

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

by Sylvia R. Gallagher

Photographs by Jim & Sylvia Gallagher

Part V

4:45 pm, Sunday, August 21, 2011

Pine Lake Territorial Park, nr. Haines Junction, YK

We've just finished two days of driving, about 150-170 miles each day. Yesterday, Sat., Aug. 20, we drove east on the Alaska Hwy. from Tok. The first part of it was along the border of Teslin National Wildlife Refuge. There the road went up and down on hills created by ice age glaciers and by wind-blown volcanic debris. Scenic roadside stops showed panoramic views of the bottomlands--bright green muskeg dotted with spindly dark green Black Spruce trees and interspersed with countless blue ponds of all sizes. Off in the distance were the mountains, which were somewhat veiled in clouds. The weather was mostly overcast, but the cloud formations themselves were endlessly variable.

Just before we reached the Canadian border I saw the only Northern Shrike of the entire trip. I only got a glimpse of it on a utility wire beside the road. It was sort of dark, so I suspect it was a juvenile, but I never got my binoculars on it because we were moving along, albeit slowly.

Crossing the border into Canada was easy this time, so we've had two unpleasant experiences followed by two easy ones on this trip. However, after we entered Yukon, the road became annoyingly slow with really deep frost heaves and lots of broken pavement. Much of this damage was difficult to see coming, so we finally settled on 40-45 mph and hoped for the best. En route we stopped for lunch at a roadside rest which offered a short nature trail through some beautiful fall-colored Prickly Rose and Giant Fireweed.



Prickly rose and giant Fireweed in fall color
Alaska Hwy., YK, near Alaska border

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

After losing an hour due to the time change from Alaska time to Pacific time, it was around 3:00 when we finally got to the RV park I had selected. It would probably have taken another hour or two to reach another of comparable quality. Our stop was called Discovery Yukon Lodgings, formerly White River Trading Post and RV Park. It's out in the middle of nowhere at km 1818 of the Alaska Highway.

The park itself was in a semi-open setting with a few tall spruce trees between the sites. Jim asked for a site on the end, but for some reason, they put someone else beyond us later in the day, so we had neighbors on both sides. Jim grumbled, "Why can't you find us a place out in the bushes?" But there just aren't any. The territorial park we stayed in twenty years ago was that type, but my diary doesn't mention anything of note we found there.

I selected this full-hookup park because the guide book mentioned the large collection of 1940s equipment on the grounds. This park was actually a small army post during the road-building period. There's even an airstrip out back. The part from which the planes actually take off and land isn't right there, but the grassy strip beyond the runway is. We saw (and heard) a couple of planes and one helicopter take off. I really enjoyed wandering the grounds and looking at the old US Army vehicles here on Canadian soil--trucks, back-hoes, ambulance, and an old filling station from the immediate post-war period when the road became public.



Old Alaska Hwy. road-building equipment
Discovery Yukon RV Park, Alaska Hwy, YK, near Alaska border

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Army ambulance from 1940s
Discovery Yukon RV Park, Alaska Hwy., YK, near Alaska border



Post-World-War-II filling station
Discovery Yukon RV Park, Alaska Hwy., YK, near Alaska border

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

The park owners were very friendly and offered a free bear-hunting tour in the evening in the back of an old, low-slung, all-terrain army truck. I decided not to go, but Jim went, along with a lot of other folks. Jim said the truck plowed through river bottoms, up steep banks, through shrubby trees, but didn't find a bear. The owners say both bear and moose are occasionally seen right in the park. I don't think I'd have liked the ride one bit, but Jim didn't mind it, although he didn't come back with any pictures.

Just as I was starting to fix dinner, we ran out of propane. Jim went out and checked the tanks and found one of them was totally full. With a little advice from a knowledgeable man in the next site, he figured out that we've just been refilling and using the same tank for many weeks and that there is a faulty valve on the other tank, which prevents the gas from coming out. Jim has been carrying a part to fix it with, but apparently the new tank that he had to buy in Fairbanks because the other one was "too old" doesn't fit those fittings. So we were out of luck. I had planned to bake some chicken, and that just wouldn't work in the microwave. So I quickly scrounged around in the freezer and came up with some smoked sausages, which I thawed in the microwave and cooked on the charcoal hibachi. I heated up some home-canned tomatoes in the microwave. This morning I cooked scrambled eggs in the microwave and Jim heated the water for the coffee the same place.

Today, Aug. 21, despite it being Sunday, we succeeded in finding a place to get the empty tank filled with propane. We had thought we might have to drive all the way into Whitehorse today and get the problem settled, a distance of 300 miles--much too far on the slow Yukon road. But now that we have a full tank of propane, we were able to return to Pine Lake Territorial Park, which we had enjoyed for a few nights back in late June on our way back to Whitehorse from Haines. We got an early start because we feared we might have to drive all the way to Whitehorse because of the propane problem. The road improved after about 80 miles, so we arrived here at Pine Lake around 1:30 and were happy to find the site we'd had before to be vacant. It's the only site that overlooks the boggy thermokarst pond area where we had Rusty Blackbirds, White-winged Crossbills, and a few other things back then. I doubt the Rusty Blackbirds will be still around, but the crossbills don't migrate, nor does the Three-toed Woodpecker that eluded us the last time. They just wander. Jim has been outside for quite a while and says he saw a Merlin, but failed to get a shot of it because his camera was set wrong. (It's that new digital and he still hasn't got it all figured out. A man on the truck-tour last night reminded him of an obscure setting that Jim needed to change, but then he went on and changed a couple of other settings, which should have been left alone.) He's hoping the Merlin--or anything else--will come back and is ready to spend two nights here if necessary.

Our drive today started out through hilly terrain with occasional ponds and crossings of broad, gravelly riverbeds with braided channels. These are very typical of the glacier-carved landscape of this area, where the valleys are U-shaped, not V-shaped. For a long time we drove through the Kluane River Valley with the tall St. Elias Mountains to the south. We couldn't see their tops very well, because the day was mostly cloudy. We even had some rain for about a half-hour right after we started out. About the time the road got better, the river valley widened into Kluane Lake and we were driving along the shore of it with the tall peaks rising right beside the road. (The tallest mountain in Canada, Mt. Logan, 19,520 ft, is in the St. Elias Mountains, but I don't think it can be seen from the valley even on the best of days.)

5:30 pm. Jim just came in and showed me a wonderful shot of the Merlin! Later, after he looked carefully at the pictures, he discovered that the bird was eating mostly dragonflies, although one photo showed the long legs of a shorebird.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Merlin with dragonfly
Discovery Yukon RV Park, Alaska Hwy, YK, near Alaska border

8:30 pm, Friday, August 26, 2011

Liard (pronounced "leerd") Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC

Monday, Aug. 22, we stayed over at Pine Lake Park, hoping for more photos of the Merlin, but Jim sat outside most of the day and saw no sign of the bird. It was apparently a transient and had continued on its journey south. I wandered around the park a while, but the birds were very scarce. My list for the park: Merlin (1 or 2), Boreal and Black-capped chickadees, Common Raven, Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler (here and there a few), Common Yellowthroat (2 jv), Black-billed Magpie, Barrow's Goldeneye (2 jv), Gray Jay, Belted Kingfisher, Bald Eagle.

Tuesday, Aug. 23, was a day of driving. We set off early for Whitehorse and headed first for an RV repair shop to fix the propane-delivery problem. When Jim showed the repair-woman (our second woman RV repair person up here) the problem and the hose-adapter-

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

connection that he had been sold many weeks ago to fix the problem and which he thought didn't fit, she told him it was the right connection and they could put it on for him after lunch if he couldn't do it himself. He set to work and had it installed in less than ten minutes. (He could have done the same thing the other night, but he was so sure it wouldn't fit!)

