

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

by Sylvia R. Gallagher

Photographs by Jim & Sylvia Gallagher

Part II

Friday, June 10, 2012

Claybanks (City) RV Park, Merritt, BC

On Friday morning, June 10, we crossed the border into Canada. This was a very time-consuming experience. The guard at the gate was an insolent, pompous, obnoxious, full-of-himself ass! He couldn't have been more rude--and for no good reason. First, we apparently didn't stop at the right line on the road and see the right red light or something. (There had been no line, so we drove right up--big mistake, apparently.) Then he gave us a very sarcastic third-degree about firearms, which we did not have. Donelda, who is a Canadian citizen, but has lived in the US most of her life, said he exhibited the same attitude toward her when he saw her California license plate, but became all suave politeness when she showed him her Canadian passport. What a wonderful introduction to Canada!

After he was through with us, a process that took maybe 5-10 minutes, we had to park and go inside the customs office. There we were greeted by two genuinely friendly customs people. They did their job, of course, but since the place was not at all busy, took time to chat at length with us about our various travels in Canada, etc. They did their job, too, of course--probably more thoroughly than usual because we were their only patrons. We had to turn over the keys to our truck and trailer to them and stay in the office out of sight of their activities while they went out and looked our rig over. Donelda didn't have to do all of this, so sat in her trailer behind ours and watched what they did. She said they spent lots of time looking in the truck, but gave the trailer only a cursory run-through.

These two people also quizzed us thoroughly about firearms, but were polite about it. We were surprised at what they didn't ask: nothing about produce, liquor, dog health certificate, etc. We were in compliance on all, and I even had obtained a "health certificate" from Toby's vet before we left home. Incidentally, Toby was in his "crate" in the truck while we went into the office. We had thought the crate gate was latched, but apparently we had forgotten to do it. The officer said when she opened the door, Toby came out and greeted her, then turned around and went calmly back into his crate. Of course, he loves people and doesn't care if he's ever met them before.

This process took the better part of an hour. After a quick stop at the BC Visitors Center for books, maps, and brochures, we were on our way. We drove northwest for several more hours through the beautiful Okanagan (spelled Okanogon in Washington) Valley and its tributaries. Produce stands lined the highways, but most were closed until fruit harvest time. We stopped at the first open one we came to and bought some delicious fresh asparagus and some new potatoes.

Our day (Fri., June 10) ended up at Claybanks (City) RV Park in Merritt, BC. It was a pleasant enough spot, but unremarkable for birds--just a big RV park like many others.

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Saturday, June 11-12, 2012

Ten-mile Lake Provincial Park, BC

Terry Hill had told us not to miss the historic gold town of Barkerville. Doing as they did in 2002, we decided to head for Ten Mile Lake PP just north of Quesnel. It was a 320-mile drive, longer than we usually like, but we decided to do it anyway and, except for a slow stretch at the start, on pretty fast highways. Even though it was Saturday night, we were able to get adjacent campsites with a view of the lake through the trees. As soon as I opened the truck door, I heard a sound I didn't recognize, not having heard it since we went to Newfoundland in 1998. With little effort, I discovered the singer, a Northern Waterthrush perched atop a small tree. Our sites both backed into little alcoves among the lakeside trees and shrubs. Lots of wildflowers were in bloom and I spent most of yesterday afternoon photographing them and figuring them out.

This morning (Sun., June 12) we all piled into Donelda's truck for the drive to Barkerville. We thought we'd be there all day, so took the two dogs along, too. Donelda drove and Jim sat in the back seat with Toby's carrier beside him as a barricade (sort of) from Oakley's *long, broad* Rottweiler tongue. Oakley was restrained, sort of, by some sort of harness arrangement that Donelda has. She's an overly friendly girl and is likely to swipe you with it when you least expect it. In between she was chewing the door handle and had to be told from time to time to cease. Toby rode quietly, as always, but when we stopped he commenced to yelp piteously when I left him. We had to leave the dogs in the car, but cracked the windows a bit. This turned out not to have been necessary because the day got colder and colder and by the time we left it was raining.



