

Highlights from March 16 Outing for Raptors and Waterfowl of Adams County

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Chuck Aid

March 19, 2019



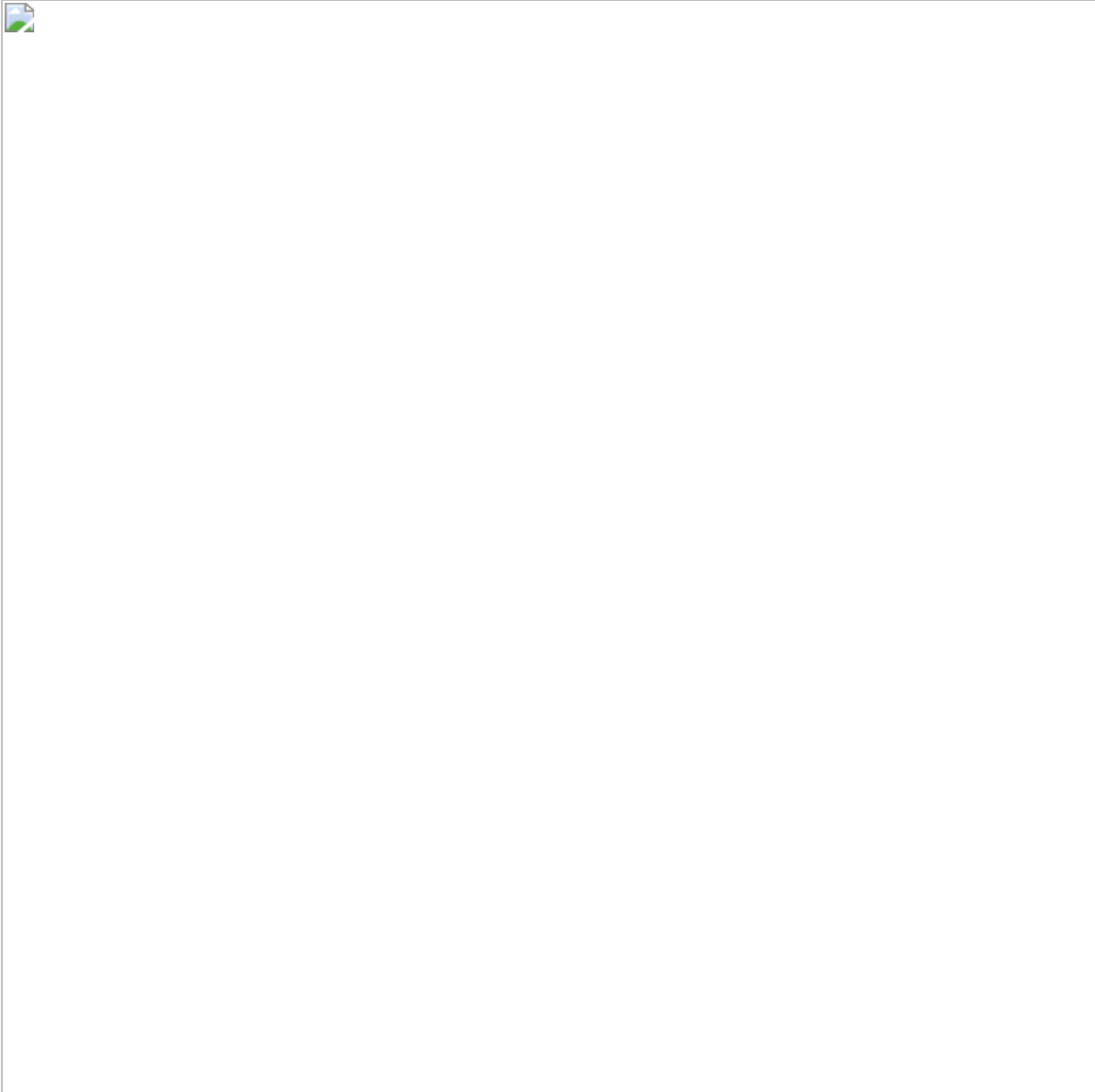
Northern Harrier – female (c) Mick Thompson

This was a great morning with two fairly distinct objectives: raptors and waterfowl. For the raptors we primarily explored the Black-tailed Prairie Dog towns along 112th Ave between Chambers and Gun Club Roads. The dogs were quite active, and we had good numbers of Red-tailed Hawks, Ferruginous Hawks, and Bald Eagles hanging around in the vicinity.



