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From the Great Basin to the Great Plains

spring & summer 2007

by Sylvia Gallagher

Introduction

If this is the first of my diaries you've read, let me introduce ourselves. Jim and I are birders towing our old (1987) 26-foot trailer with a Suburban. The trailer is irreplaceable because it has bigger windows than anything on the market today. 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 several months on the road. Our almost-two-year-old miniature poodle, Toby, completes the party.

The focus of this trip is SPARROWS. I have just finished teaching a seventeen-week workshop on these birds and challenged my students to a Great Sparrow Search--to see how many of them they can find in North America (ABA area) during one year. I gave them a form on which to enter their results. One of the class members, Roy Poucher, also leads birding tours. So he decided to organize tours to help people find some of the birds. When he asked me where they ought to go, I didn't hesitate at all and said, "Minot, North Dakota." There are probably more sparrow species breeding within a days drive of there than anywhere else. He signed up enough people to run his tour in duplicate.

I decided it would be fun for Jim and I to go there too, and touch base with his tour groups occasionally. I didn't want to lead the field trips. I guess I'm just getting too old to lead all-day trips day after day. I'm good for a morning, maybe slopping over into early afternoon, but that's it. Then I want to go back to the trailer, eat lunch, take a nap, and read or do embroidery the rest of the day.

I brought along a new two-volume tome on Bird Coloration, written by and for ornithologists, and hoped to get through volume 1. It turned out that I was able to read both volumes--but only because I didn't let myself do much embroidery. Whenever you see references to "reading my book," that's what I was reading.

My latest bird quilt is now on the quilting frame at home and is impossible to bring with me, so there is really no pressing embroidery project. I did bring something, though, and worked on it a little.

This diary is somewhat briefer than others you may have read. I wanted lots of time to read the Bird Coloration books and, more important, my laptop computer crashed about half-way through the trip. (I couldn't even use Jim's, for his had crashed a few days before we left home.) From then on, I just jotted down a few notes about each day's activities and tried to flesh them out when I got home.

Comments in square brackets, [], were added after we got home and evaluated our slides and sounds.

Sunday, May 20, 2007

Brown's Town RV Park, Bishop, CA

After two grueling days of packing, we drove to Bishop, arriving in the early afternoon. Traffic was really light all the way; Sunday is a good departure day. Rested the rest of the afternoon. Our first destination is Great Basin NP, and this is just an en route stop. It would have been 70 miles closer via Las Vegas, but we hate that city. It's cooler here, too.

Monday, May 21, 2007

KOA, Ely, NV

We drove here via US 6, which mostly goes through salt scrub habitat--sort of boring, but a good, fast road. Saw a fox of some sort cross the road when we first set out. A small group of wild horses was in and next to the road about half-way across. One was standing right in the road, so we had to slow down, but it moved aside.

When we got to Ely, it was really windy. Despite that, I took Toby for a short walk through the juniper habitat of the tent-camping section. Saw a couple of Pinyon Jays fly by, but little else. Cassin's Finches are all over the RV section singing their hearts out in the cottonwood trees between the sites.

Tuesday, May 22, 2007

Upper Lehman Creek Campground, Great Basin National Park, NV

Bought gas, did some shopping, and got here around 10:00 a.m. in order to have the best selection of sites. The park has four campgrounds, but only this one has most of its sites suitable for RV's. We took the last creek side site available, but there were others that would have been nice, too. This campground has only 11 sites. Habitat is aspens and white firs, with pinyon/juniper and sagebrush not far away. Lots of common birds: Robin, Warbling Vireo, and Black-headed Grosbeak are the main singers audible from the trailer. Have seen and/or heard others nearby: MacGillivray's, Yellow-rumped, Nashville warblers; Downy Woodpecker; Flicker; Cassin's Finch; Spotted & Green-tailed towhees; Western Scrub-Jay (woodhouseii) come to mind. Rock Squirrels are devouring Jim's birdseed, along with a single Black-headed Grosbeak, Spotted Towhee, and Scrub-Jay. No one likes the birdbath. It's too cold, and the creek is close by. Temperature topped out at around 50 degrees. Breezy.

We're still decompressing from the past week's flurry of activity, so we just sat around the trailer and took short walks around the campground. We've signed up for six nights--through the Memorial Day holiday--so we have lots of time to explore the park.

Wednesday, May 23, 2007

Upper Lehman Creek Campground, Great Basin National Park, NV

We drove down to the tiny village of Baker this morning. I wanted to explore the sagebrush flats to see if I could find any Sage Sparrows, but no luck at either the ranching interpretive site or near the new park visitors center. Birds were pretty scarce. I went into the visitors center to see if anyone knew where I could find Fox Sparrows, but no luck. The only birder on the staff is off today and tomorrow, so I guess I'll just have to eyeball the habitats as we drive by and see if I can find one on my own. I'm looking for the Slate-colored form, of which Jim has only some so-so photos from Mt Timpanagos in Utah.

It was midmorning when we got back to the campground, so I had Jim drive me the half-mile or so to Upper Lehman Creek Campground. We drove around the loops, mostly tiny sites unsuitable for RV's. In fact I'd be hesitant to even try to tow a very long

trailer around the loops.

I heard a song not unlike that of a Fox Sparrow, but it sounded thinner--more like a Green-tailed Towhee, and that's what it was.

After walking around a steep loop, I then went down the road to the trailer. The 8% grade really got my leg muscles. Huntington Beach doesn't provide much opportunity to walk in hilly terrain.

Noon, Thursday, May 24, 2007

Upper Lehman Creek Campground, Great Basin National Park, NV

The morning dawned almost totally overcast. We had been planning to drive up to the top of the park road, 10,000 ft elevation, and look at the various life zones en route, but decided to save that for a clear day.

Instead we drove to the end of Baker Creek Rd. I walked down a ways from the top, my sore muscles from yesterday complaining all the way. The road is rather high above Baker Creek, but the creek bed riparian area looked promising for Fox Sparrows. I've read that the Slate-colored races breed almost exclusively in dense riparian vegetation with meandering streamlets of water. The Thick-billed races of the Sierra and Cascade mountains of California and Oregon are found in montane chaparral away from water, as well as near it. They usually aren't found in tall, dense vegetation.

After walking 0.3 mile (by truck odometer) downhill from the end of the road, I heard the unmistakable songs of a Fox Sparrow. It even included the motifs that so resemble those of an Olive-sided Flycatcher and a flicker. Some people say it's mimicry, but I don't think so. I had my tape recorder today, so recorded it. Before playing it back, I called Jim on the radio to drive down and get his camera ready. Then I played it. Sure enough, up flew a Slate-colored Fox Sparrow. It skulked briefly in a nearby willow, then proceeded to do the fly-bys--150 ft one direction, then 150 ft another, every time I played the song. Finally it landed on a reasonably close willow-top, and Jim shot a few pictures. They'll probably be OK, but not the frame-fillers we're hoping for.

I continued to walk down the road, but the willows became more sparse, and creek farther from the road. I could hear one or two Fox Sparrows off in the distance, but there was no way to get down there from the road. Not even agile Jim would have tried it.

The only place that seemed to promise access was the Baker Creek Campground, which was a little bit farther on. So I climbed into the truck, we drove to the campground and then turned south and went around the south loop. When we were about half-way round, we came to a dirt road that was chained off to drivers, but not closed to hikers. So we parked the car and I walked the road. It went past one small building and ended at a 2nd. Beyond the 2nd was just the sort of small, shrubby meadow I was searching for. There was no trail, but it wasn't particularly wet. I



Fox Sparrow

(Slate-colored, canescens)

Great Basin National Park

May 24, 2007

Jim Gallagher, photographer

went out a little ways and played the tape of the Fox Sparrow I had recorded up the road. It took a lot of plays, but finally I started hearing a bird respond. Pretty soon it flew in and landed a little bit back in the low part of a shrub, but I could see it well enough to ID it. Then it flew around some more, finally landing in the top of a shrub with a lot of dead twigs. I radioed Jim to come, for it looked like a really good photo opportunity. He doesn't like to carry his heavy camera very far, but will do so if a picture seems likely.

While I was waiting for Jim, I recorded this Fox Sparrow's songs at rather close range. I didn't play back any more until Jim got there. Then I played back the bird I had just recorded. He came right in and perched exactly where we wanted him to--in the twiggly-topped shrub. Fortunately Jim was standing where he could get a clear shot of the bird from just the right distance, so he blazed away. Hope the photos are as good as he thinks they'll be. [They are. [See Photo 1.](#)] He has a new flash unit, which has been giving him outstanding photos in the back yard, so it's well tested.

This bird was the main reason for our coming to Great Basin NP, so the pressure is off and we can simply enjoy whatever we see. (I really don't like hunting for particular species.)

3:00 p.m., Saturday, May 26, 2007 **Great Basin NP, NV**

Yesterday we drove the 10-mile road to its terminus at the Wheeler Peak Campground. From there trails head out to a couple of lakes and a grove of bristlecone pines. Instead, I chose to walk around the very nice campground because I could take Toby. (Dogs are not permitted on the trails.) There were only 2 of the 37 sites occupied, and only one had anyone in the campsite. The elevation is nearly 10,000 ft. and the water hasn't yet been turned on for the season. The grade up there is an unrelenting 8%, so larger rigs are not recommended, although they did have quite a few sites long enough for us.

There were lingering snow patches here and there--new to Toby, who approaches every new thing very cautiously. He sneaks up, then jumps back, repeatedly. When his nose finally touched the cold white stuff, he really jumped. Then he approached it yet again and this time discovered it was just ice. He loves ice! Ice is to eat! So he did, this time and whenever we came to more of the stuff.

The campground was very birdy. Nothing especially surprising for this elevation in the western mountains, but lots of them. Recording conditions were excellent, only marred by occasional airplanes high overhead or little flurries of breeze that soon died down. Pine Siskins were especially common, and I got some nice solos. I also got mixes of several species, including probable Red Crossbill.

Toby was a fairly good companion for this endeavor, but when I stood too long in one place, he started to whine. So I radioed Jim to come and get him so I could take advantage of the day. I don't get many of them. The slightest breeze makes conifers roar, and there's usually some sort of creek flowing, too. I spent the entire morning there.

Jim has been bemoaning the fact that he left his favorite feeding log at a campground on our last trip, so he busied himself hunting up a piece of rotten wood. This he had to saw off, and only had a small keyhole saw with him to do it with. So it took quite a while. Afterwards he walked Toby round and round the parking lot. If we don't wear that dog out during the day, he wears us out in the evening, poking every toy he owns at us to be thrown or tugged, chewing at us, etc.

Last evening we went to the campfire program. It was on bird song, so I had to see how that would be handled for a general audience. His main thrust was to teach people how to imitate birds songs, which he handled nicely. In the process he also covered some of the good science on the subject: songs vs. calls, song-learning by some species, etc. The main problem with it was the strange assortment of birds he chose, most not common in the park and some not there at all. He also garbled the names of several common species. I won't enumerate. Anyway it demonstrated that he's really not familiar with the local birds. Don't know how long he's been stationed here. He's supposed to be the only bird authority on the staff, so I was glad I'd been able to find my Slate-colored Fox Sparrow on my own.

Today dawned overcast, so we decided this would be a good day for Jim to take the tour of Lehman Cave. I didn't go with him, because I had heard there were some steep steps, but he said they weren't that bad. [When I saw his photos after we got home, I was glad I didn't go.] Instead I walked down the road from the cave entrance and then made the mistake of walking out the Baker Creek Road. It's gravel and had an awful lot of fast traffic on it after I'd been on it a while. They seldom slowed down when they saw me and Toby, so we got lots of dust and, the final straw, even some little stones from a big motorhome that went by superfast. I decided then to just wander off into the pinyon-juniper woodland and find a rock to sit on until Jim called me on the radio that he was coming.

