

TRIP TO THE EASTERN U.S.

Summer, 1977

Olive and Sylvia Ranney

I “discovered” birds during the late 1960s when I was bored with lab work for my PhD in chemistry and started figuring out the birds in Mother’s yard in Santa Ana and my yard backed up to the chaparral-covered hills in La Cañada. When I finished in spring of 1971, Mother and I took a long trip across the US, and I searched for birds to my heart’s content. I did not keep a diary on that trip.

By 1977, I’d made friends with other birders. This diary was in the form of letters and postcards to Fern Zimmerman, Lois Loughran, Carolyn Honer, and others. Sometimes several postcards were written and the stack mailed together as a single letter.

Because this was a summertime trip, we had motel reservations everywhere.

We also had other trips prior to this, some of which are alluded to in the diary, but this is the first one I have a record of.

June 28, 1977; Marietta, Ohio

Dear Fern

We’ve finally slowed down a bit. Had delicious lunch today at the oldest hotel in Ohio. Tonight our 2 rooms are on a bend in the Ohio River. One room is a corner room, and we can look both ways down and up the river from Marietta. Have seen several barges.

Two life birds so far--Eastern Wood-Pewee and Mississippi Kite, the Kite nesting in town park in SE Kansas.

July 13, 1977

Dear Fern

Have seen so much, I thought I’d send several cards. I know you’ll share this with others.

We struck Atlantic coast just N of Boston. Visited old Salem and toured some fascinating old houses from Revolutionary War days. Found my 1st Great Black-backed Gull. How I could have missed him in 1971 I don’t know. He’s everywhere! Maybe I just avoided looking at gulls then.

Found my 1st Red-eyed Vireo in Kittery, Maine. Since then I’ve seen several more and heard many more. I’m really working on the songs and calls. I know I’ve seen several birds I wouldn’t have otherwise, because its song was different and I waited the 5 to 20 min necessary for it to come out.

We’ve followed the coast all the way up Maine. One choice spot was a Maine Audubon Society nature trail in Biddeford. It went around a beautiful headland with rocky shore. The land portion was partially wooded with scrubby trees and the rest with low shrubs. I found 3 life birds on that one walk. First, I flushed up an American Woodcock. Then I found an immature Great Cormorant on the rocks. On the way back the Pine Warbler was flitting through the bushes.

We spent 3 nights in Portland. One day was spent on an excursion boat through the islands of Casco Bay. It was a hot day even on the water, but pretty and clear. Saw a Black Guillemot in the distance.

On the way from Portland to Stonington, I glimpsed a female Scarlet Tanager from the car. Most unsatisfactory, but a life bird. I heard note, too, which helped clinch ID.

Stonington is on Deer Isle just west of Mt. Desert Island. We decided to avoid the crowds of Acadia National Park. Deer Isle was a joy. Card #1 [the picture on the postcard on which letter was

written] shows where we stayed. Our motel was the larger of 2 motels in town and has only 8 units! It is on pilings over the water. A lovely deck projects out into the harbor. You can see a corner of it in the picture. I went for a 2 to 4 hour bird walk every morning of the 5 days we were there. Found Alder Flycatcher, Black-throated Green Warbler, Winter Wren and Blackburnian Warbler as life birds. Saw 56 species in all on Deer Isle. Enjoyed renewed acquaintance with Common Eider, White-throated Sparrow, American Redstart, Magnolia and Parula Warblers, and Wood Thrush.

One afternoon we took an excursion boat among the islands and enjoyed it thoroughly. Not too crowded, and the skipper was delightful. Saw many Black Guillemots up close.

We hated to leave Stonington. Mother loved the deck.

I'm writing this from St. John, New Brunswick. It's a foggy, rainy, unpleasant day, but we were able to see the Reversing Falls (#3 picture). I contented myself with the stuffed birds in the museum.

Tomorrow we take the ferry to Digby, Nova Scotia. Forecast is for a sunny day. I hope it's right. There are some pelagic birds I'd love to see.

Loved your card from Mammoth. Thanks. Hope you weren't bored by my bird-by-bird travelogue.

July 21, 1977

Dear Lois

We arrived in Baddeck to find nice long letters from both you and Fern. I'm writing to you this time; I'm sure you'll share the letter with Fern.

My last letter to Fern was written just before we crossed on the ferry to Digby, Nova Scotia. The crossing was a disappointment--foggy all the way except for about 15 minutes of decent visibility. I saw two shearwaters then, but they were too far away to identify. The rest of the birds were all gulls.

