance for pictures. I decided to spend the evening at the North Platte City Sandhill Crane Viewing Blind along the North Platte River. On the road over, I saw an **eastern fox squirrel** (*Sciurus niger*).



- This wooden shack proved pretty productive for counting migration, and I saw over 3,200 sandhill cranes fly past, plus 9 other bird species. A white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) came to see what we were up to before dark. After dark, more than 200 sandhill cranes noisily landed along the river. The sound of their honking and squeaking was a little overwhelming, and even though it wasn't as big as some other natural spectacles, this was pretty exciting for me. I would highly recommend this for any other budget wildlife travelers.



- I was tired after a long day, but I only had one more night with the rental car and wanted to find some nocturnal mammals. After a quick dinner, I took a drive down Canal Rd with my thermal, and even though I did not get any pictures, I had a productive night: two raccoons, a Virginia opossum, two unidentified rodents (one large, one smaller), and a hopping kangaroo rat. I underestimated how long this road was and how slow I was driving, and decided to head back to the hotel. This is a very sparsely populated region of the country: I saw no other cars on the road, only a few houses, and heard one dog barking at my intrusions. With more effort, this road probably would've produced some lifers.

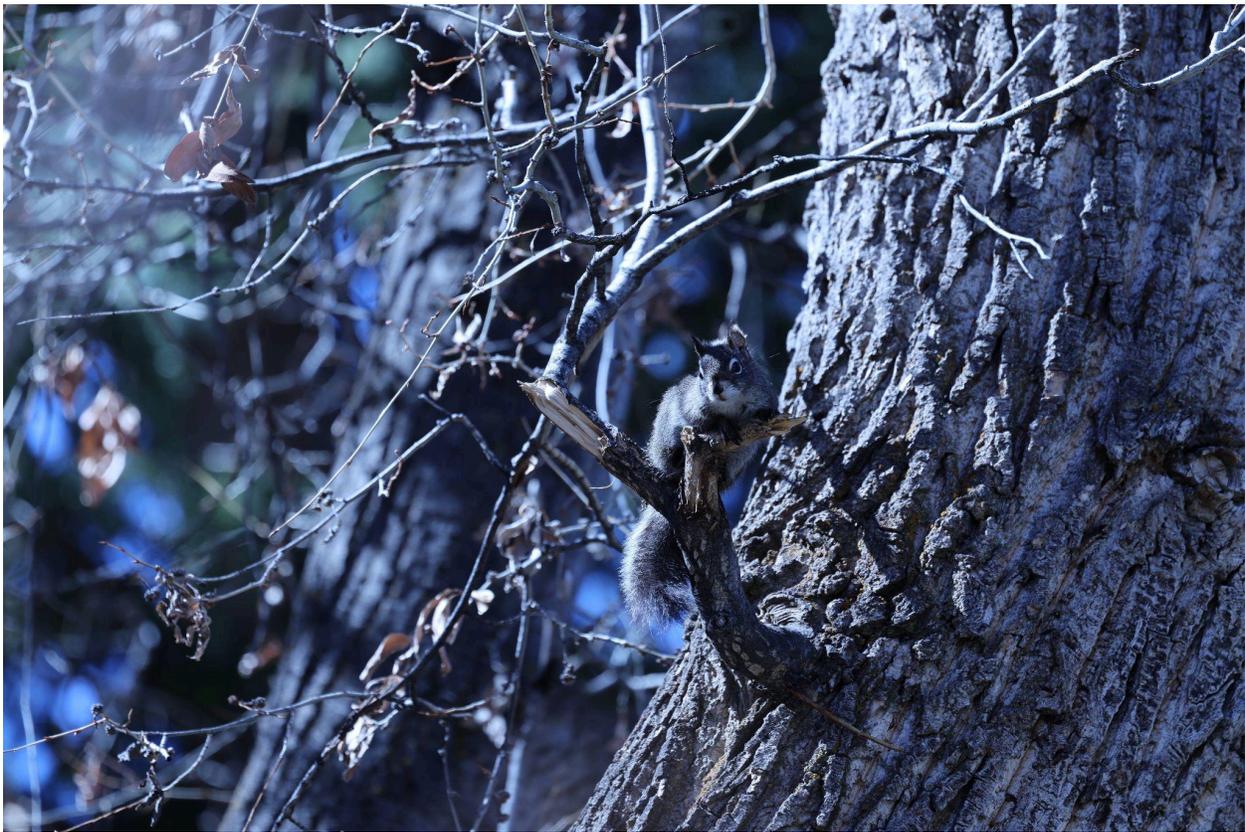
- Thursday, March 19
  - I woke up pretty early and hit the road back to Denver. North Platte is right on the border of mountain and central time, and in the past three days, I had gone back and forth across this line, so I was a little messed up with what time it was. Regardless, I made it back in time to go to Barr Lake State Park in Brighton, CO, and take some pictures of the **black-tailed prairie dogs** (*Cynomys ludovicianus*).



