

North through the Prairies

With Sylvia, Jim and Charlie Gallagher

Authors: mostly Sylvia, perhaps a little by Jim and probably nothing from Charlie

Introduction

It's been three years since Jim and I have taken a trip long enough to merit writing a diary. This time I've decided to send it home in installments so our friends can read it on the Sea and Sage website instead of waiting until we get home.

For those who have never heard of us and our travels, a little biographical information is in order. We are both birders. Sylvia teaches birding classes using sounds she records in the field and photographs from the Sea and Sage Library of Nature Slides, most of which are Jim's. Our goal in this trip is to zig-zag northward through the prairies as springtime arrives. I've just finished teaching a workshop on shorebirds and plan to do one on sparrows in a couple of years. We expect to look for migrating shorebirds and breeding and migrating sparrows. Jim would also like to photograph three lekking species, the Greater and Lesser Prairie-Chickens and the Sharp-tailed Grouse. We'll see how it all comes out.

I gave all my students a checklist of all the North American shorebirds and assigned them the task of trying to find as many as possible in as many plumages as possible in as many states as possible. Of course, I have to try to do the same thing. In this diary I plan to use the same abbreviations I used in the workshop for the plumages:

ap = alternate (breeding) plumage

bp = basic (nonbreeding) plumage

Charlie is our 12-year-old toy poodle, who loves to have us close to him in the truck and trailer. Unfortunately he is fighting congestive heart disease, but right now his health is pretty good. We chose this destination partly to keep Charlie away from high elevations.

This diary is written partly for my many birding friends who love to read about our travels. (Other titles are on sale at Sea and Sage's Audubon House and are not on-line.) It's also written for people who may like to repeat our trips in their own RV's, so I'll put in details of good and bad campsite numbers, how to get to good birding spots that are not listed in the standard bird-finding guides, etc. I also plan to describe the weather each day, for I know it has a strong effect on the nature of the migration and I might want to refer to it sometime. There might even be non-birding details of our adventures that would interest our relatives! If anything bores you, just skip it.

Wed., April 6, 2005
KOA, E of Barstow, CA

No entry.

4:00 p.m., Thursday, April 7, 2005
Meteor Crater RV Park, 35 miles east of Flagstaff, AZ

My shorebird workshop finished up last Thursday, but we were not able to get away right away because Jim was having some dental work done. It was finished yesterday around noon, and he is finally equipped with nice new implants. He broke his front bridge last summer! We are really grateful to his dentist for putting in some extra hours and rushing the lab to get their part done.

We couldn't wait to get on the road, so we took off at 1:00 pm and drove to Barstow. We didn't dare venture farther because there didn't seem to be anyplace to stay between there and Needles. It turned out to be a good move. Traffic was very light at that time of day. And this morning we got ahead of the rush of truckers leaving the LA area. Except for the inevitable bumpy freeways, it was a good drive. The only hitch was that I forgot that you have to light the pilot as well as turn on the oven in order to bake chicken. An hour later, I opened the oven to raw chicken. So I stuck it in the microwave oven a few minutes--a few too many, as it turned out--then crisped it up in the oven. Jim kindly said it was just fine. But it wasn't: it was tough as leather.

This RV park is pretty new--quite open, but with some young trees. Best of all, a Gray Flycatcher has been foraging from the tree right outside the trailer off and on while I've been writing this. It's too windy for pictures and recordings, and I've heard no calls anyway. It's an auspicious start to our trip list. (Yesterday's House Sparrows and House Finches don't count.)

Temperature is in the 70's, but the wind must be 25-30 mph. Clear.

5:00 p.m., Fri., April 8, 2005
Bosque Birdwatchers RV Park, San Antonio, NM

We thought the wind was bad yesterday afternoon. Little did we know what was in store for us. Around 1:00 am we were awakened by extremely strong winds buffeting the trailer. The whole thing shook and everything attached to the outside sounded as though it was going to come loose and fly off to who knows where. If we had not experienced similar winds once before at Antelope Island in the Great Salt Lake, we would have feared the trailer was going to tip over. Reason told us it was a tail wind, our water tank was full, and the truck was attached up front. Still I couldn't sleep, so got up and read for an hour or more. Finally I decided I had to go back to bed, so I put earplugs in my ears to dampen the roaring, rattling, and whistling and made up my mind to pretend the shaking was just Jim turning over.

By the time we awoke in the morning, the shaking had stopped, but the wind was still blowing hard. We stopped on the road after we had been driving for an hour or so and I measured the wind speed with my little wind gauge. It was sustained at 20-25 mph with gusts to 35 mph. I know it was blowing harder in the night.

Another problem: Bettina, who lives in our guest house, called last night describing problems with our watering system at home. It took them forever for Jim to understand what she meant and for suggestions to be communicated about what to do.

Still another problem: Last night Jim tried to retrieve his Pocketmail email using the cell phone. No luck. He went over to the pay phone, and it didn't work there either. So he worried about that all night long. This morning he called customer support for Pocketmail on our cellphone and after several minutes on hold and a lot more with a technician whose accented English combined with Jim's hearing loss meant that Sylvia, who knows almost nothing about Pocketmail, had to serve as a

translator. Ultimately the problem was solved. It turned out that Jim had a "corrupted" message in his "outbox." How it got corrupted is anyone's guess.

We looked for the Gray Flycatcher this morning, but saw no sign of it. It would have been too windy to hold a camera steady anyway. Instead we saw a Rock Wren.

We've decided we would definitely return to the Meteor Crater RV Park on another trip. The grounds are nicely maintained. The bathrooms are little private rooms with toilet, sink, and shower--not the drafty community affairs of most places. Jim liked them. The natural grassland/desert around the place was also appealing. The place was far superior to where we've stayed in Holbrook on previous trips.

We got on the road around 8:00 this morning, later than usual because of the Pocketmail service call. We drove about 310 miles--east to Holbrook, then southeast through St. Johns and Springerville. From there we went eastward to Socorro., NM, then south to San Antonio.

A southwest wind blew the whole time, and is still at it. The forecast is for one more day of this.

Jim has driven down to Bosque del Apache NWR to look over the situation and get brochures. I was amazed that he wanted to do this, for yesterday all he did was collapse when we got into the campground. I think the difference is that we were driving on little-travelled 2-lane roads today. Or maybe he's just glad to be here again. It's been a good many years.

Temperature ranged from the low 60's to the low 80's today, depending on the elevation. It was 81_ when we arrived here. Sky has been clear with a few clouds, but we encountered lots of areas of blowing dust on our drive. Everything in the trailer is gritty with the stuff. Guess I'll quit and do a little dusting.

4:45 pm, April 9, 2005 **Bosque Birdwatchers RV Park**

The wind finally died down last night and gave us a good night's sleep. This morning it was still calm, but it got up gradually as the morning progressed. Right now it is blowing hard, and there are clouds signifying that a front is coming. I think it'll be a dry one like the last, but we haven't heard any weather forecast. Temperature is considerably cooler--in the low 70's I'd guess.

We drove the tour route at Bosque del Apache NWR this morning. The refuge entrance is only a hundred yards or so north of this RV park, and there were ducks and shorebirds in the ponds shortly after we entered. Of course, I'm looking hard at all the shorebirds. I got a good start, finding both yellowlegs species (ap) and a few Long-billed Dowitchers showing only a little bit of molt. Later in the morning I saw a few American Avocets off in the distance. This place is not noted for shorebirds. I expect more at Bitter Lake NWR over by Roswell.

