



## COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS - Birding Sites in Mesa County

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**County Seat:** Grand Junction

**Size:** 3,309 square miles

**Low Elevation:** 4,320 ft. - Colorado River on the UT border

**High Elevation:** 11,236 ft. - Leon Peak

**Best Birds:** Lawrence's Goldfinch (2007), Broad-billed Hummingbird (2002)

**Introduction:** Home to Grand Junction, the largest city on the West Slope, and Colorado National Monument, one of its most famous birding spots, Mesa County is a major destination for birders. It contains the best-known and most accessible locations for specialty species including Chukar, Gray Vireo, Black-throated Sparrow and Scott's Oriole. In addition it has a few decent-sized lakes and montane habitats ranging all the way up to spruce-fir. This is an area no visitor should pass up!

### **Cheney Reservoir**

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** An irrigation water storage reservoir, this oasis in the desert between Grand Junction and Delta at the western base of the Grand Mesa attracts a wide array of waterfowl, shorebirds, and other water-loving birds, particularly during spring and fall migration. The surrounding desert of saltbush-greasewood and low hills hide the reservoir from view until you get there. The wash below the dam has some mature cottonwoods, and the lakeshore has scattered patches of willow and, unfortunately, tamarisk. Birds you could see here are Gambel's Quail, Yellow Warbler, Bullock's Oriole, Greater Sandhill Crane, most any duck known to migrate through western Colorado valleys, herons, egrets, grebes, ibises, sandpipers, yellowlegs, curlews, snipe, etc.

The road from US 50 can become nearly impassable when wet, even with 4-wheel drive. The shale-derived soils in the area can be pretty greasy, but since this area, often referred to locally as "the stinking desert" really is a desert, greasy is a somewhat rare condition. A convenience store with gasoline at Whitewater can provide you with the basics; beyond that, Grand Junction and Delta are your best bets for lodging and dining. The Cheney Reservoir turnoff from US 50 is perhaps a mile or two closer to Grand Junction than Delta.

**Habitat:** Reservoir, Sagebrush, Lowland Riparian, Tamarisk

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** From the junction of US 50 and CO 141 just south of Whitewater (10 miles SE of Grand Junction on US 50), proceed 9.75 miles southeast on US 50. Look for an unmarked BLM dirt road/gate in the fence on the left (east) side of highway at milepost 51. Turn left (east, toward the Grand Mesa) and go 1.5 miles to Cheney Reservoir. The primary dam and lands downstream private; most of the rest of the shoreline is on BLM land. The main access road passes through private land and this notice does not give the public permission to enter; please respect private property.

**Delorme:** 55 A6

**Roads of Colorado:** 81 F4

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## **Coal Canyon**

**Aliases:** Cameo

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** A side canyon to the Colorado River's DeBeque Canyon along I-70 between Palisade and DeBeque, Coal Canyon is an off-the-beaten path destination that's very close to the beaten path. You'll pass next to a coal-burning power plant and a coal mine to get to this canyon characterized by open pinyon-juniper woodland and the lower end of mountain shrublands such as mountain mahogany, sagebrush, and serviceberry on more northerly slopes in the canyon. Expect to find Chukar, Lazuli Bunting, Black-Throated Sparrow, Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, Rock Wren, and perhaps some wild horses and Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. The nearest gas, convenience store, and restaurant is one mile east on I-70 at exit 47, the Island Acres State Park exit, where camping is also available. Food, lodging, and wineries are available in the Palisade area, exits 42 and 44.

**Habitat:** Pinyon-Juniper Forest, Foothill Shrub

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** Take I-70 to DeBeque Canyon between Palisade and DeBeque; get off at Cameo, Exit 46, drive toward the XCEL Energy Co. power plant and cross the Colorado River, the railroad, and pass beyond the power plant complex for about a mile to a parking area at a gate which limits vehicle access from Dec. 1 to June 1. Hike from here up Coal Canyon, or go north on another road, gated year-round, through a saddle into Main Canyon.