- The rest of the day was spent settling into my hotel room in Denver and interacting with people at the American Association of Biological Anthropologists meeting. Lots of talk of wild primates, but no wild mammals were seen.
- Friday, March 20
  - Before going back to more meetings at the AABA conference, I took a walk around the Denver Zoo Conservation Alliance. People had told me there were Aye-ayes, and yet I still missed them. I was happily surprised to see two orangutans hanging in trees in their enclosures. I was also there in time to see the Asian elephants get fed. I still love zoos, but frankly, mammal watching is much more exciting than viewing captive animals.



- Saturday, March 21
  - Last day at AABA! I shared my poster presentation on my ring-tailed lemur research from Ivohiboro, Madagascar, this past August. I am very proud to continue working at this place for my PhD.
- Sunday, March 22
  - After landing late Saturday and securing the rental car, my dad and I drove from Denver to his friend's place in Aspen. He is retired but really into photography and let me use his camera for the next few days. We took a walk with his dogs to the nearby Glory Hole Park where I spotted 7 bird species including including two lifers: Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*) and Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*), and an **Fremont's Squirrel** (*Tamiasciurus fremonti*). We then rented our skis, had dinner, and relaxed.



- Monday, March 23
  - After one of the most mild winters in modern history, the skiing prospects in March were not particularly high. Nevertheless, my dad and I spent the morning on Ajax mountain in the town of Aspen hitting the slopes. After lunch, I took the car out for a scenic drive hoping to see any critters but did not find any. Then, a friend and I headed to Difficult Campground and took a walk. No mammals were spotted but we did see 5 different bird species including a lifer American dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*). We got back in the car just as it was starting to rain and headed back to Aspen. Later, my dad and I had a great time seeing Gary Clark Jr. perform at the Belly Up.

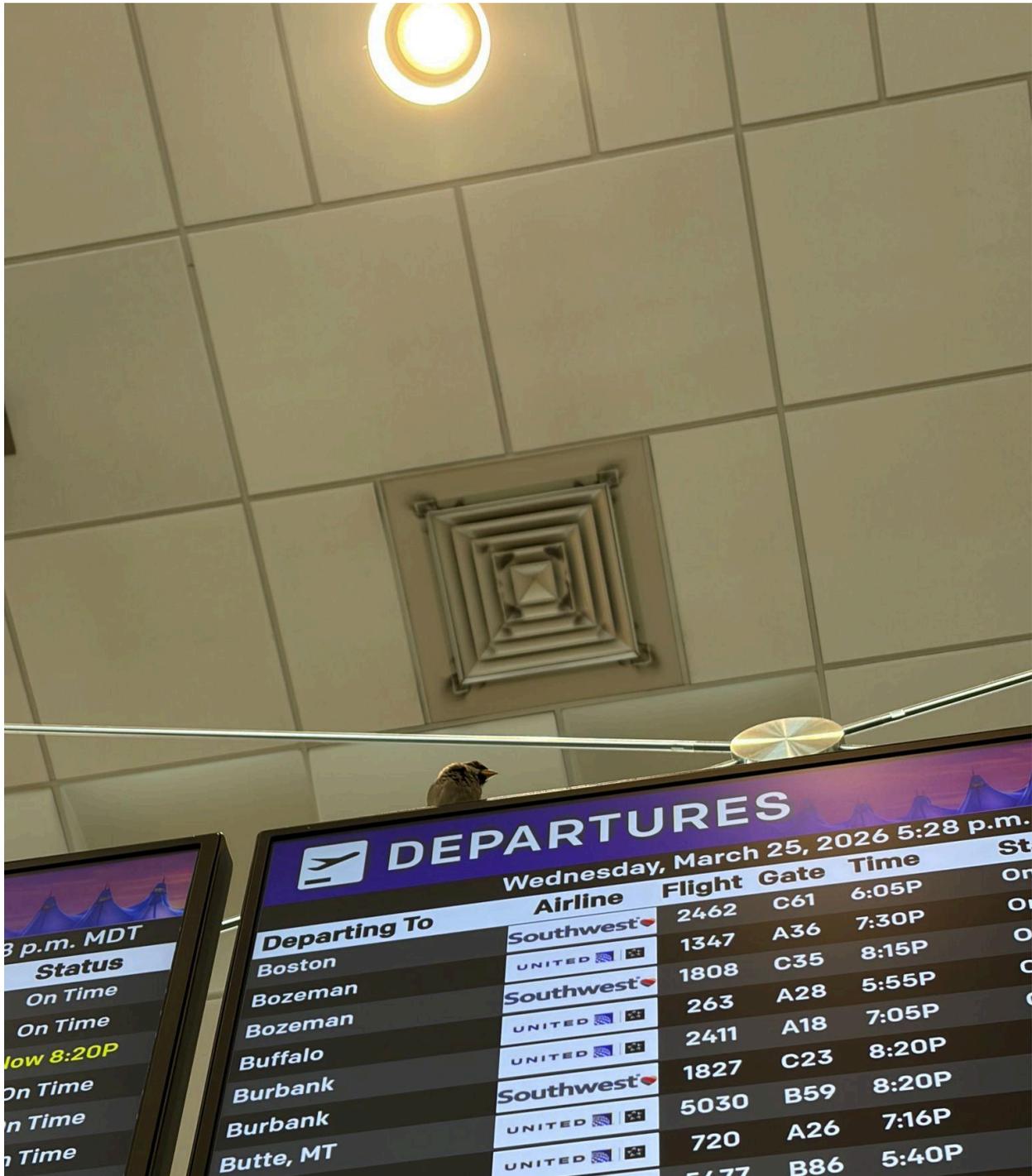
- Tuesday, March 24
  - Today I had hoped to do a longer hike at the Arbaney Kittle Trail outside the town of Basalt, but as we were leaving the house we noticed our rental car had a bad flat tire. My dad graciously dealt with the rental car company who was not very flexible and we ended up renting a new one from a different company. After all this, we ended up just walking through Aspen to the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, a protected area outside of town. A herd of **Mule Deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus*) welcomed us to the small preserve. I spotted 16 bird species on the walk including some lifer pygmy nuthatches (*Sitta pygmaea*) at the bird feeders.



