

# *North through the Prairies*

*With Sylvia, Jim and Charlie Gallagher*

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

## **PART 4**

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**5:15 pm, Sat., June 18, 2005**

**Edgewater Motel and RV Park, Malta, MT**

Not too much to report since yesterday. I spent the afternoon editing the third installment of my diary, and Jim got it to the post office just ten minutes before closing time. It probably didn't go out until today, though.

Today we drove 300 miles west on US 2 to Malta, MT, where we are now camped in the same place we were in 1994. Then we were a month later, July 18 & 19. This place has some shady sites, and we were able to get one. Unfortunately it, too, is right next to a train track, but the trains (so far) haven't gone through town as fast or as noisily as those in Stanley. Stanley had an underpass for the highway, so the through trains didn't have to slow down. [Later: the trains turned out to be worse than any other place we were.]

The country got more and more open as we moved westward. Lots of wheat fields with alternating planted and fallow strips, each perhaps 100 yd wide. About 90 miles of the road was through the south edge of an Indian reservation. There were more towns in that portion. I read in a Billings paper we just bought that in eastern Montana the population is declining, except on the reservations, where it is increasing. Wonder how they're supporting themselves. There's not a large enough population base in the surrounding area for the few casinos we saw to be bringing in much money. Maybe Canadians come down.

We plan to revisit Bowdoin NWR tomorrow.

**9:00 pm, Sun., June 19, 2005**

**Edgewater Motel & RV Park, Malta, MT**

We had a delightful morning at Bowdoin NWR near here. We got there at 7:00 and didn't get off the refuge until 1:00. The 15-mile tour road was interesting its entire length. Our total bird count for the day was around 55 species. Most were birds we've been seeing lots of other places, but here they were unusually close and many of them could be photographed from the truck. Jim shot five rolls of film and passed up opportunities for a number of additional species other photographers might want, but that he already has well.

The tour road starts out passing among several small ponds with cattails along the edges. Then it ascends a little bit and enters a nice stand of short-grass prairie. This was the area where we encountered a Short-eared Owl defending her fledglings from us when we were here a month later (to the day) in 1994. This time the owl--more likely her successor--was probably still tending her young in the nest.

Not far from the road on the right is Bowdoin Lake, a very large, somewhat alkaline lake, which makes for a barren shoreline. Ducks, gulls, and shorebirds all had to be examined, and they were all along the shore in good variety. I even saw a Bufflehead, the first one of those I've seen since we left New Mexico.

We were driving against the sun on that first leg. We kept flushing birds up off the road, but they were hard to identify. Since I was only *hearing* Savannah Sparrows, that's probably what they were. Later in the morning when we were travelling different directions I heard and saw Vesper Sparrows and heard Clay-colored.

As the road bends around to the right and goes more or less south, it ascends to a higher portion of prairie. At one point, we caught sight of a Horned Lark on a rock. Curiously enough it held its ground so Jim could get out and photograph it using his monopod. It hopped up and down off a couple of rocks. We saw no evidence of alarm or feeding young, but it must have had a stake of some sort in that territory.

While Jim was photographing the Horned Lark, I wandered ahead with my tape recorder; I thought I heard Chestnut-collared Longspurs. As I got closer to where the sound was coming from, all I could hear was Western Meadowlarks, so I don't know if I was wrong or if the longspurs simply quieted down.

Then I started hearing a song that reminded me a little of a Mockingbird: four or five motifs of one kind, four or five of a second, etc. until three to five songs had been uttered. When I looked toward where the sounds were coming from, all I could see was Bobolinks flying around, so I walked over. I'm ashamed to confess how long it took me to realize that the sounds were coming from the "Bobolinks," which were actually Lark Buntings.

The birds were rather wary at first, and with the breeze starting it was difficult to get recordings. I did get some and played them back, but the birds didn't come my way. Gradually I figured out where the center of the action was: a small depression where the grasses were a bit taller than elsewhere and where there were a few sturdy perches. When I stood in the center of that area, at first the birds were rather quiet and stayed out of sight. I played back one of my poor recordings with lots of wind roar; it elicited more song-flights. Gradually the birds got used to my presence, so I really didn't play my tape very much after that. The one bird whose territory I was apparently in the middle of finally resumed action, ignoring me completely. He would ascend from his perch at a steep angle with rapidly fluttering wings. At the apex he started his song with four or five high clear notes, then he would glide down at a shallow angle, giving several more groups of notes, the 2nd and 3rd each successively lower. If there were more than three groups, the final ones were less well formed and might or might not continue the pattern of a descending line of frequencies. After a few seconds of flight, the bird would land on a different shrub or grass stem--or sometimes on the ground--50 to 100 ft from where he went up. Sometimes he would land far from me, sometimes quite close.

