

## Trip to Arizona and New Mexico

### March, 1991

Lyman Lake, nr. St. Johns, AZ  
March 17, 1991

After 10 weeks of beginners birding skills workshops, we're on the road for a couple of weeks before I start an advanced series. We were going to leave home on Friday, March 15, but the weather was very cold and blustery--snow predicted in the mountains. So we decided to wait until Saturday and hope to sneak across northern Arizona between storm fronts. So far it has worked out as we planned.

We left home at the crack of dawn Saturday and drove to our usual Denny's in Victorville for breakfast. The weather was totally clear, calm--and cold. There was beautiful fresh snow through Cajon Pass and even down onto the Joshua trees north of the pass. We could see snow on the desert mountains northeast of the highway through Victorville, but on no other range. Jim analyzed the situation and said he thought a storm squall had just passed through a narrow corridor and left everything else untouched.

As we approached Kingman, AZ, there was more snow on the ground--wet gloppy stuff that stuck to every vertical surface. We could tell how wind-driven it had been and were glad we had not tried to drive through the day before.

We usually stay in Seligman when we start out, but Jim thought maybe we could find a quieter place in the trees if we went on. (The Seligman KOA is close to the railroad, although nicely off the highway.) I was a little afraid of the altitude at Williams--and the accompanying cold, but Jim was determined to press on. We found a KOA (Grand Canyon KOA) about 5 miles north of Williams on the Grand Canyon road. Unfortunately it was out of the trees--just scattered junipers. It had snowed the night before--about a foot, and the stuff was melting all over the grounds. I had to haul my rubber boots out of the back of the truck before I could set foot on the muddy ground. It was pretty, though. All the trees had big globs of snow on them. Juncos (3 subspecies) were everywhere, along with a few Mountain Bluebirds and other species.

We put some water in our water tank, but did not hook up to the water. (It was to be turned off at 8:00 p.m., because the temperature was expected to go down to 15 degrees.) Despite the fact that we left the oven on all night--of course, with the windows cracked open a bit--none of our faucets yielded any water this morning. Fortunately the cold water in the kitchen sink broke free before it was time to do the breakfast dishes, but Jim had to heat water in the tea kettle to wash them. All the faucets were working nicely by noon, thank goodness. We know there are no leaks, because the pump doesn't run unless we open a faucet. If there were a leak, we would hear it intermittently.

We were going to drive all the way to Bosque del Apache Natl. Wildlife Refuge, N. M., but when lunch time came along, we decided to pull into the Petrified Forest Natl. Park and fix lunch. After that I walked one of the trails. Meanwhile I had seen Lyman Lake State Park on the map and read about it in the book. It seemed nice and peaceful, so we decided to check it out. It's about 50 miles southeast of the Petrified Forest. Habitat is mostly scattered junipers.

It's just a reservoir--and very low. Furthermore the sterile silt on the bottom of it apparently doesn't harbor any food for water birds. There isn't a single bird either on the water or on the shore. I took a walk along the shore and decided all the birds are here in the campground--as is usually the case. We have Juncos, Mountain Bluebirds, Flicker, and a thrasher, which I think is a Sage, although it might be Bendire's. (Jim has good pictures of Sage Thrasher, but not of Bendire's. I don't think this bird is going to cooperate, in any event. It is quite timid, and not singing, so I can't record it and play it back to lure it closer.)

The weather is perfectly clear today, with the temperature in the 50's, I'd judge. I expect it to be cold tonight, but not as cold as last night.

Just outside Bosque del Apache NWR, NM

1:30 p.m., March 19, 1991

Yesterday morning was crisp and clear. The fact that there was very little wind or extraneous noise sent me outside the trailer at Lyman Lake with my recording gear. I got a very good Say's Phoebe, singing not only its accented "ph'bee," but also a short burry note now and then, which I did not have. I also recorded House Sparrows singing solos--with no distracting town noises. Jim wandered around with his camera trying for good Mountain Bluebird photos, but I don't think he got anything special.