We were on our way again in no time and continued on southbound on the Alaska Highway. We stopped fairly early because we'd have had to continue on quite a ways to find another place to stay. Our RV park was Dawson Peaks Resort just past the White River about seven miles beyond Teslin. It was satisfactory, but unremarkable. It had EW hookups and a dump station--and also had a restaurant, but we didn't try it.

Wednesday, Aug. 24, we drove on to Watson Lake. We stopped for lunch about 15 miles short of there at the Cassiar Highway Junction. The cafe was attractive, but outrageously expensive. Jim ordered a hamburger and said it was OK. I opted for a bowl of "chicken-vegetable" soup. I found the vegetables, but no chicken, and it was sort of watery and may or may not have had some chicken broth in it. I did find some pieces of bacon. It was a big bowl and came with a piece of whole-wheat bread from their bakery, but wasn't worth the \$7.95 price. To top it off, when I asked for water, they wouldn't serve me any tap water; I'd have had to buy bottled water for \$2.00. That made me mad and I just wouldn't do it! If I'd had the nerve, I'd have gone out to the trailer and fetched my own glass of water.

In Watson Lake we found a site in TAGS RV Park--behind a gas station at the west end of town. The RV park was just a gravel parking lot, but it was surrounded by Lodgepole Pines and we got the end site facing the pines. It had full hookups, which are sort of rare along the highway.

After an early afternoon nap period, we went to the Visitors Center, where the theme was the construction of the Alaska Highway, because the Contact Point between the American and Canadian teams wasn't far from there. It was an interesting place and they also had a nice, but old, film on the project, too. It's amazing that they could throw together such a major road in less than a year's time. Of course, it was improved considerably as soon as the war was over and today it is in very good condition most places. So far, the only poor part was in Yukon between the Alaska border and Kluane Lake. All the rest has been very good to excellent. Frost heaves have been minimal and well marked. Potholes have been patched very smoothly. It's also a nice wide road with broad shoulders, so broad that for long stretches it would be possible to stop and get entirely to the right of the white line.

Our other destination was the Northern Lights Museum, which has a planetarium type of screen and projector. There we saw two films. The first was a British production on the space program and how space is perceived by astronauts. It was quite impressive to look up and have the entire ceiling filled with a space ship and then have the door open for a space walk, etc. The other film was on the Northern Lights. From a scientific standpoint, it wasn't nearly as well done as the film we'd seen in Fairbanks, but there was a lot of footage with appropriate music that was very enjoyable. This film didn't fill the entire ceiling, but still a large portion of it. We were very glad we went. It cost us \$8.00 apiece. (Hint: Go to the Visitors Center first and get a card for a \$1.00 discount. We just happened to mention to the VC staff person that we were interested in going and she gave us the card.)

Thursday, Aug. 25, was another day of driving. We only had 130 miles to go and the road continued to be excellent, so we got here to Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC, shortly after noon. The highlight of the drive was a rather large herd of "Woodland" American Bison

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

that were moseying along the road, paying no attention to the traffic. We stopped for photos, of course. At first they were ahead of us and back-lit, but pretty soon they wandered right by the truck window, and I even got some i-Phone shots at extremely close range. After correcting the exposure and contrast with PhotoShop, they were excellent.



“Woodland” American Bison
Alaska Hwy., between Fireside and Liard Hot Springs, BC

Liard Hot Springs is the most popular park in BC, but this time of year it never seems to fill up. I recall in June, 1991, we got here around 10:00 am and got one of the last few sites. The main attraction here is the hot springs and the bathing pool that has been constructed with wooden decking and a little dam and spillway.



Bathing pool

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC



Stream below bathing pool
Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC

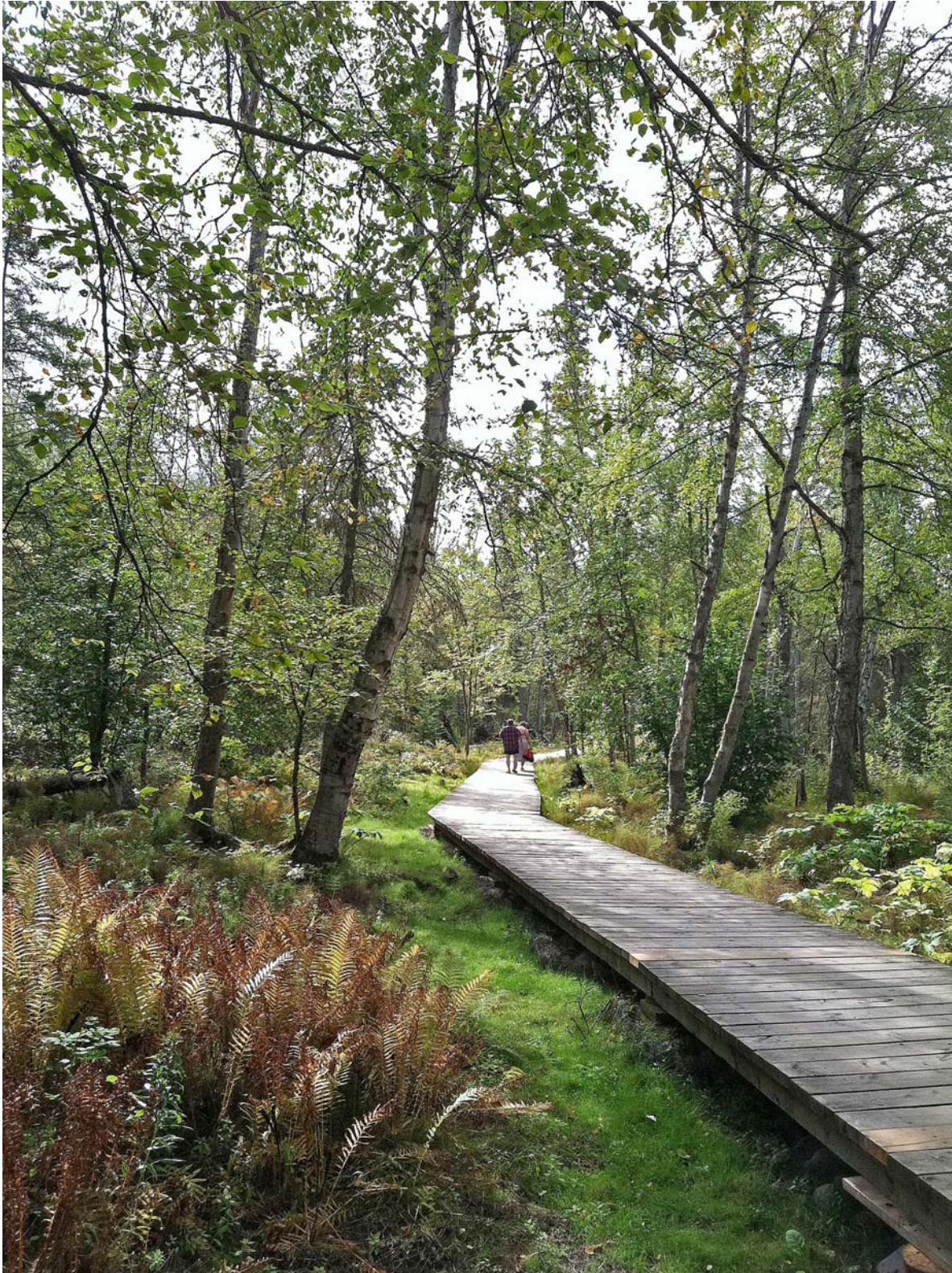
This is reached via a 600-meter boardwalk.



Boardwalk through marsh and forest edge
Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Boardwalk with Ostrich Fern, Paper Birch, etc.
Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Countless people charged past me up and down the boardwalk totally oblivious of the beautiful plants in early fall color on either side. Above the bathing pool a series of steep stairways led to a view of the hanging gardens, sort of a mini-Mammoth Hot Springs with the same chemistry as at Yellowstone. There were also some special plants there.