Because of the wind I had trouble getting excellent recordings. For a while he seemed to be flying back and forth between two general areas, so I got my mic closer to the ground by propping it up at a slight angle on a shrub and recording from there. This seemed to lessen the wind noise, but I'll have to listen to the recordings when I get home to find out how good they are.

After I had gotten all the recordings I wanted--and come to realize how frequently the bird landed and took off from a particular patch of shrubs very near to where I was standing--I called Jim over with his camera. He took a lot of pictures of the bird in flight and a few of it perched. (He already has excellent shots from other trips of perched alternate-plumaged male Lark Buntings.) [The photos were less than pleasing, for they all showed side views of the gliding bird.]

The Lark Buntings, which turned out to be quite abundant on the refuge after that first encounter, were the highlight of the morning. That had been one bird I wanted to go to Colorado to get recordings of, so I was very happy I could get them here. As we continued on around the lake, the road returned to near the shore. There Jim was able

to get some shots of Wilson's Phalaropes and Willets in alternate plumage. Earlier he had gotten some American Avocets.

Most of the phalaropes seemed to be females, and all the ones he photographed were. I wondered if the males weren't incubating eggs. (Phalaropes practice sex role reversal.)

Another thrill was a Killdeer in the road ahead of us doing its broken wing act. I've never seen one with its tail flared as much as this one's was. I discovered that they have white outer tail feathers with black spots on them. Jim photographed the bird in excellent light from quite close range. These shots will probably be better than the ones he got in Nebraska, which were in partial shade.

The final portion of the road passed by some farmland where we looked in vain for Gray Partridges, which are supposed to be there. Then a marsh with lots of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, including a lot of juveniles, one of which Jim photographed well. More duck species were in the ponds. I don't think the variety of ducks was as great as we had at Arrowwood, but I haven't counted them up.

Altogether an interesting morning with never a dull moment.

It was 1:30 by the time we got back to town and getting warm. Temperature then was around 76\_, and got up to the middle to upper 80s before the day was over. No clouds.

We put Charlie in the trailer, which had been in the sun all morning, and turned on the AC. Then we went out to lunch at the West End Restaurant across the road and a little west of where we're staying. Food was mediocre, and they seemed to be out of a lot of items. The place was really crowded with the after-church crowd. I don't know if it was more crowded than is usual on a Sunday. I didn't think Father's Day was a particularly big restaurant day, but maybe I'm wrong.

**June 20, 2005**

**KOA, Billings, MT**

No entry.

**9:00 pm, Tues., June 21, 2005**

**Indian Campground, Buffalo, WY**

Yesterday was mainly a day of driving. Since we only had 160 miles to travel, we had a leisurely breakfast and ate lunch in Roundup, the last sizeable town before arriving in Billings. We selected the only restaurant that had room for us to park with our trailer, the Busy Bee Cafe. You recognize it by the big sign with a black stallion rearing up. Figure that out. [Later: When I told Jim about it, he suggested that perhaps the busy bee stung the stallion in the rear end.] The food was acceptable, but not exceptional.

We were given a nice site at the KOA--almost at the farthest corner. It was shady and backed up to a small dike with the Yellowstone River just beyond it, but out of view. The KOA had just about every amenity a KOA ever has--swimming pool, miniature golf, BBQ cafe (awful food, lousy service, and overpriced), lake, etc. It claims it was the very first KOA, established in 1961. Everything was well taken care of, and the only poor thing was the cafe.

Although the temperature was borderline too hot, I sat outside most of the afternoon listening to the birds, mostly a couple of Yellow Warblers countersinging until I wished I could wring their necks. They were both doing the same four-parted song.

As the afternoon wore on, I became aware of an inordinate number of dogs in the park. Many rigs had portable pens outside with 3 to 10 dogs in them. All breeds were represented. After we walked down to the cafe for dinner and saw lots more of the pens, we figured there must be a dog show in town. All those doggy rigs really filled the campground. We were glad we had gotten there early in the day.

