

North Through the Prairies

With Sylvia, Jim and Charlie Gallagher

Authors: mostly Sylvia, perhaps a little by Jim and probably nothing from Charlie

2nd Installment: APRIL 28 - May 25, 2005

Thurs., April 28, 2005

Osceola RV Park, Osceola, MO

No entry.

4:15 pm, Fri., April 29, 2005

Osceola RV Park, Osceola, MO

. . . . Two cold, cloudy days with rain off and on, mostly off this time. Despite the forecast, we've had very little, but the dark skies and the threat kept us close to the trailer. High temp. yesterday was in the low 50's, and we just checked our little outdoor thermometer and it read 44'. Brrr!

. . . . This gave us some time to get caught up on the necessities of everyday life. Yesterday I spent the morning in the none-too-clean local coin laundry. The machines worked well, though--and the price was a figure I haven't encountered in at least a decade. I used five washers and five driers and only paid \$6.50 to get everything dry. Most driers say 25¢ to dry, but you have to put in quarter after quarter to get the clothes dry. These ran long enough on one quarter to dry everything except Jim's jeans. By the time I got everything folded and the bed made (always a major hassle in the trailer), the morning was over.

. . . . This morning I bathed Charlie and defrosted the refrigerator, then picked out colors for another embroidered bird.

. . . . After lunch I decided to take a walk around the campground and down to the arm of the reservoir that's not far away. American Goldfinches are here by the hundreds and twittering away in the tops of all the trees like House Sparrows going to roost. I've never before encountered so many in one place. I wonder if they're staging to move north as soon as the weather warms up. Still no warblers except Myrtle. Other species also pretty ordinary.

. . . . Jim spent all the time in a fruitless attempt to get his computer to obtain his e-mail using Wi-Fi. It was definitely functioning, for he got some communications from it, but despite hours and hours of work, he just couldn't his computer to use it. Finally he decided to reinstall his e-mail program, and that was a BIG MISTAKE, for reasons I don't quite understand, and I don't think he does either. He'd like to call consumer support, but the cell phone service

is very erratic--goes on and off every few seconds. It took many tries before we could send our PocketMail messages over it. (We tried to send PocketMail over the local pay-phones, but they're the kind we encounter occasionally that won't let you dial an 800 number, and that's how we hook up to PocketMail.) When we leave here, I think we'll try to find a commercial RV Park that has a computer room where you can hook up to a phone line. Then Jim will try to get things working again. We may try Independence, MO, and also visit the Truman Library.

. . . . I left a few things out of my last installment on our scouting trip to Taberville Prairie. There were also more lovely wildflowers, which I photographed and identified yesterday afternoon. Several were easy for they were in the same genera as species I'm familiar with in the west. New to my list are:

. . . . Common Cinquefoil (*Potentilla simplex*)

. . . . Shooting Star (*Dodecatheon meadia*) - some pink, some white

. . . . Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica*)

. . . . Bird's Foot Violet (*Viola pedata*)

I also got a shot of a huge bumblebee nectaring on the Wood Betony, which was as abundant here as it was in Prairie State Park.

. . . . I paid the penalty for kneeling down and brushing against foliage--ticks! Enormous ticks! (I guess they're better than the little deer ticks, but they're certainly repulsive.) I picked two off myself as we drove back to the trailer.

When I took my jacket off, there were 8 or 10 crawling around on the inside of it, but none down by my pantslegs. I'll have to be careful when we return there tomorrow.

. . . . I also should have mentioned that, in addition to probably finding the Greater Prairie-Chicken lek, I heard Henslow's Sparrows. I couldn't pish any up, and Jim couldn't lure them out with the tape I made for him from the Stokes recordings. Will try for them tomorrow with a tape of their own music. I should be able to record them. I didn't try last time because of the wind.

. . . . We plan to get up early tomorrow and get to the prairie before the chickens get up.

3:15 pm, Sat., April 30, 2005

Osceola RV Park, Osceola, MO

. . . . Finally, a clear, calm day--although cold: early am temp. was 38' and it's only 59' right now. "Calm" in the midwest means winds under 15 mph, but even these have been intermittent.

. . . . Anticipating the clearing based on the weather forecast, we arose at 4:00 am, hoping to get out to the Taberville Prairie before it got light. We arrived at 5:30, but unfortunately it was starting to get light then. (Sunrise was around 6:20.)

. . . . We were thrilled to have our scouting confirmed. We had indeed figured out where the lek was. The birds were hard at it. Even from our truck, which was around 200 yd away, we could hear their strange hollow three-note (do do re) calls. These were punctuated with chicken-like cackles, sounding like hysterical laughter. We decided to approach them as closely as we could so I could get some recordings and so Jim could determine exactly which portion of the

large mowed hilltop they were using. Hilltop is actually a poor word, for the prairie is only gently rolling in this area. However, they were just over the top of the summit from the approach road we walked. (Driving access was blocked by a locked gate, but foot traffic was OK.) As we stood there, we could see their occasional jump-ups silhouetted against the bright orange of the dawn sky. I walked around to about a 90' angle from the sun so the wind would be behind me, not across my microphone, and recorded them for a long time.

. . . . Jim had not brought his camera at first, but then went back for it, just in case. He approached them from the other side and pressed his luck a bit too much. Eight of them flew off, including one that was noticeably smaller than all the rest. It had to be a female. That was good news, for we had been told the females usually quit coming to the lek by the end of April. Not all of them flew, for we could still hear sounds and see at least two birds jumping up, but we figured Jim had no chance for pictures today, so we decided to concentrate on the Henslow's Sparrows.

. . . . They were really thick all over the prairie around the parking area and along the road to the lek. They were also along another road that went off at a right angle to the lek, but when it descended into a little depression, they were not there, as I discovered much later in the morning. I heard them singing even in the extremely dim dawn light when we first arrived. What they were saying is termed a song because it functions as one--to proclaim a territory and attract a mate. Its structure would make you think it was only a call, though. It's a rapid, high, scratchy "tsi-lik" or "tsi-tsi-lik." Territories couldn't have been any larger than half of our city lot at home, for the sounds were coming from all around no matter where I stood.

. . . . Jim could not hear them, so I tried to help him find one to photograph. It didn't take long, and it allowed him to stalk it. He said he got some really nice close-up shots. Playing the tape, which I took partly from Stokes and partly from Thayer's CD-ROM, was unsuccessful. I thought it was because the speaker he was using was not reproducing the high frequencies, but when I recorded one and played it back through my really good Sony TCM-5000EV speaker, they didn't pop up either. However, stalking seemed to work quite well shortly after sunrise. An hour or two later (we lost track of the time, we were so engrossed in what we were doing) I seldom saw any up. When they were up, they perched on last year's bent-over grass stems, seldom on the more substantial shrubs that dotted the prairie. These grass-stems, when upright, are up to six feet tall.

. . . . There are very few widespread North American sparrows that Jim has not photographed, and getting Henslow's was a major goal of the trip, so I was thrilled at his success. It was a life bird for him, and he doesn't count a bird unless he gets a picture.

. . . . After we had finished working with the Henslow's Sparrows, we were suddenly aware that there were again a lot of Prairie-Chicken sounds emanating from the nearby lek. They had obviously returned to resume displaying while our backs were turned. Jim tried once more to stalk them--a desperation move, for they flew off again. Much later when we were far from the lek, we could hear them at it again off in the distance. Their display drive is definitely still strong. (According to Birds of North America, they prefer cold, calm mornings, so that may be why they are so active this late in the season.)

. . . . Near the truck I heard a Field Sparrow singing from one of the shrubs that was growing along the fence that

separates the preserve from the nearby farmland. I recorded him and played the song back so Jim could get pictures. To our amazement, instead of doing the fly-by's or perching at a respectful distance, this bird approached through the grass until it was only a foot from our toes. We might as well have been trees, for we certainly didn't frighten him. He would hop around, looking for the intruder, singing all the time, then gradually work his way farther and farther away, sometimes hopping up on a nice perch to look around and sing some more. This happened twice--once at Jim's feet and once at mine. What a thrill to see that intrepid mite at such close range. Jim shot a roll or two of him on various perches, sometimes on shrubs, sometimes on the barbed-wire fence. I recorded his song from extremely close range, which was good, for by then there were all sorts of other sounds, especially cattle.

.... Jim has photographed Field Sparrows before, but these are probably better than any others. Usually they don't allow very close approach.

.... By then we had been on our feet burdened with gear for at least four hours--we lost track of the time, so can't say for sure. Sitting down seemed pretty appealing. So we decided to use the truck as a moving blind and see what we could find along the roadsides. As we were driving the one-mile spur-road from the parking lot back to the highway, we found a cooperative White-crowned Sparrow (eastern leucophrys) in the roadside shrubs and brushpiles. Jim "bagged" it on the road in front of the truck. A little farther along, there were some small puddles from the recent rain. To our amazement, a Solitary Sandpiper was working them. Jim got distant shots of it.

.... Then we drove to the little-travelled dirt road that borders the east side of the preserve and drove it slowly. There Jim succeeded in getting excellent close-up shots of an Eastern Phoebe and an Eastern Kingbird. At one point I heard a song I couldn't identify, but by the time I had my tape recorder out it had quieted down. It was one of those complicated jumbles of notes that are so hard to distinguish.

.... Tomorrow we're going to try again for the Prairie-Chickens, but this time we'll get there an hour earlier than we did today--that means getting up at 3:00 am. Jim plans to envelope himself in a hunter's camouflage cape (coarse netting with strips of camouflage fabric attached) and fine camouflage netting, take a chair so he'll have a low profile, and hope the birds think he is just a new, slightly oversized shrub. Having watched their action this morning, he knows where to sit. I don't intend to go anywhere near the lek. I got my sounds today and don't want to spook them. Instead, I plan to try to get some bird songs before the cattle start bawling. I noticed this morning that they were quiet until it got fairly light. I'd like to get really good Henslow's, Field, and Grasshopper sparrows (heard one or two of those), and Eastern Meadowlark.

.... Right now Jim has his blind set up along the hedgerow of miscellaneous shrubs and young trees near our campsite. He tells me he has photographed both morphs of White-throated Sparrow (white-striped and tan-striped) and Harris's Sparrow.

References for birding Taberville Prairie—and other MO prairies:

Palmer (ed.), *A Guide to Birding in Missouri*, The Audubon Society of Missouri, 2001. Available from ABA.
Zimmerman and Patti, *A Guide to Bird Finding in Kansas and Western Missouri*. University Press of Kansas, 1988.

Conservation Commission of the State of Missouri (P.O. Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102-0180), *Public Prairies of Missouri*. 1999. I got this free at Prairie State Park.

This attractive and comprehensive book has excellent maps and descriptions of each prairie, including the special birds and plants found on each. It has been a big help to me.

4:15 pm, Sun., May 1, 2005

Osceola RV Park, Osceola, MO

. . . . After I wrote up yesterday's installment, I heard a song outside the trailer that sounded sort of like a Bewick's Wren, but I knew they're pretty rare in the east. I spotted the sound-source high in an oak tree and it was a Bewick's Wren. I tried to record it, but got only a snatch of scold and no song. It flew off. A couple more widely spaced times it returned, but I never was ready fast enough. The song has the typical in-drawn breath beginning and a trill ending, but its middle is sweeter and more elaborate than the western ones I'm familiar with. I never saw it anywhere except high in the tree. That also is different from western ones. After checking field guides, I learned that, although they are declining markedly everywhere east of the Rockies, only east of the Mississippi are they almost extirpated. The National Geographic guide shows where we are as right on the edge of their breeding range.

. . . . Jim's attempt to photograph the Greater Prairie-Chickens this morning was a total failure. We got up at 3:00 am. Jim carried his camouflage draped camera and tripod from the truck to the lek, and I carried his chair and some foam padding to keep his backside and underside warm. We got him all draped in the stuff, then I left him there in total darkness at around 4:45 am.

. . . . He stayed there until shortly after sunrise. The chickens came in, but were obviously disturbed by the new object in their territory. They did little calling and wandered around the edges of the lek eyeing him suspiciously instead of displaying. (This was quite different from our experience with Lessers, which seemed quite unconcerned by Jim's presence in the truck only a few feet from where they were displaying.) He got no pictures and so decided to leave the area to the chickens. Of course, those that were there flew off when he stood up to gather up his gear. However, a bit later when we looked toward the lek from afar, we could see that they had resumed their normal behavior. The jump-ups are visible from the parking lot.

Shortly after he left, the chickens had a worse harassment than Jim. Two Northern Harriers were swooping around harrying the chickens. One or two chickens would fly up, circle around and land again. At the same time, we might see the display jump-ups elsewhere on the lek. This went on for several minutes, then the harriers left. Prairie-chickens seem like rather large prey for Northern Harriers, but maybe not.

. . . . The temperature was marginally warmer, 41', this morning. While Jim was waiting for chickens, I got out my recording gear and recorded the dawn chorus of prairie birds. Even in total darkness with only a half-moon for illumination, I could hear the "ts-lik" songs of Henslow's Sparrows all along the trail as I helped Jim carry his gear. I wondered if they sing all night. Later I checked Birds of North America's account (I brought along Xerox copies of

those accounts for about a dozen birds) of the bird, and it said it is fairly common, with occasional individuals singing all night long. One bird studied "sang every five seconds for at least 24 hours." I wonder what grad student had to listen to it.

. . . . It was still quite dark, but with a slight glow in the east, when yesterday's Field Sparrow tuned up. Eastern Meadowlarks first sounded off around the same time. It wasn't until it was fairly light that I heard some owls off in the distance, Great Horned and Barred. They had not called earlier. About that time I also got distant Wild Turkey gobbles, as well as an occasional Grasshopper Sparrow (not many here) and Mourning Dove. The cattle were evident in all of the recordings, but not too bad when it was really dark. After it got light, they were bawling all the time. There's a small feed lot about 1.5 miles away, we noticed later.

