

Trip from Texas to Colorado

Spring, 2006

by Sylvia R. Gallagher

Introduction.

Jim has been wanting to return to Texas and spend as long as he wants to in some of the places we rushed away from on previous trips. So we're leaving in mid-March and won't be home until mid-July. And we have no deadlines we have to meet, so we can wander wherever and whenever we want.

We'll spend as long in Texas as the birding is good and the temperature is tolerable, then head northwestward, ending up in the mountains of Colorado. At least, that's the tentative plan.

We've had to avoid high mountains for a number of years, because our precious Charlie (the poodle) had congestive heart disease. We lost him in November. He was such a dear companion that I couldn't see how I could face another trip with such a void in our lives. Everything would remind me of him. In fact, I had just the same problem at home. Anyway, as many of you know, we just had to have a canine presence in our lives, so we bought a nine-week-old poodle puppy and named him Toby. He is totally different from Charlie in every way but one, the best one. He has a really sweet disposition. But he's still a pup--six months old as I write this introduction on March 27--and really a livewire and a handful. He's really just what we need to keep us from missing Charlie too much--but I still miss him!!!

Many of you have met Toby and enjoyed romping with him before classes at our house. A lot of you told me specifically, "Be sure to tell us how Toby does on the trip." For those of you who think there's too much Toby in the diary, my answer is, "Just skip that part."

If this is the first of my diaries you've read, let me introduce ourselves. Jim and I are birders towing our old 26-foot trailer with a Suburban. Jim is a bird photographer, and I record their sounds. The results I use in the Birding Skills Workshops I present for Sea and Sage Audubon. (Upcoming classes are described elsewhere on this website.) Each year I teach for several months, then we spend three or four months on the road.

March 3-12, 2006

Caspers Regional Park, Orange Co., CA

We spent the above days at Caspers Park leading aural field trips that were the culmination of my Learning California Bird Sounds workshop--an introduction to aural birding. Despite cold, threatening weather, all the trips (6 mornings and 3 evenings) took place. We had a ten-minute shower on two evenings and a half-hour shower on two mornings, but we waited them out and continued.

Only one of the evenings was very good--the one without the shower. On that night we heard Great Horned and Barn owls and both saw and heard Western Screech-Owl. On the other days we only got Barn Owls--seen briefly once.

For me there were clearly two highlights to the day trips: The first was hearing a learning subsong from a Hermit Thrush. The atypically harsh tonal quality and lack of precision to the melody was clearly not what it will be doing in a month or two on its

breeding ground. Another time we heard a very nice song from a Hermit Thrush. We also heard two types of calls. The other highlight was a Bewick's Wren alternating two very different song types--one ending in a trill, the other ending in several well spaced notes. We watched him singing atop a small tree for quite a while. Occasionally he would do two songs in a row alike, but mainly he alternated. Bewick's Wrens are noted for ultimate variety, not immediate variety like this.

More information on the Caspers Park field trips and the birds found is located elsewhere on this website.

Mon., March 13, 2006

Picacho Peak RV Resort, north of Tucson

No entry.

5:00 p.m., Tues., March 14, 2006

Manzano's RV Park, Silver City, NM

Yesterday we drove all day --south to San Diego and across on I-8. The mountains were beautiful in the snow they'd received during the preceding week. There are three passes that are around 4100 ft, and there we had snow all around us. There had been little wind, so even the trees and bushes still had snow on them. We really enjoyed it.

After we got down on the desert, it was just the usual tedious drive. We hadn't gotten a very early start, there was some slow traffic north of San Diego, and we lost an hour when we crossed into Arizona, so it was 6:00 p.m. by the time we got to our destination--exhausted. Toby, our five-month-old poodle puppy, had eaten too much breakfast--something he rarely does--and threw up in his kennel, so I had to wash the bedding, fix dinner, then remake the bed with the electric blanket, which we hadn't been able to use at Caspers, since it lacks hookups. After dinner, Jim fell into bed right away, and I followed soon after. We had driven over 400 miles--a lot towing a trailer.

