

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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*by Sylvia R. Gallagher*

*Photographs by Jim & Sylvia Gallagher*

## Part IV

**9:45 am, Tuesday, August 2, 2011**

**Heritage RV Park, Homer, AK**

I've been having trouble with my left knee and yesterday I tore around the Creamer's nature center trying to keep up with the biologist who was removing birds from her mist nets. The trail was narrow and uneven with frequent roots and other obstacles. This exacerbated my problem, so for the past week I've been trying to keep from doing too much walking, especially on uneven terrain.

I really wanted to walk the Boreal Forest loop at Creamer's Refuge, for Donelda had told me it showed many of the features of the north country that we'd been reading about. She said the trail was nice and level—wheelchair accessible with lots of boardwalk.

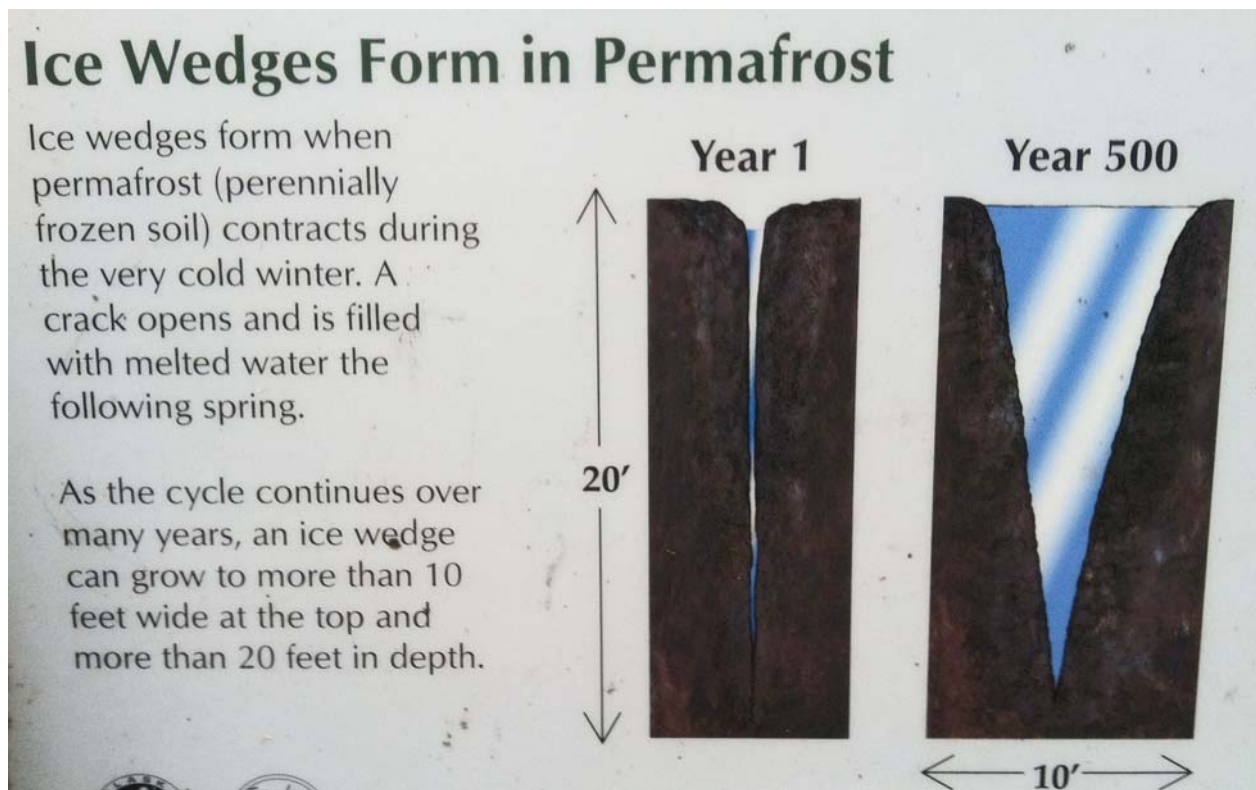


Boardwalk nature trail  
Creamer's Field Refuge, Fairbanks, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

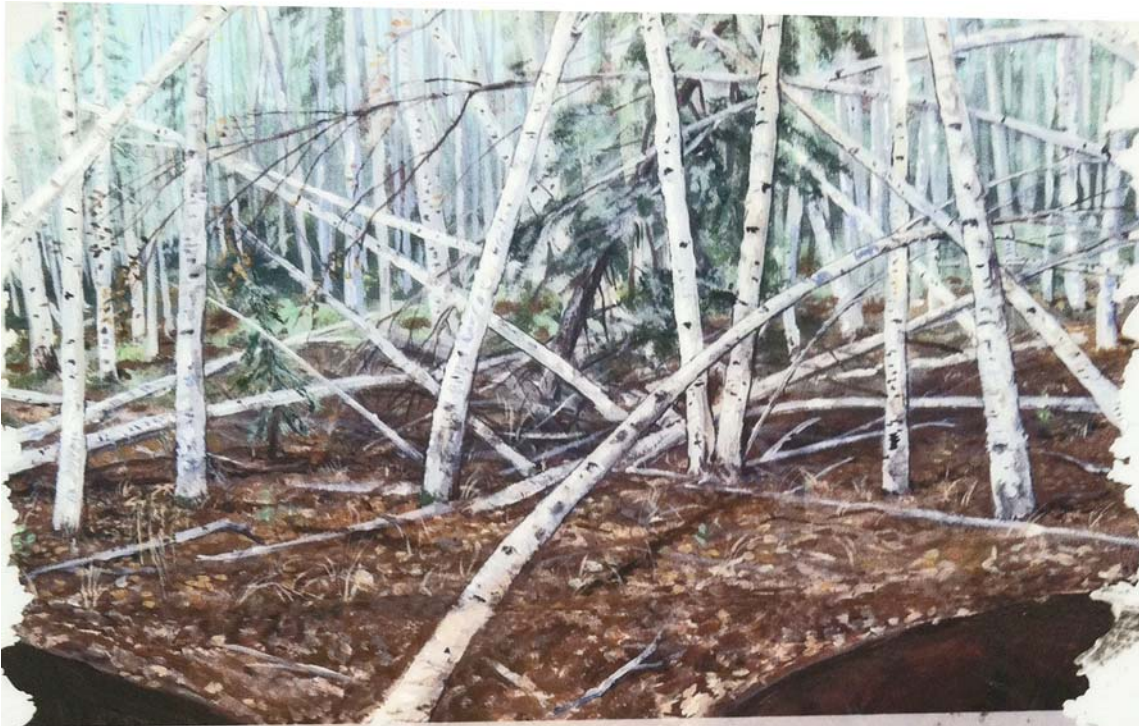
Despite the fact that it was nearly 2 miles long, on Tues., July 26, I decided to do it. Every step was painful and I took it very slowly, taking care not to twist my knee, but I completed it. It was extremely interesting to see the effects of freezing and thawing on the landscape of a forest and I took dozens of photos of the signs along the way and of the features--such things as drunken forest, ice wedges, thermokarst ponds, undulating terrain, burned areas, wind-blown sand dunes (formed during last ice age when this area was not forested, etc. This took most of the morning. I could prepare an entire lecture based just on the photos I took there, combined with information from Pielow's book, *After the Ice Age*, which I mentioned earlier. An example is two photos of a sign about "ice wedges," followed by a photo of one.



