

North through the Prairies

With Sylvia, Jim and Charlie Gallagher

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

PART 3

5:00 pm., Wed., May 25, 2005

Valentine Motel & RV Park, Valentine, NE

Yesterday afternoon the sky gradually got cloudier and cloudier, with thunderheads here and there. The forecast was for a 60% chance of thunderstorms during the night. We were parked on a grassy site at Cottonwood Lake that was down a slight slope from the gravel road. Since we feared we might not be able to haul the trailer out in the morning if it rained heavily in the night, we hooked up and moved to a different site, this time a level dirt/gravel one.

When it was becoming dark, we drove down to the entrance area near the highway, where the habitat looked sort of right for Yellow Rails. Since they say those birds nest at Lacreek NWR, I thought there was a possibility there might be some there. I clicked my two quarters together in the correct cadence, tik-tik tik-tik-tik, alternately, for quite a while, but no response came. We did hear lots of winnowing Wilson's Snipe and honking Canada Geese.

We were glad we'd moved the trailer, because we were awakened by a noisy thunder storm around midnight. I got up and listened to WeatherRadio and discovered the only severe thunderstorm warning in effect was for the Hyannis area 60 miles south of us. I think we must have been on the northern edge of it. Anyway, I set the radio for alarm mode and went back to bed. Fortunately the alarm never went off.

We awakened to glowering skies and a cold wind. Soon afterwards it started to rain--just rain, not thunder and lightning this time. This lasted for a couple of hours. Since we only had a 60-mile drive to make today, I fixed us a leisurely "real breakfast" as Jim terms it: scrambled eggs with ham, biscuits and strawberry jam. I had to thaw the ham over the pilot for a while, since we didn't have electricity for the microwave.

After it stopped, I went out and photographed a couple of flowers on the dunes at the edge of the campground. We downloaded my flowers from yesterday and today into Jim's computer and I made a cursory attempt to identify some of them. None came right away. I may need another book. Anyway, I didn't want to run out of battery power and have to hook up to the inverter, so I gave up.

We hooked up and left around 9:30, lost an hour to a time change back to central time, and arrived here in Valentine around noon. There was no one in the motel/RV park office when we got here, so we just picked a site, dropped off the trailer and the dog, and went out to lunch and did some shopping.

It turns out we're right across the street from a nice IGA grocery store with the best meat I've seen in ages--lots better than most chain grocery stores. (IGA = Independent Grocers of America. They buy staples through the association, but otherwise run their own affairs.)

The RV park is quite nice. We're backed up to a thick row of shrubs, and there is also a large lawn nearby with nice big trees. We've seen a Least Flycatcher and an American Redstart out the trailer window and heard lots of other birds in the trees and bushes without really trying. The campground is right in town (population 2820), but

behind the motel from the highway, and promises to be a good place to wait out the Memorial Day holiday weekend. We plan to make day trips to a number of interesting-sounding places not far from here.

8:50 pm, Thurs., May 26, 2005

Valentine Motel & RV Park, Valentine, NE

The day started out clear, cold (low 40s) and breezy. Gradually puffy clouds developed, making an absolutely glorious day to photograph the scenery in this area. Late in the afternoon the clouds coalesced and we had a pretty good 15-minute rain shower. Then it was back to being partly cloudy. High temperature was in the 60s.

Valentine and surrounding Cherry County are in an interesting area ecologically. The Niobrara River runs through the area. Seventy six miles of it starting just east of Valentine were declared a National Wild and Scenic River in 1991. On the south bank is a steep, densely wooded cliff, while on the north bank the slope is more gradual and the trees are more scattered. Six ecosystems come together in the county, especially near the river. According to the National Park Service brochure:

"At least 83 eastern species [of plants and animals] reach their western range limits and 47 western species approach their eastern limits in the Niobrara River Valley.

"Trees of the eastern deciduous forest grow on the moist bottomlands and islands. They include bur oak, American elm, black walnuts, green ash, hackberry, and cottonwood.

"Boreal forest species are found growing on north-facing slopes where shade and abundant groundwater in the forms of seeps and streams create cooler microclimates. Species such as paper birch, basswood, a hybrid . . . aspen, ferns, and club mosses grow here.

"Rocky Mountain plants include ponderosa pine, serviceberry, and horizontal juniper. Most of these plants grow on the drier hillsides and canyon slopes on both sides of the river.

"Three types of prairie are found in the river valley, displaying the botanical transition between the eastern tallgrass prairie, the mixed grass prairie of the sandhills, and the shortgrass prairie to the west."

I read in a newspaper a few days ago an article about the area and it said that the government came very close to building a dam on the river and destroying all these wonderful habitats. Finally concerned local citizens prevailed and the place was declared a National Wild and Scenic River, ending the dam idea.

This morning we sampled all the ecosystems when we visited Smith Falls State Park. This park is northeast of Valentine about 15 miles via SR 12. It is the newest state park and features the tallest waterfall in the state. It is the result of a small creek tumbling 70 feet down the cliff on the south side of the river. Although small, it is very beautiful. Almost perfectly symmetrical, it seems to defy logic, for it looks like it flows over a high cap of rock with more friable rock on either side. Anyway the result looks like the back of a woman's head with long silvery hair trailing down evenly on the back and sides.

The access to the park is via a spur gravel road south from SR 12. When we came to where it descended to the river through an open ponderosa pine forest, I had Jim let me out so I could walk. Of course, just then the breeze got stronger, so recordings were minimal, but it was fun to see the habitat change. I saw a Blue

Grosbeak, always a difficult bird to find because of its dependence on shrubs with meadow nearby. Also present were Grasshopper Sparrows and Eastern Bluebirds.

After we paid our park fee and drove down to the edge of the river, we walked to the waterfall across a historic bridge that had been restored as a footbridge and moved here. There was a wheel-chair-accessible ramp right to the base of the waterfall. Since it looked like such a good trail, I took Charlie along. This was probably the longest walk he has had on the entire trip. He doesn't like gravel because his feet are sort of tender. He did well on his walk.

Around the waterfall where the deciduous forest was quite lush, Ovenbirds were singing everywhere--the first for the trip. Of course, I didn't see one; I rarely do. They're the western version, that only says "teach-teach-teach . . ." instead of "er-teach-er-teach-er-teach-er. . ." as they do farther east.

Most of the lands near the river are in private hands, but Fort Niobrara NWR and the Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve occupy sizeable areas. The private lands are mainly used for cattle ranching and appear to be well managed.

Rafting and canoeing are popular on the river and there are some rapids, including one that has to be portaged. The portion that ran past the park looked pretty tame. While we were there a group of rafters got out of their boat to look at the falls, then continued on their way.

Altogether a delightful morning. I'll finish up with some miscellaneous observations.

This morning in the campground I heard a strange dove-like call. Through the trailer window with the heater fan running, it sounded like the last notes of a Mourning Dove without the initial "oo-ah," so I thought maybe I just wasn't hearing it all. The only other dove that could occur here would be Eurasian Collared, which I remembered is spreading fast. I looked up the description of the call, and it certainly seemed possible. It wasn't until we got back this noon that I saw one. They seem to be common in the tall trees of this RV park. According to one of the field guides, they're mainly found in towns, which is probably why I haven't encountered one since we left New Mexico, where I also saw one in a town.

There's an old man in an RV across from us who is always all dressed up in full ranch-style garb, including cowboy boots. The poor old fellow hobbles around as though those boots are killing his feet, but I guess he can't abandon his heritage. It reminds me of women who ruin their feet wearing spike heels.

Jim went into a large western store to see if he could find a belt or a hat he liked to replace the hat he lost and the belt he wore out. He couldn't. The hats were strictly cowboy, and they laughed when he described what he wanted. The belts were just as poor quality as WalMart's and much more expensive.

While I waited in the truck outside the store in downtown Valentine, I was amused to note that in the half-block between the store and the corner there were two religious gift shops and three saloons, one of which featured "entertainment." Elsewhere in town are lots more bars, saloons, cocktail lounges, etc. I didn't know what category "St. Christopher's, Cocktails and Fine Dining" belonged in. Unfortunately I think the reason there are so many is that there is an Indian reservation right across the border in South Dakota, and those are often dry.

Tonight I cooked the steak I bought yesterday at Henderson's IGA. It was just as good as it looked. Most steaks (and chops) sold in chain markets in the midwest and the south are no more than half an inch thick. How do you grill a half-inch steak rare and still brown the outside? I think I'd better buy a couple more steaks before we leave here and freeze them.

8:30 pm, Fri., May 27, 2005

Valentine Motel & RV Park, Valentine, NE

After a cold, clear night in the 30s, the temperatures warmed up to 67_ this afternoon. In the late morning lots of pretty puffy clouds developed, and it looked like there was rain way off, but we didn't get any. By late afternoon it had all cleared off. The major flaw in the day was the 20-30 mph wind that blew from dawn until late afternoon. It's pretty calm now, although the sun has not yet set.

We went to Niobrara NWR this morning shortly after the visitors center opened at 8:00. I had planned for us to spend the morning there, but when I asked the desk attendant about Sharp-tailed Grouse, which are there, she said Valentine NWR is a better place to find them. She telephoned the place and put me on the phone to the refuge manager, who will be off duty tomorrow. He indicated that they were still displaying and that the blind was still up. So we decided to head down there and check things out. We were given a map of the refuge with the location of the blind on it and sheet with some suggestions on how to proceed when we got there.

(If any readers are interested in searching for either Greater Prairie-Chickens or Sharp-tailed Grouse at Valentine, information may be obtained via email at fortniobrara@fws.org or calling Valentine NWR at 402-376-1899 and speaking with the manager, the only one who knows about the birds. Fort Niobrara and Valentine are connected, hence the above email address.)

The blind is accessed from the main north-south road, US 83, that runs through the refuge. Unfortunately it is a 0.4 mile walk from the highway to the blind across the prairie. The only sign of a trail is the barest hint of crushed grass where some vehicle drove out there to set up the blind a couple of months ago. We could see the blind off in the distance from the highway, but it'll be a good trick to find before dawn in the morning. There are reflectors on all four sides. Jim walked out to the blind and reported the footing isn't too bad. I stayed behind in the truck. But I was sorry I hadn't gone, too, when he reported flushing up several birds at 10:00 - 10:30 am.

The instructions say to get there a half-hour before sunrise, which is a little after 6:00, but Jim wants to arrive before daylight, so we're going to get up at 3:30 in the morning. The place is 25-30 miles south of the town of Valentine, plus that 0.4 mile walk, which took him 15 minutes in broad daylight this morning. I plan to go, too, but I don't intend to walk across the prairie until it gets light. I'll keep a discreet distance so as not to disturb the birds. My main problem is how or whether to carry both my scope and my tape recorder. I'll probably just carry the tape recorder and be contented with distant views of the birds, even though they'll be lifers.

After scouting the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek, we spent the rest of the morning driving one of the "trails" in Valentine NWR, which we were told is actually a road. [As we continued to travel in the northern midwest, it became apparent that "trail" is their word for any very poor two-track road with grass growing up the middle.] Anyone wanting to visit this refuge really must go to the Niobrara NWR headquarters and get the latest information about road conditions, maps, bird lists, etc. The two refuges are administered together, and only Niobrara has a visitors center with staff in it during regular hours. We were told that at Valentine sometimes all the staff are out in the field and the headquarters is closed. There are two information kiosks for Valentine on US 83, however.

Anyway we set out on the main "trail." It was a narrow gravel road and so washboardy that we couldn't drive more than 5 mph for long stretches. There was no

way to avoid the bumps because the road was too narrow, and it seemed that others had already attempted to get a little bit over and made it bumpy, too. It turned out to be ten miles long, but got better toward the end. We drove it westward with our back to the sun and it came out on Spur 16B, a nice paved road back to US 83.

The wind kept some of the birds down, but it may have contributed to some interesting experiences we did have. We had hardly gotten started down the road when we caught sight of a sandpiper in the road right in front of the truck. It allowed rather close approach, but didn't fly off. It just kept running along ahead of us. We're pretty sure it was an Upland Sandpiper, but something was wrong with its head feathers, so its head pattern looked strange. It also had a funny white patch on one wing. Finally, it didn't seem to have as long a neck as it should have. Jim got pictures, so I'll be able to decide for sure what it was. It's possible it was a juvenile, but more likely it was an adult with a skin or feather infection of some sort.

Later on we saw an Upland Sandpiper that looked normal. It, too, ran down the road in front of us a ways, but after a short distance, it took flight, showing its rufous tail sides.

A short distance after the first sandpiper, a Common Nighthawk flushed up from practically under my tires, and I hadn't even seen it. It flew over to a nearby fencepost and allowed Jim to get out of the truck and aim his camera at it. I think the pictures will be good. I'm sure the strong wind is what kept it from flying farther away. Before the drive was over we flushed up at least three more nighthawks, and only one of them did I see in advance. They were all right on the gravel, not in the grass beside it, and looked exactly like one more large rock.