The Picacho Peak RV Resort was nice enough, but it was very noisy--too close to the extremely heavy traffic on both the freeway and the train tracks, and I wonder if the sound didn't echo off the nearby peak. We'll never stay there again. It wasn't particularly expensive--just reasonable for the quality of the place.

Today we had a much shorter drive. I had intended to go to Columbus south of Deming on the Mexican border, but at the last minute decided it might be fun to explore the Silver City area. We stopped at the NM Visitors Center in Lordsburg and I went in and got lots of literature about the area. When we registered here, we got additional info.

We really like Manzano's RV Park. Very quiet. It's on the east edge of town and about a half-mile off the highway. It only has 18 sites, and we got a nice one on the edge. The surrounding area has estate-sized lots with lots of natural habitat between them. The habitat here is mainly junipers with pinyons and small oaks also. (They call the junipers "cedars," but North America has no true cedars.)

It's also quite birdy. The first birds we were aware of were the "wirt" calls of Phainopeplas. We were surprised to find them here, but when I checked a field guide, I found it is right at the northeast edge of their range. They're really thick around here. Also present are Western Scrub-Jay (*woodhouseii*), Curve-billed Thrasher, Canyon

Towhee, Western Bluebird, Gambel's Quail. Jim put out birdseed, and several species have found it already and are eating it right outside our window.

Tomorrow we'll take a drive up into the mountains north of here. I know it's too early in the spring for the special summer visitors, but I'd still like to see the area.

5:15 p.m., Wed., March 15, 2006
Manzano's RV Park, Silver City, NM

Today dawned cloudy and blustery, with the clouds especially dark over the mountains north of here. So we decided to postpone our mountain trip and stay in the RV park today so Jim could photograph the many birds. He set up all his attractions--water drip, birdseed, meal worms, etc. He's been outside all day photographing a wide variety of species. In addition to the ones I listed yesterday, we've had Dark-eyed Junco (Gray-headed and Oregon), Chipping Sparrow, Hermit Thrush, Bewick's Wren, Mourning Dove, House Finch, and White-crowned Sparrow.

I spent the morning entering the Caspers Park field trip results in my computer. The Intel Celeron processor of it was really not up to the mammoth five-page, multi-column table I had created, so it was forever locking up. Then I'd have to reboot and continue. Of course, I saved after about every line, so I didn't have to redo much. Still it was pretty exasperating. I copied it all on a diskette and it's ready to go to Nancy Kenyon for the Sea and Sage website. I hope she can open it! If not, I sent a paper copy.

Most of the afternoon I spent reading and embroidering and, especially, looking out the window at the parade of birds. It really was a pleasant time.

Toby got rambunctious around 4:00, so I played "throw the toy" the length of the trailer for a while, then took him for a walk. He was really wild and zoomed all over the place, really making the dirt fly. The dirt is just the same color he is (apricot--we hope he'll stay that color), so he doesn't really show it. Unfortunately we had only walked about a block when a rather large, overly friendly dog accosted us. I let Toby play with him a little, but when things began to get a little rougher than I felt comfortable with, I picked him up. The loose dog followed us all the way home, climbing on me and mouthing Toby. Toby wasn't much help. He wanted to get down and continue the game, and struggled the entire time. I was really glad to get into the trailer. That dog is still hanging around outside. I guess there'll be no more walks around here.

The sky cleared up around noon, but it has been windy all day. Will have to see what the TV says about the weather tomorrow, but expect to try the drive we didn't take today.

4:00 p.m., Thurs., March 16, 2006
Manzano's RV Park, Silver City, NM

Today we took a long winding drive into the Gila National Forest north of Silver City. We drove north on SR 15 to Gila Cliff Dwellings Natl. Monument, then backtracked to SR 35. We followed that southeastward to SR 152, then returned to Silver City via that and US 180.

The first portion--to the SR 35 junction--was very steep, narrow, and winding. In fact the road was closed to vehicles towing trailers greater than 20 ft in length. We wouldn't have wanted to be towing ours. It entered the Gila Natl. Forest soon after it

began--mainly Ponderosa Pines plus a few firs. I forgot my tree book, but when I just checked it, I discovered the only kind in this range are White Firs.