Digby is the headquarters for scallop fishing in Eastern Canada. We enjoyed watching the beautiful little blue or green (any shade) boats go past our motel window. The next morning I walked up a dirt road near the motel and heard and saw a flock of Veeries--my first--feeding on some berries. What a lovely song they have. I still think the Hermit Thrush has the nicest song. I've heard it, as well as Wood and Swainson's, this summer, too.

Walking back down to breakfast, saw a Palm(!) Warbler probing on a bank among the conifers. What names these birds have!

We've been driving all around the coast of NS, going from 75 to 150 miles per day. Motels are not abundant, so we must sometimes do more than we'd like in a day.

At Shelburne I took another walk through the woods and found a bird I drew a complete blank on. It looked like a thrush: had clearly marked spots on its chesty front. But no thrush I ever saw had black lines well above the eyes with an orange crown. Its voice was a loud sparrow-like "ketchy ketchy, ketchy ketch." After resorting to my early birding days' [I started in 1968.] procedure of thumbing page-by-page through the book, I discovered it among the warblers--an Ovenbird! I ought to be ashamed, since I've been wanting to find one of those.

Our nicest place in Canada, and perhaps on the entire trip, was the beautiful Liscomb Lodge on a river way out in the country. We had lovely rooms in their brand new units--even a comfortable living room with fire place for our sole use since the other two rooms in the building were not rented. We arrived there about noon, since a rainy morning kept us from stopping along that day's drive. It cleared up so we could enjoy a restful afternoon in that lovely peaceful spot. Of course, I had to find a life bird there to make it perfect. It was the Mourning Warbler. That made #18 for the trip. My goal is 25, so I'll have 500. I think I'll make it, since we have yet to take the boat trip to the bird islands off Cape Breton, where Common [now Atlantic] Puffins and Razorbills are promised.

We're now on Cape Breton in a fuddy-duddy motel with awful beds. (The prices are anything

but fuddy-duddy, though!) The setting is very nice, and the kitchen is well equipped. The weather is clear, but hot, although it was very foggy this morning. I hope it won't be foggy tomorrow, for I'd like to take that boat trip, and it doesn't go in the fog.

Aug. 2, 1977. Littleton, NH

Dear Fern (and all)

It's a foggy almost misty morning in early August. We're staying at a lodge in northern New Hampshire. I awoke at 5:30, put some of our Nova Scotia oatmeal on to simmer in the double boiler, and set out to explore the trail that said, "To Trout Pond." The trail led through tall conifers with a few deciduous (maples and birches, I think). here and there. The fog made the tops of the trees indistinct. It seemed very quiet, but then it's August and things do quiet down then. Suddenly a flash of tan and black and white flew up from the trail not 20 feet ahead of me, and chirped excitedly a couple of times from a tree bough. It was a female Evening Grosbeak. She flew down to the path ahead of me and then a couple more times before she let me pass under her.

All was silent again for a while. Then a Blue Jay screamed in the tree tops, but didn't put up too big a fuss. I continued on slowly to the trout pond. Just as I reached the clearing around the pond, the most marvelous music commenced: a loud jumble of Baroque trills and turns in a very high register. I never saw the singer, but it was unmistakably a Winter Wren, to whose song no recording does justice. They're always distorted. During his pauses I could hear the more dignified melody of the White-throated Sparrow.

I decided I had to sit down then and there and tell you about it, since you weren't there to enjoy it with me. So I'm sitting on a rock right now writing this. The wren ceased during the writing, a family of young robins came and went, and all is once more quiet. The fog has lifted a bit, so I can see the tops of the trees clearly now. Let's see what happens as I sit here a while longer. It's 7:15 now.

"Per-chik-o-ree, per-chik-o-ree." (They do say that to me back here.) An American Goldfinch's undulating flight is visible.

A loud whirring just went by. I didn't see it, but it must have been a Ruby-throated Hummer. This is the only place on the trip I've seen them.

Silent again except for the faint trickle of the brook

A "thrrrrump" behind me, repeated several times. It's not a bullfrog. I don't see anything. Perhaps it's some other kind of frog.

The air has been utterly still up to now. But a breeze is starting to rustle the leaves of the birches and shake drops of water off. It sounds like rain, but I don't feel any falling.

I can see a hummer feeding on some bushes across the pond that are covered with orange flowers. "Please, be a male!" I wish. It is. "Please show me your gorget." Beautiful! Overcast days are the best for viewing hummers.

