

All of America's Prairies And Deserts

Fall 2009

by Sylvia R. Gallagher
Photographs by Sylvia and Jim Gallagher

INTRODUCTION. When we started out on this trip, we had no idea it would turn out the way it did--but that's the fun of traveling with a trailer in tow and no schedule or deadlines--except when we had to be home.

My husband Jim, our four-year-old miniature poodle Toby, and I tow an old, but beloved, 26-foot trailer. We call it our mobile bird-blind, because it has wonderful large windows. Toby can run from end to end and bark in all four directions. We've looked at newer trailers, but nothing has the huge windows and convenient floor plan of our 1987 Prowler.

Jim's love is photographing wildlife. I photograph the landscapes, plants, etc., and also record natural sounds, especially birds. Our photos and sounds are used in the Birding Skills Workshops I teach for Sea and Sage Audubon Society.

5:00 p.m., Tuesday, September 15, 2009
KOA, West Yellowstone, MT

We've been on the road a week now, but there's been little of the kind of thing happening that I usually write up in my diaries. But I'll bring it up to the present just for the record.

Our first destination was Boise, Idaho, where I attended the Western Field Ornithologists (WFO) conference. I calculated that it was about 950 miles from home to there and, since we don't like to drive much more than 300 miles per day, that meant three days en route. The first night we spent at the Mammoth Lakes RV Park. It's expensive, but at least it was nice and cool. The second night was in the Winnemucca RV Park in Nevada, where we couldn't avoid the heat. The third, fourth and fifth nights were in the Mountain View RV Park in Boise, where it was also hot. Highs of 93degrees were the rule all the time we were there. It did cool down into the 60s at night though.

A nagging worry all the while we were driving was the trailer brakes. The controller started acting strange almost as soon as we left home and Jim just couldn't seem to get the brakes adjusted for the right balance between trailer and truck braking. He finally settled on something, but after we'd driven most of the first day, he began to realize that the trailer brakes were being applied slightly all the time and putting a foot on the brake pedal didn't increase the pressure. In order not to ruin the brakes and the wheel bearing grease, Jim just turned the brakes off entirely and we drove the rest of the way on just the truck brakes, which fortunately are very good on our Suburban. There were no needs for sudden heavy braking on the wide-open roads we drove, so all went well. We looked for trailer repair places in the few towns we passed through, but there was nothing. I found a place in Boise listed in *Trailer Life* guide, and we headed straight for that shop. Two guys were looking at the thing before Jim even realized they'd gone out the door after he told the service manager what his problem was. They confirmed that the controller was no good and in no time had replaced it with a new one. The shop wasn't far from the closest RV park to the hotel where the conference events were to be held. The park was right next to the freeway, but was sort of shady. The

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manager was extremely nice and helpful--and adored hyper friendly Toby. Every chance he got he squatted down and let the little dog climb all over him.

WFO meetings were all day Friday and Saturday, mostly scientific papers. Jim decided to skip most of that, so he just dropped me off and picked me up when told to do so. Fortunately the woman chairing the sessions and introducing the speakers kept things to a very strict schedule. She was wonderful.

Besides the scientific papers, there was a panel on the future of field ornithology in the west—very interesting and the speakers had some varied and perceptive ideas that really made sense to me. Saturday morning before the main sessions, I had signed up for a 3-hour session on how to learn bird sounds. I had hoped the leader would have some ideas that would help me in my teaching of that subject, but it turned out to be just a discussion session, with input from the group expected. It seemed that every time he posed a question, everyone floundered around giving half-baked answers. Since I have been teaching the subject since 1992, I let them talk for a little while, then volunteered with what I had found worked well over the years. I was happy when another participant did the same thing when the subject came to sonograms. He's in the process of creating a website on how to interpret them, and accessed it and explained them a little. Unfortunately, the tiny sonograms on his screen didn't show very well when projected for a room full of people, but they can look at them on their own. It looks like it'll be a nice program. [A few months later: When I tried to find it on the internet, I saw no sign of it.] I was somewhat embarrassed by all the talking I was doing during the meeting, but was thanked profusely by the discussion leaders and a few of the participants afterwards.

For me the best session was the after-dinner speaker on Saturday night. It was a program by Craig Benkman of the University of Wyoming on Red Crossbills and the possibility that there may be a number of species, each specializing on a different type of conifer and having a different type of call and a bill size appropriate to the cones on the conifer it favors. I had read some on the subject, but not for a number of years. A lot of new research is coming out. I took lots of notes, but won't put any of what I learned in this diary for fear I didn't get it down right. I'll definitely want to include a lot of it in my Western Mountains workshop when I repeat it in a year or so. Some of the people went on a field trip to see the South Hills form, which entailed a five-hour drive each way. Its home is in the hills south of Twin Falls. [Later I learned that two of the best places to find the bird are USFS campgrounds. We'll have to investigate them on a future trip.]

We were happy to leave the hot low country and head for West Yellowstone on Sunday. It was an all-day drive (365 miles). After some debate about which route to take, we settled on US 20 most of the way instead of the freeway. It turned out to be a nice fast road and we saved about 40 miles.