American Kestrel – male (c) Mick Thompson

Here in Colorado, wintering Ferruginous Hawks feed primarily on prairie dogs. Other raptors, then, in a game called kleptoparasitism, try and see if they can either steal all or part of the recently acquired meal. This can make for some real mayhem, as other birds try and take advantage of all the distractions and opportunities. It can get quite chaotic with up to four or five raptor species vying for one food item with the Black-billed Magpies looking for their fair share.



Ferruginous Hawk – adult (c) Bill Schmoker

Ferruginous Hawks are our largest Buteo (soaring hawk), looking rather broad-shouldered, and weighing up to 3.5 lbs. In contrast a Red-tailed Hawk weighs only 2.4 lbs with a slightly slimmer profile. In looking closely you'll notice the Ferruginous' huge bill, accentuated by its long "gape" – the portion of the mouth extending back into the head, allowing for a larger mouth opening. Also, you'll notice its large feet compared to other Buteos. In flight they have rather distinctively long, tapered wings. As with all our raptors, there's a lot to learn because plumages vary between light and dark morph individuals, as well as between juveniles and adults.



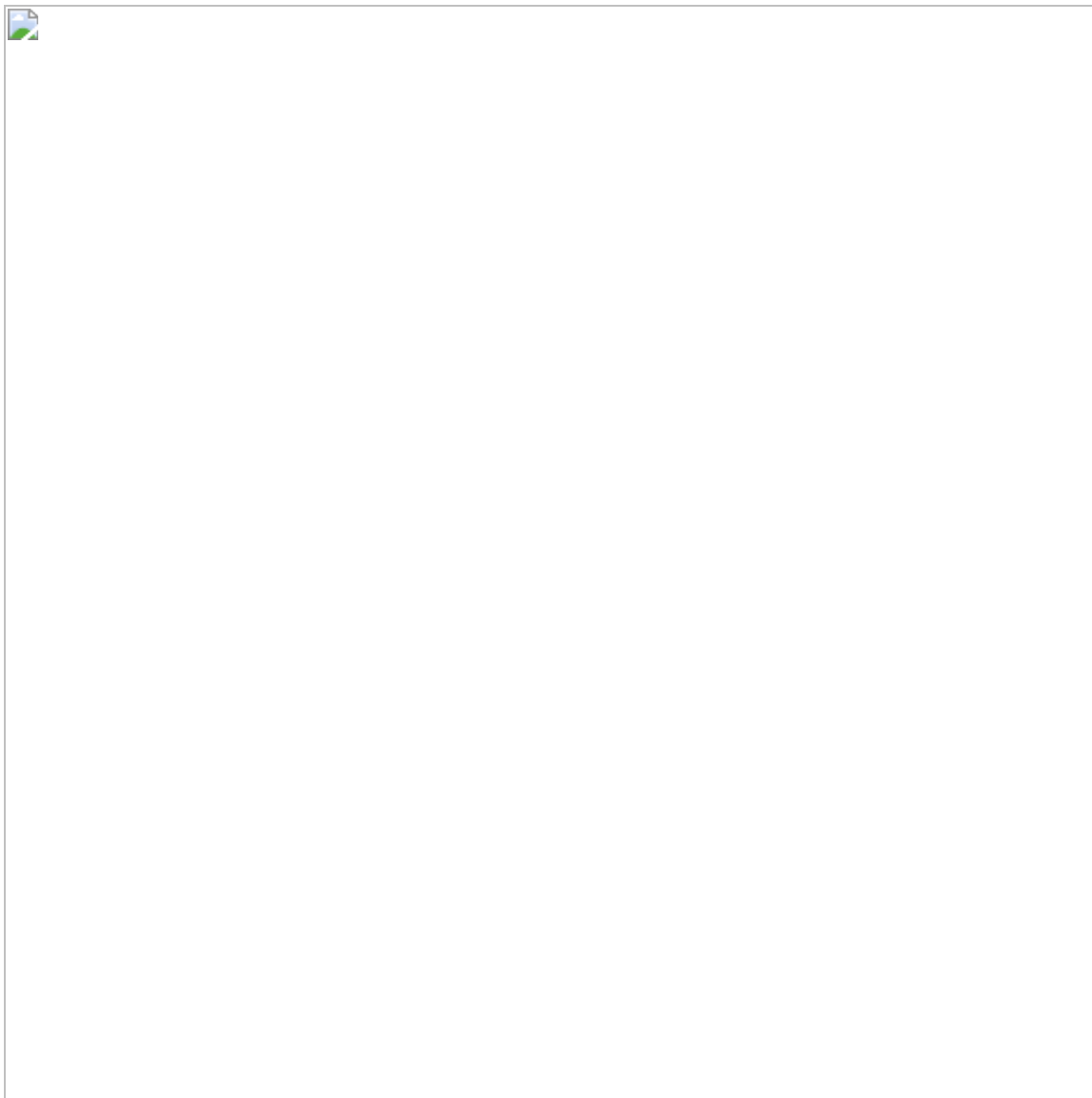
Horned Grebe – winter plumage (c) Mick Thompson