Other land birds were scarce, and the usual sandhills species: Lark Sparrow, Eastern Kingbird, Barn Swallow, etc. The latter always surprised us, for we wondered where it nested. Jim said there was one nesting in the grouse blind, and he wondered what would happen to the nest when they remove the blind, as they will soon.

We passed lots of wet areas, both large and small, including several sizeable lakes. Almost no water birds were visible. They were no doubt hiding from the wind in the marsh vegetation. All in all, the drive was a disappointment because of that wind.

At the Niobrara NWR visitors center I bought another plant book, "Grassland Plants of South Dakota and the Northern Great Plains" by Johnson and Larson, published by South Dakota State University in 1999. While I was waiting for Jim to walk to the grouse blind, I was able to identify the two flowers I photographed at Cottonwood Lake:

Hoary Vetchling, *Lathyrus polymorphus*

Narrowleaf Beardtongue, *Penstemon angustifolius*

I couldn't remember well enough what the ones on Bowring Ranch Road looked like. I'll have check them on Jim's computer sometime. [Still haven't done it.]

7:15 pm, Sat., May 28, 2005

Valentine Motel and RV Park, Valentine, NE

This morning we got up at 3:30, got dressed and set out for the grouse lek. We decided to forego any food in the interest of getting a bit more sleep. We got to the parking area around 4:45. Sunrise was to be a little after 6:00.

As arranged, I stayed in the truck while Jim set off across the dark prairie in search of that tiny blind, which in the daytime is visible from the car and from every

location enroute to it, but which was invisible at that early hour. There was good moonlight--a little over half full. Jim also wore a little head lamp. After a long time, at least 15 minutes, I caught sight of his headlamp, and it was far to the right of where he was supposed to be. So I contacted him by FRS radio and told him to head in a different direction. I knew where the blind was because there is a stick that points to it nailed to the top of a gatepost at the parking spot. He was at off by at least 40_. That was fine at the beginning, for it was not possible to walk directly to it because of some marshy areas, but he was far past the marsh. He had said he wanted to approach it from the rear so as not to disturb any early birds, but this was ridiculous. Anyway, we kept in touch by radio and I was able to tell him as he got more or less in line with it. By this time it was getting fairly light and he could see it. He had wanted to get there before daylight, but that was not to be. The birds were already there; he could hear them. Still he was able to enter the blind without flushing them.

The ranger had told us that the birds came very close to the blind, and that turned out to be true. In fact, there seemed to be one on the roof a good portion of the time!

I waited until just before sunrise and set out, carrying my tape recorder, but not my scope. It was just too much. I wandered toward the now-clearly-visible blind, recording meadowlarks (Western and a few Eastern) and Grasshopper Sparrows, along with the inevitable Mourning Doves.

Then when it seemed to me I was still a long ways from the blind, suddenly a dozen or so grouse took flight and flew far away. Apparently I had flushed them. I was absolutely sick. And Jim hadn't gotten even one picture, because the sun was not yet on the lek.

We decided the only thing I could do at that point was join him in the blind and hope they would come back. As I approached it, one final bird took flight, and I got a good look at its shape and size, which clinched the ID and gave me my life bird. It certainly wasn't what I wanted, though, for it was only a silhouette.

When I got into the blind, Jim told me he had been recording the birds with his tiny tape recorder, but the recording was marred by a jackhammer off in the distance. It seemed strange to have someone out in the middle of a bunch of sand dunes running a jackhammer at 5:00 on a Saturday morning. I hadn't heard it, and Jim couldn't seem to figure out what direction it came from, cooped up in the blind as he was. I thought it strange that I hadn't heard it.

By the time I got there, Jim was thoroughly chilled. He had thought that since there was no wind and the temperature was "only" 43_, he didn't need to wear his longjohns. Was he wrong! As we sat in that cold blind waiting and hoping, he was visibly shivering, especially his legs. If his knees had been near one another they'd have been knocking.

We sat there for about an hour becoming more and more dejected. He was certainly not looking forward to coming back again tomorrow to make up for my blunder.

Then a single male came in. He was very wary and looked around a lot. He wasn't very close to the blind either. But he stayed, so we hoped maybe the rest of the group might come. We watched that male for a long time. Finally I asked Jim if maybe he should take a token picture just for the record. We were afraid the shutter might scare it, but finally he took a chance. It didn't phase the bird, but it wasn't a great shot--just one so he could count it on his life list. (He only counts birds he photographs.) I had my life bird legitimately, for I could see him well. If nothing more happened, we'd had a bit of success.

Finally, after the single male had been there around half an hour, in flew all the rest of the birds! They landed out of our view just over the edge of the little flat knoll in front of the blind. The farthest portion we could see was probably 40 feet away. Were they going to come up onto the lek? This time the answer came in only five minutes: they were! We were elated, especially I, who had spoiled things an hour and a half earlier.

In no time the birds picked up where they had left off, and this time the light was excellent. The blind had been situated perfectly for close-up viewing and photography, with the sun at our backs and nice and close to the action. And what action! The main event took place about 20-30 feet in front of us. About 7 or 8 of the birds were all around a single female, who was half hidden in the grass. Each male was perhaps 6 or 8 feet from her in an approximate circle. Then they'd all crouch down, extend their wings, lower their heads, and elevate their tails revealing their fluffy white undertail coverts. With very tiny, rapid steps they'd run a few feet, more or less maintaining their distance from the hen. This happened over and over, and we couldn't figure out how they all started exactly simultaneously. What was the cue? Each male seemed to have his own bit of territory around the hen, so sometimes they ran in one direction and sometimes another. While doing this, they revealed their beautiful pinkish purple esophageal sacs and their bright yellow-orange combs. These birds don't have the long rabbit-ear feathers that the prairie-chickens flail around so dramatically.

There were also a number of twosomes of males facing one another intently on the periphery of the lek 30-40 feet from the main action, apparently jockeying for position, which seemed to be a draw in each case. Apparently they weren't qualified for the center ring yet. Jim said that occasionally one of the main birds would come over and put one of those sideline birds in its place with some posturing.

Occasionally between periods of coordinated dancing, there would be a jump up, but not nearly so often as with the prairie-chickens.

The sounds were incredible: such a wide variety of moans, gobbles, whistles, etc. When they did their running in concert, I realized what Jim was hearing that sounded like a jackhammer. It seemed to be a feather sound, either from the tail or from the rear of the wings. Later, I looked it up in *Birds of North America* and learned it was a feather sound, "produced by lateral movement of upturned rectrices [tail feathers], causing them to scrape or click against one another as part of Dance." It said there it was on two frequencies, 0.2 kHz and 3.0 to 3.5 kHz. I think the low frequency drowned out the high one. The rate averages 18.7 "clicks" (a funny term for a sound that resembles a jackhammer!) per second. In addition to the feather sound, BNA describes six different male vocalizations on the lek: cackle, "chilk," "coo," "cork" (like a cork being pulled from a bottle), gobble, and whine. I'll have to listen to my tape and try to hear all of them. I'm sure I heard at least four.

Most of the time the other birds were on the ground, there was a bird atop the blind, walking noisily around and calling--I forget which call, but my tape will answer that. I don't know why it was up there.

Jim took two or three rolls of film, including some volleys of the action. We have high hopes for the pictures. Finally the birds all raised their heads and looked around as though they sensed danger, this time not from us, and took flight. But not until they had given us a wonderful half-hour of dancing. We were ecstatic.

After that we realized we were both cold--Jim more so than I, for I had my thermal underwear on. Even the brisk 0.4-mile hike back across the prairie, lifting our feet and our gear high for the vegetation, failed to warm us up. Even the heater on high in the truck failed to warm me up. After a decadent breakfast in a local cafe with

more coffee than I usually drink, my feet were still cold, even though I had changed out of my wet shoes and socks. Only after we'd been in the trailer for a while did I really warm up. Then I took a two-hour nap!

Late this afternoon Jim asked, "Did you hear the jackhammer? I wonder where it was." Only then did I discover that Jim had really thought he was hearing one all the time he was there. In fact, I had a hard time convincing him it was the birds. Only when I showed him the information from *Birds of North America*, and translated the technical terminology, was he convinced. He did agree that a lek out in the sand dunes was a strange place for a jackhammer.

I've been corresponding by PocketMail (e-mail that works on an ordinary telephone) with Terry Hill. She was active in Sea and Sage and, even more so, in Amigos de Bolsa Chica, before she and her husband retired and started spending long months on the road in their motor home. She's the birder and has sort of been tagging along behind us on a trip to the prairies similar to ours. They couldn't get started as soon as we did. Today she said, "You're making me crazy." She went on in this vein: Here I have all these plans, arrange for mail delivery someplace else, etc., and you lure me with these wonderful bird reports.

They're in Ogallala SRA now, but after hearing of our Sharp-tailed Grouse success and how wonderful Cottonwood Lake SRA is, have decided to forfeit the fee they paid for their last night at Ogallala and join us here tomorrow. They had planned to go to Custer in the Black Hills from there, but she can't resist what I've told her we've found. It'll be fun to get together with them for a couple of nights. I know they'll like this RV park. I hope they have as good weather as we did today.

I had thought we might take a drive to Fort Niobrara NWR this afternoon, but it was such a nice warm (mid-70s) day with only a breeze (by my definition, not Nebraska's), that I couldn't tear myself away from my comfortable outdoor chair. So I just sat around doing my embroidery and watching the birds in the treetops. I tilted the chair back and focused my binoculars on a Tennessee Warbler for a long time. It was fun to watch its deliberate foliage gleaning up in the treetop. Also present from time to time and even more deliberate were two vireos, a Warbling and a Red-eyed.

I marinated and grilled those pork chops from Henderson's IGA for dinner. They were just as good as the steak the other night.

A truly memorable day. Two personal goals of this trip were (1) to see a Sharp-tailed Grouse, the only potential lifer in this area, and (2) to try to decide what bird to put on my Birds of North America quilt for Nebraska. The Nebraska bird was finally chosen today. I hope Jim gets a good photo of one in that display position. In designing the quilt, I've selected one bird from each state and Canadian province with which I've had a memorable experience. The birds for all the other states and provinces have been decided, and most blocks are totally finished. The remaining ones are all stamped to embroider and I have them with me to work on. (I haven't done as much embroidery as I hoped to. Between the lack of TV and writing this diary, there hasn't been as much time as I thought. I've done lots of reading in lieu of TV.)

8:45 pm, Sun., May 29, 2005

Valentine Motel & RV Park, Valentine, NE

We sort of took it easy today. We slept in until 6:00, fooled around in the trailer and had pancakes for breakfast, then went out to Fort Niobrara NWR and drove their 3.5-mile tour route. The day was partly cloudy and quite cold, with a low last night in the low 40s and high in the mid-60's. The breeze was moderate, maybe 10-15 mph at most.

Fort Niobrara was established in the late 1800s to keep the Indians from attacking the settlers who were occupying their former lands. They had been sent north to present-day South Dakota, where they still have a reservation. When the Indians became resigned to their lot, the fort was decommissioned in the early 1900s. Some of the land was homesteaded, but about half of it became a refuge, one of the first established to try to save the bison, whose numbers had declined to only 300 animals. It still is a home for them. A few are in the huge enclosure through which the tour road meanders. The rest are elsewhere in the refuge, also fenced in. There are also a few elk.

We drove the tour road slowly, so slowly that we were forever having to pull over a little bit off the road to let other cars pass us. This being a holiday weekend, we encountered more traffic than had been at other refuges. Of course, the promise of megamammals probably draws more tourists than simply birds.

In addition to the bison, there is a prairie dog town--not as big as the one at Lacreek NWR, but still fun to watch. This time we succeeded in seeing a couple of Burrowing Owls, which are always in these communities nesting in abandoned prairie dog burrows.

We also saw quite a few Upland Sandpipers, and Jim got some more pictures of them, this time in the grass instead of on a gravel road.

After driving the tour road, I walked the road to the Bur Oak Picnic Area in the refuge. It's only about 1/3 mile long and runs along the Niobrara River. The habitat is partly prairie, partly trees and shrubs, so the bird life is quite varied. By the time we got there at 11:30, the breeze was almost a wind, so I couldn't do much recording. I think I may go back there first thing tomorrow. It's supposed to be a place for hybrid Eastern x Western Wood-Pewees. I heard one that sounded like a standard Eastern, plus a lot of other birds, but nothing unexpected.

We had just finished lunch when Terry and John Hill arrived. We spent a good part of the rest of the afternoon chatting with them. They've gone down to the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek now to check it out. If they're lucky, the birds will be doing a pre-sunset dance, so they won't have to get up early in the morning to go down there again. (That's why we suggested they wait until late in the day to go. We remembered how the Lesser Prairie-Chickens had done a similar late-day performance--not as vigorous as the morning one, but still impressive.)