When we got here to West Yellowstone, we found that the Yellowstone Grizzly RV Park was sold out, so we back-tracked six miles to the KOA, which had plenty of empty sites. It's not a particularly interesting place, but the sites are widely spaced.

We've been stuck here for three nights waiting for the arrival of a business paper I'm supposed to sign. It turned out the lawyer who was supposed to send it didn't get my email. My niece, who also received a copy of the email did get it, and the one to the lawyer didn't bounce, so don't know what her office did with it. Anyway, for the last two

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days we've been just biding our time. Now we've arranged to have it sent to one of the POs in Yellowstone—I hope.

Yesterday morning we explored the portion of the Madison River between West Yellowstone and Madison Junction. I've always thought it looked like an interesting area, but we've been in too much of a hurry to get someplace else in that huge park. This time we stopped at all the turnouts and read all the signs. The only animals we saw, though, were a female elk and her well-grown calf off in the distance. On the way back to town, we drove a mile or so along a river-side road that parallels the main road. Rather, Jim drove and Toby and I walked. Saw a few birds, but nothing remarkable. Mergansers were off in the distance a couple of places—probably Commons based on the Yellowstone bird list. Red-breasted are less often seen. However, they were much too far away to tell for sure.

After grocery-shopping in two stores, it was well after 1:00 when we got back to the trailer.

This morning we still hadn't learned that the business papers had not even been mailed, so we decided to explore the Hegben Lake area, a reservoir on the Madison River downstream from the area we explored yesterday. A huge (7.5) earthquake in Aug., 1959 (50 years ago), did major damage and killed 28 people in a campground. The road was sloughed off into the lake in one place and a gargantuan landslide in another blocked the road. Many people were trapped between the two spots. The earthquake tilted the lake floor with the north side sinking and the south side rising. This caused major flooding on the north side. This flooding was compounded by the landslide, which blocked the flow of the Madison River. A lot of campers and dude-ranch visitors in the area headed for one high promontory, where some or all were evacuated by helicopter. There's a visitors center near the landslide, but unfortunately it had closed for the season. I recalled seeing a book in a little shop at Madison Junction yesterday, so when we got back to West Yellowstone I went into the nice big bookstore and asked for one. It turned out they were all out of that one, but had another, which I bought. Jim's reading it now and says it's very good. (Reference: Christopherson, Edmund. 1962. *The night the mountain fell--the story of the Montana-Yellowstone earthquake*. Yellowstone Publications, West Yellowstone, MT.)

We were glad we had to spend the extra time in this area, for I had always been sort of interested in that earthquake zone, but hadn't realized how well-interpreted it was.

4:30 p.m., Sunday, September 20, 2009 **Ponderosa RV Park, Cody, WY**

We just finished four days in Yellowstone National Park, where we camped at the Norris Campground on Wed.-Sat., Sept. 16-19.

On Wed., Sept. 16, we drove from West Yellowstone to Norris, but the road between Madison and Norris was closed for construction for the duration of the season, so we had to drive all the way around via Old Faithful, Canyon, etc. We encountered a herd of Bison--and a herd of vehicles watching them—in the Hayden Valley, but we didn't dare stop for fear we wouldn't get a campsite. It was about 11:30 when we got there. Since check-out time was 11:00, we were able to get one of the few sites long enough for our rig. Most of the sites are just long enough to accommodate a van-type camper. The day was gorgeous and perfect for sitting outdoors, which I did most of the

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rest of the day. In fact, every day we were there, the temperatures topped out in the low 70s, with nights in the 30s.

Jim had high hopes of finding all the animals with big racks parading round right beside the road, so Thursday morning we drove over to Canyon, up to Tower, then out the Lamar Valley a long distance. All we saw were a couple of coyotes, a few distant Pronghorn, and a distant flock of Bison. We drove back to the trailer via Mammoth, stopping at a little nature trail about half-way from Tower to Mammoth. It had interpretive signs about the natural history of that part of the park. The most interesting thing I learned was that Lodgepole Pines in the Rockies have two kinds of cones:

Type that matures in two years, then opens to scatter seeds. If the forest floor is shaded by older trees, the seeds seldom germinate.

Serotinous type in which the seeds are tightly sealed inside the cone until the heat from a fire melts the resin that glues the cone shut. Then the cone bursts open to spread its seeds.

I had never heard of that before and resolved to look into it further. My "bible" for trees, *Western Trees* by Petrides, doesn't mention the serotinous type at all.

We had to wait about 15-20 minutes for a construction zone right beside the terraces in Mammoth, and got back to the trailer around 1:30 after a disappointing morning.

Friday morning Jim decided he might as well go photograph those Bison that were beside the road in the Hayden Valley, so we headed over to Canyon, then south a few miles. At one spot, they were off in the distance to the west and made a beautiful accent to the golden fall grasses, so we stopped for photos, then headed on south to the end of the valley, turned around, and drove back.