We left there about 10:30 and spent most of the rest of the day driving here. The park owners call their place Bosque Birdwatchers RV Park. We really thought it would be quite special, but to our disappointment it was just a gravel parking lot, with utility hookups at intervals down the middle. One couldn't even park near the edge of the gravel. No attempt had been made to lure birds to food or water.

We selected the last site, as close to the open desert (creosote scrub) as we could get, but as soon as we turned on the microwave oven, we blew the electrical circuit breaker. We found out that the last eight hookup boxes were a home-made installation job, so had to settle for a spot nearer the center of the lot. What a disappointment. The owner claims that only certain types of trailer electrical systems blow the circuits, but we find that hard to believe. We've certainly never had this experience before [or since!]. Anyway the place we had hoped would be a nice place to spend a week or so isn't! To make matters worse, it has no rest rooms, and Jim thinks the facilities in the trailer are too cramped. They said it was OK for Jim to take a shower in the owners' house, but when he appeared there, towel in hand, it turned out there was a \$2.00 charge, so he decided to forget it and make the best of the trailer facilities.

This morning dawned cloudy, but not particularly threatening, so we packed some trail mix and cheese and set out for Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. The first hour or so was fine, but then a powerful wind got up--the kind that blows dust all over even when there is no vehicle to raise it.

Before the wind got too strong, I walked along the tour road for a mile or so and got some nice recordings of Red-winged Blackbirds, Gambel's Quail, Canada Geese, plus mixed sounds for backgrounds. Jim got his best Ring-necked Pheasant photos. The bird, a male, was totally unconcerned by our presence in the truck nearby--unlike every other pheasant we've ever encountered. He also got off quite a few shots of a female Northern Harrier. They may be his best yet. [They weren't.]

We continued on around the refuge. The southern half is marsh and pond with lots of waterfowl. The cranes--Whooping and Sandhill--have left already, but there were lots of ducks, Canada Geese, etc. I tried to record a Pied-billed Grebe, but without much success. Maybe we'll go back there tomorrow morning, if the wind dies down.

The northern half of the refuge is wooded (Bosque = woods in Spanish.), but the wind kept any birds out of sight. Just as we were getting pretty discouraged, Jim spotted what I dismissed as just a clump of mistletoe in a tree 100 yd from the road. He had other thoughts, however, and turned out to be right. It was a porcupine sound asleep near the top of a bare cottonwood. He came back for the camera--and me, who had never seen a real live wild porcupine. When we went out again, he spotted another one 50 yd farther along, this time in a much lower tree. I was thrilled to see one so close. It awoke when we stood right under it, and climbed a bit higher, but the tree wasn't tall enough for it to go very far. So it just clung there and peered at us. I found it to be a very appealing little

animal--with its big bright eyes and short piglet-like snout. The quills waving in the wind didn't look the least bit menacing, either.

Jim photographed it from every angle and even went back to the truck for two more cameras equipped with other lenses, so as to get it from varying distances. After he had done everything he could think of in the photography department, we finally left the poor thing to go back to its nap.

This concluded our morning's outing. We ate our cheese and trail mix, drove the remainder of the loop, and came back to the trailer to wait out the wind.

Bottomless Lakes State Park nr. Roswell, N. M  
Friday, March 22, 1991

Waiting out the wind was what I was doing the last time I wrote up this log--and I'm doing it again.

We returned to Bosque del Apache the next morning--the wind was not too bad. I really wanted to get the Pied-billed Grebe's calls, but was not successful. I may have gotten it--but a Coot was sounding off simultaneously. The best recording spot I found had a row of high bushes between the road and the pond. This prevented the waterfowl from seeing me and fleeing. It also broke the wind quite effectively. I spent at least an hour wandering back and forth along that 100 yd row. In addition to the possible Pied-billed Grebe, I got Marsh Wren (call and song), Red-winged Blackbird, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler (Their call is like a hoarse Mallard quack.), and few other things. Many of them were mixed together and will make nice background sounds. I still need that P-b Grebe, though! [Even today, I still need that Pied-billed Grebe.]