**Delorme:** 43 C6

**Roads of Colorado:** 81 F2

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## **Colorado National Monument (eBird Hotspot)**

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** The monument's stunning red sandstone cliffs and canyons can be seen to the southwest from downtown Grand Junction. A variety of diverse habitats ornament the monument's cliffs and canyons, including pinyon/juniper, sage, and riparian. Many of the pinyon/juniper species can be easily found in all seasons; Pinyon Jay, Juniper Titmouse, and Bewick's Wren. In late spring and summer look for Peregrine Falcon, Ash-throated and Gray Flycatchers, Gray Vireo, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and Black-throated Sparrow. Golden Eagle and Peregrine Falcon are resident, and Gray Vireo is common in the bottom of the canyons that open up into Grand Valley. Good and varied birding at all seasons. The west entrance of the monument has a wonderful visitor center, which is stuffed with all kinds of interesting natural history items, including checklists. Read more about Colorado National Monument [here](#).

**Habitat:** Pinyon-Juniper Forest, Cliff Face, Sagebrush

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** Westbound on I-70, take Exit 31 to East Entrance. From the off ramp turn left onto Horizon

Drive for about one mile to a roundabout, exit the roundabout onto southbound 12th Street, and drive for two miles. Turn right on Grand Avenue for another two miles, cross over the viaduct and the Colorado River, and take the first left turn past the bridge. Stay on Monument Road for three miles to monument entrance. Eastbound on 1-70, take Exit 19 at Fruita to West Entrance. From the off ramp turn right on Colorado 340 for about three miles to the entrance station. Campgrounds are located in this vicinity, as well as excellent views of the surrounding valley floor. The main park road is the historic, paved, 23-mile Rim Rock Drive. A self-guided nature trail and 13 backcountry trails offer birding options. A printable travel guide is available at <http://www.nps.gov/colm>, and the phone number is 970-858-3617.

**Delorme:** 42 D3

**Roads of Colorado:** 81 D2-D3

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### **Colorado River State Park (James M. Robb) (eBird Hotspot)**

**Aliases:** James M. Robb, Connected Lakes State Park, Island Acres State Park, Corn Lake State Park, Colorado River Wildlife Area, Fruita State Park, Lucy Ferril Ela Wildlife Sanctuary

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** Many species can be found at all times of the year. The trails lead to interesting riparian areas and small lakes. During migration it would not be unusual to record over 100 species in a day, and during winter over 60 species of birds might be found during a day's outing. Many unusual birds have been found in the park; for example, Green Heron, Least Tern, Lesser Nighthawk, Eastern Kingbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Indigo Bunting have all been seen here. Gambel's Quail and Western Screech-Owl are common year round, although the owl is more challenging to locate than the quail. Birding along this park system will always produce pleasant surprises no matter what time of year. Best seasons for birding: All year, night and day.

**Habitat:** Lowland Riparian, Stream

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** This state park extends almost the length of Mesa County, stretching along the river for 30 miles from DeBeque Canyon west to Fruita. The park is actually comprised of smaller parks; ½ Island Acres (43 C6), Corn Lake (43 D5), Colorado River Wildlife Area (43 D4), Connected Lakes (42 D3), Fruita (42 C2)-- most of them connected by a trail-and-bike-path system. Lucy Ferril Ela Wildlife Sanctuary is located near the Connected Lakes segment of the park. Although Grand Junction is the hub for this river park, there are many access points. Camping is available at Island Acres (along the Colorado River in DeBeque Canyon northeast of Palisade) and the Fruita unit (on the Colorado River just south of Fruita). An e-mail to [colorado.river.park@state.co.us](mailto:colorado.river.park@state.co.us), or a phone call to 970-434- 3388 will answer most questions.