To make things worse, there were almost no birds. I did get a superior Western Tanager recording before I got to the dirt road. I was surprised to find it in pinyon-juniper woodland and almost dismissed it as a hoarse Black-headed Grosbeak. The entire bird list consisted of that bird plus two Mountain Chickadees, one Western Scrub-Jay, and one Broad-tailed Hummingbird. Pretty slow for an hour and a half's effort.

When Jim picked me up, we went on up the Baker Creek Road and then out the road to Grey Cliffs, a scenic area and group campground. I walked Toby a ways in that area, but added nothing we don't have in our own campground.

Weather has been on-and-off cloudy today. High in upper 70s. Breeze is up pretty good now, which keeps things pleasant.

4:30 p.m., Wednesday, May 30, 2007
Craters of the Moon NM, ID

Haven't written this up for several days because little of interest happened. Sunday morning we drove up to the top of the road again. I had planned to walk a little on the trail system up there. There are trails that go to two small lakes, which I recall we walked to in 1989 when we were last able to drive to the top of the road. I started out on one of the trails, but found it had lots of snow on it. More intrepid hikers than I had crunched through it, but I'm not sure-footed enough for that sort of thing, so I contented myself with the little nature trail. It was sort of a windy day, so recording conditions were not what they had been on our earlier visit. Besides, there were lots more people, it being the Memorial Day weekend.

After I had given up there, we drove on back down and out the Baker Creek Rd. to where I had found the Slate-colored Fox Sparrow. I didn't try to lure the bird out again with a tape. I just wanted to photograph the habitat, which I had forgotten to do the first time.

The rest of the day was spent reading and doing embroidery. I brought along a two-volume book on Bird Coloration, which I'm determined to read this summer. I'd like to get the first volume read on this trip and the second on our fall one. It's not easy reading, being written for professional ornithologists, but my background in chemistry (I have a PhD) and physics, as well as my experience as an amateur ornithologist is enabling me to understand most of it. My main weaknesses are in computer applications and statistics. I had so much free time at Great Basin NP that I got a lot of reading done. Since we left there, I've done almost none.

Monday was a day of driving. We returned to Ely, then drove straight north to Twin Falls, ID, where we spent the night at the 93 RV Park--just a sterile commercial RV park with blazing "security" lights. No attendant was on duty on the holiday, so we had to wait until the next morning at 8:30 to ask about where we could get several things taken care of. We needed a new cord connecting the trailer to the truck. When we tried to get the propane bottle filled at the RV park, it turned out its washer was bad, so so we had to go find Suburban Propane. Both RV repairs were handled very rapidly and efficiently. After some shopping time at WalMart, it was lunch time. We found a Pizza Hut--and there we waited and waited for them to cook a simple little pizza. After lunch it was 100 miles on rough roads to Craters of the Moon National Monument, where we are now.

I visited this place with Mother many years ago, but every time I've come near it with Jim, it's been too hot to even consider. This time the temperature highs are in the 60s and the lows around 40. Perfect weather for exploring lava beds and the interesting plants that have colonized them. Yesterday afternoon we went to the small, but very interesting, visitors center and looked at all the displays. Jim asked where was the best place to photograph a pika, and was told it was only 1/4 mile from the campground. The attendants at the desk went into the back room to get the information and came out and told us the man said it was "corpuscular or something like that." I suggested he might have said "crepuscular," and they were amazed that I knew that word. I explained that it meant "active at twilight." They were happy to learn a new word. Delightful, friendly people. We spent a lot of time around the nature trail, where the animal was supposed to be, but saw none.

This morning after breakfast I walked down there and did the trail again. This time I saw two pikas. Jim had had diarrhea in the night, so decided not to go with me until he discovered whether he was recovered. (Fortunately he was, so we did everything else together this morning.) Later this evening and tomorrow morning before we leave, Jim plans to go down there himself and hope one will pop up close enough to have its picture taken. (We only have a distant photo of one in our collection.)

We thoroughly enjoyed the lava beds and, especially, the wildflowers that were blooming all over the cinder fields. Tiny little belly flowers that I associate with

subalpine locations were blooming here at 5,000 ft elevation. Furthermore, the trees are all Limber Pines, many of them very good sized. These also are usually found in harsh subalpine climates. I guess "harsh" is the word, and "subalpine" is not required. We both took lots of pictures of the geological and botanical features.

I took photos of the following plants:

Bitterroot, *Lewisia rediviva* (our favorite, closes at night, but opens into beautiful white blossoms by mid-day. We thought we were seeing buds early in the day.)

Cushion Buckwheat, *Eriogonum ovalifolium*

Dwarf Purple Monkeyflower, *Mimulus nanus*

Dwarf Phacelia, *P. humilis*

Hotrock Penstemon, *P. deustus*

Antelope Bitterbrush, *Purshia tridentata*. First shrub to colonize lava beds. Big Sagebrush takes over later.

We saw a few birds. Brewer's Sparrows and Rock Wrens predominate, but we were especially interested to see Violet-green Swallows and Mountain Bluebirds apparently visiting nests in crevices in some of the lava towers, especially in the throats of spattercones. In one place along the tour road, a large number of Clark's Nutcrackers were apparently harvesting Limber Pine seeds and carrying them up a steep hill. They hide them under boulders in such places, where they will not be covered by snow in the winter.

Two squirrels, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel and Yellow-pine Chipmunk, are the only customers for our birdseed, but they're always around. We also saw a Red Fox and Jim shot a bad, distant, backlit photo of it--desperation. [It was awful.]

4:30 p.m., Tuesday, June 5, 2007

J & M RV Park, Stanford, MT

Again I've let quite a while go by without a writeup. Most of the elapsed time we were dry-camped in Yellowstone in a site with limited sunlight for our solar panels, so I didn't want to use the inverter (changes battery 12-volt DC to 110-volt AC).

Last Thursday morning we drove from Craters of the Moon NM almost all the way to Yellowstone, stopping for various errands in Idaho Falls, and for a flat tire on the trailer along the road. [The flat tire was a blow-out in the middle of the tread, and we hadn't hit any road hazards or rough pavement for a long time. Jim thought it was very strange to have that type of failure. After we got home, we read about similar tire failures on Chinese-made tires and wondered if that was what had blown. Unfortunately, we turned the tire in at the tire store in West Yellowstone when we bought a new one, so we will never know. Jim usually buys Goodyear trailer tires, but sometimes when we're out in the middle of nowhere we have to take what we can get.]

We stayed the night in an ordinary RV park, Valley View RV park, 13 miles west of West Yellowstone. Its valley view may have been there, but our view was of the monster RV next to us.

Jim had been having problems with diarrhea for several days, and it wasn't getting any better. In fact, for three nights straight he slept on the couch so he could get up suddenly when he got an urge. (Normally he has to crawl over me.) He felt fairly good in the daytime, but it always seemed to hit him worst at night. We didn't know if it was the pizza he ate in Twin Falls--the only thing different from my diet that he'd had--or a reaction to the antibiotic his dermatologist had put him on before she removed a growth from his nose. Anyway, by Friday morning, even he agreed he had to get medical attention. When the RV park office opened, I learned there was a walk-in clinic in West Yellowstone, so we headed there. The MD or NP (Jim's not sure whom he saw) on the staff knew instantly from his symptoms (diarrhea, but no vomiting, aching,

temperature, etc.) that the problem was his antibiotic. The info. with the medication had said that if there was going to be a problem, it would show up during the first few days, but he'd been off of it for several days after a ten-day course. She showed him--and gave him a copy of--an article that said the problem can show up as long as several weeks after stopping the medication. Anyway she put him on metronidazole, and within hours he was feeling better. Apparently the dermatologist's antibiotic had killed all the good bugs in his colon, leaving only one bad one, which was giving him the problem. He has to take 6 tablets of this a day for ten days, to be sure there will be no relapse. The only drawback is that he can't drink alcohol--and he dearly loves his afternoon glass of wine.

Just to be on the safe side, we decided to spend the night in West Yellowstone before going into the park. We got a good site at the Yellowstone Grizzly RV Park, a very nice place just a couple of blocks away from the clinic. (Terry and John Hill had recommended it in the past.) It backs up to national forest property and we had a site on the edge. I did some laundry at the laundry building right across from the site, Jim bought a new trailer tire, and we just whiled away the rest of the day.

The next morning, Sat., June 2, we didn't want to get to the campground in the park too early--before people had had time to check out--so I took Toby for a long walk on the trails in the national forest behind the campground, and we headed for Norris Campground in Yellowstone.

When we got to the campground, we found our favorite site from last time occupied--and most of the other long sites as well. We finally managed to squeeze into one, but it wasn't a particularly nice one. We signed up for three nights. By the end of the three nights, we were totally fed up with the officious management of the place. They were forever on our case for minor violations. In order to keep our truck out of the loop road, we had to park sideways in front of the trailer, and this entailed having one wheel on the bare dirt--an absolute no-no! (The bare dirt was covered with tire tracks!) We were told our alternatives were to park way down the hill through the trees in the overflow parking area or rent a second site. We certainly weren't going to have our truck that far from our surveillance, so we anteed up for the extra site. It wasn't much money with our Golden Age pass, but it certainly was annoying.

After we had been there two days, we came back and found a warning on our trailer regarding Jim's little feeding log and water drip. He knew it was against the rules to feed the wildlife, but has always done it anyway. But the objection to the plastic jug of water dripping into the tiny birdbath was a new one. They also didn't like the spare container of water for the water tank that he had on the other side of the trailer. Curiously enough, they never said a word about the fact that we had backed into a site that we could obviously only have accessed by driving the wrong way around the loop in the campground. It was really only suitable for a motorhome that could head in, but even they like to back in. [Note added August 13: I just read an article in today's L.A. Times that enumerated similar incidents of harassment at Yosemite.]

Between skirmishes with the management we managed to do the things we had especially wanted to do in the park. Our friends Clair and Sue De Beauvoir, who often seem to be on the road where and when we are, had been in Yellowstone several days, and we'd been in touch by email. They told us of several animal photo ops. The closest one was a coyote mother, who had a den with nine cubs right along the road only ten minutes from Norris, so we went down there Saturday afternoon. We did see two or three cubs come out of the den in some jumbled rocks--and also saw the mother wander by--but those standing there told us she had nursed the babies at 2:30 before we got there.

The next morning, Sunday, June 3, we drove across to Canyon and down the Hayden Valley as far as Fishing Bridge. That area is usually good for lots of wildlife, but there

weren't even very many bison. Waterfowl were few and distant, and it turned out to be a big disappointment.

Late in the afternoon Jim went back to the coyote den. I stayed in the trailer reading, not wanting to stand around beside the road with a bunch of people for another three or four hours. Besides, I brought along a lot of reading material that I'm determined to get through on this trip. I also fixed a nice dinner that could hold over low heat until he got there.

Jim came back around 7:30 very happy. This time the mother came in and fed the pups. She nursed them and then regurgitated some sort of prey, which they scuffled over and ate. He said he shot the better part of three rolls of film of all the actions. Although there was a brief rainstorm, the sun came out before the mother came in, so the light was excellent. It had been mostly cloudy the day before. [The photos were wonderful! [See Photo 2.](#)]



[2.] Coyote nursing pups

Yellowstone National Park

June 2, 2007

Jim Gallagher, photographer

Monday morning, June 4, I decided to do the walk through the Porcelain Basin of the Norris Geyser Basin that I'd had to forego last year when we had our electrical problems on the trailer. I had Jim drive me to the Geyser Basin and I walked around the loop trails, then back to the campground on a delightful trail through old- and new-growth Lodgepole Pines. I took my recording gear and recorded some of the wonderful sounds of the thermal features, and then in the forested areas I got a rather nice singing Townsend's Solitaire and probable Dark-eyed Junco (Pink-sided).