We had been told that the Sandhill Cranes had all left except one. Believe it or not, we saw one flying around and then descending. We also saw a Wild Turkey cross the road in front of us. Lots of ducks were present, and I think they all are breeding species: Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler (most numerous), Mallard, Gadwall, Cinnamon Teal, Redhead, Ruddy Duck. Jim photographed one bird, a Swainson's Hawk flying round and round not far overhead. Land birds were hard to come by because of the rising wind. Heard one Wilson's Warbler, but found no other migrants except swallows (Barn and N. Rough-winged). Neotropical Cormorants were visible in a few places, but all too far away for better pictures than we have already.

After making the loop, I went into the visitors center and watched the video on

how the refuge is managed for Sandhill Cranes. Especially interesting was how they save the corn for the cranes and discourage the all-too-numerous Snow Geese from eating it. They plant tall corn, then row-by-row knock over the tops of the stalks so the cranes can reach the ears on the bent-over stalks, but the geese can't. This process is done gradually so there is never a surfeit of corn and the cranes don't leave any on the ground for the geese. Snow Geese are a serious problem, not only here but in the Arctic, where their huge numbers are devastating their tundra breeding habitat. Of course they are too numerous because of all the grain grown on their wintering ground and left in the fields after harvest.

We gave up around noon and came back to the trailer for the afternoon. I've been hearing a Pyrrhoxia and just took a walk to try to see it, but didn't even hear it while I was out. The wind chased me back to the trailer. I certainly hope this is the last front to come through and we'll have some calm days.

9:00 pm, Mon., April 11, 2005

Bottomless Lakes SP, southeast of Roswell, NM

Yesterday we simply drove from Bosque del Apache NWR to this location, a distance of about 170 miles. After stopping at Wal-Mart and waiting in an interminable check-out line, then finding a table at Chili's right after all the after-church crowd had placed their orders and waiting another interminable interval for food, we didn't get here and settled until 3:00. By then the usual afternoon gale was blowing. It quieted down with the sunset and didn't get up again til this afternoon. That seems to be the normal pattern around here. Sky has been clear with a few clear-weather cumulus in the afternoons. High temps. in the 70's. Delightful, finally!

We've been to Bottomless Lakes SP before and will visit its lakes tomorrow before we leave. They are sink holes produced by water flowing through calcium sulfate deposits and gradually dissolving them. The campground is beside an artificial lake with a bath house, swimming, etc, although our site is rather nice and backs up to a cliff. A Say's Phoebe is starting to build a nest under the roof of the shelter over our picnic table. He's not in a big rush, though. Rock Wrens come down out of the cliff behind the trailer.

This morning we spent several hours driving the tour route at Bitter Lake NWR, just northeast of Roswell. Both it and Bottomless Lakes SP are in the bottomlands of the Pecos River.

This refuge is supposed to have the best shorebirding in New Mexico, but we saw only American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Killdeer and a few Greater Yellowlegs. I did get a fairly nice recording of the latter doing its continuous series of alarm calls.

For me the highlight of the morning was the flowers. Several places there were carpets of white evening-primroses plus other species that were white, yellow, and magenta. I'll have to figure them all out from my notes and photographs. I do have a book that I think covers this area. There was a desert nature trail with some of the shrubs identified, and I photographed those. We're right on the boundary between the Chihuahuan Desert and the southern border of the short-grass prairie, so I don't know which habitat these flowers are native to.

Bitter Lake NWR seems to have both fresh water from the Pecos River and brackish water from streams flowing into it through calcium sulfate deposits. Some places it smells just like the Salton Sea. Other places look as though they are fresh and don't have white deposits on the shoreline. Unfortunately the auto tour leaflet doesn't explain all this.

We saw lots of ducks of mostly the same species as at Bosque del Apache--plus Bufflehead and Lesser Scaup. Other interesting species included Cassin's Sparrow (a short-grass prairie bird), Scaled Quail (Gambel's at Bosque), Black-throated Sparrow, and Curve-billed Thrasher (Chihuahuan Desert birds, the latter two of the Chihuahuan Desert subspecies). Total for the morning was only 28 species.

After a quick lunch of forgettable fast-food seafood in Roswell, we went to the BLM office to get information on Prairie-Chicken leks. Unfortunately the knowledgeable staff member was out to lunch, so we had to wait for about 20 minutes for him to return. He suggested certain leks as being particularly accessible and told us we were welcome to camp there in our trailer and suggested places. Late this afternoon we drove out to the area, the Caprock Wildlife Habitat Area, part of the Mescalero Sands 40 miles east of Roswell. Pat and Dick Cabe had suggested we come here. They parked their RoadTrek camper right beside a lek, but we wondered about our larger rig.

It was with much difficulty that we figured out where we were supposed to go. All of the leks are off a caliche road that runs north from a gate opposite the only roadside rest area on that stretch of highway--US 380 just west of the junction with SR 172 at Caprock. Pat and Dick had given us a copy of a map of the area, and the biologist had marked suggested leks for us.

We had a hard time finding the right cross roads out in that labyrinth of narrow dirt roads. First we drove two miles too far because one road on the map was barely detectable and we miscounted. We didn't dare make a bad turn, because some of the roads narrow to sandy two-trackers impassable to two-wheel-drive vehicles. There are also few places to turn around. We finally think we found the place the biologist had suggested would be best for photography (area 24n on the map). If it was the right place, it was pretty poor. The birds would either have to display on the road or concealed in the low vegetation. We could find no open lek. The birds were in the area, for we could hear them clucking. It was supposed to be on an old oil-well pad, but the only road that seemed to go in that direction was an abandoned sandy two-tracker--totally undriveable. I walked it a ways and saw nothing. To cap the experience, we had had to open a gate to get out the road and had a terrible time getting it closed again. Finally Jim was able to get the loop of wire onto the top of the post, but it took both us to do it, one on each side of the gate. Then Jim had to crawl under the gate to get out, but we couldn't have done it any other way. We were really puzzled and discouraged.

We decided to check out other leks on the map. Number 2n had looked pretty good as we drove back from two miles farther than we were supposed to go. It even had some standing water nearby where birds seemed to be drinking. [After talking to the chicken-counter the next day, it turned out we weren't at 2n at all. Where we were was not a lek.]

Then we caught sight of a decent looking road that headed northeastward from the "main" north-south road. A study of the map revealed that it didn't go very far, and that it also ended at an old oil pad labelled lek 22n on the map. We drove out there--about 100 yards from the road and lo-and-behold there were a bunch of chickens displaying--and lots of room to park the trailer on a firm surface. Jim took a few pictures, but of course they're much more active in the mornings, then we drove back to the trailer, getting back here around 7:45 pm, tired but happy. I fixed a quick dinner, and Jim went to bed. I wanted to write this up first, though.

Tomorrow morning we'll bird around Bottomless Lakes SP, then take the trailer out to the lek in the middle of the day when the birds are not displaying.

Tues., Apr. 12, 2005
Caprock Wildlife Habitat Area

No entry

11:45 am, Wed., April 13, 2005
Caprock Wildlife Habitat Area
Between Roswell and Tatum, NM

We're camped on an abandoned oil pad (dry well) four miles north of the roadside rest area just west of Caprock. It's also Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek number 22n, which was the reason we selected it. This area is very lonely. The only traffic on the one-lane caliche road was the BLM biologist who was out counting chickens this morning.

We got here around 1:00 yesterday afternoon after spending the morning sightseeing at Bottomless Lakes SP. I finally saw my first true spring migrant of the trip, an Ash-throated Flycatcher, which I was able to record giving a tremendous variety of calls.

The "bottomless" lakes are in a series along the base of the bluff between the high plains and the Pecos R. bottomlands. All of them are quite round. In one place two of them come together, and the sign said one of them was much saltier than the other despite their tangency. It also said fish could not survive in the saltier one. Despite this I saw a good-sized one jump right in the middle of it.