Hanging Garden
Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC

I spent the entire morning on that boardwalk absolutely fascinated by the variety of plants that have taken advantage of this unique "tropical" (for northern BC) oasis. I took a couple hundred photos with my iPhone camera and figured out most of the plants from my books. I still have a couple that I couldn't find in any of the books. One was especially beautiful. It had large compound leaves with five leaflets and always there were three of these leaves sticking out symmetrically from a central stem. The diameter of the entire array was about 12-18 inches and the flat spray of leaves stood maybe a foot off the ground. Some of the leaves were still green, while others were brilliant rusty red or in transition. They were really beautiful and I tried all my books to find out what they were. [Keep reading. I found out what they were much later in the trip and put some photos there.]

Besides this special plant, the rest of my list was:

Black Spruce, *Picea mariana*

White Spruce, *Picea glauca*

Tamarack, *Larix laricina*

Trembling Aspen, *Populus tremuloides*

Balsam Poplar, *Populus balsamifera balsamifera* (Black Cottonwood, *B. b. trichocarpa*, found farther south is the same species, but a different and poorly differentiated subspecies. Intergrades common in central BC.)

Alaska Paper Birch, *Betula neoalascensis*

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Red-osier Dogwood, *Cornus stolonifera*.
(One photo clearly showed a Black Fly.)



Black Fly on Red-osier Dogwood,
Comus stolonifera
Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC

Thinleaf Speckled Alder or Mountain Alder
Alnus incana tenuifolia

Canada Goldenrod, *Solidago canadensis*

Bunchberry, *Cornus canadensis*

(I had photographed it in flower
earlier in the summer, but now it
had bright red fruit. A Native

Canadian came along while I was looking at this and told me the members
of his tribe used the fruits for asthma. He also said Gray Jays are fond of
it. We saw one in the bill of a Gray Jay this morning.)

Great Northern Aster, *Aster modestus*



Great Northern Aster
Aster modestus
Liard Hot Springs Provincial
Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Western Mountain-Ash, *Sorbus scopulina*

Highbush-Cranberry, *Viburnum edule*

Rosy Twistedstalk, *Streptopus roseus*

Shrubby Cinquefoil, *Potentilla fruticosa*

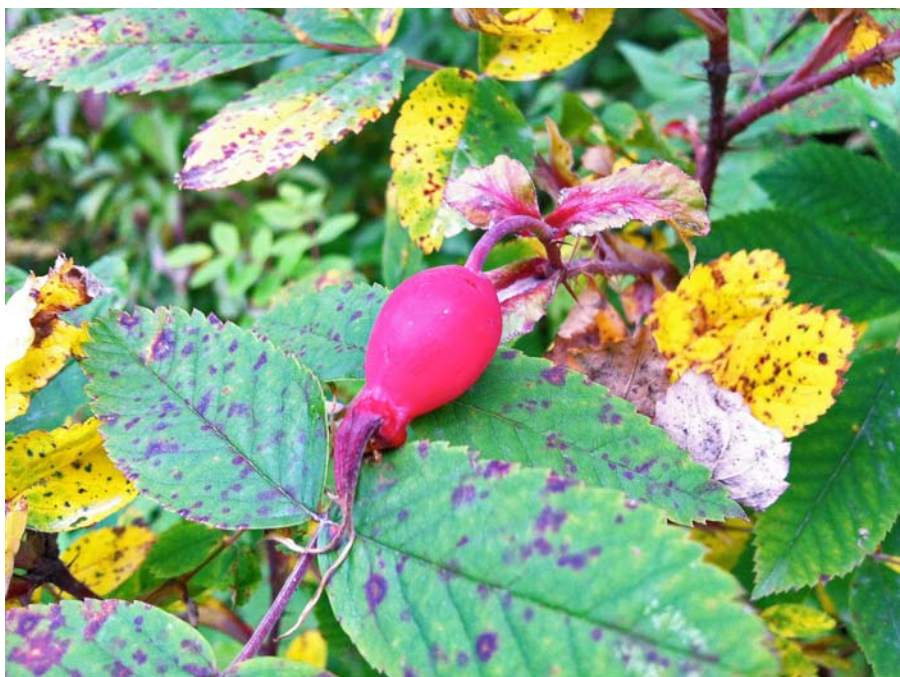
Philadelphia Fleabane, *Erigeron philadelphicus*

Labrador Tea, *Ledum groenlandicum* (I've seen this many times in flower, including this summer, but now some of the leaves have turned brilliant crimson. Beautiful! This is not the same species I photographed in Tuktoyaktuk.)



Labrador Tea in fall color,
Ledum groenlandicum
Liard Hot Springs
Provincial Park. BC

Prickly Rose, *Rosa acicularis*. (Brilliant red hips)



Prickly Eose hip,
Rosa acicularis
Liard Hot Springs
Provincial Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Yellow Monkeyflower, *Mimulus guttatus* (Common in California, too)

If it hadn't been for the plants, the morning would have been a bust, for the birds were few and far between. The only common species was Pine Siskin, which I could hear in the treetops most of the time, but never saw well. Also present were a few chickadees (probably Black-capped from the habitat), Common Raven (a few), Gray Jay (one at a time), a sparrow of some sort (saw a dark form dive into a shrub and heard a couple of notes that could have been White-throated, common here in June, 1991). Jim glimpsed a long-legged sandpiper (Lesser Yellowlegs nest here and he got photos in 1991). Jim gave up and went back to the trailer early; he's *not* interested in plants.

5:20 pm, Saturday, August 27, 2011

Toad River Lodge & RV Park, Km 675, Alaska Highway

We only drove about 80 miles today. We were planning to go 105, but we saw so many animals along the road that we decided to drive very slowly. Our first encounter was a single caribou, which walked in and out of a thin veil of roadside shrubs and Jim never got a shot of it because he was waiting for a clear one.

A bit farther down the road there was a Black Bear in the wide clearing along the roadside. Usually these animals head into the woods right away, but this one just kept on eating. Jim got out of the truck and approached it somewhat, but with a telephoto lens. The animal looked up at him from time to time, then put its head back down and ate some more of whatever it was finding in the roadside vegetation. After two or three minutes, it finally ambled off into the forest, but Jim blazed away whenever it put its head up.



Black Bear Alaska Hwy.
west of Muncho Lake
Provincial Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Loving Cotton Grass as I do, I was interested to discover a different species in this area from that I'd seen in the Arctic. This one grows in drier ditches and is not pure white, but still impressive.



Cotton Grass overview, probably *Eriophorum chamissonis*
Alaska Hwy. west of Muncho Lake Provincial Park, BC



Cotton Grass close-up, probably *Eriophorum chamissonis*
Alaska Hwy. west of Muncho Lake Provincial Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

We hadn't driven much farther when we entered Muncho Lake Provincial Park,



Muncho Lake
Muncho Lake Provincial Park, BC

and soon came to a herd of Thinhorn (new name) Sheep. These are the dark "Stone" Sheep; "Dall" Sheep are the white form. (He photographed "Dall" or "White" Sheep beside Turnagain Arm south of Anchorage.)

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Thin-horned ("Dall") Sheep
Beside Turnagain Arm south of Anchorage, AK

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

The animals were grouped tightly together all licking the gravel on the side of the road. They paid absolutely no attention to the cars and trucks whose occupants had stopped to watch them. Jim actually got out of the truck and approached them with his telephoto lens in order to get a better angle to the sun. There must have been about 30 animals--males, females and young. They were in two tightly packed groups--actually in physical contact it looked like to me from the truck. There was no vegetation beside the road, so perhaps they were going for minerals. Anyway, Jim shot a lot of pictures and was very happy when he came back. [Later: They were wonderful--so wonderful I had to include four of them with this diary.