. . . . The experience of standing there alone on the prairie, hearing those tiny sounds all around me both near and far, and watching the arrival of the first hints of daylight and then sunrise was an experience I'll savor. Birding to me is more a collection of memories like this than a compilation of life birds to write down.

. . . . Shortly after sunrise the wind got up and really made being outdoors unpleasant--and also prevented any more first-class recordings. The birds didn't like it either and stayed in cover, so Jim was unable to try for additional Henslow's Sparrow photos--or anything else.

. . . . I didn't want to go back to the trailer that early, so we drove south along state highway H about a mile or two to where there is a public parking lot for Taberville Prairie right next to the road. That was the only place I was aware of the last two times I was there because I didn't have the books I do now. I wanted to see if it had changed any.

. . . . It hadn't. Without the wind, it still would be an excellent place to bird. It was the first place I saw Henslow's Sparrows--many years ago when I visited the area with Mother. When I brought Jim there June 13, 1992, I couldn't find any there. I attributed it to a date that was later in the year than when I was there with Mother. Today I couldn't find any either. The prairie grasses were not as tall as those where they do occur. They manage the prairie, burning portions of it every few years. I suppose that's the reason.

. . . . The lay of the land in that location is first a descent of about 200 yd through the prairie along a mowed road to a wooded creek, which I was able to wade across with my high-topped, waterproof overshoes. Then there is a long, muddy ascent up the slope on the other side. Near the top of the slope there are some shale outcroppings with shrubs growing from the cracks. That was where we recorded and photographed the eastern Bell's Vireo last time. There was no sign of one today. Maybe it was the wind, or maybe it's too early in the season.

. . . . The most interesting experience was the unusual song I heard from the creek crossing on the way back. I recorded it and played it back. It turned out to be a White-eyed Vireo doing two different songs in rapid succession. It did that for a minute or so, then reverted to its more typical song--which I had heard on the way out. (Playback did not elicit the unusual song. It was doing it of its own accord and only came close and did it some more when I played it back.)

. . . . It was a cold, exhausting hike with little reward in the way of birds, but I'm glad I did it. Down in the depression, all signs of man's impact on the land were gone--except for that mowed two-track "road." I could imagine

early visitors and immigrants to the prairie standing there in all its windy vastness and experiencing emotions ranging from exhilaration to fear. I knew I could return to a nice warm truck with only a 15-minute walk. They had to endure it. Some loved it; others returned to the more familiar woodlands back east.

. . . . After that, I was ready to call a halt to outdoor activity for the day. In addition, the bursitis in my hip was really bothering me. We got back to Osceola around 10:30, hoping to find a cafe where we could buy a late breakfast (our 3:00 am one was a long time ago). There does not seem to be a single restaurant in town. Still hungry for a real breakfast, I whipped up some waffle batter and fried some bacon. [When we left town the next day, we discovered a couple of cafes on the main highway, SR 13, only a few miles north of town, where we might have eaten. The main part of town is about a mile off the highway, and all the restaurants there seem to be defunct.]

. . . . Temperature now is 59' and it is still fairly windy, but somewhat protected where we are in the trees. Sky is about half cloudy--puffies, no rain threatened for the foreseeable future. We're certainly glad we're not farther south. They're having record-breaking rain on the Gulf coast, where we spent a totally dry month three years ago. I wonder how the migration is there and when the warblers will start showing up here. I did see an Orange-crowned by the creek today, but that's not too exciting.

. . . . Jim is in his blind again shooting the assortment of sparrows, etc. I'm sitting in the trailer watching them from a distance. Only the Chipping Sparrows venture far away from the line of shrubs where Jim has his blind. They were the only birds eating the birdseed right outside the window.

. . . . I had to admire one tiny Chippy's method of eating dandelion seeds, whose puffy balls were sticking up on robust 8-to-10-inch stalks all over the grass. The bird jumped up and turned itself sideways so it could grasp the stalk with both feet. Then with a flutter of its wings, it downed the stalk. Holding the stem down with its feet, it cleaned the entire head in short order, then tackled another one.

Mon., May 2, 2005

Campus RV Park, Independence, MO

No entry.

Tues., May 3, 2005

Campus RV Park, Independence, MO

. . . . Jim had screwed up his computer's e-mail feature trying to connect to Wi-Fi in Osceola, so we decided we had better seek an RV Park with ordinary telephone hook-ups for campers. Independence, MO, seemed like a good stop, and we could also take a day off from birding to visit Harry S Truman's home and library.

. . . . Before leaving for the 100-mile drive to Independence, I wandered around the campground in Osceola. It was cold (36'), but clear and calm. I added two new migrants, Red-eyed and Warbling Vireo, but still no eastern warblers.

. . . . We got here around 12:30. Jim was able to get his ATT email connection restored with a minimal hassle. He downloaded countless email messages, many junk, but several of interest. I tried to reach PocketMail on the

cellphone, but the signal here was apparently also too weak, but Jim was able to get it on the payphone in the campground--5 messages there. We spent the rest of the afternoon catching up on our correspondence.

. . . . One of the messages was the good news from Nancy Kenyon that the replacement diskette I sent her was fine and that she would have the first installment of the diary on-line that evening.

. . . . Since we were in a sizeable town, I decided we'd eat out. I found one of those all-you-can-eat buffet restaurants that Jim loves not far away. The food was good, but the 50's rock-and-roll music was annoyingly loud.

. . . . This morning we visited Truman's home and library. It was interesting to see the fairly ordinary house where he lived. It had been his wife's family home since it was built in the 1860's. The living room furniture was temporarily in storage so they could restore the wallpaper, but the rest of the downstairs was open for guided tours. The upstairs will not be opened until his daughter, Margaret, who is 82, dies. Although the home was willed to the US government, she can stay here up to a week each year, if she wishes. Because of this, the upstairs remains closed. She hasn't used it in ten years, though. She lives in New York City.

. . . . The house is large and comfortable, and really quite ordinary, especially the kitchen, which was less impressive than the one my paternal grandparents had in Santa Ana. Truman's wife was from one of the "best" families in Independence (flour-milling money), while he was from a poor farming family. It took years of persuading for him to get her to marry him.

. . . . From there we went to the nearby presidential museum and library. We viewed a 45-minute film on his life, which was an interesting review of a period of history I hadn't thought much about in many years--end of WW-II including the A-bombs, Marshall Plan, start of cold war, and the Korean war with the accompanying firing of General MacArthur. The displays were in sort of a time-line of his life and expanded on themes developed in the film, not just his presidency, but his entire life from his humble beginnings to his return to an unpretentious life after his presidency.

. . . . I was especially interested in the even-handed way they interpreted his decision to drop those A-bombs on Japan. There was a wall with quotes from various sources pro and con, some written shortly after the events and others written more recently. There seemed to be more cons than pros, which I thought surprising in that setting. Jim, of course, has always been pro, for he fought in Okinawa near the end of the war and knew he would probably have been involved in the attack on the main part of Japan had it taken place. Several of the quotes were from people convinced that Japan couldn't have put up much of a fight, but a Japanese military leader said they were prepared to fight to the bitter end. Who knows? Personally, I'm glad my wonderful Jim is here today!!

. . . . Late this afternoon we went to the National Frontier Trails Museum, which interprets the trails to the west, many of which started here in Independence. We didn't finish viewing the exhibits, but they gave us a pass to go back tomorrow morning, which we plan to do. It's really a very interesting place--perhaps more interesting than the Truman Library.

. . . . Campus RV Park, where we're staying, seemed a strange name. I wondered what university it was near. It

turned out it is on the "campus" of the world headquarters of the Community of Christ church, the new name for the "Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints" a name they finally abandoned in 2001 because it was too cumbersome. From the RV Park we can see the extremely tall spire of the temple. The entire building spirals upward and is covered in stainless steel or some other shiny surface. It's really impressive and very conspicuous.

. . . . Not far away are all the other main-stream denominations--Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, etc. (There's probably a Catholic one around, but I didn't see it.) Each has a sizeable edifice, and all are in red brick. Notably absent were any of the new fundamentalist/evangelical/pentecostal types that are taking over the country. I suppose they're on the edge of town, where they could find vacant land. We're right on the edge of downtown. I also wonder what was on all the land that the Mormons own today. All their buildings and open space areas seem very new. [The next day I learned that they've owned the land for a long time--almost from the beginning of the denomination in the 1800s.]

8:15 pm, Wed., May 4, 2005

Big Lake SP, northwestern MO

. . . . This morning we went back to the National Frontier Trails Museum to finish looking at the displays. I found it fascinating to read the many quotes from diaries of travellers on all the trails (Oregon, California, Mormon, Santa Fe and all their alternate routes and cut-offs) that emanated from Independence, MO. There was a sequence of displays for each trail, with the number of miles from Independence at the top of each. In addition to the quotations, there were displays of items that would have been part of the journey, some genuinely old, others reproductions and clearly labelled as such. I'm sure as the years go by they'll try to replace the reproductions with originals, although I doubt they'll try to get an original loaf of bread.

. . . . The museum is a joint project of the City of Independence and the Missouri Dept. of Natural Resources and was established in 1989.

. . . . Jim dragged me away before I was really finished to go see the interior of the Community of Christ Temple, but he did allow me to spend a few minutes selecting several books containing material from women's diaries. I had to look the books over carefully, for I already have quite a few books on the subject, which has always fascinated me.

. . . . The Temple building is so distinctive that we really were interested to see what it was like inside. Since it was Mormon, we had thought that only Mormons could go inside. But we learned, partly from the manager of the RV Park, who is a member, and partly from the receptionist at the Frontier Trails Museum, that this is a totally different denomination of Mormonism. It broke off from the original shortly after it was founded, mainly because they did not believe in polygamy. Other differences are that they do not have the secrecy associated with the Salt Lake City variety of Mormonism. Visitors are welcome in their temple. They do not wear special undergarments. When we learned a bit about their beliefs, it sounded almost like a cross between the large LDS church and the Unitarian Universalist tradition. They're big on peace and tolerance for all people's beliefs. Unfortunately they're a small

church with only 250,000 members worldwide.

... Despite this their world headquarters is mighty impressive. It includes an auditorium that seats 6,000 and that temple shaped like a slender nautilus shell, that cost \$35,000,000, including an immense organ. (The auditorium has one almost as big.) We were disappointed not to be able to hear it played.

... In order to visit the sanctuary we had to go on a guided tour (only 6 people in our group) and unfortunately we drew an extremely long-winded guide. (We saw another group come and go while we were still a captive audience. He was a very sweet man and it would not have been polite to leave, however.)

... The interior was every bit as beautiful as the outside. From the center of the circular sanctuary we could look up 195 ft to the top of the spiral. The windows that we had seen from the outside are part of a ramp, but it is used only by a custodian when he has to change the aircraft warning light at the top of the steeple.

... Photos were permitted in all parts of the building, and Jim took a number of them.

It was noon by the time we got back to the trailer, and we had expected to be on the road by 10:00. We quickly hooked up and left, stopping enroute for a quick hamburger and some groceries. We had 110 miles to go to get to our next birding destination. Because we had such a late start, we broke with our usual practice and took the freeway, I-29.

... We're here to visit Squaw Creek NWR, which is in the bottomlands of the Missouri River. Lucy Lee recommended it highly and gave us information on the place. It has an impressive bird list. We'll go there tomorrow.

... The closest campground is Big Lake State Park, which is something of a disappointment. Although it is located on the shores of Big Lake, a Missouri River oxbow, none of the lakeside sites have hookups. All the sites are in the middle of an open lawn dotted with shade trees. None backs up into the nearby woods, and none even backs up very close to the woods. We selected a site that backs up to the road with only a line of conifers as a barrier. The sites are enormous, but we have to park our trailer near the front because the electric box is right next to the park road. Even so we're using our extension cord.

... As a result of the openness of the campground, the birds are mainly Robins, Common Grackles, and Downy Woodpeckers. There does seem to be a Brown Thrasher in the hedgerow of small conifers between our site and the nearby road. Jim saw a White-breasted Nuthatch. Maybe we'll find more when we really explore. We were tired from a morning of standing and an afternoon of driving and didn't feel like doing anything but sit around under the trees.

... Right now I don't feel like doing anything but going to bed. We missed our afternoon naps. Jim has been in bed for an hour.

9:00 pm, Thurs., May 5, 2005

Big Lake SP, MO

... Squaw Creek NWR is a beautiful place in the bottomlands of the Missouri River. It also includes the loess bluffs, which are heavily wooded--more so than they were before human settlement and its accompanying tree

planting and fire suppression. Some of this forest is being removed and converted back to the sloping prairie that was there originally. We saw one controlled burn while we were on the refuge this morning.

. . . . We drove the 10-mile tour road through the flat portions of the refuge this morning. It is a very good, wide, gravel road with nicely mowed grassy shoulders, so we could stop anywhere we wanted to. We were surprised it was one-way. Lots of trees, some enormous, line the sides of the water impoundments, but not so thickly that they obscure view of the water. Ducks were mostly Blue-winged Teal, but we were happy to see some Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers, which are both cavity nesters. Lots of nest boxes had been placed for the Wood Ducks. I wondered at the time if the Hooded Mergansers used them too, but when I checked the bird list, it doesn't show them breeding or wintering here. So they were just migrants.