Street scene with Jim
Barkerville Historic Provincial Park, BC

Barkerville is a restored town, established in 1862 during the gold rush here. People in costumes role-play in many buildings. The place opens at 8:30 (AAA incorrectly says 8:00), but most of the activity doesn't start until 10:00 or 11:00 am, so we mostly looked at empty buildings and displays. By the time the buildings were to have been occupied by people doing

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their various activities, it was raining, windy, and cold. So we left, not really having experienced the place as we should have. Terry said it was wonderful, so I'm sort of disappointed.

There was a large Chinatown at the far end of the village street, and even a Chinese restaurant. I'd have liked to eat lunch there, but I didn't want to drag Jim and Donelda back up that street in the rain. I did purchase a pretty Chinese embroidered picture of a loon with two chicks on its back. (One little shop carried Chinese embroidery exclusively.)

We got back to the trailer around 12:30 and really wouldn't have had to bring those troublesome dogs along at all. I've done nothing else this afternoon but eat lunch, nap and write up this installment.

9:30 am, Monday, June 13, 2011

Ten Mile Lake PP, BC

This morning I resolved to get up and record the dawn song of the Swainson's Thrush, which I had heard yesterday. I got up at 4:30 am and got dressed, but by that time it had started raining. When the rain quit, the thrush had no more to say. The song was quite interesting--high and scratchily metallic, curtailed. I'd have liked to have it. It's been raining off and on ever since. After breakfast I did get a nice recording session, picked up American Redstart, Northern Waterthrush, and partial and complete songs from a White-throated Sparrow. When it did its partial songs, those first notes sounded much like the "Oh dear me" of a Golden-crowned Sparrow. I hope I'll be able to find a real Golden-crowned on this trip.

3:15 pm, Saturday, June 18, 2011

Boya Lake PP, nr. north end of Cassiar Hwy., BC

Again too many days have gone by since I updated this diary. It seems I spend most of my evening time analyzing those digital photos I'm getting from my iPhone--especially figuring out what the plants are.

On Monday, June 13, we got a late start because we only had a short drive to Prince George. There we stayed in South Park RV Park south of the city. Our main purpose in going there was to do some shopping in a large city (80,000 pop.) before heading into the northlands. That afternoon we sought out bookstores, one in the major shopping mall and the other downtown. We found some books, but by no means all we sought. The downtown store is much the nicer of the two, however. Donelda and I both bought some plant books on various parts of the northwest. I also bought a couple of books about women's experiences settling in northern BC and the Yukon. I haven't started reading them yet, though, for I'm still trying to bone up on the natural history in the books we brought on that subject. I have one on the Arctic and Donelda has one on the Natural History of BC. We've each read our own and have now exchanged them. [Later: I liked mine better because it was more widely applicable on our trip. Hers presented some of the same information, but used only BC examples. I don't remember the particulars about it, but mine was *A Naturalist's Guide to the Arctic* by E. C. Pielou, U. of Chicago Press, 1994. After I finished that, I read *After the Ice Age--the Return of Life to Glaciated North America*, same author and publisher, 1991. Both books are outstanding!]

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Tuesday, June 14, was a day of driving. After stopping at WalMart on the west side of Prince George, we spent the day driving west on the Yellowhead Highway. We stopped for lunch in a little cafe in a small town en route, where I had about the best egg foo yung I've ever eaten. The place had a general menu and Jim and Donelda ate from the Canadian (same as American) side of the menu. We ended up at Shady Rest RV Park in Houston. It's a very nice place with flowers everywhere, especially the huge row of hanging baskets of tuberous begonias hanging from the eaves of the office. The flowers were all colors and at the peak of their glory. We had EWS sites surrounded by turf that backed up to a deep wooded ravine. After prowling around, we discovered that they also had some EWS sites in the woods. The park owners had placed well-stocked seed feeders various places on the grounds and Jim and Donelda photographed their customers, including Purple Finch (with Brown-headed Cowbird jv), "Oregon" Junco, Black-capped Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch--and also Red Squirrel. A few of the other birds there were Cedar Waxwing, Swainson's Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet (Donelda also saw one Golden-crowned), MacGillivray's Warbler, Belted Kingfisher, White-throated Sparrow. Recording conditions were so-so because of the traffic on the highway. It seemed that whenever I tried to walk to the back part of the property, it started to rain. If we hadn't had a long trip ahead of us, we could have happily spent several days there and maybe Jim could have attracted some of the birds to his feeders.