**Hayden Valley with distant American Bison
Yellowstone National Park, WY**

We encountered other groups of Bison, but most were on the east side of the road and back-lit, so not so good for photography. But when we got back to the original herd, we discovered they had moved toward the road and many of them were very close. So we stopped again for photos. The road was across a little creek and up a steep embankment from where the Bison were, so we thought they'd stay down below, but it wasn't long before they waded across the creek and were ascending the embankment.

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They passed between and around the throng of vehicles, ignoring the excited tourists who were standing around everywhere, then moseyed on their way down the other side. The tourists were exceedingly well-behaved, but the Bison gave everyone a marvelous photo opportunity, no matter how modest their investment in photo equipment. Jim mainly used his 100-400 lens and was pretty happy with what he got. I exposed a few frames myself. with my 35-70 lens, mostly of groups. There were adult males and females and juveniles.



American Bison
Yellowstone National Park, WY

I was expecting a large envelope with some business papers I had to sign. The lawyer's assistant told me they had been mailed Tuesday afternoon to the Canyon PO.

I had told her to mail them the fastest way possible and so I thought they might have arrived Thursday, but when I went into the PO around 11:30, they weren't there. However, that day's mail hadn't arrived yet and wouldn't be ready until about 2:30. So we had a lot of time to kill—and Toby who couldn't be left alone in the hot truck. I bought us some take-out food at one of the shops, and we ate it in the truck. The Visitors Center has some nice displays and a new interpretive movie that they show hourly. So I went in and looked at the displays and watched the movie at 1:00. Jim did the same and saw the 2:00 movie. When we got to the PO, the package had not arrived. Although the PO is officially closed on Saturdays, the nice postmaster told me that the mail does arrive that day and he puts it into the PO boxes between 2:00 and 2:30. We could come back the next day around that time and see if it had arrived.

Saturday morning I decided to walk around the thermal area at the Norris Geyser Basin, where Steamboat (tallest geyser in the world) and Echinus geysers are the main attraction. Neither geyser was doing anything spectacular, but I still enjoyed watching the gentle splashes, the heads of steam, and all the calmly bubbling pools with the multicolored soil and organisms in the run-off. I even sort of like the rotten eggs odor of hydrogen sulfide gas, because it reminds me of the many years I taught qualitative analysis to high school and college students. It was always my favorite topic to teach because it illustrates so many important principles in inorganic chemistry.

I also started looking at the cones on the Lodgepole Pines to see if I could find any serotinous ones. Most of the cones were the typical splayed out ones I was familiar with, but on a few trees, I found a tightly-closed, more conical type that I might have

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thought was just an immature cone. But this time I wondered if it might be the serotinous type. Just in case, I photographed both types of cones. Under one tree there were a lot of both types that had fallen off. Although I know you aren't supposed to pick up anything in National Parks, I figured that the park has billions of Lodgepole Pines and would not miss a few cones, so I gathered a few of each type -- and photographed them on the tree.



**Rocky Mountain Lodgepole Pine
with serotinous cone
Yellowstone National Park, WY**



**Rocky Mountain Lodgepole Pine
with non-serotinous cone
Yellowstone National Park, WY**

While I was walking the trail, Jim was trying to replace our water pump, which had started acting up and giving signs of quitting altogether. (He had taken me to the trailhead and picked me up when I called him on the radio.) We've been carrying a spare pump for years, because we've had the things go out before in inconvenient remote locations--like this. When I got back, he had all the pots and pans out of the lowest cupboard and had been lying on his side on the floor reaching into that cupboard for hours. Gradually he came to the conclusion that the new pump just wasn't going to work. So there we were with no water. He went down to the hill and fetched a waterbag full of water, which we poured into various buckets, etc., to use. But it was pretty inconvenient.

We had to drive over to Canyon (12 miles away) to see if that package had arrived in the 2:00 mail. The mail arrived around 2:15. At first the postmaster said it was not there and gave us a card to fill out to have the thing forwarded to Cody, but while we were filling it out, he discovered it was there after all. (I hadn't known how many pages it would be, nor how they would package it.) When I saw the envelope, I discovered the stupid legal assistant had just sent it ordinary first class and hadn't paid extra for fast delivery. And all the emails I had received had had incredible urgency about them. I was really disgusted, but glad to finally get the thing. I just have to sign four sheets out of about 50 and mail them back.

Since we had no water in the trailer for fixing dinner, we ate a late lunch in the dining room at the Canyon Lodge. We discovered it closed at 2:30—and that was the exact time we walked in the door. The food was so-so, but filling.

Since the water pump was now our main concern, we decided to skip Grand Teton National Park and head directly for Cody, Wyoming, which looked to me to be the biggest town in the area. It was 107 miles from Norris to Cody. Since we couldn't fix

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breakfast in the trailer, we ate in Canyon on our way. We arrived around noon. The RV park is right in town, but is an old one with lots of tall trees in the part of it with moderate-length sites. All the huge rigs have to stay in the new section with ultra-long sites and no trees. Perfect!