. . . . Most of the land birds were Red-winged Blackbirds, Barn Swallows, Common Yellowthroats and Yellow Warblers, but one interesting eastern warbler, a Blackpoll was present. One stretch went through the edge of a boggy forested area, but all I could hear there was House Wrens.

. . . . Along the final portion of the tour loop, there were a couple of places that were managed for shorebirds, only one of which had any. Unfortunately they were pretty far away even for my telescope--and hopelessly far away for Jim's telephoto lens. I was able to identify six species, none new for the trip: Long-billed (presumably) Dowitcher, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Semipalmated, Least, Pectoral, and Baird's sandpipers. We'd seen Spotted Sandpipers earlier on the tour.

. . . . If I had walked more sections of the tour road, I might have discovered more migrating land birds, but we drove very slowly, stopping often to look and listen.

. . . . It was around 11:30 when we completed the loop, so we decided to drive back toward the uplands through the roadcuts in the loess bluff, for there we had seen a large colony of nesting Bank Swallows yesterday as we drove down with the trailer. Jim spent half an hour or so photographing them as they came and went to their burrows. He feels he may have obtained some good pictures, but those birds come and go so fast, it's hard to be sure. He may try again another day while I walk the nature trail near the headquarters. [He didn't.]

. . . . The temperature was in the mid-40's this morning, warming for the first time in quite a while into the low 70's by late afternoon. First thing in the morning the wind was calm, but a southwest wind got up pretty strongly--up to 20 mph, I'd guess--by mid-morning and blew all the rest of the daylight hours. It's calmed down pretty much now. Sky was about half cloudy all day.

. . . . Around 5:30 this afternoon, I took a walk down to the far southern end of the campground, where there is a small stand of huge trees (cottonwoods and black walnuts mostly). There I found a bird Jim has been trying for years to get decent photos of, the Red-headed Woodpecker. We have yet to find a nest, and the birds fly all over the place--high in the trees, down to the ground, back and forth in the air flycatching, then way off somewhere else so you lose track of them--frustrating birds. These were no exception. I called Jim on our FRS radio, and he brought a chair down to the area and sat there trying to photograph one, but was unsuccessful in even seeing one. Later in my walk I saw one on the opposite side of the stand of trees, which also disappeared. I thought it might have flown into a cavity

in a tree, so stood there a maybe 10 minutes to see if it would come out, but it didn't.

... Two new migrants for the trip graced my afternoon, a Catharus thrush (probably Swainson's, but possibly Gray-cheeked; it was a bit too far away to tell) and a Rose-Breasted Grosbeak (beautiful adult male). But no more warblers.

8:15 pm, Fri., May 6, 2005

Big Lake SP, MO

... That south wind blew up a really warm day--high of 86'. The wind almost died down last night, but was pretty strong all day. Sky was partly cloudy, and humidity was fairly high. We have a nice shady site, so we didn't turn on the AC. Right now it is still 78' outside.

... We decided to stay in the state park today. There is a park road that extends about 1.5 miles from our trailer to its end. About half of it is next to the lake and near small patches of woodland. Since the lake itself is north-south oriented, I thought maybe those woodlands would serve as a migration corridor and that the south wind might have blown up some birds last night.

... I was happy to discover that my hopes were realized, albeit in a modest way. The numbers of Baltimore Orioles, Yellow Warblers, and Warbling Vireos have increased about 10-fold over yesterday. In addition I saw several new birds for the trip: Gray Catbird, Black-and-white and Bay-breasted Warbler. All of the migrants I saw, except for one Orchard Oriole, were males. Females are known to migrate later and arrive after the males have established territories.

... In addition, I saw two Bald Eagles circling low overhead--an adult and a 1st year. I also found a tree which probably has the Red-headed Woodpecker's nest. Unfortunately it's mighty tall and the lower portion is covered with vines, leaving only the top for drilling. Several old holes in the treetop were occupied by starlings. The woodpeckers were foraging at various places, but I didn't see any excavating, nor did Jim, who spent some time watching the area. At least he finally saw the bird, even though it looks like a hopeless photo subject.

... As I was walking back to the trailer, I encountered the campground host, whom Jim asked yesterday if he'd seen a Red-headed Woodpecker. He wondered if we'd found it. Then the conversation turned to other birds. He asked if I'd heard the big news that "the Yellow-billed Woodpecker had been found in Arizona." That drew a blank with me. So he said, "You know--the bird that hasn't been seen since the 40's." Then I realized that he meant the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, whose recent rediscovery in Arkansas was in the news. Then the conversation turned to the "Yellow-winged Cowbird," which is pretty rare around here, but sometimes seen. When I suggested Yellow-headed Blackbird, it turned out that's what he meant. We've decided to cease picking the brain of this man about birds.

... In the late morning, Jim wanted to drive to the nearest town, Rulo, Nebraska, to see if he could buy a newspaper, so I went along, since there was a sign near the state park advertising a grocery store there. To get there we crossed the Missouri R. on a very rough, very narrow, old bridge. I hope it's not one of the ones they fear may collapse, but there were no load limits, just a 25-mph speed limit.

. . . . Rulo itself has a population of 191, and the "grocery" store turned out to be a private butcher operation outside town. Every business in town seemed to be defunct, although there was a post office. All the houses were run-down with peeling paint, and one had the most gosh-awful collection of junk all around it that Jim wants to get a picture when we drive through on Sunday. [He didn't.] We drove the single block of the main street and the next cross street from the highway was called Rouleau Blvd. That's obviously where the town's name, Rulo, came from.

. . . . The afternoon was spent sitting outside and enjoying the balmy day and the trees full of birds, although I didn't add any to the list I got this morning.

. . . . It's Friday evening, and the campers have been pouring into the campground, although most people are over by the lake. We do have some people in the site next to us, but they're pretty quiet. We usually try to avoid a campground by water on weekends, but in this part of the country that's all there is except for city RV parks.

8:30 pm, Sat., May 7, 2005

Big Lake SP, MO

. . . . As I reported before, Big Lake is a large oxbow lake formed by the Missouri River. Lewis and Clark mentioned what was probably this lake in their diary. Except for the state park land, which occupies about two miles of the east shore, all the rest of the shoreline is lined with vacation homes, which range from tiny, old, and run-down to new and quite nice. There are no "good" and "bad" neighborhoods, just a mix of various types of housing. Most are unoccupied and apparently used mainly in the summer. We've only driven the road on the east side of the lake. There are a few houses on the east side of the highway, which lack a waterfront location, but most of that land is cornfields, still fallow or just plowed right now.

. . . . Big Lake State Park is one of those facility-rich parks so common in many eastern states. In addition to the campground, it has motel units, housekeeping cabins, a cafe, swimming pool, boat ramp, and children's playground. The motel and cabins look very nice. We ate lunch in the cafe today and it was nicely prepared. No fancy menu items, just the usual hamburgers, chicken, pizza, salads, etc.

. . . . Saturday night in the campground: Since the campground is so open, we've been amusing ourselves this afternoon people-watching. All the campers seem to be decent folks--no rowdiness or loud music.

. . . . We now have families with very young children on both sides of us. On one side, a van just pulled up and unloaded about ten people. I guess they're here for a visit; wonder how late they'll stay. So far their conversation is very subdued. [A half hour later: guests still here and talk still quiet--amazing!] Their campfire has been going for a couple of hours, with the smoke blowing right in our window. But that's my only complaint.

. . . . Yesterday and today the occupants of one rig on the opposite side of the campground, apparently a man and his teen-age daughter, have been taking turns riding a motor scooter round and round the campground loop. Jim and I have been counting the laps. The daughter is maybe 16-18 years old with short, curly hair. She always sits statue-like

on the quiet little vehicle, staring straight ahead with a serious expression on her face and never exceeds the 10 mph speed limit. It seems almost as if it's a chore she has to perform, but she must be having fun or she wouldn't do it so much. Dad is very roly-poly, but has the same serious expression as he does his laps, which are also apparently recreational, since there are too many in a row for them to be trips to the john. He tires of the sport sooner than she does, though.

. . . . Across the highway behind our campsite is a house whose family "car" seems to be a the cab of a semi truck. Its owner drives in and out all day on errands of various lengths. There is also a trailer to go with it parked in the driveway.

. . . . Every so often a guy (couldn't be a gal!) goes tearing by on the highway in a pickup truck with three huge white dogs in the back. They're all standing up with their forepaws on the sides or the cab of the truck, and one of them barks the entire time. We can hear it for a half-mile in each direction as it comes and goes.

. . . . That's what I have to report based on my observations while sitting outside reading my book.

. . . . Today it was very windy all day. It was mostly cloudy, so the temperature topped out in the upper 70's. The wind made birding difficult and recording essentially impossible. More of the same is forecast for tomorrow.

. . . . Despite the wind, we still tried to do some birding. We returned to Squaw Creek NWR. First I walked their very short nature trail along the base of the loess bluff. Loess (pronounced "lo-ess" by the locals, not the German "löss") is compacted dust that was blown into dunes many centuries ago. It's very soft and sort of like adobe. Bank Swallows have no trouble excavating holes in the roadcut.

. . . . We also visited the Jamerson C. McCormack Conservation area, which also preserves a portion of the loess bluff. It's located west of the NWR entrance and about 3/4 mile east of the junction with SR 111. The place is poorly labelled, but there is a small parking area. An old dirt road ascends steeply up the hill. I walked it for a couple hundred yards and took pictures of the habitats. First the road went through dense, tall forest, then beside very steep slopes covered with tall-grass prairie that looked very mature and high, even though it was last season's grass stems that were visible. I added several new birds to my trip list: Wood Thrush in the deep forest, Eastern Towhee in the forest near the edge, Indigo Bunting in brush just outside the forest, and Great Crested Flycatcher toward the top of the hill where the trees next to the prairie aren't so tall.

. . . . It was around 10:30 when I got back to the truck exhausted from the steep climb; the descent was OK. We decided to drive again the first part of the 10-mile tour route in the NWR, where we'd seen the most birds. Nothing special in the bird line--too windy--but we found an enormous Snapping Turtle out on a log. It was much bigger than the one we found at Quivira NWR some time back. Jim took pictures, with another species nearby for size comparison. (Have yet to figure out what it is, although I did get a digital image of what is probably the same species a couple of days ago.)

. . . . We exited via the north entrance to the refuge, which goes by an area of shallow water transitioning to mud with

emergent vegetation on the far shore about 75 yards away. Shorebirds were working the mud, but hard to see. Nothing new, except possibly a Wilson's Snipe, which I couldn't relocate when I got my scope out to check for sure. It may have been another Long-billed Dowitcher; I saw several. Jim wasn't interested in even looking at birds he couldn't photograph.

8:30 pm, Sun., May 8, 2005

Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area, NE

No entry.

8:30 pm, Mon., May 9, 2005

Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area, NE

. . . . Yesterday morning I decided to walk the road at Big Lake SP one more time to see if any different migrants had turned up. I saw my first American Redstart of the trip. But there was one sound that drove me crazy all morning. I knew it was a warbler, but just couldn't get a look at it. It said "tik-it tik-it tik-it ti-ti-ti-ti-ti..." with the final trill one of those that seems slow enough to count, but isn't. Once I had a Blackpoll Warbler up in the tree from which the sound was emanating. But I had just recorded one of these earlier and its song is much higher and otherwise different. To clinch it, several times I was watching the Blackpoll while hearing the mystery song and its bill and throat were not moving. The sound came from all sorts of places--thick woods, isolated trees next to the lake, high, low, etc. I was really mystified. Worst of all, I was pretty sure I had heard that song before on some previous trip, but couldn't remember what did it.

. . . . Finally I heard the song from a single wispy tree and after a long search finally caught a glimpse of a tiny gray bird with a fine bill. Couldn't see much pattern on it because of the sky background. That did it, though. It was a Tennessee Warbler. And the song matched the description in the National Geographic guide pretty well. Later in the campground, I saw another one equally poorly from where the song was coming. So I'm sure the song was from that tiny gray bird. I'll check it against known Tennessees sometime, for I have it on tape.

. . . . Females were starting to be seen, but only a few Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Baltimore Orioles, etc. Males were still much more common. I also heard my first Least Flycatcher for the trip.

. . . . Since it was Mother's Day, we decided not to eat lunch on the road, so had an early one in the trailer and set out for a 55-mile drive to our next stop. The day was quite warm--probably mid-80's and rather humid.

. . . . Our destination was a place for Jim to have another try at Greater Prairie-Chickens. It was written up in two Nebraska bird-finding books:

. . . . Knue, Joseph. 1997. Nebraskaland Magazine "Wildlife Viewing Guide."

. . . . Farrar, Jon. 2005. Nebraskaland Magazine - special issue on "Birding Nebraska" (Jan.-Feb. issue) This outstanding book is much more than a magazine. Full of wonderful information about Nebraska's natural history

(geology, botany, etc.), the history of birding in Nebraska, places to bird, and lists of key species at each place. It's illustrated with magnificent color photos and maps throughout.

Both are published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, 2200 N. 33rd St., Lincoln, NE 68503. The first one may be out of print, but the second one is brand new and can be ordered from www.outdoornebraska.org or by phone at 1-800-6325263. Price \$12.95 + tax and shipping--a tremendous bargain! (I have Carol Getz to thank for sharing both publications with me, and I had time to order my own copy of the recent one before I left home. They shipped very promptly.)

. . . . We headed for Burchard Lake Wildlife Management Area, which "Birding Nebraska" said had primitive camping. It is located near the tiny town of Burchard. The entrance is reached by turning south off SR 4 three miles east of where it junctions with SR 99 and turns north. After a mile or two on a paved road, you reach the entrance to the preserve. (I think you can also get there from Burchard by driving east, then north, because one source mentioned it and we saw a fair number of cars on the road past the area.)