Another lake was surrounded at least 3/4 of the way around by a steep vertical cliff. Flying around over the water were Northern Rough-winged Swallows. Nesting on the cliff face were Rock Pigeons. I got excellent recordings, and the reverberation off the cliff face made for most interesting acoustics. Mourning Doves were also in the recording. Curiously enough I'm happiest about the Rock Pigeons. This highly urban bird is hard to record without extraneous noises. I was out of business, though, when an angler came up and started casting for fish.

We went back to the trailer and took showers so as to save our water when we're dry-camping in the wildlife area. Then we returned once more to Roswell for gasoline and a few groceries.

The road north from the roadside rest to "our" lek is graded caliche, but the first mile was very washboardy. When we got here I discovered the vibration had knocked the TV cockeyed on its perch on Jim's table. It had also dislodged all sorts of other things. Most curious was that it had unscrewed the lids off a couple of jars in the refrigerator and then knocked them off.

The place is very quiet. Only a few bird species are around. We took naps, then to be on the safe side Jim went out to his blind 50 ft east of the trailer around 4:00, for the information said the chickens start their evening display in the "late afternoon." It turned out they didn't arrive until around 6:45 pm. Jim had his book and a glass of wine, but it was still a tedious wait.

While he was in the blind a pair of meadowlarks wandered by the trailer. They were making short buzzy calls and a buzzy rattle that I was not familiar with, so I decided they must be Eastern Meadowlarks. I got some nice recordings out the trailer window. Later I heard an Eastern song not too far away and that clinched the ID. I also recorded that.

Jim came back to the trailer discouraged about the pictures he took. It seemed the birds were always behind small bushes or clumps of grass. I suggested he take

the truck around to the other side for the morning display. It's higher than the blind. He did it in the evening, so it would be ready for the morning.

I wasn't happy with the few chicken recordings I made, because big buzzy flies were constantly right outside the screen, so I gave it up, figuring morning would be better. I had my scope in the trailer with me, so set it up and watched their behavior for a long time, knowing they would be back-lit in the morning.

This morning Jim got up at 4:45 and was in the truck by 5:00 to await the arrival of the chickens. He said he heard them clucking within 15 minutes, so his timing was perfect. The sun didn't rise until after 6:00, so he sat there and froze for an hour. But it was all worthwhile, for the truck turned out to be in just the right spot to catch the action of the dominant male. He was thrilled with his photos. His only complaint was that the females left before the sun rose, and he didn't take any pictures of them not realizing they wouldn't stay around. Tomorrow he'll shoot them with flash. (They were really close!)

While Jim was in the truck, I slept in another hour, then got up and recorded them out the trailer window. Conditions were ideal, and I just let the recorder run for about 15 minutes during the peak of the action. I couldn't see the birds as well as I could last night for the sun was behind them. Also the trailer window was very dirty.

Jim drove the truck back over to the trailer around 7:30 for breakfast, but there were still a few chickens around even then. They left when they were good and ready. If he had walked back, they might have flushed.

After breakfast we drove north about a mile to a place where there was a 20-foot long patch of standing water, possibly from a little spring. We had seen it in our scouting Monday evening and thought it was lek 2n. We hoped there would be interesting birds there. Most of them were Mourning Doves, but there was also a Mockingbird and a Savannah Sparrow. Once I saw a couple of Scaled Quail scurry off. It was the place where we saw a Burrowing Owl Monday evening, but we saw no sign of it this morning.

While we were there a BLM biologist came back from his morning chicken count. He proceeded to tell us of all sorts of other leks that might be better than the one where we are camped. I listened politely, and so did Jim, but when we compared notes later, we agreed we'd stick with the one where we are camped.

Now for the bad news. As I was talking with the biologist, I happened to look down at our truck tire, and discovered it was very soft. Worst of all, Jim discovered that he could not figure out how to use the jack to extract the spare from underneath the truck. We read the instructions, but the thing just didn't add up. Our cell phone doesn't work here, so Jim dropped me off at the trailer and drove slowly back to the roadside rest on the soft tire. He plans to get help from a passing traveler or worker there. They can drive toward town and call AAA to come and assist him. He'll probably then drive back to Roswell to get the tire fixed and perhaps purchase a better jack than the one that came with the Suburban. (We've had lots of flat tires on the trailer, but this is the first on the truck.)

I'm sitting here with Charlie in the trailer with a nice breeze blowing in the window, the temperature in the low 70's. Poor Jim has to contend with the leaky tire. Guess I'll quit and fix lunch, then wash that trailer window.

9:00 pm, Fri., April 14, 2005
Palo Duro Canyon SP, nr. Amarillo, TX

I was just settling down for a nap when Jim drove in a little after 2:00 pm with the tire all taken care of. He had found a truck driver at the roadside rest whose wife has a similar type of spare tire assembly (under the rear of the vehicle). He succeeded in getting the spare loose so Jim could change it. Jim then drove back to Roswell to a tire store. They weren't busy, so patched the tire in only a few minutes, and he was soon on the road back to our campsite, munching a sandwich he bought.

He did some more blind work on the afternoon visits of the male chickens, but for some reason the birds are spooked by the blind, but not by the truck. Perhaps it's because this lek is where groups of people come to see the chickens and they're use to vehicles. Because he knew afternoon was not the optimal time, he took his digital camera out this time and shot a few pictures to e-mail to Nancy to accompany this log--we hope! We'll just have to find somewhere we can connect up a computer or a place with wi-fi. Our travels so far haven't taken us to very high-tech places to say the least.

This morning he again got up early and sat in the truck until the birds came in. Yesterday he found he had selected just the right place in the lek--where the dominant male's territory was. He defended it from two birds on territories on either side of his.

This time Jim knew that the females came and left before sunrise, so he shot lots of flash pictures of them, then more of the males after sunrise. All in all, a totally satisfactory photo opportunity.

It was around 8:30 when we got ready to leave our unforgettable campsite. This time Jim drove extremely slowly over that washboard road so as not to dislodge things the way he had when we came in. Our slow pace was rewarded! We saw a few land birds, all Savannah Sparrows, I think, but the highlight was a Pronghorn that didn't run away when he spotted us. It was on the right-hand side of the road with the morning sun illuminating him beautifully. Jim got out on the driver's side and took what I thought was an interminable amount of time getting just the right lens/extension tube/setting/whatever on his camera. That wonderful animal just stood there, occasionally stooping down for a mouthful of grass. Jim got several side views, then some more head-on. Definitely the best Pronghorn opportunity he's ever had, and we've been trying hard for years.

As I mentioned yesterday, the only other vehicle we've seen in the area was that of the BLM man counting chickens. He went by early this morning, Jim said and hadn't come out when we left. So we were astounded to meet another car on the road as we were leaving. This caused some consternation because it's a one lane road with soft sand on either side most places. Luckily the driver of the other car had arrived at one of the extremely rare turnouts and waited for us to pass.

As we approached the car, we were surprised to see that it had a California license, so we had to stop and chat with the driver. To our amazement, it turned out to be our good friend Clair de Beauvoir, also a bird photographer. (His wife Sue was back in their motel in Roswell fighting a bout of food-poisoning.) We hadn't known they was coming this way at all, although we had told them what we were planning to do. He had the same map and information sheets from the BLM office that we did. Jim turned the map over and diagrammed precisely where he should park his truck tomorrow morning. He told him, "Just put your tires where mine are." It was pretty windy this morning, and tomorrow may be windier. I hope it isn't too windy for the birds to display for him. According to the literature, they don't like extremely hard winds.

All in all, a wonderful experience. Even the flat tire wasn't too bad.