Two campgrounds are recommended for summer birds. We stopped at one of them, but it definitely was not summer. The temperature was about 30 and it was in a very shady canyon. The place was very quiet, but surprisingly full of campers. The ones we could see looked like lone homeless people. One man had lit a fire, but it didn't really catch. He just sat there facing it with his head down and his hands right above the smoldering embers, inhaling lungfuls of smoke. He never looked up as we walked close to him on our way to the nearby restroom. Most campers are quite friendly.

The area is along a creek, which had no water but according to the literature has none in the summertime either. The birdfinding guide touts it as wonderful in the summer, but not this time of year. So we drove on up to the top of the ridge, where it was a bit warmer. I walked Toby a while along an old dirt road. It'll have to be his walk for the day, since I don't dare take him out around our RV Park.

The road then descended a bit along a ridge, and the trees became mostly Alligator Junipers. At the end of the ridge there was an overlook of the Gila Wilderness. Snow was still present on the north-facing slopes. After taking a few pictures of the view, I discovered what I thought was an unusual juniper. It had gray peeling bark, with a red layer underneath. I photographed it thoroughly, then cut off a spray to bring back. When I looked it up in the book, I found I had an Arizona Cypress, a new species for me. The bluish "fruits" I had noticed were actually just immature cones. The branch I brought back had older cones that were closed and becoming woody--just right for a cypress.

After we passed the SR 35 junction, the road was just as steep, but the hairpin turns weren't quite so tight, and it was wider. People do take trailers up that way. We drove all the way to Gila Ruins. Jim started out on the one-mile trail, and I stayed behind with Toby, who was not permitted. It wasn't long before Jim returned. He had decided he didn't want to see the ruins badly enough to hike that steep trail.

The road back ran along the Mimbres River and was still pretty winding, but faster than SR 15. We didn't get back to the trailer until around 2:00 p.m. A trip to Wal-Mart to replace an old chair that Jim broke yesterday completed our day's driving.

The sky was clear all morning, but has now become totally cloudy, but I don't think there's going to be any rain soon. I think the high was in the upper 60's before it clouded up, but it's colder than that now. No wind, which is nice.

Jim is outside shooting the birds with flash. Our count is now up to 17 species using the food and water in our site. That could be a record. We've added three new ones this afternoon: Juniper Titmouse, Red-winged Blackbird, and American Robin.

Toby has just discovered there's a big world outside the trailer window and sits there looking out for long periods of time. He's also discovered that he's supposed to bark at passers by--unfortunately. Before this he was just wrapped up in his own little puppy world.

Yesterday I discovered that the conifers in our campground are new ones for me. I couldn't photograph them yesterday because of the wind, and now it's cloudy. Hopefully tomorrow morning will be clear and calm. They are Oneseed Juniper (*Juniperus monosperma*) and Two-needle Pinyon (*Pinus edulis*). I got hooked on conifers when I was preparing for my workshop on the western mountains and their birds. Now I'm trying to document them all.

6:00 p.m., Fri., March 17, 2006

Pancho Villa SP, Columbus, NM

We really liked Manzano's RV Park in Silver City. In addition to the 18 species of birds (House Sparrow added this morning), the park is immaculately kept up. Attractive stone walls mark off the edges of the sites. There are wooden benches here and there for sitting and enjoying the surroundings. Unfortunately it was too cold to enjoy them this time. Jim says the bathrooms are immaculate. The community building seems to be a converted house, so the bathroom is just like one in a home. Of course, we loved the natural surroundings in their oak/juniper/pinyon habitat. And the sites weren't too crowded together, as they are on many parks. We paid \$21 a night (including \$1 city tax) for full hookups.

We stayed around until 11:00 this morning. It was overcast the entire time, but quite bright. Jim photographed the birds some more and finally got the Juniper Titmouse to hold still. I did the unpleasant tasks of changing the bed (a major project in our trailer because of all the stuff stored around it) and washing Toby. He tolerates the washing and blow-drying all right, but hates to be brushed. I had to have Jim hold his head while I did it to keep him from attacking my hand and the brush holding it. It's hard to tell whether he's playing with the brush or truly snapping at it, but whichever it is, his teeth are sharp. He really looks nice when he's all clean and fluffy. He hadn't had a bath for two weeks.