Sign – Ice Wedges  
Creamer's Field Refuge, Fairbanks, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



## Why is the Forest Collapsing?

When ice wedges begin to melt, the overlying soil and trees begin to slump and fill the ice-free trough. This trough becomes a drainage for snowmelt and rainwater. Since 1996, the slumping has been dramatic. Because of the unstable terrain, the trail was rerouted northward 3 times between 1996 and 2006. The trail was first constructed in 1977 and prior to 1996 the trail had never been moved.

## An **Unstable** Future?

Many scientists agree that the global climate has warmed in recent times, especially in the northern Boreal Forest. If the warming trend continues, the boreal forest **will** change dramatically.

Sign – Collapsing Forest near Ice Wedges  
Creamer's Field Refuge, Fairbanks, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

---



Tilted and fallen trees near ice wedge  
Creamer's Field Refuge, Fairbanks, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---

Meanwhile Jim hung around the open field (old pasture from the former creamery) hoping the Sandhill Cranes would come close enough for photos. Donelda had lucked out on another day. She was with her Rottweiler (dogs are permitted on the trails) and the Sandhill Cranes happened to be near the trail. The uneasiness that she thought might have been created by Oakley's presence caused the birds to go into a little of their territorial(?) dance and she got some wonderful photos of the behavior. Unfortunately the cranes were way out in the field all morning, so Jim got nothing.

After that we had lunch at the Cookie Jar Cafe. I had a nice crisp salad with excellent honey-mustard dressing and a small piece of crab quiche. The filling was nice, but the crust was sort of a biscuit dough and so soft that it was barely detectable. It was definitely not pie crust.

Although my leg really ached, it seemed that Tuesday afternoon was the only time we could go to the Large Animal Research Station (LARS) and see captive Muskoxen, Barren-ground Caribou, and Reindeer. We were with a large tour group and stood outside the paddocks with the animals not far away beyond the fences. The young woman who was our guide did an excellent job of explaining all sorts of things about the animals. She's only a freshman in college, but had been working and volunteering at the center all through high school. We got some photos, but sounds were impossible with all the people. So Donelda arranged for us to go back the next day when there was no tour going on and get some sounds and maybe some more pictures. We did that in the afternoon of Wed., July 27. See Jim's photos of Muskox & Caribou.



Muskox  
Large Animal Research Station, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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Muskox

Large Animal Research Station, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK



Muskox

Large Animal Research Station, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK

Caribou and Reindeer are different subspecies of the same species. They can be separated easily because the antlers of Reindeer are more spreading. After I looked at our pictures, I discovered that neither of us photographed the Reindeer.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---



Caribou – male and female  
Large Animal Research Station, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK

Wed. morning, July 27, my leg was still bothering me. (By then the whole leg ached, not just the cartilage beside the knee.) I had to get some prescriptions filled and do some shopping, so I drove over to Fred Meyer (sort of a Wal-Mart type of place) across the street from our RV park. Every item on my list was a major search, and the fact that the store was in major upheaval due to remodeling didn't help. I did succeed in finding everything, though, except one prescription item. They called across the street to Safeway's pharmacy, which had it. I made Jim go across and get it for me; I just couldn't walk any more that day. I had spent an hour and a half in Fred Meyer, partly because I couldn't walk very fast and partly because things were so hard to find and I traipsed back and forth in that huge building.

We didn't go anywhere in the afternoon because we had arranged for a company to bring a new windshield for our truck. (He opted for mobile service, not the company Donelda had used.) You may recall that a speeding truck on the last 15 miles of the Dempster threw a couple of rocks at it and one of the spots was developing lengthening cracks. After the windshield was replaced, we were not supposed to drive for an hour. I was glad to sit on the bed and read and hope my leg would get better.

Thurs. morning, July 28, Jim had an 11:00 appointment with a doctor for his skin problems. He didn't get out until around 1:00. I went with him to help him find the place and spent the two hours in the waiting room reading. It was cold and drizzly, so I didn't want to sit in the truck. Jim loved the doctor, who had a delightful personality and is something of a birder. I even met him a couple of times. The first time, he came bouncing out to where I was sitting and told me how much longer it would take before Jim came out. I sensed his breezy

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---

style in that short encounter. And, how often does the doctor himself make that sort of trip? Or even the nurse, for that matter? The place where we were was a very large clinic, not just a simple doctor's office and Jim was being treated on the 2nd floor, not the ground floor where I was sitting. When Jim finally came out, he was grinning from ear to ear, he'd had so much fun chatting with the doctor. Before we had gone out the door, the doctor came up again and gave me some instructions about suture removal, etc. Very friendly. Actually, just about everyone in Alaska has been friendly.

We ate lunch in a simple coffee shop on the way back to the trailer. Menu was fairly ordinary. I splurged on a Monte Cristo sandwich, which was surprisingly non-greasy and very tasty.

Friday morning, July 29, was supposed to be an entire day of driving south on the George Parks Hwy. toward Anchorage. But before we did that, we had to dump our black and gray water and fill our water tank. When it came time to dump the gray, Jim couldn't get the valve open. So we had to traipse back to the RV repair shop for some work. When we got there, there was some question as to whether the item needed replacing or not, for there seemed to be no gray in the tank. Did Jim dump it inadvertently along with the black? He usually does it afterwards in order to rinse the hose. Who knows? Anyway getting it taken care of delayed our departure a couple of hours.

Jim and I had no desire to visit Denali National Park, but would have been willing to dog-sit if Donelda wanted to take the drive on those awful yellow school busses. She decided she'd had enough of being jammed in with mobs of people on the Skagway train and had seen plenty of tundra on the Haines and Dempster highways, where we pretty much had the place to ourselves. All she really wanted was to see that 20,000+ mountain. I looked at all the choices of campgrounds and decided that Denali View North in Denali State Park might do the job. Denali State Park is south of Denali National Park, but the main highway goes just as close to the mountain there as does the national park road far out on it. Our day's drive was 200 miles, and we got there around 3:00 pm, since the pavement was pretty good.

The state park campground is nothing but the portion of the viewpoint parking lot where overnight parking is permitted. We paid \$10.00 to park there and had sites with unobstructed views of the mountain range.

When we first arrived, we could see the mountain! It was partly veiled in clouds, but by watching it long enough, we could see the whole thing. Although the view was pretty close from that location, there was a hill in the foreground, but still a good portion of the top was visible. This was the fourth time I've been in the area of Mt. McKinley (Denali, "the big one") and I've seen it every time. Most people fail to see it at all, so my luck held. After an hour or two, however, the clouds closed in and we were not to see it again. The next morning the clouds were really low, making it and all its neighbors look more like a mesa than mountains. That was probably the case for the next several days, too.

Mt. McKinley is the tallest mountain in North America--by far. Even its closest neighbors are only in the 12,000-13,000 ft range. Furthermore, the area from which we were viewing it was only about 2,000 ft high. Why does such a huge mountain occur essentially all by itself in that location? I've been speculating to myself why that would be and was happy to see a really nice geology board in the park where we were staying. It confirmed my hypotheses and added one more that I was unaware of:

Mt. McKinley is located at a sharp bend in the boundary between the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate. (The North American plate continues to bend around all the way to



# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---

Japan, and it was along that boundary that the recent huge Japanese earthquake occurred.) As the Pacific Plate subducts the North American one, surface rock scrapes off the Pacific and accrues. There is a strike-slip fault line at the boundary, with the Pacific plate moving northwestward and the North American moving southeastward. However, the part of the fault northwest of the mountain is locked, while the other part keeps moving. The material moved along by the Pacific Plate just keeps piling up--thus the huge mountain. (This last part is what I didn't know.)