We got back to the trailer around 11:30, read the literature and discovered check-out time was 11:00 (much earlier than most campgrounds--another negative for the place), so we hurriedly hitched up and left.

We drove eastward to Carrizozo, stopping for lunch at a roadside rest among the junipers. After buying gas and mailing a birthday card, we returned westward about three miles to Valley of Fires State Park. This is an "island" in a sea of lava, which is believed to have flowed only 1500-2000 years ago--the youngest in the U.S. The RV sites were all strung out single file along a narrow ridge, with fabulous views in two directions--eastward towards Carrizozo, and westward across the lava-filled valley. The lava flow is about 40 miles long and perhaps 3 miles wide.

By now the wind was blowing a gale again, but we decided to take the nature walk down through the lava. It was most interesting to see the two types of lava. Here it was mostly pahoehoe, the ropy kind, but there was some aa, the chunky kind. Plants of all sorts have taken a toe-hold in every conceivable nitch in the lava. There was even one pretty verbena-like flower in bloom. Maybe I can identify it from Jim's photo.

There were mildly threatening thunder clouds all around us, which made for a dramatic sunset. Fortunately the wind went down with the sun, but it came up with it again the next morning. Because of the wind we saw very few birds--one Say's Phoebe and two House Finches. The literature said there were lots around.

We got started around 8:00 the next morning, and drove eastward again. For about 20 miles it was snowing, but not very hard. Furthermore, the snow melted when it reached the ground. We soon got out of it and were in clear air. As was explained on the TV that evening, the clouds were moving northeastward, and the area southeast of the stationary front was clear.

We are now parked near Lea Lake in Bottomless Lakes State Park. This is the largest and deepest of seven lakes in the park--90 feet deep, not bottomless. The early cowboys just couldn't find the bottoms with their lariats.

The geology of this area is very interesting. It is next to lovely red cliffs on the eastern edge of

the Pecos River valley. The ground is underlain with gypsum (calcium sulfate) and salt (sodium chloride) deposits. Circulating underground water gradually dissolves away these two soluble compounds. Finally the overburden collapses. Since the water table is quite high in this river valley, the sink holes fill with water. There are seven lakes along the edge of the cliff. Some are freshwater and are stocked with trout, etc., for anglers. Others are saturated brine. We saw one pair of lakes whose waters actually were connected near the surface. Yet the sign next to them said one was fresh, the other saline.

To me the most fascinating of all was a lake which had algae over half its surface. It was obviously a brine-filled one, for saturated calcium sulfate (gypsum) solution had soaked up through the thick algae coating and then the water had evaporated, leaving the algal layer coated with intricate crystal patterns of solid calcium sulfate. From the looks of the bottom of the lake, these islands eventually get too heavy and sink, then the process repeats itself.

This lake-forming action is an ongoing process, for there is a land-slide across Lea Lake from us, which was formed in 1975. It all seems a bit unsafe, but I guess it's OK, or they wouldn't have a developed RV park here.

The infernal wind let up last night, but by 8:00 a.m. it was going full blast again. We decided to go see Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge anyway. It's a series of man-made ponds (plus one natural one--Bitter Lake) about 10 miles north of here along the Pecos River. There is an 8-mile tour route around the lakes. We drove it and observed what we could from the truck, getting out only rarely to scope the scene. Lots of ducks, plus Canada Geese, breed here. Northern Shovelers seemed to be the most abundant. All were in the lee of the dikes and small islands to keep out of the wind. Jim didn't take any pictures, because (1) it was too cold and (2) he couldn't have held his camera steady.

There are some nesting platforms out in the middle of the lakes--about 2 feet off the water and maybe 3 feet square. Jim thought they were for Canada Geese, and perhaps that's so. We scoped one that had looked through the binoculars as though it had an incubating goose on it--and saw a Great Horned Owl! I don't know if that's typical or not. I certainly hope the young owls are good flyers--or swimmers.

We got back here around 11:30 and plan to hole up in the trailer this afternoon. Tomorrow is supposed to be relatively calm, so maybe we can move on then.