The rest of the day was pretty uneventful. We drove east to Tatum, north to Clovis, then northeastward to Canyon, TX. Palo Duro SP is about 12 miles west of Canyon. We lost an hour to a time-zone change enroute, so got here close to 5:00 pm. It was windy and warm, so I sat outside a while, but the place is infested with hordes of little flies that like to crawl over you. I put on some insect repellent, but finally gave up. Unfortunately a lot of them got inside the trailer, so I've been swatting them all the time I've been writing this log. There also seem to be some tiny things that crawl right through the screen. No more open windows in the evening here!

This park is in a deep canyon, reached by descending two miles of 10% grade. The setting is spectacular with red rocks on the walls, etc. For Texas it is unique. We're in a campsite that's not too far from a creek. The setting is low riparian woodland--hackberry, juniper, mesquite, willow, etc. So far I haven't seen very many birds, although a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is nesting in a tree in the campsite next to ours. I did see a Cardinal and a Black-crested Titmouse. This canyon appears to be the northernmost extent of the titmouse's range. Tomorrow morning I'll do more birding. Hope it isn't too windy. A front is supposed to come through.

8:00 pm, Fri., April 15, 2005 **Palo Duro SP, TX**

An interesting morning, but a not-so-interesting afternoon!

Right after breakfast I had Jim drive me about a mile farther south along the campground road, where a creekside trail comes out to the road. Then I walked back to our campsite along the creek. There was almost no wind and almost no traffic on the road that early. Everyone sleeps late around here.

There wasn't a wide variety of birds, but those I found yielded excellent recordings. I found myself forever looking at the range maps in my field guide. It was interesting to find western and eastern, northern and southern birds' ranges meeting here. I had Carolina Wren at its westernmost, and Ash-throated Flycatcher and Ladder-backed Woodpecker near their northeasternmost. Black-crested Titmouse and Golden-fronted Woodpecker are at their absolute northernmost. I guess nothing was at its southernmost. The Pine Siskins I saw are probably still on their wintering ground.

While I was out on the trail, Jim was busy photographing the Wild Turkeys that wander all around the campground. He got a tom with his tail fanned, but only from the rear.

This reminds me of an encounter I had with a couple who were just starting down the trail as I was exiting it. They had an obvious New York or New Jersey accent and were apparently urban folks, as evidenced by the question the man asked me: "What are those big creatures wandering around the campground? We think they're birds."

I replied, "Do you mean the Wild Turkeys?"

"Yes! We wondered if that's what they were," he responded.

Jim also got nice pictures of the pair of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers attending their nest in a still-bare hackberry tree. It is in the campsite next to ours, and the woman staying there pointed it out to me yesterday. She didn't know what bird it was, nor did she know we were birders. She just thought it was interesting. She told me she was going to have to see if she could find the birdwatcher she ran into that morning. I told her I could probably tell her what it was. When I walked over by the tree, the little

"pwee" call told me right away what it probably was, and sure enough that's what flew up to the nest.

In the late morning we drove to the town of Canyon to visit the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, which was highly recommended by the AAA Guide, and also the woman in the next campsite. It's on the campus of West Texas A & M University. I learned that it was originally an independent institution, but now belongs to the university. It's a very well-done, large museum and interprets a wide variety of natural and human historic subjects. Particularly intriguing were the megamammal skeletons. It seems as though every present-day mammal's extinct relatives were larger than what's around now--wolves, pigs, horses--and of course there were the dinosaurs. Skulls with horns of four or five bison species were on display. The farther back in time the skull came from, the larger the horns.

I also particularly enjoyed the windmill room. Without them, this country could not have been settled as early as it was. Some of them were enormous and quite beautiful. I was disappointed in the "textiles" exhibit. There were only two quilts and most of the displays were of gowns that were probably not ever worn by women in this area.

Noon-time rolled around, so Jim suggested we go out to lunch, then come back afterwards. We were told of a nice Mexican restaurant a couple of blocks away, which we enjoyed. After lunch, Jim decided not to go back to the museum at all. His blind fell out of the truck yesterday and a crucial part broke. He wanted to find a hardware/lumber store to get materials to fix it. He had also mentioned the possibility of finding a cabinet-maker to fashion the part for him.

He left me at the museum around 1:00. I was finished by 1:45, but Jim didn't get back until 4:15. I couldn't imagine what had kept him and started imagining a cabinet-maker fashioning his blind part while he waited. I had looked in the gift shop/book store earlier, but found nothing interesting. After sitting in the front room of the museum staring at a sculpture of a buffalo soldier (nice, but not that nice) for half an hour, I decided to look again at the books and not be so picky. I found one and read it for the rest of the afternoon. (It's about a woman's girlhood in the 1930's and 1940's on a ranch in what is now Big Bend National Park. I'm glad I bought it.)

When Jim walked in the door at 4:15, I kiddingly asked him if he got lost--and he sheepishly agreed that that's exactly what happened. He'd received directions to a Lowe's in Amarillo 15 miles away, but he swears it was 30 miles. Then he got lost on the way back and found himself way down the freeway headed for Lubbock. Then when he came back, he took the wrong road east, thinking it led to the museum and then to the park. It even had a similar looking flooded pasture with a duck on it. By the time he finally found his way back to the museum, he'd put at least 100 miles on the truck--an expensive wild-goose-chase, even with gasoline "only" \$2.099 a gallon instead of what it is at home. He was most contrite and kept repeating, "I don't know why I didn't stop and look at the map. I thought I knew where I was going."

Anyway, we topped off the gas tank and drove back here, the afternoon pretty well over.

After we got back, Jim decided to try to figure out how to download the digital images he took of Lesser Prairie-Chickens. I was afraid that as tired as he was, he'd not succeed, but after some trial and error he brought them up--and they were nice! He thinks the film ones will be even nicer. We'll e-mail Nancy a couple to put with this log if we can find a place to hook up his laptop computer--and if he can figure out how to use the new version of PhotoShop he has.

9:20 pm, Sat., April 16, 2005
Palo Duro Cyn. SP, TX

At dinner tonight Jim confessed a little more about his misadventure of yesterday. It turns out he ended up in the town of Dimmitt before he decided maybe he should stop and look at the map. When I looked at the map, I discovered he drove south on I-27 35 miles past the correct exit in Canyon and got off at the next town, which was Tulia. Then for some strange reason, he drove west; Palo Duro Cyn. and the museum are both east of the freeway. Still he was sure he was on the right road, for he saw that flooded pasture I mentioned yesterday. (Could there be more than one of those?) Finally when after 31 miles more he came to Dimmitt, he resorted to the map. The map showed a slightly shorter way back to Canyon, where he should have turned east. Still, according to the mileages on the map, he made a 117-mile detour that he didn't want. He's still very ashamed of himself and agrees he deserves to suffer the penance of having me write up his foolishness in my diary.

Today things went quite a bit better. He fixed his blind. He learned a lot about downloading digital images on his new computer and his new edition of Photoshop Elements. There are still things that aren't working quite right, but he'll probably figure those out in time.

While he was doing all this, I took the truck and poked around in other portions of the park. I especially wanted to check out the areas near some of the shear cliff walls. Sure enough, I found some new birds for my park list. Got a nice Rufous-crowned Sparrow (interior form) song. I also recorded another sound--a simple, slightly upslurred whistle--that I couldn't identify. It wouldn't come in for playback, so will have to remain unknown.

I also saw several beautiful flowers and photographed them. One I identified later, but the other two I had to give up on. Maybe with the photos and my books together, I'll succeed. One was a shrub, which probably isn't in any book I have.

I also checked out the junipers and found the ones on the flatland to be One-seed Juniper. The bird-finding guide to Texas was a help on those, for they said there are only two species in the park. The Rocky Mountain Juniper must be on the canyon walls. If I'd wanted to, I could have driven back up the entry road, but I figure I have lots of chances to see that tree. Besides it was getting along toward lunch time.