Saturday morning, July 30, was another day of driving. We stopped in Wasilla because Donelda wanted to find a Radio Shack. It was in a jammed parking lot, but we finally were able to find parking places. I was prepared to not like anyone I met in that town, which elected Sarah Palin as mayor, but when I went into the huge Carr's grocery store, the people were exceptionally friendly and helpful. Every time I turned around, someone was asking me if they could help me find something. (I could have used them in Fred Meyer a few days earlier. There I couldn't find anyone and even asked a construction worker for help by mistake. He was friendly and tried, though.) Our shopping finished, we ate lunch at a Mexican take-out place. The food was quite good--except for Jim's nachos. He didn't realize that plain nachos are just chips and cheese. He should have ordered some sort of "super" nachos if he wanted chicken, beef, etc. on them.

We continued driving through Anchorage, which we had no desire to visit, and on south. The traffic south of Anchorage along Turnagain Arm was extremely heavy and the road was mainly two-lane. We ended up in another parking lot, this time in Chugach State Park, Bird Creek Campground overflow area. The regular part of the campground was across the road and across the creek and the book had not recommended it due to awful roads and short sites. When we got a look at it the next day, we discovered it was now closed. Our site was just wherever we wanted on a small gravel parking lot at the far end of the paved day-use part. The gravel area was pretty unlevel, but after a couple of false landings, we finally found a level portion. Donelda's site was unlevel, but she's not as particular as we are. (I don't like to stagger around the trailer, sleep with my head lower than my feet, or roll into Jim or have him roll into me at night.). The price was right--only \$5.00.

### **Continued at 5:00 pm, same day.**

Sunday, July 31, we didn't want to wait for the weekenders to go home, so decided to drive all the way south to Homer, a distance of around 200 miles. The traffic was light at first, because Alaskans stay up late and sleep in during the long summer days. So we stopped at all the viewpoints and read the informative signs. I photographed the most interesting ones, which covered topics such as glacial valleys, mudflats and why you should keep off of them, tides and tidal bores (Donelda tried unsuccessfully to see one of these the day before), fish, eagles, whales, etc. Their text started out with generalities in large print, but had really interesting scientific details in smaller type. In fact, that's been true of interpretive signs and brochures on roads and trails and in museums throughout Alaska and Yukon; they don't talk down to people. With my iPhone camera in my pocket all the time, I've been able to bring home copies of all the fascinating things I've learned. I also shot a number of scenics. Despite the overcast weather, I got some nice photos and especially liked one of the panoramas I created with Auto Stitch.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---



Turnagain Arm – panorama  
South of Anchorage, AK

After we left Turnagain Arm, the signs ceased and we ascended into the mountains as high as the subalpine forest, then turned right on the Sterling Highway towards Homer. The first part is mainly along the Kenai River. By then the going-home traffic had picked up considerably and we met a steady stream of vehicles heading north and had a fair number in our southbound lane. The road was very narrow through there, too. Every parking area was jammed with cars and whenever we could see the river, it was lined with boats and people in waders holding fishing poles. We didn't know what was going on, but finally got the explanation when we stopped for gas on the outskirts of Soldotna near the coast. Jim was told there was a 13-mile-long run of Red (Sockeye) Salmon going on, *and* that it was the last day of fishing season. That certainly explains the fishing frenzy.

After we left Soldotna and continued south, the traffic was much lighter. Although there were a lot of towns along the road between Soldotna and Homer, we had trouble finding a cafe to stop for lunch. I saw one in the *Milepost* (guidebook to everything about the northland) that claimed to have the best sourdough pancakes, clam chowder, and Bloody Mary's [sic] in the world. When we stopped and went in, the cafe part was closed and all that was open was a beery, smoky bar. Ugh! The place was incredibly junky and run-down, too.

A few more miles down the road was the town of Clam Gulch. There we found a decent-looking cafe with a nice large, albeit bumpy, parking lot. All along the road we'd seen signs advertising people who wanted to take you out clamming, so we decided we really must go for the fried clams. They were fried, all right! Fried so long that it was impossible to cut some of them with a dinner knife and nearly impossible to chew when we put a whole one in our mouths. What a disappointment. The place was crowded, too, but there was no competition.

As we drove on down to Homer, I perused the guidebooks for the right RV park to select there. We wanted to stay a week, but only one place on the famous Homer Spit had full hookups. Most just had electricity or nothing. We finally decided to go for the full-hookup place. The book said their price was in the "over \$40" category, but we really gulped when it turned out to be more like \$70. After we calmed down, we decided we'd done so much boondocking on this trip that we could afford it. It was still less than the average motel is these days. We have nice wide sites overlooking Kachemak Bay, an arm of Cook Inlet, which extends up to Anchorage.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

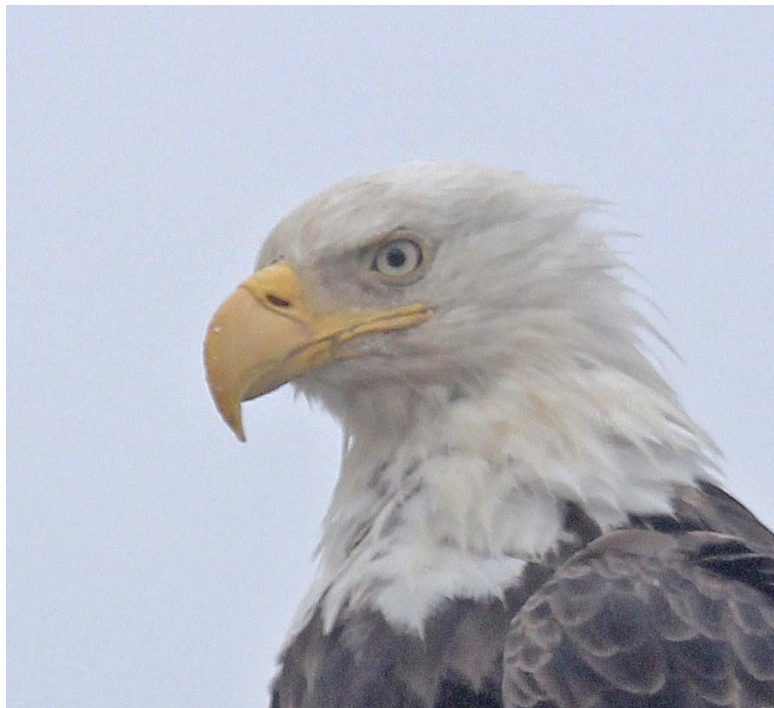
## Summer 2011

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Kachemak Bay from campsite  
Heritage RV Park, Homer, AK

Gulls are resting on the mudflats except at high tide. We've also seen a few Common Loons and one Red-necked Grebe. And a couple of times a really tame Bald Eagle perched on the utility poles right across from our trailer, even allowing for head shots.



Bald Eagle near campsite  
Heritage RV Park, Homer, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---

Yesterday morning, Monday, Aug. 1, we slept in a little for a change, then went into town to the Alaska Marine Wildlife Refuge Visitors Center. This is a beautiful new interpretive facility for all the coastal wildlife refuges in Alaska from the panhandle to the Bering Sea coast. It had excellent displays and a couple of very nice short movies with stirring shots of myriads of seabirds swirling around steep cliffs. It took quite a while to see it all. After that we drove the main business street in Homer and stopped at a very nice bookstore. I spent a long time perusing the "Alaska" shelves, but only found one book that interested me. (I'd already bought a lot of books at other places.)