I had really been looking forward to having a water hook-up again, but when Jim turned on the water at the faucet outside, he discovered one of the fittings under the sink was really dripping, and he didn't dare tighten it any more for fear it would break. It's way in the back with all sorts of connections under the drip, so we can't just put a pan under it. So we had to turn the water off again. There's an RV repair place advertised in the RV park brochure, but it's not open Sundays, of course.

While Jim was registering, I saw a Dairy Queen sign peeking up over the treetops. Jim loves Dairy Queens!!! Then when we found our campsite and were backing in, I discovered a Pizza Hut with a lunch buffet banner out front just across the highway from our campground. So that solved the problem of food for the day. We stuffed ourselves with pizza (little or no garlic in Pizza Hut pizza, so I can eat it) and are going to walk over to the Dairy Queen for a treat after I finish this log. I don't know what we'll do about breakfast, for Jim didn't unhook the truck from the trailer, thinking he'd just have to hook it up in the morning to take it to the repair place.

Our RV park has WiFi. I was distressed to learn that my student and dear friend, Kathy Barnes, had lost her battle with lung cancer. While we were at Yellowstone another email informed me that another student and friend, Carmen Diaz, had died of heart disease. Carmen, a retired interior decorator, had helped Sea and Sage with furnishings for our new building. Two wonderful people gone in just a few days!

It took a while to recover from the shock of Kathy's death, although it was not unexpected. She had been ailing for several years.

Later I decided to check the internet for information on serotinous cones on Lodgepole Pines. After checking a couple of unproductive sites, I found an excerpt from a book (Google Books) that told me just what I wanted to know. The book is *Mountains and Plains: the Ecology of Wyoming Landscapes* by Dennis H. Knight (1996). Google took me directly to pp. 165 & 168, which discussed the topic I was interested in. There were even a couple of photographs, showing the two types of cones. It turned out that I had indeed picked up samples of each type yesterday. I had also photographed them on trees. They'll really come in handy when I do my Western Mountains workshop again. The text had more information than the sign in the park. Most of the information about serotinous cones on Lodgepole Pines came from studies after the 1988 fires swept through the park. A few of the most interesting facts: Serotinous cones are apparently found only on the Rocky Mountain subspecies of Lodgepole Pine, but not all trees have them. The feature is apparently genetically determined. (I had noticed that only a few of the trees on the Norris Geyser Basin trail had those closed cones.) Fascinating stuff--two types of cones on the same tree. Isn't evolution amazing and wonderful?

Cody has a huge museum with displays all kinds about the west. After we get the plumbing problem solved, we plan to take it in. It even has Thomas Moran's huge (8 ft x 14 ft) painting of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone--on loan for six months from the Smithsonian. I can't wait to see that.

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8:00 p.m., Friday, September 25, 2009
Eagle RV Park, Thermopolis, WY

Our breakfast problem was solved when we went to Dairy Queen for dinner, for right next door was a nice restaurant with a lighted sign out in front saying they opened for breakfast at 7:00 a.m. So that was where we went the next day, Monday, Sept. 21. It was very nice--far better than the breakfast we'd had the day before at the Canyon Village restaurant. There they'd had a breakfast buffet for \$11.95 and everything had been standing on the steam table for an hour or so. The French toast was particularly awful—so dried up, that it was difficult to cut with a knife, let alone a fork. The breakfast in Cody was much better and about half the price.

As soon as we got back from breakfast, Jim called the RV repairman, and he was there by 9:15 and had it fixed by 10:00. We thought that was when the museum opened, but it turned out they'd been open since 8:00, probably to accommodate the extra Moran crowds.

We loved the Buffalo Bill Historical Center; it's a world-class museum and well worth a detour to see. We might not have realized it if our friend and fellow RVer Terry Hill hadn't recommended it. It's actually five museums in one, each one in a separate wing spoking out from the central service area: Western Art, Natural History, Plains Indians, Firearms, and, of course, Buffalo Bill. We spent at least two hours Monday morning in the Art section. I couldn't wait to see that Moran painting, and I wasn't disappointed. In fact I kept coming back to it time and again for the entire two days we spent there. It looked so different from various distances. The Art section also has many paintings and sculptures by various other famous western artists—Jackson, Remington, Russell, Proctor, N. C. Wyeth, and many others.

After lunch and a nap, we went back. Jim visited the Plains Indians and Firearms wings, and I went to the Natural History one. It was on several levels and you spiraled down from the alpine to the foothills life zones. The displays were very well done, with lots of very good information—not too simple and not too challenging. One feature that I found fun was a computerized screen in each section, where you could test yourself as a naturalist. There were about 5 questions in each section and I was pleased to get them all right. They weren't particularly easy, either. So I came out as a "Master Naturalist." That's good, if I plan to teach a workshop on the western mountains.

One novel feature of the Natural History section was the way they showed what was going on underground. There were sheets of clear plastic on the floor and underneath you could see the burrow of some animal, the roots of some tree, etc.