8:30 pm., Mon, May 30, 2005

Valentine Motel & RV Park, Valentine, NE

Terry and John did succeed in seeing a Sharp-tailed Grouse from the blind, but only one. No dancing. She's contented with that--it was a life bird--and decided against going out there again this morning. That tramp across the prairie is sort of daunting, especially in the dark and when combined with a freezing wait on a metal folding chair in a drafty blind.

This has been an excellent place to spend a holiday weekend. It's a very nice park with lots of trees and birds, and it's never been full. Each night a few people have arrived in the evening and taken off the next morning on their trips. Others have been here for several days. Best of all, no one has been noisy.

The unprecedented happened today: there was no wind, not even a breeze by *my* definition of one. For long periods of time the leaves on the trees didn't even move. It was mostly cloudy, and I don't think the temperature got above 57_, but the sky was pretty bright all morning. However, we kept eying the dark clouds lurking in

the west.

It was an ideal day for recording, and I made the best of it. We went back to the Bur Oak Picnic Area at Fort Niobrara NWR. I had Jim let me out at the start of the road, and I merely wandered back and forth within 50 ft of that spot for at least 40 minutes recording a wide variety of birds. Then I gradually worked my way to the other end of the road.

The first interesting sound puzzled me a bit. It had the quality of the Tennessee Warblers that gave me so much trouble at Big Lake SP in Missouri. This one was definitely doing a three-parted song, while those others' songs had been two-parted. Playback and a binoculars view confirmed that I had a Tennessee, though, and I was happy to get a quite different song.

As always in the east and midwest, there were lots of Red-eyed Vireos. But then I heard a song that was slower and huskier than the Red-eyes. One of its phrases sounded almost like the burry "breer" of the Great Crested Flycatchers, which were also present, so it was hard to sort it out. I knew it was a vireo song from the pattern, but which one? Fortunately, playback elicited what Jim and I call the "fly-bys," and I was able to get a decent look at the bird singing in the treetops. It was a Yellow-throated Vireo. Eventually I got it almost singing a solo; other species were rather distant.

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It was hard to tear myself away from that wonderful place, but finally around 10:30 I figured I'd recorded most everything there and Jim had been patient long enough. He understood that calm days are very few around here and was content to let me have my morning recording.

We spent the rest of the morning doing some roadside birding. We took SR 12

north, then east about six miles to a gravel road that went south to the east end of Fort Niobrara NWR. Enroute it descended to the Niobrara River and crossed it on a one-lane bridge. All along the several miles from SR 12 to the bridge, the habitat was ever-changing in the same way that the road to Smith Falls, which I described a few days ago, was. It is only about two or three miles west of that road and parallel to it. There was a barbed wire fence next to the road for almost its entire length (not true of Smith Falls road, where the fence was only on the very first portion), and it was usually the right distance for photography.

I drove and Jim tried to photograph birds out the window. He had success with only one species, but it was a nice one, a Dickcissel. He doesn't have very many pictures of that. He almost got a Grasshopper Sparrow, but his camera couldn't find the focus before it flew away. I tried recording it to bring it back. The recording was awful, for I did it at maximum recording volume out the truck window across Jim and Charlie, but it certainly stirred up the bird. Unfortunately it only did the fly-bys and would never perch again on the bush it had before. We braked for umpteen meadowlarks, but they always seemed to fly when we stopped. Jim may have gotten one back view. They invariably turn their backs to conceal their conspicuous yellow underparts.

After we got across the river, the road ascended quickly to the open prairie. Soon it entered the NWR where the fence was much higher to keep the elk penned in. That meant that any bird atop it was silhouetted against the bright gray sky, not nice green shrubs and grasses. So we proceeded a bit faster on that final segment.

Just as we were almost back to the trailer, it started to rain and did so for a couple of hours. The rest of the afternoon has been dark and gloomy, but not rainy. It's supposed to rain again after midnight and much of the day tomorrow. We have a 150-mile drive north to Pierre, SD, so I hope it doesn't rain too hard. TV weather seems to indicate the rain is less heavy farther north. We're glad it's just old-fashioned rain like we have at home, no pyrotechnics with descending icy golf-balls.

8:30 pm., Mon, May 30, 2005

Valentine Motel & RV Park, Valentine, NE

Terry and John did succeed in seeing a Sharp-tailed Grouse from the blind, but only one. No dancing. She's contented with that--it was a life bird--and decided against going out there again this morning. That tramp across the prairie is sort of daunting, especially in the dark and when combined with a freezing wait on a metal folding chair in a drafty blind.

This has been an excellent place to spend a holiday weekend. It's a very nice park with lots of trees and birds, and it's never been full. Each night a few people have arrived in the evening and taken off the next morning on their trips. Others have been here for several days. Best of all, no one has been noisy.

The unprecedented happened today: there was no wind, not even a breeze by *my* definition of one. For long periods of time the leaves on the trees didn't even move. It was mostly cloudy, and I don't think the temperature got above 57__, but the sky was pretty bright all morning. However, we kept eying the dark clouds lurking in the west.

It was an ideal day for recording, and I made the best of it. We went back to the Bur Oak Picnic Area at Fort Niobrara NWR. I had Jim let me out at the start of the road, and I merely wandered back and forth within 50 ft of that spot for at least 40 minutes recording a wide variety of birds. Then I gradually worked my way to the other end of

the road.

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Tues., May 31, 2005

Farm Island SRA, Pierre, SD

No entry.

Wed., June 1, 2005

Farm Island SRA, Pierre, SC

A rather uneventful two days have just passed. Yesterday morning we got up to rain that had been falling steadily since around midnight. By 8:30 it had let up to a barely perceptible drizzle, so Jim was able to hook up without getting very wet.

We drove northward about 150 miles to Pierre (pronounced "peer"), SD, It rained intermittently most of the way, but still it was beautiful to drove across the strongly undulating green prairie, surmounted by dark gray clouds. The clouds had some definition, so it was a pretty dramatic scene. In some places there were trees growing naturally in the coulees, especially on the north-facing slopes.

We got a campsite at the above state recreation area. The park is on the north bank of the Missouri River, which in most of South Dakota is a series of reservoirs. I doubt there's a free-flowing portion of the river in the entire state. Farm Island is an island in the river, but connected to the mainland by a short causeway. The campground is on the mainland, however, and the island itself is a natural area with trails running through it. It got its name because in the early days there was a fort here and they used the island to grow crops.

They would only let us take a site for two nights, for all the sites are reservable two or more days in advance. We said we'd come in the next day (today) if we wanted to stay Thursday night, but they said we couldn't do that because someone might have

reserved it. We didn't, and still don't, understand why that would be the case if people could only reserve two days in advance. It seemed to us that today they ought to know if our site is reserved for tomorrow night. But she said she just couldn't do it! Anyway, we've decided to leave tomorrow, so the point is moot.

After we got situated, I spent a good part of the afternoon driving to three different offices to get information on South Dakota--maps, bird guides, campground lists, etc. At the Game, Fish, and Parks office I was able to obtain an atlas to the entire state showing wildlife areas that was much like the one I used in Nebraska. This one doesn't name any of the areas, but the jurisdictions are color coded, and the print can be read without a magnifying glass.

I also went to the headquarters for Fort Pierre National Grasslands to see if they had a prairie-chicken blind. Unfortunately they had taken it down for the season, thinking no one else would want to use it. I also asked about a tour route in the area, but there is none. Furthermore, they recommended against driving the roads, because even some of the ones marked gravel might be gumbo after the recent night of rain. So much for that place.

This morning I walked the trails on Farm Island, where there's a nice mix of marsh, woodland, and a bit of meadow. Unfortunately the wind was blowing around 20 mph, so the birding was sort of poor. I saw a fair number of species, but got no decent recordings. All the birds were birds that probably breed in the area--no migrants. There were a couple of biologists with mist nets set up near the entrance to the walk. They told me that migration has been sort of late this year, which is why they were still doing it on June 1. When I returned later in the morning, they said they hadn't caught anything of interest, possibly because of the wind, possibly because migration was over. So their experience agreed with mine.

The wind continued to get stronger and stronger as the day progressed, so we just stayed indoors after a trip to WalMart. Temperature topped out at 79_, but was hotter in the trailer, which is in full sun. This campground really doesn't have many shady sites. Even though there are some trees, they're not very large or very close to the sites. It's another one of those turf-and-trees campgrounds with almost no shrubs.

Of course, turf has to be mowed, which is what happened when I was trying to take a nap this afternoon. I swear the guy mowed the 8-foot-wide swath right behind our trailer ten times!

We ate dinner at the China Buffet in town--so-so.

8:45 pm., Thurs., June 2, 2005

Lake Mitchell RV Park (city), Mitchell, SD

Ever since we had such success with orange halves attracting orioles at Lake Ogallala, Jim has been putting them out at other places. No luck. Magic Meal is usually devoured by grackles, so sometimes he doesn't put it out at all. They also like birdseed, but don't clean it up so fast. At Farm Island SRA, the best customers for birdseed were the Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels, which were abundant.

At Farm Island SRA, he didn't put out Magic Meal until he saw a Red-headed Woodpecker over by the restrooms. Then it was Magic Meal in every tree--over there and by our site. The grackles ate it all in our site in short order, but didn't seem to find what was over by the john. Then first thing this morning, he discovered a Red-headed Woodpecker eating it out of one of those trees. Right after breakfast he took his

camera and tripod and staked out the tree, but the woodpecker was too wary of him standing there, despite the fact that it tolerated the comings and goings of campers. I guess it didn't like to be stared at. Anyway, after a while, Jim came back and lugged his blind over there. This time he had success! After all these years of trying to get decent photos of that bird, this one finally posed. The reader will recall all the times he's tried and failed just on this trip.

We didn't get away until around 10:00, so I decided we'd divide up what I had planned for an ambitious single day into two. So we drove the 150 miles to Mitchell. Jim wants to go to Cabela's and see if he can replace the hat he lost. How he could lose a big felt hat is beyond me, but he did. If it's still in the truck, I don't imagine it's in any shape (literally) to put on his head. Also, I really want Jim to see the Corn Palace. I saw it years ago with Mother, but the inside is only open Memorial Day to Labor Day and we were not here during that period. Both Cabela's and the Corn Palace open at 8:00 am, so we'll visit them in the morning, then head north.

This was another eastward drive. As the reader may have noticed, we're sort of zig-zagging back and forth across the prairies--diagonally northeastward from New Mexico through Oklahoma and Kansas to eastern Missouri, westward through southern Nebraska, then eastward through extreme northern Nebraska and southern South Dakota. Our final westward "zag" will be through North Dakota, then we'll head south through the extreme western portions of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and maybe Colorado just south of there.

As we drove eastward, we were first along the shores of one of the many "lakes" on the much-dammed Missouri River, then set out across the prairie. The first half was exceedingly rolling and mostly cattle country. Then the land began to flatten out and more wheat fields were seen. Finally we're in an area where a variety of crops are grown.

The day was mostly cloudy with a high in the mid-70s--and very humid. Thunder showers were a possibility this afternoon and evening, but so far, we haven't had any, and it doesn't look likely that we will. It's pretty muggy, so I don't imagine it'll get very cool tonight.

The city-owned RV park where we're staying is OK, but the sites are very close together. Fortunately it's almost empty. Most of the sites have EWS and cable TV. We selected the only one that backs up to a view of the lake (#15) and it happens to be one of the few sites without a sewer hookup, but the view seemed like fun, so we're doing without it. Most places we've been haven't had sewer hookups anyway. To have cable TV in a government-owned park is pretty unusual. Our site is not particularly shady (most are), but since it was mostly cloudy, it didn't seem to matter, but it cleared off for two or three hours before sunset and the trailer was pretty warm. It's pleasant now, though. The place takes reservations, but will not reserve a particular site, which is probably another reason why we were lucky enough to get this view site.

Fri., June 3, 2005

Washington (city) Park, De Smet, SD

No entry.

4:30 pm., Sat., June 4, 2005
Washington (city) Park, De Smet, SD

So little of interest happened yesterday that I decided not to bother getting the computer out last night.

First thing in the morning we went to Cabela's, the huge sporting goods store that only has a few retail outlets, one of which is in Mitchell. Jim was thrilled to find just the hat style he was looking for. They had exactly two of them, and both were his size, so he bought them both. He also bought a belt. He was very pleased with the quality of his purchases.

