

Highlights from our Beginner Bird Walk to the Wheat Ridge Greenbelt, April 17, 2021

Chuck Aid. April 18, 2021 :

Green-winged Teal (c) Mick Thompson

Spring has sprung. The grass has riz. I wonder where the birdies is. Well, on Saturday the answer to that was the Wheat Ridge Greenbelt. The chilly Spring morning was perfect for the birds, and it helped keep the bicyclists to a minimum, so we weren't getting run over. We eased our beginning class into action by working on the dabbling ducks in Clear Creek, starting with Gadwall, Mallards, and Green-winged Teal. The Gadwall were our most abundant ducks of the morning, and we focused on the black rump patch of the male, his black bill, her orange and black bill, and the white secondary flight feathers of both that can often show up as a small white patch on the flank when the birds are swimming or just hanging out. On the swimming Mallards we noted the white horizontal tail feathers (buffy in the female), and his black rump and black curly tail feather. The Green-winged Teal were spectacular, the male having a dark chestnut head with a green swoop behind the eye, a vertical white bar at the shoulder, and a pale-yellow patch on the rump. We were fortunate to see the green secondary flight feathers several times in both the male and female (aka drake and hen).



Cinnamon Teal (c) Mick Thompson

Moving on, things quickly got more complicated as we saw a pair of Hooded Mergansers and an American Dipper. The Dipper is North America's only aquatic songbird and is always a special treat. We also enjoyed lots of good looks at Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal. While most of the ducks we see in the Denver area are here primarily in the winter, these two teal are only here in the breeding season, the Cinnamons arriving in early March, and the Blue-wings a couple of weeks later. There were a few diving ducks, including a small group of handsome black, gray, and white Ring-necked Ducks. These guys are poorly named as the ring on their neck is almost never seen, and they have a number of far more easily discerned features, including a multi-stripped bill, a black "English riding saddle" on the back, a white vertical "spur" on the shoulder, and a pointy head. Finishing up with the waterfowl, we noted that the dark, slate-gray American Coot with its white bill, is not a duck, but is more closely related to cranes and rails. The bill is not spatulate, as with the ducks, but is conical, and the feet are not webbed, but instead have lobed toes which help it to swim.

Eastern Phoebe (c) Bill Schmoker

A few other high points were provided by a group of Snowy Egrets that were coursing up and down Clear Creek. Their "golden slippers" being quite evident. And we saw a pair of Black-crowned Night-

Hérons. These large-headed, short-necked, stocky herons don't fit our usual perception of herons as something long and elegantly attenuated, and their large red eyes can be a bit startling. Finally, "the bird of the day" was an Eastern Phoebe. This is a flycatcher of eastern North America that is an unusual find in Colorado. There are always some seen here in the eastern part of the state each year, but it's not a common occurrence. We noted its black head, its long black, wagging tail, its white throat and belly, and the light gray streaking on its breast.

Spring migration is really underway! Get out and enjoy it!

Chuck

Wheat Ridge Greenbelt, Apr 17, 2021 (10 participants)

36 species

Canada Goose 12

Wood Duck 1

Blue-winged Teal 12

Cinnamon Teal 6

Northern Shoveler 13

Gadwall 28

Mallard 18

Green-winged Teal 17

Ring-necked Duck 4

Bufflehead 8

Hooded Merganser 2

Pied-billed Grebe 1

Eurasian Collared-Dove 1

Mourning Dove 2

American Coot 6

Wilson's Snipe 1

Ring-billed Gull 4

Double-crested Cormorant 8

Snowy Egret 5

Black-crowned Night-Heron 2

Red-tailed Hawk 1

Belted Kingfisher 2

Downy Woodpecker 2

Northern Flicker 2

Eastern Phoebe 1

Black-billed Magpie 4

American Crow 2

Black-capped Chickadee 12

Tree Swallow 3
Barn Swallow 2
American Dipper 1
American Robin 10
House Finch 6
Vesper Sparrow 1
Song Sparrow 9
Red-winged Blackbird 23

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