Sun Country RV Resort, N of Huachuca City, AZ

12:30 p.m., Tues., March 26, 1991

It takes a spell of inclement weather to get me to settle down and write up this log. It's rainy and blustery outside.

Saturday morning dawned clear and calm. I took advantage of the calmness to try to do some recording. I walked around Lea Lake and on the far side by the cliff found a singing Canyon Wren. He was never closer than about 50 ft from me, but the recording conditions were quite good. Only what sounded like a crop-duster airplane in the distance marred the morning. I may be able to filter that low frequency sound out. On the way back I encountered a pair of Killdeer courting. The male (presumably) minced back and forth 10 or 15 ft from the female, and gave an interesting trill. I was able to sneak up quite close to him by staying behind a small tree. All in all, a good morning.

When I got back to the trailer, Jim had it all hitched up to go. Earlier we had seen a truck with a huge trailer come from the south on a paved road that was not on the map. When we got to the corner, a sign indicated it went to Dexter. Since that town was on the map, we decided to take the road, since it cut off about 30 miles, including all the Roswell traffic. It turned out to be quite adequate--just a bit slow, since the pavement seemed to follow every heave in the terrain. It crossed

the Pecos River just before it reached Dexter. Shortly thereafter we saw a lake off to our left that looked like it was surrounded by a park, so we decided to go see what was there. When we got there, we found a modest RV park right next to a grove of cottonwood trees. We spotted a Flicker and a Kestrel right off, so we decided we might as well spend the night there and see if anything could be photographed. We had a few qualms about Saturday night revelry, but it turned out to be very quiet.

The lake is mainly used by local folks for fishing, but, since a road goes all around the lake and they can park closer to the water everywhere but where we were, things were very nice. The only attraction near us was the rest room. (Jim said it was pretty scuzzy and very dark. He'll put up with some pretty awful places, but even he drew the line at taking a shower there.)

I took a walk around the lake--about a mile I'd guess. There were a few patches of cattails, but last year's growth had burned off, and this year's was just starting. I found a Marsh Wren foraging in the new growth, and Jim sat there quite a while trying to get a picture, but I don't think he got anything.

A pair of Kestrels were investigating a hole in a cottonwood tree, but we saw no signs of nesting activity yet. There were two flickers in the area--one Red-shafted and one Yellow-shafted. Great-tailed Grackles were emoting--both by posturing and by vocalizing--all over the place. Lots of Starlings and House Sparrows, too. Unfortunately nothing seemed to look promising for photography, and the people noises were all around us, precluding any recording.

So Sunday morning we drove on south. We stopped for an hour or so at the Living Desert State Park in Carlsbad. It's a combination zoo/botanic garden devoted mainly to the Chihuahuan Desert. It reminds one of the Living Desert Museum near Tucson, but not nearly so extensive. They're working on expanding it, though.

We drove right past Carlsbad Caverns, stopping briefly for lunch in White's City. We had decided to head for Hueco Tanks State Park--a favorite of ours about 30 miles east of El Paso--but when we got to the spur road heading up to the park, we encountered a "campground full" sign. Apparently lots of El Paso folks were there climbing the rocks. It was the start of Easter Week. So we spent the night in a KOA in Las Cruces. By nightfall every spot in that place was taken. (Lots of snowbirds are on the freeways heading home right now, so any place near a freeway is likely to be busy.) The place was perched on a bluff west of Las Cruces, and at night we could see the glistening lights in the distance. The morning sunrise was even lovelier. Many of the city lights were still on, and in addition we could see the jagged silhouettes of the mountains against the pink sky. Despite the beautiful setting and nice facilities, it was not our kind of place. Too many people and no bird habitat.

Yesterday we decided to try to find a nice place somewhere near Sierra Vista, AZ. We checked out Ramsey Canyon, where we had seen an old bedraggled RV park several years ago when we were here without the trailer. At that time there was a sign with a phone number one could call to rent a space. The place was still there and had a few small trailers in it, but no sign that it is still a public campground.