Then we took a look at the Corn Palace, a really strange building for a small town in the middle of the prairies. It's a civic auditorium, where conventions and sporting events, especially basketball games, take place. Unlike other such places, which tend to be big rectangular boxes, this place has garish Moorish architecture with fancy turrets and spires. All of the sides of the building are covered with corn and other grains. Various colors of corn, all natural, are used to create a set of huge murals depicting local scenes and events of current and historic interest. Each year a different theme is chosen, all the corn from the previous year is torn off, and a new set of pictures is stapled up. Inside the building are similar-looking murals, but these never change. They don't have to be redone every year, but when redone they are kept as they were for historical continuity. The whole thing is really quite bizarre. In the lobby of the building are photos of the way the exterior looked in every year. Jim noticed that in earlier times they coated all the turrets with corn, but now they're just painted in elaborate patterns with shiny, bright colors. Too expensive and dangerous to coat with corn, I guess.

Jim had been having trouble with a part on our trailer hitch, making it difficult to hitch and unhitch because he had to handle a huge heavy piece of metal instead of two smaller ones. The day before, he went in to the only trailer place in Mitchell, which is actually more of a sales lot than a repair shop, and tried to get a new hitch. They said they'd have to order it and it wouldn't come in til the middle of next week. So he resigned himself to coping with the old one. Then when he went to hitch up to leave Mitchell, it finally came apart, so he decided to go back to the trailer place and try to get the parts to fix it, which he did. This took a couple of hours.

We ate some lunch, and were on the road around 1:00. We only had a 70-mile drive, so got here to De Smet by mid-afternoon.

I had planned for us to stay at Lake Thompson SRA about eight miles southeast of town, but when we got there we were told it was entirely booked up for a fishing derby. So we went to my second choice, the city park RV Park. There's also a private park, which we passed on the way to and from Lake Thompson. It was about 2/3 full, and backed right up to the main highway, but it would have been OK, too.

The city park was listed in a state-published South Dakota tourist guide, but there were no signs to it on the highway. We found out where it was from the girl at the entry booth at Lake Thompson. It consists of a few sites with electricity along a quiet road that runs through Washington Park, on the east side of De Smet. On one side of the road is a lovely city park and on the other are the city's baseball and track fields. Fortunately there were no games last night. I guess school's out. There was one other RV in the park last night and so far we have the place to ourselves. [Another rig did come later, and a couple more drove by to look. Although the place has eight electric boxes, they're so close together that only three or four of today's large rigs can fit into them, since they have to be parked end to end parallel to the road.] Nice clean

restrooms with hot showers are just across the road. Price: \$9.00. No water hook-up or dump station. Don't know whether there's one anywhere in town. But we're fine for a couple of nights.

My reason for coming to De Smet was to revisit the Laura Ingalls Wilder sites in her Little Town on the Prairie, where most of her books were set. It's where she spent her teen-age and newlywed years. I had visited here with Mother many years ago, but for some reason we didn't get the pictures she took. I can't remember why, but it was some simple reason like film not in camera or not engaged in sprockets, film lost, film ruined in developing, etc. I resolved to visit the place again and get pictures of everything, including a few places Mother and I did not visit. Jim was tolerant of it all--or most of it--but decidedly disinterested. He spent part of the time in the trailer reading a book.

The following paragraphs describe the various places, and those who would have spent the same hours in the trailer with Jim have my permission to skip them, but they're precious to me, for those books were an important part of my childhood. Furthermore, my mother was born in a similar Little Town just one county north of here, and my grandparents, whom I remember well, were about Laura's age. I know little about their lives in South Dakota, and the Wilder books have sort of served as surrogates. So most of what I'll be writing is *for me*. If anyone else is interested, fine.

Ingalls homestead. This is located on a rise about a mile southeast of town. The site of the claim shanty is marked with a stone monument and the five cottonwoods that Pa planted are still there north and east of the house site. These cottonwoods were one each for his wife and four daughters. Laura loved the homestead much more than their place in Pa's store in town, where they spent the winters. The openness of the outdoors was something she felt lost without. As I stood on that knoll on a foggy morning, I could barely make out the town off in the distance across the Big Slough, where Pa harvested slough hay for them to burn during the Long Winter. The town was actually farther away on those days, for it was much smaller than it is today.

The homesite is on the extreme northwest corner of the 160-acre homestead. Wrapping in an "L" around the acre where the trees and the homesite are, but still on the original 160 acres, is a commercial "Ingalls Homestead" venture, where living history displays are presented each summer. I could see various small buildings that were constructed to depict homestead life. I didn't have time to visit the place, but I think it is mainly for children. From the literature I picked up on the place, I learned that they offer wagon rides and a chance to experience what it was like to go to school in a one-room schoolhouse, along with various farming and homemaking operations. Sounds rather nice and looked tasteful from the outside.

Just below the homestead to the north on the grassy slope are a few small buildings that are part of the stage settings for the outdoor "Laura Ingalls Wilder" pageant that the local folks put on each summer--three weekends in July.

The Big Slough. This prairie marsh is one of many glacier-created depressions left over from the last ice age. I doubt it looks much different today than it did in the 1880s. At one place where there was a tiny bit of open water, I listed an incredible number of duck species for this time of year: Gadwall, Redhead, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal, Ruddy Duck. There seemed to be a pair of each. Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds were also present. It was on the homestead next to the slough that an "auk"--a bird resembling the Great Auk in Pa's "big green book of animals" dropped out of the skies one day. It probably wasn't a Great Auk, but any

Alcid would have been most unusual. I doubt their sighting is on the South Dakota of accepted bird records, though.

Silver Lake. This is connected to the Big Slough by a narrow bit of slough, across which US 14 passes on some filled-in land. The lake itself was drained many years ago by cutting a ditch to Lake Thompson, but it still refills when there's been plenty of rain. I was thrilled to discover that it had water in it.

Surveyors' House. This is where the Ingalls family spent their first winter in De Smet, almost alone on the prairie except for their dear friends and neighbors, the Boasts. The railroad was still under construction, and this was where the surveyors lived. They went east to their homes for the winter and were happy to have Pa and his family overwinter there. (At that time he was the timekeeper, paymaster, and bookkeeper for the railroad construction company.) The house was "By the Shores of Silver Lake" when they lived there, but was moved into town in 1884, because it was a very nice house for its day--definitely the nicest house Laura lived in during her entire childhood. Today the original vertical "board and batten" exterior has been covered with horizontal clapboards, like so many houses.

Guided tours, which start from the house next door and are sponsored by a local non-profit organization, enter the house, which has a few Ingalls artifacts. Most notable is the church organ, which Ma and Mary both played for church services in the local church. There are also lots of early surveyor's tools.

Brewster School. A reproduction of what this probably looked like is behind the Surveyor's House. Laura taught there starting when she was 15 years old in order to earn money to keep Mary in the college for the blind that she loved so.

Ingalls Home. After Pa sold his homestead and moved to town permanently, he built this house. They lived there until Pa, Ma, and Mary were all dead. The house was eventually sold, but some Ingalls belongings remained in one upstairs bedroom. A few years later, in the 1920s, they were all thrown away because no one came to get them out of the house. (Laura and her husband Almanzo lived in Missouri, and their daughter Rose lived all over the world.) What a loss! But, of course, who knew at the time how famous their daughter would make the family? The books were published starting in the 1930s. Some original things remain, however, especially a huge cabinet for dishes and other items that Pa made. It looks remarkably like some of the cabinet work my Grandpa Gilbert did, but on a much larger scale.

Although the house has some of the original furnishings and pictures, much of it has been redone. In one back room there is a great deal of information about the town, Ingalls and Wilder families, other families mentioned in the books, etc.--lots of pictures, documents and small artifacts. I spent a long time reading and looking at them. This was permitted at the end of each tour, for each tour guide remained in the house until the next tour arrived.

I was particularly interested in the panel that addressed the accusation made by some that Laura's daughter Rose wrote the books, not Laura. (Rose Wilder Lane was a famous author and journalist in her day, who wrote both novels and historical and libertarian nonfiction works, as well as many magazine stories and articles.) Pros and cons of this were presented, but to me the most convincing arguments for Laura's authorship were (1) Laura had been writing articles for farm journals in Missouri for decades and certainly knew how to write even though she never went past 8th grade, (2) the yellow notebooks on which she wrote the books in pencil still exist, and (3) Laura's books have endured the test of time and Rose's have not. No doubt Rose helped edit the books and certainly was instrumental in getting them published. From what I've read about her, she simply didn't have the sweet

personality that could have written those books. She was a hard-charging career woman who was somewhat difficult to get along with. One place I read that she was more like Almanzo's sister, Eliza Jane, than like her own mother. (In one book Laura describes Eliza Jane's problems teaching the local school--problems that derived from her personality.)

Original town school. This building has been moved from its original site and is now a private home. It looks unloved in and is sort of run-down with peeling paint, etc. It seems like a good project for the Memorial Association which owns the surveyors' house and the Ingalls home to purchase and restore the building. Certainly that schoolhouse featured strongly in the books. [Later I read that they do own it. Maybe they have plans to restore it.]

Loftus' Store. This store was one of the first buildings built in the town and is still standing. It was across the street from Pa's store and was the most successful store in town for decades. Today it is a gift shop. I went inside, and the owner was very friendly in explaining the history of the place. Unfortunately I couldn't find anything I wanted to buy. I'm afraid I have a great deal of resistance to "cute" and rarely find anything in gift shops. In fact, I usually avoid them.

According to the gift shop owner, Pa's store was torn down in the 1890s or early 1900s and replaced by the brick building that is there today. It looks pretty old. She said the town passed an ordinance that any new construction had to be brick for fire protection. The Loftus store is one of the few remaining wooden structures.

Along the two or three blocks of the main street is an eclectic mix of old and new. In addition to the buildings mentioned above, there are some very modern-looking ones and some ugly older concrete ones. It's a real hodgepodge.

Almanzo's claims. This was where they lived when they were first married. The farm claim was 1.5 miles north of town and the tree claim 1.5 miles farther. A historical marker shows the site of the farm claim shanty, and a few scraggly cottonwoods are all that are left of the 40 acres of trees he was required to plant in order to file for the second claim. I don't recall whether he ever proved up these claims. Bad luck plagued the early years of their marriage: grasshoppers ate crops several years, fire burned down house, first baby died, diphtheria, etc. They left the state for warmer climes and after trying out various places, eventually settled in Mansfield, Missouri, where they were happy for the rest of their long lives. (It was when I wanted to stop and snap some pictures of the scraggly cottonwoods that Jim thought I was going a bit overboard on the picture-taking, but to me they were significant.)

Cemetery. I saw the graves of Pa, Ma, Mary, Carrie, Grace (and her husband), plus those of a few others mentioned in the books. Laura and Almanzo are the only family members not there. They're in Missouri.

The town was named De Smet in honor of an early Jesuit missionary to the Indians, who never visited the place. Laura barely refers to the naming of the town in her books. I think all that is said is that Pa told the family there was to be a town on the site and, when someone asked him what it was to be called, he told them, "De Smet." I wonder if there wasn't some disapproval in the family of the choice of name, but that Laura didn't want to address in her books the prejudice against Catholics that was surely present in the town. Today there is a statue of Father De Smet on one corner of Washington Park, where we are staying. Diagonally across the corner from the statue is the Catholic Church. It's possible they are responsible for the statue, but it is on city ground.

The town of De Smet is small (ca. 1200 population), but seems prosperous. Most of the homes are modest and many seem quite old. (The Ingalls home fits in perfectly with its neighbors on its street.) However, nearly all are well cared for, with fresh paint and neatly trimmed lawns and shrubs. It is the county seat, so there are some government buildings and several schools to which children from all around are bussed. A small hospital is right across the street from where we are camped--on one end of the Washington Park property.

I took photos wherever it was permitted--not inside any of the buildings. Unfortunately it was a gloomy morning, totally overcast. High humidity made things a bit foggy, too. High temperature was probably in the upper 60s, so it was pleasant to be outdoors. In the afternoon it rained hard for a couple of hours, then cleared partially. It's supposed to start to rain again after midnight.

By the time I'd done all my sightseeing it was well after noon and starting to drizzle. We decided to remain here tonight because Saturday night is a poor night to arrive at a state recreation area. Besides, our drive tomorrow is fairly long and on the way I want to take another look at Garden City, where Mother was born--and this time snap a few pictures--can't do that in the rain.

5:45 pm., Sun., June 5, 2005 **Richmond Lake, SRA, nr. Aberdeen, SD**

This morning dawned cloudy and misty, and while we were eating breakfast it started to rain in earnest. Since we didn't have very far to go and didn't want to drive in the rain or get to our destination too early, I spent some time after breakfast modifying and adding a considerable amount of material to yesterday's segment.

We left around 9:30, but hadn't been on the road very long when a steady, moderate rain started. We hoped for the best and kept on our northward course to tiny Garden City (population 72), where my Mother was born. The tiny town is off the through road, which is itself only a byway, by two miles, and looks like life passed it by. From the highway we drove westward until we saw a lot of trees over on the left and figured it must be the town. We saw a couple of gravel streets heading southward, so took the second one. It passed a number of houses, many abandoned, boarded up, and decaying, but others lived in. A few were rather new looking, but most were old. The lived-in ones seemed well cared for.