Since I started out at 7:00 a.m., I essentially had the entire place to myself--beautiful! I love all the steam vents, blue water, colored algae, etc., and I really took my time, stopping occasionally just to sit on a bench and absorb all the beauty. Even with all the lolly-gagging, I got back to the trailer at 9:30, then sat outside for the rest of the morning.

Meanwhile Jim had gone over to the Dunraven Pass area, where, for several days straight, a mother Grizzly Bear and her two playful cubs had been making an appearance and been duly photographed by the roadside crowd. He spent the entire morning there, but no bear. After our usual early afternoon naps, I went back over there with him. We hung around there for several more hours, but again no bears. This time I had had the presence of mind to bring along a magazine--and since we were leaving the park the next morning, my comfortable chair was in the truck. So there I sat beside the narrow road, reading in Birding magazine about whether Ivory-billed Woodpeckers exist and glancing up the mountainside for bears every so often.

Clair and Sue had told us about a badger den with young out in the Lamar Valley, but unfortunately the animals had just recently left that area. If they had still been there, we'd have been out there today hunting for them. Instead, we decided to continue with our planned trip, and spent the entire morning and half the afternoon driving northward.

We're spending tonight, Tues., June 5, in J & M RV Park in the tiny town of Stanford, MT. It's just a roadside park with very few customers. Most of it is OK, but the water pipes seem to be very corroded, and the water smells and tastes very metallic--and looks yellow. It's not listed in Trailer Life Guide--just in the Montana state guide. We're headed for the Havre area in the northern part of the state, which the Montana bird-finding guide recommends. More on that after we find out whether it's as nice as it sounds.

8:00 p.m., Saturday, June 9, 2007
Riverside Motel & RV Park, Malta, MT

On Wed., June 6, we completed our drive to the Havre area. After a bit of shopping at Wal-Mart, we drove south to Beaver Creek Park. This was recommended in the Montana Bird-finding Guide. It claims to be the largest county park in the nation, 10,000 acres. (How large is Caspers?) It stretches for 17 miles along Beaver Creek and the mountainsides on either side of it, with an average width of one mile. Beaver Creek arises in the Bears Paw Mountains, which are of volcanic origin. Its gradient is rather steep, so the habitats in the park change rather dramatically during the 17 miles. The first portion is mostly rolling grassland, with just a narrow strip of willow riparian in the creek. By the time we had gotten about 2/3 of the way up the park, the riparian was very thick and a couple hundred yards broad. The tall trees are mainly Eastern Cottonwoods, but lots of other types of vegetation are there, too. I didn't have time to try to figure out what they were, although some of their names were in the birding guide. We did figure out where the park office was, but all we learned there was that it was closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays. There wasn't even a map of the park posted nor a rate schedule. We didn't have the faintest idea where we were supposed to camp. We had passed some campgrounds named for various service clubs (Rotary, Kiwanis, JC's, Firemen, etc.), but didn't really know what that meant. But we fogged around and ended up in an area where there were numbered sites, so we figured that must be where to camp. To get there we turned off the paved road onto a narrow 1-vehicle-wide road and entered the forest. The road twisted around, with some corners a bit tight for our trailer, but we had to keep going. We passed one site with a trailer about our size in it--no people around--so figured we couldn't get into too much trouble. Pretty soon we came to another campsite, and another. Then we found one to our liking. It was really large, as all were, but this one wasn't right next to the creek. Jim wanted to set up his water drip, and I didn't want the creek noise to mar any recording I might do.

The site was sort of in the open (for our solar panels), but surrounded by riparian woodland and various shrubs. There would have been plenty of room for two trailers there, as was true of most of them. It was also completely out of view of any other site, as was also true of most of them. Beautiful, and all eight wheels were on dirt, just our kind of place. It was strictly dry camping. The only amenities were a fire pit, trash can, and a pair of disgusting pit toilets. (I didn't even go into one, but Jim said they were awful.)

As soon as we got out of the truck, I heard the reedy, descending "veer veer veer veer" of Veeries all around. What a thrill! They were also calling their insistent single "veer," which isn't quite so reedy. Also audible were Yellow Warbler, House Wren, Warbling Vireo, and Gray Catbird. I later became disenchanted with the catbird, for he not only sang all day, but also commenced singing each night around 3:00 a.m. in the shrub right outside my bedroom window. (It's Jim's bedroom window, too, but his deafness saved him from hearing it.)

I fixed lunch, Jim set up his water drip and feeding log, and then we took late naps. When we awoke, the sky was really dark and soon it started to rain. It rained steadily, but moderately, until around midnight, causing us to worry a bit that we might end up stuck in a muddy mess and be unable to get out of the site--or even the campground. Weather Radio (NOAA) told us that a Pacific cold front was passing through.



[3.] Veery

Beaver Creek Park, near Havre, MT

June 7, 2007

Jim Gallagher, photographer

I spent several hours wandering around getting recordings for myself. Besides the Veery, which I recorded at length, I also got Dusky Flycatcher, Lazuli Bunting, Spotted Towhee (songs vary a lot geographically), and a few others. The day was cold (high around 60), but not particularly windy for the first few hours.

After I got back, we drove back to the office, paid the modest camping fee (\$7 per night), then explored by car the low elevation areas of the park back toward Havre. Some of it looked like possible McCown's Longspur habitat, which I'd like to find for my sparrow list (for the workshop I just finished). I walked a couple of dirt cross roads a ways, but found none. Best bird was Bobolink, which is always fun. (The attendant in the office called it "bo-bo-link" instead of "bob-o-link".) The roads were very muddy--too muddy for the truck, we thought.

After lunch I spent the rest of the day in the trailer reading and looking out the window.

The next morning, Friday, June 8, was even more beautiful. I should really describe the area--a canyon with high green hills on either side, some of them with volcanic rocky outcroppings. Wildflowers everywhere, many in beautiful carpets of yellow (sunflowers of some type), blue (lupine, flax, etc.), white (some type of pea), with accents of pink, rose, etc. I never took time to haul out my flower books and figure them out, but quite a few looked familiar. I walked farther than I had the day before, even finding a place where the creek was flowing slowly and there was a mudbar where a pair of Spotted Sandpipers were foraging and calling.

In the morning, Thursday, June 7, there was a lot of mud, but we weren't in the lowest spot in the site, so it didn't look too bad for leaving. The sky was clear except for a bit of residual ground fog. I set out to explore the campground with my tape recorder on my shoulder. (Toby had to stay indoors all day. He'd have made a mess of himself.) I had intended to record the Veery so we could try playing it back for Jim to photograph, but we were thrilled when, right after breakfast, our closest one decided to forage for worms right next to Jim's feeding log. Jim just sat in his chair and blazed away with his camera--no blind necessary. (See [Photo No. 3.](#)) I think it's only the second time he's ever gotten shots of this species. (The other was in Goose Island State Park, Texas.)

When I got back to the trailer, Jim said not a single bird had come in while I was gone--and nothing but the Veery had come in the day before. He was ready to pack up and leave. But I wanted to drive uphill (south) and see what the mountains were like, so we did. We were out of the park after several miles. The road in the park was excellent, but above it, there were deep potholes all over--so many that you couldn't possibly avoid them all. But we kept going because it was so beautiful. The canyon became narrower and the walls steeper. Ponderosa Pines and possibly some Douglas-Firs (I didn't look that hard) became mixed with the cottonwoods. Also there were more aspens. The road supposedly went all the way to a ski area, but we came to a construction zone, so decided to turn around. On the way back, I had Jim let me and Toby out, and we walked downhill for about an hour while Jim drove. When I thought I heard a Cordilleran Flycatcher, I got out my recording gear to try to hear it above the roar of the creek. I couldn't be positive about that one, but later I heard one somewhat better. The habitat was perfect--narrow canyon with tall trees and running water. I also heard and recorded an Ovenbird, which I tried to lure out for Jim to photograph. It came closer and kept singing, but we never even glimpsed it. Also had a probable MacGillivray's Warbler, which wouldn't come out either. (I never thought I'd find both of those warblers in the same place.)

We got back to the trailer around noon, ate lunch, then drove 40 miles to Chinook, which is 20 miles east of Havre. There we found a site in the Bear Paw Motel and RV Park, just an ordinary parking lot RV park, but the location was right for what we wanted to do the next day.

Saw a Eurasian Collared-Dove, amazing how far north they've expanded. I checked Kaufman, and he didn't show them this far north, but the newest National Geographic Guide does show a dotted line that includes this area. I'm surprised they're not yet common at home, based on how they're spreading in the midwest.

Today, Sat., June 9, we drove a loop route south of Chinook, which was recommended for McCown's Longspurs, among other things, in the Montana bird-finding guide. We found no longspurs, but it was a glorious drive through grassy, flower-covered hills, with occasional pothole ponds for waterfowl and marsh birds. Came back with a list of 38 species. We're becoming somewhat disenchanted with Terry McEneaney's Montana bird-finding book. It didn't really spell out how to bird Beaver Creek. Here the mileages and the road names were off. It said to drive south on the paved road (Cleveland Rd, Route 240), then turn right on the road to Lloyd, which is about 12 miles past the Nez Perce Battlefield National Historic Site. Nine miles past the site we came to the little village of Cleveland, which our roadmap showed past the turnoff. We'd seen no sign for Lloyd. Fortunately there were two folks horseback riding in the area, so we asked where the road was, and they said we'd passed it 3 miles back. It was called Crown Butte Rd. I remembered passing it, so we returned there, turned, drove the 8 miles to Lloyd, then back north on Lloyd Rd. (If you do the math, you'll see that the turn was six, not twelve, miles past the battlefield.) If I had it to do over again, I'd do it the other way around--drive south out of Chinook on Cleveland Rd. to Lloyd Rd. (turn is shortly after milepost 6), go south to Lloyd, left on Crown Butte Rd, then left on Cleveland Rd. Lloyd Rd. and Crown Butte Rd. are unpaved, but good. Cleveland Rd is paved.

The Nez Perce Battlefield Historic Site looked very interesting and had a 1.5-mile loop trail, but we didn't have time to investigate it. (It's where a great many basically peaceable indians, under Chief Joseph, were slaughtered as they tried to escape to Canada. This is where Chief Joseph finally surrendered and is reputed to have said, "I shall fight no more forever.")

I took quite a few pictures of the beautiful scenery. The road went uphill and down dale and the hilltops presented awesome views of the mountains and valleys. Again there were wildflowers everywhere. We saw lots and lots of Vesper Sparrows, surprisingly no

Savannahs or any other kinds of grassland sparrows--and definitely no McCown's Longspurs, which was what I especially wanted. Isolated cottonwoods often had hawk nests. Jim got photos of a Red-tail with some Krider's genes.

When I was walking with Toby along one stretch, I spotted a small black snake beside the road. I called Jim on the radio to photograph it. It didn't look injured, but was very lethargic--and the day wasn't cold. Jim said it didn't even move when he nudged it, but it did release a discharge of some sort from its mouth. Was it dying? Had it been struck by a car, even if it didn't show it? Don't know. [He photographed it, but I was unable to identify it from the photos.]

We got back to the trailer around noon, ate lunch, then drove 70 miles farther east to Malta, where we are now located in the Riverside Motel and RV Park. The park is right next to a railroad bridge over a river, and the trains are very noisy, but the location under tall cottonwoods is so nice, we came here. We'd been here before, so knew about the trains, but the other place(s) in town just aren't this nice. This is the only one Trailer Life recommends--except for a city park with dry camping only. We like our electricity and cable TV (with CNN and PBS) when we can get it. We've become rather out of touch with the news of the nation and the world with all our recent dry camping.