Before we left I photographed those two trees and even found a few cones from the Two-leaf Pinyon for my collection. They weren't the most wonderful pictures because of the gray sky, but they'll add to my collection. Whenever I photograph trees, I try to get the entire tree plus close-ups of the foliage, cones/fruits, and bark.

Our drive was about 75 miles. We had lunch at a Pizza Hut in Deming and unfortunately hit the place precisely at the peak of the rush hour, which they were not prepared to handle. It was full of high school kids, and we waited our entire meal to get our drinks. It was a buffet, a common lunchtime feature at Pizza Huts lots of places in the country--but not around home.

Pancho Villa State Park is due south of Deming. It's more open than we remembered, but still there are cottonwoods and lots of cacti. I also discovered that they've planted Arizona Cypress here and there, and they're doing fine. So far we've had Curve-billed Thrasher, White-winged Dove, Lark Bunting, and Greater Roadrunner in our site. There were two roadrunners right outside the window at the water drip for a while, and I had a hard time keeping Toby from yelping at them. I think he wanted to go outside and play with them.

The wind got up pretty strong by mid-afternoon, so we stayed inside most of the time. It has completely died down now, just as the sun is setting.

Our reason for coming here is a recent article in *North American Birds* (Vol. 59, No. 2; 2005; pp. 352+) on Aplomado Falcons along the Mexican border. They don't tell precisely where they are, but there is a map with dots showing all the sightings since 1990. They're done surveys along the roads, so I think we'll drive the one that heads west from here and see if we can find any. They've even nested four times since 2001, once successfully. The nests were active from early March through June--various nests in different months.

The sky has been overcast all day, but all afternoon there has been a sliver of blue sky on the western horizon. Right now we're watching a gorgeous sunset through that sliver. It's illuminating the entire sky with a pink glow.

Sat., March 18, 2006
Pancho Villa SP, Columbus, NM

No entry.

2:15 p.m., Sun., March 19, 2006
Pancho Villa SP, Columbus, NM

Yesterday morning we drove 44 miles westward on SR 9, carefully scanning the tops of yuccas, fence posts, etc., for Aplomado Falcons. This is the area that, according to the map in the North American Birds article, has had the most sightings. We knew in advance it was a long shot, so we weren't surprised not to see a falcon. However, it was interesting to see the type of habitat they prefer. I took a few pictures of yucca stands for the record. When we get to south Texas, where they've been reintroduced, it will be fun to compare the two habitats.

The wind got up around 8:30, not too long after we got started, but wasn't super strong until we were heading back, so I don't think it was a deterrent to those birds, which are undoubtedly used to some wind. The article had mentioned that they conducted their surveys as late as noon unless it got windy earlier.

After we got back, it got super windy for a few hours. According to the TV news, it was 32 mph in Deming with gusts up to 45 mph. That's the closest place to where we are. The wind really buffeted the trailer, and we were in the middle of an awful dust cloud for several hours. Even though there were high clouds most of the day, the temperature was in the upper 70's, so we had to have a few windows open for ventilation. The trailer is coated with the stuff.

The wind went down at sunset, just as it had the day before.

This morning dawned nearly clear and cold, upper 40's I'd guess. The wind didn't start up until around 9:00. It's pretty strong right now, but not like yesterday. The front went through last evening, so the temperature is about 10 degrees cooler than yesterday--pleasant in the trailer with all the windows closed.

We got up about 5:15 this morning, before daylight. I quickly mixed up some pancake batter and put it in the refrigerator (I think the pancakes are better if the batter stands at least an hour). Then I wandered around the campground for three hours recording birds. There were some extraneous noises, mostly highway traffic on the road to Mexico, but also a few roosters, dogs, and miscellaneous campground noises. Even so, recording conditions were pretty good.

I don't think I got any solos for the simple reason that it was impossible to record anything without White-winged Dove sounds, too. In addition to their usual two types of calls, I got an aggressive call and a nice piece of wing sounds as one took flight. The wings whistle almost as loudly as a Mourning Dove at first, then become more of a whoosh.