A small boy bursts into the clearing, the first human I've seen today. [Mother would have still been in bed.] The hummer leaves, but I had a good look. The boy collects some pond water in a paper cup and departs as quickly as he came.

I hear the Winter Wren again--way off in the distance now. I think I hear a Hermit Thrush, too, even farther away. A chickadee is working through the spruce just across the pond.

7:45. It's getting brighter. Maybe the sun will come out. I guess it's time to work my way back along the path to that oatmeal. Hope the bottom pan hasn't boiled dry.

Things are a bit livelier on the way back: A large flock of noisy chickadees overhead. Almost getting run down by a squirrel chasing another squirrel. A monotonous Red-eyed Vireo. A Hairy Woodpecker not 10 feet away, then a female sapsucker in the same tree! A cute little fledgling Redstart with no tail. I hate to go in.

3:30 p.m. The preceding epistle was written on the only paper I had with me this morning, the blank places on my "want list" of birds. So I had to copy it over. I hope it made you feel you were with me. Now I'll bring you up to date on all we've done since I wrote to Lois from Cape Breton.

My main objective on Cape Breton was the trip to the Bird Rocks. The boat is a 20-passenger remodeled lobster boat and can't go out unless the weather is good. We had 6 days on Cape Breton, so I didn't worry. The first day was foggy. The 2nd day was rainy. The 3rd day was clear, but blowing a gale. I was getting worried. The 4th day was a bit breezy, but the charming Dutch captain (wooden shoes and all) decided it was OK to go. The boat was full, of course, but I lucked out and chose the best seat aboard, the left rear one, and the islands were always on that side as he went around them. He went very close, and I could see the Common Puffins and Razorbills very plainly. I don't think there's anything more thrilling than a cliff face covered with nesting sea birds. The Pribilofs thrilled me the same way when we viewed them from above.

All the while we were circling the islands, either the captain or his high-school-age son was on the boat deck just behind me, so I could get all the information I wanted. Both were very knowledgeable--unlike our Aleut bus-driver on the Pribilofs, who knew nothing.

Post card #1 was our "ticket" on the boat. I thought you might enjoy the flowers.

That afternoon the wind got up again, and it blew hard all the rest of our stay in Cape Breton. I'm sure the boat could not have gotten out again. Thank goodness for that one morning's lull.

The wind didn't stop us from doing the sightseeing we had planned. In fact, the crystal clear air and dashing water was beautiful. One day we drove the Cabot Trail through Cape Breton Highlands Natl. Park. Mother went camera-crazy in the little fishing village of Neil's Harbor. We both went crazy over the beautiful hooking in the French Canadian village of Cheticamp and bought coasters and hot dish mats.

I met a fellow-birder (the only one on the entire trip) on the boat. She told me where to find Hudsonian Godwits, so we drove up there one day. There they were--two of them. I could set my scope up in some tall shrubs beside the mud-flat. That way the wind was no problem. I hope they saw the two birds I told them about.

I wasn't sorry to leave Cape Breton, for I hated the place where we stayed. I slept on a converted Naugahyde couch, because one of the beds was so broken down and lumpy. The couch was kind of short, and I had to use my entire stock of safety pins to hold the even shorter sheets on, but at least it was firm.

We next went to the Fundy coast of New Brunswick. Saw the Hopewell Rocks. Those tides are fantastic, even at the time of month when the variation is less. I enjoyed the little town of Alms, where we stayed. I walked into the Fundy Park in the morning. Saw lots of shore birds (finally!) in the river bed, but no new ones.

From there we drove to Fredericton, in the beautiful St. John River Valley. That afternoon we visited Kings Landing, a reconstructed and restored 1830's village. It was interesting, but seemed to lack focus. There was a sameness to all the buildings and the activities inside. All the women were sewing. Surely those 19th century women baked, dipped candles, made soap, etc., in the afternoons!

The next day we drove some more through that beautiful valley, with farms sloping up from the banks of the river. At Houlton we enjoyed the long covered bridge and drove across it on our way back to Maine. In Maine, but not in Canada, we began to see those huge house-shed-barn combinations you asked about, Fern. They were not in coastal New England (not cold enough there), but we've seen lots of them in Maine and NH.