After lunch I spent a little more time figuring out the little digital camera with the 12x optical zoom. I'm happy to report that the first significant pictures--other than the three nothings I snapped yesterday--were Wild Turkeys that came to eat Jim's birdseed. I also tried out the macro feature on the common yellow flowers (Arizona Bladderpod, I discovered later) that carpet the ground between the trees on the flat canyon floor. Later in the day, after Jim had figured out how to download the pictures, I was able to see them on the computer screen. The turkeys were quite nice, but I'm most thrilled by the flowers. That camera really blew them up BIG. The depth of focus was also much better than with the macro feature on my film camera. Now I'll be able to photograph the flowers that I can't identify and figure them out at leisure later. That beats picking a sample and having it wilt even when I put it in water. Also, I never pick flowers unless they are quite common.

The rest of the day I worked on my embroidery and enjoyed the balmy, intermittently cloudy day. It rained some last night, but there wasn't any today. The flies weren't so bad--or I just got used to them. Temperature this morning was 51_ when I was driving around. It probably got up to the upper 70's this afternoon. No wind in the morning made for excellent recordings. A comfortable breeze this afternoon made for a perfect day.

9:00 pm, Sun., April 17, 2005
Great Salt Plains SP, OK

One final installment of Jim's Panhandle Odyssey. It turned out he drove 10 miles past Tulia, got off the freeway, turned around and went back north before he headed west. He thought he had gone too far--an understatement! As we were trying to get to the bottom of why he did all this at breakfast, it seemed he saw no exit that said, "Canyon, next ---exits." So he kept driving hoping to find one. When he discovered he was lost, he figured if he kept making circles he'd spiral in on his destination. Besides he kept seeing familiar-looking landmarks. What he didn't realize was that he was actually spiraling out, and every place looks like every other place in that country. What it boils down to is that he'd rather fog around and find things on his own. It's too much trouble to look at a map or ask someone. Usually he ends up where he wants to be sooner or later, but not this much later. I like to have my finger on where we are on the map all the time. In fact, I'm probably too compulsive that way, but at least I rarely get us lost.

Not much new today. We drove about 300 miles northeastward to Great Salt Plains Lake and the state park campground here. The place is practically deserted now after all the weekenders have left. (That was why we stayed that extra day in Palo Duro. Never arrive at a resort area on Saturday night!)

We stopped for lunch in the cafe (that's all the sign said)--the only one, it looked like--in Arnett. It was a classic small-town midwest cafe, run by a couple of friendly women. Food was classic midwest cuisine, too. The Sunday special was a choice of hamburger steak with gravy, fried chicken strips, roast beef or chicken-fried steak. This came with mashed potatoes and gravy, carrots, canned pea and cheese salad, beverage, and dessert (sort of a mock cheesecake topped with cherry pie filling) for \$5.50, \$4.25 for a half order. I figured in this country one should really have chicken-fried steak. I had the half order, Jim the full one. Mine was plenty, but Jim polished his off. It was all delicious! Only the carrots were just average cooked carrots.

This campground is in a turf-with-trees, park-like setting, but surrounded by natural habitat--brushy mixed woodland with junipers (species to be determined, I hope), deciduous trees of various types, and miscellaneous shrubs--all in an impenetrable tangle. There's also a patch of marsh. On one side of the park flows the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River, and not too far upstream is the spillway where it came around a dam. This spillway is the major drawback of the place, for it's like a perennial waterfall, making sound recording difficult.

We selected the same site we had in June, 1988, the only other time we've been here. It's at the end of the row, facing a nearly dry, tree-lined ditch.

The wind blew pretty hard until sundown, but now is very gentle. I took a walk all around the park area. We're getting into more of the typical eastern birds--the first Blue Jays and Carolina Chickadees of the trip. Again lots of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers [discovered a nest up in the tree right outside our dinette window the next day--too concealed for photos]. American White Pelicans are hanging around with the human fishermen below the spillway of the dam.

Much of the lake and its shoreline is a National Wildlife Refuge. We'll explore some of the nature trails and the short wildlife drive tomorrow. There's also a visitors center, which will probably have other information. I really hope to see some shorebirds. So far I've only see Killdeer.

8:45 pm, Mon., April 18, 2005
Great Salt Plains SP, OK

Gale-force winds all day long made birding difficult. I certainly couldn't look for the shorebirds I came here for. All I've seen are two Killdeer on the shores of the river opposite the trailer. Anytime we went out into the open the wind was super-strong, so we kept to more protected areas. Temperatures are quite mild--not cold last night and not hot today. Sky mostly cloudy. More of the same, with the addition of isolated thunder showers, is forecast for the next few days.

The NWR has planted a variety of trees native to the southeastern states all around the lake, producing extensive stands of woodland. Most of these trees are not found naturally this far west, I discovered when I checked out some of them in my tree guide. Still, it was interesting to try to learn some of them from the interpretive signs on the NWR nature trail. Eastern Redcedar (actually a juniper) and Southern Catalpa were two I really studied.

After walking a portion of the nature trail--not the part right along the edge of the lake where the wind was too strong--we drove the 2.5-mile auto tour road. It runs past forest, marsh, pond, and fields where they grow grain for the wintering and migrating cranes (even an occasional Whooping) and waterfowl. One of the crops mentioned in the leaflet was cowpeas. I wonder what they are.

Blue-winged Teal is the most common duck, but we've also seen a few Northern Shovelers, and Mallards. Giant Canada Geese are introduced here and breeding. We saw a variety of herons and egrets, including Little Blue Heron and others common at home.

I discovered a pair of Eastern Bluebirds nesting in a tree cavity yesterday, and Jim spent some time near it with his camera this afternoon, but all he could get was a head peeking out of the hole. He thinks they're incubating eggs right now.

This afternoon, Jim discovered a Harris's Sparrow eating birdseed outside the trailer. This bird is expected in this area, but we have a number of pictures from California and Arizona, where it is casual. Still, it was nice to get photos of one in full breeding plumage. This morning I saw a House Sparrow eating the birdseed, so when Jim told me about the Harris's, I thought I had made a mistake this morning. The two species look somewhat alike, and I only ID'd the House Sparrow with my naked eye through the screen. However, I was gratified to see a House Sparrow and a Harris's Sparrow together for a short while this afternoon. The Harris's is quite a bit bigger and, of course, there are many other obvious differences.

With the above two exceptions, land birding has been pretty mediocre. I'd love to see more migrants. Perhaps when we get farther east we will. The refuge bird list shows most eastern migrating warblers to be rare here.

I didn't do anything outdoors this afternoon because of the wind. I just stayed inside and bathed Charlie, napped, figured out some more features on my digital camera, and worked out the details of the next few days of our trip. We'll probably stay here one more day and check out a few other sites around the lake. That is, if the trainer jets aren't screaming around loudly as they were this morning. There's an auxiliary airport close by, and the pilots seem to be practicing take-offs and landings there.

8:45 pm, Tues., April 19, 2005
Great Salt Plains SP, OK

More clouds, but less bluster today. No rain, although thunder storms were forecast. They're forecast for tomorrow, too, and then it's supposed to be clear and cooler for a few days. It hasn't really been hot, highs seem to be in the upper 70's.

This morning we drove the ca. 45-mile loop around the lake in order to make two widely spaced stops where shorebirds could be found. I found quite a few (9 species; about 40 have occurred here), but none close enough for Jim to photograph--had to use scope myself. I loved the deep rusty Long-billed Dowitchers in full ap. Also present were the first Baird's Sandpipers I've been aware of seeing in ap. I may have seen them on another trip but not paid attention to their plumage. One Pectoral completed the list of the most interesting sandpipers. I also saw a single Snowy Plover, which is in even more trouble in this part of the country than it is in the west. They breed here.