Then I recalled that the Coronado National Memorial had camping, so we drove down there (It's at the south end of the Huachucas right on the Mexican border.), but they've converted the place to day-use only. So we decided to drive back up to an RV park we'd seen out in the country at the junction of State Routes 82 and 90. It's in the open desert, surrounded by grassland with scattered mesquites. We have a site right on the edge by ourselves. Folks in a trailer nearby are feeding the birds--mostly Brewer's Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and House Finches. Jim put out some bird seed and a water drip--and now they're patronizing us, too. Big deal! But we've also seen Pyrrhuloxia, Gambel's Quail and Meadowlark in the area. I hope the latter will turn out to be Eastern, but I haven't seen them that well yet. (There's an interesting pale race of the Eastern Meadowlark in

southeastern Arizona.)

This morning dawned cloudy and blustery, with showers threatening, but we decided to do some exploring anyway. We drove east to where Hwy 82 crosses the San Pedro River. The BLM (U. S. Bureau of Land Management) has recently acquired 30+ miles of this river and its bordering riparian areas. We went to the headquarters and picked up some literature.

I took a walk around the headquarters, but there are no trails. I walked some distance along a dirt road, but it just went through mesquite scrub land, not very close to the river. Meanwhile Jim photographed a pair of Vermilion Flycatchers by a nearby building. Later Jim and I together found a trail of sorts down to the river. We saw very few birds except near the building and the feeders. The wind was blowing so hard that most birds were out of view.

By the time we got back to the truck, it was starting to rain, but we decided to check out what the literature says is the best area for birding--where Hwy 90 crosses the river--some 40 miles away by road. By the time we got there, it was raining hard, as well as blowing a gale, so we decided it was hopeless and came back to the trailer. I'm now watching about 100 cowbirds devouring Jim's birdseed--and hoping something more interesting will decide to check out what they're eating.

The weather forecast is for two storms in rapid succession--the present fairly warm one followed by a colder one tomorrow. It might even snow at this relatively low altitude. I want to stay and see if it will.

#### Same place

8:00 a.m., Thurs., March 28, 1991

We did stay, and it did. This morning we awoke to an extremely light dusting on the ground--along with puddles from the rain right after dinner last evening. Nothing is particularly spectacular in the immediate foreground. However, the mountains in the distance are all white--both the Huachucas to the south and the Whetstones to the north. The sky was nearly clear, with just a few clouds in the distance. However, in the 2 hours we've been up, more clouds blew in, and it's snowing right now--lovely big flakes!

Shortly after I wrote up my log two days ago, the birds started to find Jim's feeding station. When we saw a Vesper Sparrow among them, Jim decided to brave the wind and cold and set up his blind. He has a nice plywood one that hooks together in short order. It has loops on all four corners that he can attach with Bungee cords (heavy elastic strips with hooks on each end) to tent stakes. It held up very well in the wind. That's more than I can say for Jim. Whenever he came in from sitting in that blind with the wind blowing directly in his face, it looked like a shriveled prune.

Yesterday Jim spent nearly all day in the blind. It was sunny and calm all morning, but the winds which preceded the new storm got up in the afternoon. He quit about 3:00, having photographed the Vesper Sparrow, and a cute Mexican Wood Rat, whose home seems to be in the brush under the little tree where Jim has his feeding station. (It likes birdseed, too.)

Jim saw a Loggerhead Shrike come in and take a male House Finch. Unfortunately the shrike dropped with its victim into some tall grass and then flew off with its prey before Jim could get a picture. The action was so fast that he never got a shot.

Two more interesting birds, which Jim would like to photograph, are in the area, but have yet to pick on the birdseed--Scaled Quail and Cassin's Sparrow. He's never photographed that quail.

We're going to stay here one more night before going on to Green Valley, where Jim's mother lives. The weather would make driving difficult. Besides, it's supposed to clear up this afternoon, and Jim wants more time in his blind.