Thin-horned ("Stone") Sheep – female
Muncho Lake Provincial Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Thin-horned ("Stone") Sheep – male
Muncho Lake Provincial Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Thin-horned ("Stone") Sheep – female and juveniles
Muncho Lake Provincial Park, BC



Thin-horned ("Stone") Sheep – male, female and juveniles
Muncho Lake Provincial Park, BC

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Another thing that slowed us down was about ten miles of gravel road. The first part of it wasn't too bad, but the final part had a signal and a pilot car because it was incredibly dusty. The purpose of the pilot car seemed to be to slow down the traffic, but we thought the pilot car went too fast. For at least five miles we had a cloud of dust in front of us that was so dense we literally couldn't see. It was pretty frightening. The pilot car got to the other end long before the tail end of the traffic did. Long before we got to the end of the unpaved road, we met the pilot car coming back with a train of traffic behind it. Now we had to watch for oncoming traffic through the dust and stay on the right-hand side of the road. We were really glad to see the paved road again and turned off at the first chance to fix lunch and relax a bit.

Soon after that we reached the true Rocky Mountains, with their uptilted sedimentary rocks--just like Colorado, though not so high. They were created after the coastal mountains when the west-moving North American plate and the east-moving Pacific Plate forced the continent to buckle in the middle along an apparent weak strip. It was easy to see the curves and broken lines of sediments in the cliff faces. Unfortunately there were very few places to stop and photograph the effects, but I got some pictures.



Contorted rock layers
Alaska Hwy, through northern Rocky Mountains, BC

Around 2:00 we saw a sign that said, "Watch for caribou next seven kilometers." We could have continued, but we really wanted to be sure to see those caribou. It was another 35 miles to Summit Lake, where we had planned to stop, but there was also an RV park with high ratings right before those 7 km. So we decided to stop here at Toad River Lodge and RV Park. Besides, who could turn down an EW site that backs right up to the edge of a river?

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

The flow is pretty sluggish right here and I can look out the window at what, to my eye, seems to be perfect moose habitat.



Toad River from campsite
Toad River Lodge and RV Park, Alaska Hwy., BC

Maybe we'll luck out. [Later: We didn't.] The place has a gas station, so if we decide to drive back and forth along the road, we can get a little gas. (We'd been told gas was pretty expensive between Contact Point and Ft. Nelson and only have enough in our tank to get there without any extra miles, but at least it's available if we need it.)

5:15 pm, Sunday, August 28, 2011
Triple G RV Park, Ft. Nelson, BC

This is the same RV park we stayed in back in June, 1991, on our way north. Then it was called Westend RV Park. It was here that Jim got such nice photos of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers at their nest. Of course, now these birds have flown south. We're now east of the Rockies, so I was hoping to see a few more migrants--and we have indeed been seeing more flocks of unidentifiable small birds flying across the road as we've been driving. However, this park seems to be awfully quiet--just a few American Crows. Even that is a change, for it's been all Common Ravens for the last several days. We did see crows in a few places in YK and AK--where there was agriculture, as here. As we've been approaching Ft. Nelson, we've seen lots of hay fields, some with rolls of hay, and a few--very few--even with cattle.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Yesterday was a beautiful day, with scattered clouds. When we awoke this morning, we thought it would be a repeat of that, but within minutes the sky was totally cloudy and has been that way all day.

It took us an hour and a half to drive the thirty miles from Toad River to Summit Lake, but we were rewarded by several caribou stops. The first one had a nice buck with a good rack, but he disappeared into the tall creek-side brush before Jim could get his camera on him. The second one was a couple of females, which were frightened away by a truck that went charging past. The third and largest group was just outside Stone Mountain Provincial Park and they stayed beside the road and allowed Jim to approach them. He got lots of nice shots of females and youngsters.



Caribou – female
Alaska Hwy. east of Toad River Lodge, BC

There was no male present. Even though there were vehicles stopped in the road on either side of them, a huge truck went roaring around us and through the group at a rather high speed. Meanwhile another truck waited patiently behind the trailer on the other side of the herd until all of us tourists had finished looking at them.

That reminds me of yesterday when Jim was shooting the sheep. A big oil tanker truck stopped and the driver got out of his cab with his camera and took a bunch of pictures just like the tourists. It just shows that there are all kinds of truckers. And there certainly have been a

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

lot of them on the road today, even though it's Sunday. The construction zones have been active, too. I guess they have to do their work while the short summer lasts.

Today we encountered the highest and the lowest points on the Alaska Highway. The highest point is Summit Lake, where we spent a night in Stone Mountain Provincial Park back in 1991. It's about 2500 ft high and passes through the northernmost part of the Rocky Mountains. The lowest point is Ft. Nelson, about 1400 ft. Amazingly little difference, isn't there?

As we descended from the typical Rocky Mountain scenery with the craggy uptilted layers, we got into more of a foothill habitat with rounded-off mountains. The road still ascended and descended some pretty good grades. Finally we were in a low, nearly flat habitat at the level of Ft. Nelson. It's still rolling because of the glacial action of the ice ages.

The trees here around Ft. Nelson are the tallest we've seen for a long time. Balsam Poplars are probably the tallest, but I've seen some pretty tall Black and White spruces. Tamaracks are scattered among some of the smaller Black Spruce stands. There's lots of evidence of logging, for there are lots of small, even-looking stands of various types and heights.

We got here around 2:00, took naps, and now it's raining. We were supposed to get WiFi, but it seems to be off-line. However, the forecast I got three days ago said it was supposed to rain the next two days both here and in Ft. St. John. Oh, well! We do get a nice day now and then. We're thankful for those we had in Liard Hot Springs and around Muncho Lake.

5:00 pm, Thursday, September 1, 2011 **Moonshine Lake PP, AB**

Monday and Tuesday, Aug. 29 and 30, were days of driving south in the Rocky Mountain foothills from Fort Nelson to Dawson Creek. We spent Monday night at Sikanni River RV Park about half-way down the road. Both days had similar hilly country. Most of the soil seemed to be soft sedimentary material that had been moved around by the glaciers and the extremely strong winds that occurred on their slopes as they were melting. (Even today such winds are noted in Greenland and Antarctica, according to a book I mentioned earlier, *After the Ice Age* by Pielow.) Since the most recent glacial period, this soft material has been cut deeply by the rivers, so we had lots of descents and ascents on grades up to 8%. Both days had a mix of clouds and sunshine with occasional showers. The distant and approaching storms, a few with lightning, added a dramatic touch to the scene. Between storms the puffy cumulus and cumulonimbus clouds were beautiful.

Monday morning we had to wait in Ft. Nelson for the banks and grocery stores to open (9:30 and 9:00, respectively), so it was close to 10:30 when we got on the road for a 130-mile drive. We stopped at a roadside rest area and fixed lunch, then arrived at Sikanni River RV Park just as the strongest storm of the period was tapering off, so we didn't have to set up camp in the rain. The sky was still really dark and the park seemed especially gloomy because it is set in a deep canyon where the highway crosses the Sikanni River. It was really depressing. The campsites are extremely close together, but fortunately there was hardly anyone there. We both took naps and after we awoke the sun was out and the place was actually pretty attractive. I think we stayed there in the rain on our way north in 1991, too. There are very few campgrounds along this north-south stretch of road, a distinct contrast to

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

the large number on the scenic and animal-laden east-west portion through the Rockies from Watson Lake to Ft. Nelson.

As we were driving south, almost all the traffic was trucks, carrying the most varied assortment of equipment you could imagine. The interior of this part of the country is being rapidly developed for oil and natural gas. We saw dozens of "wide loads" with accompanying escort vehicles. All were carrying modular units that looked like housing or office buildings for the staff of industrial developments. All along the highway were roads turning off into the forest to "plant number such and such." Fort Nelson is a bustling town with a lot of industry south of town, including a huge refinery for natural gas products. In addition to petrochemicals, the area also has forestry, agriculture (mainly pasture, hay-growing, and cattle), and, of course, tourism.