A robin went through its entire repertoire. That'll really fool my students if I use it as a practice sound in a desert workshop sometime!

Gambel's Quail were all over one area, and I got some pretty good calls of several types from them. Also Cactus Wren, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Dark-eyed (Gray-headed) Junco. House Finches were everywhere, and not mixed in with House Sparrows, of which there seem to be none (saw a few later). I watched a pair of

roadrunners for a long time, but they had nothing to say. Worse luck. I still need a decent recording of that bird. Everything I have is borderline audible.

After our late (9:00) breakfast, I took Toby for a long walk before the wind got super-fierce. He loved it and chased everything that blew near, darting this way and that. When the wind comes from the rear, he even chases his tail--or sits down on it. I don't know what he thinks it is.

I drove over to the the only gas station in this tiny town and bought a Sunday El Paso *Times*, then came inside and sat down on the bed to read it. No sooner had I started, than I started to feel an awful prickling on my hands, arms and across my midriff. I couldn't imagine what it was. There was nothing I could see where the prickles were. I changed my shirt and washed my arms up to my elbows, scrubbing them vigorously with the washcloth. That seemed to do the job. I could see tiny red spots on my skin where the prickles had been, but they no longer hurt.

Then after lunch I began to have the same feeling again. I still didn't know whether it was some sort of no-see-um insect or something that was blowing in the wind. Then it occurred to me that my hat had blown off when I got out of the truck with the newspaper. I had rescued it from a cactus plant. I remembered noting that the cactus seemed to be spineless. When I looked at the hat, I discovered little patches of brown fuzz here and there on it. I realized that was probably what had been pricking me. In aggregate those spines were visible, but not singly. I took the hat outside in the wind and brushed it thoroughly with an old toothbrush, then came in and changed my shirt again and washed my hands and arms as before. Hope that solves the problem. Moral: don't touch "spineless" cacti! I think I'd rather have encountered one with big spines than that one.

When I got back from my morning walk, I found Jim photographing birds through the trailer window. We were located right next to a beautiful big cholla plant, and he'd placed his water drip and birdseed at the base of it. He was getting nice close-up shots with his 100-400 mm zoom lens from 5 to 8 feet: Pyrrhyloxia, Lark Bunting, Curve-billed Thrasher, etc. All should be really pretty in the cactus with its bright yellow fruits. The background was an Arizona Cypress.

Pancho Villa State Park commemorates his raid across the border from Mexico on an American fort. Here is the text of the sign: "Site of the last hostile action by foreign troops in the continental United States. Led by General Francisco (Pancho) Villa, insurgent Mexican forces on the night of March 9, 1916, raided Camp Furlong, a United States Army cantonment and the nearby town of Columbus. Several people were killed, many others were wounded, and numerous buildings and tents were burned. The underlying motive of the raid is still in dispute among survivors and historians. Six days later United States punitive forces under General John J. (Black Jack) Pershing entered Mexico and pursued Pancho Villa without success. In recognition of the subsequent long continued friendly relations of the two countries, the New Mexico state legislature in 1959 designated this site as a state park." Remnants of the fort are scattered around the north half of the park. Some are small adobe buildings, which are under metal roofs to protect them from the rain. Particularly interesting is the first grease rack in the country--an impressive pair of concrete ramps for the wheels, with a gap in the middle to work on the undersides of the army trucks, which were just starting to be used in warfare. The sign nearby said that despite the trucks' presence here, all fuel for them was hauled in by pack animals. I guess the roads were just too awful for multiple trips.

Mon., March 20, 2006
Balmorhea SP, TX

No entry.

4:00 p.m., Tues., March 21, 2006
Balmorhea SP, TX

Yesterday was pretty uneventful. It was cold and windy all day. According to the TV weather last night, it was a steady 30 mph with gusts to 45 mph. We got an early start and were on the road by 7:00 a.m., hoping to reach our destination before the wind got too strong, but that was not to be. Fortunately it was a tail wind, so we really didn't feel it, and it probably helped our gas mileage.

