

PAS Grant Award Recipient 2019

Young Birder Calvin age 13

ABA Camp Colorado

By Calvin Bonn



On July 27th, I began my first ever young birder camp and I was ecstatic! Thanks to a very generous grant from the Pasadena Audubon Society, I was able to attend the American Birding Association's (ABA) Camp Colorado this summer. Camp Colorado is a weeklong birding camp centered in Estes Park, Colorado - the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park. Twenty young birders were there in all, as well as five amazing staff; Jennie, Jake, Joel, Jordan, and Bill. We birded most mornings and the afternoons and evenings were devoted to various bird related activities. It was an amazing experience and I enjoyed every minute of it.

When I arrived at Denver International Airport, smiling, friendly faces and binoculared birders greeted me. I was a little apprehensive at first, being both the youngest and the

smallest present, but within the first twenty minutes on the road, I had no problem fitting right in.

We spent a couple mornings birding in montane habitat, exploring areas of Rocky Mountain National Park. The highlight of these mornings was seeing *American dippers* - a lifer! This was an awesome experience as





the dippers were very close and put on quite the performance. We found the first dipper - a juvenile - after several fruitless searches at different creek viewpoints. This juvenile provided great views of it preening and eventually 'dipping' its body up and down, as if bobbing to an unheard rhythm. The show really started, however, when out of nowhere an adult dipper appears, and the juvenile begins to crazily flap its wings, screeching to be fed. The adult dipper complies, allowing us to watch it forage in the creek, diving into dangerous rapids, but always appearing again, safe and sound. The up-close performance

put on by these pair of dippers was one of the highlights of my trip.

We also had the opportunity to go birding with the editor of *Birding* magazine (the main publication of the ABA), Ted Floyd, in the foothills around Lyons, Colorado. Ted is an amazing birder and it was a great opportunity to be able to learn from him for a day. On a hike up Rabbit Mountain, we saw many singing lazuli buntings, blue grosbeaks, Bullock's orioles, and spotted towhees providing us great looks. We even caught glimpses of common nighthawks and canyon wrens! One of the cool things about Colorado is that it is at a confluence of both eastern and western birds, allowing for eastern and western kingbirds, lazuli and indigo buntings, and blue and Steller's jays to coexist. Because this brings some very similar birds in to contact where they otherwise don't usually, hybrids can occur. At Rabbit Mountain, we saw a lazuli x indigo bunting hybrid, which looked like a lazuli bunting, but with a slightly different shade of blue and only one bar of white in the wing.

When we got back to the YMCA of the Rockies in the afternoons, we had two days of afternoon workshops - sessions led by the staff to improve certain birding skills. I chose the field journaling/sketching workshop the first day, and we watched as a group of approximately twenty **violet-green swallows** laid on the ground. Joel and Jordan (our leaders for this activity) explained that field journaling is all about trying to answer questions about the natural world, so this group of swallows is the perfect opportunity - what the heck are they doing!? First, we write down the facts (a mixture of ages and sexes are lying on the ground, with some feathers splayed and/or wings open, and have their undersides tilted towards the Sun. Some have their mouths open.) Then, we write down theories to try and guess what they are doing (cooling off, anting, dust bathing, or warming up.) We then try to disprove each theory - they aren't actively flicking dust over their bodies (so they were not dust bathing), after they flew, we check to see if there are any ants (there aren't many) so they are not anting, if the ground is hot (it is) so they can't be cooling off. We eventually decide that they are probably sun bathing themselves to warm up, but it is totally possible that it is something different, which is okay if we don't get a conclusive answer - it's nature, it can't always be fit into neat yes/no answers. The second afternoon of workshops, I decided to do point counts. Point counts are a survey method used by researchers to document bird population and distribution. Our point counts were along a creek at the Y, where we saw 'gray-headed' dark-eyed juncos and a Hammond's flycatcher. I realized that I loved point counts during that session and left camp with new knowledge that I was eager to use at home.



The fourth day was the sixth annual Camp Colorado Challenge to try and see as many species of birds possible, and we went to Pawnee National Grassland! I was so excited when we got up bright and early to drive east to the Great Plains! I had dreamed of going there since I was little and couldn't wait to finally get there. As we got onto the prairie, I couldn't believe my eyes! There were miles and miles of rolling hills, grass as far as the eye could see. It was amazing and peaceful! We saw hawks, as we scanned the fields for mountain plovers, which would be a life bird, finding lots of horned larks instead. We also found lark buntings! This state bird of Colorado was a lifer for me and we saw them everywhere, in all plumages, from stark black-and-white males, to streaky females and juveniles with startling white wing bars. We moved on, finding distant specks that were identifiable as McCown's longspurs (lifer) only in flight with a mostly white tail. We saw tons of pronghorn antelope in fields with babies that could still beat us in a race. We got to a prairie dog town and saw **mountain plovers**! A whole family of these adorable sandy colored 'shorebirds', from the striking adults, that looked like bigger, yellower snowy plovers (which I have studied in California), to the cute chicks, who looked like speckled little puffballs on stilts. We watched them forage for a while with their very vigilant parents keeping a watchful eye on us. While we were there, we also saw a burrowing owl and grasshopper sparrows (lifer). As we watched, I was struck by the contrast between a grassland with prairie dogs, and a prairie dog free grassland, as both were visible on opposite sides of the road. In prairie dog grassland, the grass is shorter and sparser, which provides good habitat for McCown's longspurs and mountain plovers, while the burrows provide homes for burrowing owls, and the prairie dogs provide a food source for ferruginous hawks and prairie falcons. On the other side of the road, the grass was taller and lusher which provides ideal habitat for chestnut-collared longspurs.