. . . . I was a bit apprehensive as to how primitive the camping might be, having visions of bad dirt roads and tent sites only. We were pleasantly surprised to find the access road entirely paved with only a short dirt loop that was nicely graded. (Another part of the campground had a bad dirt road, though.) We're parked in the shade with a beautiful view of a grassy area dotted with trees and with a shrub-lined brook running through it. A footbridge crosses the brook to the other portion of the campground. Out the other side of our trailer it is more open, and various sparrows, including Harris's and the first Clay-colored of the trip were feeding on weed seeds this morning. Across the county road is brushy pasture, and Field Sparrows and Bell's Vireos were singing there.

. . . . Best of all, there was no one else in the campground. The one security light isn't working, so it's nice and dark at night. There is a water pump across the footbridge in the other part of the campground, but the sign says it's not potable.

After a short rest, we set out to explore the lake. It's a fishing lake and wildlife refuge, and the campground is in the lowlands below the low dam. It's really a refuge, too, for the entire lake is closed during hunting season so waterfowl have a place of peace away from hunters--or anyone else.

. . . . The lake is U-shaped (bottom of the U to the east), and a paved, then gravel (good except for occasional potholes), road goes most of the way around it. The surroundings are quite beautiful, with scattered trees, and a mixture of prairie and hay. Why they can't make the whole thing prairie is a puzzle to me. I supposed they sell the hay to support the refuge, but don't really know. We've seen no sign of anyone in charge of the place--only a crew with some strange big machinery fixing something this morning. Incidentally, camping is free here--14 day limit, but that's no problem for us; we rarely stay anywhere that long.

. . . . On the patches of prairie beside the road we found some of the special birds of that habitat: Grasshopper Sparrow, Dickcissel, Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink. The Prairie-Chicken lek is atop the hill in the center of the U,

and there are signs along the road telling you where to walk up, although there are no maintained trails. Two blinds have been placed on the edges of the lek, one north-facing, the other south-facing. Jim was really irritated that they didn't have one west-facing with its back to the morning sun.

. . . . The literature says Henslow's Sparrows are in the park, probably where the lek is, but I didn't go up there. (Jim can't hear them.) We have such good photos and recordings from Taberville Prairie that I didn't try to find them here and was too lazy to hike up the hill on little or no trail.

. . . . This morning Jim arose at 4:30 and got into the north-facing blind. About a dozen or so males and one female were displaying, but at least 100 yards from the blind. The other blind would have been even farther away. He finally decided to shoot a desperation shot in order to be able to say he'd photographed the species, but when he raised his camera to the opening in the blind, they all flew away. The sun was shining into the blind, which didn't help. He's ready to give up on the Greater Prairie-Chicken, which seems to be much warier than the Lesser. People wanting to merely see the birds and who have scopes because of the great distance, could do nicely here, provided they had their scope placed in the window of the blind before it got light.

. . . . I decided to forego the chickens and sleep in. I awoke him when the alarm clock went off because he can't hear it, then went back to sleep. I awoke briefly to the dawn chorus at 5:30, then decided to sleep some more. I had just gotten up and was whipping up some pancake batter when he got back around 6:45. That's the latest I've slept in on the entire trip.

. . . . I'm always looking for shorebirds. The place we saw the most was where the refuge road crosses the creek that enters the lake at the west end of the north fork of the U. Although the numbers were small, I did see a good variety: Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs; Baird's, Semipalmated, and Least Sandpipers; Wilson's Phalarope--all yesterday. Today the Semipalmated Sandpiper and Wilson's Phalarope were gone, but several Pectorals had come in.

. . . . Killdeer were everywhere, and today when we drove to the parking lot and turnaround at the end of the road at the top of the south side of the U, one was doing a broken-wing act right outside the truck window. Jim blazed away and probably shot 2/3 of a roll. With the elevation of the truck window, he really had a good angle to show that rufous rump and uppertail. It was sort of shady there, but he doesn't think that will be a problem. We had just turned the truck around where the bird was displaying and hope we didn't squash the nest. We got out after the birds (there were two, but only one displaying) had tried to lead us away and looked around for it, but couldn't see it. Maybe instead of a nest there was a chick hiding in the shrubs, but we didn't find it.

. . . . Last evening we had a dramatic thunderstorm. After it was over there was a dramatic sunset--entirely gold, no reds, but it lit up almost the entire sky. Jim went up to the viewpoint by the dam and took some pictures of it. This morning dawned totally clear, and we've had just a few clouds all day. Much cooler--high in the mid-70's.

. . . . This really is a nice place to camp and bird--very pretty, totally private, and my list has 51 species on it. The rest of the birds are common ones that I've been seeing most places.

. . . . Across the road from the entrance to the refuge is a pasture with grazing bison. A sign facing the exit says:

Tegtmeier Buffalo. Steaks, ground, jerky. Delivered to your campsite. Call [2 numbers listed]. I might have been tempted, but our cell phone didn't work there.

8:45 pm, Tues., May 10, 2005

Crystal Lake State Recreation Area, Ayr, NE

. . . . Today we headed westward and drove about 125 miles. I wanted to spend some time birding the Rainwater Basin, a section of south-central NE with many pothole lakes. These are not glacial like those farther north. "Birding Nebraska"

(p. 66) says, "The Rainwater Basin is geologically young and has not developed a system of streams to drain surface water. Runoff gathers in shallow basins as small lakes, marshes and sheet water in fields. Once there were nearly 4,000 major wetlands totaling nearly 100,000 acres in the 4,200 square-mile, 17-county region. Today fewer than 400 remain."

. . . . "The origin of the Rainwater Basin's wetlands has long been the subject of speculation. Most researchers believe wind scoured shallow depressions when vegetation lost its grip during arid periods and the soil surface was broken by disturbances such as wallowing buffalo. Radiocarbon dating indicates the basins were created near the end of the Ice Age, 20,000 to 25,000 years ago, but might have been enlarged and new ones created as recently as 3,000 years ago. Over thousands of years, minute clay particles accumulated in the bottoms of the basins, effectively sealing them and preventing standing water from seeping away. . . Wetlands of this type are called playa wetlands."

. . . . In the early days, farmers just farmed around the basins, but now ways of draining them have been developed, and today most of them are just farmland.

. . . . On our way we stopped at Homestead National Monument, devoted to interpreting the homestead period in the US. The Homestead Act was passed in 1862 and took effect Jan. 1, 1863, after the Confederacy had withdrawn from the union. Southerners opposed it because they didn't want small farmers, who would be opposed to slavery, settling the west. It really took off after the Civil War was over. The monument is on the site of what was probably the very first homestead filed. The man who filed it had a wife who was 17 years younger than he, and she lived until 1931 on the same land her husband had filed on Jan. 1, 1863, just a few minutes after midnight. The man was a scout for the Union Army in the Civil War and had orders to be back on duty by the end of the day Jan. 2, so the land office agent issued him his papers on New Years Day, when the office was officially closed, but the law was in effect. The monument was established in 1936, only a few years after his widow's death.

. . . . There is an interesting visitors center with a very well done 17-min video on the history of homesteading in the US, both good and bad features. There are also displays of tools that men and women would have used. Curiously enough, the 160 acres of this original homestead is being converted back to the tall-grass prairie from which it came as a way of demonstrating what the homesteaders started with. There are nature trails through the prairie, but we've been in several other prairies and didn't do any of these. Besides, there was some incredibly noisy road equipment working right next to the site.

. . . . After visiting the monument we backtracked to the Chamber of Commerce Visitors Center in the city of Beatrice (pronounced bee-AT-riss). I needed an atlas to the wildlife protection sites in Nebraska, published by the same agency that put out the birding guides. The guides recommended getting it. The thing is essentially a road map of the entire state, but the print is incredibly tiny. Fortunately I have a magnifying glass.

. . . . We selected Crystal Lake State Recreation Area as a campground not for its birds, but for its proximity to a number of rainwater basins. Unfortunately it's 25 miles from the closest one, but there isn't much in this area. It's listed in Trailer Life Guide as having electric hook-ups only, and we wondered if there would be any water at all. We found that two sites actually had water hookups and that there are water faucets elsewhere on the grounds. No dump station, but sign says there's one behind the fire station in Ayr, which is only 2 miles away. Don't know where the fire station is yet, but the town only has a population of 101, so we probably can find it. The campground is just a big grassy lawn dotted with Eastern Cottonwood trees. We're under an enormous one, which must have a six-foot trunk diameter. Around the edges there is riparian woodland. Crystal Lake itself is a small fishing pond with no shoreline to speak of and no shorebirds.

. . . . It got up to a muggy 89' today, so we were content to just sit around when we got here and settled around 3:30. There are supposed to be thunder storms tonight (I'm seeing lightning occasionally now) until 1:00 am and then cool off for the next week or so, according to weather-radio from Hastings, which is only 11 miles north of here. (We carry a WeatheRadio from Radio Shack. It only tunes in the government weather stations and is rather handy when we're in range of a signal.)

. . . . Better quit this writing and try to decipher the small type on that map of the basins we want to find tomorrow. I have hopes of finding a Buff-breasted Sandpiper in this area. There are only 15,000 of these birds in the world, but they all come through this area around May 10-15, according to what I've read. We're here at the right time.

8:00 pm., Wed., May 11, 2005
Crystal Lake SRA, Ayr, NE

. . . . We awoke to cloudy weather with a borderline drizzle. WeatheRadio said it would probably lead up to a few thunder storms after 3:00 pm, but that they should not be severe because the clouds were thin.

. . . . Because of the threat of rain, Jim decided to take the truck to Hastings 11 miles away for routine service. The "Service Engine Soon" light has been coming on intermittently for a week or so. He was gone most of the morning. He tried to call me on the cell phone, but the service here is borderline and so he never got through, although I got the phone number he was calling from and tried to call him back when the signal got better. Of course, by then he had left the phone. It turned out it was just as well he didn't get through, for at that time it looked as though the truck was just sitting there and the job might take all day. Even though I had not received his call, I figured that was probably what he was trying to tell me and didn't expect him for a while.

. . . . Then around 11:30 Charlie jumped up on the back of the couch and started sitting up and waving his paws. I told him he was silly and should settle down. Jim wasn't coming for a while. But he was right. That little dog's

hearing is incredibly acute. He had heard the sound of our truck engine from way beyond a line of trees 100 yards away.

. . . . While Jim was gone I took a walk around the grounds of this park. My list is up to about 25 species, including Northern Bobwhite, a species about which there is concern due to habitat loss. It likes the same type of brushy prairie that Field Sparrow, also a species of concern, does.

. . . . I also learned the history of Crystal Lake from a state historic marker in the park. The Little Blue River was dammed in 1893 for a huge icemaking operation. When the "lake" froze over in the winter, men with huge saws would saw it up into chunks for people's iceboxes. When well insulated and stored in bulk, it would last all summer. Ice was shipped by train all over this part of the country. The company went out of business in the 1920s when refrigeration came in. Then the area became a private recreation park. Finally the state acquired it in the 1930s and the CCC built some picnic shelters that are still in existence today.

. . . . Around noon the weather was pretty nice and it looked as though we might be able to take a drive to some of the Rainwater Basin's wetland preserves later in the afternoon. But were we wrong!

. . . . Around 3:00 it started to rain. Then it rained some more—really hard thunder showers. Then a bit of hail. Then more—some as large as 3/4 inch in diameter. I got alarmed and turned on the WeatherRadio around 4:15. I listened to the weather info, which was more alarming than what had been on in the morning and was all about severe thunder storms and hail just like we were having. So I turned off the sound, but left the radio in its alarm mode, since there were severe weather watches in effect. Alarm mode means there's a loud tone telling you when there's a severe weather warning and you can turn on the talk and hear what it is.

. . . . I had no sooner turned it to that mode when the alarm sounded. I hit the "weather info." button and heard, "The National Weather Service in Hastings has issued a tornado warning for Adams County, and it should reach Ayr around 4:35. By then it was 4:25. We had decided that the picnic shelter would be the best place to be in a tornado, so snatched Charlie, a raincoat, and the WeatherRadio and headed out the door of the trailer.

. . . . Just then a truck screamed to a stop. It was a man from the Ayr Volunteer Fire Department. He told us we should go to the fire station two miles away, then headed off so fast we wondered if we could find the fire station before it was too late. It turned out to be easy. The station really didn't look much more secure than the picnic shelter, but it was comforting to have the half-dozen guys around. The firefighters are also trained tornado spotters and several of them were standing in the road out front of the station carefully watching the wall cloud south of town. At that time it was not raining, although it did from time to time while we were there.

. . . . Jim, of course, was out in front of the firestation with the spotters ready with his camera to photograph the funnel cloud just before he had to dive for cover. Fortunately the swirling in the cloud that the Doppler Radar had detected did not develop into a tornado. Jim did get pictures of the wall cloud with his film camera, then went back to the truck to get his digital—and discovered he'd locked his keys in the truck when he got his other camera out. In the haste of leaving, I had not picked up mine, so they were in the trailer.

. . . . One of the firemen had to bring Jim back to the trailer to try to get in and obtain my keys. We thought he could

just raise the window by the dinette, which doesn't lock very well and reach around and unlock the door from the inside. It turned out the window locks better than we thought and it wouldn't budge. He went around and tried the much smaller window on the opposite side of the trailer and fortunately it was not locked. But the open portion of the window is only about a foot high, a tight squeeze for big Jim. Fortunately the young fireman was really slight, so he climbed up and with a push from Jim got through the opening and onto the couch, then unlocked the door.