## Same place

Fri., March 29, 1991

We're still in the RV park north of Huachuca City, but plan to leave this afternoon. The Scaled Quail have never appeared, but Jim has spent hours waiting for them. We have had Pyrrhuloxia, Chipping Sparrow, and, just a few minutes ago, Curve-billed Thrasher. The Meadowlarks have proven to be Westerns.

There's a bird list on the bulletin board in the office, which someone made when he (or possibly she, although the penmanship looks masculine) visited the park one April. How I'd like to see all the birds on that list. In every instance where there are two look-like species, he managed to see both of them--or at least convince himself that he did! He saw both Bendire's (possible, although I've not seen it) and Curve-billed Thrashers, Purple (very rare here) and House Finches, Eastern and Western Meadowlarks (both possible, but I've only seen Western), Cassin's and Botteri's Sparrows (Botteri's is rare and shouldn't arrive til May.), etc.

I've done a little recording out the window of the trailer. Mixtures of bird sounds mostly, but I'm sure I've improved on my Brown-headed Cowbird sounds. There is usually a large flock of them eating our bird-seed. I hate to feed those birds, but it's the only way to get anything else to come in.

I never lack for projects in the trailer while Jim's in the blind. This time I (1) took inventory of our supplies in preparation for our upcoming Alaska trip, (2) wrote lecture notes based on a book, Bird Sounds and Their Meanings, by Rosemary Jellis (for my upcoming birding skills workshop), (3) worked on a new needlepoint strap for my bird-book bag, and best of all, (4) simply enjoyed watching Jim's birds out the window! (I call them Jim's birds, because he sets up the feeding station each time with bird seed, Magic Meal, water dripping into a little bird pumice birdbath on the ground, and sometimes a syrup feeder.)

## Home

Wed., April 3, 1991

We left the Huachuca City RV park Friday afternoon and drove around through Patagonia and Nogales to Green Valley, where Jim's mother lives. It's a lovely drive, but we didn't stop anywhere. Instead of the pretentious parking lot of an RV Park in Green Valley, we decided to try another one in Amado--about 10 miles south of Green Valley. It turned out to be quite a bit better, although not perfect. All the sites are pull-throughs, with the areas around the edge, where we would prefer to park, used for storage of trailers. Even so, there are a few small trees and cactus patches here and there in the park, and, best of all, no concrete wall around the edge. Not far from our site, which is as close to the edge of the park as we could get, is a patch of open desert equal in size to the RV park itself. It was full of wonderful birds, some of which would fly occasionally into the park.

We spent three nights in the Mountain View RV Park in Amado. That gave us two full days in the area. The mornings and early afternoons we spent in the patch of desert near the RV park. Jim took lots of pictures, the best being the Bendire's Thrasher he's been wanting for years. It came and went from the small tree right next to our site. It seemed to be gathering some sort of shredded material for its nest. The nest site was high in an agave(?), and not visible from the ground, Jim said. On several occasions we would hear the thrasher singing outside our window, and Jim would rush out the trailer door and photograph it right on top of the little tree in our site. It was a very tame campground bird.

I did some recording both mornings, but the conditions weren't very good. The freeway was much too close. There was also a fairly stiff breeze.

We took Jim's mother out to dinner all three nights we were there. Each day we had a nice visit

with her. She seems to be happy and busy--and a real celebrity in the area. In every restaurant, one or two people recognized her and came over to chat with her.

We left there Monday morning and drove all the way home in one day.

## CAMPGROUNDS

3/16	Grand Canyon KOA, Williams, AZ
3/17	Lyman Lake SP, nr. St. Johns, AZ
3/18-3/19	Bosque Birdwatchers RV Park, San Antonio, NM
3/20	Valley of Fires SP & BLM Camp, Carrizozo, NM
3/21-3/22	Bottomless Lakes SP, nr. Roswell, NM
3/23	Lake Van City Park, Dexter, NM
3/24	KOA, Las Cruces, NM
3/25-3/28	Sun Country RV Resort, SR 82 x SR 90, N of Huachuca City, AZ
3/29-3/30	Mountain View RV Park, Amado, AZ
4/1	Home