8:30 p.m., Wednesday., June 13, 2007
Theodore Roosevelt NP, North Unit, ND

On Sunday morning, June 10, we drove the 15-mile tour route at Bowdoin NWR. Despite focusing on land birds and paying minimal attention to water birds, my bird list had 48 species for Malta plus the refuge.

The list did not include the Eurasian Collared-Dove, but we've been surprised to find it in two other Montana towns close to the Canadian border, Chinook and Culbertson. The newest edition of the National Geographic Guide is the only book I have that shows it this far north, but only with dotted lines. What a rapid range expansion.

As we drove through the refuge, we poked along through the grasslands, and I walked long portions of it. McCown's Longspur is on the refuge list as a rare breeder. We didn't find it, but we did see lots of Chestnut-collareds. I got some fairly good recordings of birds doing their flight displays--mostly just flying around singing, not like the beautiful display of the Bobolink, which I think I described in my diary from two years ago. We spotted the Chestnut-collared Longspurs when they were foraging in the gravel road--a pair of them. I tried bringing them in for Jim to photograph, either perched or in flight, but they would never come very close, so he didn't even try for a shot.

As I was setting out from the truck to walk through the grasslands, a Willet shot up from no more than eight feet ahead of me and not much farther than that from the road. I hadn't seen it. We knew it must have been on a nest, and after a short search, we found one with four eggs. Jim went back for his camera while I stood next to it so he could find it again.



[4.] Wilson's Phalarope (male)

Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge. MT

June 10, 2007

Jim Gallagher, photographer

The rest of the drive was rather uneventful and tedious, although Jim did pop off some nice shots of a male Wilson's Phalarope ([Photo No. 4](#)). I tromped through a lot of what I hoped was short grassland trying for those McCown's and not finding them. I also walked (with Toby) some fairly lengthy stretches of road. Finally, as it was getting towards midday, we just drove, stopping frequently to listen. Near the end of the drive, I heard off in the distance a descending group of liquid notes. At first I thought it might be the longspur, but upon reflection I realized it was more like a Sprague's Pipit. Of course, I recorded it. It was better than the only other recording I have--when the wind was blowing a gale. I listened to the Stokes recording of the pipit in the evening, and it fit nicely.

After spending from 7:00 am till 1:00 pm driving the refuge road, we decided to treat ourselves at Dairy Queen. The hamburgers were soggy--both bread and meat--but those Blizzards! It's a good thing there are no Dairy Queens in Huntington Beach. [Wrong!! I discovered one just the other day, but it's not very close to our house.] We brought our dripping frozen delights back to the trailer; they pile them up in a paper cup. We each ate a small portion of ours and put the rest in the freezing compartment and made them last several days. We've decided they won't be the only Blizzards we indulge in on this trip. Mine had lots of chocolate and lots of pecans. Jim's had lots of chocolate--and lots more chocolate.

I spent the rest of the day sitting outside reading, embroidering, and watching the robins and catbirds in the RV park.

Monday, June 11, we drove back out to the refuge--not far from town--and went to the office when it opened to inquire about McCown's Longspurs. They told me that McCown's Longspurs had not bred in the refuge for many years, despite the bird list. They sent me to the BLM office back in Malta for better information. There I talked to a very knowledgeable biologist. He said he'd seen probable migrants four to six weeks ago, but not since. He also gave me printed directions to the only place at all accessible where they have bred the last two years. He also said they probably wouldn't breed there this year, because there had been so much rain that the grass was too tall for these short-grass prairie birds. In years like this the birds fly farther north to breed. I was going to check the area anyway until I looked at the directions and discovered the place was 44 miles north of Malta.

I decided we might as well hook up and leave. We drove 210 miles east and somewhat south, ending up in Sidney, MT. Along the way we ate lunch in Culbertson. The place advertised pizza, but also other things. We went for the special of the day, which was supposed to be a Mexican taco-style pizza. It turned out to be sort of a turnover made out of thick pizza dough, with almost unseasoned hamburger meat, mozzarella cheese, and pepperoni inside. The Mexican parts were a side each of salsa and sour cream. It was pretty awful.

In Sidney we found a place at a very run-down RV Park (in the state guide, but not TL) called 5-Wheel RV Park. The sites did back up to a line of Russian Olives, so at least it was shady. We were having the hottest day yet on the trip, with a high of 95_. The park management also runs a go-cart track, and a defunct, very minimal miniature golf course is also on the grounds. Fortunately the go-carts were having a slow day.

The instructions for finding the RV Park in the Montana state tour guide were simply, "Turn between McDonald's and Pizza Hut." We had no idea where in town those might be, but found them with no difficulty. After the awful lunch, we decided to patronize Pizza Hut for dinner--and brought home half of it.

Our reason for going to Sidney was to search for McCown's Longspurs at Fox Lake Wildlife Management Area (state) 21 miles west of town, and that's what we did Tues. morning, June 12. The WMA is listed in the Montana Bird-finding Guide and also in a

new birding trail brochure on this part of the state. Both guides said to go to the town of Lambert and drive south through town. Then each one said a different thing to do. As it turned out, neither was correct! I could see on the map where Fox Lake was, and from a hilltop on one of our wrong roads, we could actually see it. Anyway, it turns out that the way to get there is to drive south through town until there is a road to the right that says it leads to a Bible camp. Turn on that road and go a short distance till you reach the entrance to the refuge. The refuge road is just a rough two-tracker, which would be impassable after a rain. There had been heavy rain a few days earlier, and the ruts from those who drove the road were sizeable. I would never have attempted it in our 2-wheel-drive truck. Anyway, it had dried up nicely, so we drove it a couple of miles. Rather, Jim drove it and I walked most of it with Toby.

The habitat really looked better than any we've seen for McCown's Longspurs. The grass on the hillside above the lake--where the road was, fortunately--was very stunted. I listened regularly with my microphone all along the road, but didn't hear what I wanted to. I did get Grasshopper, Savannah, Vesper, and Clay-colored sparrows, but no longspurs. Also got the flight treatment from an irate Marbled Godwit, whose nesting territory I had invaded. We also saw a female Sharp-tailed Grouse fly up from the grass just after we entered the refuge. We stopped and searched the grassy area where she had been for her nest, but without success.

It was almost noon when we got back to the trailer after doing some grocery shopping. We decided to leave, partly because of some creepy men in the decrepit trailer two spaces away--empty site between. We think they were probably just guys working on some temporary job in the area, but they were incredibly unfriendly--just stared at us when we gave a simple Hello.

After the mid-day heat of Monday, thunder clouds rolled in late in the day. There was even a tornado two counties (75 miles) north--pixs on TV. Thunder storms were severe in the two counties south of us for several hours during the evening, but we got almost nothing. It was obvious that Fox Lake got almost nothing, too, or we wouldn't have driven onto that road. However, Tuesday was totally overcast. No rain in the am, but intermittent drizzle in the afternoon.

Our destination was Theodore Roosevelt National Park, a 70 mile drive from Sidney. We were well over half way before we found a place to pull off the road to fix lunch--road was narrow with no shoulder. Then we found a roadside day-use recreation area with fishing lake, where I heated up last night's pizza.

T. Roosevelt NP has two units. The north unit is where we are. We've been here before and like it because it gets very few visitors. The south unit is right off the Interstate and folks probably figure they've seen the park if they see that. However, the two units are very different. The scenery in this one is much more spectacular, with sweeping views of the valley carved through colorful badlands by the Little Missouri River. The campground is in the riparian area next to the river and has lots of birds.

Because of the cloudy, drizzly weather, we did little else after we found a campsite around 3:00 p.m.

This morning, Wed., June 13, there was ground fog when we arose, but it soon burned off--but not before Jim got a few scenics from one of the viewpoints of bits of it lingering in the river bottom.

After breakfast we decided to drive the 10 miles to the end of the park road. Even before we got out of the campground, we encountered a small group of bison in the road and had to drive through them slowly. Toby was really shaken by the experience. He trembled strongly all over and whimpered. Whimpering is what he always does when he sees another dog and wants to play with it, but the trembling is what he does

when he thinks he's going to have a bath--only this was much stronger. Anyway, he calmed down as soon as we were past the animals. He's seen large mammals before, but normally not on both sides of the truck and right next to it.

There were almost no people driving the park road that early in the morning, but to our surprise the only ones were Phil and Judy Smith from Huntington Beach and two of their friends. We met them at one of the overlooks. They'd been farther east in North Dakota and had seen all the special sparrows, thanks to a guide they hired in the Steele area. They told me they would have taken my sparrow class if they'd known they were going to ND. They said they really didn't know what they were supposed to look for. Phil has been really active in the Bolsa Chica battles and has worked for various organizations associated with it--don't recall all the details. But we've known him for many years--and met his wife a few times.

I walked a long stretch of road with Toby and my tape recorder--not always a totally successful combination. Toby wants to root in the grassy shoulder and eat who knows what. If I pull him back onto the pavement, he whimpers. Neither makes for great recordings. But he doesn't do either all the time. Sometimes he behaves quite nicely and just stands there, giving me hope for the future.

I got some fairly nice recordings of Yellow-breasted Chat and Lazuli Bunting, although the breeze had gotten up a bit. Even a little breeze makes a lot of noise in a cottonwood tree. I played the two sounds back with Jim standing by with his camera--and the Lazuli Bunting posed beautifully on nice close twiggy-topped bushes with green grassland in the background--should make for beautiful photos. ([See Photo No. 5.](#)) The chat did fly up, but wouldn't come anywhere near.

This afternoon we both sat outside. Jim took a chance and set up his feeding log. Rule says you're not supposed to feed wild animals because "its dangerous." We figured they didn't mean little birds. A Spotted Towhee was the only regular customer, but about mid-afternoon, I actually saw the Ovenbird that I had been hearing in the brushy understory ever since we arrived yesterday. It was in the Rocky Mountain Juniper right over my head. Usually Ovenbirds are heard, but not seen. Jim decided he had to set up his water drip and see if the bird would come in. Within 15 minutes it was there. Unfortunately the flash scared it off, but he did get one picture [a so-so front view]. The bird came back again a few minutes later, but this time Toby scared it off. He saw a man with a dog passing by the trailer window and always barks at other dogs. The Ovenbird twiddled around in the trees and elsewhere on the ground in the open for a few more minutes, but never returned to the water drip. However, I probably had the best looks I've ever had at that bird--nice and close and behaving naturally. When in the juniper trees, it usually was on a fairly large horizontal limb, and several times I saw it walking, not hopping, along the limb. It has incredibly long legs, and also a long bill.

I could also hear, and occasionally see, Yellow Warbler, American Redstart, Red-eyed Vireo, White-breasted Nuthatch, American Robin, Chipping Sparrow, and in the late afternoon, Common Nighthawk overhead doing its wing "roar" as well as its "peent" call. Temperature was in the upper 70s with a slight breeze. Only a few mosquitos, but lots of cottonwood fluff that could be mistaken for a landing mosquito. I tried to read, but finally gave up and got out my embroidery. I can look at birds better while doing that, for I can look up whenever I pull a thread through. I lose my train of thought when I try to read and watch birds.

While writing up the next installment, my computer crashed. Fortunately I had saved the previous stuff on a diskette and could bring it up when I got home. For the rest of the trip I just jotted down brief reminders of what we had done each day, so the remainder of the log was composed from them after we got home.

Thursday, June 14, 2007
N. Unit, T. Roosevelt NP, ND



We decided to stay over one more night here, hoping Jim could get the Ovenbird to come in for a bath. It sang tantalizingly overhead, but never came down, so we might as well have left.

