

Pawnee National Grassland, Colorado

Bird Photography Site Guide

Overview

Pawnee National Grassland is located in Weld County, Colorado. It is approximately 35 miles east of Fort Collins, CO, approximately 90 miles northeast of Denver, CO, and 65 miles southeast of Cheyenne, Wyoming. Pawnee is a 30 by 60 mile, 193,060 acre area that is intermixed public and private lands.

Pawnee is managed by Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests, one of 20 grasslands so administered. The land is public land with no entrance or other use fees other than camping at designated campgrounds.

The grasslands are a wonderful place to visit to see many species of birds, mammals and wildflowers. May and June are the best time of year to visit as the breeding birds are arriving and the wildflowers are in full bloom. Dawn and dusk are the best times of day to enjoy the area.

While the grasslands are in the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains, the weather can be somewhat unpredictable. Afternoon thunderstorms are likely and can produce high winds and large amounts of rain. A visitor should be prepared for these conditions upon arrival.

Getting to Pawnee National Grassland

Denver International (DEN) is the nearest airport for the long distance traveler. Cheyenne Airport is serviced by Great Lakes Airlines and by United Express.

From DEN, take I-70 west to exit number 279, then I-270 towards Ft. Collins. I-270 connects with I-25 in 4-5 miles. Take I-25 north 52 miles to Ft. Collins and State Highway 14. Travel 35 miles east of Fort Collins on SH 14 to County Road 77. Turn left (north) to the Crow Valley Campground. From there the visitor can travel on the county roads or take the Auto Tour that is detailed in the literature provided by the grasslands (see references for details).

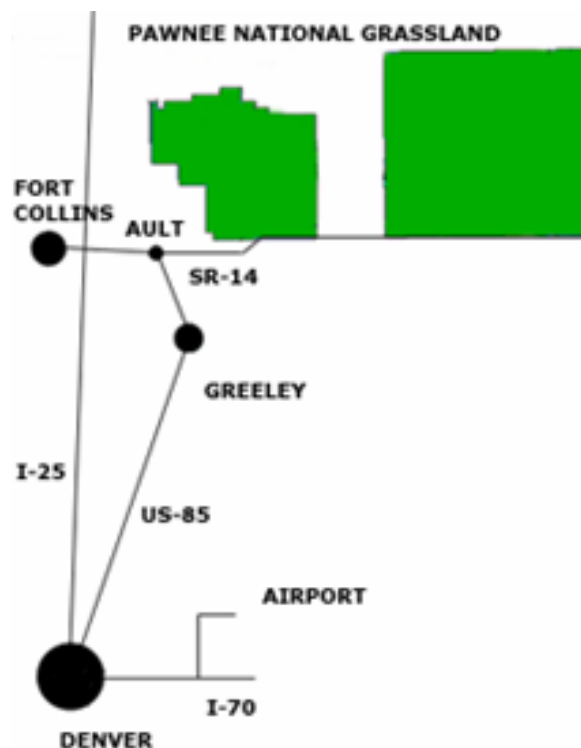
From Cheyenne Airport take I-25 south to Colorado State Highway 14 and go the same as above from Ft. Collins.

Access

Pawnee National Grassland is administered by the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests. The land is public land and there is no usage fee for the land.

Self-Guided Auto Tour

May and June is the prime time of year to visit Pawnee. While the rest of the year provides many opportunities they are fewer and less predictable. During late spring the birds are arriving and the wildflowers are in full bloom.



Advance information and brochures about the grasslands can be obtained by contacting:

- Pawnee National Grasslands, 660 "O" Street, Greeley, CO 80631
- Phone (970)353-5004
- <http://www.fs.fed.us/arnf/districts/png/>

The Greeley office is open during the week, but not on weekends, if you wish to pick up any information. Some information is also available at a host trailer at the Crow Valley campground.

In the packet of information you will receive a **Birding on the Pawnee by Automobile or Mountain Bike** brochure. Although in need of revising, this auto tour guide is paramount to the birding and photographic success of the visitor. The brochure covers 13 points of interest that include areas to see Loggerhead Shrikes, American Kestrels, and Mourning Doves. The next location of interest includes a spot known for breeding (and highly threatened) Mountain Plovers. Nesting Long-billed Curlews at location 3 etc.



There are areas designated on the map as requiring high clearance and/or four-wheel drive vehicles. There are times after a rain where this is essential. Even when the road looks at first as being passable it can turn treacherous at any time.

Photographing from your vehicle is probably the most effective way to go. Most of the county roads have barbed-wire fences with "natural" looking posts. The sagebrush provides opportunities to photograph birds on a more natural perch but requires patience and skill.

The grasslands have a variety of settings from county roads to open spaces. Longer glass is almost always necessary to obtain the best results. While shooting from your vehicle is most common, you may find a particularly cooperative species at one of the reservoirs on the site. This will require carrying equipment anywhere from a few feet to a half-mile. Most of the opportunities are within a half-mile from a road.

Light conditions at Pawnee are usually better in the mornings. The light quality is soft, fairly even illumination. Afternoons are very nice as well but the possibility for afternoon thunderstorms is always there.



The type of clothing needed will depend on the time of year and how much you will be getting out of your vehicle. While outside of your vehicle, you should wear long pants and boots or hiking shoes to protect from cactus. Also, there have been reports of rattlesnakes in the area so be prepared for them too.