When we got here, Jim set up his water drip and spread birdseed, then we just sat inside and looked out the window. We were able to get the same site we've had in the past (#31), with a little bare ground and a large patch of shoulder-high shrubs very close. The most interesting birds, curiously enough, are the White-crowned Sparrows. We have two subspecies--*gambelii* and *oriantha*. The former is the common wintering form all over the west, while the latter is sometimes called the Mountain White-crowned Sparrow. It breeds in the high mountains of the west and mainly winters south of the Mexican border. I was surprised to find them here. I know they are not migrants this early in the season. We probably have around 40 sparrows at any one time feeding here and perhaps 20% are *oriantha*.

Other interesting species using our site, some of which showed up yesterday, others today: Green-tailed Towhee, Northern Cardinal, Pyrrhuloxia, Clay-colored Sparrow, Scaled Quail.

This park has an enormous (62,000 sq. ft) swimming pool fed by a generous spring (22-26 million gallons daily) not far away. Around the pool is a grassy park area with scattered cottonwood trees. Some of the birds there are Vermilion Flycatcher, White-winged and Eurasian Collared-Dove, Ladder-backed Woodpecker.

The entire area was an extensive cienega (wetland) before development of the park and surrounding agricultural land. To somewhat compensate for its destruction a small cienega has been constructed not far from where we're camped. Last time we were here it had just been constructed. Now it is mature and has a variety of species in the pond and marsh areas: Green Heron, Snowy Egret, Sora, Marsh Wren, Blue-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup (apparently the water is deep enough), and American Coot.

This morning dawned clear and calm and 36'. I bundled up and went out to try to record some birds. Unfortunately there was an awful lot of truck traffic on the road outside the park. Furthermore, miscellaneous pumps, sprinklers, small waterfalls, etc. connected with the water flowing through the park in canals, prevented me from doing very well. I did get a fairly good recording of the Eurasian Collared-Dove--probably better than anything I had up to now--but little else. White-winged Doves and Great-tailed Grackles were constantly vocalizing, but I really don't need those.

Jim has been outside all day photographing the birds in our site. It doesn't seem to matter whether he is in his blind or just sitting in a chair; these are campground birds. After I got back from my morning walk, I spent the rest of the time in the trailer working on revising my chapter in Brad Schram's "Birder's Guide to Southern California", for the temperature is still pretty cool, and there's a stiff breeze, probably 10 to 15 mph.

Toby has been penned up in the trailer all day. While I've been writing this, I've been interrupted innumerable times to keep him from chewing pillows, curtain pulls, assorted electrical cords, etc., and dragging toilet paper rolls out of the cupboard and tearing them up into little pieces. I closed the door to the bathroom and gave him his toy box, and he hauled everything in it out. Now he's asleep on the couch and looks like an angel! But I think he'd be happy to wake up and go for a walk. He's usually hyperactive in the late afternoon and early evening, calmer the rest of the day.

Each day when we're driving, Toby stays curled up in his little bed between the seats all day without complaint. He doesn't even leave it when we stop unless I put his leash on him. I bought a small kennel to go on the back seat in case he got out of hand, but haven't used it yet. In fact, I have converted it into a cupboard for my purse, camera, film, etc., to keep them away from Jim's clutter.

Now for that walk. He's into something else!

8:30 p.m., Wed., March 22, 2006

Seminole Canyon SP, ca. 40 miles northwest of Del Rio, TX

Last night at dinner I asked Jim if he had photographed any immature *oriantha* White-crowned Sparrows. He replied that he had not and didn't know they could be distinguished from *gambelii*. I explained that they have the same differences the adults do--eye stripe connecting to the lateral crown stripe in the supraloral region (I didn't use that technical terminology, though) and pinkish bill. I had seen one or more during the day. We decided he would spend a while trying for them this morning before we left, since we only had 200 miles to go. I sat in the window watching for them, but saw none. However, after an hour or two, he came in and said he had photographed some. I hope he's right, but the photos will tell the tale. I didn't have as good an angle to the sun as he did, so he could see them better than I.

We got on the road around 9:30 and continued eastward on I-10 to Fort Stockton, where we did some shopping at Wal-Mart and a grocery store, bought gas and ate lunch. Then we drove southeast on US 285 to US 90, then continued southeast to Seminole Canyon SP, arriving around 4:00.