I had Jim take me over to the trailhead for the one-mile Nature Trail, but it was closed. They were spraying herbicide to get rid of invasive introduced plants. That was a disappointment, for I remember enjoying it last time I was there. Instead, I walked very slowly back to the campground through the picnic area, with lots of time spent sitting at various picnic tables watching for activity in the tall Eastern Cottonwoods. Red-headed and Hairy Woodpeckers were nesting and the most visible birds of interest, but the nests were all very high in the trees. Had I found a low one, I'd have called Jim over on the radio

[5.] Lazuli Bunting (male)

Theodore Roosevelt Nat. Park (North Unit), ND
June 12, 2007
Jim Gallagher, photographer

Friday, June 15, 2007
City RV Park, Stanley, ND

This morning we drove about 110 miles northeast to Stanley, a town of ca. 1700 people that is only about 20 miles south of Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge. We were happy to find the site farthest from the railroad tracks free. We'd stayed here on previous trip. The sites are E only, but water, dump, restrooms and showers are all available. They are on lawn, but back up to a dense row of trees and shrubs, on the other side of which is a golf course, so the variety of birds was interesting. The sites are widely separated, and no one ever parked right next to our site, so we really enjoyed our time in the town.

The RV park is right across the street from the beautiful old county courthouse. Occasionally I'd see Chimney Swifts circling around the dome; they were probably nesting in it.

We didn't do much the rest of the day, for Jim was having a relapse of the adverse reaction to that antibiotic. He finally decided to go to the clinic at the county hospital. They gave him a prescription for more of the same medicine he had had before, and did more tests. Unfortunately he couldn't get the prescription filled until Saturday, when the town pharmacy opened. (All they had was the IV version, which would have taken an hour to administer.) His previous prescription had said not to take the medicine with alcohol, but it didn't say he couldn't have a glass of wine as soon as he was done with it. Here he learned that he should have waited several days before drinking any wine. Anyway, he decided to play it safe and not drink any wine for the rest of the trip, a real deprivation for an Irishman like Jim, but he didn't want to chance a recurrence of the virulent diarrhea he'd had. (He celebrated our return home a month later with a glass of wine--no adverse effects.)

Saturday, June 16, 2007

Stanley, ND

This was a gorgeous cool, calm day. It would have been perfect for spending the morning at Lostwood NWR. Perfect days were hard to come by. Unfortunately, we had to wait until 9:00 for the pharmacy to open, and Jim had made arrangements for an electrician to come by and try to find out why the connection between our truck and trailer brakes was not working. We'd been doing all our braking with the truck brakes for quite a while--not a safe thing to have to do, although the Suburban has wonderful brakes. It was almost noon before the man came, but he soon found what the problem was--and it was not what Jim expected. Jim had had all new wiring done on the braking system just a few months before we left, so he didn't suspect that could be the problem, but it turned out that the guys who installed the wiring had placed one portion in a place where it rubbed against a piece of metal under the trailer, eventually shorting it out. Anyway, the electrician fixed it and we had no more trouble the rest of the trip. So the day was shot for birding, but was a nice one for sitting outdoors and looking at birds in the bushes behind the trailer. Among the more interesting species, all of which were most likely nesting, were Cedar Waxwing, "Yellow-shafted" Flicker, Chipping Sparrow, Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart, Downy Woodpecker, and Black-capped Chickadee. Several of the latter became regular customers at Jim's birdseed before we left.

Sunday, June 17, 2007

Stanley, ND

Today was the stormiest day of the entire trip. It dawned dark and blustery--and sometimes became even darker as the day progressed. For about an hour around 11:00 a.m. we had to turn the lights on in the trailer even though we were sitting right inside the windows. Intermittent downpour and lots of steady rain. Cold and windy. We stayed in the trailer all day, except for a short foray to the grocery store between squalls.

Monday, June 18, 2007

Stanley, ND

The inclement weather of the day before wasn't entirely over. It was still very windy: 30-40 mph with gusts to 50 in some places in the afternoon, according to weather radio. Drizzly. Despite this, we decided to go to Lostwood and bird from the truck on the tour road. Baird's Sparrows were singing in many places. As it turned out, I heard more that day than any other day we visited the refuge. Maybe they thought it was dawn all morning long because it was so dark. Jim photographed a couple of them from the truck. [Pictures must have been so awful that he threw them away, for I never saw them.]

Tuesday, June 19, 2007

City RV Park, Kenmare, ND

This morning dawned clear with little wind. We returned to Lostwood and had no sooner pulled into the parking area by the refuge headquarters, when Pat and Dick Cabe walked up. They were in the sparrow workshop and were doing a sparrow tour of North America for the Great Sparrow Search. Jan Wilson, who had also been in the workshop, was with them. I was surprised they knew each other--and it turned out they didn't until the night before at the campground in Kenmare. There they had struck up a conversation, compared hometowns (Huntington Beach, Long Beach), and birding goals. When it turned out that they all seemed to be pursuing sparrows and not much else, they discovered that they had all been in the sparrow workshop. So the Cabes invited Jan to go with them to Lostwood the next day.

Although there were fewer Baird's Sparrows singing, they were still easy to find. Finally I was able to do some recording and was especially pleased by a piece of tape that had Baird's and Clay-colored Sparrow plus Horned Lark's recitative and intermittent

songs all on the same tape.

We looked for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow in the place where we found it last time, but without success. Later we learned it was in a different pond this time.

After the morning at Lostwood, we went back to the trailer, ate lunch, hooked up, and drove to Kenmare. The city RV park there is just a bare, dusty parking lot--not nearly as nice as the one in Stanley, although it has full hookups. Lostwood is about equidistant between the two places.

Wednesday, June 20, 2007 **Roughrider RV Park, Minot, ND**

This morning we decided to explore Des Lacs NWR, which runs along a river valley north and south of Kenmare. After a visit to the headquarters for brochures, we took the road south of town because they told us it had the most marsh and grassland. The north section was more wooded. (Later from Roy Poucher, we learned the short stretch of marsh at the start of the drive north of Kenmare was better.) All too much of the south drive had the railroad tracks between the road and the wetlands. Anyway, we hadn't driven the entire road when the "Low Gasoline" signal came on in the truck, so we decided we'd better return to Kenmare for a fill-up.

Then we started on the tour road north. By then it had gotten pretty warm, so we just drove on past the marshy areas and came to a nice shady stretch of road that went through the riparian woodland with assorted coulees (wooded draws in the bluff side). I walked a stretch of the road with Toby for at least an hour, covering a mile or two, enjoying it thoroughly. Lots of birds singing, but nothing particularly remarkable. Too windy for recording anyway.

Unfortunately the main event of the day wasn't the birds. It was TICKS!. Although I stayed out of the bushes, I still got more of them on me than I can ever remember. Toby was an absolute mess, because he has to stick his nose in the grass beside the road. After we got back, I picked and picked, combed and brushed, then bathed him, brushed, combed, and picked some more. Ditto for myself, but I'm not quite as fuzzy as little Toby. Fortunately Kenmare has full hookups, so there was plenty of water for baths. Neither of us was bitten, fortunately. There were big black and medium-sized brown ticks. I think the big black ones are wood ticks and fairly harmless, although very repulsive. Don't know about the smaller ones. Jim, as driver, didn't think he got any, but for the rest of the day, he kept finding them on himself and on the couch near where he was sitting, so I think he was also infested. They just seem to fall out of the trees. [As I'm writing this up at home on July 19, I keep feeling as though ticks are crawling on me all over again. We had them off and on for the rest of our stay in ND--but never again that bad. Jim and I each got bitten several times, but I don't think Toby ever did. He's on Frontline, which probably helps.]

By the time lunch and tick-removal was finished it was well into the mid-afternoon. Since the RV park in Kenmare is so uninviting, we decided to try out another one a bit farther down the road. The city park in Carpio looked nice, but when we got there, we discovered it was full--most unusual, for these city campgrounds are usually quite empty. This one was listed in Trailer Life, however, and also takes reservations--things that do not apply to the others. We learn about most of the city park campgrounds from state tourist guides. Many plains states have them.

So we decided to drive on into Minot instead of back to Kenmare. We selected an EW site at the Roughrider RV Park, because they backed up to an oxbow pond. The EWS sites were pull-throughs out in the middle. All are more or less shady, but somewhat narrow. We had stayed at this RV park in 1994 when we attended an ABA Convention. Then the manager was the most disagreeable man one could imagine. (Later, we

discovered he was notorious all over town.) If we hadn't heard the park was under new management, we'd not have returned to the place. When I told this to the woman in the office (sister-in-law of owners), she said it had taken them several years to get regain the business that man lost. I think I wrote up the problems we had with him in my 1994 diary--don't recall what they were right now.

Thursday, June 21, 2007
City Park, Granville, ND

We had been planning to use Carpio as a base from which to explore Upper Souris NWR, but we recently learned that the tour road there is closed for reconstruction, so there is little one can see this year. So we just did some shopping at Wal-Mart, then headed out of town about 22 miles to the small town of Granville. It has a nice big city park on one edge of town with E hookups. Also has one water faucet near the campsites plus a dump station and water faucet on the opposite corner of the park. The sites are nice big grassy ones with shade possible if you back way in. No one was there when we arrived, so we selected site #1 at the far end of the line.

It was lunch time by the time we got situated, so we just sat around all afternoon. Around 9:00 p.m. we drove to the nearby Buffalo Lodge Lake Rd. area (written up in the ND bird-finding guide and one of my favorites from previous trips.) On my first trip here in 1994 I heard, but did not see, my life Yellow Rail. Now that area is much too grown up with cattails, etc., for Yellow Rails, but I tried anyway, using the usual method of rapidly clicking two quarters together: tick-tick tik-tik-tik etc. It's always beautiful to watch the sun set over a prairie marsh anyway.

Because of the late sunset in this far north area on the west edge of the time zone, it was 11:00 when we got back to the trailer, and there was still a glimmer of light on the western horizon. Still had to take a shower to get the insect repellent off.

Friday, June 22, 2007
City Park, Granville, ND

Today didn't start out very well, but turned out fine in the end. We decided to check out the Grassland Trail at Salyer NWR, which is pretty far from here. We got an early start and drove north to Upham (about 25 miles), stopped by the headquarters for literature. The office wasn't open yet, but these ND (and eastern MT) refuges all have their lobbies unlocked all the time. There they have racks of brochures, a sign-in book, and very nice restrooms, so we always try the doors.

Then we had to go another 15-20 miles farther north and west to the start of the trail. There we found a closed gate across the entry road and a big "No Entry" sign. This was hard to understand, for we had picked up the trail guide in the office and there had been no sign saying the trail was closed. (Incidentally a "trail" in the midwest usually means a two-track road open to vehicles.)

So we drove back to the headquarters, which by now was open. After going through a few underling employees who just stood there and said, "I don't know," when we inquired about the trail, I finally got one of them to go see if they could find someone who did know. Out came a very nice fellow, Greg Erickson, who may have been the manager, but I'm not sure. He was surprised the gate was closed, but said it was OK to open it and drive in. He said it had probably been closed by the man who runs cattle on the prairie (successors to the bison that are no longer there). Just to be sure everything was OK, he decided to precede us up there. So we followed him. Before we got there, he screeched to a halt (he drove pretty fast), and burst out of his truck. It turned out he had seen a Sandhill Crane, which he showed us off in the distance in a fallow field. He said breeders are pretty rare in the area (only 2 records on the refuge), but this was a loner. (Several days later, we heard a couple in the Granville area.)

It was 9:00 by the time we got on the Grassland Trail road--much later than we wanted to. By then it was quite breezy and getting hot (ended up 90_ in Minot per TV). I walked quite a bit of the prairie road, listening and looking in vain for Chestnut-collared Longspurs and Le Conte's Sparrows in appropriate habitat. I had had both there in 1994.

In the last pasture, which looked the best for the longspurs because it was the barest from cattle grazing, I took my tape recorder and wandered well out into the prairie. When I was about 100 ft from the truck, a Mallard female suddenly exploded from only three feet from my feet. I looked down and discovered her nest with a large number of eggs. I radioed Jim to come and photograph it, but he replied, "I can't right now. I just flushed up a sparrow from its nest and am trying to photograph it."