We tried to eat lunch at the Mermaid Cafe, Bookstore and B&B, but couldn't find a place to park in their lot. Linda Allen had said it was a "sweet little bookstore," but that'll have to wait. She'd also recommended another restaurant, "Fresh Sourdough Express," so we ended up there, getting the last parking spot. When we entered, we discovered a group of musicians was performing. Their music was a little too loud, but nice--an eclectic mix of folk, blues, etc.--so we stayed. Food was excellent--all organic, "green," local, etc., but not vegetarian, thank goodness. Jim had a classic Reuben. I opted for their special, which consisted of pulled pork BBQ in a rhubarb sauce along with a side; I selected cream of broccoli soup (excellent). Both sandwiches were delicious and absolutely loaded with meat. We each took half our sandwich home for dinner.

This morning, Tuesday, Aug. 2, we had been planning to take a boat trip around Kachemak Bay and to Gull Island, but the forecast was 100% probability of rain, so we cancelled out. Donelda went, though, and said it only rained about a half-hour of the four-hour total time out. The boat had a cabin, but no head, which bothered me a bit. The day was totally overcast, so the photos will be only so-so. Besides, we'd done that trip two or three times when we were here twenty years ago.

Instead we went to the Pratt Museum. There they have a live video camera trained on Gull Island. With a joy-stick you can pan and zoom around the island and look at what the birds are doing up close. With no difficulty, I found Black-legged Kittiwakes and Common Murres. I also saw a Pelagic Cormorant, but no Red-faced. With much searching, I finally located a couple of Tufted Puffins, but no Horned. Donelda said they were there--a few way up on top.

The museum covers all aspects of the natural and human history of this area. There's a nice display on the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which didn't really affect Homer. A feature that really impressed me was the way they interspersed the informative displays with art by local artists. In every case it was relevant to whatever was being displayed in that section. Some of the pieces were quilts and other fabric art, which really interested me. An appliqued & quilted piece on local birds was especially nice. I took lots of photos.

Afterwards we tried again to eat at the Mermaid Cafe and Bookstore, but again we couldn't find a place to park, so we ended up at a fish-and-chips place next to a gas station that Linda Allen recommended. [Linda, one of my former students, and her buddy Carole Sunlight are touring Alaska in an RV this summer, too, and we had hoped our paths might cross, but we were never anywhere close.] It was nicely prepared, but there was no lemon. To me, fish without lemon is not worth eating.

It rained off and on most of the afternoon, so we've been in the trailer.

## Trip to Yukon and Alaska

### Summer 2011

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**5:00 pm, Thursday, August 4, 2011**  
**Heritage RV Park, Homer, AK**

Yesterday, Wed., Aug. 3, we took a tour boat from Homer to Seldovia and back. This boat spent a fair amount of time at Gull Island, the seabird nesting colony near the opposite shore of Kachemak Bay from Homer, then it went on around a point to Seldovia, which is out of view of Homer. There we had a three-hour layover to eat lunch, sight-see, shop, etc., before the return ride to Homer, which came directly, not via Gull Island.

Gull Island is really the highlight of the trip, and we remembered it from our 1991 trip here.



Bird Rock from boat, Near Homer, AK

Black-legged Kittiwakes are the main birds nesting there, but there are also large numbers of Common Murres, a reasonable number of Tufted Puffins and a few Horned Puffins. We also saw Red-faced Cormorants and Pigeon Guillemots. Jim and Donelda stood on the bow of the boat and shot a lot of photos of those birds and also of the Sea Otters and Bald Eagles we saw at various places.



# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---

I shot a few scenics with my iPhone camera. The day was mostly cloudy with occasional light rain, but it really didn't come at the crucial times for photos. The mountains around Kachemak Bay with their glaciers and snow fields are especially dramatic cloaked with an ever-changing veil of clouds. (In fact that's the scene we're enjoying from our campsite, but from a greater distance.) [Later: Most of the photos were unremarkable and Jim did better from boats out of Seward.]

We ate a pretty poor lunch in a Seldovia restaurant then killed some time by buying ice cream. I popped into the little visitors center for a few minutes, but it was only mildly interesting. It did have one display board that showed how the town had looked before the 1964 earthquake and tsunami inundated it. (That was the strongest earthquake in North America for which there are historical records.) Then the downtown buildings were right at the water line during high tide. They could either access the businesses via a rickety boardwalk that ran along in front of all of them or via the beach at any time other than high tide. (The tides in this area go in and out about 20 ft.) After the earthquake, the ground level sank four feet, so the establishments had four feet of water in them at high tide and people had to wear hip-waders to get around their stores, etc. The town simply had to be moved around the cove to higher ground. It had been on sort of a gravel bar before. That means that today's buildings are all rather new and so the town is less interesting because it has no original buildings.

The boat we took was fairly large with most seating inside a heated cabin with big windows. It was jammed pretty full on the way over, but had fewer people on the way back. It serves as a water taxi for people wanting to go to Seldovia, which is not accessible by road. There is also a ferry for cars, and there are several roads that go out from town a few miles.

We were gone from 10:30 am until nearly 6:00 pm, so I had planned that we'd eat dinner out at one of the fish houses on the spit. Captain Pattie's was only about a mile away and seemed to be the most popular, so we showed up there at 7:20 pm. They told us there'd be a half-hour wait, but since they had no place to sit and wait, we made a reservation and came back to the trailer for a while. The food was excellent--probably the first truly excellent meal we've had in Alaska. I had charbroiled halibut, and Jim ordered a combination platter of fried salmon, halibut, scallops, and shrimp and brought home half of it for tonight. Both meals were cooked perfectly and not covered with some strange, gloppy, garlicky, sweet sauce, as the food we'd had in Fairbanks was. (I don't think sweet sauces go well with seafood, although they're all the rage in current cuisine.)

Today, Thurs., Aug. 4, it rained off and on and we didn't do much except a little shopping. I tried to buy some fresh fish at Safeway because I had gotten some nice salmon in Wasilla a few days ago. The butcher told me they had stocked it for a while, but no one would buy it. He told me where to go on the Homer Spit and I intend to try some tomorrow. Tonight we have Jim's left-overs--plus a frozen Chinese chicken entree I bought for myself at Safeway.

### **5:00 pm, Friday, August 5, 2011** **Heritage RV Park, Homer, AK**

Last night it rained lightly the first part and then it cleared off and a 15-25 mph wind came up. The temperature never got above 50° today. We didn't have anything special planned, but decided we might as well drive Skyline Drive on the upper ridge of Homer. Many people live up there on large lots. Houses range from small, old, and run-down to large and well-maintained. Many "for sale" signs were evident. This entire area is not doing well

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

---

economically and the cost of living is so high that the people are obviously going somewhere else--or moving back in with relatives. Prices in Safeway here are almost as high as those in Inuvik, I've discovered.

I had read in George West's bird-finding guide to Alaska of a nature center up on Skyline Dr. with an 800-ft boardwalk. We found it, but they were rebuilding the boardwalk and the alternative trail was pretty muddy. They don't feed the birds there, so there was little reason to hang around in the cold and wind.

After that we drove out the spit to the seafood place that the Safeway butcher had recommended. It turned out that they had nothing but frozen items at outrageous prices. I can buy those at home at Costco for far less money. I wanted fresh salmon or halibut. Donelda suggested a place where she had purchased oysters and clams, but when I went there, I discovered they only had shellfish. So that fresh cilantro for which I paid \$2.00 a bunch and hoped to serve with some salmon will have to go in a chicken enchilada casserole made with canned chicken. (Jim said he was tired of fish anyway.)

We holed up in the trailer for the rest of the day, since it was just too blustery to enjoy the out-of-doors. On our way to Skyline Dr. we stopped at the mudflat at the base of the spit and discovered a few additional shorebirds--Short-billed Dowitchers and a couple of Black Turnstones--to add to the Greater Yellowlegs of a couple of days ago. I was hoping for something more exciting: in 1991 we saw half a dozen Hudsonian Godwits there about this same time of year.