The last hour or so the wind was blowing fairly strongly. The park is situated on a high bluff above the canyon, so gets lots of wind. There were very few birds around in the late afternoon. Hope things are better tomorrow morning. We loved this place last time we were here (mid-March, 2002), and Jim got excellent pictures of Scaled Quail and a nesting Ladder-backed Woodpecker. The latter was drilling a hole in the support pole of the picnic shelter at a nearby campsite. Jim went over and looked at the place and discovered the park staff had filled several holes with concrete. I suppose they really damaged the structure, but it seems a shame. The Ladder-backs are still around; I saw one later at a hole in an electrical pole.

Thurs., March 23, 2006

Seminole Cyn. SP, TX

No entry.

4:15 p.m., Fri., March 24, 2006

Lonesome Dove RV Ranch, Del Rio, TX

Yesterday was pretty much a bust. It was cold and very windy all day. Recording was impossible, and there were almost no birds out to be seen. Jim sat outside for a while a couple of times--all bundled up, but got nothing for his efforts. He did catch sight of what he thought was a juvenile Mockingbird. Later I saw the same bird from the window and told him it was a Sage Thrasher.

I took two walks, one with Toby, but the rest of time I stayed inside and kept warm. Got lots of embroidery and reading done!

The wind finally died down last night. We arose before daylight this morning and were greeted by the hoots of a distant Great Horned Owl, the only sound to break the silence. The day dawned clear, calm, and cold (34'). Birds were all over the place. They hadn't liked the wind either.

After breakfast the sun had just risen and I decided to take a walk with my tape recorder. I set out about 7:00 a.m. and walked the length of the campground and then took off on the Rio Grande trail, which is actually a dirt road that goes six miles to the Rio Grande. Park visitors are only permitted to use it as a hiking trail, but its nice smooth surface suited my hiking "skills" to perfection. I had taken it when we were here before and loved it. The other trail down into the canyon is only open to tour groups, which go to see the pictographs and other evidence of an early indian settlement. We've never taken that tour.

The birds were widely scattered, because it was open desert. However, it allowed me to get solos, something that is often quite difficult to do. I got nice Pyrrhyloxia songs, Bewick's Wren scolds, and best of all, a Cassin's Sparrow song. That may be my favorite of all the sparrow songs, even though others are more elaborate and varied. Its crystalline simplicity is really thrilling. There were lots of other sparrows, too, but most of them were feeding silently in mixed flocks: Clay-colored, Brewer's, Lincoln's, White-crowned, Black-throated, Lark Bunting were all there.

The trail has an alternate route in the middle. I took the left fork, which led to an overlook of a side canyon to Seminole Canyon. It was northeast facing and had some well-developed trees at the upper end. I sat on a rock for quite a while, hoping some interesting birds would turn up, but that did not happen. Last time when I sat in that area I got a recording with three wren species in it: Cactus, Canyon, and Bewick's. I did hear a few calls from a Canyon Wren. Cactus Wrens are all over the place. Of course, I didn't go all the way to the Rio Grande--got back around 10:30. The wind was still very light and the temperature was only 54 degrees.

Last time when I took that trail Charlie went with me and I missed him when I sat on that rock hoping for three wrens. Unfortunately Toby can't be trusted to stay on the trail. He dashes all over the place and would be full of cactus thorns in no time. I have to stick to paved roads or broad gravel ones with him.

When I got back to the trailer, I found Jim surrounded by sparrows and other birds, too. He continued photographing them until noon. Then we ate lunch and drove to Del Rio, about 40 miles, where we found a site in a commercial RV Park. Most of the rigs are permanently or seasonally placed, but they have a few sites out in the middle for overnights. It's adequate and the location is closest to where we want to do some city park birding tomorrow.

I took a nap this afternoon. Before drifting off, I ticked off some of the campground birds I was hearing, Great-tailed Grackle, Lesser Goldfinch, House Finch, White-winged Dove, and, especially, the monotonous two-longs-and-a-short call (all on the same pitch) of the Eurasian Collared-Dove.