After about a half-mile we reached "downtown." All the businesses seemed defunct except the grain elevator and possibly the tiny bank building. One old concrete storefront read 1908, so would have been built while Mother was living there. (She was born in 1905, and her family left when she was four or five years old.) It was in the row of closed businesses. We turned left at the corner, which incidentally had a tall flagpole with a flag flying right in the middle of the intersection. Along the east-west street there was an overgrown city park with some children's playground equipment. I think part of that area was where the school was. When I visited the town years ago on a trip with Mother, we saw a huge, crumbling, redbrick building that must have had a separate classroom for all eight elementary grades. They've obviously torn it down; it was definitely a hazard then and no doubt an attractive nuisance for local children.

The town had one church, a rather new-looking Methodist one. Elsewhere in town was a boarded up old church with no name. It could have been the old Methodist church. My grandparents and Mother were Methodists, (I was brought up in that religion, too) so that organization probably goes back many years.

I took pictures of various buildings--old and new houses, churches, businesses, etc. It was raining lightly the entire time, so Jim put his old hat to use shielding my camera lens from raindrops. (This was the dingy old old hat, not the new old hat that he lost.)

It's really sad to see towns die, but with modern transportation people really don't need so many towns. We decided to take a look at the city of Clark, the county seat of Clark County. Its population is about the same as De Smet's, around 1200. It looked much like De Smet and was well kept and prosperous-looking. We had been wondering if the Wilder tourists had been the reason De Smet was so nice looking, but apparently not. We did agree that De Smet was a bit trimmer-looking than Clark, but not by much.

After that we continued on to our present location, Richmond Lake SRA near Aberdeen. The campground is in a wooded setting near a small reservoir on the James River. When we saw the nice habitat, we thought there'd be lots of birds in the campground, but the place is eerily quiet--not even any robins running around on the lawn. Wonder why.

Shortly after we arrived we had a quick and noisy thunder storm, but it's partly sunny right now.

Our reason for this stop is to visit Sand Lake NWR, which is about 25 miles away. That we'll do tomorrow.

Guess I'll take a walk and see if I can find any birds. Jim couldn't when he took a walk a little while ago.

9:00 pm., Mon, June 6, 2005

Richmond Lake SRA, nr. Aberdeen, SD

Just after we awoke this morning we had one clap of thunder and about 20 minutes of rain. We wondered what was in store, since the forecast had been for a totally clear day. Fortunately the forecast was right. As we were driving to Sand Lake NWR, there were still a few clouds, but they were soon gone, leaving a cloudless sky. The morning was pleasant, but in the afternoon after we were back at the trailer, it got rather warm and muggy. I don't think the temperature in our nice shady campsite got above 84_, but the report this evening said Aberdeen got up to 88_. Forecast for tonight is for thunderstorms after midnight into early morning, then again in the late afternoon. Another cold front is approaching from the west and a warm front moving up from the south. They're expected to clash with the usual results.

Sand Lake is a huge lake, some of which is, I think, the result of small dams. Around the edge are some rather large marshes, and wet and dry prairie. Some stands of trees, occasionally sizeable, dot the area. The trees were all planted in the 1930s, when this area became a NWR.

It's a 30-mile drive from Richmond Lake to Sand Lake and took about 45 minutes over some rather narrow secondary roads. On the way I saw a few small shorebirds feeding in a roadside pond, but it was impossible to stop on that narrow, shoulder-less road. I wonder if they were White-rumped Sandpipers. That's one species I still haven't seen on this trip, and it's one of the later migrants. I hoped I'd see more at the refuge, but there was absolutely no shorebird habitat there. Wherever the water was shallow, there was marsh vegetation, not mudflat.

I had almost no information about the lay of the land at the refuge, just that it was north of the town of Columbia. We turned at the first junction after we entered the refuge, hoping to find the headquarters, but all we encountered was the back side of

stop 12 on the tour route. That gave us the hint that we had to proceed farther north on the highway, so we did. The refuge headquarters had the usual refuge brochure, tour route map with text for the stops, and bird list. They also had some very nicely mounted specimens of some of the birds on the refuge, mainly waterfowl and hawks. Some of them said, "Please touch." It was fun to stroke the silky feathers of a mounted Greater White-fronted Goose, as well as the furs of several small mammals.

The tour route is a 15-mile loop around the southern portion of the lake, crossing on a dike road. Probably the most impressive thing about the birdlife was the numbers of Ring-necked Pheasants. I think I saw more pheasants today than I have in total previously. They were everywhere, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in threesomes that didn't get along very well. We saw them in the barren fields where crops are planted for birds to eat, in the grassy prairie, and exploding from the roadsides. Sometimes in their concentration on one another, they paid no attention to us, and Jim got photos of several males. No females, unfortunately; they're warier. Territorial conflicts brought extended versions of the hard call, not just the familiar doublet that has always reminded me of a power lawn edger rubbing against the curb.

We spent a lot of time poking along trying to get pheasants to pose, so by the time we got to a stand of nice prairie, it was around 10:00 and there was too much breeze to do any good recording. I did hear a lot of Sedge Wrens and a few Clay-colored Sparrows. Bobolinks were fairly common, and I never tire of hearing their rapid liquid flight song. I discovered Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow was on their list as a breeder. I hadn't boned up on its song, but read the description in the *National Geographic* (NG) guide and listened for something that sounded like that description, but didn't hear it. Just a few minutes ago I listened to an actual recording of the song and decided the NG description had been very good and that I had imagined correctly what to listen for. I definitely didn't hear it.

Yellow-headed Blackbirds were very common, and Jim couldn't resist photographing a couple of males that demanded to be models.

We didn't get off the drive until around 12:30, and drove the last few miles much faster than we had earlier. Near stop 12 there is a narrow portion of the lake where Western Grebes were paired up. Unfortunately there was no parking allowed on the bridge on the side of the road where we could see the grebes. Otherwise Jim might have sat in the truck for a while hoping for a dance display. (We had discovered this spot when we made the wrong turn first thing in the morning.)

The tour route doesn't seem to be a one-way road, for occasionally we met refuge vehicles on it. There are a number of places where one can enter and exit the tour route onto county roads. If we were to go back there, I think we'd only do a portion of the route and concentrate on the prairies first thing in the morning.

As we drove through Columbia this morning, we discovered that the city park on the south edge of town, just north of the James River bridge on the east side of the road, has three nice RV sites with electrical hookups. How I wished we had known of them. I looked in all the South Dakota-published literature and saw no mention of them. We checked them out more fully on our way back to the trailer. The sites are level back-ins onto grass from a gravel road. The electric boxes have 20, 30, and 50-amp connections. There is a restroom building with toilets and showers. It looked very clean, although old. I saw only one water faucet--out in the middle of a lawn, so any RV arriving should have plenty of water on board. No dump station. Price: \$10, pay at address in town given on sign. The park had lots of nice bird habitat. If we ever go back to Sand Lake, we'll definitely stay there.

We debated going back tomorrow and doing it right, but many of the birds we seek can also be sought elsewhere, and our time is getting limited, so we decided to move northward tomorrow.

This afternoon I sat outside at Richmond Lake and found a few more birds, including the robin I missed yesterday. Still I only had a bird list of about a dozen species. (I had 50 at Sand Lake this morning.) One that was sort of fun was a Downy Woodpecker that flew up to the base of a tree about ten feet from where I was sitting and proceeded to forage in all the little knotholes in it. Then it flew to a couple of others only a little farther away before finally flying off into the woods. When I told Jim about him, he immediately loaded *all* the knotholes with Magic Meal. We'll see if anything develops. We don't have to rush off in the morning, for we're only driving about 100 miles. Of course, it's supposed to be raining then. Oh, well!

June 7, 2005

**Jamestown Reservoir Recreation Area, Jamestown, ND
(Bureau of Reclamation Cpgd.)**

No entry.

9:30 pm., Wed., June 8, 2005

Jamestown Reservoir Recreation Area, Jamestown, ND

The woodpecker did not come for the Magic Meal.

It thundered and rained most of the night, but most of the activity was in southern North Dakota. Still, there was the threat of some large hail in our area. We were glad it never developed.

Before leaving Richmond Lake, we drove to the other side of the lake and took their "Forest Drive." I think the forest is about a quarter-section (160 acres). It's planted, of course, and cross-country ski trails wind their way through it. There's also a 1.1-mile road around in it, which we took very slowly, stopping frequently to look and listen for birds. It was about as quiet as the campground. However, Jim did get some photos of a juvenile (yearling) Red-tailed Hawk (eastern), which were nice and close.

Afterwards we hooked up and drive north 100 miles to Jamestown, ND. The day started out clear, but was totally overcast by the time we got here. On the radio last evening we learned that Aberdeen had been 86_ and Jamestown 68_. What a difference.

Enroute we were detoured off the main highway onto a fairly long series of narrow dirt roads. They were pretty slithery, because they happened to go through the area that had had torrential thunderstorms the night before. We were astounded that they'd detour main highway traffic onto such a road. (The map showed a somewhat longer possible detour that would have been all paved.) We don't know the reason for the detour, but it could even have been due to flooding, for it seemed to go around a place where the road crossed a river or creek. We crossed the same creek elsewhere.

By the time we ate lunch, visited the visitors center, and shopped for groceries, it was nearly 3:00 when we got to this campground. It's pretty quiet, too, but it doesn't have the varied habitat of Richmond Lake. It's in a grove of trees, and the sites are shady. Hookups are water and electric--one box between every two sites. Since the sites are far apart, we had to use our extension cord to reach the box. Each box has one plug-in each for 20-, 30-, and 50-amps. We took the 30, which is always the most

popular. I don't know what people do when the place is full and two RVs want the 30, but we won't be here to find out. (It is totally reserved for this weekend, we learned when we registered, but we don't want to stay that long anyway.)

After being kept awake by the wild weather the night before, we took late afternoon naps. Then I perused all the literature I had obtained at the visitors center, including a nice brochure on birding drives out of Jamestown and Carrington. The lady in the visitors center tried to find out from the state Game and Fish Dept. if there was an atlas of wildlife areas like the ones I had used in Nebraska and South Dakota. She called the local office, and whoever she talked to had never heard of one.

The clouds developed into thunderstorms and hard rain (2.33 inches reported in Jamestown), which lasted for hours. There was a tornado warning south of us--in the same area that had the heavy rain the previous night, and through which we drove the muddy detour. On the TV tonight, we learned that several people lost their homes in flooding in one small town in the area.

The thunder ceased around 2:00 am, but the rain lingered until around 9:00 am. I called Arrowwood NWR to be sure the tour road was open. The receptionist said no one had told her it wasn't, but she didn't really know. So we decided to go there anyway. It turned out to be open and fine, with just a lot of firm-bottomed puddles and a good gravel surface.

As we drove to the refuge, the overcast gave way to gorgeous puffy clouds, but of course it was wind that blew the clouds away. It was between 20 and 30 mph all day--poor for birding. Recording was impossible, and even hearing the birds was hard, but I did succeed in hearing quite a few. The best birds were a huge flock of White-rumped Sandpipers. They were pretty far away and back-lit, but they were with some sort of peep for size comparison, had long primary projections, the right length bill, patterning across the breast, and seemed to have rusty upper scapulars. So I was pretty sure of my ID. I was also aware that this bird is sort of a late migrant. I was gratified to learn that a recent shorebird survey had reported about 95% White-rumps, and a fair number of Semipalmateds. (I hadn't been able to ID them to species from that distance.) I also saw a few Wilson's Phalaropes and one or two American Avocets.

We drove the 5-mile tour route. The prairie birds were much the same as at Sand Lake, and I identified a lot of them by sound only. No sign of my two targets, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and Sprague's Pipit, but they aren't too likely on that tour route, according to the literature I had.

The refuge itself is a truly beautiful place, tucked in the windin valley of the James River. The river itself has been impounded into a series of lakes for waterfowl habitat enhancement. We took quite a few pictures of the valley, the waterways, and the mosaic of tree-filled coulees, prairie grasses and shrubs, and marshlands--all greatly enhanced by the brilliant blue sky and dramatic clouds. No pictures of wildlife were possible, though.

Before driving the tour route, we stopped in at the headquarters building and got some wonderful literature. One was a fantastic new book, *Birding North Dakota*, and the other was the atlas I had tried to get yesterday! The latter is entitled *[Conservation] PLOTS Guide* in this state. Both are published by the ND Dept. of Game and Fish, but whoever the visitors center had talked to didn't know they existed. (PLOTS = Public Lands Open to Sportsmen)

We met another birding couple, who had just finished birding in Kidder County near the town of Steele. They told us they had a nice bird-finding brochure on that area that they had ordered by mail last winter. Arrowwood NWR didn't have it, and the

receptionist called Long Lake NWR, which would be covered in the brochure, and whoever answered the phone had never heard of it and could find none in their rack. A couple of areas in that county are in the *Birding North Dakota* book, though, so we may go over there if we can't find our target birds around Carrington.