We're staying at the Baker Brook Lodge, between Littleton and Bethlehem, NH. Our cabin is obviously the one the "Crooked Little Man" lived in. The floors are tipsy, and none of the doors will close--except the front one, fortunately. It had 2 good beds in one bedroom and one lousy one in the smaller room. With much sweat, we fixed that! So we're happy here. And I love being able to step out of the door and go for a nice walk. Yesterday I walked part way around their lake (not trout pond) and then along the stream. It was as lovely as this morning's walk and had a life bird to top it off--a

Canada Warbler (a fall version, but unmistakable).

I found your nice long letter waiting when we arrived here. Guess I'd better finish off by answering it:

The post card idea is one I got from Mother. She has written them to her Foster Children overseas for years.

The Red-eyed Vireo's song is similar to the Solitary, but the former seems more hurried. Sometimes I get confused, though.

I saw another Woodcock in Baddeck, flushed it once as I drove along a gravel road. Then I got out and flushed it again deliberately, so I really had a good look at this one.

We had two rather hot days in Nova Scotia, but it was always cool on the immediate coast and it cooled off pretty well at night even in the inland locations where the motels all seemed to be located. So we didn't suffer like people farther south in the U.S. did.

Mother sends her regards, and Mitzi [her toy poodle] is as self-possessed as ever. She loves having a ride in the car every day.

[Apparently a letter missing here.]

Aug. 14, 1977. Mauston, Wis.

Dear Fern, etc.

Picture a marsh meandering through a wet grassland extending for a mile or more. All around is a scrub pine-oak(?) woodland. I walked through the woodland hearing only the "pee-oo-wee" of the Eastern Wood-Pewee and the raucous screams of the Blue Jay. Approaching the observation tower, the honking of Canada Geese was embellished by the bugling of Sandhill Cranes. The sun was still fairly high at 6:00 p.m., but the light was getting that golden glow of sunset.

Suddenly two shorebirds flew rapidly into view at a fairly high altitude. They had stiff-winged flight like a Spotty, but their plumage markings were those of the Upland Sandpiper. That was the scene of my #500 bird, and I saw it last evening in Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin. The sandpipers flew around chasing each other for a minute or so, then descended and were lost in the grass.

I was scouting Necedah by myself yesterday afternoon. Today Mother and I returned for the day, and I finally saw a male Scarlet Tanager. I had had a brief glimpse of a female earlier, but this was a satisfying look. Otherwise the refuge was pretty quiet. There were very few land birds, although their list indicated that several I'd love to see should be around in August. There were shorebirds in fair numbers in certain places. Mother enjoyed the Sandhill Cranes, for she had never seen them before. When I took a long hot walk out to see them in Okefenokee Swamp in 1971, she sat on her easy chair under a scrubby tree--and got a tick!

We've been pretty lucky in the settings for our motels lately. I've already told you about two, including Carolyn Beach [Thessalon, Ontario]. From there we went to a place 15 miles south of Escanaba, Mich, where we had a two-bedroom-and-living-room house with two baths right on the lake (bay of Lake Michigan). The rate was much less than we'd been paying, too. We'd like to spend several days there sometime. I could walk along the lakefront for quite a ways and it looked as though there were trees across the road which would have been productive. (Unfortunately we had to get a fairly early start the next day.) The food in their restaurant was also excellent. I had a combination seafood dinner (whitefish, perch, trout--all fresh), served with a nice salad and fresh-picked sweet corn. Dessert was marvelous pie. We both chose raspberry.

We're now in Mauston, Wis., in a motel with spacious shaded grounds right on a river. Yesterday a.m. we took the Wisconsin Dells boat tour--vastly overpriced and overrated, we thought. The town was so junky, too. There are all sorts of cheap tourist traps in town: Storybook Village,

Prehistoric Monster Land, Old Fort, etc., *ad nauseum*. We were glad we had chosen to stay 20 miles north of there in this quiet little town.

I probably won't find much more to write about, for tomorrow we start west, and most of the time will be spent driving. It looks as though I'll arrive home having found my 500 birds with none to spare, but maybe I'll be lucky in the snatches of time we have ahead. I mustn't forget the Miss. Kite in that Kansas lunch stop.

I'll keep this letter for a few days before mailing it, in case something interesting turns up.

Forgot to mention that weather has been absolutely perfect the last few days: cool nights, clear dry days, highs in the 70's. It really makes things fun. I almost hesitated to plan this Wis. stop for fear the weather would be hot and humid.

Aug. 19, 1977. Salt Lake City

An uneventful drive across the country. We had cool weather, but quite a bit of rain. Motels mostly in town, so no a.m. birding. Guess I'd better mail this.