We also visited the actual salt plain, a flat, featureless 25-square-mile surface. The area was once covered by a shallow sea. This sea dried up and was covered by sediments washed out of the Ozark and Rocky mountains. More recently these sediments have eroded away, once again revealing the salt. A crust of sodium chloride coats the surface of the flat. It is produced by wicking action as the water evaporates. Under the surface of the mud, the slightly soluble compound calcium sulfate dihydrate is continually dissolving and recrystallizing. The resulting mineral is called selenite. Despite the implication of the name, it contains no selenium, which is highly poisonous.

The selenite crystals here assume an unusual hour-glass shape, due apparently to the nature of the sand, silt, and clay particles found here. The exact mechanism of this crystallization is not known.

The salt flats slope gradually until they end abruptly in a reservoir that was excavated in 1941. Our campground is below the dam of that reservoir.

From April through October cars are permitted to drive in a marked route out about a mile onto the salt flats. People enjoy going out there and digging up the selenite crystals. The procedure is to dig a hole about two feet deep and two feet in diameter, wait for water to rise in the hole, then use the water to rinse off the crystals. They're rather fragile at first, but fairly sturdy when dry. I looked at some at the visitors center yesterday. They're sort of brown due to included iron compounds. The ones I saw, which were free for the taking, didn't show the hour-glass shape. They were probably broken. Each year a different portion of the salt flat is open for digging. Then it is closed to allow new crystals to grow.

The salt flats are the nesting home of two endangered species, the Snowy Plover and the Least Tern. Biologists have enhanced the habitat a bit for the terns by putting out T-shaped boards; they place their nests in the resulting angle.

Crystal-digging actually enhances the habitat for the Snowy Plovers. The mounds of dug-up mud provide elevated places for plover nests, so they won't flood in a heavy rain. The discarded crystals are used instead of the usual rocks for nesting material. The plovers also eat the brine flies that are attracted to the water-filled digging holes.

The salt plains are also of great interest to microbiologists. Seventy or more microbes found nowhere else on earth occur here. A few of the bacteria most closely match microbes found in deep-sea hydrothermal environments.

Jim photographed the Eastern Bluebirds some more this afternoon. He thinks

the chicks just hatched, for now the adults are bringing food to the nest. This time he got shots of the male clinging to the outside of the nest. The female entered it directly. He shot film most of the time, then switched to digital for a few token shots just before he quit. Unfortunately that was the only time both adults were visible at the nest at the same time. He got a wonderful digital image of the pair when the male came in to feed the female. He missed the actual moment of feeding, but in the picture she seems to be looking at him very affectionately. (How's that for anthropomorphism?)

9:00 pm, Wed., April 20, 2005

Melody Acres RV Park, Hutchinson, KS

I awoke to a dawn chorus of Northern Cardinals and Carolina Chickadees and decided to try to record the latter. They were singing, not just giving their rough "chik-a-dee" call. Unfortunately they stopped the instant I got my recording gear ready. I decided to take a walk anyway and try to get behind trees from the roar of the spillway. That proved to be impossible, and I didn't hear anything special anyway.

What I did find was a nice low Red-bellied Woodpecker nest. After breakfast when the sun was a little higher, Jim went down there and got some pictures of the male. We debated staying longer and trying to get the female, but decided to leave. He does have good pictures of her from a previous trip.

We left around 10:00 and drove north around 110 miles on various back roads to Hutchinson. We tried to find a restaurant for lunch along the route in several towns, but without success. Then when we were only about 20 miles short of our destination we caught sight of a "cafe" sign in Arlington, a tiny town about 20 miles southwest of Hutchinson on SR 61. After turning the corner onto the main street, we discovered the restaurant was pretty scroungy looking, but figured it must be good for there were lots of cars parked all along the street. Then a very short block and a half off the highway (left side of street), we saw a clean-looking storefront restaurant painted white with blue trim, Carolyn's Essenhaus. We decided to try it and easily found a place to park the trailer on a nearby side street. When we opened the door of the place, we found it absolutely jammed with people--and it was a fairly large place. We decided this must be a pretty special place, for the town is so tiny the whole town would have to eat there nearly every day to generate such a crowd.

Because of their dress, we soon realized it was a Mennonite establishment. Food was old-fashioned country fare. We opted for the day's special--fried chicken (thigh, 2 wings, leg) plus mashed potatoes, gravy, corn and beverage for \$5.50. It was outstanding.

Jim struck up a conversation with a woman who was just leaving, and it turned out she and her party had driven all the way from a town 25 miles away where we had failed to find a place to eat. The couple in the next booth to us were from Hutchinson, 20 miles away. After more conversation, we learned that this man is a construction worker who is working on the road near Quivira NWR, where we want to go tomorrow. He cleared up some discrepancies between two maps I had and told me exactly how to get to the portion of the refuge I wanted to visit. (I recall it looked good when we were getting tired on a previous trip.) A great many of the roads on the AAA map of Kansas have no highway numbers on them, making it difficult to know which is the one you want to take. The road I thought I wanted is labelled SR 19 on the AAA map, but has only county numbers on the refuge map.

That's about it for the day, except for a trip to a Super Wal-Mart for all sorts of things. It takes forever to find things in those gigantic stores.

Weather was very warm and muggy--temperature in the upper 80's. Right now it's starting to rain and there's thunder and lightning in the distance. Severe thunderstorm warnings are in effect west of here.

This RV park is pretty nice. It's not listed in the Trailer Life Guide, but is in AAA's camping guide, although the directions in the book are pretty bad. (Fortunately the construction worker knew where it was, too, and gave us detailed directions how to find it.) It's located on the northwest side of SR 61 and US 50 between the Arkansas R. and where the two highways part company right in town. There's a sign on the highway for the park and it's not 0.3 mile off the road; the registration house is right next to the road, and the campsites are only a little bit farther. We have a site that backs up and is partly under some tall trees to the west, so we were in full shade most of the afternoon. The trees seem to be part of a city park--and possibly the campground is, too. We did register at a house/office combination at the entrance. The park has showers, but Jim didn't like the looks of them. That may be why Trailer Life doesn't list the place. But we've been in places they do list with equally bad rest rooms. Also TL sometimes lists places that have no rest rooms or showers at all.

We plan to go to Quivira NWR tomorrow. Last time we stayed in Great Bend and also visited Cheyenne Bottoms State Wildlife Area. It's supposed to have more shorebirds than Quivira, but our experience was that everything was tremendously far away--scope distance only--affording no photo opportunities. So I decided to skip it this time. Besides, we hated the RV park where we stayed there. We do have a list we got off the internet of other RV parks in that city. None are in the TL guide and if they are as bad as the one where we stayed, they don't deserve to be. Great Bend is sort of midway between Quivira and Cheyenne Bottoms, so is the place to stay if you want to visit both. However, Quivira is almost midway between Great Bend and Hutchinson, which is why I selected the latter as a place to stay.

4:00 pm., Thurs., April 21, 2005 Melody Acres RV Park, Hutchinson, KS

Quivira NWR was pretty much a bust this morning. We saw almost no shorebirds, just a handful of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, two Baird's Sandpipers, Killdeer, Black-necked Stilt, and American Avocet. Land birds were just the most common ones that we see everywhere. Jim wishes we'd stayed longer at Great Salt Plains.

Perhaps the most interesting thing we observed was the mating behavior of two avocets. They were right next to one another in some shallow water. The female had her head lowered so the lower curve of her bill was tangent to the water. After a few seconds of this, the male mounted her briefly, then hopped off. Then they linked bills and blended their adjacent wings as though they were holding hands and did a little pirhouette. It was all very elegant and graceful.