We didn't get back to the trailer until 2:00 because of our late start this morning. After a quick lunch, long naps were again in order to make up for the lost sleep due to last night's thunder storms. We're supposed to have only a "20% chance of scattered showers" the next few days, then a repeat of the severe weather again on Saturday and Monday. It's really making birding difficult!

We just had a short shower a few minutes ago, but no thunder, thank goodness. It's 10:20 now. Maybe I'll get to bed at a decent hour tonight.

10:00 pm, Thurs., June 9, 2005

Lone Steer Motel and RV Park, Steele, ND

Again a breezy morning. Started out clear and in the 50s. Warmed to the high 60s this afternoon. Had some afternoon rain, but no thunder. Clearing now.

This morning we returned to Arrowwood NWR, but this time did the southern portion of the refuge, following the map recommended in the brochure on birding tours out of Jamestown and Carrington that I picked up at the visitors center. (It was also available at the refuge.) It was a challenge to stay on the route--lots of zigs and zags in order to stick to graded gravel roads and not get off on dirt two-tracks. I watched the odometer very carefully and wrote the reading on my map every time I made a turn, for the country was very uniform-looking: lots of lakes, ponds, flooded fields, marshes, with agricultural fields of various types in between. Some patches looked like prairie.

As we approached one rather small pothole, I caught sight of some medium-sized shorebirds flying around. They had white rumps and tail bases except for dark central tail feathers. They were Wilson's Phalaropes. When we stopped they flew all around the truck, chewing us out. Jim finally decided they might hang around if he got out, so he did so and took a bunch of flight shots. He's not sure he got very many, or any, good ones because they were moving around so erratically, but he certainly tried. I recorded them, trying shield myself somewhat from the wind by standing in the lee of the truck.

The tour route spent some time in the refuge and crossed the James River twice. At both crossings it was suggested that Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows might be found. Despite the wind, I walked the low-lying marshy areas and amplified the marsh sounds with my tape recorder, straining to hear the song of the bird. All I got was Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Common Yellowthroats, with a smattering of other birds, never anything resembling the sound I wanted. The bird would not be a life bird for me, because I've seen silent (possibly calling, can't recall) wintering ones at Upper Newport Bay. Jim has never photographed one, though.

At the end of yesterday's drive, I had 32 species in the refuge and surrounding roads. By the end of today's drive, my list was up to 55 species, including 12 species of waterfowl: Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Gadwall, Blue-winged Teal, Redhead, Ruddy Duck, Northern Shoveler, Canvasback, Lesser Scaup, Mallard. All are probably breeders. Hooded Merganser might have been seen had I walked some distance along a particular trail, but I didn't have time for it.

Mammals included White-tailed Deer, White-tailed Jackrabbit, and a white-tail-

tipped ground squirrel, probably Richardson's based on range. I didn't see the latter very well, but we've seen a lot of small, plain ground squirrels running across the road the last several days.

We got back to the trailer around noon, ate a quick lunch, took naps, then drove 60 miles west to Steele in Kidder County. I had been debating whether to come here or go to Carrington. In an e-mail Terry Hill quoted from a brochure saying that there are good places to photograph birds from vehicles at Long Lake NWR, and that they were going to be here tonight. So we decided to come here before going to Carrington. She also mentioned availability of brochures with tour routes outlined. The lack of those had been the reason for going to Carrington.

Anyway here we are in the most decrepit RV park imaginable. The North Dakota Tourist Guide said they had sewer hookups, but the office told Jim that only sites 1-4 had them. We couldn't find any numbers on most of the sites and partial numbers on others, but could find only one sewer hookup and it was on a site with a 5 on it. It also looked like it hadn't been used for a long time and might be clogged with dirt and ??? Some of the electric boxes had been knocked over. (Those that were still functioning had 30-amp hookups and good voltage.) Some of the water faucets didn't work, etc. In general, a really run-down place. The other RV park in town looked totally abandoned and the sites looked too small to back into from the narrow road through the park and around some cabins. Besides, Terry and John's motor home was in the Lone Steer RV Park, so that settled it. (The Lone Steer Motel looks just as run-down as the RV park. It has a restaurant, bar, and small casino in connection with it, none of which are the least bit inviting.) Terry said neither RV park is in the 2005 state tourist guide, but I found them listed in the 2004 one I was given in Jamestown. They're both in the birding tour guide for the area, which was how she knew they existed. We were due to dump our black water and hadn't done so at the last place because of the promise of sewer hookups here. Fortunately they did have a dump station, which we used before selecting a site. Jim had to straddle a mud puddle while dumping and when it came time to rinse out his hose, he found that the water didn't work there.

Despite the unsatisfactory utilities, we found a site next to a row of cottonwoods with brushy understory. Gray Catbirds, Brown Thrashers, American Goldfinches, Orchard Orioles, and House Finches (a bit unusual here) are visible at close range out our dinette window. We just ignore the scene the opposite direction.

Would we ever return to this park? Surprisingly the answer is yes. Despite its drawbacks, its location is right in the center of what the literature says is one of the best birding counties in ND.

I'm really late writing this up because we talked a long time with the Hills. Time to go to bed.

10:30 pm, Fri., June 10, 2005

Lone Steer Motel and RV Park, Steele, ND

Despite the fact that this RV park is between the freeway and the train track, there are very few trains and the freeway noise is amazingly hard to hear. We had a nice quiet night--not even any sound effects from the heavens. Temperature got down into the mid-50s. And, wonder of wonders, we awoke to calm air. The sky was half cloudy, but the cloudy half blew on eastward, leaving nothing but blue. As the day wore on, puffy clouds formed, but never amounted to much. Although it got a little breezy, conditions were fine for recording all day. When was the last time I didn't

complain about the weather?

We took the southern half of the tour route to Long Lake NWR outlined in the birding brochure for this area. Before setting out, I plotted the suggested route in my PLOTS atlas, so I could be sure I understood where I was supposed to go.

The first portion of the road went past some sections of nice looking prairie and others planted in crops. A few areas had grazing cattle, so I got cows in some of my recordings. We stopped and I got out and recorded in a number of places. In some of the places where the habitat seemed right, I simply waved my microphone out the window to see if I could hear any interesting birds. Most of my recordings at first were mixtures of species, with lots of Bobolink, Western Meadowlark, Savannah Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird and Brown-headed Cowbird.

Then at one place a Grasshopper Sparrow flew up to a fence wire about 30 feet off the road and looked for all the world as though it was singing at me, an intruder in his territory. Of course, I aimed my mic at him and got his song. After a while he tired of singing at me, and flew off to another perch maybe 100 ft away and sang some more. Even though I've tried unsuccessfully several times on this trip to get Grasshopper Sparrows to pose for photos with playback, I decided to give it another try. Amazingly enough, a single song brought him right back to the nearest fence wire. I quickly called Jim on the radio to come with his camera. (He was in the truck a ways back. He always lets me walk ahead of the truck, then catches up with me every so often.) By the time he got there and had his camera hooked on his monopod, etc., the sparrow had flown across the road and across the field quite a distance. I was afraid he wouldn't be able to hear my recording, for I had not beefed up the recording volume when I got it, as I sometimes do for this purpose. But the little mite had been hearing, for it took only a few seconds of sound to bring him back to his original perch. Jim took pictures from the road, then walked down into the ditch and up the other side to get closer to the bird, which let him get as close as he wanted to. Jim even ran out of film and fiddled around changing the roll, and the bird still stayed. Finally he flew off, but only because he was ready to, not because we flushed him. After he flew in on the initial playback for Jim, I didn't have to play my recording any more. That experience was the highlight of Jim's day.

A bit farther along, I had the highlight of my day. As the road descended to a causeway across Long Lake, there was quite a bit of wet prairie with little potholes. So I decided to walk down the slope to the lake. No sooner had I gotten out of the truck than a Marbled Godwit flew up to me screaming its head off. It was a strident call that is quite different from the "raddita raddita" sounds of wintering birds. Of course, I recorded it. The bird would circle around me in the sky, sometimes uttering a one-syllable call and occasionally a two-syllable, two-pitch version. I discovered I could elicit more of the two-syllable calls if I waved my arms at the bird in a threatening manner. As I continued to walk down the road, other individuals would engage in the same performance. A couple of times two birds at once were flying around me screaming. It was obviously a territorial display. The curious thing is that I seldom could see them coming. Like Stealth bombers, they flew in low, then ascended at the last minute to circle around about 50 feet overhead. I was so engrossed in recording the birds and waving my arms at them that I didn't realize that Jim was photographing me with his telephoto lens. And I didn't realize either that Terry and John, who slept later than we did, had caught up with us and were watching the performance.

In the same area there were a lot of Wilson's Snipe winnowing and calling their one- and two-syllable calls. Usually winnowing snipe are so high in the sky that

they're almost impossible to find. But many of these were winnowing quite low. One would ascend maybe 200 ft, then descend with its tail flared and wings fluttering, making the ascending "woo-woo-woo-woo..." sound as the air flowed over its special outer feathers. Then it would ascend and do it again and again, sort of like an undulating roller coaster. Sometimes it would call during the ascent or during level flight between descents.

We also saw a fair number of Wilson's Phalaropes, both on the ground and in flight, but they were never very close to us.

I listened for Chestnut-collared Longspurs and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows in appropriate habitat near the causeway, but no luck.

We finished up at the refuge headquarters, picked up some brochures and then came back to the trailer, arriving around 1:30. After napping, I was able to sit outside for the first time in a long while. Jim staked out the puddle in the road produced by our water faucet that dripped copiously from the top and the bottom of the pipe. I had discovered the birds using it when I went to the truck to get something and saw a Gray Catbird drinking from the puddle. I was within 10 ft of the bird and had opened the truck door before I saw it. Since it was that unafraid, I went ahead and got my papers and slammed the door. The bird merely flinched slightly at the final sound. Jim went over there and got shots of it bathing. Then he moved the truck so he could use it as a blind and sat there for some time, but all that came after that was a male Common Grackle, which, of course, he had to shoot.

High temperature for the day was in the low 70s, and there never was much breeze. A perfect day with some really interesting birding experiences. Forecast is for a couple more like it. Hurray!

Afterthought: This afternoon I went into the motel/RV park office to get some of the birding literature Terry had told me they had. The woman at the counter, who seemed to be the owner or manager of this place told me to be sure to tell all my friends about this RV park. I assured her I would. I'm not sure she'd be too thrilled if she saw what I wrote about it yesterday to all of you, my friends! Jim could add a thing or two about the restrooms and showers: no privacy, broken shower heads, etc.

It's 11:20 and really time to go to bed. We had a nice visit with Terry and John, so I got a late start, but wanted to write up this wonderful day while my memory was fresh.

8:45 pm., Sat., June 11, 2005

City Park RV Park, Carrington, ND

We awoke to almost totally cloudy skies, ca. 55_ temperature. Starting out around 6:45 am, we took a shorter drive than yesterday's--to Horsehead Lake. This drive is suggested in both the *Birding North Dakota* book and in the little birding brochure on this area. To get there we drove east to exit 205 from I-94, then straight north on a good gravel road. The book suggested going only 12 miles from the freeway to a pullout for the Horsehead Lake Wildlife Management Area. We found the pullout with no trouble, but it looked as though we'd have to walk at least 1/4 mile through lots of tall grass to get to the lake from there. We'd seen lots of lakes right beside the road in the last few days, so this wasn't particularly appealing. So we continued on past that spot, and about three miles farther found an area where the road was on a short causeway through the northwest portion of the lake. There was a good assortment of water-related birds, but nothing new.

Recording conditions were outstanding--even calmer than yesterday and again

almost no traffic. I got two recordings that really pleased me. At one spot we spotted a Bobolink on the roadside fence post. They're usually on bushes out farther. When we stopped, he obviously considered our truck to be an intruder in his territory, for he started to sing, then ascended and flew toward the truck, looped around it, and back to his perch. He did this several times until he apparently decided we weren't another Bobolink. I had recorded him out the truck window, once getting the performance from beginning to end. After he quit flying over us, I thought maybe if I got out of the truck, he would fly over us again. He did, and this time I got an even better recording. Because of the heavy cloud cover Jim had no incentive to try to get flight photos of him. He has some on a clear day from Lostwood NWR many years ago, but definitely wants more some time.

The other highlight was a couple of male Ruddy Ducks doing their breast-slapping display, which ends in a little quack. One in particular was quite close to the road, so I got out recorded him at length from a position partially concealed behind the truck. I hope a few of them will turn out to be in breaks in the cacaphony of Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds. Jim did attempt a few photos, but claims I scared them off by going from the front to the rear of the truck. I only did so because I was getting clicking noises from the truck engine as it cooled down. His photos wouldn't have been that great anyway because of the lack of sun. It is true that he doesn't have a good one with its tail up. These definitely had their tails up showing their white undertail coverts.