## **5:15 pm, Saturday, August 6, 2011** **Heritage RV Park, Homer, AK**

This morning we joined a local birding group for a field trip to Anchor Point State Recreation Area, about ten miles north of Homer. We had seen an announcement of the trip in the visitors center. I don't know who sponsored it or whether it was even an organization at all or just a bunch of friends. One woman seemed to be in charge--sort of--but she merely indicated where we should go and when. Unfortunately my knee is still tender, so I wasn't able to keep up with the group and avoided walking on the rocky beach with slippery seaweed whenever possible, so I wasn't with the group a good bit of the time.

The location was along the shoreline and ended up at the mouth of Anchor River, where there were mudflats and marsh. The main goal of the trip was shorebirds, but the selection was minimal. We saw a few Short-billed Dowitchers, Greater Yellowlegs, and Western Sandpipers. With the Westerns were also a couple of larger sandpipers, which were puzzling, but we never really reached a conclusion on them; they were pretty far away.

The highlight of the morning was a juvenile Sabine's Gull that flew back and forth and occasionally landed on the water just a few feet off shore. Jim and Donelda got full-frame photos of it.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---



Sabine's gull, juvenile  
Anchor Point, north of Homer, AK

The bird must be pretty rare here, for the people in the group didn't know what it was. I was pretty sure it was a Sabine's, but it's been many years since I've seen one--maybe not since the last time we were in Homer, where I saw one from one of the boat tours--so I checked Sibley on my iPhone before speaking up with the identification.

People launch boats, some pretty good sized, from the beach at Anchor Point. Curiously enough, there is no formal boat launch. Instead the boat trailers are unhitched from their tow vehicles and attached to "Cats" (ancient Caterpillar tractors) and towed out into the water, where the boats float free from their trailers. They're brought in the same way. We were told this is the only place where it's done this way. I suppose the boaters pay the Cat owners for their service.

When we were walking back to our cars, we came upon a boat with two huge outboard motors that had been left high and dry on a sand bar by the descending tide. (Later we learned that the engines had refused to start.) Lots of people were standing around discussing what to do. The rest of the birding crowd watched a while from the beach, then went on to look for Yellow-rumped Warblers and Boreal Chickadees in the trees around the parking lot. I found the drama taking place on the beach more interesting. They finally managed to use two Cats and get it free. First they winched up the bow with the tractor and inserted two huge pieces of wood under it. Then they reattached the trailer to the tractor and backed it up to the boat. Now with a combination of winching and backing they were able to get the front half on the trailer, but the stern was still dragging in the sand. (Fortunately it was sand at that place, not rocks.) A little more backing and it just pushed the boat along the sand. So they decided to try dragging it as it was. The boat had been parallel to the waterline, so they dragged it around at right angles to the water, then backed it into the water. When it was afloat, it was easy to get it completely on the trailer and haul it out of the water. I documented the whole operation with a combination of stills and video on my iPhone. Fun! I still can't get used to having all that capability right in my pocket at all times. Most of the action I captured on video, but the still photo shows the stranded boat before any action. Behind it is a second boat being successfully hauled ashore.



# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---



Boat launch with "Cats." (Foreground: stranded boat. Behind: successful haul-in)  
Anchor Point, north of Homer, AK

It was about 11:30 when the tour ended, so we drove back into Homer and bought some fish and chips from the place by the gas station. This time we bought it to go and took it back to the trailer to eat, where I had some lemons. These lemons, from our backyard trees, are gradually spoiling, but I still have a few. With lemons at \$2.00 apiece in the grocery store, they're precious. I guess that's why the place doesn't serve lemons. (Jim prefers tartar sauce on his fish.)

It rained all afternoon--moderately to lightly, but steadily. The only really clear day we've had all week (yesterday), the wind blew. What a summer!

### **5:30 pm., Tuesday, August 9, 2011** **Stoney Creek RV Park, Seward, AK**

Sunday, Aug. 7, Jim and Donelda were going to charter a small boat to take them out to Gull Island, but unfortunately it was too windy to take pictures, even though the boat would have gone out. They just didn't think they could aim and focus on birds from a heaving boat.

It was a beautiful day, so we decided to drive a short distance north to the town of Kenai and settle in an RV park with a view of the Kenai River mouth. It was called Beluga View RV Park because Beluga Whales are sometimes feeding there and even swim up the river. We had a wonderful campsite on the end of a row with a commanding view of the river mouth.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

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Kenai River mouth panorama  
From Beluga View RV Park, Kenai, AK

(Other sites in the park would not have been as good. In fact, the park was just a big parking lot with narrow sites.) I spent a lot of time looking out the window for whales, but without success. It was really nice to be able to stay inside, for the temperature was in the 50s and the wind was around 10-15 mph.

In the late afternoon I took Toby for a walk and discovered that the RV park is located right in old Kenai. A beautiful Russian Orthodox Church and rectory are nearby, surrounded by a number of striking old houses, all dating from around 1900. I had to walk back to the trailer for my iPhone to take pictures of them, so Toby got twice as much walk as I had intended.



Russian Orthodox Church  
Kenai, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---

Donelda had been conversing with the man in the trailer next to hers and found out that he was visiting a friend who has Spruce Grouse visiting the patch of wild strawberries in his yard. Donelda called him and early the next morning, Mon., Aug. 8, we drove about 15 miles north to the next town and found his house, which is in a semirural area with large, forested lots. We prowled around his property, including some trails he had created, but failed to find any grouse.

We then went back to the trailer and had breakfast. I had mixed up some pancake batter the night before, so it didn't take too long to fix Jim's favorite once-a-week breakfast.

We got a fairly late start with about 100 miles of slow driving to do. We stopped in Soldotna for groceries, then continued on our way. We debated between a full hook-up RV park north of Seward or a non-hook-up spot along the waterfront in the city park. (These sites are on the ground where buildings stood before the 1964 tsunami. They elected not to rebuild anything on that ground.) Since it's a lot of trouble to dump and get water and the weather had been pretty cold (50s mainly) and we had really been enjoying our little electric heaters, we elected for the private RV park (Stoney Creek RV Park) about 4 miles north of town. (We first checked out Bear Creek RV Park, which was recommended in a camping guide I've been using with a lot of success, but it turned out to be an absolute mess.)

Stoney Creek has some back-in sites along the creek, but Donelda took the one on the end, the only one we could have enjoyed. All the rest looked out at the trailer next to them. We took the end site in a row of pull-throughs, and it looks across a campground road to a lawn with a row of shrubs and spruce trees on the far side and houses beyond that. At least we don't have to look at the trailer next to us.

This noon I spotted a flock of Varied Thrushes feeding on the Sitka Mountain-Ash berries in the shrubby row. Jim went over and snapped a few pictures, including a couple of quite good ones. I've been watching for those thrushes to come back for another meal for a couple of hours as I sit in the trailer window, but haven't seen them again.



Varied Thrush  
Seward, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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This morning we spent about three hours at the Alaska SeaLife Center, an impressive, large facility built on the ground where the old railroad dock had been destroyed by the tsunami. I hope they've fortified and elevated the building to withstand another one. The center has lots of informative displays about fish, birds, mammals, etc. And, most interesting of all, it has tanks with live ones. We really enjoyed seeing the aviary, where many species of seabirds are held, including puffins (2 spp.), Rhinoceros Auklet, Long-tailed Duck, Harlequin Duck, King Eider, Black Oystercatcher, and maybe others that I've forgotten. I took a few pictures with my iPhone, but most of them were mediocre at best. Jim took photos with his little Canon camera with 35x optical zoom, and I suspect they'll be much better than mine.