Some of the dogs were well behaved, but one dog had its owner trained to say, "Quiet!" Every time the dog barked, which was *often*, she said "Quiet!" This would go on about 10-15 times until the dog tired of the game. Never once did the owner say, "Good dog," when the dog was quiet for a few seconds. I'm sure the dog just figured it was a fine game and a way to get some attention.

One family had far more dogs than any other--a bunch of black-and-white terriers of some sort, with maybe 6 to 10 of them jammed into one tiny wire pen. When we were walking back from dinner, we heard the snarling and yapping of a major dog fight in that pen. What a melee, with all those dogs whirling around and leaping over one another. The owner (possibly the one who was trained to say "Quiet!") jerked one dog from the pen by the scruff of the neck and threw it angrily into another cage. She was apparently embarrassed by the crowd of bystanders watching from the park road, but it was obvious she had far too many dogs and didn't know how to handle them.

Fortunately the dogs quieted down at sunset. After loud trains the preceding five nights, we welcomed the quiet with only the gentle swish of the river and the distant hum of the freeway.

Unfortunately our peace and quiet was not to last. At 11:00 in drove an enormous diesel truck with cabin capacity (where the dogs resided, we later discovered), towing a gargantuan travel trailer. There were two sites beyond ours which were too short for anything but very short pick-up truck campers. They had assigned this monster rig to parallel park in the two sites. First they spent a half hour with the engine running, discussing something--probably how to park the rig. Then they spent the next half-hour backing and forthing trying to get the thing parked in the sites. I wanted to wake Jim up and have him go out and show them how to back up a trailer, but with his hearing loss he slept through the whole ruckus. (That made me even madder!)

Finally around midnight they decided they had it parked. Then they proceeded to turn on all their outside lights, which shone right into our bedroom. The reason for this was so they could extend all the creaky slideouts, pull out the awning, get side curtains for the awning out of the various cabinets and hang them from the sides and front of the awning, get rugs out of other cabinets and spread them on the ground under the awning, and slam all the cabinet doors, all the while discussing the process with one another. Finally, well after midnight they went inside and turned on their air conditioner, which droned away the rest of the night. At least that was a steady sound. By then I was so angry that I didn't calm down and go to sleep until nearly 1:00.

The birds, especially those Yellow Warblers, awoke me at my usual time--around 5:00. We wanted to get up early so we could get the day's activities over before it got too hot.

Our main activity of interest was a visit to Pompey's Pillar National Monument, which is 28 miles east of Billings, just off I-94. This large sandstone butte is where William Clark signed his name on July 25, 1806, when the Journey of Discovery was on its way back from the Pacific Coast. This famous piece of graffiti is the only on-site evidence in the west that the Lewis and Clark expedition took place. Clark had scrambled up the rubble below the butte to sign his name. In the intervening years much of the rubble has eroded away, so no one can reach the area from the ground

today. The National Park Service has built a wooden stairway up to the signature--and then on up to the top of the formation. Today the signature is sealed behind glass to protect it from the elements. Before that it was protected from vandals behind a metal grating that the railroad company had put up in the late 19th century. It was difficult to photograph because of the light reflecting off the glass, but Jim tried with a polarizing filter. We'll have to see if it worked.

Pompey's Pillar was called Pompy's Tower by Clark in his journal. Pompy was Clark's nickname for Sakagawea's young son. (Pomp means "little chief" in her language.) The name was changed in 1815 when the diaries were first published and the corrupted name has stuck. Apparently the editor thought the name was applied in error and that Clark had meant to name the formation after the more famous Pompey's Pillar, which has endured since antiquity in Alexandria, Egypt. (Lewis and Clark were noted for their creative spelling.)

Pompey's Pillar is about 100 yd from a fairly pristine stretch of the Yellowstone River. A paved trail winds among some tall Eastern Cottonwoods (called Plains Cottonwood on the signs there). It's a very pretty spot and had quite a few birds. Hairy Woodpecker and Spotted Towhee were a couple I haven't seen for quite a while. White-throated Swifts were swirling around the pillar--no doubt nesting in the crevices. The Montana bird-finding guide says Rock Wrens are supposed to be there, too, but I didn't hear or see one.

We got back to the trailer around 9:30 or 10:00, hooked up and got on the road--but not before I took time to write an indignant note to the occupants of that monster outfit that came in in the middle of the night.