I took careful note of where the Mallard nest was--not easy in the uniformity of a prairie--and returned to the truck to find Jim photographing the "sparrow," which I told him was actually a female Bobolink, a rather sparrow-like bird. I suggested that maybe it had been that bird that he had flushed up. We soon discovered that to be the case. We looked at the nest and discovered several big, hungry gapes waiting for food. So we got back into the truck and pretty soon in came the parents to feed the chicks. Shooting from the truck window, Jim got his first decent pictures ever of a female Bobolink and improved greatly on the males he had. (See photos Nos. 6 and 7.) We both photographed the nest. Then he went out and photographed the Mallard nest. The female had not returned.



[6.] Bobolink (male)
Salyer National Wildlife Refuge, ND
June 22, 2007
Jim Gallagher, photographer



[7.] Bobolink (female)
Salyer National Wildlife Refuge, ND
June 22, 2007
Jim Gallagher, photographer

After that I resumed my longspur search across the prairie parallel to the road, but 100 yd out, listening for their song with my microphone. This was difficult with the steadily increasing wind. No luck, so we finally gave up. Jim paced me in the truck, as he often does on these pursuits.

The grassland Trail is only a few miles from the small town

of Newburg, which also has a city park with electrical hookups. Before returning to Granville, we checked it out to see if it was still as it had been. It was. Got back to the trailer around 1:00 p.m. and kept cool the rest of the day. Despite the heat, the breeze and the shade in the park made it pleasant to sit outdoors and read my book.

Saturday, June 20, 2007
Roughrider RV Park, Minot, ND

This morning I had Jim drive me to the far east end of Buffalo Lodge Lake Road, and I strapped on my tape recorder and walked most of it--back to sun, downhill, very pleasant. Jim paced me, stopping here and there beside likely spots to see if anything would pop up to be photographed.

My highlights:

Willetts dive-bombing me and screaming.

Upland Sandpipers behaving similarly. I got nice recordings of their alarm calls, but they also have a call that resembles a slow "wolf-whistle," which they seem to use in courtship. I kept hearing it at a distance, but couldn't get it closer.

Savannah Sparrows in the road everywhere. I got tired lifting my binoculars and discovering one more.

I was walking on the road from 6:45 till 9:15. By then it was getting pretty warm, and I was getting tired. So I had Jim come and pick me up. We decided to have me drive slowly along the road so we could look for birds for Jim to photograph on the fences and bushes.

We hadn't driven very far and were right in front of the only farmhouse on the road when Jim spotted a bird in the road ahead. Without even looking at it, I told him, "It's a Savannah Sparrow." But he insisted that I ought to look at it. When I saw its rich ochre coloration and streaky breast, I realized it was a Le Conte's Sparrow. He popped off a

couple of semi distant shots with his digital camera, and we went on our way, hoping for more. [When we got home and I asked to see those shots, it turned out he had deleted them.] I had thought I was hearing some off in the distance earlier, but hadn't been sure. This time I heard several more in the roadside ditches on the way back to Hwy 2. When we got there, we decided it was too early to go back to the trailer, and I was refreshed sitting down in the nice air-conditioned truck and was game for more windshield birding.

So we crossed Hwy 2 and continued south for several more miles. I heard Le Conte's in the ditch for the first quarter-mile after we crossed the road, too. (Later I told others about my find, but no one else could find them--and I couldn't either when I returned a week or so later. I think maybe the hot weather sent them elsewhere, seeking wetter ditches.)

A little farther down the road, there was windbreak of tall cottonwoods about 100 yards west of the road. A pair of Krider's Red-tailed Hawks apparently had a nest up there, for they were circling around and calling to one another. I recorded their screams from the spot most sheltered from the wind I could find, behind the truck with the two back doors open. (A few days later we returned to the spot when there was less wind, and I recorded them again.)

We got back to the trailer around 11:15, ate an early lunch, and hauled the trailer back to Minot. We had liked the spot we were in before and had reserved it for tonight, but when we got there, they had lost the reservation, the campground was nearly full, and we had to take a sunny spot. To top things off, the campground's voltage was low from the demand of the air-conditioners of all the RV's. We made sure they had our reservation for our next return there several days later.

Our reason for returning to Minot was to have dinner with Roy Poucher and most of the members of his first sparrow birding tour group. Most of the group had assembled in the special little dining room reserved for them when in trooped the remaining participants all decked out in identical T-shirts adorned with a wide assortment of sparrows. They had purchased them at the Kern Valley Birding Festival, but were more than appropriate for the occasion. After dinner (all-you-can-eat buffet), I gave them a brief introduction to North Dakota, its glacier-created potholes, its human history, etc. Then Roy discussed the plans for their day-trips. He had been getting all sorts of tips on where to go from local experts and shared a few places I wasn't aware of with me. We'll go to them on our own. The most interesting one is very close to Granville, from which we just came.

When we got back to the trailer, we found our neighbors, who were occupying 3/4 of the double-site, were still noisy and had their chairs set up as close as a foot from our trailer. Their noise continued until 11:00 pm. Even their toddler, who belonged in bed, was running around yelling.

Sunday, June 24, 2007 **City Park, Granville, ND**

Around 3:00 a.m. there was a rip-snorter of a thunder-storm, which lasted about 45 minutes. When we got up in the morning, there was no electricity in the trailer. We attributed it to the thunder-storm, but then we began to realize other people were running their air conditioners, etc. When Jim went out to the electric box, he discovered that the neighbors on the other side of us (not the noisy ones) had left early and turned off the circuit breaker for our electricity, as well as their own, when they left. (Some people think they have to flip the circuit breakers while hooking and unhooking, but we never do.)

We spent a lazy morning--pancakes, reading the paper, watching Sunday Morning on

TV, etc. I had no desire to explore the areas around the ponds, etc., because the tall grass was so wet from the rainstorm. (I had wandered around when I was there a few days before, so knew pretty much what was there.) Also the overcrowded campground was a big turn-off.

Around mid-morning, we drove the 22 miles back to Granville. We were disappointed to discover our favorite site, #1, was occupied. But no sooner had we settled into another site than the people left #1. We decided it was worth it to move, so we did. Even though I was pretty sure no one would come in, I dashed down there and plunked a chair in the site while we hooked up. This time we backed even farther into the site than we had before and were able to get even more shade. This necessitated using our extension cord, but we carry a long heavy-duty one for just such occasions.

It was so nice to be back in comfortable little Granville again. Even the railroad isn't very close. The town itself only has a few hundred people and no businesses to speak of, just a saloon. No grocery or other stores, a one-pump gas station that looks very iffy--don't know if they're even still pumping gas. No public telephone, so no Pocketmail (our email device). Our cellphone doesn't work anywhere here in ND; Jim bought it at 7-11 and the company obviously doesn't serve these northern states. It did work in Texas. Just lots of peace and quiet.

Monday, June 25, 2007 **City Park, Granville, ND**

This morning we couldn't wait to explore the places Roy had told us about only 7 miles southeast of Granville. It was extremely windy, but we went just the same. Anyone trying to visit these areas should obtain a Conservation PLOTS Guide--free from the state. (PLOTS = Public Lands Open To Sportsmen.) It was created to designate areas where hunting is permitted, but is equally useful for birders and is a wonderful road atlas to the entire state. The areas of interest are all on Map 20 of the book.

Directions: From Granville go south on US 2 to where it makes a right angle and heads west. Instead, go east on 57 St N, a very good graded gravel road with almost no traffic. (If coming from Minot, drive straight east, instead of making the bend northward just south of Granville.) Check your odometer and drive east 5 miles. Just past 7 Ave N (on road sign, but not in PLOTS map, which doesn't show names of secondary roads), the road descends slightly to a marsh with a fen (brushy wetland) just beyond it. This wetland is marked as a lake on the map, but no open water is visible. Some people found Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow in the area, but we never did. Also, it's supposed to be good for Le Conte's Sparrow, but apparently no one found any there this year. However, it did have lots of Upland Sandpipers, and just short of a mile east of 7 Ave N there was a pasture with nesting Chestnut-collared Longspurs. (We didn't discover these on June 25, but am including this for completeness.)

Although the mile containing the fen is probably the richest birding area, the entire road is wonderful for windshield birding. We drove it several times. Continue on east past the fen to a T at 1 Ave N, passing open fields, pothole ponds, bits of woodland, etc. Turn right onto 1 Ave N and go a little over a mile to 55 St N and turn left. For about 2 miles along this stretch of road there are fairly open pastures on both sides of the road with Chestnut-collared Longspurs. The road continues on a few miles farther to paved SR 14, but we didn't take it.

Instead of following the above directions, today we went east out of Granville on US 2 to 10 Ave N, then south to 57 St N. This gave us another look at the Red-tailed Hawks and an especially cooperative (for photos) Upland Sandpiper pair.

When we got to the fen, we discovered a birding group there of which we were aware. James Rising, David Beadle, and Ron Martin were leading an American Birding

Association Institute for Field Ornithology (IFO) sparrow workshop the same week. We exchanged information. I told them about my Le Conte's Sparrows of a few days earlier, which they couldn't find. They told me of the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows they had just heard right there, but I couldn't because of the ever-stronger wind. Rising and Beadle are the authors of two field guides on sparrows, which I had used in my workshop. Martin is an expert Minot birder and a co-author of the very nice North Dakota bird-finding guide, available free from the state's website and at various refuges and visitors centers.

After that we drove on to the two-mile stretch of pasture indicated above. Jim photographed male and female Chestnut-collared Longspurs on the fence wires, but it was hopeless to try to record them; by then it was blowing a gale. The morning was pretty well along by then, so we just went back to the trailer and enjoyed the relatively sheltered park for the rest of the day.

Tuesday, June 26, 2007 **City Park, Granville, ND**

This morning we drove the main tour road at Salyer NWR. Roy had recommended we do it backwards because the light was better. It's not a one-way drive, but finding the end of the route isn't easy. Directions: From the junction of 80 St N and SR 14 on the southeast corner of Upham, drive southeastward on SR 14 about 4 miles to 77 St N. (This is about 2 miles northwest of Bantry.) Turn east on 77 St N and follow the route in the tour guide leaflet you've previously obtained at the refuge headquarters. You'll know you're on the right track as you keep finding the back sides of the various numbered stops along the route.

The hot south wind of yesterday had become a cool, brisk breeze after a dry front came through during the night. Just the type of day for a brisk walk--but no good for recording. So I walked several miles of the tour road with Toby. It was a delightful walk through prairie, woodland, marsh, wet meadow, lake, etc. I saw a total of 50 species for the entire day. A few highlights: Mountain Bluebirds nesting in nest boxes on fenceposts, Great Crested Flycatcher and Eastern Wood-Pewee calling from the treetops in one of the wooded areas, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Sedge and (eastern) Marsh wrens singing not far from one another, handsome Ruddy Ducks displaying, Eared Grebes in breeding plumage with chicks.

When we returned to the trailer well after noon, we found a family of as many as five White-breasted Nuthatches had finally found Jim's feeding log and the Magic Meal (cornmeal & bacon fat) he had plastered into the knotholes in the trees. American Goldfinches were also present. The male goldfinches are very beautiful here--yellow areas totally yellow, not covered with gray patches like the ones most places, including home. (Often the birds don't finish molting out of dull non-breeding plumage before it's time to molt back into it--but not here.)

Wednesday, June 27, 2007 **Roughrider RV Park, Minot, ND**

Today was overcast and cold and more wind, so we didn't drive out to the fen again as we had planned. Instead Jim photographed the nuthatches and goldfinches some more, this time with flash. Then we drove back to Minot for another dinner with Roy's tour.