Around midmorning we drove back to the RV park. As we were nearing the end of the gravel road it started to rain lightly and was doing so all the time Jim hooked up.

We drove north from Steele 41 miles, then east another 41 miles, ending in Carrington. The rain stopped about half-way up the first 41 and started again half-way along the second 41. There was a diagonal line of rain moving from southwest to northeast.

We ate lunch in an attractive coffee shop in Carrington before finding the campground. No campgrounds are listed in Trailer Life, but the ND Tourist book lists three, one in the city park. We didn't look at the two private ones, because the city park one is fine. It has 8 EW sites, although the book said they were ES, which would be an unusual combination. There is a dump station. I don't know whether the restrooms have showers. Jim hasn't checked them out.

It rained absolutely continuously from when it started west of town until around 7:30, rather heavily at times. On the TV news their radar showed a narrow line of rain steadily moving northward through Carrington, with other places getting much less. They said we had over 2 inches by the time they went on the air. It's stopped now, but might rain some more during the night.

The reason we came here was to drive one more birding tour route, but with all the rain, I hesitate to venture forth on unknown gravel roads. I guess we'll do the necessities we've been postponing far too long: laundry, dog-washing, refrigerator defrosting, and trailer-cleaning.

Jim just called me to look at a pretty rainbow out the window. So the rain is definitely not over.

8:30 pm, Sun., June 12, 2005

Graham's Island SP, Devil's Lake, ND

We awoke to an absolutely gorgeous day--clear, calm, high 50s rising to mid-70s. But I had resolved to do the laundry today and even stripped the bed as soon as

I got up. Since we had seen our neighbors in the campground drive off with their laundry yesterday, we asked them where it was. They informed us that it had been closed when they went there yesterday and was closed on Sundays.

So we decided to this was a sign we should go birding, despite our trepidation about the gravel roads after yesterday's 2-inch rain. We drove the first portion of one of the tour routes. Exactly seven miles east of town on SR 200 it headed south. It went up onto the Missouri Coteau, a hilly area dotted with exquisite lakes, ponds, marshes, etc. We found the numbered stops on the brochure, but unfortunately didn't find the Nelson's Sharp-tailed, Le Conte's, and Baird's sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspur, or Sprague's Pipit that had been promised. I did find a nice singing Sedge Wren. I recorded him at length singing from a fencepost. Then he flew a little ways and disappeared into the grass, coming up a minute or so later with a mouthful of grassy nesting material. He carried this about 20 feet and disappeared into the grass again. This time a lot of scolds and singlet calls emanated from the spot. Then he returned empty billed to his original perch and sang some more.

I tried playing back the songs and calls so Jim could photograph him, but he just disappeared into the grass and quieted down. After Jim left his territory, I could see and hear him singing again. Jim does have excellent Sedge Wren pictures from a previous trip--from a bird who flew right up in front of him when we played the tape. Some of my old-time readers may recall that this was the bird we had the privilege of taking Roger Tory Peterson to many years ago. He also was able to photograph it.

We continued down the road--or should I say up and down the road? The terrain became more and more hilly and the road had no cuts or fills. It also became more and more muddy and less gravelly. It became rather difficult to drive. I had to be careful where I stopped, because once my tires spun a little before taking hold. I also had the feeling I was sliding laterally from time to time. The road had become narrower, and there was a steep slope down to a ditch on both sides. I was happy when we finally came to a paved road. I decided that was enough driving on these roads that had had so much rain yesterday. We took the paved road six miles west, where it intersected a paved road that took us back north to the road we had turned off of originally, SR-200.

The Missouri Coteau is an interesting geologic feature in this glacial country and also very beautiful. We took a number of scenic photos. Quoting from the brochure with the tour routes on it:

"The coteau is the most rugged topographical feature of glacial origin in the state, and runs from northwest to southeast through the area [Carrington, Jamestown, and vicinity]. Created by the most recent Wisconsin Age glaciation, the landform of the Coteau is known as dead-ice moraine. The hilly landscape is a result of the ice advancing over the Missouri Escarpment [not defined, but probably has something to do with the Missouri R. valley]. In the process, the stress from the internal shearing resulted in large amounts of sediment being forced to the surface of the glacier. When the ice eventually melted, the cover of glacial sediment on top of the ice slumped and slid, forming the hilly landscape we see today. The multitude of wetlands on the Coteau are critical for the production of many species of waterfowl in North America."

The Coteau looks a lot like the sandhills of Nebraska--hills with lakes and wetlands in the depressions. The substrate here ranges from large, round rocks to fine soil, not merely sand. Many of the fields have piles of rocks that have been removed so plows don't get broken. Lots of rocks are still visible, though.

We got back to town around 11:30. I still had all my other tasks to do. So I got busy right away and bathed Charlie. After lunch we drove about 60 miles north. We stopped in the town of New Rockford and inquired about a laundry and were told there was one. So we spent a couple of hours there. The room was swelteringly hot and I was dripping by the time I was through. We were able to park the trailer right out front, so I was able to make up the bed--a major project in our trailer--while some of the driers were finishing.

We got to Graham's Island SP around 6:00 pm, having to drive all the way around to the north side of Devil's Lake and then south on a causeway. Devil's Lake has really risen since the last time we were here, and they're having to raise all the roads and make them into causeways. We drove for miles on a succession of these causeways. The state park has had a large EW section added since we were there. Then I don't think we had hookups at all. The part of the campground we were in then is now full of tent campers. I had called the park Friday night to see if we would be able to find a campsite there on Sunday night and was assured we could. We were rather disconcerted when we passed the entry booth to see a sign in the window that the campground was full. Taking a chance that they hadn't removed it from Saturday night, we continued on. Fortunately there were a few available sites. They all had a sign saying "Reserved," but since it was a permanent sign, we figured it meant "Reservable" and took a chance and parked in one. Jim then went over to the nearby camp store and discovered he could register there. Fortunately no one had reserved the site we chose. However, the place is 90% full even on a Sunday night.

The reason is fishing. All along the causeways we saw people's cars parked (in No Parking areas that are apparently unenforced) and the folks sitting on the edge of the water fishing poles in hand. Here in the campground there are a lot of boats, and as we entered the area, we saw a parking lot with 100Å vehicles with boat trailers attached and lot of folks at the fish-cleaning station.

Devil's Lake is sort of a saucer-shaped sink-hole in this part of the country. In the last decade or so it has risen dramatically. When it reaches a certain level it overflows, but I don't know what that level is with respect to the towns on the periphery. A drainage ditch has just been completed to drain the water out of the basin. Canada is outraged at the project, because the water will end up in their lakes. This entire area is in the Arctic watershed and eventually ends up in Hudson Bay. The imminent opening of the "drain" is a subject of much news in this part of the country.

[On June 17 we read in the Minot *Daily News* that the lake has risen 25 feet in the past 12 years. It seemed to both of us that it had tripled in surface area. When I compared its area on the current ND state map with that on the AAA map, which seems not to have been upgraded in a long time, that estimate holds pretty well. A succession of really wet years is responsible. The Minot news article said recent rains are delaying opening of the drain. They've had over 11 inches of rain over the last three weeks. The article described the loss of another county road and reported on two farm families that will have to move and lose everything. Flood insurance won't cover their homes unless they're living in them, which they can't if the road is closed. The article reported that when the drain opens, "lake water will be pumped through the outlet into the Sheyenne River, which flows to southeast North Dakota before emptying north of Fargo into the Red River. The Red flows north and ultimately empties into Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba."]

Last time when the water was more shallow, there was vegetation along the water's edge and nesting birds. I especially remember a large colony of Eared Grebes. As we drove around the lake today, we saw very few birds on the water.

The new section of the campground is one of those turf-and-trees affairs that are so common in this part of the country. The site we had in the older section last time was more secluded. There is a row of trees a little ways behind our site, but it's a thin one with one of the park roads beyond it. So we're kind of disappointed. Despite its uninteresting appearance, there are a lot of birds in the campground. I don't think I've ever heard as many Warbling Vireos as there are here. Also dominant are Robins and Yellow Warblers. We only paid for one night and don't know if this site is available tomorrow night--and don't know if we want to stay, although our next destination is 92 miles away. I was so tired from the day's activities that I haven't done any birding here yet except by ear out the window of the trailer.

Still have to defrost that refrigerator. It's really iced up. Maybe tomorrow.

4:30 pm., Mon., June 13, 2005 **Graham's Island SP, Devil's Lake, ND**

We awoke to gray skies and wind. Another afternoon and night of rain was predicted. Temperature has been in the 60s all day.

I walked around for about an hour before breakfast (between 5:30 and 6:30 approx.) with my tape recorder, but the wind in the trees prevented any recordings from being very good. This place really had an exciting dawn chorus--too bad I couldn't get it well. All the campers, even the fishermen, seemed to be asleep, so only the wind was a problem.

After breakfast I finally got the refrigerator defrosted. Then Jim and I took a ride to see what became of the road between the park and the little town of Minnewaukan. When we were here in late June, 1994, we spent a lot of time along that road. I was thinking we did some recording and photography there, but when I checked my database, I couldn't find anything at that location. All I really remember, though, is a dead tern that had crashed into a barbed wire fence in a flooded pasture. Apparently I never catalogued that picture. Anyway, we found the start of the road, but it ended in a half-mile in a big ROAD CLOSED sign and a strong barricade. Beyond the barricade was lake, and way off in the distance we could see the line of trees of the town. If we looked carefully we could see where the road had been because of a line of marsh vegetation, and it looked like it was drowning out. The road did turn at the barricade, but a glance at my PLOTS atlas showed it ended within a mile, probably at some farm buildings we saw on a hill. Some farm land still remained on the high ground, but we wondered how much had been flooded out. I recall hearing also that much of the town of Minnewaukan is now under water, but the town itself is still on the map, so I guess the higher portions remain.

We took pictures of the flooded area and came back to the trailer. We decided we might as well wait out the rain here as anywhere and were able to rent this site for another night. Our next stop is to be a city park in the tiny town of Granville. From there we'd like to revisit a place nearby (near Buffalo Lodge Lake) where we heard Yellow Rails in 1994. The place is in the new ND Birding Guide, so must still be a popular birding spot. In 1994 we drove out from Minot, but I discovered the city park listed in the ND Tourist Guide.

Jim was happy to come back, because a White-breasted Nuthatch had discovered the Magic Meal he put in the knot-holes in the tree right outside our window. Then, even better, he saw a pair of Cedar Waxwings picking up scraps of tissue and carrying them off. In no time, Jim had cut several sheets of Kleenex into strips, laid them on the grass, and positioned himself in the truck to photograph the

action out the window. The birds were soon right there, grabbing four or five strips each time and flying off with them. Sometimes there was a tug-of-war between the two birds, who were obviously a mated pair, since they came and went together. Except for a short break for lunch, Jim spent the entire morning and early afternoon monitoring the action at the Kleenex and on the tree trunk. Occasionally female Yellow Warblers (up to three at a time) would come in for some Magic Meal, but I think they were always gone before Jim could get any photos. I really hope those Cedar Waxwing photos are good. We could use better ones of that bird. Even if they're great, though, they'll be more interesting as behavior shots than as portraits of the species--too much Kleenex and (later) strips of embroidery floss in the picture. For the record, they liked the yellow embroidery floss, but turned down red-orange and green.

When it started to rain around 2:00 pm, the action was over. It's been raining lightly ever since, but seems to be getting stronger now.

Tues., June 14, 2005
City Park Cpgd., Granville, ND

No entry.

9:00 pm, Wed., June 15, 2005
City Cpgd., Stanley, ND

The rain at Devil's Lake did not stop all night long, but was never more than moderate. It was still raining when we hooked up to leave yesterday, but fortunately only a heavy drizzle. We had light rain half-way to Granville, which is a small town on US 2 about 22 miles east of Minot. Temperatures were in the 60s all day. After we got there, we had one short rain shower in the late afternoon.

We found that the city park campground, listed in the North Dakota Tourist Guide, but not Trailer Life, was quite nice. It's on the edge of town, and the park is quite large, with both broad-leafed and coniferous (spruce) trees planted. Some prairie is on the edges of the fields across the road, where Clay-colored Sparrows were singing in the shrubby cottonwoods. The campground birds were nothing remarkable. Granville is a tiny town, and there were nice little blue-and-white signs on both of the entry roads from the highway directing us to the campground. Sites (gravel with grass growing up through it) have electric (30 amp) hookups, water centrally located, and a dump station. The top of the pipe we had to dump into was a foot off the ground, so Jim had to drain the gray into a bucket, then pour it down the pipe. Not a place to dump black! Price \$10.