Our 160-mile drive was mainly southeast and all on I-90. Because of the heat--as high as 94\_ according to our truck's thermometer--we didn't stop for lunch enroute; we couldn't leave Charlie away from air-conditioning. We got to our destination around 1:00 and ate lunch at a fast-food cafe next-door to the campground. Jim thinks the hot dogs he ate gave him food poisoning.

I had checked the Trailer Life guide for Sheridan and Buffalo, and the ad for the Indian Campground in Buffalo said they had 200 mature cottonwoods with sites "mostly shady." With the heat we've been having, shade was more important than anything else. And the place is definitely as billed. We had to take a pull-through because their only back-ins backed up to other trailers. We like to back up to the bushes when we can. The campground is in an urban setting with a motel on one side, the fast-food cafe on the other, and I-25 only a few feet beyond it. We've had the AC on ever since we got here, so I don't know how much noise there'll be from the freeway, but there are lots of trees to muffle the sound. It can't be worse than those trains. Jim liked the shower, too. So although it's not very exciting, it's acceptable for one night. [Later: the highway noise was no problem at night.]

The temperature got up to a muggy 89\_ this afternoon. There was no breeze, so I didn't try to sit outside. (I think the high temperature yesterday was about the same, but there was a breeze.) I took a long nap to make up for last night, then just amused myself in the trailer with books, embroidery, and TV.

**8:15 pm, Wed., June 22, 2005**  
**KOA, Laramie, WY**

The only thing that disturbed our peace and quiet last night was a one-hour period of thunder, lightning, and wind--with just a tiny bit of rain.

This morning Jim discovered a flat tire on the trailer. He was thankful to be able

to change it in the campground in the cool of the early morning. He discovered a fairly long laceration in it, but neither of us can figure where he ran over something in parking in the Indian Campground. Anyway, the tire was no good, so he had to buy a new one this afternoon when we got to Laramie. Got a good price, so he was pleased. We always carry two spares. Otherwise we would not have left Buffalo until we had a new spare.

Our drives yesterday and today were through the rolling, sometimes hilly, country of eastern Wyoming. There has been quite a bit of rain lately, so the entire landscape was clothed in gorgeous green velvet. Most of the habitat was short-grass prairie, with occasional areas covered with sagebrush and other shrubs. The only thing that marred the scene was heat/humidity haze, so the distant views were sort of fuzzy, and the sky wasn't brilliant blue.

In our drive today I think we saw more Pronghorns than we ever had in a single day's drive. They were all along the road and really stood out against the green prairie. We even saw an occasional mother with one or two youngsters. We also spotted several prairie dog towns.

Our route today was via I-25 to Casper, then SR 220, SR 487, and US 30/287 to Laramie. The latter is the old road that all east-west traffic took before I-80 was built and cut off this stretch. Several old towns along the road have practically died because of the lack of tourist trade. We ate lunch in the Longhorn Restaurant in Rock River, one of these towns. It was a delightful place. Jim had a good hamburger and I had a delicious taco salad--amazing for the middle of Wyoming. The two ladies who ran the place seemed to love their work and were very efficient and friendly. The walls of the place were lined with glass showcases full of interesting small antique items of all types. The one beside where we sat had penknives, aspirin tins, children's books and toys, eyeglasses, etc. Others were equally varied. The walls where there were no cabinets had old kitchen utensils attached everywhere. It was fun to look around. All in all, one of the nicest lunch stops on the trip. Highly recommended.

The altitude here in Laramie is 7200 ft, but it still was pretty warm when we arrived. This KOA has absolutely no shade and is just a big, dusty gravel parking lot right next to the heavy traffic of I-80. Unfortunately, it was the only RV park listed in Trailer Life. To top it off, it costs \$32 a night, probably the most expensive park we've been in on the entire trip, and we're here for two nights.

The temperature cooled off after we'd been here for an hour or so because glowering thunderheads developed in the northwest. We saw lightning off in the distance and it seemed to be raining there most of the time, but we've had none here. It may hit us yet, however. I'm seeing lightning now as it's getting dark, but the thunder is very far away and almost inaudible--especially above the freeway traffic.

## **8:00 pm, Thurs., June 23, 2005**

### **KOA, Laramie, WY**

The freeway noise last night was pretty bad; I wore my ear plugs.