Wednesday, June 15, was also a day spent mostly driving. We started sort of late so Jim and Donelda could photograph the birds at the feeder some more. We stopped in the Visitors Center for information on the Cassiar Hwy. Our major stop was in two Indian communities ("First Nations" in Canada), where there are some old totem poles. We had visited them when we were on our way home from Alaska 20 years ago, but we wanted Donelda to see them, too. Totem poles have no religious significance; they're a way of celebrating features of their culture. After viewing the totem poles we ate at a small cafe recommended by the woman in the visitors center. The food we ate there was slow in coming, but OK. However, we made the mistake of each buying a piece of rhubarb pie. It probably would have been pretty good if it had been baked longer. The crust was pale and doughy and the rhubarb wasn't fully cooked. It also could have used a bit more sugar.

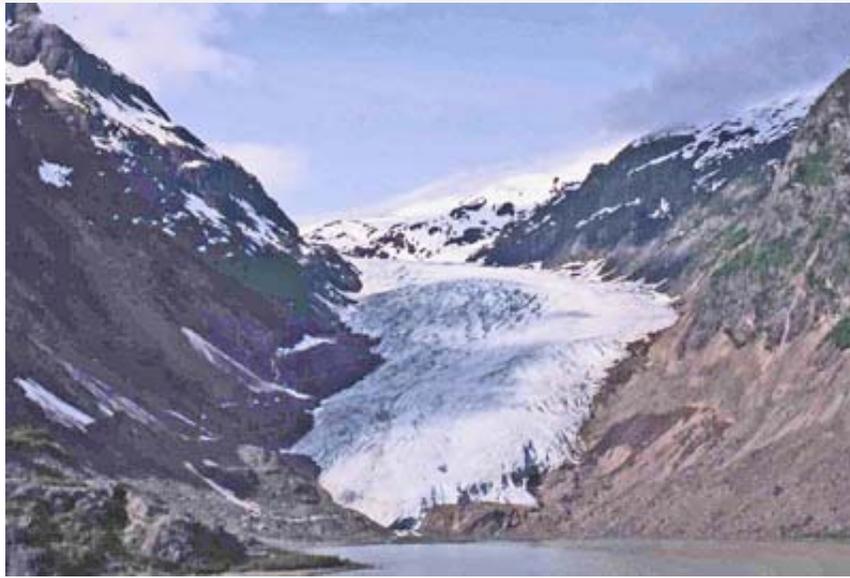
Our destination was Meziadin PP at the junction of the Cassiar Hwy. and the road that goes west to Stewart, BC, and Hyder, AK. We got beautiful lakeside sites and signed up for two nights, **Wed., June 15, and Thurs., June 16**. Our site had trees on both sides and was sheltered from the wind--but not from the mosquitos. We fought them the whole time we were there. Every time the trailer door opened, in came half a dozen more. I finally had to resort to Raid to kill them before bedtime. I found a can of it in the trailer, but the spray nozzle didn't work; it produced a stream. Then the next day I dug deeper and came up with another one that worked. So the first night we "slept" with the little devils zinging around our ears.

The park is very pretty, but we were disappointed that the only bird on the lake was a single Bonaparte's Gull. The birdlife was similar to what we'd had in Houston, but not as many species. Donelda found a Northern Goshawk and recorded it from a distance, but I never heard it at all. I did hear the drumming of a Ruffed Grouse from the same general area as the Goshawk.