**Delorme:** 42 C2, 43 C6

**Roads of Colorado:** 81 D2-F2

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## **Divide Road on the Uncompahgre Plateau**

**Aliases:** Casto Reservoir, Uncompahgre Plateau

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** From the Divide Road, many side roads and trails access the various habitats, which include pinyon/juniper, Gambel oak, ponderosa pine, aspen, and spruce/fir at the highest elevation. Dusky Grouse, Northern Goshawk, Flammulated Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Common Poorwill, Purple Martin, Grace's Warbler, and Fox Sparrow nest in the forest habitats, and Casto Reservoir supports large populations of nesting waterfowl and grebes. Peregrine Falcons love to hunt here. In August and early September, large mixed flocks of migrating passerines use this landmass as a staging area for their flights farther to the south. When traveling onto the plateau, start with a full tank of gas, good maps, the basic emergency supplies, and sufficient food and water—there are no services. The Divide Road is graveled, but might not be passable until late May due to mud, snow, and locked gates. Camping is available in several no-fee Uncompahgre National Forest campgrounds on a first-come, first-served basis. Delta, Grand Junction, and Montrose are the best bets for traveler needs, such as food, gasoline, and comfortable beds.

**Habitat:** Pinyon-Juniper Forest, Scrub Oak Forest, Ponderosa Forest, Aspen Grove, Spruce-Fir Forest

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** From Whitewater on US-50 southeast of Grand Junction, take Colorado 141 west for 15 miles. Turn left onto Divide Road (FR 402), switchback up the plateau, and continue to Montrose County. Casto Reservoir – take FR 403 three miles west. Divide Road stays on top of the plateau for most of its length, at times exceeding 9,000 feet elevation. Several interesting side roads lead off the plateau: Other high-clearance forest roads connect to highways in the valleys, but be aware of weather and road conditions before attempting them.

**Delorme:** 55 B4-D5

**Roads of Colorado:** 97 D1-D3

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## **Grand Mesa (eBird Hotspot)**

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** Straddles the Mesa-Delta county line, the western boundary about 20 miles east of Grand Junction. Due to the broad elevation range of the mesa, an excellent variety of birds can be expected. There are many interesting trails crisscrossing the mesa. In winter, many of these trails are groomed as excellent cross-country ski trails, allowing access to good birding areas. Target birds in winter include American Three-toed Woodpecker and White-winged Crossbill. Spring is a good time to see Dusky Grouse, and from March through May Boreal Owls are frequently detected. When the snow melts in early June, access is easier for finding the spruce/fir species. In fall, when the aspens are changing to golden yellow, birding for higher-elevation migrants can be excellent. Good and varied birding during all seasons.

**Habitat:** Mixed-Conifer Forest, Scrub Oak Forest, Aspen Grove, Spruce-Fir Forest, Mountain Meadow

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** Access is via Colorado 65, which traverses the 10,000-foot, flat-topped mountain north to south, between 1-70 Exit 49 and Colorado 92 just east of Delta and via the Lands End Road which leaves U. S. Highway 50 twelve miles southeast of Grand Junction. Grand Mesa National Forest campgrounds are open in summer, and lodging is available year round.

**Delorme:** 44 D1-D3

**Roads of Colorado:** 82 B2-B3

### **Highline Lake State Park (eBird Hotspot)**

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** Many rarities have been discovered at this reservoir over the years; Red-throated Loon, Red-necked Grebe, Hudsonian Godwit, and Red Knot are just a sampling. A park road skirts the full length of the west side of the reservoir and has parking areas with great views of the water. The park has a nice trail system, giving access to semi-desert shrublands. Good all year except in summer when the boaters outnumber the birds. The month of May can be exceptional if the lake has some muddy shoreline. The park has an exceptional campground. Mack Mesa Lake, a small lake at the north end of the park, often has interesting birds.

**Habitat:** Reservoir, Sagebrush, Lowland Riparian

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** Western Mesa County north of Loma. From the 1-70 Loma Exit take Colorado 139 six miles north to CR-Q, then west 1.2 miles to CR-11.8, which leads one mile north to the park. . For reservations and fee information e-mail the park at [highline.park@state.co.us](mailto:highline.park@state.co.us), or phone 970-858-7208.