Today was our last day of birding, the search for the Mountain Plover. The morning was mostly clear, but with a brisk breeze from the very beginning. We drove the 17-mile "Old Laramie River Rd." recommended in Oliver Scott's ABA/Lane Guide to Wyoming (1993). I don't know where he got that name for the road, for so far as I could determine, it had no name. There was an ancient county road-number sign near the beginning of it, but it was not visible from the highway. The road was easy to find from the directions in the book. To get there we drove north from Laramie about 20 miles on

US 30/287 to the nearly-ghost town of Bosler. Just before the first building on the left, there is a gravel road that crosses the railroad track. We turned left onto that road, and it turned out to be easy to follow. Whenever there were side roads, they always seemed to be either much less significant than the main road or to lead to some nearby ranch buildings. The road was well-maintained gravel the full length. Although not overly wide, there was plenty of room to meet vehicles anywhere. Since traffic was extremely light--maybe half a dozen vehicles all morning, if you count each time the ones we saw coming and going. The road started out southwest and then turned to a southeasterly direction about half-way along, finally ending up back on US 30/287 about six miles north of Laramie. Where it came in, there were a lot of ranchettes and a number of roads, none with names, so I can see why Scott gave directions for starting at the north end. Also, it was a better morning sun angle.

Most of the road was through short-grass prairie, much of it grazed, but not overgrazed. Many cattle guards separated the various tracts. We saw almost no cattle, but shortly after we got on the road we found ourselves in a field with a bunch of horses--maybe twenty. As we approached, they were on both sides of the road, but as we got closer, a couple of them decided they wanted to be on the other side of the road, and a couple more decided they wanted to be *on* the road. The rest of the herd were barely off the road. So I drove extremely slowly toward them, expecting them to yield to the larger "animal," but one horse decided to be mulish and simply stood there with its side to me right in the middle of the road. It didn't even turn its head to look at our approaching vehicle, but it was obvious it knew we were there. Just as it seemed I was going to have to actually push that horse aside, it decided to yield and backed barely off the road, but with its head still extending in front of the windshield. A nudge with my outside rear-view-mirror forced it to turn its head as I passed. The other horses were still all around, too--barely off the road and watching the whole affair. Not being a horse psychologist, I have no idea what possessed those horses to behave that way.

The other "animal" that was forever on the road was Horned Larks. We were constantly flushing them up. I'm sure we saw hundreds, if not more, in the course of our drive. Jim was frustrated, because it was impossible to photograph them in the road ahead, and when they flushed, they dropped down into the grass. There was a lot of singing and this would have been a great place to record them had there been no wind, for very few other birds were present, not even Western Meadowlarks. This was probably the first prairie drive we've taken that didn't have Eastern and/or Western Meadowlarks.

We drove the entire 17 miles at around 5-10 mph, searching diligently for signs of Mountain Plovers, but could find none. I know they're hard to spot sometimes, but if there had been the significant numbers Scott promised, we should have found a few. Maybe their numbers have decreased so much since the book was written that they're no longer in that area. The total population now is estimated to be no more than about 9000. Pawnee National Grasslands, where their numbers are greatest, is not very far away, though. They are almost always found in prairie dog towns, and we did see a few of those, but none of them was very large--never more than a couple or three dozen mounds. Perhaps the control measures for prairie dogs that the cattle people have used have eliminated the plovers, too.

The day wasn't totally wasted, though, for there was a surprising amount of wetland along the route. (The book had given the impression that it was all prairie.) We passed several sizeable ponds and lots of wet meadow. Often the birds were concentrated in the narrow strip of open water--the borrow pit--beside the road. Jim was able to get nice close-ups of Willets, Wilson's Phalaropes (including a male this

time), American Avocets, all in alternate plumage.

The only group of trees along the route had a Swainson's Hawk nest, with one bird apparently incubating and the other perched 100 yd away in a tree. When we got out of the car to get the scope out, the adults both rose up into the air and circled over us, screaming. I did manage to get a fair recording by standing in the lee of the truck. I don't think Jim got any flight photos, and we did not approach the nest.

About the only other birds were a few Vesper and Brewer's Sparrows, but no Savannahs. These sparrows were all in areas where there was sagebrush mixed into the grasslands. The areas of pure grasslands had only Horned Larks. Longspurs, especially McCown's, were promised by Scott's book, but we found none of those either.

All in all, a rather disappointing morning, but not a total loss. It certainly wasn't worth driving all the way over here for, but it would be a nice drive for anyone coming this way anyway.