There were also a couple of other tanks, where Steller's Sea Lions (now endangered) and Harbor Seals (declining) were swimming around. It was fun to observe them from the huge underwater viewing window.

The purpose of the facility is three-fold: education of the public, research (especially searching for causes of population declines of certain spp.), and rehabilitation of sick and injured individuals. It's the only rehab center in Alaska. All of the display birds and animals are retired from research or else rehab individuals that can't be released.

After we left, we checked out a Chinese restaurant we remembered fondly from our 1991 trip. It was still there in the old downtown a few blocks up from the SeaLife Center. We went there for dinner that evening and it was just as good as I remembered it.

## **5:30 pm, Friday, August 12, 2011 Stoney Creek RV Park, Seward, AK**

Wed., Aug. 10, Jim and Donelda took the "Captain's Choice" tour from Kenai Fjords Boat Tour company. It's on a small boat and the purpose is to look for some of the more obscure species of wildlife that the general public would probably not be interested in. It holds a maximum of 20 passengers and, unfortunately, it was full, so they had to work to find a comfortable place to sit when they weren't photographing. Seats inside the small cabin only hold about eight people comfortably. Also the rocking boat made it hard to take photographs. Jim returned exhausted and discouraged, although I think when he looked at some of his images later, he got some good ones. He had only taken his 500-mm lens and it was very hard to get on the subjects from the moving boat. Then when the boat was close to a rookery or other subject, the image was too big. Donelda had her problems, too, for she discovered after she got back that she had inadvertently turned off the image-stabilization feature of her camera by brushing against it. She was pretty discouraged, too, but when she looked at them in Photoshop, not the program that came with the camera, many of them were OK. I haven't seen any of them myself.

My job was to stay home and dog-sit. The boat was out nine hours, so someone had to stay behind to take the dogs out a couple of times. Oakley is 100 pounds of slobbering, wriggling love and is very hard to leash up, but when that's accomplished, she's really a very good girl. Donelda says she'll do anything for cookies (dog biscuits), but I really think she'd do all those things just for affection.

The first two hours they were away were the highlight of my stay in Seward. A migrating(?) flock of birds seemed to be passing through the hedgerow next to the campground and I spent a couple of hours outside with my tape recorder. Best were the 10-20 Varied Thrushes, including juveniles, making all sorts of calls, including some that sound like song elements, except shorter and not repeated at regular intervals. Also present were a few

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---

adult and juvenile American Robins. It'll be a challenge to sort out all of those sounds, although I tried to do it on the tape whenever I knew what I was hearing. Also present were Wilson's, Townsend's, Yellow-rumped warblers; Black-capped and Chestnut-backed chickadees; Red-breasted Nuthatches; and other species that I've forgotten. (I wrote this on Aug. 22, having forgotten to include it originally. How could I have forgotten that wonderful morning?) [Later: Those were the last robins I saw or heard in Alaska.]

Thursday, Aug. 11, was Donelda's day to dog-sit while Jim and I took a much larger tour boat, which visited much the same areas. It goes out Resurrection Bay from Seward and up Aialik ("I-AL-ik") Bay to the Aialik Glacier, the largest one in Kenai Fjords National Park. We had an absolutely clear day--the best day all summer according to the captain. The scenery was breathtaking--blue sky and water, steep snow-capped mountains, calving glaciers, etc. [



Seward with city RV park along shore  
From tour boat out of Seward AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

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Aialik Glacier – calving  
From tour boat out of Seward, AK



Aialik Glacier – close up of calving (Jim's photo)  
From tour boat out of Seward, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

---

And we saw quite a bit of wildlife, too. The captain was very good, both as a boat pilot and as an interpreter. We had excellent looks at Orcas and Humpback Whales, Steller's Sea Lions and Harbor Seals, Common Murres, Tufted and Horned puffins. I also got fleeting glimpses of Northern Fulmars (2 dark-morph) and Kittlitz's Murrelets, the latter near Aialik Glacier. Although the nesting cliffs were interesting, the numbers of birds on them were small. Gull Island near Homer had more, as did the Pribilof Islands, which I visited many years ago before I knew Jim. On the Atlantic Coast, the colonies in Newfoundland, Quebec, and Nova Scotia are also more impressive.

Jim liked this boat better than the one the day before. It was larger and much more stable, so easier to take pictures from. Also, he took his 100-400-mm lens, which was more appropriate for the large subjects and close-up approaches to nesting cliffs. For example, he really felt good about his Steller's Sea Lions this time. I don't think he's looked at them on his computer screen yet.



Steller's Sea Lions  
from tour boat out of Seward, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

---

He also got nice shots of a Harbor Seal and a pair of Horned Puffins.



Harbor Seal  
From tour boat out of Seward, AK

The puffins nest in burrows underneath the green plants atop steep cliffs.



Horned Puffins  
From tour boat out of Seward, AK



# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

---



Puffin nesting cliff  
From tour boat out of Seward, AK

I stayed inside the cabin of the boat most of the time, because there were so many people outside. It was a very warm day for Seward and the cabin became uncomfortably warm in the afternoon, so I didn't need all the warm wraps I had brought. I had even borrowed Donelda's qiviut mitts and scarf, which she had really appreciated having the day before. (Qiviut is the most insulating fiber in the world and is the undercoat of the Muskox, which is shed every summer. It's spun into yarn and knitted.)

The trip was nine hours. They served a small lunch on board and we stopped at Fox Island, a resort owned by the same company, for dinner. The dinner was all-you-can-eat salmon and prime rib. The rub was there was only an hour to get off the boat with all those people, stand in line, get your food, eat it, and get back aboard. Since I knew I was a slow eater, I made sure I was first off the boat and first in the food line, so I managed to get my dinner eaten. The prime rib was very good, but the salmon was hopelessly overcooked. The rest of the meal was so-so: sweet corn, green salad with Kraft dressing, rice, tiny one-inch-squares of soggy dessert. I had heard it was a good meal, but I'd really recommend that others take the earlier 8-hour trip that only includes lunch, but on one of the large boats. Kenai Fjords Tour company is really a very good one to deal with, except for the poor dinner. (Just as I was writing this, Donelda came by after another day on the small boat, and she really liked the captain on that, too. She felt good about her photography and about the wildlife she saw, so the Captain's Choice is right for some people.)

Exit Glacier  
Seward, AK

## Trip to Yukon and Alaska

### Summer 2011

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Today, Aug. 12, Jim and I stayed ashore and dog-sat. In the morning we drove up to Exit Glacier, a small glacier only nine miles up from the Seward Highway. Donelda had been there yesterday and said it was "a zoo" with lots of tour buses, as well as people in their own vehicles. We got there at 8:30, a couple of hours earlier than she did, and it wasn't too bad. We walked the one-mile "easy" loop, which included a nice view of the glacier.



# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

---

Donelda had said that the additional 1.2 mile round-trip up to as close to the glacier as you can get is pretty strenuous with uncertain footing in spots, so I knew I couldn't do it. The trail went through a lovely piece of Balsam Poplar and spruce forest. A species of Wild Wintergreen was in bloom all over the ground. I think it was Pink Pyrola, *Pyrola asarifolia*.



Pink

Wintergreen, *Pyrola asarifolia*  
Near Exit Glacier, Seward, AK

Most interesting was a large wasp nest hanging at about four feet off the ground from a young balsam poplar. It was about five inches in diameter and maybe seven inches high, with an opening at the bottom. The wasps were very docile, so I got nice and close and even got some decent images of the insects themselves. The nest itself was sort of gray and woody looking. When I got back to the visitors center, I discovered an insect book for sale and found the species in it. It was a Potter Wasp, *Dolichovespula arenaria* probably.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

---



Potter Wasp nest  
Near Exit Glacier, Seward, AK

When we got back to the parking lot, it truly was a "zoo," but we'd had a nice walk before the place got too crowded.