Most days recently have been cloudy with occasional showers. However, Thursday, June 16, was clear for our drive out to Hyder, Alaska. The road is along a river through the Coast Range of mountains--a very spectacular drive. Tall glacier-dotted mountains were on both sides. The highlight is the Bear Glacier, whose terminal lake comes right up to the highway.

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Bear Glacier
Stewart Hwy., BC

We all took far too many photos, and analyzing them took a lot of the time I should have spent writing up this diary. We also saw several roadside bears. I photographed one with my iPhone, but it's not particularly good.

We continued on to Stewart, BC. This small town has a port from which raw logs are shipped to the Orient. It's a sore point with local folks that the lumbering industry is dying because they ship the logs uncut. The place didn't look very busy. Another dock had hundreds of white bags with some mystery product inside waiting to be shipped. As we drove back, we discovered a quarry where an exceptionally white rock was being cut out and speculated that these rocks were what was in those bags.

At the border the pavement suddenly ends and a little sign over the road announces, "Welcome to Hyder, Alaska, USA." There is no US Customs there; you just drive in. Hyder is a funky town of some 80 residents and lots of abandoned buildings. The occupied ones are sort of quaint in a run-down sort of way.



Alaska border
Hyder, AK

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We drove on through the town and north on a very scenic road beside a small creek to the place where bears congregate in late summer to catch chum salmon.



Marsh creek near bear-watching area
North of Hyder, AK

We saw them doing it when we were there in 1991. Then you just walked along beside the stream, and I always thought it was kind of dangerous. Now they have a nice elevated boardwalk to keep the bears and the people separate. (It's kind of like the boardwalk north of San Simeon to keep the people and the elephant seals apart.) Of course, there were no bears there because the salmon run hasn't started yet. We hadn't expected any.

On our way back we stopped for smoked salmon at a little store and I also bought a couple of pieces of fresh-frozen King Salmon, which we'll have for dinner tonight. Donelda bought some too and pronounced it delicious.

There is a Canadian Customs station on the way back from Hyder and there we encountered a woman agent who was almost as surly as the man we dealt with when we first entered Canada from Washington. But at least she didn't make the ordeal last very long.

During our free time in Meziadin Provincial Park, Donelda and I wandered around with our dogs searching for and photographing wildflowers. Identifying them is still a work in progress, but I've found Wild Rose (*Rosa* sp.), Northern Starflower (*Trientalis arctica*),

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Northern Starflower, *Trientalis arctica*
Meziadin Provincial Park, Cassiar Hwy., BC

Bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*),



Bunchberry, *Cornus canadensis*
Meziadin Provincial Park, Cassiar Hwy., BC

Rosy Twistedstalk (*Streptopus roseus*), Arctic Lupine (*Lupinus arcticus*), and one more that I've temporarily given up on. Maybe Donelda has found it in one of her books.

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On Friday, June 16, we drove about 150 miles north on the Cassiar Hwy. The drive was beautiful. Out in the middle of nowhere I was astounded to see a Eurasian Collared-Dove fly across the road in front of us and land on the railing of a little bridge. Donelda spotted it, too, and concurred with my ID. I knew that bird had spread pretty far north, but certainly didn't expect it in the wilderness. The location was about Km 220 on the road. We also saw Red Crossbills just a little before that area and at the gas station in Bell II.

Our destination was an RV Park I remembered so well from our 1991 trip as being incredibly beautiful. It didn't disappoint. It's changed hands since then and been renamed as Mountain Shadow RV Resort. Then it was A-E RV Resort, for the initials of the owners. To get to it we drove downhill 0.3 miles from the highway on an excellent gravel road through a deciduous forest, then emerged to a spectacular view of a meadow sloping down to a little lake. Behind it all is an expansive view of the glacier-clad Coast Range of mountains.