When we got there, we discovered that the kitchen faucet had been leaking down into the cupboards below it and there was water everywhere. It had even run out onto the rugs and carpeting. We had to take a bunch of stuff out of the cupboards and spread it out all over the trailer to dry. The place was a mess. Since it was so cold, I turned on our little electric heater to aid the process.

That evening there was a large group of Roy's tour people. Some of the people from the first party were still there, and the new party was larger than the first one had been. There must have been 20-25 people in all. Beadle, Rising, and Martin were eating in the same restaurant and came in briefly to be introduced. They seemed impressed/speechless with the size of our group--all these Californians here just to study sparrows! My students asked several very good questions. I was proud of them.

From here on, I got lax and didn't even take notes on the day's activities, so the rest is from memory several weeks later. I used my calendar plus my field notes and sound recording dates from my tapes.

Thursday, June 28, 2007

City Campground, Stanley, ND

This morning we did some shopping--especially to get a new faucet for the kitchen sink. The old one had been dripping badly anyway. Then Jim installed it and we put all the stuff back in the cupboards. This took most of the morning. I had agreed to accompany Roy's tour group to Lostwood NWR tomorrow, so we drove back to Stanley and found our favorite site--farthest from the railroad tracks--free. Jim spent the rest of the day photographing chickadees next to the trailer.

Friday, June 29, 2007

City Campground, Stanley, ND

We joined Roy's tour group for the morning and early afternoon. We spent a lot of time hanging around the pond near the headquarters, because it had a pair of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows. I could hear them calling above the wind, but only using my microphone. At the end of the morning we returned there and part of the group got a good look at one, but the rest, including me, were still in the restroom. More hanging around and more tape-playing produced nothing. The location is no good for photos--pond much too far from the road. The pond where we found them last time was much better.

The highlight of the day for me was being with everyone when they found and got good looks at the Baird's Sparrow. Once I peeked through Roy's scope and was privileged to see Baird's, Clay-colored, and Vesper sparrows all in the field at once, with Savannah just out of view. Others were seeing them, too. Sprague's Pipits were heard from time to time.

[After we got home and Jim was examining his slides, he brought one to me and asked, "What sparrow is this?" I was overjoyed to be able to tell him, "It's not a sparrow. It's a Sprague's Pipit." That was the main bird I had wanted to get on this trip. He had photographed it when I was far away from him and thought nothing about it at the time. I supposed he dismissed it as another Savannah. There was only one good shot, plus one fuzzy one. I wish I could have seen it, for all the ones I've ever seen have been singing specks high in the sky. (See Photo No. 8.)



[8.] Sprague's Pipit

Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge, ND
June 29, 2007

Jim Gallagher, photographer

Saturday, June 30, 2007

City Campground, Stanley, ND

We returned to Lostwood and spent the morning, but found little of note. I tried to walk

the hiking trail, actually a road used by park employees. It was quite muddy and totally icky with cattle droppings. When I crested the first hill, I discovered why. A herd of at least 100 cattle was all over the road. I didn't want to try to walk around them on the muddy prairie, and I certainly didn't want to walk through them.

I failed again to see the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow at the pond.

Sunday, July 1, 2007

City Campground, Newburg, ND

Several days earlier we had made arrangements with Donelda Warhurst to meet her in Newburg after she finished with Roy's tour. She has a trailer, too, and is also an avid photographer and sound recordist, so we planned a few days together. (She's been creating a weblog, too, including in it some of her photos. Address:

<http://donelda.blogspot.com>) After a leisurely morning watching TV and having our weekly pancakes, we drove over there and discovered Donelda had arrived there the night before. We had thought she wouldn't come until today.

Monday, July 2, 2007

City Campground, Newburg, ND

With Roy's tour Donelda had seen Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows at stop #5 on the main tour route at Salyer NWR. I had thought we'd do the grassland trail, which is very close to Newburg, but this information changed our plans.

Stop #5 is located where the marsh is transitioning to wet prairie. Donelda played her tape and up popped one of the sparrows, giving me a good view and Donelda a few more photos, but Jim just couldn't find it in time, and it never came up again. He still lacks any very good photos of that bird. Jim and Donelda tried a long time to bring out a bird. There were lots of them audible along a couple hundred yards of roadside.

Meanwhile I wandered off to do some recording on my own, not wanting to hear her tape or their conversation. I was lucky enough to hear a Swamp Sparrow, which is pretty uncommon here at the northwestern edge of its range. I played it back once to be sure my ID was correct, then called Jim and Donelda on the radio to come. They did, and the bird proved to be an extremely cooperative subject for photos, as well as sounds. Donelda was thrilled, Jim less so, for he already has good photos of that bird [but none better than these].

Tuesday, July 3, 2007

City Park, Granville, ND

We returned even earlier in the morning to the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow spot, but were unable to lure any birds out for photos. So we went back to Newburg, hooked up our trailers and hauled them down to Granville.

Donelda and I drove over to Buffalo Lodge Lake Rd. around 9:00 p.m. and spent an hour or so. I wanted to show her the area. I did a little recording, but got nothing special.

Wednesday, July 4, 2007

Granville, ND

All three of us spent the morning on Buffalo Lodge Lake Rd. Donelda spent a lot of time playing Le Conte's Sparrow recordings, but got no definitive replies. She recorded some distant iffy sounds, but when she plotted sonograms, they were still iffy. (I can't do sonograms because my computer is down, and she can't make sonograms from my analog recordings. She records digitally.)

I wandered off on my own to escape her canned Le Conte's, hoping to get the Upland

Sandpiper "wolf-whistle" loud and clear, but just got the alarm trill. I discovered that the trill is very similar to the trill of the Western Meadowlark. I wonder if there's an ecological reason for the sounds of these two unrelated prairie birds to be so much alike.

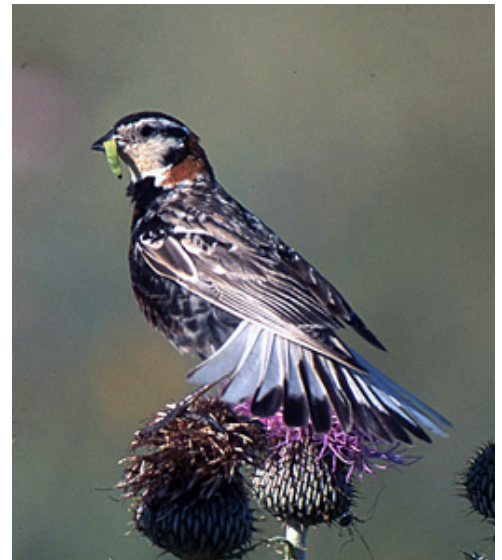
Jim and I spent the rest of the day in the campground, but Donelda drove to the fen area in the late afternoon and discovered a Chestnut-collared Longspur pair with a nest just a few feet inside a fenced-in pasture. She took quite a few pictures.

In the evening several groups of townspeople came to the park and the surrounding small hill to set off their fireworks. Of course, they had to wait until dark, which around here is 11:00. So we had to listen to loud booms and whistles for over an hour, Toby paid no attention to the noise, but Hannah, Donelda's greyhound, was a nervous wreck. She cowered, trembled, whimpered, tried to crawl under the mattress, you name it. Donelda knows that if she had opened the door, Hannah would have been off running as far as she could. To make matters worse, we heard fireworks every evening for a week. It seems that some people have to shoot them off every night just for the devilment of it.

Thursday, July 5, 2007 Granville, ND

This morning we drove immediately to Donelda's Chestnut-collared Longspur spot. I recorded a few sounds, then walked off on my own. Jim and Donelda stood by that fence for most of the morning. The adults feeding young soon ignored their presence. They both got lots of pictures. [They're wonderful. [See photo No. 9.](#)] Some are on the fence, but the ones I like best are on a beautiful Wavy-leaf Thistle plant covered with flowers.]

Since sound-recording and photography don't mix very well, I walked back west along the road for a mile or so, recording whatever came along. It was sort of windy, so I tried getting down into the dry roadside ditch, which helped somewhat. I finally got some fairly close wolf-whistles. [I couldn't rate any better than A- because of the wind and/or the fact that other birds were vocalizing at the same time.] I also deliberately tried for mixtures of prairie, fen, and marsh birds. Among the birds recorded were Grasshopper, Savannah, and Clay-colored sparrow; Red-winged Blackbird; Brown-headed Cowbird; Killdeer; Black Tern; Horned Lark; Common Yellowthroat; Sedge and Marsh wrens; Willow Flycatcher; Wilson's Snipe; Ring-necked Pheasant; and Sora. By mid-morning the wind was pretty strong, so the recordings were so-so.



[9.] Chestnut-collared Longspur (male)

Granville, ND

July 5, 2007

Jim Gallagher, photographer

This seemed like a good day to leave Toby in the air-conditioned trailer and drive into Minot for the oil change the truck had been demanding for several hundred miles. We hoped for a Jiffy Lube or similar place, but drove all the main business streets in town without finding one. We ended up at the Chevy dealership, where they had a "quick-lube" area. There were two cars ahead of us in line, and each one took a half-hour to

be lubed and checked over, so we were there an hour and a half. Fortunately there was a nice cool breeze and I'd brought along a magazine. It was around 2:00 when we got through, so we decided to pig-out again at the buffet we'd visited with Roy's first group. Afterwards we bought groceries and gas, which are not available in Granville. Needless to say, we skipped supper.

Friday, July 6, 2007
Granville, ND

We arrived at the fen area at 6:30, hoping for a little time before the wind got up, but even then there was some breeze. I spent the morning recording just as I had the day before, getting more sounds similar to those.

Once I heard a rapid series of notes from high in the sky. At first I thought it might be a funny-sounding Upland Sandpiper, but when I looked up, there was a Northern Harrier being harassed by four Red-winged Blackbirds. I was pretty sure the blackbirds weren't making the sound, although they have quite a repertoire. They eventually flew much lower and I was able to watch the harrier's beak and see that it opened in time to the sound. I was also able to get a better recording. These agitated calls continued for several minutes, and I recorded them most of the time, hoping for a lull in the wind. [I could rate no portion of it better than A-, mainly because the bird wasn't doing a solo. The Red-wings' "churks" plus the sounds of all the other birds were clearly audible. The wind wasn't too bad.]

I also improved on my Upland Sandpiper wolf-whistle and was actually able to rate one A. Still need an A+. Meanwhile, Jim was standing again by the Chestnut-collared Longspur nest, this time being more selective of his photos. He wanted the ultimate picture of the male with his tail flared, showing the black inverted T on a white background. [Photos were very good.]

Later in the morning we drove about 5 miles east of the fen to a small woodland, hoping to get out of the wind. Big mistake! The least bit of stir in cottonwoods sets up a tremendous rattle. Least Flycatcher, Baltimore Oriole, Northern Flicker were present, but none of the recordings was worth much.

In the evening Donelda and I drove back there again. (Jim likes to be in bed by 9:00, so stayed behind.) We hoped for good recording conditions after the breeze died down and especially wanted to get a close solo Sora whinny after the other birds had gone to bed. Unfortunately a crop-spraying airplane had also waited for the breeze to die down. We hadn't been there more than 10 minutes when it was up flying back and forth over a nearby field.

So we drove several miles east along the road to where there was overgrazed pasture on one side and a recently harvested hay field on the other. There I got some nice Western Meadowlark sounds--song, "churk," trill.

We returned to the marsh/fen about an hour later (maybe 10:00) and found the airplane had finished. There I finally got a good Sora [rated A]. Other species were still singing, but I think I got one whinny that may be separable if I start and stop the tape at just the right place.

Saturday, July 7, 2007
Granville, ND

This morning I spent a little time trying to improve on my Chestnut-collared Longspur sounds--with no cameras clicking. Got fairly good perched and flight songs and rattles, but the breeze was up by the time I got there.

