Meeting location on Saturday:
The field trip will begin at 7:30 a.m. on Saturday morning at a location in or very near Lone Pine, ready to begin a full day of birding. MAKE SURE YOUR CAR’S GAS TANK IS FULL. Full directions to the meeting location will be provided to those who have made trip reservations. It is recommended that people leave a day early and avoid an early get-up. Lone Pine has motel facilities and interesting movie sites in nearby Alabama Hills.

Sunday morning:
Since there are several possible locations where the Sage Grouse display, I am leaving it to the leaders to provide you with this information. We will caravan to the Greater Sage-Grouse strutting grounds (or ‘lek’) early in the morning since the grouse begin their display at first light and lek activity drops off as the morning progresses. Spotting scopes are highly desirable for viewing this fascinating courting display of scores of birds. As there are no restroom facilities at the lek, it may be best to not fill up too much with coffee or other liquids on this early morning trip.

Background Information: The Lek
It’s one of nature’s little spectacles: a showy display, with male birds, driven to impress the others of their species, dramatically strutting about and puffing themselves up to their greatest proportions. This ritualized courtship behavior, particular to some members of the grouse family, takes place every spring on what is know as a “lek.”

The term "lek" is derived from the Swedish for “sport” or “play,” and now is used to designate a place where birds carry on certain displays and courtship behaviors. A lek is unique in that it is a site used season after season for a competitive and repetitive communal courtship display among species which do not form pair bonds. Consistent with the attention drawing nature of the display behaviors performed at a lek, it is located on an exposed site, often on an elevated rise or open flat, that is clearly visible to the surrounding areas.

Of the species of grouse found here in California, the Greater Sage-Grouse is notable for its lek-based courtship activity. In mid-spring, male Greater Sage-Grouse congregate at a lek and begin strutting about with their tail feathers erect and fanned. In their full display, they punctuate this behavior by throwing their heads back and inflating brightly colored air sacks in their necks while holding their wings rigidly downward. This is followed by a loud popping or bubbling sound, produced as they deflate their air sacks. Based on the response of nearby grouse, the displaying birds may repeat the process many times before resting. With feathers spread, air sacks inflating and deflating, and pops and bubbles flowing, these exhibitions are impressive, both visually and audibly.

The location of each male grouse on the lek is dictated by territories. Each breeding season, as a male Sage-Grouse matures and gains in experience and dominance, he moves to a more central position on the lek. This, in turn, normally allows him to attract and mate with more females, who also prefer the center of the lek. As a result, relatively few males sire most of the young.

For the female Sage-Grouse, the activity at the lek is a compelling attraction. After a period of being courted on the lek by numerous displaying males, she will choose and mate with one. When mating is completed, she loses interest in the male and departs the area for a suitable nesting site in the surrounding sagebrush country. There, on her own, she builds a simple nest on the ground under a bush and raises her young. It will not be until late in the following fall that the male and female Sage-Grouse again come together to forage during the winter in mixed flocks.
Be prepared for cold temperatures Sunday morning!
Though the grouse don’t seem to mind, the temperature will be VERY COLD while watching the grouse display at dawn on Sunday morning. You will need to bring along (and wear that morning) very warm clothes such as long johns, knit caps that cover the ears, warm gloves, boots with heavy socks, warm pants, etc.) Most people find that dressing in layers works best; that way you can add more clothes when you’re cold, and remove them in layers as you warm up. Be sure your boots have been treated with a waterproof solution (which you can purchase at a cobbler’s or at REI). You may have to walk through snow in order to get to the lek. You want to be sure that your feet will stay dry and warm; bring along extra socks just in case.

Other trip preparations: The weather on this trip cannot be predicted; anything is possible! It could be cold and snowy, wet and muddy, warm and sunny, or overcast. Tire chains for your car (in case of a sudden storm) are advisable for those who like to be prepared for any emergency, but are not mandatory. Do be sure, though, that you car’s tires have good tread and that your car is in good working order! The AAA map entitled “Eastern Sierra” is very helpful; EVERY DRIVER SHOULD HAVE A MAP WHICH COVERS THE AREA.

Food for the trip: BRING FOOD FOR PICNIC LUNCHES AND PLENTY OF SNACKS FOR BOTH DAYS. We will not be stopping to buy lunch in town and there will be no time to buy lunch materials once the trip begins. Some people find that a thermos with a hot drink or soup in it does the job. You may need to prepare for a very early breakfast on Sunday morning – before the restaurants are open.

Two-way radios: Two-way radios are very helpful on a trip of this kind. We will need one radio per car. PLEASE LET ME KNOW whether or not you have a two-way radio with quiet codes that you can bring on the trip with you. Those cars which do not have a radio may borrow one from me for the trip, but you will need to make arrangements with me about the radio before the trip since I probably will not be on the trip with you.