The easiest subjects to photograph are the Lark Buntings and Western Kingbirds. They are on every fence and fencepost of the auto tour. Also readily available are Horned Larks as well as Loggerhead Shrikes. These birds are easily spooked and the best approach is to find an area where there is a heavy concentration of the birds and wait for them to return.

Crow Valley Campground

The Crow Valley Campground has two short birding trails: one on the south edge, and one at the northwest edge near the education area. The birding trail near the education area seems to offer the best variety of opportunities. We have seen Orchard Orioles and Brown Thrashers there in fairly good numbers.

Of Special Note

The Mountain Plover is considered a very highly threatened species. Research indicates human activity closer than 500 feet may disturb the birds. Disturbances from people wanting to get closer can drive an adult off the nest, and this may result in a destroyed generation due to sunlight heating the eggs.

The Crow Valley Campground can at times be crowded especially on weekends and particularly on holiday weekends. For the purpose of birding and bird photography it is best to avoid the campground at these times.

Briggsdale is the closest town to Pawnee but restaurants are nearly non-existent. Bring your own food and water. Ault is located 23 miles west of Pawnee and has a few restaurants.

Expected Species & Site Specialties

The Pawnee National Grasslands has an online birding checklist located at:

- <http://www.fs.fed.us/arnf/districts/png/nature-viewing/bird-chcklst.htm>

When to Visit

May and June is the prime time of year to visit Pawnee. While the rest of the year provides many opportunities they are fewer and less predictable. During late spring the birds are arriving and the wildflowers are in full bloom. Raptors are most plentiful during winter.

There is a Renaissance Festival at the Crow Valley campground during Memorial Day weekend. There are hundreds of people in the campground making it difficult to get through the campground or find parking.

Places to Stay Nearby

The nearest town with motels is Ft. Collins, 35 miles west of Pawnee. Super 8, Motel 6, and Days Inn are just west of I-25 on Highway 14.

Crow Valley campground is at the heart of the grasslands. The fee for the family campground is \$8/unit/night for a single or \$12/unit/night for a double. Facilities include tables, fire rings, drinking water, and toilets. Campsites are available on a first-come, first-serve basis; no advance reservations can be made.

Weather

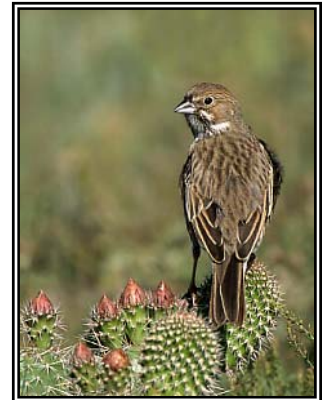
While May and June is the best time of year to visit, the weather is also the most unpredictable. A visitor can literally experience all four seasons in a single day. It is wise to be prepared for snow even in June. It can go from sunny and 65 to snow and below freezing within a few hours. Typically the temperatures are 65-80 during the day and 35-45 at night.

Afternoon thunderstorms are the norm with high winds and hail possible. Mornings are typically calm and sunny.

Summer temperatures will reach into the 100's during the day. Winter temperatures range between -20 and 70.

Local Resources

Pawnee, located close to Briggsdale, Colorado, is a small farming and ranching community. There is one local grocery store. The visitor might be lucky enough to get batteries but film isn't likely at this local store. Ft. Collins, 40 miles west of Pawnee, is the



closest city large enough to have photographic supplies. Western Camera is located at 230 S College Ave, Fort Collins, CO 80524; phone: (970) 482-8448.

Safety Issues

Winter weather can be severely cold and summer weather can bring on heat exhaustion. Being prepared for extremes in weather is very important.

Rattlesnakes are present most times during the year.

Usual precautions should be taken to protect photo equipment and other personal belongings. The risk to persons is minimal. Having a cell phone is always a good idea. Cell service is available while on the grasslands and the Crow Valley campground.



There are areas of private property where people are shooting guns. This activity can be seen from the county roads and should be avoided. Confrontations with these individuals should be avoided (obviously).

Other Nearby Opportunities

Pawnee Buttes is located 13 miles east of the grasslands. This location is spectacular for scenic and mammalian wildlife and has nesting Great Horned Owls, Prairie Falcons, Cliff Swallows, and Rock Wrens.

Directions: Head west out of Briggsdale on Colorado Highway 14 for 13 miles to Weld County Road 103. (This is the "Keota Turnoff.") Follow Weld County 103 north for 4.8 miles, following the signs for Pawnee Buttes. You'll be going north for 3 miles on Weld County 105 to a "T" intersection with Weld County 104. Head east on 104 for 3 miles, then go north on Weld County 111 for 4 miles to the Buttes Trailhead turnoff. The trailhead is 1 mile from this last intersection.

References & Resources

- *Planning Your Visit to the Pawnee National Grasslands* - US Forest Service
- *Birding on the Pawnee by Automobile or Mountain Bike* - US Department of Agriculture
- *A Birders Guide to Colorado*, Harold Holt, American Birding Association, 1997
- Pawnee Website:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/arnf/districts/png/index.htm>
- http://gorp.com/gorp/resource/US_National_Forest/CO_PAWNE.htm
- http://gorp.com/gorp/publishers/fulcrum/hik_gra2.htm
- The Colorado Field Ornithologists: <http://www.cfo-link.org/>
- Colorado Audubon on Pawnee National Grassland:
<http://www.auduboncolorado.org/IBA/46.htm>
- Colorado Rare Bid Alert: (303) 659-8750
- Recent posts to the Colorado bird mailing list can be viewed at:
<http://birdingonthe.net/maillinglists/COLO.html>

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