The next morning, Tuesday, Sept. 22, we went back. (The ticket was good for two days.) We both toured Buffalo Bill's wing, then I went to Plains Indians, while Jim went to Natural History. These sections were also very well done, but they were subjects I was less interested in than those I'd visited the day before. I gave firearms a pass, but Jim said it was also excellent; as a World War II veteran and retired police officer, he has considerable knowledge of firearms. An afternoon visit to an enormous Wal-Mart did me in for the rest of the day.

Wed. morning, Sept. 23, I defrosted the refrigerator and washed Toby while we still had electric and water hookups, then we returned toward Yellowstone and found a campsite in the Wapiti Campground (USFS). There are quite a few USFS campgrounds along the 20 miles of Shoshone NF before you get to Yellowstone. Most of them were closed for the season. I had learned at the visitors center in Cody, then

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checked it on the internet, that two of them have electrical hookups. One was closed for the season, but when we got to the other, Wapiti, it turned out the electrical loop was closed for the season, so we camped in the non-hookup section. Campsites are well separated from one another. We had a site that was sort of open on the south side (for our solar panels), but had lots of trees.



**Campsite, Wapiti Campground,
Shoshone National Forest, WY**

Most of the trees were cottonwoods, and with the aid of my tree book, I figured out that most were Narrowleaf Cottonwood, but that there were a sizeable number of Fremont Cottonwoods. The range map for the latter showed a finger of them descending along the Shoshone River, so we were on the easternmost edge of their range. Narrowleaf Cottonwoods are the common species in the Rockies. There were a few pines that I knew weren't Lodgepoles. When I checked them out in the book, they turned out to be Foxtail Pines. I know I've seen them before, but it was good to refresh my memory. I snatched a very nice cone off the ground. It was ultra-pitchy, but fortunately I had one of the plastic bags I use to pick up after Toby, so didn't get any on myself. Completing the tree list were Quaking Aspens, Common Douglas-Firs, and Rocky Mountain Junipers. I took nearly a roll of film of all these trees.

Meanwhile Jim had set up his bird-feeding concession, but was unsuccessful in attracting anything, not even the Mountain Chickadees that were all around. I heard them occasionally, but the sound I liked the best was the songs and calls of Townsend's Solitaires. They never did full songs, but even the partial ones were nice. They were always in the treetops, though. The total bird list wasn't more than about ten species.

We stayed in the Wapiti Campground two nights, Wed. and Thurs., Sept. 23 and 24. This morning, Friday, Sept. 25, we drove back up the road as far as the Yellowstone NP entrance. I had glimpsed a moose when we drove down that road with the trailer on Sunday and hoped to see another, but no luck. The scenery was gorgeous, though, and it was fun to see it from the other direction.

Everything in this area is Buffalo Bill. The road we took back to Yellowstone was the Buffalo Bill Scenic Byway. It went past Buffalo Bill Reservoir and Buffalo Bill State Park. There was even a side road to Buffalo Bill Boy Scout Camp. And the town of Cody (population about 10,000) was established by Buffalo Bill Cody.

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I hated to leave our beautiful campsite, but with no birds for Jim to photograph, there really was no reason to linger. So we drove back down through Cody, then headed southeast for 82 miles farther, ending up in the town of Thermopolis (population about 3,000). I had thought we'd just spend the night there, but when I looked over the little Chamber of Commerce booklet, it seemed we really should see some of the sights in the area--more in the next installment.

We're in the Eagle RV Park--a nice shady place, which is good, for the temperature is supposed to get up to 89 degrees tomorrow. (It was 80 degrees here today.)

This evening we went downtown to a restaurant advertised in the booklet, but got in just as the lone waiter was taking the orders from a party of about 20. We quickly realized we had a long wait ahead of us. I had spotted a Chinese place a few doors down the street, so we decided to walk down there and eat. It was a buffet with about ten entrees and various other typical Chinese accompaniments and was very good. The young Chinese proprietor immediately recognized us as being from out of town, for no doubt he knew everyone else in the place. He was very solicitous and courtly--and utterly charming. He'd even been to Huntington Beach once--to look for a used car. (His mother lives in Temple City.) Tomorrow night we'll try the place we walked out of, for the menu looked very interesting.

4:00 p.m., Monday, September 28, 2009 **Ft. Robinson SP, near Crawford, NE**

The booklet on the Thermopolis area said that Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep had been reintroduced into the Wind River Canyon just south of Thermopolis, so we drove the ten miles of canyon on Saturday morning, Sept. 26. It's a nice wide road with lots of large turnouts. We stopped at every one and scanned the impressive, sheer cliffs and hanging meadows for the beasts, but found nary a one. Although the day was destined to warm up to 92 degrees, even in our nice shady campsite, it was chilly, and the wind was really funneling through that narrow gorge with cliffs of up to one-half mile on either side. The scenery was worth the trip, even without the sheep. The highway department has placed signs at intervals along the drive, naming the rock formations we were passing and telling how old they are.

