

Highlights from Bird Walk to the South Platte River – Commerce City, Mar 20, 2021

Chuck Aid. March 26, 2021 :



Cackling Goose (c) Bill Schmoker

The South Platte River below the Wastewater Treatment Plant in Commerce City can be a great place to get close looks at waterfowl, particularly in mid-winter when reservoirs freeze over and birds are seeking open water. The warm effluent can help the Platte to be one of the few places around that provides this attractive feature. Now, at the onset of Spring, the reservoirs have opened up again, and though the concentration of birds on the river is not what it was six weeks ago, it can still be pretty good. But first, what did we fail to see? For starters, we struck out on Cackling Geese. These guys generally arrive in Colorado in large numbers around the beginning of November, and then around mid-March they begin to start heading back north and are pretty much gone by mid-April. So, they should still be around, but perhaps in diminished numbers. We also missed a few duck species (Northern Pintail, Redhead, Bufflehead, and Common Merganser) that can generally be counted on along the river, but for some reason we missed out.



Barrow's Goldeneye pair (c) Mick Thompson

Despite those ducks we missed, we did find eleven other species, the highlight being a beautiful male Barrow's Goldeneye with his fleeting bluish-purple head color. He was accompanied by a female that looked suspiciously like a Barrow's, but I just couldn't be confident about that identification – definitely a nemesis identification problem for me – telling a female Common Goldeneye from a Barrow's. What we did see was that our mystery female had a steep forehead, and a bill that was about half yellow. A female Common Goldeneye has a very sloping forehead and only the outer fourth of her bill is generally yellow. The trouble is that these two features, forehead and bill color, can be variable. One minute a forehead appears steep and the next minute it can look more sloped, and there is known variation in the amount of yellow in the bills of these two species.



Horned Grebe – winter plumage (c) Bill Schmoker

Another problematic identification was presented by a Horned Grebe. These guys and the similar Eared Grebe have strikingly different plumages during breeding season. However, in the non-breeding season they are a bit tricky to tell apart, and then in the transitional molt to breeding plumage things can sometimes be even crazier. Our bird on Saturday definitely fit into this latter category. However, we were fortunate to get a good long look, albeit from a bit of a distance, but we could discern a few key features – a flat head that was slightly higher towards the rear; a bright red eye; a straight, slightly stout bill; a white chin; and a lot of white down the front of the neck. It is the head and bill shape and the amount of white in the neck that leads us to the Horned Grebe identification. A couple of more subtle features were that the back was only slightly humped, whereas an Eared Grebe can look very fluffy-buttled (what Sibley refers to as having a “high-stern shape”). Also, a Horned Grebe looks heavier-headed and thicker-necked than the more delicate Eared Grebe with its thinner neck and needle-like, slightly upturned bill.



Western Meadowlark (c) Mick Thompson

We did leave, at the very end of our walk, with one more unresolved identification of two birds that quite possibly could have been a pair of Green-tailed Towhees. These would have been a rare find in the area we were in, but not an impossibility, and, in fact, there were a couple of reports of a Green-tailed Towhee in Commerce City back in January and February. Only one person in our group got to see them, so as is often the case, we ended up not having been able to resolve with total clarity all of the bird identification problems presented to us. Which, of course, is why we have to go out there again to see if we can find those rascals.

Things are hopping! There's lots of courtship starting to happen! So, make sure to get out there and check it out!

Chuck

South Platte River – 78th and 64th,

Mar 20, 2021 (10 participants)

37 species

19 Canada Goose

2 Wood Duck

85 Northern Shoveler
260 Gadwall
16 American Wigeon
18 Mallard
73 Green-winged Teal
4 Ring-necked Duck
13 Lesser Scaup
39 Common Goldeneye
1 Barrow's Goldeneye
1 Common/Barrow's Goldeneye
1 Hooded Merganser
1 Pied-billed Grebe
1 Horned Grebe
9 Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon)
1 Eurasian Collared-Dove
187 American Coot
2 Killdeer
9 Ring-billed Gull
4 Double-crested Cormorant
1 Great Blue Heron
3 Black-crowned Night-Heron
1 Bald Eagle
7 Red-tailed Hawk
1 Belted Kingfisher
4 Northern Flicker
12 Black-billed Magpie
3 Black-capped Chickadee
32 European Starling
4 American Robin
1 House Sparrow
4 House Finch
12 White-crowned Sparrow (Gambel's)
5 Song Sparrow
1 Western Meadowlark
10 Red-winged Blackbird
14 Brewer's Blackbird