

# ABOUT THE COVER

## Text and photographs by Bob Steele

Idaho has long been my “home away from home.” After we graduated from high school in Idaho Falls, my wife Susan and I met at college in northern Utah before settling in Kern County, California, in the early 1980s. Not long after, we got into birds—Susan with birding and I with photography. With family in Idaho, there have been many trips back at various times of year. Each time we venture north, we make side trips to various birding destinations, especially in southeastern Idaho. The photos on the May 2010 cover of *Birding* are all from one particular spring trip in May of 2008.

Idaho boasts an excellent mix of species—from the central Rocky Mountains in the north to the Great Basin lowlands in the south. More than 400 species have been recorded in the state. Idaho’s western edge borders the grasslands, farms, and mountains of eastern Washington and Oregon, while the eastern edge of the state has rugged mountain wilderness shared with Montana, Wyoming, and Yellowstone National Park. Down the middle and southern parts run two of North America’s great rivers—the Salmon and Snake. Idaho is a friendly place with plenty of public land for great birding. The Idaho Birding Trail <[tinyurl.com/2cz7ohw](http://tinyurl.com/2cz7ohw)> is an excellent introduction to birding in Idaho. Check out the website, and find information on bird species, birding locations, and other important resources for getting around the state.





1

This particular May trip had us in southeastern Idaho again, and we took the opportunity to visit **City of Rocks National Reserve** (main cover photo). City of Rocks is famous as a 19th-century pioneer landmark for settlers traveling west. Today it is also known for its scenery and for its world-class rock climbing features. City of Rocks is a worthwhile birding destination, with several breeders that are hard to find in much of Idaho—species such as **Virginia's Warbler** (gatefold, #2-middle) in riparian areas, along with Juniper Titmouse, Gray Flycatcher, and Plumbeous Vireo in the higher, drier pinyon-juniper woods. **Lazuli Buntings** (gatefold, #1-top) also flit amid the lush vegetation along stream edges.



2

Another side trip took us out to the Camas Prairie Centennial Marsh Wildlife Management Area for the incredible display of purple camas lily blooming in the flooded marsh and the abundance of breeding marsh and sagebrush avian species. The marsh has several good roads for access to great birding, allowing excellent viewing of breeding American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Wilson's Phalarope, Willet, Black Tern, Yellow-headed and Red-winged blackbirds, and numerous duck species. The roads around the edges of the marsh provided great birding for sagebrush and marsh edge species such as Long-billed Curlew, **Horned Lark** (gatefold, #3-bottom), Mountain Bluebird, Sage Thrasher, Western Meadowlark, and Brewer's and Vesper sparrows.



3

Songbird photography requires a number of different strategies and an array of photographic equipment. My current stock of lenses for songbirds includes Canon 600mm f4, 500mm f4, and 300mm f2.8 image stabilized lenses; 1D MkIV and 7D camera bodies; and the other requisite accompanying hardware like tripods and flashes. Often the key to getting close to songbirds is to hide yourself and have extreme patience. The Horned Lark on the cover, for example, would surely have flown away long before I could have walked up to it with a large lens. Instead, I crept slowly closer with my car, approaching to within 30 feet of the lark. Singing warblers can sometimes be photographed by observing a favored perch from a distance, then getting in a photographic blind near the spot, and waiting. Other songbirds—the Lazuli Bunting, for instance—will often fly a route to and from nesting and feeding areas, and they can be photographed well away from the nest by careful observation of the route and concealment in a strategic location.

Knowing your subject well will help tremendously with bird photography. The best bird photographers I know are all excellent birders. Solid understanding of avian status and distribution, bird behavior, and of course identification all go a long way to improving your skills as a bird photographer. It doesn't hurt to have an expert spotter along—like my wonderful wife Susan who often finds some great birds for me to photograph!

**B**ob Steele is a longtime resident of eastern Kern County, California—home to some great birds and birding. More of Bob's photography can be seen on his website <[bobsteelephoto.com](http://bobsteelephoto.com)>.