The rest of the day was slower birding until we got to a small pothole pond. At the pond, we were overwhelmed by all the birds. There were shorebirds (American white pelicans, American avocets, lesser yellowlegs, killdeer, spotted sandpiper,



and Wilson's phalarope) all around. While we were identifying those already on the scene, an upland sandpiper struts by - lifer! A flock of about 30 passerines flies into the grass around the pond and we realize, based on their wedge of black on an otherwise white tail, that they chestnut-collared longspurs - another lifer! The sandpiper and longspur are sometimes missed by the camp in other years, with occasionally one or two longspurs seen, so to see them in these numbers was a rare treat! As we get ready to leave, a sage thrasher flies on to the fence by our van, providing amazing views! We drive back to camp to find some species around the Y campus, before making a final count - we saw 87 species! Even though I only saw 74 of them, and we didn't break the record, we still had an awesome day!

On the fifth day of camp, we went up into the alpine tundra! At 12,000 feet this is the highest point of our trip. We drove into Rocky Mountain NP for the day, headed up to Medicine Bow Curve to look for ptarmigan. We saw a moose in the valley below us as well as elk galore on the way up. We saw nesting horned larks, American pipits, and white-crowned sparrows - birds that we usually see wintering in Southern California. Here they are calling and singing in all their glory. We took a close look at the tundra plants, some of which were only an inch high and yet fifty years old! This is a very hardy, yet fragile ecosystem. We scanned up and down the slopes for rock-shaped birds, and find bird-shaped rocks - no ptarmigan. We stop at Lava Cliffs and after an hour are rewarded by brown-capped rosy-finches - lifer! However, rosy-finches have extremely good camouflage, and even though they were dead-center in the scope, it still took me eight tries to successfully see them. They were very handsome birds and Joel was very knowledgeable about them as he had studied them for two years with Bird Conservancy of the Rockies. The next day, we decided to go back up to the alpine zone to try for ptarmigan again. This time we got lucky and were able to see a mother white-tailed ptarmigan and her chick -

lifer! They were so adorable, but I maintain that they still do look like rocks if they sit still. We were able to see good details however, and it is not an experience I am likely to forget anytime soon.

We headed down to the Alpine Visitor Center, where two friends and I decided to run up (and down) the nearly 200 ft of a mountain next to the visitor center on a long flight of stairs. We all came from sea level thinking, "Altitude, what's the big deal?" only to find ourselves huffing and puffing only about $\frac{1}{4}$ the way up. We eventually got to the top to find a raven waiting for us (not our preferred compensation, but still nice) only to realize that we had four minutes to get back down! We sprint down, and we make it with a minute to spare. We all pant the story out to the counselors, laughing, trying (and failing) to find oxygen to meet our demand and I tell you, by the end of the week, my lungs ached from a lack of oxygen due to the elevation and the never-ending laughter and jokes!

On the way back down the mountain, we stopped at Rainbow Curve to find Clark's nutcrackers. They were almost tame and we could see that at least two of the birds had bands on their legs, one of which we could read! It was appropriate that we saw banded birds, because later that day we watched a bird banding demonstration at the Y, where we were taught the process of banding birds and saw broad-tailed and rufous hummingbirds being banded. We got to release them and the ***broad-tailed hummingbird*** that I released did not stick around for long, and took off right away. It was an amazing experience.

The final activity that we did at camp was a Conservation and Career's roundtable. It was an opportunity to pick our counselors' brains about their experiences and how they got to have bird, conservation, or research jobs. I took advantage of this and learned many things about making connections in the birding world, putting yourself out there, and trying to take the first steps towards research jobs. It was extremely valuable.



The connections I made at Camp Colorado have made me more involved in the young birder community. I learned about opportunities in bird conservation and steps to get there. I made lots of friends and had an overall great time. The birding was AMAZING!! I saw 118 bird species over the week, 16 of which were lifers.

It was an unforgettable experience as my first young birder camp, and I loved every minute of it! A big thank you to the Pasadena Audubon Society and the ABA for making this possible.