We were interested to learn that the river is called Wind River when it is in the canyon, but becomes the Big Horn River after it exits it just south of Thermopolis. Wind River is the Indian name and part of the canyon is in the Indian reservation; Big Horn is the white man's name. They couldn't agree on a single name, but today the spot where the name changes is called the "Wedding of the Waters."

After that we drove around Hot Springs State Park, which is supposed to be the biggest hot spring in North America (or maybe the world; I forget). The main spring produces water that is 127 degrees F. It is diluted slightly with cold water from the nearby Big Horn River and used in all sorts of swimming pools and spas right at the site, so is far from natural. There are a couple of natural springs on the grounds, but after Yellowstone, they are pretty puny.

Our main reason for staying in Thermopolis a second night was to visit the Wyoming Dinosaur Center. We knew it would be air-conditioned, so saved it for when the day got hot. The reason I wanted to go there is that it has an Archaeopteryx fossil on display, one of only three complete ones in the world. There are also about seven

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incomplete ones. This "ancient wing" (translation of the name) was the first fossil found that was intermediate between reptiles and birds. Charles Darwin had predicted such a find in his *Origin of Species* in 1857, and the first fossil was found in 1863, greatly bolstering the case for evolution. Since then a number of other intermediate fossils have also been found. Jim took several pictures of it, but the fossil was behind glass and the room was sort of dark, so we don't know if they'll come out. [They came out just fine. The only problem is that the bird was in an awkward position when it was fossilized, so it's difficult to figure out which part of the skeleton is which.]



Archaeopteryx fossil
Wyoming Dinosaur Center, Thermopolis, WY

There were lots of other interesting things in the museum. Many fossils from all periods were on display, and I've never seen any as well prepared as these were. Some were really large slabs—up to 5 or 6 ft wide. Another that was about 2 feet in diameter had 20 different species on it. The background sandstone had been carefully removed, leaving the fossils in high relief. There were a number of skeletons of large dinosaurs, the "main event" being the specimen of a *Supersaurus vivianae*, which stretched from one end of the museum to the other. Quoting from the Chamber of Commerce booklet:

The skeleton of the second known example of *Supersaurus vivianae*, a 106-ft long dinosaur that weighed an estimated 40 tons, took over a year to reconstruct. "Jimbo" may be the largest dinosaur ever found in Wyoming. The body parts found so far include one of the longest ribs (9.5 feet) ever discovered.

In fact, a recent CT scan revealed a congenital defect in his vertebral column.

The burial of Jimbo tells a tale of severe drought, fire, and high-energy mud flows. The plant remains, micro fossils and invertebrate traces help to build the scientific story of the late Jurassic environment and the ecology of the region where Wyoming's largest dinosaur roamed. *Supersaurus* lived in a semi-arid climate, much like the current climate of the Big Horn Basin where it is displayed today.

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There was a little slide show recounting the recovery of the bones and the preparation of the skeleton. One of the slides showed how the bones were scattered all over the area. It was like putting a puzzle together to reassemble the creature. The mounted skeleton is a replica, for the fossilized bones couldn't stand the stress of standing on their own. But the original bones are in display cases all around the skeleton. Jim and I were impressed by how small its head was. How did it get enough food to keep its huge body going?

The museum building is a prefab one that looks like many midwestern barns and is just big enough to hold that *Supersaurus*. All the other displays are fit in around and under it.

After a nap we went back downtown to visit the County Historical Museum, arriving about 3:45. I had thought it would surely stay open until 5:00, but it turned out it closed at 4:00, so we were out of luck. It's closed Sun. and Mon. It sounded interesting and is supposed to have a few quilts, which I love to look at.

On our way back to the trailer, I stopped at a BBQ stand, Grumpy's. Fortunately the woman selling the food wasn't; she said Grumpy just cooked it. I bought a pound of smoked brisket, half of which we ate last night. It was OK, but a little dry--sort of like mine. (I have to try a different way of smoking it, which I recently learned.)

We ate dinner at PumperNicks, the restaurant we gave up on the night before. It was OK, but not nearly as good as the Chinese buffet the night before.

Sunday morning, Sept. 27, we got an early start on the 300-mile drive across Wyoming to extreme northwestern Nebraska. It's sort of boring terrain, but was enlivened by more Pronghorns than I'd ever seen before. They were here and there all along the road, often in groups of 25 to 100. I think they outnumbered the cattle, which was nice. We even saw one right in the busy town of Douglas. It was grazing on the grassy shoulder with business buildings beyond and an auto race track on the other side of the highway.

We arrived at our destination, Fort Robinson State Park, around 3:30 p.m. and got a nice site in the full hook-up section. It's a little barren, but there are a few Eastern Cottonwoods here and there. This morning we drove through the electric-only section of the campground and found it to be much more wooded. It might have been birdier, but I didn't hear much when I opened the truck windows.

The park is in the scenic Pine Ridge portion of the state, with lots of hills and steep cliffs.