- Wednesday, March 25
  - Our host told us that elk are typically seen on Owl Creek Rd on the way to Snowmass so after we packed up our bags and said goodbye, we took the scenic route out of Aspen to look for the herd. Although we did not see the elk, I spotted a **Common Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel** (*Callospermophilus lateralis*) hanging out under a transformer box and was able to get pictures. We then continued towards Denver, stopping in the town of Frisco for lunch. Then, we took a small walk at Apex Park in Golden, Colorado, where I



saw no mammals but might've if I had more time, and 4 bird species including a lifer bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*). We made it to the Denver airport with plenty of time to relax before boarding and returning to NYC. A house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) inside the terminal wished a safe flight and more luck mammalwatching in the northeast this spring.



Bird lifers:



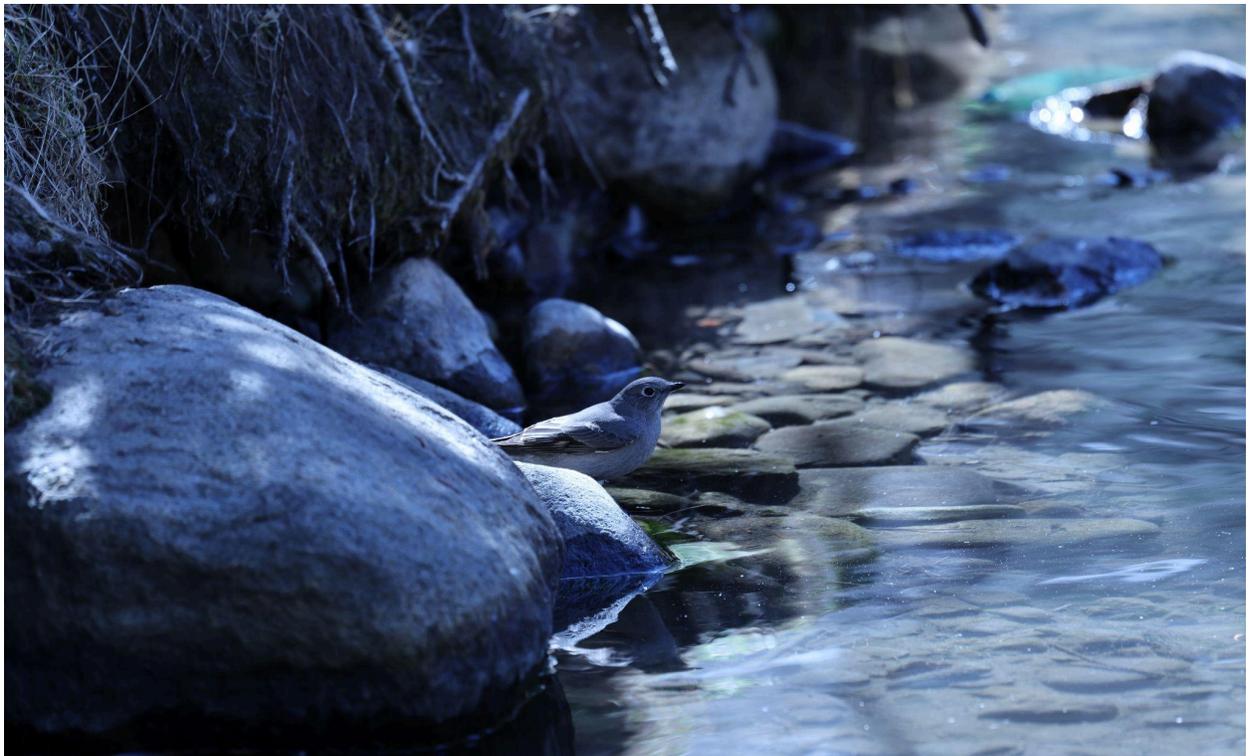
Western Meadowlark



Ferruginous Hawk



Male Greater Prairie-Chicken



Townsend's Solitaire



Steller's Jay



American Dipper



Pygmy nuthatch



Bushtit