. . . . In his haste to be off Jim had not listened carefully when I told him the two possible places where my keys might be, so he couldn't find them. The young man had to take me back to get them. By the time all this had occurred, it was 5:30 and the tornado warning had expired. But there were others in the area, including another in the northeastern portion of our county. Since all this weather seems to be moving from southwest to northeast, we decided not to wait until it expired and returned to the trailer.

. . . . While in the fire station, they turned the TV on for me to watch what was happening around the area, including nice Doppler Radar images of where the severe weather was. The NET (Nebraska Public TV) station was really doing a good job. What really frightened me was to learn that hail the size of baseballs had broken all the windows in Hastings Community College. I really worry about the flimsy vent covers in our trailer in any kind of hail. I think the fact that we're partially under that big cottonwood tree may have broken the fall of some of the smaller hail we had, for so far we only are getting water leaking in around some of our window frames. Jim will have to caulk them when things dry out.

. . . . After all this, we were both nervous wrecks. We're Californians and tornado watches and huge hailstones are not things we're used to. I've had the WeatherRadio on ever since we got back, and the alarm goes off every few minutes. Fortunately the new warnings are for severe thunder storms and flash-flooding north and east of us. I hope the worst has passed us here. They're still forecasting heavy rain and flash-flooding all night long throughout the area, though.

. . . . I forgot to mention that when the fireman brought me back to get the keys, he pulled up right in front of the trailer—and got stuck in the mud. He made a huge rut trying to get out. How are we going to haul the trailer out of this site? I guess we'll have to stay in the area a few days and hope it dries out. I don't think we dare drive any of those gravel roads that go by the wildlife refuges either. Maybe we'll visit the nice, safe museum in Hastings. I think I've been to it before, but AAA recommends it highly and I could use something unstressful. Jim just wants to shoot birds. He put out a water drip this morning, but I doubt it'll attract much after the "water drip" we've just endured.

8:30 pm, Thurs., May 12, 2005

Crystal Lake SRA, Ayr, NE

. . . . We came to the Rainwater Basin, but we didn't expect the powers above to fill it to the brim in one night! According to reports, six to twelve inches fell in this area, depending on where the thunder showers hit. I'm sure we had at least six.

. . . . Jim went to bed, but I stayed up and kept the WeatherRadio on until around 1:00 am because the county we were

in was under a tornado watch until 5:00 am. I activated the alarm feature so I wouldn't have to listen to the same things over and over. But every 5 to 30 minutes that extremely loud alternating two-tone alarm sound jolted me to attention. After our tornado warning, all of the other reports were for severe thunder storms or flooding. The thunder storms were forecast to be capable of generating hail the size of baseballs and winds of 60 or 80 mph, and judging by the damage reported, they were doing just that. The county we were in had one or two more warnings, but in the north part, maybe 12-15 miles from us. We did have a lot of strong wind that shook the trailer and one more cloudburst around 1:00 am. That got Jim up to find out what I'd been learning. He decided that he'd better get dressed in case we got a warning here, but we didn't. We sat around til the rain stopped, and then the wind even died down. Despite the fact that the tornado watch was still in effect, we figured there was probably no danger. All of the warnings were now for places at least 40 miles north or east of here. So around 2:00 we went to bed, me for the first time.

. . . . Jim got up at his usual time, but I decided to sleep in and didn't get up until 7:00, late for me.

. . . . When we looked outside, we saw a quagmire in front of the trailer. How were we going to haul it out? At that time they were forecasting a possible repeat tonight of last night's scenario—plus we're pretty near a river that could conceivably overflow its banks. We wanted to be able to get out of here on short notice, trailer and all. Jim was afraid that he couldn't haul the trailer out with the Suburban without getting both it and the truck stuck in the mud. If the truck was stuck, we'd not be able to phone for help. Our cell phone doesn't work here, but we discovered that it did about four miles away on a main highway. There we called AAA, with which we have emergency roadside service for both the truck and trailer (we pay extra for trailer). Of course the tow-trucks were working overtime. The tow-truck firm's dispatcher said she'd worked all night and was still on duty. But she still had time for a bit of small talk about what these people from California were doing here in an obscure park in rural Nebraska. Since we were in no particular hurry to be hauled out, so long as the rains held off, we agreed they could come in the afternoon.

. . . . Since the rural byways we want to explore seemed very iffy, I decided to visit the museum in Hastings. It's an old-fashioned museum with beautiful dioramas of natural history subjects, including some large mammals and even a California Condor. (It's the principal museum between Chicago and Denver for that kind of thing.) They also had many mounted specimens of birds, probably all that had occurred in NE, for there were places in the cases for future acquisitions. I was amazed to see Carolina Parakeet, Passenger Pigeon, and Eskimo Curlew among the specimens.

. . . . There were lots of other kinds of displays—Indians, early settlers, rocks and mineral, insects, you name it. An extensive feature was on the man who invented and marketed Kool-Aid. He grew up in Hastings, but it seemed much ado about nothing to me. It was all sort of interesting, but also kind of depressing: No bright interactive exhibits. Dark halls, even some lugubrious funereal background music, and all those dead animals and birds, which I'd rather have seen out in the field living their lives. I think I was in a poor mood because of the depressing night I'd just experienced. Maybe another time I'd have enjoyed it more. It really is a fine old-school museum.

. . . . After lunch I collapsed for a two-hour nap and awoke feeling much more cheerful. The man with the tow-truck didn't arrive until 6:00, when we were about to give up on him. In his presence, Jim tried backing the truck up to the

trailer to hook up and see if he could pull it out. He couldn't even back it up all the way without spinning his wheels. So the huge tow-truck hooked up the trailer and hauled it out onto the gravel park road, and Jim handled it from there. Jim and I had sort of worried we might be calling the towtruck unnecessarily and look foolish, so we were rather glad it turned out that we really did need it.

. . . . After we were hooked up, we decided to take it down to the fire station, where the dump station is, then come back and fill it up with water and select a different site. Since the only other site with water was taken, we took a dry site, but we do have electricity. This time we chose one that seemed fairly high and that had a fair amount of gravel in it. (None of them have very much.) And we only backed the trailer in far enough to get the tongue off the road, leaving the truck wheels on the road. When we hook up, we'll simply have to block the road for that period of time. Since there are only us and one other RV here, it won't be a serious problem.

. . . . It was 7:30 after all that, so I thawed something quick and simple in the microwave for dinner. (I had been going to make a tuna casserole.)

. . . . I'm afraid our plans to see the refuges in the Rainwater Basin are not going to be fulfilled. Every field has a rainwater basin in it from last night's torrents, and I'm sure the roads to the more permanent ones will be impassable. Besides the migrating shorebirds don't have to go to them. They are probably spread out all over the entire countryside.

. . . . Despite all the other puddles, Jim was getting a few nice birds at his water drip and birdseed today, including "Yellow-shafted" Flicker, Hairy Woodpecker (first for trip) and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak that almost came down—plus a lot of Chipping Sparrows. He hated to close down that operation, but we're at the opposite corner of the grassy camping area.

. . . . I guess we'll stay around here tomorrow morning. There are still portions of the park I've not birded. Then the following day maybe we can drive some of the paved back roads in the area and see if we see any interesting shorebirds at the flooded fields.

. . . . The possible rain for this evening has not materialized, although the sky at sunset was still mostly cloudy. Forecast for the next few days sounds pretty good— cool, cloudy, only 20% chance of thunder showers.

8:45 pm, Fri., May 13, 2005

Crystal Lake SRA, Ayr, NB

. . . . It may have been Friday, the thirteenth, but it was just a nice uneventful day for us. It was mostly cloudy until late afternoon, when it changed to a mix of puffy clouds and blue sky, ending with a beautiful sunset. Temperature topped at 60'.

. . . . Jim spent the day in his blind at the muddy site we vacated at the opposite corner of the campground. He didn't get anything unusual, but enough regular species to keep things interesting—including a female Indigo Bunting. He was puzzled for a while by some Pine Siskins, which seemed to lack any yellow on them, and thought they were unusually tiny House Finches. Then he looked at their bills and realized what he had. Hope he got pictures showing

no yellow, so I can use them in a workshop, for it's a common confusion. He did see a red male finch, which was probably House, although Purple is also a possibility. A Purple would be migrating north a little west of its normal route. House Finches are uncommon in this area, which is in the zone between where western House Finches are spreading east and those that were introduced in New York are spreading west. They've practically met now. House Finches are nonmigratory in the traditional sense.

There was only a slight breeze, so I spent a couple of hours this morning out recording. My main complaint was too many birds all singing at once—no solos possible. The closest I came was a long rendition from a Brown Thrasher. I was amazed at its repertoire of crisp phrases, almost every one uttered twice. Coincidentally, this afternoon I was reading "Nature's Music," a comprehensive new book on bird sounds that was put together as a tribute to the late Luis Baptista. In Chapter 1, the information was given that the Brown Thrasher has the greatest repertoire of song motifs in the world. Over 2000 have been identified from a single individual.

. . . . The only other really interesting sound was a Northern Waterthrush. I hadn't heard one for some time, so had to use playback to find out what it was. Fortunately it did some nice fly-by's so I could identify it. The recording isn't great, though—too much competition.

. . . . The rest of the day I just relaxed in the nice warm trailer, reading and embroidering and watching the birds out the window. Our new campsite is near a line of swampy trees, and a brushy prairie area is close by. Jim's feeding operation outside our trailer was drawing only Blue Jays and Chipping Sparrows. Actually we don't often attract Blue Jays, even though they're a pretty common bird. This time a pair of them hauled off Magic Meal all day long.

. . . . It was nice to have a day to decompress after the excitement of a couple of nights ago. Tonight on TV we saw more evidence of the damage the hail storms did and were again thankful we were spared. The forecast is for no rain in the foreseeable future. Good!

9:15 pm, Sat., May 14, 2005

Crystal Lake SRA, Ayr, NE

. . . . A clear, cold, blustery day. I don't think the temperature got out of the 50's, and the wind this morning was a steady 20 mph out of the north. We were glad Jim did his blind work yesterday. The temperature was just as cold then, but there was little wind.

. . . . I decided I had to see if I could find the Buff-breasted Sandpiper, which I had my heart set on finding in the Rainwater Basin. This bird is reputed to feed on recently plowed fields in the daytime and then go to the shores of a basin in the late afternoon to drink. Unfortunately, after Wednesday's deluge, no one is plowing because the fields are too muddy. Also, there are rainwater basins in fields everywhere on this undulating prairie, so things didn't look very promising.

. . . . I charted a course which went by a number of state Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA). Isn't that a disgusting name? Of course, they really are producing ducks, just as the farmers produce hogs, cattle, and chickens. Only these ducks will be shot by "sportsmen" instead of sent to slaughterhouses. The route I

used was the one recommended in the NEBRASKAland Magazine Wildlife Viewing Guide by Joseph Knue (1997), one in the series of Falcon Guides on the various states. This tour is on p. 40 of the book, but there it is difficult to determine what roads are intended. Fortunately I had obtained the "CRP - Management Access Program Atlas," a joint publication of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and Pheasants Forever, a copy of which I had obtained from the Chamber of Commerce in Beatrice. In it are all the rural roads in the state, county by county. It gives the condition of each road--gravel, graded dirt, barely perceptible, etc. The type is incredibly small, so even a person with normal eyesight has to use a magnifying glass. Fortunately I have a nice one. With it in hand, I felt confident venturing forth on the gravel roads, which are easy to follow, for the whole countryside is laid out in mile-square blocks. It's just that some of the boundaries lack roads, or have only dirt roads. Based on our experience in the campground after the rain, I knew I had to stick to gravel.

.... We drove south to Ayr first to check our PocketMail at the payphone. No sooner had we left the campground when we encountered our first partly flooded, newly planted cornfield. And it was alive with sandpipers: Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs; Semipalmated, Least, Spotted, and (new for the trip) one Stilt sandpiper. I was thrilled and had high hopes for the rest of the morning. Because of the light, we drove east about 40 miles on paved SR 74, then turned north at Shickley in Fillmore Co. to drive mainly back westward on various gravel roads that passed near 5 to 10 rainwater basins. The gravel roads are very good and well graded, actually smoother than some of the paved ones. They're also nice and wide, so we could stop anywhere. I think in the course of our drive we encountered only 2 or 3 vehicles, probably because the farmers are waiting for their fields to dry out before doing any work.

.... We took it very slowly, perusing every fallow, newly plowed, and just sprouting cornfield, looking for the elusive Buff-breasted Sandpiper. It's colored about like a Mountain Plover, for those who know how hard that bird is to spot on a bare field. Whenever we came to a flooded area, we perused that for other shorebirds. What did we find? Upland Sandpipers in two places (a total of five, new for the trip) and no other sandpipers of any kind. That bonanza just outside the campground had been a fluke.

.... We did have a consolation prize, however. Two different places we encountered Krider's Red-tailed Hawks resting in fields near the road, and Jim got a somewhat distant picture of an adult and a closer and better-lit one of an immature. They're in migration this far south and may have been too tired to move away from our stopped vehicle. They had been bucking that cold north wind. Actually, we really don't know why they didn't fly away.

.... Most of the WMAs were totally flooded with no bare shoreline, just grasses, and the edge of the visible water was far away across the gently sloping surrounding prairie. Only one place, Moger WMA, was the marsh close enough to the road for us to see any birds. There we encountered Black-crowned Night-Herons and Black Terns.