**Delorme:** 42 B2

**Roads of Colorado:** 80 C1

### **Jerry Creek Reservoirs (eBird Hotspot)**

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** Two reservoirs that can be particularly interesting birding in fall and early winter when they host a wide variety of waterfowl and Bald Eagles. From mid-November through the winter (or until the lakes freeze over -- which rarely happens) it can be very interesting. During that period there is normally a flock of 20-30 Barrow's Goldeneyes, among a nice mixture of other ducks and geese as well as grebes and loons. Long-tailed Ducks have wintered in two of the past three years.

**Habitat:** Reservoir

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** From the recession of Colorado Highway 65 and 330 just north of the town of Mesa, go east on 330 1 mile, cross the bridge over Plateau Creek, and turn left into a small parking lot (restroom here). Park and hike up the trail a quarter-mile to the reservoir.

**Delorme:** 44 C1

**Roads of Colorado:** 82 B2

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## **Rabbit Valley and Brewster Ridge (eBird Hotspot)**

**Aliases:** Brewster Ridge

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** Perhaps the best high desert birding destination in western Colorado, this area is nearly in Utah! The canyons in the Rabbit Valley area south of I-70 lead to the Colorado River through scenic and varied terrain, while Brewster Ridge to the north takes you into the heart of the Grand Valley desert country that straddles the state line. Vegetation ranges from riparian along the river to saltbush-greasewood, sagebrush, and pinyon-juniper woodland and combinations of all the above. Rabbit Valley specialties include Gray Vireo, Black-Throated Sparrow, Pinyon Jay, Rock Wren, and Gray Flycatcher. More difficult to find to downright lucky are Chukar, Burrowing Owl, Long-billed Curlew, Cassin's Kingbird, and Mountain Plover. Brewster Ridge provides the best opportunities in Western Colorado for Scott's Oriole, and is probably the most reliable place in Mesa County for Northern Mockingbird. Pronghorn antelope, Ord's kangaroo rats, white-tailed prairie dogs, and leopard lizards add variety for visitors. Additional attractions in the Rabbit Valley area include petroglyphs in McDonald Canyon (along a two-mile trek to the Colorado River) and the "Trail Through Time" where you can see dinosaur fossils in place in the rock along the trail. Convenience store/gas stations are located in Mack and Loma, nine and 13 miles east respectively on I-70. Highline State Park north of Loma has a nice shady campground. For motels and restaurants, you'll need to go further east to Fruita and Grand Junction.

**Habitat:** Sagebrush, Pinyon-Juniper Forest,

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** Take I-70 west to Exit 2. For Rabbit Valley, turn left and go south, several different roads take you through the area. Four-wheel drive with decent clearance is recommended if you plan to go very far. For Brewster Ridge, turn right of I-70, then at the trailhead for the "Trail Through Time," turn left, paralleling I-70 as you climb a gravel road that tops out on a ridge above I-70. Begin looking here for Black-Throated Sparrow, then stay right into the scattered junipers and look for Scott's Oriole. If you don't spot orioles here, come back out of the juniper area and proceed north until you come to the paved M.8 Road (old US 6&50, the main road to get to Salt Lake, Reno, or Las Vegas before I-70 was built). Turn right (east) to 1.8 Road, turn left, and go a mile or so and turn right on 2 Road which takes you up Brewster Ridge. Once you reach the top, take 2.8 Road north out Brewster Ridge and look for Scott's Orioles near scattered junipers. You should be able to find a Mockingbird in this area as well. Four-wheel drive is not necessary for Brewster Ridge in dry conditions. All bets are off if there's been significant recent rain, or if you are receiving significant rain.

