

January Program Review

By Tim Johnson

On Jan. 28, a large crowd braved newly fallen snow to attend David Leatherman's presentation *Natural Wonders of Southeastern Colorado*. Leatherman has lived in Colorado for more than 40 years. He is retired from the Colorado State Forest Service, where he served as the forest entomologist. His talk was a spirited celebration of the great biodiversity of this area, which encompasses roughly 10 counties.

Leatherman defined southeastern Colorado in the following way: draw a line on a map between Pueblo, CO and Kanorado, KS. The area between this line, Interstate 25, and Colorado's borders is southeastern Colorado. At one time it was mostly shortgrass prairie. Now the dominant plants are corn and wheat. Averaging 10-15 inches of rain a year, it has historically been an area of extremes: locust plagues in the 19th century, severe dust storms in the 1930s and 1950s, routine three-digit temperatures in summer, and the possibility of massive snowstorms in winter.

The area is sparsely populated and sits at the intersection of mountain and plains with no significant geographic barriers to the south and east. Close to 400 bird species have been recorded here, most of the state's 17,000 insect species live here, and it is the best area in the state for reptiles and amphibians. Historically a refuge for Bison, it provides habitat for Elk, Pronghorn Antelope, and Bighorn Sheep, as well as interesting smaller mammals like the Kit Fox. There are also recent records of Nine-banded Armadillos near the town of Lamar.

Leatherman adorned his talk with abundant photographs, anecdotes and sometimes hilarious commentary. I urge readers to watch the video on the DFO website at this link: <https://dfobirds.org/Programs/Past.aspx>. Here are a few items I found most engaging.

Reptiles and amphibians: Leatherman shared photos of about eight snakes. The most dramatic was the Coachwhip, an 8-foot-long, reddish snake that is extremely fast and has an aggressive temperament. He recalled an encounter in which a Coachwhip reared up like a cobra and watched a circling flock of cliff swallows, hoping for one to come too close. Leatherman discussed whether bullfrogs could be considered native to southeastern Colorado and showed a stunning image of the Great Plains Toad. This softball-sized amphibian looked as if I could

have inspired Jabba the Hutt, the *Star Wars* character. I learned that there are three species of horned lizards in southeastern Colorado and that the Yellow Mud Turtle is very fragrant, though not in a way that would interest Chanel.

Insects and other invertebrates: Leatherman has identified several insect species previously unknown in Colorado, including the Kiowa Two-Bearded Spider Wasp. Only 20 specimens of this insect exist and all are from Lamar. He mentioned that several butterfly species get blown into southeast Colorado from the south, including the Blackwitch with its impressive 4-inch wingspan. An onlooker admonished him not to pick one of these up since it looked like a bat! He shared an image of a hefty, flightless Lubber Grasshopper eating roadkill – who knew a grasshopper could do that? He also noted that Robber Flies are the insect equivalent of flycatchers. Spiders got their due in the form of tarantulas and their Tarantula Hawk predators. There are at least three to five species in Colorado.

Birds: Leatherman gave examples of birds considered rarities in southeastern Colorado now but perhaps regular in the future. Among those on this list are Inca Dove, Zone-Tailed Hawk, and hummingbirds familiar to southern Arizona such as the Magnificent and Broad-billed. Colorado's first confirmed nest of the Mississippi Kite was in La Junta. Stray and migrant species from the east and southwest are to be expected, including Northern Cardinal, Purple Finch and many eastern warblers. He showed an arresting photo of a Greater Roadrunner in flight. It looked to me like the [Hoatzin](#), an unusual South American native. Species considered unusual in the Denver area are often found in abundance in the southeast. In winter, birders can see flocks of 100,000 white geese, up to 40 percent of which are Ross' Geese.

To explore southeastern Colorado, Leatherman suggested a route that begins in Limon and proceeds to Lamar and then to Springfield, Kim, and Grenada before returning to Limon. Late April to early May is prime time, but Leatherman actually prefers to go in the fall, when migration is more drawn out. Inspection of this route on a map suggests many possible intriguing detours. You can expect very few stoplights, few birders, a visible horizon, and a landscape conducive to wanderlust. Be prepared for anything and support the local economy by spending money in the towns.