On Tuesday we stopped in Ft. St. John for me to get the rest of my groceries. I had hoped they'd be cheaper down there, but they weren't. Canadian grocery prices are much higher than those in the US. Even Alaska was cheaper than Ft. St. John. Then we continued another 50 miles to Dawson Creek, arriving around 2:00. We stopped for lunch in the little town of Tayler at the bottom of the steep grade down to the bridge across the Peace River. We ate in a little diner that seemed to be popular with the locals. Maybe that's all there was; the food was pretty poor. (Actually the food in the interior of western Canada is generally pretty ordinary, if not awful.) We stopped early because I wanted to see some of the interpretive centers in Dawson Creek, the official Mile Zero town on the Alaska Highway. (Jim would have preferred to go on to someplace where he could shoot birds.)

We stayed at Mile "0" RV Park, a city park which is actually at Mile 1.5. It's a huge park, but the sites are fairly wide and have grass and Eastern Cottonwoods around them. It was pretty full and, judging by the pick-up-truck traffic out of the park at 6:30 am the next morning, it was obvious that most of the residents are guys in town for some industrial or construction project. My camping guide had said there wouldn't be any permanent trailers there because the place closes Sept. 30, but there were certainly a lot of long-termers.

As soon as we were settled in our campsite, I walked over to the Pioneer Village, which was right next to the campground. It's a collection of old buildings of all types, very nicely furnished with period furniture and supplies. The Peace River Valley was settled fairly recently, so most of the buildings were from the 1920s and 1930s and their contents from even later. It made me feel my age to see familiar items from my childhood. Examples: a cookstove like the one in my grandparents' house and a telephone switchboard like I used to run as a volunteer for Red Cross when I was in high school, as well as many other things. There were no people in any buildings to explain what things were for and I was puzzled by a few. Despite the lack of interpreters, everything was spotlessly clean and not covered with dust. I was especially puzzled by one item in the kitchen of a house.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Unknown kitchen device
Pioneer Village, Dawson Creek, BC

No one in the office could tell me what it was for, nor could anyone in the Visitors Center museum the next day. In the latter location, the woman even searched the internet for ideas. Her best guess was that it was some sort of fruit crusher.

The only person I met was a retired fireman who is now the proud owner of the two original fire trucks from Dawson City, dated 1942 and early 1950s. They are housed in the original firehouse, which has been moved there. The man was working on restoring one of the trucks, the other one already finished. He was an opinionated, garrulous old cuss and I had a great time listening to him. He hates Al Gore, David Suzuki and a few other environmental types whose names I didn't recognize. On the other hand, he does believe government services should be provided to all people in town, and the political big-wigs shouldn't receive special treatment. I didn't argue about the things I disagreed with. It wouldn't have done any good--and, besides, it was more fun just to listen.

Yesterday morning, we waited until the interpretive centers downtown opened and towed the trailer down there to their nice big parking lot. I enjoyed the art gallery and even bought a painting. In another building there were displays on the Alaska Highway road construction, natural history, and the settlement of the area. All were interesting. I took a few pictures of mounted specimens of birds we apparently aren't going to find in the wild for Jim to photograph--a few hawks, owls, grouse, etc.

It was around 11:00 when we got on the road for the 40-mile drive to Moonshine Lake Provincial Park in Alberta. When we got here, we discovered that nearly all the sites were taken in what we then thought was the only loop with electrical hookups. We knew that Labor Day was upcoming and it was obvious that people were staking out sites for the upcoming long

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

weekend, for a lot of sites had just a single pup-tent or an unoccupied trailer in them (counter to the rules on the bulletin board, which a camper told me are not enforced). We had thought we might spend a night or two here, then move on to another park, but this settled it. We're going to spend five nights right here!

It's a very nice campground with a small lake and boreal forest around it. It doesn't allow boats with gas-powered engines, only electric or hand-rowed. Thus it should be quiet, for it won't attract the rowdy types that like to speed around on the larger lakes. The people here already have been nice and quiet. Even the two dogs in the next site are like Toby. They bark whenever they see someone walking by their site, but quiet down when told to. Those people have gone home now, but the new folks are pretty quiet, too.

We had no sooner set up camp when a bird flew into a spruce tree near our site. It took no more than a glance to discover it was a Blue Jay.



Blue Jay
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

I hadn't realized its range extended this far northwest, but Sibley shows it in Alberta on the flatlands east of the Rockies almost to the northern border. It's rare in British Columbia. It's been years since we've seen one, so we've really been enjoying the half-dozen or so that have been busily hauling off Jim's peanuts and sunflower seeds ever since we got here. Dark-eyed

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Juncos that look like intergrades between Slate-colored and Oregon, but more Slate-colored, are also present.



Dark-eyed Junco (Oregon/Slate-colored intergrade?)
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

Gray Jays appear from time to time, but don't seem to know what peanuts are; they certainly take them other places we've been. Elsewhere in the park I've seen Red-breasted Nuthatch, Osprey, Boreal Chickadee, Gadwall (female & seven juveniles), White-throated Sparrow (heard partial song). However, I've really not done much exploring yet. This morning we gave the trailer a thorough cleaning. We practically had to shovel the dirt out of the place. The Alaska Highway is pretty dirty even though most of it is paved--just a few patches of gravel that haven't been oiled yet. Even where the road is paved, the shoulder isn't and passing trucks throw up a lot of dirt. I hope the drives won't be so dirty now that we're down in the settled part of Alberta.

The rest of the morning was lost to a long overdue time change on our part. It occurred to me that Alberta might be on Mountain time and I looked at a map and discovered we've actually been on Mountain time since somewhere in the Rocky Mountains before we got to Ft. Nelson. That means that all the times in this diary from Ft. Nelson until now could be wrong, unless western BC doesn't go onto Daylight Saving Time. Anyway, I settled it by asking the camper in the next site what time zone we're in and she told me I had to set my watch forward an hour.

This morning Jim was looking at the park brochure and discovered that another loop is

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

marked "electric." He thought we might like to be in that one and on the edge of the developed part of the park. So after breakfast we drove around it and discovered that every campsite is taken or staked out, so that clinched it. We came back and immediately paid for the remaining four nights of the upcoming Labor Day weekend. Our site is actually quite nice and in retrospect we may have been lucky to get it yesterday.

After lunch it clouded up and rained a while, but seems to be clearer now.

4:00 pm, Sunday, September 4, 2011
Moonshine Lake PP, AB

Friday morning, Sept. 2, when I raised the shades and peeked out at Jim's feeding station, I discovered a new species in addition to the juncos and Blue Jays. The light was dim and the birds were wet, so at first I thought some or all were Swamp Sparrows. Further examination revealed that they were all White-throated Sparrows. Some seem to be immatures and the rest fall adults. None is truly white-striped, but one might turn out to be that in breeding plumage. I'll have to look up the details in my sparrow books when I get home. There are up to four of these birds and they've been around our site ever since.



White-throated Sparrow
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

Friday was a day of intermittent drizzle and light rain with a high in the 50s, so I spent most of the time indoors getting caught up on working with my photos. Jim showed me how to use Photoshop Elements to lighten only the shadows in some of my pictures and, lo and behold, convert some of my disappointing shots into first-class ones. I had never used Photoshop, but Jim had installed it in my computer before I requisitioned (stole?) it from him

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

right after he bought it several years ago. Its only Version 3, while Jim is using Version 5, but it does what I want.

People poured into the park all day for the holiday weekend, many of them occupying the sites that they had reserved with a pup-tent, but most passing by the occupied sites in our loop and then settling for the large non-electric loop. I suspect the entire place was full by the end of the day.

Saturday, Sept. 3, was a beautiful day and Jim and I took the trail all around the lake. It goes across the dike, which was installed to convert a wet depression into a true lake, then through the essentially empty day-use area, which has alternating grass and forest. After that there's a fairly long stretch through the spruce-aspen (mostly) forest and then along the lakeshore between the dry-camping loop and the lake. It's really a nice walk and took us the better part of the morning because we had to stop all the time for interesting plants (me only, of course) and birds.