Since we'd pretty well done all we could photographing and recording the birds,

Donelda and I decided to photograph the many prairie wildflowers that were in the fen area and on the prairie nearby. She's thinking of doing an embroidery with lots of massed wildflowers and a bird, perhaps one of her longspur photos. My list of flowers:

Wild Lily, *Lilium philadelphicum*
White Camas, *Zigadenus elegans*
Harebell or Bluebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*
Meadow Anemone, *Anemone canadensis*
Common Milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*
Common Sunflower, *Helianthus annuus*
Wavy-leaf Thistle, *Cirsium undulatum*
Unknown 3-to-4-ft tall plant resembling dandelion
Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea angustifolia* (my favorite)
Purple Prairieclover, *Petalostemum purpureum* or *Dalea purpurea* (depending on book)
Prairie Coneflower, *Ratibida columnifera* (w/ mating insects on it) [When I looked at Jim's slides, I discovered he got a beautiful picture of one with a Clouded Sulphur butterfly on it.]

[Most of my flower pictures came out very well, despite the breeze. Most of the time I was down in the roadside ditch and somewhat protected. But I also waited for a brief lull in the air movement before snapping each image.]

Most of the last several days the weather was pleasant in the morning, but the afternoons got well up into the 80s. Can't remember if it ever surpassed 90.

Sunday, July 8, 2007

Butte View City Park Campground, Bowman, ND

Today was a day of driving. We headed for the southwesternmost county in North Dakota. Weather was overcast with intermittent rain. This area is the only place in the state where McCown's Longspurs are found. I hadn't gone down there earlier, because my failure to find them not far away in Montana had discouraged me from trying there. Besides, it's pretty far even from T. Roosevelt NP, North Unit, the closest we had been to the area. However, Donelda had checked the area out on her way to Minot and found that the birds were there. She got a really nice flight shot of one male--on her web site. So we decided to make it the first stop on our drive home. Bowman is the closest place to the location with a campground. It has a large number of sites with electricity. Water and dump station are centrally located. Restrooms are present, but Jim said the showers were pretty strange--dumped water down on the top of your head. Very few trees, but since the place was almost empty, we found a shady site.

Monday, July 9, 2007

KOA, Miles City, MT

This morning we followed the directions in the North Dakota bird-finding guide to Rhame Prairie. To be sure I understood the directions, I marked the route out in my PLOTS Guide map first. Directions were easy to follow, Roads were very good, both paved and gravel. One stretch that was marked gravel on the maps turned out to be paved.

We got there at 6:30 a.m. Directions said to check in with the nearby farmhouse, because the farmer might be running cattle on the land. (It's school land and open to the public, but they rent grazing rights.) We drove into his farmyard, but hesitated to knock on the door so early in the morning. No one came out, so we drove the quarter-mile to the two-track trail into the prairie. We had no sooner gotten out of the car when the farmer drove up. He said there would have been no problem with us knocking on his door that early. They were up. (We could have telephoned--number was in the bird guide--but we had no access to a phone.)

He had created a little "guest-book" and we looked over the names on it and could see that the only visitors there this year were people in Roy's groups and in the IFO group, which included a two-day jaunt down there in their regular schedule. An amazing number of people on Roy's tour had gone down there either before or after their tour days.

We parked just off the road in the edge of the pasture, then loaded up our gear and hiked due east to the top of the highest hill. It turned out to be at least a quarter-mile away, but hadn't looked nearly that far from the truck. When we got to the top, the truck was amazingly tiny off in the distance.

McCown's Longspurs prefer the least amount of vegetation of any prairie sparrow, and the hilltop seemed to be some sort of volcanic soil inhospitable to many plants. In fact, the entire area looked volcanic, with apparent cinder cones here and there--but I'm not a geologist. The wind was blowing a gale, since a cold front had come through the night before--not a good day to be chasing longspurs, or much of anything else. But we were getting antsy to be on our way home, so we gave it a good try.

I had brought along Stokes tape of the bird and played it from the top of the hill, hoping it could be heard above the gale. Within a few seconds a male McCown's flew right past my head dropped down far away. We stayed in the area for about a half-hour, occasionally playing the tape and occasionally seeing both the male and female. Jim popped off a few shots. Will have to see if any of them are any good. I made some recordings--just for the record--but they'll not be much good because of that wind. The microphone frequently cut out completely, as it is designed to do if a noise is too loud. [The sounds ranged in quality from B to D, always with a loud wind roar, but without other bird sounds intruding.]

Other species in the area included Chestnut-collared Longspur (in the taller grasses at the base of the hill), Horned Lark (everywhere), Pronghorn, Prairie-Dog, and a Golden Eagle on a utility pole en route. This was our only ND Golden Eagle, but was present in this area because there were cliffs and badlands, not just rolling prairie. Oh yes, there were also Deer Flies, which were out and hungry for blood despite the wind.

It was only 11:00 when we got back to Bowman, so we decided to eat a quick lunch and get a start on our long drive west. We ended up in a very nice KOA in Miles City--a beautiful shady setting with gigantic Eastern Cottonwoods. The afternoon was even windier than the morning, and we had a quick thunderstorm, too. If the weather had been better, I'd have explored it a bit on foot looking for birds, but the wind was blowing the sand and dust around and it was really unpleasant.

Tuesday, July 10, 2007

Red Cliff USFS Campground between Bozeman and West Yellowstone, MT

Today was a a long day of driving. We were ready to go home. However, we didn't drive quite as far as I had intended. I knew I didn't want to get home on Friday, with all its traffic, so we had a day to spare. When we entered the beautiful canyon of the Gallatin River south of Bozeman and started seeing campgrounds, we decided that would be a lovely end to our sightseeing and a nice contrast to the open prairies. I looked in the Trailer Life Guide and discovered the Red Cliff Forest Service campground even had a lot of sites with electrical hookups. So we headed for that, getting there around 2:00 p.m. Although there were a lot of campers there, we found a nice site among the Douglas-Firs. (Some of the sites are reservable and others are first-come-first-served. The one we took was reserved for the upcoming weekend, but we only planned to stay one night. There were some nice unreservable sites available, too.)

We'd been birding pretty hard for many days, so it was nice to just relax in the cool 7000-ft forested canyon.

Wednesday, July 11, 2007

Buffalo Run RV Park, Island Park, ID

This morning we slept in a bit, ate a leisurely breakfast. Then I took Toby and walked to the far end of the campground and back, birding all the way. I didn't try to do any recording because of the river noise and the sounds of other campers. The loop we were in--with E hookups--was nearly full, but the other loop--no hookups--was nearly empty. It, however, was much more open, but still nice.

I was puzzled by some Empidonax flycatchers. I'm pretty sure I had Hammond's, and maybe also Cordilleran. For a while I thought I had Least, too, but finally decided not to write it down. It was hard to hear and see the birds, which were high in the Douglas-Firs next to the noisy river.

A pair of Spotted Sandpipers seemed to be nesting next to the river in the grasses. "Pink-sided" Juncos, Chipping Sparrows, Audubon's Warblers, Pine Siskins were common, and I could hear and occasionally see Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Lincoln's Sparrow, Western Tanager. Nothing especially unusual, but fun for a change.

We ate lunch there, then headed down the road to the Island Park area--not more than a two hour drive. I didn't want to go any farther south, for it had really turned hot in the Snake River Valley by then. The place where we stayed was almost full, and we were parked in the blazing sun, so had to close all the blinds and run the A/C for hours until it cooled off in the evening. The RV park is small and backs up to a marshy, willowy area. Saw/heard Yellow Warbler, Song Sparrow, Lazuli Bunting, Tree Swallow, etc., after it got cool enough to venture out.

Thursday, July 12, 2007

Ryndon RV Park, Exit 314, 11 miles east of Elko, NV

Another long day of driving brought us through the hot Snake River Valley, south through Jackpot, NV, to I-80, then west to the Elko area. Since this area is 7000 ft high, I thought it might not be too hot. I checked out the RV parks in Elko, and they sounded like parking lots next to casinos. Then I spotted the Ryndon RV Park outside town. It didn't have as high ratings, but did have two important words regarding the sites: "some shaded." Our A/C works much better in the shade, so we headed there.

The park had very few customers, and a lot of the sites were shady. Several of them were blocked off because the electricity wasn't working. We picked a nice-looking one, but soon discovered its electricity wasn't working very well either, so we hooked into the box on the other side and it was OK, though the voltage was a little low. (We were careful to turn off the A/C whenever we wanted to use the microwave oven.) The electrical boxes were ancient, so it wasn't surprising that they were having problems. The place was under new ownership. I hope they have enough funds to completely redo the underground wiring--not just install new boxes.

Birds present included Western Kingbird, Lark Sparrow, and Common Nighthawk. One of these was roosting in the tree right next to our site. Then it flew around a while and ended on the wooden fence not far away--perched longitudinally as always. It allowed Jim to get as close as he wanted for photos. But when he tried to get flight shots later in the day, the birds were just too quick for him as they zipped in and out around the trees.

Despite the electrical problems--and also the superfluity of security lights--we'd stay in this park again. Although it was right next to the freeway, the noise didn't really bother us, and it cooled off nicely at night.

Friday, July 13, 2007

Mammoth Lakes RV Park, Mammoth Lakes, CA

Our goal today was Lee Vining, another high-elevation stop, but when we got there, the campground was full. It's right at the west end of Tioga Pass, so I wasn't completely surprised.

So we headed on south to Mammoth Lakes RV Park. I've never liked the park very well, but at least it promised to be high and cool. It was almost full, but we did get a site--jammed between two enormous rigs bristling with slide-outs and right across a narrow strip of road from another row of equally enormous rigs. Except for a bit of chaparral visible out the rear window, all we could see from the trailer was other RV's. Ugh. The sites are as close as they can cram them together, and the borders of the sites are just lines on a big asphalt parking lot. Backing our trailer into the site was not easy, and the man in the site next to ours had to move his truck while we did it. The sites weren't level and Jim didn't want to unhook, since we were leaving early in the morning. So we backed onto three boards--two on one side and one on the other--and put up with not being quite level.

Mammoth Lakes is usually not too busy in July, but they were having a big jazz festival in the community room of the RV park, hence the crowd. Anyway we got a site and a nice cool night's sleep. The other campers were very considerate and quiet. The only problem was that Toby wanted to bark at the dogs in the rigs on both sides of us--and one of the neighbor dogs was equally yappy. We had to put Toby in his kennel a good bit of the time to keep him quiet. The neighbors did the same thing; their kennel was outside, and they put a towel over it to keep their beagle from seeing other dogs and barking. The two Bedingtons on the other side totally ignored Toby's yaps.

Saturday, July 14, 2007

Home

We snuck out of the RV park as quietly as possible at 6:30. Bought gas in Bishop--cheaper than at home, we discovered. Stopped in Kramer Junction for lunch. I stayed in the truck with the A/C running while Jim went across the street to a Burger King for hamburgers. It must have taken 15 minutes (not exactly fast-food), and when he got back, he discovered the gas gauge was on empty and the warning light was on. We really panicked, for we were sure we weren't out of gas. He checked for leaks and didn't find one--or smell one. So we gulped down half of our oversized hamburgers, hoping not to exhaust the gasoline completely, then dashed around the corner to the Arco Station. We were much relieved to have the gas gauge go back to normal as soon as a small amount of cool gasoline entered the tank. We decided that idling the truck so long had just overheated the entire gauge system. (My brother told us later that he had had that experience, too.)

We got home around mid-afternoon. Traffic was OK until the Riverside/Corona area, then very slow most of the way after that.

webmaster's note: Some of you may wish to email Sylvia with questions or comments about this trip diary. Here is her email address: [Sylvia Gallagher](mailto:Sylvia.Gallagher@jasrgallagher@yahoo.com)
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