**Pine Ridge Escarpment
Ft. Robinson State Park, NE**

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They're covered with Ponderosa Pines, but a huge 1989 fire decimated much of the forest. There has been a lot of replanting (1200 youthful volunteers, 350,000 new trees), but of course the trees are still small. The trees that burned were mainly about 100 years old, because the old trees were harvested during the homesteading and railroad building period around 1900. We were amazed at how green the grassland still is, although with a golden cast. It must have been a wet summer. Soldier's Creek runs through the park and has deciduous trees all along it. They're starting to turn color, mainly the yellow of cottonwoods.

Fort Robinson was an active military base from the 1870s to the 1940s. It played a major role in the subduing and subjugation of the Indians and housed lots of German POWs during World War II. After decommissioning after the war, it was used as an agricultural field station for many years, then became the state park it is today. For those interested in military history, there are lots and lots of buildings from all periods on the spacious, shady grounds. Many of them are very stately and beautiful.

This morning, Sept. 28, we drove the two park roads, hoping for birds and animals. There were more birds than we'd seen in the Rockies, mostly Western Meadowlarks and assorted sparrows, some of which were hard to identify. We were amazed at the large number of Mountain Bluebirds on the main military grounds. Jim got off a couple of images of a perched Vesper Sparrow, which had something in its beak. Could it be feeding young this late in the season? We did see a couple of distant Pronghorns, but they were impossible photo subjects. The birdiest place was around Johnson Lake, but the variety of species wasn't too interesting. Jim went out again this afternoon, but I stayed here in the trailer writing up this log. He didn't find anything of interest. So we'll head for another place tomorrow.

4:15 p.m., Wednesday, September 30, 2009 **Chadron State Park, 8 miles south of Chadron, NE**

The next morning, Sept, 28, Jim went out again looking for animals to photograph, but came back reporting that all he could get was a herd of horses, no doubt the saddle horses they use during the summer season.

Meanwhile I took Toby for a long walk around the grounds and through the other camping loop. Saw no birds. Well, maybe a robin.

After that we hooked up and drove the 35 miles from Ft. Robinson to Chadron State Park, stopping in the town of Chadron for gas and a few groceries.

The habitat here in Chadron SP is much more varied than at Ft. Robinson



Valley through Ponderosa Pines
Chadron State Park, NE

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I fell in love with it immediately. The developed areas have turf and lots of tall trees, especially ash and cottonwood. There is a small man-made lake near the entrance (nothing on it). A couple of small creeks with trees and shrubs along their banks and overhead create riparian corridors. The upper slopes are covered with mixed-grass prairie, dotted with clumps of fairly scattered Ponderosa Pines. Some of the pines have a grassy understory, while others have various deciduous trees and shrubs underneath. These are in all shades of fall color--red, mahogany, gold, and the original green.



Ponderosa Pines with grassy understory
Chadron State Park, NE



Ponderosa Pines with deciduous understory
Chadron State Park, NE

We learned from an interpretive sign today that they have been managing the forest for fire control, since too much understory makes for a fire that kills the trees. So they've been removing the understory and thinning out the trees to simulate what the original scattered lightning-caused fires would have caused. They're also making sure that the forest has all ages of trees. Some look like they could be 100 years old, while others are much younger. All the trees in this area were removed during the period of settlement.

Yesterday afternoon I sat outside in my comfortable chair and hoped for birds, but saw only robins and a single Sharp-shinned Hawk that sailed past. Jim went searching for the public phone that the *Trailer Life Guide* said was here, but it had been removed and the office was closed, so he had to drive the eight miles back to Chadron to use the one at Wal-Mart. It was essential that he get the email, because we're hoping to cross paths with Clair and Sue De Beauvoir as we drive south and they drive west.

The wind got stronger during the night, but I don't think it ever got past what they call a "breeze" in the midwest. (I'd call it "wind.") This morning we decided to explore the park in the truck. Since the office had been closed when we arrived yesterday, we had no map, but we just drove around and, after we got a map, discovered we'd seen the entire park.

We saw a few more birds during our drive: American Robins and Northern Flickers are the most common and seem to be in small flocks; I think they're migrating south. I also saw or heard Warbling Vireo, Orange-crowned Warbler, Black-capped Chickadee, Downy and Hairy woodpeckers. Best were these two species: (1) A flock of Red Crossbills calling atop a tall ash (Why not a conifer?) by the park office. I saw them well, but my tape recorder was in the trailer. I've heard so few birds that I've stopped taking it. I've recorded nothing so far on the trip! (2) A Northern Goshawk, that

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flew across the road in front of us and landed in a tree with its back to us. While we were debating how Jim could photograph it, since it was on my side of the road, it turned around and showed its breast, then flew off. So no photograph was possible. Even so, it was probably the best look I've ever had at that bird.