As for the waterfowl portion of our day, we made a brief visit to one of the gravel-pit lakes adjacent to the South Platte just north of 88th Ave. Here we had a good variety of birds, four of which deserve special mention. First, as far as I'm concerned, any day you see a Red-breasted Merganser is a great day, and we saw three males and two females. Then, we had both Horned and Eared Grebes. In mid-winter distinguishing between these two can provide a nice challenge for the neophyte birder. Fortunately for us the Horned Grebes were still in their non-breeding, winter plumage (flat-topped head, dark cap meeting all-white cheek in a clean line, straight bill, white front to the thick neck), while the Eared Grebes were well on their way to acquiring their breeding plumage (pointed, all black head with wispy yellow ear plumes; thin black neck; thin up-turned bill; and often very fluffy-butted).



Eared Grebe molting into breeding plumage (c) Bill Schmoker

Finally, the bird of the day was a winter-plumage Red-throated Loon. This is our smallest loon, about the same size as a Western Grebe, though with longer wings and a much shorter neck. The wintering adult has a distinctive white face and neck with a narrow, up-turned bill; and when sitting on the water generally has visible white flanks and a lighter back than any of the other winter loons. A truly great way to conclude our outing – a life-bird for more than one person.



Red-throated Loon (c) Rick Leinen

Spring migration is upon us. Mountain Bluebirds are being seen in the Evergreen area, and down on the eastern plains Swainson's Hawks should be starting to show up any day now – certainly by April first.

Good birding, Chuck

Adams County, March 16, 2019

37 species

Canada Goose 170

Northern Shoveler 180

Gadwall 4

Mallard 2

Redhead 5

Lesser Scaup 9

Bufflehead 6
Common Goldeneye 5
Red-breasted Merganser 5
Ruddy Duck 50
Pied-billed Grebe 1
Horned Grebe 4
Eared Grebe 3
American Coot 12
Ring-billed Gull 1
Red-throated Loon 1
Double-crested Cormorant 2
Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) 60
Eurasian Collared-Dove 1
Killdeer 2
Northern Harrier 3
Bald Eagle 8
Red-tailed Hawk 16
Ferruginous Hawk 7
Great Horned Owl 1
Northern Flicker 2
American Kestrel 1
Black-billed Magpie 11
American Crow 1
American Robin 2
Horned Lark 17
European Starling 3
White-crowned Sparrow 1
Western Meadowlark 10
Red-winged Blackbird 92
Brewer's Blackbird 14
House Sparrow 10