Moonshine Lake with ducks – panorama
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Aspen and spruce tree tops
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB



Water Smartweed, *Polygonum amphibian* – common beside lake
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

While I was dallying with a plant that turned out to be a common alien, Jim went on ahead and came upon a mixed flock of about twenty Greater and Lesser yellowlegs resting on the lake's shore bank. He said he was absolutely thrilled when the first bird on the bank not only allowed him to slowly walk to within twenty feet of it, but then it led the whole group slowly parading by right in front of him, one by one, even closer than twenty feet, allowing him to get fantastic photos. Each bird looked at him quizzically as it walked by, but showed no sign of fear--this despite the fact that the Canon 60D camera he was using at the time has a fairly loud shutter noise.



Greater Yellowlegs
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

There was also a Common Loon that occasionally came close to shore, but Jim wasn't able to get any shots of it.

Near the end of the walk, by the children's play area on the beach, we saw fresh moose tracks which had to have been made since Friday's rain. Jim ran into a man who told him he had seen the moose that morning. Today Jim went over there at dawn--and even walked completely around the lake again--but didn't see any sign of the beast. He's really had bad luck with that animal on this trip--just the two head shots in Two Moose Lake on the Dempster Hwy. Incidentally, we later learned that the "First Nations" Natives had had a death in the tribe and had shot one of those tame Moose for the funeral feast. What a shame, but the Natives have rights that the rest of the citizens don't have.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

This morning, Sun., Sept. 4, we took a short drive to Jack Bird Pond, also part of the park. We wouldn't have had any idea it was there if I hadn't had a chat with the camp host; he told me about it. To get there we returned to the main highway entrance to the park on Road 725, drove south one-half mile to a dirt road across from a farm complex on the right. We turned left (east) on that road and drove one mile, where the road made a right-angle bend to the right. After about one-half mile on that road, we found a sign that directed us to turn left into the park. (That was the only sign there was.) A short drive took us to a little turn-around with rest-rooms, picnic tables, and a grassy trail that went part-way around the pond.



Jack Bird Pond
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

En route to the lake we found a couple of Ruffed Grouse next to the forest on the mowed road shoulder of the exit road from the main part of the park. They were on the right and in the shade, so Jim couldn't try to photograph them from the truck. He took a chance and got out and shot a few frames right there, then approached them cautiously and shot a few



more. Most of the pictures were awful because of the low light and long exposure, but one was excellent because both the bird and the photographer were motionless. They were digital images, of course. The task would have been impossible with film.

Ruffed Grouse
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

There were a number of ducks on Jack Bird Pond, including several that I hadn't seen on Moonshine Lake: Ruddy Duck, Redhead (probably), Bufflehead. All the ducks are in eclipse plumage now, so it's hard to identify them unless they're pretty close.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Jim didn't get any pictures at the pond, but I decided to photograph a few flowers on the way back, although I was pretty sure they were weedy aliens. One of them was probably introduced Common Tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*, but the other was a widespread native, Canada Thistle, *Cirsium arvense*. As I was photographing the flowers, I discovered that each one had a different species of bee on it. Even though they were swaying in the wind and difficult to get my iPhone to focus on, I got as close as possible to them and was thrilled to discover that I had first-rate shots of both bees--not first-rate for an iPhone, but first-rate *period*; even the tiny hairs on them show crisply and I had to crop the images quite a bit. One of them was Two-spotted Bumblebee, *Bombus bimaculatus*. The other I couldn't find in Kaufman's *Insects* book, but I'm pretty sure it's in the family Megachilidae. I'll have to try to pin it down when I have internet access.



Two-spotted Bumblebee, *Bombus bimaculatus*;
on Common Tansy,
probably *Tanacetum vulgare*
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB



Bee (probably Megachilidae family) on
Canada thistle, *cirsium arvense*
Moonshine Lake Provincial Park, AB

[Later: I never figured it out to the species.]

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

As the morning progressed, the sky clouded up but without rain. About the middle of the afternoon it suddenly cleared up and became quite windy. Obviously a dry front came through.

Jim was not only happy with his yellowlegs adventure, but he was finally able to take many bird pictures at our site during the course of our stay there. He was really tickled about the number of birds that were attracted to his birdseed offerings--especially the Blue Jays, which were present in force because we were now east of the Rocky Mountains. Some of the campers came by and asked him what he was feeding the birds to get such a response. He told them that the Blue Jays were really scarfing up his sunflower seeds Jim had the feeling that they thought he was hogging all the birds in the park.

Once when Jim was seated in a chair outside our trailer, a Red Squirrel ran up his leg, seated itself in his lap, and looked at him eyeball to eyeball at six inches for a few seconds. Then it ran off. The next day Jim was seated at the campground table and the squirrel came up on the table and proceeded stick his head in the hood of the camera lens that Jim was holding in his hands. Funny creatures, eh? (Note the Canadianism.)

The name "Moonshine Lake" is interesting and I found a paper posted on the bulletin board by the restroom explaining it and telling the history of the park. Here's an excerpt: "The lake's name has a colorful history. Moonshine Lake was situated on a detour from a trail that was known in the 1910s and 1920s as the Moonshine Trail. Sometime during the 1920s, two local residents spilled their illegal brew from a wagon into the lake, and thus christened the lake 'Moonshine'. At some point after this time, the lake was officially renamed 'Mirage', but local residents continued to use the original name. In 1983, the name was changed back to Moonshine."

We've been really happy here over this holiday weekend. The people have been quiet and their children well-behaved and polite. Two very young kids on their tricycles pulled off the road for our truck and wouldn't budge until we went by even though Jim gestured to them to go ahead because he had to take a moment to fasten his seat belt. I met a group of them on the trail and they excitedly told me all about the dragonfly they had seen. It's wonderful, but rare these days, to have kids aware of nature. I know it's because they don't allow fast motor boats on this lake. I heard a lot of generators as I was passing by the non-electric loop, but the hookups in our loop and the one above us keep our area free of that annoying drone. Thank you, Alberta, for putting hookups in your campgrounds! BC doesn't have them, nor does California for that matter, with a few exceptions. My only complaint is all the smoke from campfires--and there are a lot of them because firewood is free.

5:45 pm, Tuesday, September 6, 2011 **Winagami PP, AB (nr. High Prairie)**

Yesterday morning, Monday, Sept. 5 (Labor Day) we walked along the dike area of Moonshine Lake one more time. The yellowlegs had departed, but it was such a beautiful day! I enjoyed puzzling out the eclipse ducks, which were near the closest "corner" of the lake and didn't show any inclination to swim off. Between Moonshine Lake and Jack Bird Pond (both part of the park), I listed eight species: Gadwall, American Wigeon, Blue-winged Teal, Mallard, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, Redhead, and Northern Shoveler. Other birds on the water included Canada Goose, Common Loon, and Red-necked Grebe. For the entire park, I ended up with 36 bird species, more than anywhere in BC, Yukon, or Alaska.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

We left the park around 10:30 and drove about 105 miles east to Winagami Lake Provincial Park between McLennan and High Prairie. The campground turned out to be a nearly birdless monoculture of aspen and poplar. All I've detected is one Downy Woodpecker (heard its whinny once) and one White-throated Sparrow (heard its song once). We're fairly close to the lake and I walked down toward it with Toby, but there was just a 100-yard swath of birdless tall grass and shrubs with a mowed trail right at the edge of the forest. I walked along it a ways, but gave up when nothing popped up or vocalized.

This morning we did better. We drove to the day-use portion of the park, where I found a flock of American Pipits, a few Black-capped Chickadees, and a single Yellow-headed Blackbird and probable Marsh Wren that popped up and back down into the cattails. But we hit the jackpot on the boardwalk railing out to a little breakwater. There we found a flock of about 20-30 Common Terns plus a single Bonaparte's Gull. The terns were both adults and juveniles and in various stages of molt. They paid no attention to Jim as he gradually approached them to the distance he wanted to be. He must have photographed those birds for nearly an hour. He has never gotten Common Tern in these plumages before. The light was so good that he also got out his film camera and shot a lot of slides with that, too.