8:00 p.m., Sat., March 25, 2006
Lonesome Dove RV Ranch, Del Rio, TX

It's easy to understand the "dove" part of the name of this campground, but they certainly aren't "lonesome." Large numbers of three species are cooing all over the place: White-winged, Inca, and Eurasian Collared-, surprisingly no Mournings. I did see Mournings today at Moore Park, as well as Rock Pigeons. The "ranch" part is, I suppose, because they've outfitted the front of the park attractively as an old-west town with false facades of a row of tiny businesses, old equipment, etc. I guess the trailers out back are on the "ranch."

The campground advertises itself as the newest one in Del Rio, but it can't be very new, because it has some fairly large trees all over the grounds. Our site isn't particularly shaded, but most of the ones where the permanent trailers are located are. Very few sites are available for transients like us. We chose it because it's the closest one to the parks we wanted to visit.

Around 12:30 a.m. last night we were awakened by a pair of Great Horned Owls duetting in the trees right outside our window. I went out and recorded them, but even at that late hour, the traffic on the highway prevented the recordings from being first rate. Too bad, for they were very close.

The folks in the park are very friendly. Twice we were invited to last night's potluck dinner, but we refused. I didn't have time to make anything, although they'd no doubt have said "come anyway." Besides we'd seen an interesting looking steak house down the highway a short distance. It's called Cripple Creek and features steak, prime rib and seafood. When we drove by it on the way in yesterday afternoon, there was no one there, but since it was so close, we decided to check it out--and go someplace else if it was defunct. It was anything but defunct. The large parking lot was full of cars. Jim had the prime rib and I had a steak. Both were quite tasty, but cold. The service was slow and it was obvious the food had sat around a while before it was served. We each brought home half our meat. I'll be sure it's warm when I serve the rest. Prices were very reasonable.

This morning we decided to do a good job checking out the various parks in Del Rio. We went first to Moore Park, where Jim photographed a Green Kingfisher many years ago. It's located along a creek fed by San Felipe spring. We did see one, and it was perched almost the same place we saw it years ago. Jim stood around the area hoping it would come back, but finally gave up. He figured out what the problem was. That time there was a large stand of cane in the creek, which he had used a sort of a blind. The other two times we've been there, it's been gone. Still, it was nice to discover the birds are still in the area. We also saw one or more Belted Kingfishers.

Other parks besides Moore Park are along the creek, and we checked out several. They're sort of connected by a paved walkway, interrupted by highways. Interesting birds included Great Kiskadee and Couch's (probably, but not seen well nor heard) Kingbird. We also checked out Laguna de Plata, which was not what the book led us to expect. It turned out to be a sewage treatment plant, but we saw no ponds like those at San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary--just the concrete-lined agitated ones where the sewage is aerated, noisily. There was a small area of vegetation along one side with a trail winding through a mesquite tangle. This was edged by pastureland. A Wild Turkey was on the trail, but nothing else of interest. All of the areas we birded were written up on the ABA/Lane guide to the Rio Grande Valley.

All in all, the birding was a disappointment. But we did get a number of jobs done that we'd been trying to do for some time. Jim got a welding job done on the trailer hitch (only \$5 for what would have cost at least \$50 at home) and some parts for the outside cabinet doors. We also got a new TV set. The old one had quit playing through the speaker except when teased repeatedly. (I make him use the earphones, because he watches so much TV--when we have a signal--but occasionally I want to hear the news.) We gave the old one to the campground; they can probably get it fixed cheaply. We also did some other shopping, but the Saturday crowds made it very time-consuming.

Toby gave us a scare this afternoon. He had been pretty good about staying inside the trailer when one of us opened the door to leave and told him to remain. So after I took him for a walk, I put him just inside the trailer and stood on the step to take off his leash. No sooner had the leash been removed, but he darted past me out the door and started running all over the place--around the trailer on one side of us, then the other, then . . . We didn't know where he was and, especially, how far away he had gone or intended to go. Jim sternly ordered him to come, but I decided coaxing might be better, so I went inside the trailer and called in an upbeat tone, "Come on, Toby." In no time he came zooming into the trailer and greeted me like a long-lost friend. He had been playing a game with us, of course, but we didn't think it was very much fun.

Tomorrow we head on southeastward along the Rio Grande.