.... At one place, Jim had me stop the truck (I was driving) because he thought he saw a woodpecker on

a utility pole far from any trees. I thought he was crazy and, of course, it played hide-and-seek, as woodpeckers do, but finally hopped up on top of it long enough for us to identify it, then flew off. It was a Red-headed. I always thought they were in open woodland with lots of tall trees. That utility pole was a poor excuse for a tree. A few minutes earlier, I had thought I saw a pair in two moderate sized trees all by themselves beside the road (probably in a place where there used to be a house). Jim thought I must have been wrong, and I halfway did, too, but I guess now I wasn't. We both really learned something about the versatility of that bird. Of course, it does engage in aerial flycatching like an Acorn or a Lewis's. [Later I looked at the range map of the species and discovered that it's quite migratory. Although we were in the all-year range of the bird, many of them move considerably farther north. We very likely saw migrants.]

... It was 12:30 when we finally came out onto a paved road two miles south of the tiny county seat, Clay Center. So we drove up and had hamburgers at the only cafe in town, Daddy's Diner, then back to the trailer.

... Later this afternoon, the wind had died down somewhat. Jim pulled the truck up near his feeding and watering station and photographed Blue Jays out its window for a couple of hours. The truck was considerably warmer than the blind, and the jays paid no attention to him or his flash.

... I hate to give up, but it just doesn't look like a promising year to see a Buff-breasted Sandpiper. We're planning to drive 200+ miles west tomorrow, out of the narrow spring migration corridor of that rare (only 15,000 in existence) bird. I just don't want a repeat of this morning's fruitless search, and Jim wants it even less than I.

Sun., May 15, 2005

Lake Ogallala SRA, NE

No entry.

8:45 pm., Mon., May 16, 2005

Lake Ogallala SRA, NE

... Not too much of interest the last two days. Yesterday we drove westward about 220 miles. We had a choice of a faster and 10-to-15-mile shorter route via the freeway, but elected to take back roads that parallel the freeway 15 to 40 miles south of it.

Nebraska roads are mostly pretty good. Only in towns and in Lincoln County yesterday have we consistently encountered rough going. We have no real complaint about the roads anywhere except Oklahoma. They're generally awful—narrow and rough. Freeways are another story, although the one we took in Missouri wasn't too bad. They make them out of concrete and most road contractors seem unable to make a concrete road that is smooth even on the day it opens.

... As we moved westward, we saw more and more irrigation with huge overhead sprinklers that pivot

around a central source of water. This is very wasteful of water because of evaporation, but how else can a cornfield be watered? They're necessary for wheat, too, but we didn't see much of that. I read that only within a hundred miles or so of the eastern border of Nebraska is there enough rain to make growing corn without irrigation economically feasible. Wheat is what should be grown west of there, since it requires less water. However, corn brings in more money. It's used to feed cattle and hogs, and nowadays is an increasingly important component in automotive fuel. So we save our petroleum by replacing some of it with ethanol, but mine the aquifers for water to grow the corn. Does that make sense? Many aquifers are being drawn down alarmingly.

.... We saw some wheat farming as we approached our destination, but more cattle grazing. I guess the wheat is mostly grown north of where we were in southern Nebraska. We've seen lots of it in the Dakotas and Canada's prairie provinces.

.... We're camped beside Lake Ogallala, which is actually the borrow pit for the Kingsley Dam. This dam was constructed in 1937-1941 and the reservoir behind it is called Lake McConaughy. (One of my pet peeves is calling reservoirs "lakes.") Lake McConaughy is the largest and deepest body of water in Nebraska. Both Kingsley and McConaughy were 1930s politicians in central Nebraska who worked hard to get the federal government to dam the North Platte River so they could have water to irrigate the fields in their area.

.... This area is supposed to be one of the best birding areas in Nebraska, because eastern, western, and water birds are all found here. Some really rare (for mid-continent) deep-water species (gulls, pelagic species, etc.) have occurred here. We haven't found much of interest in the campground, which has trees only and no shrubs. The trees have all been planted, so the place is sort of like a city park. Birds are just the most common ones. We have yet to explore the areas recommended in the birding literature. Had to do necessities in town this morning (laundry, shopping, car-washing, etc.)

.... This afternoon I drove to the nearby visitors center for the dam and the state recreation areas that occupy much of its shoreline. Displays were mildly interesting, but there I learned about the reasons for the dam and more than I was interested in about how it was constructed. I did pick up a lot of brochures on places around here and also on other SRAs we may visit. Also got a birdlist for the area, but it's flawed: Although it does list the species month-by-month, it gives no indication of how abundant they are. You can't tell if there's just one record or if there's likely to be one in every tree.

.... On the way back I stopped at the spillway overlook at the south end of the dam. This is where Bald Eagles are quite a spectacle in the wintertime, but today it was Cliff Swallows. I couldn't see that they were nesting under any of the dam structures, but when I walked over to the opposite edge of the parking lot, I discovered that they were nesting under an overhang in the cliff—only the 2nd time I've ever seen Cliff Swallows on cliffs. (The other place was at Baldwin Lake in the San Bernardino Mtns. before it dried up.) The overhang was far above the water level, but based on the high-water line all around, it must have

resulted when high water a number of years ago undercut the soft cliff. I don't know where they're getting their mud.

... Temperatures are quite mild. Today was mostly cloudy with a high of 83'. There's a chance of thunder showers tonight, but I don't think they're supposed to amount to much. Despite the overcast and thunder threat, it doesn't seem as humid here as it did under the same conditions farther east. Breeze was fairly light today, and this campground is rather sheltered by the dam and by all the trees. A pleasant day to sit outdoors.

8:15 pm, Tues., May 17, 2005

Lake Ogallala SRA, NE

... Not too much of interest today either. We set out first thing in the morning to explore the north side of Lake McConaughy, which is all a SRA, too. There are a couple of developed campgrounds there, one with electric and another with full hookups. We wanted to check out the c... The habitat there is broad, sandy beaches and many inlets. The lake is much below its "bathtub ring." Roads lead down to the beaches, but I'm always hesitant to drive on sand, even if there are tire tracks leading onto it. A few endangered Snowy Plovers and Least Terns nest there, but I didn't want to see them badly enough to walk or drive down there. The SRA road parallels the main road, SR 92, and winds around past various parking lots, campgrounds (mostly primitive), and beach access roads. I guess this place is a zoo in the summertime, but today it was nearly deserted. In between developed features there are groves of cottonwoods and junipers, which seem to have been planted. The cottonwoods are quite large, but many of them seem dead or dying, probably due to the drought that has plagued this area for several years.

... We stopped in one parking lot to read the bulletin board and discovered one of Jim's target birds, a Red-headed Woodpecker, atop a post next to the public telephone. Jim could have photographed it out the window, except his camera was in the back seat. So I drove around a short loop, during which he got the camera out. But the bird flew into the nearby cottonwoods just as we approached. We saw where it went, and Jim walked over there and discovered a hole near the top of a broken-off cottonwood. This hole wasn't as high as most of the Red-headed Woodpecker nest cavities we've seen, but according to Kaufman's Lives of North American Birds, they sometimes nest quite near the ground. The bird seemed to have flown into the hole. Jim wanted to spend some time there and see if it was an actual nest, so he got out his tripod and assumed guard a discreet distance away. Incubating woodpeckers sometimes spend an hour or longer in their nests before emerging, but he was prepared to wait as long as it took.....

... I left him standing there and drove off to check the other campgrounds. I found them to be in open grassy fields with just a single young cottonwood in each site—not nearly as nice as where we are. I think we'll not move. We have to stay here a day or two longer to await a package.

... When I returned, I took a short walk from where he was and recorded some songs of Baltimore

Orioles and Western Meadowlarks. They'll be unremarkable because there was a pretty good breeze rustling noisy cottonwood leaves by then. Jim told me I really didn't have to hang around and could go do what I wanted; he was determined to stick it out until noon. I hated to leave him, but couldn't see spending three more hours waiting in the truck while he waited at that cavity. So I came back to the trailer and washed Charlie and baked a Mrs. Smith's pie. I went back and picked him up at noon.

.... It turned out that he had never seen the Red-headed Woodpecker again. Worse luck. We see all those wonderful close-ups of the bird in publications, but have yet to have one allow that kind of close approach by us.

.... While he was waiting, he caught sight of a flicker at a hole near the top of another steep, broken-off limb. The bird had a black moustache, so was probably a Yellow-shafted, but might have been an intergrade. Jim couldn't see it well enough to determine any other field marks, and besides, he's not up on all the distinctions between the two forms. He really couldn't photograph it because he would have to have aimed his camera up at a 70' angle. So he didn't watch it much, devoting his attention to the possible Red-headed Woodpecker.

.... The thing that he enjoyed the most about his vigil was watching a pair of courting(?) Orchard Orioles. On three different occasions, he saw the male flying along slowly about eight feet above the ground, fluttering its wings in an exaggerated fashion. The female flutted along about ten feet behind him. They flew at least sixty feet in this fashion before disappearing from view in the trees. He was surprised to see the female following the male, instead of the male chasing the female, as is the case with most Icterids.

.... Around noon the wind got up strongly, and blew intermittently hard and harder all afternoon. According to WeatherRadio, it got as strong as 30 mph in Ogallala. Although the temperatures were delightful (mid-70's), the wind kept me indoors all afternoon. There was a threat of severe thunderstorms for a while, but they cancelled it for this county. However, we've had a little thunder and lightning and a minute amount of rain.

.... The wind has now nearly died down; the front has passed, I guess. It's supposed to be somewhat cooler tomorrow, but not the bitter cold we've had so much of.

.... We've been getting lousy TV reception throughout the trip, and finally decided after a bit of experimentation that something's wrong either with our power antenna or with the connections. Jim tried to check the connections by climbing up on the roof of the trailer via the truck roof (I can't watch him do that!), but it didn't do any good. So this afternoon he drove to a nearby RV repair facility and made an appointment to take it in tomorrow morning at 8:30. (We couldn't call, for our cellphone doesn't work down here behind the dam.) There goes another morning of birding, but it can't be helped. We'd really like to be able to get some TV. We're quite out of touch with what's happening. An occasional newspaper is all we get.

..... We still haven't visited any of the places around here that seem to have the best potential for May birding.

Wed., May 18, 2005

Lake Ogallala SRA, NE

No entry.

8:45 pm, Thurs., May 19, 2005

Lake Ogallala SRA, NE

..... Yesterday was a beautiful, clear day, which started out chilly, but ended up in the mid-70's. Fairly windy in the morning, but much calmer in the afternoon. It would have been a great morning to go birding, but we had that appointment to get a new TV antenna installed.

..... On the way down to the RV repair facility, we had a little time to spare and stopped at the dam overlook where the Cliff Swallows were nesting. I looked down another place from where I looked yesterday, and it seemed as though they were nesting right under the ledge at my feet. I walked around the bend onto the highway shoulder where I could see under the ledge, and there were no nests there. However, the birds kept hovering at the top three or four feet of bank. Finally I realized that the ledge was just dirt, and that recent rains had soaked down three or four feet. The birds were using that moist dirt for nest material. It didn't seem nearly as wet as what Cliff Swallows usually use, but I guess that's all they had.

..... It took an hour and a half to get the antenna installed. (The man who did it refused to accept payment for the extra half-hour, because that's not what he had quoted. It seems to be a one-man operation.) Then we had to go down into town for groceries, buy propane, get the holding tank dumped, and before we knew it, it was time for lunch. We'd shot the entire morning.

..... Late in the afternoon I did take a walk on a hike/bike trail that goes south from the end of the campground. When it reaches the edge of a marsh, it turns and follows it for quite a distance. I didn't go much past the start of the marsh, but found lots of Marsh Wrens singing. I wonder if they're eastern or western ones. Westerns have bigger repertoires than easterns, but all have pretty large ones.

..... This morning we finally did the drive to the west end of the lake that was so recommended for birds. We stopped a couple of places on the north shore. One place there were 100-200 White Pelicans loafing on the mudflat where a creek enters the lake. I could see no sign that they were nesting there. The only shorebirds with them were a handful of American Avocets.

..... We continued on to the end of the lake. I wanted to see what the undammed North Platte looks like, so we continued on past the end to Oshkosh, where a road south crossed the river. Unfortunately they

were working on the bridge and had one-way traffic across it with a traffic signal. There was no way to take a picture of the river facing westward, but I did snap a couple facing eastward, but they were toward the sun. I've always heard that the early pioneers described the river as "a mile wide and an inch deep." In some places it is indeed a mile wide, but in many places it's more than an inch deep.

... After we got across the bridge, there was a gravel road that seemed to follow the course of the river, so we drove it a short distance, but we couldn't really see the river for the trees. We did find a snake in the road, and Jim, of course, had to stop and snap pictures. It turned out to be dead—probably from a collision with a passing vehicle. He thinks it may be a gopher snake—will have to figure it out later, but I can't get too excited about adding a headless snake to our slide collection.

... We returned to US 26, the road that goes around the south side of Lake McConaughy. Where this road crosses the North Platte, it passes through about a half-mile stretch where there are marshes on both sides—called the Lewellen Marshes because of a nearby town with that name. There is some river flow, but I think the marshes are due to the water backed up by the dam. I walked all along that stretch crossing back and forth across the highway to see both sides. Nothing unusual in the way of birds—lots of Red-winged Blackbirds and Marsh Wrens, and a single Green Heron. It was easy to walk, and Jim followed me in the truck, stopping wherever he wanted. The road has nice wide shoulders there.

On the south side of the river we soon came to the Ash Hollow Cemetery on the right. The birding literature directed us to turn left there and drive east on a gravel road. It claims it is the single best birding spot in the area. I was sorry it was 10:00 and getting pretty warm when we got there. I could easily have spent an entire morning there. The road runs for two or three miles along the north-facing bluff. On the south side is a steep slope heavily vegetated with an amazing variety of trees (junipers and broad-leafed) and shrubs. One shrub had beautiful pink flowers. It was up the slope a bit, but we took telephoto shots. I'll have to figure it out later. The north side was grassland, then more marsh. We drove to the far end of the road, where a two-tracker extends farther into Clear Creek Waterfowl Production Area, but we turned around there and drove back slowly. This turned out to be a good decision, for now we had our backs to the sun, and the wind was such that the dust didn't catch up with us when we stopped.