We went out to lunch, revisiting the Chinese place, Peking Chinese Restaurant, which is located on the southeast corner of 3rd St. and Jefferson, only a couple of blocks from the SeaLife Center. This time it was a lunch buffet, only \$9.95 for a wide assortment of delicious items. Excellent. The place is very elaborately decorated inside, but slightly run-down, and seems to be patronized mainly by the locals, but the food is what counts. I really wish we had a place like that at home. (No dinner for us tonight.)

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

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**4:20 pm, Tuesday, August 16, 2011**  
**Williwaw USFS Cpgd., Portage Valley, AK**

Saturday, August 13, was our 25th wedding anniversary and I really wanted to make it a special day. We had debated whether to move on or stay one more night in Seward, since we'd really done all the things there were to do there. Donelda settled it the night before when she discovered a nearby lake, where she could launch her canoe. She learned from the proprietor of a nearby B&B that there were salmon running on a creek on the far side and that bears are often seen from the lake at that spot. She gave it two good tries, both morning and evening on the 13th, but had no success. We drove over and took a look at the lake from near the B&B, the only roadside access and saw nothing of interest. (Most of the lake has private homes or else wilderness on its shoreline.)

I made Jim his long-delayed chocolate-cake-with-chocolate-frosting that he didn't get for his birthday because I made a rhubarb pie instead. I even presented him with his birthday card, which I thought I had forgotten, but discovered in with the anniversary card. So that made the day a little festive.

I had thought we might eat at the Chinese restaurant for our anniversary dinner, but we'd already eaten there twice. After looking through the Chamber of Commerce brochure and checking the reviews in Google, I settled on Gene's Restaurant, the dining room at the historic Seward Hotel. It turned out to be a really nice choice. The restaurant is in the historic section of the hotel, not the newer and more modern part. The hotel was originally built in 1905, but burned down (1930s I think) and was rebuilt in the same fashion right after World War II.

When we walked in, we found a large, rather noisy cocktail lounge on the left--bright and cheery and definitely up-scale, not what we had in mind for our anniversary dinner. However, a hostess soon appeared and led us down a hallway to what turned out to be an old guest room. In it were three tables for two, but we had the room to ourselves the entire time. (There were two other rooms like it, where we discovered guests eating as we left.) The room had one window with a pretty stained glass hanging in it. It had no view because the annex was only a few feet away. The walls were decorated with the kind of Victorian art that would have been in a nice hotel at the turn of the 20th century. It wasn't over-decorated like some homes of that period. Soft, pleasant music was playing.

I had told them that it was our anniversary when I made the reservation, and we found a nice anniversary card on the table and a complimentary box with two chocolates. The food was quite good. We started with seafood chowder--a bit too thick, but very tasty. Then I had a chance to try something I'd always heard of, but never seen on a menu: halibut cheeks. They were small, very tender pieces of halibut and prepared in a mushroom & caper sauce. It was a little heavy on the salty, vinegary capers, but the fish was delicious. It was served with rice and carrots, both very nice. Jim took the rare prime rib and pronounced it excellent. We took a number of photos with my iPhone of the room and each other, but my favorite is the one of the table and Jim's hands. Whenever I look at it, I think of the amazing variety of things he's accomplished with those hands.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

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Jim and Sylvia's 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary table  
Seward Hotel, Seward, AK

Our waitress was a young college student from Serbia, who is working two jobs here in Alaska this summer to help pay her college expenses back home. She said her country is so depressed economically that she couldn't get a well-paying summer job there. Her English was so good, I was amazed she had only been in this country a short time. Her major is linguistics and she's obviously really worked on her accent. When she told me her uncle had spent a lot of time in England and helped her learn, I remarked that her accent was American, not British. She replied, "I think the British version sounds snobbish." Interesting, for that's what I've always thought, too, but most Europeans have that sort of accent. She gave us excellent service--until it came to getting the bill. Jim had to go down the hall and ask for it. The reason for the delay may have been a large party we saw in the middle dining room when we left. Let's hope so. We really liked the young woman and admire her spunk. All in all, a memorable evening. We're really glad we stayed that extra night. Besides, we'd probably not have been able to get a campsite in our next campground on Saturday night.

Sunday morning, Aug. 14, we only had about 80 miles to drive, so we delayed starting until around 11:00 to be sure the campers had left our destination, the Williwaw Campground, a USFS campground in Portage Valley about 40 miles south of Anchorage. All worked out as planned. We have a delightful site (#38, but there are lots of others like it) in a mixed forest of spruce (mostly White x Sitka here, so I've given up trying to figure out what they are) and Balsam Poplar (known as Black Cottonwood farther south; they're poorly differentiated subspecies), along with a lot of Sitka Alder.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

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Portage Valley and Williwaw Creek  
South of Anchorage, AK

The understory is mainly bracken and Devil's Club.



Forest understory  
Portage Valley, AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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Devil's Club with fall color starting  
Portage Valley, AK

It's in a steep-walled canyon with hanging glaciers on the north-facing slopes, including one visible from Donelda's site.

Best of all, we've finally found BIRDS--land birds in goodly numbers, if not variety of species. There is also a wonderful network of easy trails. They're good enough for wheel-chairs and bikes and they run through a variety of habitats. Wherever it's a bit wet, there's a beautiful boardwalk. I walked two miles of it yesterday and another mile this morning--more later.

It was cloudy when we arrived Sunday and it rained pretty steadily the early part of Sunday night, but stopped well before dawn. Yesterday morning, Monday, Aug. 15, dawned foggy and the mountaintops were obscured. Gradually as it cleared, we got ethereal views of portions of them through the clouds.



## Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

---



Portage Glacier from Visitors Center  
Portage Valley, AK

We went to the Portage Glacier Visitors center shortly after it opened at 9:00. It's excellent--nice displays and a very good movie, shown on a large screen. We discovered that the receding glacier hasn't receded much more since we were there 20 years ago. It can't be seen from the visitors center. If you want to see it, you must take a one-hour boat tour. We decided not to spend the \$29 apiece to do it, since we've seen other glaciers. (I do remember seeing it from the Visitors Center on a trip in the 1960s with Mother and my brother Gil.)

Salmon (Red and Chum) are running right now and there is a viewing platform near our campsite. Just about every time we went there, a crowd of people was hanging over the railing, but I discovered that I could have the fish to myself if I walked up the creekside trail. Several places there were just as many fish as at the platform and I could enjoy them without enduring the inane conversation of the other tourists.



## Trip to Yukon and Alaska Summer 2011

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Late in the afternoon, I took Toby and walked a two-mile loop trail that started out along the creek, then past some trout ponds (old gravel pits), across the road past an active gravel pit, then back through the forest (described above) to our campsite. I hadn't realized it was a two-mile loop when I started, so Jim was beginning to be concerned when I finally got back. I hadn't thought to take a radio.

Last evening Donelda came over and inquired, "What are we going to do in Valdez? I'm getting pretty tired." (It's no wonder she's tired, for she fills her days with twice as much activity as we do--and is usually rewarded for it, but not lately.) I really hadn't planned our activities in Valdez. I just remembered that we liked it the last time we were there.

After she left, Jim and I talked it over and decided we really didn't need a buddy system for the remainder of our trip, which is on well-travelled highways. Also, this was the first place we've found photographable land birds on the entire trip. We really wanted to stay here another night. So I went over and suggested maybe she'd like to leave and go on her way at her own pace. She wants to visit relatives in Ft. St. John, BC. So off she drove this morning bright and early.