**Delorme:** 42 B1-C1

**Roads of Colorado:** 80 B1-B2

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## **Six and Fifty (6 &50) Reservoir**

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** A small desert reservoir in the middle of nowhere; however, in recent years it has been one of the few spots in Mesa County to find a migrating shorebird, particularly in the spring. In many years it is dry or almost dry by fall. Burrowing Owls can be a bonus for the area around the reservoir and along nearby 2.8 Road.

**Habitat:** Pond, Sagebrush

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** From Mack, drive west four miles on old Highway 6 and 50. A dirt road to the left leads to the reservoir in one quarter-mile. The water is visible from the highway.

**Delorme:** 42 C1

**Roads of Colorado:** 80 B1

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## **Unaweep Canyon**

**Aliases:** Cactus Park

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** A 40-mile drive, from Whitewater to Gateway that hosts nearly 100 species of breeding birds. Begin birding at the bridge over the Gunnison River last several mile after turning off Highway 50. A variety of ducks, swallows, and other water birds congregate here in season. Most of the lowland riparian species can be found in the cottonwoods along the river banks, including Blue Grosbeak, Yellow Warbler, and Bullock's Oriole. New gravel mines a half-mile west of the river promise to be hotspots once mining is complete and they are allowed to fill with water. About 2 miles from the highway a nice riparian strip of cottonwoods line East Creek; these are nice migrant trap, and cliffs across the creek host Canyon Wrens . The road then climbs up through sparse pinyon-juniper woodlands, which host the expected species during the breeding season including Gray Vireo and Ash-throated Flycatcher. After climbing the hill through the PJs, a pullout on the right offers an overlook of the creek; look and listen for Belted Kingfisher, Rough-winged Swallow, and Lesser Goldfinch here. Take a short side trip into Cactus Park for Sage Sparrow, Sage Thrasher, and Brewer Sparrow. The cliffs one half-mile west of the Cactus Park road host to colony of White-throated Swifts. A rich mid-elevation riparian zone extends a quarter-mile or so above and below the first bridge over East Creek. This strip is on BLM land; Cooper's Hawk, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Lazuli Bunting are regular breeders here. Eared Grebes, Canada Geese, and a variety of ducks nest at the two Ponds just west of Unaweep Divide, and Sandhill Cranes can frequently be found in the wetlands between these two ponds. Unaweep Seep is a lush mid-elevation riparian zone that hosts all of the expected species, Including Yellow-breasted Chat (the seep also hosts a nice variety of butterflies including California Sister and Nokomis Fritillary) home. The bridges over West Creek often have nesting American Dippers, and those at 6.7 Road may represent the lowest elevation Dipper nest site in the state. Near Gateway, the road reenters low elevation riparian, which here hosts Western Screech-Owl.

**Habitat:** Lowland Riparian, Cliff Face, Pinyon-Juniper Forest, Pond, Wet Meadow, Stream

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** Five miles south of Grand Junction on US Highway 50, turn southwest on Colorado Highway

141 and start birding.

**Delorme:** 55 A5-C1

**Roads of Colorado:** 81 E3-D4, 97 D1, 96 B1-C1

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### **Vega State Park and Reservoir (eBird Hotspot)**

**Ownership:** None Listed

**Description:** A large reservoir surrounded by aspen and Gambel oak. Rarities including Red-throated Loon, American Golden-Plover, Red Phalarope, and Eastern Phoebe have been found there in summer and fall. Best birding is when the water is low and the mudflats are extensive.

**Habitat:** Reservoir, Aspen Grove, Scrub Oak Forest

**Elevation:**

**Directions:** Situated on the north flank of Grand Mesa, 11 miles east of Collbran via Colorado Highway 330 and Mesa County Road 64.5. Vega has camping, a nature trail, picnic areas, and a loop drive around the reservoir. Call 970-487-3407 or e-mail [vega.park@state.co.us](mailto:vega.park@state.co.us).

**Delorme:** 44 C3

**Roads of Colorado:** 83 D1

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