... I walked portions of the road—should have walked it all, but by then it was really getting hot. Even in the short time I spent there, I heard a Bell's Vireo singing in one place and in a piece of grassland, both Eastern and Western Meadowlarks were holding forth. I recorded all of these. [Later I read in Nature's Music that Eastern and Western Meadowlarks sometimes mimic each other. I wonder what I got. Even if I got sounds of just one species, both must have been in the area.]

... Ash Hollow State Historic Park is just south of there. Unfortunately the visitors center is only open from Memorial Day to Labor Day. It sounds like a really interesting place. Prehistoric animals have been excavated nearby, early Indians used the area extensively, and here the Oregon Trail had one of its steepest sections where it descended from the top of the bluff down to the river floodplain. We did visit the

Oregon Trail spot, which is called Windlass Hill, because a legend (not true) developed later that they had to use a windlass to get the wagons down the grade. They actually used the usual method of locking the wheels and hoping for the best. Actually the grade wasn't nearly as bad as others they had to descend farther west.

....The road continued on to Ogallala. We called the PO when we got a cellphone signal and found our package had arrived, so we drove into town and picked it up. If it hadn't come, I think I'd have gone back to that road across from the cemetery tomorrow, but other even more interesting spots farther north beckon.

....It got up to 87' this afternoon, and (something I thought never occurred in the prairies) there was absolutely no breeze. That made it pretty uncomfortable. Still we spent most of the afternoon outside—except Charlie, for whom we turned on the AC in the trailer; he's getting pretty fuzzy.

....I had bought some oranges, hoping to coax the Baltimore and Orchard Orioles to come in. Jim very skeptically nailed a couple of halves to a tree yesterday, and nothing came then. But today when we got back from our drive, we discovered they had been nibbled at. We no sooner got into the trailer than the male and female Orchard were there. The Baltimores soon came around, too. Jim sat in his blind most of the afternoon photographing them. I think he got photos of all but the female Orchard.

8:40 pm, Fri., May 20, 2005

Ogallala Lk. SRA, NE

....We decided to stay here over the weekend for several reasons: First, it's not prudent to arrive at a new campground on a Friday or Saturday. You never know what the availability of sites will be, although where we're going next, I doubt there will be a problem.

....Second, we're having a heat wave. Temperature topped out at 94' today, and stayed at that level for hours. There was some breeze, so we sat outside in it, but it was nice to have the air-conditioned trailer for refuge from time to time and, especially, for Charlie. Our site is shady except for two or three mid-morning hours, so the A/C is working very well. It doesn't work well at these temperatures in the sun.

....Third, those orioles (Orchard and Baltimore) really love orange halves! Jim was happy to spend most of the day in the blind photographing them, and also a Warbling Vireo, which came in to the water drip from time to time. I know he improved his shots of females, which are much warier than the males.

....Finally, the package that we picked up at the PO yesterday was an initial copy of one of our videos that we're making for Sea and Sage. I thought I could go through it in an hour or so and make just a few suggestions. It turned out not to be nearly as well done as the first one they did. I had to go over and over it and write up all the changes that needed to be made. Then I organized them in WordPerfect and finally copied that with two fingers on the little PocketMail keyboard. The project took all morning.

....I don't think I've mentioned that we have a robin's nest in our site. It's about 10 feet up in a crotch of an oak tree right outside our dinette window. The adults are feeding three very energetic chicks and are

definitely campground birds. We almost have to watch our feet to keep from stepping on them. Jim has photographed the nest by standing on the picnic table. The adults pay no attention to him, no matter how close he gets. I sit outside practically under the nest in the shade most of the day and watch them. It's amazing how they've grown since we've been here. Jim finds it repulsive the way the adults sometimes eat the fecal sacs instead of carrying them off. I suppose they provide protein.

Although the robins don't care a bit about our presence, for a while this morning they attacked the orioles whenever then came in. One robin tried out the orange to see what the orioles were eating, but couldn't cling to the bark of the tree or the orange without lots of fluttering, so soon gave up. After that it left the orioles alone. The robins have also chased the ubiquitous Common Grackles and once one attacked a starling viciously when it was foraging on the ground 30 feet from the nest tree. The starling accepted the blows stoically, but continued feeding, then flew away and never came back. Jim says they're nesting pretty far from here.

... This morning, as every day, I awoke around 4:45 to the dawn chorus. This time there was no wind, so I decided to go out and record it for a while. This I did for about an hour—until the traffic on the top of the dam got too continuous for good recordings.

It's fun whenever we travel to listen to the dawn chorus and try to enumerate the birds that are singing in the order in which they start to sing. Here the Western Kingbirds take the prize hands down, for they were singing when I awoke for a while at 2:30, but were really going strong during dawn chorus time. Robins are probably the first to start up at dawn, then Mourning Doves. After that, it's sort of a tie among all the rest, the most common here being Common Grackle, Yellow Warbler, the two orioles, and Warbling Vireo.

... Because of the heat, we didn't do much after lunch except sit around, Jim in his blind, of course. There was a 10-20 mph "breeze" in Ogallala per WeatherRadio, but I think it was more like 10 mph here in the shelter of the trees. It helped. This afternoon a lot of beautiful cumulonimbus clouds developed, but no thunder storms ensued. They dissipated at sunset. Forecast is for a high in the mid-80s tomorrow. That will be a relief. We're going to stay here til Sunday morning before moving on.

... Ugh. A bunch of giggly tent-camping kids just arrived in the site right behind us and proceeded to hang a big light up in the tree to shine right in our bedroom window. So much for the peace and quiet and darkness we've enjoyed up until now in this campground! We hope they'll go to bed early and turn that light off. It's only 9:10 now.

8:30 pm, Sat., May 21, 2005

Ogallala Lk. SRA, NE

... This will definitely be our final night here, but I'm really glad we stayed the extra day. The orioles became more and more numerous at our orange halves and polished off an entire orange in half a day. Around noon Jim came in and asked, "Are there any other orioles here besides Orchard and Baltimore?"

When I queried him about what he had seen, he reported a bird that looked like an adult male Baltimore, but had much more white on its upperparts and seemed not to be totally black on its head. I immediately suspected what he had seen and got excited. The Platte River valleys east of the Rockies are where hybrid Baltimore x Bullock's Orioles are found. In fact, the two species were lumped on this basis for a while (remember the "Northern Oriole"?), but then resplit. Now they aren't even next to one another in AOU order, but I forget the details.

... Anyhow we watched carefully for an hour or two, hoping it would return. I was about to take a nap, but Jim remained in his blind just in case the bird returned. I told him to radio me if the bird came in. I had just lain down when he called. I looked out the window and, sure enough, there was a bird with big white wing patches, not just the wide white wing bar of the Baltimore. Its head was almost totally black, but had a narrow, somewhat dotted, orange supercilium. Otherwise, it looked like a Baltimore. It certainly fit my conception of what a hybrid might look like. Jim photographed it both then and when it returned once more later on. If he got a digital image, we'll send it to Nancy for the website version of this diary.

... Otherwise it was an uneventful day for me. I thought about driving east and exploring other areas, but decided instead to defrost the refrigerator and plan the next leg of our trip. By then it was noon.

... Last night was the warmest night of the trip—only got down to 70'. We had to keep the back window curtains drawn because of the lights behind us, so we were pretty warm. The people did shield the lights somewhat when I asked them to. They yakked until after 11:00. I stayed up until then, then put in my earplugs and went to bed.

... This morning the wind shifted to the northwest as a dry front passed and the day was much cooler than yesterday—a high of 86', instead 94'. A nice breeze made it quite pleasant outdoors. We still used the AC for Charlie. The trailer gets hotter than the outdoors even when we're in the shade.

8:20 pm, Sun., May 22, 2005

Cottonwood Lake SRA, Merriman, NE

... I didn't go to bed until 11:30 last night, trying unsuccessfully to wait until the noisy bunch behind us quieted down. It turned out to have adults and kids of all ages, not just teen-agers. The adults were the noisy ones this time. They also had a dog that they allowed to bark ceaselessly during the day and a screaming child. That one really puzzled us. The child, who was maybe 4-6 years old, was standing on a picnic table screaming at one of the adults or older teen-agers. The adult just sat there, and the child just screamed on and on. It was a highly ambiguous scream—almost as though the child had been told to do so for therapy of some sort. The screaming didn't cease until Jim and I gave them some rather obvious dirty looks.

... Anyway, at 11:30 pm I gave up, put in my earplugs, and went to bed. The dawn chorus awakened me before 5:00, but that was OK because we wanted to drive through the sandhills in the early morning hours

before the bird activity stopped. I also wanted pictures of the hills with some nice shadows to give them definition. Most of the rest of the campground was up at that hour too, for they wanted to be out on the lake in their boats fishing, so we didn't have to worry about the noise we made hooking up. We didn't care if we awoke the people behind us, who seemed to be the only people not stirring.

... We drove straight north—as straight as the sandhills permitted—on SR 61 to Merriman, a distance of about 125 miles. We stopped frequently for pictures typical of the area—the hills, the ranches, the attempts to irrigate the land, and the ponds and lakes in the depressions between hills.

... The road was pretty awful, except for a couple of stretches of 20-30 miles each that were fine. Some of the bumps were due to wear and tear and others were major depressions at transverse seams every 30-60 feet. They apparently laid the pavement in blocks. On some of the steep portions of the newer stretches of road, however, it was interesting to see that they laid a coating of asphalt in the ditch on both sides to keep rainwater from undercutting the road as it runs across the sandy soil.

... A little information about the sandhills might be interesting. It is mostly taken from the NebraskaLand Magazine's "Birding Nebraska" issue referenced earlier. This 19,000-square-mile area is "the largest sand dune area in the Western Hemisphere, and one of the largest grass-stabilized dune regions in the world." The dunes are very recent geologically, having been formed since the last ice age during a period of "prolonged drought from 3,500 to 1,500 years ago." When the drought eased, vegetation began growing on the dunes, stabilizing them. Their contours today are essentially what they were 1,500 years ago. The entire landscape is underlain by the huge Ogallala Aquifer, and water seeps to the surface between the dunes, forming wetlands and even feeding rivers that flow out of the area. There are "about 1,600 lakes of 10 acres or more" and countless smaller ones, as well as marshes and wet meadows.

... This country was opened for homesteading in the early 1900s, with each homesteader allowed to file on a square mile of land. Despite the larger plots of land (1/4 square mile was typical in other areas), every farm failed! The sand is too porous and the rainfall too sparse for dry-land farming.

... Now the country is still almost entirely in private hands, but cattle ranching is the main activity. I'd like to know how large the average ranch is, but we certainly saw lots of ranch headquarters buildings. [Later in Merriman we saw a display of sandhills cattle brands and counted 98, but don't know how wide an area they represent.] Maybe they're concentrated along the highway with long narrow holdings extending back from there—just speculation. The cattle must still be handled on horseback, because no wheeled vehicles can maneuver on the soft terrain. Consequently we saw several pastures full of mares and their colts. In the southern portions of the region, where the hills aren't so high, we saw some attempts at center-pivot irrigation, and I took a photo of the only cornfield I saw all day with a center-pivot unit in it. (The cornfield was still fallow, but the old stalks were unmistakable.)

... It took us 4-5 hours to drive the road, partly because we had to drive 30-40 mph on some of the bad stretches, and partly because we stopped here and there to bird. There was no shoulder, and we didn't

dare get off the road for fear we might get stuck in the sand, but there was so little traffic, we just picked places where there was good visibility, turned on our emergency flasher lights, and stopped right in the driving lane.

... Despite our cursory method of birding and never getting the scope out, we identified 26 species, including some new for the trip. On the grassy upland grassland they were mainly Mourning Doves, Horned Larks, Western Meadowlarks, Western Kingbirds, Lark Sparrows, and a few little brown jobs that were probably Savannah Sparrows. A couple of times we saw small flocks of Lark Buntings. In the wet depressions the diversity was greater. A few of the more interesting species were Western Grebe, Black Tern, Trumpeter Swans (a pair each in two different places), White-faced Ibis, Canvasback, Redhead, Wilson's Phalarope, and Long-billed Curlew. I suspect most of them are breeders. I didn't see any shorebirds that were clearly migrants.

... Enroute we passed exactly two towns, Arthur and Hyannis (someone nostalgic for their old Cape Cod home?), both very tiny (100-200 people), but both the county seats of their respective counties. They both looked desperately poor, as does Merriman, the town near where we're staying.

... We got to Merriman around 11:30, so decided to see if there was a cafe in town. Appropriately enough, it's called the Sand Cafe. Jim, of course, selected the Sunday buffet, but I didn't think it looked very good (Jim said it was only so-so). I looked over the sandwich menu, and along with the usual hamburgers, BLTs, and ham-and-cheeses, there was something called a Budda, as well as a mini-Budda. I had ask the waiter, who was the high-school-age son of the women who owns the place, what it was. It was a hamburger smothered in sauted onions, green peppers, and mushrooms, with a slice each of cheddar and Swiss cheese. It sounded good, and it was. Everything was freshly cooked to order.

... On the way out I asked the owner, who was very jolly and friendly, why it was called that and if it was a common sandwich in this part of the country. She told me that the former owner of the place had a strapping teen-age son named Budda (pronounced boo-da) who told his mother, "Fix me a sandwich that'll fill me up." That's how it all started. The mini-Budda, which I had, came along later. It was plenty!