This afternoon we just sat around in the trailer. It got warm enough for the AC in the mid-afternoon--maybe low 80s outside, but hotter inside--but by late afternoon it cooled off as the thunder clouds piled up. They gave us only a little bit of rain--just as I was finishing cooking some hamburgers on the grill. The hamburgers were fine, and I got the grill whisked under the trailer to cool off and stay dry.

Tomorrow we start the long drive home.

**Fri., June 24, 2005**

**Phillips RV Park, Evanston, WY**

No entry.

**8:45 pm, Sat., June 25, 2005**

**Red Ledge RV Park, Kanarrville, UT**

We've done nothing the past two days except drive, eat, sleep. Each morning we set off very early--around 6:00 to 6:30--and found a campground by early afternoon after a drive of ca. 300 miles. We stopped early for lunch and, fortunately, it hasn't been too hot to leave Charlie in the trailer while we ate in a restaurant. Charlie is *very* bushy with nearly three months of fur and feels the heat. We haven't trimmed him much, because we always make a mess of it.

Yesterday we drove westward on I-80. At first the habitat was the same rolling, velvety grassland we'd explored the day before. Gradually it transitioned to more sagebrush and drier grass between shrubs. Also the contours of the land became more abrupt with rugged cliffs and capped rock formations. We stopped for lunch at Little America--the first of these hotel complexes to be established. On the menu we read that it was opened in 1934. Just as with the Flagstaff one, we'd been seeing signboards for the place for hundreds of miles. The lunch was excellent. I had an outstanding chicken quesadilla and Jim ordered a ham and eggs and pancakes breakfast, which he pronounced excellent, also. He said they did the scrambled eggs perfectly. He likes them very loose, and most places overcook them. This was probably the best restaurant meal we had on the entire trip, but the competition was mostly pretty dismal.

We stopped for the night at Phillips RV Park in Evanston, WY--almost to the Utah border. It's a very nice RV park, with widely spaced sites (for a commercial campground) and lots of grass and mature trees. The only drawback was that it is awfully close to the traintrack and the freeway. The freeway sounds weren't as bad as

at Laramie, and the train noises weren't as bad as Stanley and Malta, but they were still annoying.

The history of the place was on the park information sheet. It was established in 1936 as a Sinclair gas station with a campground out back. Gradually travel trailers began using the area also. Motel units were added early on and "rented for \$1.25 per night or \$1.50 with linens. The rooms were heated with coal stoves and water had to be carried to the rooms because there was no running water." The gas station was removed in 1945 and the motel units were gradually removed between 1947 and 1985. Now it is exclusively an RV park. We'd definitely stay there again.

We ate dinner at Don Pedro's, a Mexican restaurant almost next door to the campground. Although I'd had a Mexican lunch, Jim hadn't, so we tried it. Since it has two locations in Evanston plus half a dozen or so others elsewhere in the area, we figured it must be pretty good. We were wrong. It was mediocre at best. My Mexican meal at Little America, where the menu had a little of everything, was much better.

Today we drove south through Utah, sticking to freeways the entire distance. Some stretches of freeway were OK, but others were simply awful. Utah is way behind other states in keeping their roads up. Some repaving was going on, but other places it looked like they were just patching the patches.

We ate lunch at a Chinese restaurant (Hunan?) just off the freeway at the northernmost exit in Beaver. Food was OK, but not wonderful.

Since I recalled not being too thrilled with the RV parks in Cedar City, I looked further and discovered a small 22-unit place in Kanarraville, nine miles south of there. It was well off the freeway in a small-town (almost rural) setting and promised shade. The place does have trees, but they don't shade very many of the sites--and the sites are jammed extremely close together. The place is nearly full and neighboring trailers are about 4 ft away on either side. Several of the sites are occupied by a construction crew, who are doing drywall on a new housing development in Cedar City. When they all came back from their day's work, we wondered what we were in for, but they're very nice quiet, friendly men--mostly youngish except for an older man, who seems to be the boss. Because of the crowded sites, we'd never stay there again, although the manager was very nice and friendly.

The weather both yesterday and today has been very unsettled, a mix of clouds and sun, with occasional thunder showers. Temperature topped out around 80\_ both days. In addition to the clouds this afternoon, there has been a lot of smoke. Most of the day it was only high in the sky, but the last hour or so we've really smelled it. The fire is a major one in the Gunlock area of the mountains west of here and has been featured strongly on all the TV newscasts. Our birding friend Larry Tripp, who used to live in California, now lives somewhere in that area, so we emailed Bettina Eastman, his good friend, to see if his home or workplace (his brother's business) are threatened. Haven't heard back from her yet.