This morning, Tuesday, Aug. 16, dawned crisp and clear. We were so glad we weren't leaving. Why waste one of the few perfect days of the summer driving down the highway? Jim was going to stay in the campsite and wait for birds to arrive while I walked the Blue Ice Trail the opposite direction from which I had returned yesterday. (There's an access point to the trail right behind our campsite.) I hadn't walked very far before I realized that there were birds everywhere and many of them were low enough and in the open enough for Jim to stalk with his camera, so I called him on the radio and he spent most of the morning on the trail, too.

According to what I learned in the Visitors Center, Portage Valley is a major migration route through the coastal mountains. Also, there were a lot of fledglings and young juveniles around, making identification a challenge. I was afraid I was going to have to work to figure out what some of the birds were in Jim's pictures. Unfortunately the birds proved elusive, although he did get a nice (Russet-backed) Swainson's Thrush and a cute photo of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, possibly a youngster based on the fragile-looking plumage. [



# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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Swainson's Thrush  
Portage Valley, AK

My bird list so far includes Lincoln's (a few) and "Sooty" Fox (many) sparrows; "Slate-colored" Dark-eyed Junco (a few); Orange-crowned (many), "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped (abundant), Wilson's (abundant), Townsend's (a few) and Yellow (a few) warblers; Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned kinglets (moderate numbers); Black-capped Chickadee (common); Varied (one) and Hermit Thrush (many); Common Raven (a few); Harlequin Duck (female and well-grown juveniles). Jim also thought he saw a Merlin streak through our campsite. It's not a particularly long list, but the numbers of individuals are what's so special. Also the habitat is open enough to allow them to be seen well. Even the Golden-crowned Kinglets and Varied Thrush, which usually stay hidden are low to the ground and visible.

Jim has gone back out on the trail now and has been gone for at least an hour, so must be having some success. Goodness knows, he needs it. This is the first place we've been where the land birds are this numerous--and he dearly loves this kind of photography. He also loves his brand new digital camera and I guess I'm just going to have to learn how to integrate his digital images into the slides when I do programs. At least, his photos will have date and time on them so I can figure out where they were taken. I've learned how to catalog my iPhone pictures, so I guess I can do his photos, too.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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**7:15 pm, Friday, August 19, 2011**  
**Sourdough RV Park, Tok, AK**

Wed., Aug. 17, we awoke to the familiar fog, clouds, and drizzle that we've seen so much of. So we agreed that it was useless to stay longer near the coast. We spent the day driving inland through Anchorage to Palmer, where we did some grocery shopping and ate lunch. Part of the time between Anchorage and Palmer it was really raining hard.

After that we continued eastward on the Glenn Highway. As we got away from the coast, we got away from the drizzle. We ended up in a rural area about half-way between Anchorage and Glennallen. We camped at Grand View RV Park, and it really lived up to its name. There were steep mountains on both sides and on the north Thin-horn (Dall) sheep are sometimes seen. We didn't see any. A trail behind the RV park leads to a glacier viewpoint. I didn't walk very far on it because it was pretty overgrown with dripping foliage, but I did photograph about the prettiest patch of fireweed I've seen on the trip.



Giant Fireweed, *Epilobium angustifolium*  
Grand View RV Park, Glenn Hwy., AK

When we left Portage Valley, our gray and black water tanks were full and our fresh water was nearly empty, making the trailer rear-heavy. Jim had trouble maintaining control, especially on the stretch of freeway where it was difficult to go slowly. The rain didn't help any either. It took us a while to figure out what the problem was and we moved a couple of heavy items from the rear of the trailer to under the dinette table while we were stopped in Palmer. That helped a little, but the next day after we'd dumped and refilled our fresh water tank at Grand View RV Park's full-hook-up site everything was fine.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

## Summer 2011

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En route on Aug. 17 we had passed the Matanuska Glacier and stopped for some distant photos. The books said there was a road that went right up to it, so after inquiring where it was in the RV Park office, we drove the Suburban the six miles back there on Thurs., Aug. 18. To get to the glacier, we descended a very steep dirt road that had some pretty bad ruts in it. Fortunately it wasn't more than a mile in length. Then we came to a gate to a private road. We had to pay \$30 to drive the remainder of the road to the glacier--but the road was much better than the one we'd been on.

At the end of the road there was a trail marked with orange highway cones that led to the glacier itself. The guy in the office had said it was a pretty easy trail, but actually it involved a six-foot descent down some casually carved steps in a wet-sand bank, and then a walk on a narrow plank trail across a lot of mud. Even sure-footed Jim didn't want to walk on a glacier badly enough to take that trail.



Steps and trail to glacier  
Matanuska Glacier, near Glenn Hwy., AK

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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There was a wonderfully close view of the glacier from the trailhead, though, so we were glad we went. (Due to a washout, the degraded road in the foreground of this photo is no longer accessible, even to hikers.)



Matanuska Glacier from private road  
Glenn Hwy, AK

Afterwards I decided to walk back a ways with Toby on the access road. Even though it's only mid-August, a small patch of Balsam Poplars was already in fall color.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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Balsam Poplar in fall color  
Matanuska glacier, Glenn Hwy, AK

I even saw a few birds: White-crowned Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Hermit Thrush, and a juvenile Bohemian Waxwing. I was still looking over the little flock to see if I'd missed anything when a Merlin discovered them, too, and flew in, chasing them all away. But the Merlin perched in plain view for a while trying to figure out why it had failed to get its lunch. It was the best view of that bird I've had on this trip. I've heard a lot of them, though.

After we got back to the trailer, we hooked up and drove about 90 miles to Glennallen, where we stayed at the Northern Nights RV Park. It was a very well maintained private park, but it lacked the one thing I really needed, a laundry. I asked the woman in the office if they had one, and she said I'd have to drive about a mile back out the road to find a laundromat.

# Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

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This morning (Fri., Aug. 19) first thing, that's what we did. However, the place was an absolute disaster. Bare-board floors and wide-open doors and windows on a cold, rainy, morning were a turn-off from the beginning. However, when I peeked inside the washers I intended to use, I discovered most of them were full of sand and pebbles and one of them was half-full of murky water that apparently wouldn't even drain out. I've been in some bad laundromats in my 25 years of RVing, but this was the first one I absolutely refused to use.

I vowed we'd find the nicest RV park with a laundry in Tok, 90 miles away, no matter what it cost. We ended up at the only Good Sam park in town. The park itself was a little pricey (\$39 a night). The laundry was spotless. Washers were \$2.00 a load, about average for Alaska. The driers were \$1.50 for 30 minutes, but it took three runs of each drier to get the clothes dry, for a total of \$6.50 per load, multiplied by four loads. I think \$26.00 is a record laundry bill for us. To top it off, I had to trot back and forth from the trailer each time in a light rain. We only do laundry about every 3-4 weeks, so we should have to do only one more partial one before we get home. (We bring along lots of clothes and when a laundry bag gets full, we just throw it on top of all the stuff in the truck. I figure it doesn't take any longer to wait for four loads to wash than it does one, so we don't waste a lot of time doing laundry.)

It rained lightly most of the day, with occasional breaks around mid-day. It's supposed to be the same for the next several days. We had been planning to drive south to Valdez, but the weather forecast was even worse down there on the coast, so we reluctantly decided to head on down the Alaska Highway. We were also warned that the pass we'd have to drive over might be dangerous in that kind of weather. Not going to Valdez will allow us to poke along more as we go south. Maybe we can catch a few migrants east of the Rockies when we get there.