We had two choices of places to stay in this town. There was a place a bit north of the junction that was listed in the Nebraska tourist guide and had six full-hook-up sites. There was also Cottonwood Lake State Recreation Area just east of town off US 20. It doesn't have any hook-ups. Although the idea of full hook-ups was mighty appealing, we decided to take a look at the SRA, and fell in love with the place. Finally we're backed in to the habitat, not out in the middle of a grassy lawn with the lake far away. We lucked out and got a beautiful site that backs up to one of the sandhill lakes. All around the edge is a narrow band of cattails. Eastern Cottonwoods grow here and there, but they seem to be old and scraggly, so there's little shade. Several recent years of drought have taken their toll. This spring has been quite wet, so the lakes are brimming with water and our trailer is only a foot or so above the water level. Fortunately the weather has cooled off, so we could accept a sunny site. There are also some nearby depressions that have wet

meadows in them. Even though I've done little walking around because the Sunday fishermen were still around and it was noisy, I've already found some nice birds, mostly by ear: Long-billed Curlew, Willet, Common Nighthawk, American Bittern. Jim saw blackbirds harassing a hawk of some sort, but it disappeared before he could ID it.

..... Just as the sun went down, we watched a full moon rise over the lake behind the trailer, and Jim attempted photos of the scene, but the lighting was tricky and they may not come out.

..... Better quit before my battery goes dead. Don't have electricity here. I can recharge it tomorrow using the inverter, but it's under the bed and Jim has gone to sleep and I don't want to disturb him.

4:15 pm, Mon., May 23, 2005

Cottonwood Lake SRA, Merriman, NE

..... I decided to write this up early so I can power my computer with solar panels and the inverter, then recharge my battery.

..... This morning we toured Lacreek NWR just north of here in South Dakota. We followed directions in the June, 1990, issue of *Winging It*. To get there we drove east from Merriman about 10 miles to an unnamed road near milepost 146 that was signed as going to Eli. Eli, if we saw it at all, looked more like a ranch headquarters than a town, but maybe the town was actually off the road a bit.

..... The northbound road was paved to the South Dakota border, then nominally gravel. The instructions told us to follow it to the town of Tuthill and turn left, following the signs. The majority of the road was through the sandhills, then it abruptly descended to more or less flat prairie. We were astounded by the quick change. Of course, as soon as we got on the flatlands, the land was farmed.

..... When we got to a small cluster of buildings including a nondescript post office, which we presumed was Tuthill, we saw no sign for the refuge, but we did see an intersection. I caught sight of the back of a sign past the intersection and got out and checked it. Sure enough, it said to turn west to Lacreek NWR. After that we did fine. In just one mile, at the top of a hill we found the entrance to the refuge and were able to pick up a brochure with a map and a bird list.

..... From the brochure I learned that "Lacreek," sometimes incorrectly rendered "La Creek," is a corruption of "Lake Creek," the name of a creek in the area which ended in a lake.

..... The refuge itself is quite varied in habitat, with lots of lakes, marshes, mudflats, and prairie. I think what impressed me most was the huge Black-tailed Prairie Dog town, the biggest one I've ever seen. It sprawled over hilltop after hilltop. A ranger we met up with told us it's about 600 acres in area. I asked him if there were any endangered Black-footed Ferrets there, and he said no. Furthermore they wouldn't try to introduce them because they require a prairie dog town of at least 1000 acres. They might have been there before the prairie dogs were nearly exterminated in the 1920s, but no one kept records then. The refuge is one of many established in the mid-1930s, a priceless legacy of the depression.

. . . . There is a sizeable White Pelican rookery there, but overambitious (we learned later) electric-fence installers had fenced across the access road. Later we were told we could have just opened the gate and driven up to the labelled viewpoint. We did see a bit of the rookery through an opening a bit later, though.

. . . . We drove all the refuge roads, some county roads that transverse the refuge, and also a one-way loop tour road that starts and ends at the headquarters area. There is a tall look-out tower near the headquarters, which I made Jim climb to take some overall scenes. (I'm too scared of heights to attempt it.) In addition to the prairie dogs and pelicans, there are lots of breeding waterfowl, Blue-winged Teal and Canada Geese being most conspicuous. The ranger told me there were shorebirds in one place along the tour road, but I really didn't see many—just a few Willets and American Avocets. There's a greater variety where we're staying at Cottonwood Lake, even though it's much smaller.

. . . . A north wind was blowing 20-30 mph the entire time we were there. The southern east-west portion of the loop tour road was bordered on the north by an almost continuous line of dense shrubs. There were a number of land birds in the shrubs and, to keep out of the wind, they were mostly on our side of the hedge. Yellow Warblers, Bell's Vireos, and one Empidonax flycatcher, possibly a Willow or Alder were present. The road was extremely close to the bushes and Jim lucked out with a couple of shots of a Bell's Vireo. This is the yellowish belli subspecies and quite different from our western ones.

. . . . After we finished touring the refuge, we again followed the instructions in the Winging It article and drove 7 miles due west to a T, then south to where the road intersected with a paved road and continued south back to Merriman. Where it reentered Nebraska, it became SR 61 and came in at the center of town. The 7 miles west from the refuge to the T showed signs of being pretty awful after a rain. It was mainly dirt with little gravel and had deep ruts in it. Fortunately it was dry when we were there. If I were visiting the refuge after a rain, I'd find another route out. The road south of Tuthill to the Nebraska border might get muddy, too, but it didn't have any ruts in it, perhaps because it sees little traffic. There is another way there, but it involves driving more miles and approaching Tuthill from the north.

. . . . As we reentered Merriman from the north, we looked at the six-site RV park we had not patronized. It looked pretty nondescript—just a few weedy sites next to a dirt town street. We're glad we're at Cottonwood Lake, but it would have been acceptable if that was all there was.

. . . . I tried to find a grocery store and finally asked a woman on the street, who told that the town doesn't have one. (I wonder how far they have to drive for groceries.) We tried to find a payphone at the gas station, and the town doesn't have one of those either, but they were happy to let Jim use their regular phone to call an 800 number. We won't impose on them by checking our PocketMail there, though. We have reservations in an RV Park in Valentine, 60 miles east, over the upcoming Memorial Day weekend and had been asked to call them and tell them exactly which day we planned to arrive, thus the phone call.

. . . . I just looked out the trailer window and saw about eight White Pelicans fishing on the sparkling blue water. It's really a pretty scene, with cattails just behind them, then the sandhills in the distance, and all

topped by some tall thunderheads.

.... Those thunderheads are east of here, so no threat to us, but there is a 50% chance of our getting hit this evening. Our site is grassy and down a slight slope from the road. Hope it doesn't rain much and get us stuck again. We're parked as close to the road as it is level, and Jim plans to spread his tarp on the grass to keep it dry. I'm skeptical if that will work in the wind that always accompanies such storms.

4:15 pm., Tues., May 24, 2005

Cottonwood Lake SRA, Merriman, NE

.... The thunder storms did not develop in our area. All we got were a few spits of rain after dark. It never looked particularly threatening.

.... After I went to bed last night at 10:30, I could hear Wilson's Snipe winnowing over the lake. There seemed to be two of them--maybe more. Canada Geese were also calling. It was totally dark and had been for some time.

.... Temperature got down to 52_ last night and up to the low 70's today. It started out mostly sunny this morning with a brisk breeze. (I've figured out from WeatheRadio that anything less than 20 mph is merely a breeze. Between 20 and 30 it might be a breeze or a wind. Above that it's a wind.) As I write this now, the sky is 3/4 cloudy and the wind has died down so much that I just spent an hour or so outside doing some recording. Got lots of Flicker, Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbird, and Common Grackle--with bits of a lot of other things. Nothing memorable and nothing solo.

.... This morning we wandered around the campground for a while, then drove slowly out the quarter-mile road to the highway. There we turned around so Jim could shoot the Willet that hangs out in one particular place. It's in full breeding plumage and all speckled with blackish. It allowed rather close approach because it was wading in the sparse, wet marsh grasses right behind the self-registration station for the park. It was obviously used to having people stop there and get out of their vehicles.

.... We had just finished that and were looking for the Upland Sandpiper that we saw yesterday when we caught sight of a dark bird on a fence post ahead. It was a Black Tern! I crept the truck slowly toward it. (Jim got mad at me because I didn't maintain an even speed, but the bumpy road didn't permit it.) The bird allowed us to get as close as we wanted to. The lighting was perfect, and I was amazed to discover that there is a beautiful mauve iridescence to the gray wing coverts. I had always thought the light areas were just gray—with head and body black, of course.

.... Another Black Tern was a couple of posts farther along, and Jim photographed that one, too. Although sexes are nearly alike, we thought there might be some slight differences, but both had the same iridescence. Then the second bird flew off and started foraging over the marsh. Pretty soon it came back to the other bird with something in its bill and, hovering over her (probably), he (probably) passed the food to her. We decided it was courtship feeding. I backed up the truck so Jim could focus his lens on her.

Pretty soon the male came back with more food, and Jim was ready. He blazed away at 8 frames per second and a shutter speed of 1/800 sec. We have no idea how many pictures he shot, but some of them have to be great. We were thrilled! Just for good measure, the male came in once more and Jim got another series before the female decided to fly off. Again we lucked out because we had birds that were used to people. Jim has photographed Black Terns before, but never this well.

.....The rest of the morning we spent by driving to Bowring Ranch State Historic Park, the access road to which is a couple of miles north of Merriman on Hwy 61. When we turned off the highway, we followed a good gravel road that wound through the sandhills, then went down into a slight depression, where the old ranch houses are located. There is also a large interpretive center. Unfortunately the park buildings don't open until Memorial Day, but we wandered the grounds. The ranch house was huge, and I'd have loved to tour it. There was also a sod house. Whether it is new or was constructed for the visitors to see I don't know. There are no interpretive signs on the grounds. I guess they take you on a guided tour. Unfortunately we'll be gone by then. There were a few cars in the lot, apparently of people getting ready for the opening this weekend. Some chickens and a noisy gobbler were in the barnyard, so apparently it's a living history ranch. [Later I learned that Mrs. Bowring served in the US Senate. What I read was somewhat ambiguous, and she may have finished a term after her husband died.]

.....We still had lots of time to spare before lunchtime, so I decided to walk the road from the ranch house back to the highway in order to experience the sandhills at close range. I climbed a couple of them to take pictures of the overall scene. The sand is very fine and compacts well, so it was easy walking. I also took pictures of several wildflowers that were sticking up or hunkering down here and there among the bunch grasses and low shrubs. This all seems to fit the definition of short-grass prairie. Most of my pictures were digital so I can try to figure them out soon, if they're in any of the books I have.

5:00 pm., Wed., May 25, 2005

Valentine Motel & RV Park, Valentine, NE

.....Yesterday afternoon the sky gradually got cloudier and cloudier, with thunderheads here and there. The forecast was for a 60% chance of thunderstorms during the night. We were parked on a grassy site that was down a slight slope from the gravel road. Since we feared we might not be able to haul the trailer out in the morning if it rained heavily in the night, we hooked up and moved to a different site, this time a level dirt one.

.....After that we drove down to the front entrance area where the habitat looked sort of right for Yellow Rails. Since they say those birds nest at Lacreek, I thought there was a possibility there might be some there. I clicked my two quarters together in the correct cadence, tik-tik tik-tik- tik, alternately, for quite a while, but no response came. We did hear lots of winnowing Wilson's Snipe and honking Canada Geese

.....We were glad we'd moved, because we were awakened by a noisy thunder storm around midnight. I

got up and listened to WeatherRadio and discovered the only severe thunderstorm warning in effect was for the Hyannis area 60 miles south of us. I think we must have been on the northern edge of it. Anyway, I set the radio for alarm mode and went back to bed. Fortunately the alarm never went off.

.... We awakened to glowering skies and a cold wind. Soon afterwards it started to rain—just rain, not thunder and lightning this time. This lasted for a couple of hours. Since we only had a 60-mile drive to make today, I fixed us a leisurely "real breakfast" as Jim terms it: scrambled eggs with ham, biscuits and strawberry jam. I had to thaw the ham over the pilot for a while, since we didn't have electricity for the microwave.

.... After it stopped, I went out and photographed a couple of flowers on the dunes at the edge of the campground. We downloaded my flowers from yesterday and today into Jim's computer and I made a cursory attempt to identify some of them. None came right away. I may need another book. Anyway, I didn't want to run out of battery power and have to hook up to the inverter, so I gave up.

.... We hooked up and left around 9:30, lost an hour to a time change back to central time, and arrived here in Valentine around noon. There was no one in the motel/RV park office when we got here, so we just picked a site, dropped off the trailer and the dog, and went out to lunch and did some shopping.

.... It turns out we're right across the street from a nice IGA grocery store with the best meat I've seen in ages—lots better than most chain grocery stores. (IGA = Independent Grocers of America. They buy staples through the association, but otherwise run their own affairs.)

.... The RV park is quite nice. We're backed up to a thick row of shrubs, and there is also a large lawn nearby with nice big trees. We've seen a Least Flycatcher and an American Redstart out the trailer window and heard lots of other birds in the trees and bushes without really trying. The campground is right in town (population 2820), but behind the motel from the highway, and promises to be a good place to wait out the Memorial Day holiday. We plan to make day trips to a number of interesting-sounding places not far from here.

posted 05/30/05

Return to page telling about [Sylvia's Trip Diary](#).....

Return to the [HOME page](#) of this website.

Sea & Sage Audubon
PO Box 5447, Irvine CA 92616
(949) 261-7963