Common Tern, immature
Winagami Lake Provincial Park. AB

While he was doing that, I took a birdless trail through the forest to a viewing platform with a mounted spotting scope, but all I could see was some probable Red-necked Grebes off in the distance. They flew away before I could get focused.

With nothing more pressing to do, we drove about 20-25 miles into the town of High Prairie. Jim tried to find a place where he could get his oil changed, but there were none of those quicky places. He went to the GM dealer and they told him they could do it if he'd come

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

back at 3:00 (it was then 11:00). The oil change will wait. After a quick hamburger at A&W (quite good, hadn't eaten in one of those in years), I bought a huge list of groceries at the local IGA. Their meat looked wonderful--nice pale pink pork chops, *small* chicken thighs, etc. Their produce was nice and fresh, too, and the expiration dates of their dairy products were amazingly far into the month. Because of the dearth of land birds in these flatland parks, we've decided to take in Jasper and Banff National Parks, where groceries will be expensive and the selection limited. Maybe Jim can find some more megamammals to photograph. He still needs that elusive moose, and a few elk or another grizzly bear would also be nice.

3:15 pm, Saturday, September 10, 2011

Whistler's Campground, Jasper National Park, AB

Wednesday, Sept. 7, we drove part-way to Jasper National Park. We could have gone farther and stayed in a private RV park, but I spotted an interesting looking provincial park, Carson-Pegasus PP and we decided to check it out. It had a lot of electrical hookups and we were sure we'd get one on a Wed., night, but we were wrong. Those sites were all taken. We were assigned a dry site, which supposedly had a view of the lake across the loop road. Yes, we could see the lake, just barely, through a lot of trees. Worst of all, the sites were extremely close together. We were in a V between two sites that backed in towards each other. Later, when I walked Toby around the park, I found lots of empty sites that were on the lake side of the road and much farther from each other. The site we had should not have been used except as a last resort. An added disadvantage of the park was that the place was extremely shady, and there seemed to be no site that would get enough sun to charge our solar panels. So we knew we couldn't stay there for any length of time even if it turned out we wanted to. The woman at the entry booth had put us on the waiting list for an electrical site for the next night.

There were a couple of trees in our site that looked as though they had been worked on by a Three-toed or Pileated woodpecker, so we had some hope that one might drop by. Jim put some Magic Meal in the trees just in case. He also put some birdseed, etc., all around and managed to attract a few Blue Jays. Some Gray Jays dropped by briefly, but didn't discover the food and didn't return.

Late in the afternoon, I took Toby and walked the trail along the lakeshore, then looped back through the campground. Birds were almost nonexistent. I saw a few gulls way out in the water. They could have been Herring. I heard one call from a loon, but didn't see it. I detected absolutely no birds in the forest.

Later in the afternoon the man in the site next to ours took Jim down to the lake and showed him two Common Loons. One was feeding the other, which Jim interpreted as courtship, but I think it's the wrong time of year for that. I think it was more likely a parent feeding a juvenile. Jim shot some pictures, but it was too late in the day for them to be very good. They weren't even good enough to tell for sure whether they were adults or juveniles. One did show vestiges of breeding plumage, but whether the other did is not clear. The pictures were really fuzzy.

Since the birdlife was so sparse, we didn't bother to check the next morning (Thurs., Sept. 8) to see if an electric site was available. Instead we drove on to the last town before the entrance to Jasper National Park. We stopped for lunch in Hinton and had a really poor Chinese lunch in a beautifully decorated new restaurant. The decor was spare Chinese modern with one tall bamboo plant and a single statue as a focal point; the walls were painted in various intense shades of gold, rust, cream, etc. Unfortunately the food didn't live up to the

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

decor. It was too oily, lacked flavor, and the fried shrimp had at least twice as much soggy batter as shrimp.

We found a site a couple of miles beyond Hinton in the Hinton-Jasper KOA. The campground was well back from the highway and all the sites were in the open. We lucked out and got one on the end of a row with a beautiful view across a mowed field to the Rocky Mountains in the distance. The day turned hot and without shade we used our air-conditioner for the first time on the trip. The temperature topped out at 86° that day and 83° the next.

We chose the place because it promised WiFi and cable TV. We really needed to get caught up in our correspondence and knowledge of what was going on in the world. The WiFi was the usual temperamental satellite version, for which they apologized in their brochure. Sometimes we got online right away, other times we didn't. Sometimes we got a signal to the park receiver, sometimes we didn't. Sometimes we couldn't connect to the internet even though we had two bars to the park's signal. Their information sheet explained that clouds often prevent the signal from connecting--either local clouds or clouds between the satellite and the main ground transmitter, wherever that is. It must have been the latter, because the sky was almost cloudless the entire time we were there. Even so, we got online often enough to get caught up on our correspondence and to learn that the heat isn't supposed to last more than a couple more days, and that there is only one minor front with rain in the offing for the next ten days. Sounds nice!

On Friday, Sept. 9, we left the trailer in the KOA and drove into Jasper National Park and took the 17-mile spur road to Miette Hot Springs. It turned out to be only mildly interesting. The road wound up steeply through a very narrow valley, with occasional views of the mountain peaks. The hot springs area was highly developed with the spring water in an extensive complex of baths and swimming pools of various temperatures. There was also a lodge, restaurant, and gift shop next to them. The most interesting thing there was a nice set of signs that explained the formation of the Rocky Mtns. in general and the hot springs in particular. I photographed them, as I do all signs, with my iPhone camera. (Graphics like that would have come in handy in my recent workshop on the mountains.)

We got back to the trailer in time for lunch and I spent the rest of the day re-editing some of my earlier trip photographs using Photoshop, which I had just learned I had and could use on those photos. It really improved some of the ones that had disappointed me.

This morning we towed the trailer only about 50 miles into Jasper National Park. All the sites with hookups were taken in the big Whistler Campground, but we were thrilled with the nice back-in site we received on the outer edge of the huge place. It's site 29M. (The campground has 67 numbered loops and each loop runs from A to Z and sometimes even more--AA, BB, CC for example.) Some of the sites are close to their neighbors, but ours isn't. We're also in a loop that doesn't allow campfires, I guess because it's on the outside. We were also happy to learn the limited generator hours: 8:00-10:00 am, 5:00-7:00 pm--just long enough for people to charge their batteries, but not run them for hours on end to watch TV or whatever. Our site has filtered shade through tall Lodgepole Pines and Balsam Poplars. We think our solar panels will get sufficient sun if we're careful.

We stopped en route and walked a short trail to where one of the first way-stations ("houses") on the fur trade route through here was located. We got here around noon, ate lunch and took a nap. Now we're off to explore a nearby lake, which promises an easy trail all around it. Hope it's shady, for the day is warm.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

8:40 pm, Sunday, September 11, 2011
Whistler's Campground, Jasper NP, AB

The trail around Annette Lake yesterday was shady--except for about 100 yd across a beach crowded with pale Canadians trying to get an end-of-the-season suntan. However, the temperature was 81°, there were almost no birds, and one gang of teenagers, who had found a spot a ways away from the rest of the crowd, were playing a blaring boom-box that could be heard clearly all across the lake. Unfortunately, they started it when we were about half-way around, or we probably would have turned back. I think the warm weather has brought a lot of people from Edmonton and Calgary to the park who might not otherwise have come.

I found it interesting to compare the assortment of trees in the campground with those on the flatland where the lake was located. The lake is near the Athabasca River, but isolated from it. It's a kettle (pothole in US) lake created by glaciers near the end of the last ice age. Our campsite is located just below an east-facing slope. Around Annette Lake, the trees were mainly White Spruce and Common Douglas-Fir, with a few Lodgepole Pines. In the campsite, the dominant trees are extremely tall Lodgepole Pines and Balsam Poplars, with Common Douglas-Fir and a few White Spruce in the understory. Is the difference due to the location, the soil, fire history in the area or . . . ?