View from trailer
Mountain Shadow Resort, Cassiar Hwy., BC

We were the first customers of the day and I think only a couple of other vehicles arrived afterwards. Since we were there before, EW sites on a portion of the meadow (pasture in 1991) have been graded and covered with gravel. We took the end sites in two rows and had perfect views of the scene described above. If the place had had more people, the other customers would only have had views of the trailer next to them. Couldn't they have done a better job of creating those sites?

After a late lunch and a nap, we walked down a little road to the small lake on the property. The habitat was a mix of wet and dry meadow with trickles of water here and there.

The wet areas were covered with willows and the dry areas mostly had dandelions and some plant whose blooming period was finished, so I couldn't ID it. Among them were other flowers and in the forest trail near the lake, I found still others. The ones I succeeded in identifying from their photos were:

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Tall Bluebell, *Mertensia paniculata*

Labrador Tea, *Ledum groenlandicum* (I remember it from Newfoundland.)

Heart-leaved Arnica, *A. cordifolia*

The place abounds with birds. New ones for this part of the trip were Wilson's Snipe, Spotted Sandpiper, Lincoln's Sparrow, Orange-crowned Warbler, Willow Flycatcher, White-crowned Sparrow (*gambelii*, I think from the familiar song), and Fox Sparrow. I recorded this last bird this morning and tried to bring it in with playback for Jim & Donelda to photograph. The bird did fly to a distant spruce-top, but was much too far away for pictures, although I think I heard Donelda pop off a couple of desperation shots. I looked at the bird as best I could through binoculars to try to figure out what subspecies it might be. All I could see was its breast, which had a large dark-gray blotch surrounded by heavy dark gray streaking. I'll have to look up what it might be. I suspect it's *altivagans*. [Later: After I got home and purchased the new 6th ed. of the *National Geographic Field Guide*, the map of subspecies in the back showed I was probably right, although we weren't far from *zaboria*. That race probably would have showed more red, though. Those subspecies range maps alone are worth the price of the new edition.]

I really hated to leave that beautiful spot. I'd have loved to stay one more night, but again our itinerary called. We didn't get on the road until 9:30 because of the Fox Sparrow and other things. Our drive was another 150 miles. I should say a little about the condition of the Cassiar Highway. When we drove it in 1991, it was mainly gravel, especially the northern two-thirds. Now it's mainly paved and mostly pretty smooth, although a few places are patched and bumpy. Today we drove a portion of ca. 30 miles that was alternating pavement and gravel, but the gravel was very smooth and the transition from pavement to gravel very even. I think they're going to oil the gravel and produce what's called a "chip-seal" pavement, but no one was working today, Saturday, thank goodness. The first part of the road and the road to Hyder are normal pavement with painted lines, but most of the pavement after that has been that "chip-seal" type, which is rougher, but OK. Sometimes it's kind of narrow and none of it has any painted lines on it.

We stopped for lunch in our trailers at one of the plentiful pullouts. This one had a view of a lake with mountains in the background. Then we continued on to Boya Lake Provincial Park, arriving at around 3:00 pm. The park was mainly empty and we selected two beautiful lakeside campsites, this time without mosquitos--well, maybe a few. The sites were without hookups, as are all provincial parks in BC, I think.

When we arrived, the lake was very still and the sun was shining, but off to the north were some huge black thunderheads. With the sunlit lake in the foreground, it made a dramatic scene. To compound the beauty, the edge of the lake has rocks covered with moss or lichens or something on the bottom, giving it a sort of chartreuse cast. This color transitioned to typical lake-blue and then to a deep, bruised blue where the thunder clouds were reflected in it. After photographing this scene as it became more and more threatening, I went inside and got my tape recorder and recorded the thunder and the wind in the spruce trees. Soon enough, but not too soon, the storm arrived and we've had an hour or more of rain, some torrential, as I've been writing up this installment. It's now 4:45 pm and I'm bleary-eyed from typing steadily for the past hour and a half. The rain has passed, the lake is still again, and I'm going to fix myself some tea. [Later: Those photos were among the most memorable of the trip.]

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Approaching storm from campsite
Boya Lake Provincial Park, Cassiar Hwy., BC