We did photograph two turtles that were standing in the middle of the refuge roads. I took digital images and will try to ID them from those, but for now they remain just turtles. They were definitely not the same species.

We had a pretty good thunderstorm last night, but it never seemed to be right where we are--just a fair amount of rain. TV news said large hail (baseball, golf ball, etc. sizes) fell in some areas. I hope we never get any of that. It could do bad things to our solar panels and vent covers.

This morning as we were driving west to the refuge, we could see a strange line of clouds ahead in the sky. Pretty soon they were right over us, then they were to

our east. Simultaneously the temperature cooled down, a brisk breeze started, and the sky got less hazy. We decided we had seen the cold front pass. This all happened in a period of an hour or two. High today seems to be at least 8 degrees lower than it was yesterday and the humidity is much lower.

We're going to indulge ourselves at the Dutch Kitchen tonight. We were told by others at Carolyn's Essenhaus yesterday that it's similar--and it's not far from where we're staying.

9:00 pm same day.

The Dutch Kitchen was also very good. We both had roast beef. It's about 7 fast miles southwest of our RV park on SR 61 and US 50.

Fri., April 22, 2005 Elk City Lake SP, nr. Independence, KS

No entry.

9:00 pm, Sat., April 23, 2005 Same place

Yesterday was an uneventful day of travel. We drove 170 miles southeastward to Independence, Kansas. My reason for coming here was to visit the site of the original Little House on the Prairie that Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote about in her books.

We found a campsite at Elk City Lake SP only five miles from town. It consists of mostly open turf and trees with narrow windbreaks around the edges. Very few birds, but also very few people. We have a pretty nice site—a back-in right next to a little ditch, so there should be birds, but all we see are robins, mockingbirds and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers.

The wind was blowing a gale yesterday and most of the day today, although it has calmed down now and promises to be fairly calm tomorrow, according to weather radio. Today's high was only in the high 50's, making it unpleasant to be outside.

Yesterday afternoon after we were rested up a bit, we went into Independence to the library, where they taught Jim how to access any email waiting for him on his home email address. There was nothing of value, so he just deleted it all. They wouldn't let him hook his laptop up to a phone jack; he had to use their computers, but it worked out OK.

This morning we drove a little ways around the reservoir and spent some time in an area near the Project Headquarters area. Saw a FLOCK of Harris's and White-crowned (*leucophrys*) Sparrows plus a fleeting glimpse of an Orchard Oriole. Eastern Bluebirds were nesting in nest boxes.

By then it was nearly 10:00, time for Little House on the Prairie to open, so we drove down there—only about 9 miles away. The discovery of the site is an interesting bit of detective work by a local woman. The Ingalls family was here for only one year, 1869-1870, but 1870 was a census year and their names are all on the census, although their last name is misspelled "Ingles." They were here before the area was officially open for homesteading, so never filed a claim. However, the names before and after the Ingalls family on the census rolls had filed claims. By looking at all the names on the census-taker's list, it was possible to discern the route he followed. There were two quarter-sections that might have been where the Ingalls family lived. A visit to the two areas revealed that on one of them there was an old well (Laura described the digging of the well) and some foundation stones that might have been

from an old cabin. Furthermore even today the appearance of the surroundings fits what she described in the book to a T. Not far away is a depression with a creek and trees. Beyond that is a low bluff.

A replica of the cabin has been built near the old farmhouse that is now on the grounds. The only problem with it is that it is on a concrete foundation and it has store-bought wooden shingles on the roof. It was built out of logs from the nearby creek though. The well is also there, although it has been capped for safety. The clerk in the gift shop (in the old farmhouse next door) didn't know where the rock foundation stones were. (They should have been featured!) Also, according to the AAA guide to the site, it was supposed to be possible to hike to the creek. The clerk thought there was a marked trail with a sign, but said, "I haven't checked it this year." I fogged around all over the place, but could find nothing. Every mowed trail led to a pasture fence. I really wanted to see the creek bottom, where the Indian encampment had been.

An old schoolhouse and post office have also been brought in and set up near the replica cabin. The schoolhouse dates from about 10 years after the Ingalls left, but the girls would have gone to school there had they remained in Kansas.

When Laura wrote here book, she thought their cabin was in Oklahoma, not realizing that this corner of Kansas was still Indian territory. That was why she said Pa had to go 40 miles to Independence for supplies. Actually it was only 13 miles.

In her book, Laura says the Ingalls left because he heard that the US government was going to kick the squatters off their land. Actually they didn't do so, and the Indians "agreed" to move to Oklahoma. In fact, Laura describes the caravan of them moving out right past their cabin. They apparently didn't know it was for good.

Probably the real reason they moved was that the man who bought their property back in Wisconsin didn't want to continue paying for the land. He wanted to go west. So Pa had to return there to reclaim the property.

Laura was only three years old when the family was in Kansas, although in the book she is more like five. Everything she wrote was based on what her parents told her about the place, for she was too young to remember it. It's remarkable how well the actual setting fits the book.

I know I've carried on at length about this visit, but it meant a lot to me. As a child I read and reread the Wilder books. Just before leaving home for this trip, I reread Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie once more. As I read them, I realized how much she influenced the way I try to live my life today. Over the years in my travels I've now visited all the homes she featured in her books. The only childhood home I've not visited is in Burr Oak, Iowa, which she did not write about—probably because it was an unhappy period.

The afternoon was spent resting and figuring out where we're going to go next—and staying in out of that cold wind.

5:15 pm, Sun., April 24, 2005
Elk City Lake SP, KS

THE FIRST TWO PARAGRAPHS DESCRIBE COMPUTER PROBLEMS I'VE HAD. I WANTED A RECORD OF IT. IF YOU'RE NOT INTERESTED, SKIP THEM.

Last night when I went to write up my diary, my computer refused to bring up Windows. It's been giving me problems for quite a while, but usually after several tries, it would start. Jim had just gone to bed, so I awoke him and used his computer. Unfortunately it has WordPerfect 12 for Windows, while I'm still using my old friend

WordPerfect 6 for DOS. It was extremely difficult to do even the most rudimentary tasks on it. I didn't get it written up and saved to my satisfaction (on his computer and on my diskette) until 11:00. In the process I created a number of extraneous files on Jim's computer and despite all my searches I could not figure out how to do the simple task of deleting them! I doubt he knows either.

Today I looked in the instruction book for my computer to see if it addressed what to do. It said to start it up from the start-up diskette. I looked in my box of diskettes and was overjoyed to find a copy of it there. I started it with that, did a couple of things, including a 45-min scandisk, which found no problems. It ended up at A:\. When I tried to change to C:\, where my WordPerfect is, it balked. So I just turned the computer off at the switch. Then I turned it back on. IT STARTED right away. So I'm now using my old friend, WP 6, again. I was even able to access the WP 12 document I created last evening, (TR-PRAI.423) although for some reason it has twice as many bites as my usual installments do. I hope it doesn't cause any problems for Nancy.

THE DAY'S ACTIVITIES

After last night's computer problems were more or less under control, I had to stay up another hour to calm down--to bed at midnight. Then my Restless Legs Syndroms (RLS) kicked up a couple of hours later, as it frequently does when I'm upset, so I got up and read for another 45 minutes. A good nap this afternoon, plus a computer that is now working has me back in good shape.

Today dawned clear, and CALM for a change. It was still cold (44_). We spent several hours in the bottomlands along Card Creek on the north side of the lake. This is an area of narrow channels, but they seem still to be full of water backed up by the dam. Tall trees are in the area--and finally some interesting birds and wonderfully quite recording conditions. I saw (and recorded) the first two eastern warblers of the trip, Prothonotary and Northern Parula. I suspect both will breed in the area. Also fun were the first Field Sparrow, Summer Tanager, and Indigo Bunting of the trip.