We got to Granville around 10:00 after a 92-mile drive. I spent the rest of the morning putting together a tape for Jim that has all the prairie birds he might want to photograph. It has about two minutes of each species with the announcement of the name of each bird at the beginning and end of each segment. Because of his hearing loss, Jim can't hear most of the bird sounds, so depends on those announcements. The Bobolink and Sedge Wren I took from my recent recordings and the rest from Stokes Eastern Recordings.

Our purpose in going to Granville was to visit a wet prairie area where Yellow Rails are sometimes found. I heard my lifer eleven years ago there. The place is only about 3 or 4 miles from Granville and is now described in the *Birding North Dakota* book. To get there we drove east from Granville a mile or two on US 2, turned north at a gravel road whose sign said it led Buffalo Lodge Lake. Then we drove north 1.4

miles to the 2nd road and turned east for two miles. Along both legs of the gravel route there are shallow ponds and wet meadow/pasture to look at. Toward the end of the final leg, it ascends into drier prairie, where I found Baird's Sparrows last time.

We met up again with Terry and John and all went out to the area in the late afternoon after the shower. The clouds were absolutely spectacular with piled up rain clouds and more benign cumulus here and there, but lots of blue sky, too. No lightning, however. We took quite a few photos of the wetlands with those beautiful clouds. Jim loves these clouds, but when he comments about them to the locals, they look at him strangely. They've seen clouds like these all their lives.

The place looked just about the same as it did 11 years ago, with perhaps a bit more standing water--understandable after all the rain there's been this year. The other year was rather dry.

Then we went back to our RVs, had dinner, and chatted until it was getting dark. We got out to the wetlands around 9:30, then separated and checked out all the likely spots along the road for Yellow Rails, clicking quarters furiously. Unfortunately, none was heard. We did hear Soras, Virginia Rails, and American Bitterns. The Sora calls were widely spaced, as usual, so I was unable to catch the whinny on tape, but I did get the other two. The sky still had a pale glow in the northwest when we gave up at 11:00. A half-moon was glowing in the totally cloudless sky

Despite getting to bed late, we still awoke at our usual time this morning, around 5:30. It had gotten pretty cold overnight, and a dense, drizzly groundfog had developed. So we ate a fairly leisurely breakfast and went out to the wetlands once more. The drizzle was spotty--on the west-facing slopes, but not on the flatlands. I spent most of the morning recording, and Jim spent it standing around playing Le Conte's Sparrow tapes to try to lure those birds out in the open. They would not be lured, so in desperation he tried all the other birds on the tape I just made for him! They wouldn't come in either.

My recording day was only mediocre. I only heard Le Conte's Sparrow a couple of times. Baird's Sparrow, which I recorded last time, was not to be heard. I thought I heard Chestnut-collared Longspurs in the distance, but it was hard to tell from the Western Meadowlark and Bobolink jumble. Shorebirds were flying around--Wilson's Phalarope, Willet, Marbled Godwit--and calling. I even got one snatch of Upland Sandpiper, but those birds don't call as much as the others. The wind got up fairly early, so the recordings aren't really wonderful. Still I had a nice time walking that country road through the beautiful prairie. We finally quit around 10:30. I probably walked a mile or two and did a lot of standing around, too.

We then went back, hooked up and drove on to Minot, where we had an awful lot of little errands--getting a leaky tire valve replaced (had to try 2 places before they could work on it right away), getting a part to repair a cupboard door in the trailer (took two tries to find it, too), buying propane, gasoline, groceries, and lunch. (The grocery store was enormous, but very nice. It took forever to find my list of items.) All the places were right along Bypass 2, so were handy to find, but still it was nearly 3:00 when we got on the road again.

We then drove about 40 miles farther west to Stanley, from which we plan to drive to Lostwood NWR tomorrow. Last time we went to Lostwood, we drove there from Kenmare, but we really didn't like the city campground in that town--crowded sites, right next to the highway with heavy trucking to Canada, poor restrooms. We read that Stanley had a city campground, so decided to try that. It has its drawbacks, but we think we like it better than Kenmare. It's on SR 8 on the north edge of town and has very little road traffic. Unfortunately it's only about 100 yards north of a busy train

track. The trains don't blow their whistles near here, but they are pretty noisy as they pass. The sites here are widely spaced, grassy, and back up to a dense row of shrubs and trees. Hookups are electrical only (30 amp). Dump station available. There must be a water faucet somewhere, but we have some in our tank and haven't looked yet. [There was. It was on the side of the rest room building.] Has restrooms and scroungy showers without hot water. Price: free, but there's a donation box to which we contributed \$10, the price they asked in Granville.

4:00 pm., Thurs., June 16, 2005 City Cpgd., Stanley, ND

The trains didn't bother us particularly last night--don't even know how many, if any, passed while we were in bed. What did bother us was a security light right outside our bedroom window. I had to put my dark cloth on one window and snap the dark curtain I made for just such occasions in the vent.

We got to Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge around 8:00 this morning, stopped by the office, which opened at 7:30, to pick up some literature and some suggestions as to where to find our target birds, and spent the morning until around 12:30 driving the tour road, which is about seven miles long.

Lostwood is in the Missouri Coteau--lots of prairie-covered hills dotted with lakes and ponds, some fresh and some alkaline. Brochure said "coteau" is French for "little hill," but still didn't explain the Missouri part.

The biologist who seemed to be the one to whom everyone in the office referred bird questions told me a couple of places he'd seen Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows last year. He hadn't looked this year. Then he said Sprague's Pipits and Baird's Sparrows are "all over the place," and Chestnut-collared Longspurs are hard to find.

According to the *Birding North Dakota* book, Sprague's Pipits are common around the fire tower, so we stopped there for a while. The wind was blowing fiercely up there, but windy days are supposed to be when the birds are most active, according to *Birds of North America*. The wind made it difficult to hear them if they were doing their song flights. We finally gave up and went on.

The road then descended to a straight east-west section and passed through a small marshy area with only a little open water. That was where we had been told to look for the Nelson's. No sooner had we stopped than I heard its unimpressive little song. Standing in the lee of the truck to keep wind noise at a minimum, I recorded it, but to lure it in we used the tape I made for Jim the other day. It immediately flew right in and lit on the narrow gravel road about 25 feet in front of the truck, giving me an excellent look at it. Jim was able to get several shots off before it disappeared into the tall roadside grass. After a few more plays of the taped song, it reappeared atop a reed stem not far away, but the habitat was so uniform I was unable to explain to Jim where it was and it flew off before he could find it. I continued to hear it singing from not too far away and got some more recordings that are probably not too bad, considering the wind.

The road ascended from there out of the marshy habitat, but I kept hearing what sounded like the same song. I knew it couldn't be the bird because it wouldn't be in open prairie. Finally I was able to amplify the song and not the wind enough to detect the entire song. It was one of the many Savannah Sparrows in the area, and the final portion was lost to the unaided ear. I also heard lots of Grasshopper Sparrows in the uplands.

Most of the tour road goes up and down well away from water--just the place to look for Baird's Sparrow and Sprague's Pipit. We did find a couple of Baird's Sparrows. Jim tried to call one of them out with his tape, but it seemed more intimidated than challenged. At any rate, it wouldn't come in to the music.

He did have a certain amount of success with the Bobolinks and got off a few shots of the birds doing their song flight. When they were heading into the wind, they weren't moving making much forward progress, so he was able to focus on them.

While Jim was spending a long time shooting the Bobolinks and trying for the Baird's Sparrows, I was trying to find a place in the lee of the truck where I could use my microphone to listen for Sprague's Pipits. Once I was pretty sure I could hear one far away in the sky. It went on for a minute or so, then stopped. I could never see it, and couldn't even hear it with my unaided ear. I'll have to listen carefully to the tape and probably plot a sonogram to find out for sure if I had one.

Near the end of the tour route is an overlook of a small pond with a fairly broad ring of dried alkaline salts around the edge. That's where the Piping Plovers nest. I had to scope the shoreline to see if I could find one for my special shorebirds list. Finally I came to a fenced enclosure, which I hadn't seen with my naked eye. Sure enough, right in the middle of it was a bird on a nest. The biologists had obviously put it up to keep predators away from the nest of this endangered bird.

In total, we had an encouraging morning, but certainly didn't meet all our goals for the place. We plan to go back again tomorrow and try again. In fact, we may stay around this area several days. According to the weather forecast, it's supposed to get *hot* Sunday and Monday--up to 100_ in southwestern North Dakota and down into South Dakota. It may not get above the high 80s where we are. We may wait out the hot spell right here. Lostwood is really our last true prairie stop anyway. There are a couple of places that sound interesting on the way home, but that's all.

The temperature was supposed to get up to 78_ today, but I think it's hotter than that now. We don't have our thermometer out. Our trailer is in full sun and we're using the AC.

The reader may have noticed that I've not said much about mosquitos. On previous trips to North Dakota they have been major pests and were especially bothersome at Buffalo Lodge Lakes during the evening search and at Lostwood. Although we've had some of the pests, they're been much less of a problem than we feared. I've used insect repellent at a few places, and that has really kept them away. Jim wore his net at Buffalo Lodge Lakes, but no where else. Of course, if a single one of the tyrants gets in the truck, he's swearing, swatting, and swerving all over the road, scaring me to death.

11:00 am, Fri., June 17, 2005

City Cpgd., Stanley, ND

We got out to Lostwood NWR at 7:00 am this morning, hoping to beat the wind, but it was not to be. It was blowing around 20-30 mph the entire time. Even so, we did accomplish a few things.

We stopped first at the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow spot, but playing the tape elicited only fly-bys, and the bird never perched in view. So we gave up after less than five minutes.

In order to get there before singing ceased, we drove as rapidly as the narrow, winding, gravel road permitted to where they have a Sharp-tailed Grouse blind set up. This is a recommended spot for Baird's Sparrow and Sprague's Pipit. As we turned

off the main tour road onto the two-track near the blind, about a dozen grouse took flight from in front of it. Obviously they had been displaying there this morning. All the literature says activity ceases by mid-May. Maybe the best show does, but for people who couldn't be here for that, this might be pretty impressive.

We spent most of our time parked in that one area. When we first got out, a couple of Savannah Sparrows were perched on the electric cattle fence with bugs in their mouths. Obviously we were too close to their nest. Jim photographed them, then backed the truck up a bit to allow them to feed their chicks, wherever they were. (A lot of cattle are grazed on the refuge. That and fire are used as management tools to keep it in prairie. The cattle replace the bison of old.)

I wandered around and not far away heard a couple of male Baird's Sparrows countersinging on either side of the two-track road. I attempted to record them, but got mostly the roar of the wind. I suggested that Jim might get photos if we played the tape I made for him. I played the tape and in no time a Baird's popped up a little beyond camera range. As I continued the music, it dropped down into the grass, but pretty soon it popped up close enough for photos. Jim shot a few until the bird dropped down again. The third time it was nice and close, and Jim finally ended up with almost a full roll of that bird. He was really thrilled. The ones he shot in 1994 were all more distant than this.

All the time we were there I was hearing Sprague's Pipits' descending "zhree zhree zhree . . ." series high in the sky. I tried recording them in the lee of the truck and also in the lee of the grouse blind, and definitely improved on what I got yesterday. But I was determined to actually see one of those high-flying mites. My unaided eye wasn't yielding anything, so I finally just focused my binoculars on the distance and panned all over the sky. This method worked! High up there was a tiny gray-brown bird facing the wind and fluttering rapidly. It had to be the source of the loudest sound I was hearing. This time I knew where to aim my microphone, and, since I was sitting on my little camp chair behind the grouse blind at that time, got a half-way decent recording--I hope!

After shooting the sparrows, Jim spent a bit more time trying for flight shots of Bobolinks, but probably didn't get anything worth keeping. They kept displaying up-sun from him.

Even though it was only a little after 10:00, we decided to call it a morning and headed for the south exit. After seeing so many roadside Savannah Sparrows that we began to ignore all roadside birds, I suddenly caught sight of a small bird in the road that flushed differently from the Savannahs. It seemed to skip up and down like a pebble cast across the water. I jammed on the brakes and raised the binocs. It was a Sprague's Pipit. As we approached it slowly, it kept running ahead of us down the road like a Killdeer. So Jim decided he had nothing to lose if he got out and tried to photograph it. Even while he was walking toward it, it kept running ahead of him. Finally he decided to stop and get a few distant shots, which were better than nothing. This was Jim's life Sprague's Pipit--definitely not pictures to be proud of, though.

We tried the Sharp-tailed Sparrow tape in the marsh just before the exit at the south end--no luck. Then we drove back to town. I've been trying all week to find time to finish editing my diary to send home. Now I have the rest of the day and can probably get it in the mail this afternoon.

Tomorrow morning we'll go back to Lostwood only if there's no wind. Otherwise, we'll head for someplace else. Deciding where it will be is another project for the rest of the day.