Kanarraville was the last town at a high enough elevation to be cool. St. George has been in the high 90s every day. Tomorrow night we'll just have to brave the heat and stay in Barstow. Fortunately the KOA there is quite shady. Driving all the way home on a Sunday afternoon doesn't seem like a very good idea to Jim. So it's another 300-mile drive, which we'll take early again.

**8:00 am, Thurs., June 30, 2005**

**Home**

Although I'm writing this several days later, we got home on Sunday, June 26.

We got on the road around 6:15 am Sunday. As we drove south toward St. George, the air became more and more smoky. Soon there was fire on both sides of the highway, which showed signs of having been a major conflagration the evening before. Even as we passed, we saw lots of smoldering shrubs and an occasional Utah Juniper fully engulfed in flame. This was apparently what the news media had called the Hurricane fire. A bit farther along we could see the smoke from the Gunlock fire. We turned the AC to recirculate so as not to get too much in the truck. Even after we descended through the Virgin River Gorge and were out on the open desert, we could see still other fires in the mountains southeast of the highway. All were apparently lightning-caused. There had been lots of lightning bolts, but little rain actually reaching the ground to quench any fires they might have caused.

We gained an hour, which put us into Barstow around 11:30. As I had been secretly hoping, Jim decided he didn't want to stay in Barstow after all. So we grabbed a quick sandwich from the refrigerated case at the Flying-J gas station--plus a cup of coffee for Jim--gulped it down, and continued on down the road. We got home around 3:00. The only delay on that leg was another trailer flat tire. The horrible roads in Utah--and the equally bad ones in California--had taken their toll. In addition, "old horse" Jim had driven them at what I considered too high a speed in his haste to get the drive over.

Bettina told us neither Larry's home nor his brother's business had been affected by the fires. It looked like they came pretty close, though.

We usually like to get home in the middle of the day, so we can unload the trailer that very day. This time we decided we were going pretend we had stayed in Barstow and leave things just as they were until Monday. So we took naps, read the newspaper, went out to dinner, went to bed, went out to breakfast--and then tackled the job. It took three full, exhausting days to get the trailer unloaded, the laundry done (including all the trailer rugs), the spider webs more or less cleared out of the house, the essential shopping done, etc. Both the trailer and the house still need a good cleaning, and Jim has a yard full of weeds to clear. We also discovered that the front lawn sprinklers hadn't been working while we were away and the lawn looked worse than it usually does. The lack of water had also almost totally defoliated my two Cape honeysuckle "trees" that I enjoy so much out my second story office. (The birds love them.) I hope they'll recover.

## **9:00 pm, Thurs., July 7, 2005**

### **Home**

I've now labelled all the bird and animal slides, but not the scenics, flowers, and sounds. Comments about how some of the photos came out and what some of the critters turned out to be, as well as some minor editing, have been added throughout the entire diary.

The trip met many of my goals for it, at least partially. Most memorable of all were our experiences with lekking "chickens," but there were lots of other great moments, I didn't do nearly as well as I hoped with shorebirds. I completely missed three species I had thought possible: Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Mountain Plover and Hudsonian Godwit. Jim got photos of only a few of the others--mostly those he already had pretty well. On the other hand, he did get some nice sparrows, which I'll put to good use in a workshop in a couple of years. My trip list shows 24 sparrows, and Jim photographed most of them.

Although finding life birds was not a major goal, I did get one, the Sharp-tailed

Grouse. Jim, who has to photograph his, got four: Henslow's Sparrow and Sharp-tailed Grouse well, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and Sprague's Pipit poorly.

I haven't listened to the tapes yet, but I don't expect many outstanding recordings because of the almost ceaseless wind. We visited many places that would have been wonderful recording areas on calm mornings.

Our route gave me a more in-depth appreciation for the differences among the various prairie habitats. Although I had visited many of those areas on previous trips, Nebraska had been almost a complete blank. Seeing how it fit in helped me complete my mental picture of that part of the country. Of course, the Sandhills are uniquely Nebraska's. I now feel I have a much better understanding of how things change from south to north, from west to east, and from spring to early summer. This knowledge will be reinforced when I examine and label all the habitat slides we took. Many of them will find places in future workshops and programs.