This morning we drove the 25-mile spur road past Medicine Lake to Maligne Lake. Claire and Sue de Beauvoir had suggested that we might find Pika and Moose on that road. We really lucked out on the Pika. They were at the most popular viewpoint of Medicine Lake, the first one you come to. There is a talus slope with huge boulders in some spots and a nice plot of grasses and forbs at the base of it. There's also a wooden stairway down to the bottom of the talus slope and a trail across the base of it. Lots of people were trooping all over and many were noticing the Pikas. So these were animals that were used to people and went about their business unconcerned. Jim said one came within four feet of him a few times--so close he couldn't get pictures. The animals were always darting around and he thought he might not have set his shutter speed fast enough, but even so he got two wonderful shots, one on a rock and the other gathering grass.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Pika
Jasper National Park, AB



Pika gathering grass
Jasper National Park, AB

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

I photographed them in their habitat with my iPhone camera and they're barely detectable in the image. But I mainly wanted a photo of the habitat.

Pikas are an animal of great concern in California and Colorado because climate warming is crowding them ever higher and often the mountain just isn't high enough, so they die out. However, the US Fish and Wildlife service recently declined to list them under the Endangered Species Act. They're an animal of the subalpine and alpine, which is much higher in elevation farther south than it is in Alberta. I don't know if there's any concern here about them. We certainly didn't detect any farther north. [Later I checked the internet and found that half the world's population dwells in Canada. It has no recognition other than "special concern" in either the US or Canada, but I did learn that a plant it depends on near the northern edge of its range in Yukon has been declared Endangered because of its connection with the Pika.]

Medicine Lake is an interesting place geologically. Signs which I photographed explain: In the early summer during the peak of snow-melt water, the lake is full, but gradually it disappears during the course of the summer leaving a mudflat, and that's what we saw. (I think we have early summer photos at home when it was full.) For a long time no one knew where it went. The Indians thought it was bad medicine or magic and were afraid of it. Now the geology has been worked out. The lake drains out through a series of constricted underground tubes; a diagram was on a sign & I photographed it. They're too narrow to allow the early summer snowmelt to flow out, so it backs up for a while, but gradually drains away over the summer. We saw the lakebed with about a 50:50 mix of mudflats and shallow water. There were lines of large animal tracks (moose? bear? caribou?) all over the mud, but where they were visible the road was far above the level of the lake so we couldn't identify the tracks.



Medicine Lake
Jasper National Park, AB

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

Anyway, we certainly didn't see any of the above-mentioned animals either there or up by Maligne Lake, where Claire had photographed some moose years ago.

In fact, all Maligne Lake was good for was restrooms! It has a huge parking lot, a gift shop, boat-launch, restaurant, and boat tour of the lake. That might have been interesting, but it was a little after 11:00 and the next boat didn't go out until 12:00, and we had left Toby in the trailer.

On our way back, we viewed the scenery from a different angle and the mountains were spectacular framed by the trees on either side of the road. I took one photo of Medicine Lake through the trees with mountains behind and beautiful puffy clouds and blue sky above. I consider it one of my best shots of the trip.



Medicine Lake through trees
Jasper National Park, AB

The afternoon was spent analyzing photos and walking Toby.

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011

5:15 pm, Monday, September 12, 2011

Lake Louise Campground, Banff National Park, AB

Today we drove 142 miles southeast on the Icefields Parkway, crossing from Jasper National Park to Banff National Park about half-way down the road.

The day started out with low clouds and even some minor fog in the higher passes, but after a couple of hours it dissipated and we ended up with a glorious day. I don't think I've ever before driven this highway on a clear day and we enjoyed every mile of it--except that we began to get tired when we still had a long ways to go, so we hurried through the last part of the drive. We got here around 4:00 and had to wait for half a dozen or so other camping units to register before we got to the window. But we were fortunate to get an electric site this time, which we'll be happy to have tonight. The days are warm, but the nights are cold. Last night it got down to 41° in Jasper. Lake Louise is higher and will probably get down into the 30s.

We drove slowly, looking all the time for large animals beside the road, but saw none. The traffic was pretty heavy, too, so people were forever passing us. Fortunately most of this road has a wide enough paved shoulder that we could pull over into it to let vehicles pass or to take photos of scenery, etc.

I was fascinated by the passing scene. First, the geology of glacier-carved mountains was so dramatic that I had to stop and photograph aretes, towers, U-shaped valleys. (I've learned lots of geology since I was last in these parks.) And the mountains themselves were created by a major buckling of the continent long before the ice ages. The sedimentary rocks that were under water before the uplift are tilted, bent, broken into chunks, etc. The remaining glaciers themselves began to show as we approached Sunwapta Summit and the Columbia Ice Field. After that, it seemed we passed a continual succession of mountains with glaciers on their north-east facing slopes, which were facing us. Unfortunately by then the sun was no longer on them, so we didn't stop for many photos.

We passed up the Columbia Ice Field because of the countless vehicles, including dozens of busses, that were in the parking lot. There is a museum, gift shop, restaurant, and opportunity to ride a large-tired vehicle out on the Athabasca Glacier, a portion of the ice field. I did that once many years ago and we had our own private experience with the toe of a glacier in Alaska when we drove to the toe of the Matanuska Glacier and had it all to ourselves!

I had to stop at the Bow Summit and walk the trail to the overlook of Peyto Lake, which is an unbelievable bright turquoise color. We got photos there last time we were here--over 20 years ago--and featured them in our *Shaped by Fire and Ice* multi-projector show. That day the sky was overcast, so the place had sort of a crystalline feel about it. Today it was brilliantly sunny and also beautiful, but I really think I'll like the other photos better. Both times the wooden viewing platform was jammed with bus-tourists yakking trivial inanities. Last time we couldn't understand the inanities because they were in Japanese. But everyone had to have their picture taken backed up to the railing with the lake in the background. I took a lot of photos myself, including some groups of images that I made into panoramas using the AutoStitch app on my iPhone. (I've been making these panoramas throughout the trip and they're really quite nice. They're not as crisp--not so many pixels--as the regular photos, but I've discovered that I can sharpen them and otherwise improve them greatly with PhotoShop.)

Trip to Yukon and Alaska

Summer 2011



Peyto Lake – panorama
Banff National Park, AB

The trail to the Peyto Lake overlook is paved, but extremely steep in spots. (Handicapped people and bus-tourists bypass the trail, for there is parking for them at the top.) Jim went on ahead of me in order to get back to the parking lot in time to see if he could get the ravens to take peanuts from him. I wished he was with me to hold my arm on the steepest spots on the trail, but I made it. My knees aren't what they used to be; I don't even remember that the trail was steep last time.

The Bow Summit is in the subalpine zone and I discovered that finally the White Spruce have been replaced by Engelmanns--or at least hybrids. The cones had saw-toothed edges to their scales, not smooth like White Spruce. There were also the first Subalpine Firs I've found on this trip. I know I could have found them farther north where the Alaska Highway crossed the Rocky Mountains, probably at Summit Lake, but we didn't stop there. One Subalpine Fir was mature enough to have cones, yet wasn't very tall. I had Jim photograph the cones on the treetops. Fir cones are easy to tell from those of all other conifers, because they grow upright on the branch instead of hanging down and they disintegrate on the tree instead of falling to the ground intact.

The Lake Louise Campground has widely spaced sites, but each site is expected to accommodate two RVs side by side. We're next to a rental unit occupied by a couple from the Netherlands. (At stops along the road today we shared the parking lot with a lot of foreign tourists, most of whom seemed to be speaking German or some other Germanic language.) Between the sites are tall Lodgepole Pines with shrubs underneath.

Guess I'd better quit and look at my photos.