When we got back to the trailer, a Baltimore Oriole was singing right next to it, and he's been doing so most of the rest of the day.

Jim had to repair the battery box he made for the front of the trailer, so I took the truck to what they call a nature trail, that makes a 2/3-mile loop through the upland forest near the Memorial Overlook of the dam. This was a bust. The only birds were Northern Cardinals. I did find some pretty pink flowers. They had four united petals on a long tube, and leaves like some geraniums. I couldn't find them in my only flower book. (I took digital images and worked from them.)

I also photographed the leaves of a couple of the trees and brought back samples, too. These I succeeded in identifying--Northern Red Oak and Shagbark Hickory. They call the trail the Post Oak Nature Trail--don't know of that tree is there, too.

Although they call the trail a Nature Trail, there were no interpretive signs or numbered posts and a leaflet. That disappointed me.

We had planned to leave this morning, but since it was noon by the time I finished my sightseeing and Jim finished his battery box repairs, I suggested we stay another night. Besides, I really needed that nap after my ordeal of last evening.

Mon., April 25, 2005
Crawford SP, north of Girard, KS

No entry.

5:00 pm, Tues., April 26, 2005
Crawford SP, north of Girard, KS

Again, I've had horrendous problems getting this computer started. Finally--and unfortunately I'm not quite sure what I did--I got it started once again. I guess I might as well update my diary and save it on my diskette.

Yesterday morning it started raining around 3:00 am and rained off and on, mostly on, all day long. During a mid-morning lull in the rain Jim hooked us up and we drove about 100 miles to this state park, which is almost to the Missouri border.

The park is beside a fishing lake and surrounded by woodland. Around 5:00 I took a short walk around the campground, but found nothing special in the way of birds. I keep hoping for some migrating eastern warblers, but all I saw were Yellow-rumps (Myrtles).

Our purpose in coming here was to visit Prairie State Park in Missouri, which has the largest expanse of tall-grass prairie in the state. It's about 30 miles from here, but this was the closest campground I could find to it. Knowing that its visitors center would probably not open very early, we arrived shortly after 9:00, which was when it opened. By then the wind was blowing a gale.

We viewed the excellent diorama of a Bison surrounded by prairie wildflowers and animals. We also viewed their orientation video, which was quite nice. The information we got was not what we wanted, though. They do have a Greater Prairie-Chicken lek, but you have to view it from the road, which is scope-distance from the birds. Henslow's Sparrows are along the trails, but you can be on them only from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, which is when the wind is up in these parts. I did get a couple of books on wildflowers and a very nice free publication showing where all the prairies open to the public in Missouri are located. It indicates which ones have chickens and which have H's Sparrows. I think we'll try to find some on our own.

The rest of the morning we drove some of the county roads that run north-and-south through the park and took some pictures of prairie. By then the remains of yesterday's rain clouds had become beautiful high puffies. Since this is the largest prairie, it seemed as though it would be a good idea to get pictures here. Other places there will surely be farmers' fields in the scene along with the native prairie.

I photographed half a dozen prairie wildflowers with both of my cameras. Will try to identify them using my new books and the digital images this evening.

8:00 pm, Wed., April 27, 2005
Osceola RV Park, Osceola, MO

I think I may have figured out why my computer is giving me conniptions. I have my Thayer Birding Software in the CD-Rom drive. That may be confusing the thing. When I opened that drawer immediately after turning on the computer, it brought up Windows just fine. The question still is, why was it working OK earlier in the trip, but not lately? Oh, well, I doubt I'll ever begin to understand these exasperating machines, useful as they are.

I spent three hours last evening identifying EVERYTHING I had photographed with my digital camera. That must be a record, for usually I have to give up on something. There were a lot of plants, plus the two turtles at Quivira NWR. The little one was a Yellow Mud Turtle, and the big one was a Snapping Turtle. Jim had picked up the little one so I could get a picture of the plastron (underside), but he hadn't picked up the big one. At the time, the thought crossed my mind that that turtle looked mean. When I compared notes with Jim today after telling him what it was, he said he

had had the same thought; that was why he didn't pick it up. I thought it was surprising to find either of these turtles on a road, but the book said that occasionally they do occur there. Anyway, they'll be nice additions to the Sea and Sage Library.

My wildflowers from Elk City Lake, 4/23:

Dwarf Larkspur (*Delphinium tricorne*)

Rose Vervain (*Glandularia canadensis*)

I also photographed a Harris's Sparrow in a bush there. It was a bit small, but identifiable. I considered myself lucky to even find the bird in the view-finder to take its picture.

Those from Prairie State Park, 4/27:

Yellow Star Grass (*Hypoxis hirsuta*)

Prairie Violet (*Viola pedatifida*)

Indian Paintbrush (*Castilleja coccinea*)

Wood Betony or Lousewort (*Pedicularis canadensis*)

False Garlic (*Nothoscordum bivalve*) - probable ID, flower closed

Rose Vervain (again)

Again I didn't get to bed until almost midnight, but this time after a most satisfying evening. My new digital camera really takes nice close-ups of flowers. My pictures are much better than some of the ones in the flower guides I bought.

This morning we drove about 90 miles to Osceola, Missouri. It is a town of 870 people, but is the county seat of its county. I selected it because its RV park is the closest to Taberville Prairie. That is a place I've visited on two previous trips, once with Mother and once with Jim. Two bird-finding guides that I brought along recommended it for both birds and flowers. One even said where there is a Greater Prairie-Chicken lek.

The Osceola RV Park is a real gem of a place. It's owned by the city, and is on the shore of one of the arms Truman "Lake" (a reservoir). There is lots of parkland besides the RV Park. The sites are all pull-throughs; we prefer back-ins, but the setting is under oaks with natural forest nearby. This all sounds very rustic, but listen to what else it has: full hook-ups (including sewer, which we haven't had for since Bosque Birdwatchers in New Mexico), cable TV (good assortment of basic channels), and even wi-fi (wireless internet access). The latter was "down" today, but the manager said it should be fixed tomorrow. The price: \$14.00 a night with senior discount (\$15.50 without). We paid \$22.00 a night in Kansas state parks for just electric and water--and the showers were solar-heated, which means they weren't hot because the weather has been quite cold. We weren't sure how long we'd stay here, so we told the manager we'd just pay for two nights to start. He said, "Why don't you just register, then pay when you leave?" That's unheard of in RV parks.

After lunch and a nap, we decided to scout Taberville Prairie so we wouldn't waste morning time doing not knowing where we were going. The place is about a 25-minute drive west from here through beautiful rolling farmland, forests, creeks, etc. The road seems to have no or curves cuts; it just goes up to the top of each hill and down to the bottom in a straight course.

The guidebook said the lek was near the end of a particular two-track road and that a blind is sometimes set up there during the breeding season. We didn't find a blind, but we're pretty sure we located the lek. It's on the top of a gentle hill several hundred yards from the parking area. Lekking season is about finished now; that is, the females are probably no longer coming in. However, the males often continue to display in a somewhat half-hearted manner for several weeks afterwards. We've decided to go out one morning around sunrise and see if we're right about where the

lek is and no doubt scare the birds away. If we succeed in finding activity, Jim will wrap himself in camouflage netting, carry a chair and go out well before daybreak the next morning. I'll probably have to carry some of his gear, for with camera and tripod, it'll be too much.

It looks as though none of this can happen tomorrow, for it's supposed to rain tonight through tomorrow morning. Guess we'll do laundry tomorrow. There's a laundromat here in Osceola.

Today was a beautiful partly cloudy day, with a high of around 60_. The clouds were starting to thicken around sunset, so I think the weather forecast will turn out right.