I took lots of photos of the craggy Pine Ridge escarpment (actually part of the Black Hills, the easternmost extension of the Rocky Mountains), the Ponderosa Pine forest with and without understory, and the mixed-grass prairie. The latter is intermediate in height between the more famous tall-grass and short-grass types and is found mainly in the northern Great Plains. There's lots of it in North Dakota, but this was the first time I'd seen it in the fall



**Mixed-grass prairie
Chadron State Park, NE**

Then we went to the office, which was finally open, to inquire about a phone. The attendant told us the pay phone was removed because it cost too much, but she let us use the office phone to access Pocketmail. We then responded to our incoming email from Sue. We'll meet them tomorrow night in Sterling, Colorado, 166 miles south of here.

While we were driving around, we passed some people at one of the picnic shelters and wondered why they'd be having a picnic so early on a cold morning. When we told the attendant in the office we were birders, she said there was a banding station set up in the park, so those were the people we had passed. We went back and visited with them for a while. They had sixteen mist nets set up and were bringing back an Orange-crowned Warbler when we got there. Jim photographed it before they released it. They were sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory.

The morning was partly cloudy, but this afternoon the wind got stronger and just a few minutes ago it started to rain. The woman in the office said they'd had a nice wet summer and fall. We'd been noticing that there was still a greenish cast to all the hillsides and roadsides as we'd been driving through Wyoming and Nebraska.

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5:30 p.m., Saturday, October 3, 2009
KOA, Grand Island, NE

The rain stopped and the wind died down in the evening after I wrote the preceding. Around dusk Great Horned Owls started calling--first one in the distance, then a second, until there were four distinct voices from various distances. One seemed to be right outside the trailer. This went on for the better part of an hour.

During the night the wind got up again and when we got up in the morning on Thursday, Oct. 1, it was blowing a gale, with a little drizzle to go with it. I was worried about driving that day, so I went out to the truck and listened to the radio for a weather forecast. When they said "sustained winds of 30-40 miles an hour with gusts to 65," that settled it. We stayed there another night and had to email Clair and Sue that we wouldn't be able to meet them for a visit. I spent the entire morning working on revising my *Learning More California Bird Sounds* CD contents--adding sounds from my spring trip. The wind blew so hard all day that it was totally unpleasant to be outside. It was cold, too--never got above 57 degrees.

Yesterday the wind was still blowing at around 30 mph, but the gusts were not as strong. Furthermore it was from the northwest and we were heading southeast, so we had more or less of a tail wind as we drove 200 miles to Victoria Springs State Recreation Area, near the tiny town of Anselmo, NE. The drive was mostly through the sandhills, which I never tire of watching. This time they were sort of an olive shade, mostly brown with a hint of green. I'd have liked to stop and take a few photos, and the nice wide shoulder would have permitted it, but the cold gale made the idea of getting out of the truck very unappealing. So I decided to content myself with the photos we got of the sandhills when they were green in June, 2005.

Victoria Springs is a nice little park with a spring-fed pond. It was windy yesterday afternoon, but this morning I took a walk around the grounds with Toby, even though it was awfully cold (40 degrees). Again the only birds that were present in numbers were flickers and robins. I also heard Eurasian Collared-Doves and Starlings and saw one Eastern Phoebe. That was it! Oh, yes, we saw a White-tailed Deer doe with two well-grown fawns while we were eating breakfast.

After my walk we drove to Grand Island, shopped at Wal-Mart, ate a huge lunch at a Chinese buffet, then took in the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer. Only the main building was open, but I enjoyed the displays. I remembered visiting the place with Mother many years ago. Since then they've hauled in many old buildings from around the region and have them open during the summer season with people going about the activities of a 1900 town. Unfortunately all that closed down Sept. 30, but I walked around looking at the buildings, which included Henry Fonda's childhood home. (He was born in 1905).

We settled for the night at a KOA southeast of town, near I-80. It has WiFi. I had planned to take in the Plainsman Museum in Aurora tomorrow, but when I checked on the internet the place in Lincoln that I *really* want to visit, the Quilt Museum on the University of Nebraska campus, I discovered it's open from 1-4:30 on Sundays and *closed on Mondays*, so I decided to skip the Plainsman. I looked at its description on the internet and it didn't sound overly interesting. They have some temporary displays and I think what impressed me last time I visited the place (many years ago with Mother) was one of those--a lot of intricate machine-quilted quilts done by a retired

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engineer. There is no special exhibit on now. So we'll drive the 80 miles to Lincoln tomorrow morning, get a campsite, then go to the quilt museum.

6:15 p.m., Thursday, October 8, 2009

Millstream Resort Motel RV site, Cottonwood Falls, KS

Sunday, Oct. 4, we drove from Grand Island to Lincoln in the morning. We started out on I-80, but soon became annoyed by all the trucks and having the passing scenery so far away. I discovered that there is an old US highway just three miles north of the freeway and it goes through several small towns, so we cut up to that and found it ever so much more interesting. We enjoyed looking at the various crops in the fields, ripe for harvest. I had never seen soybeans, sorghum, etc. at that stage. In fact I wasn't sure what we were looking at. Later I looked them up on the internet and found a site with lots of photos of each grain crop. It turns out that milo and millet (common in birdseed mixes) are just varieties of sorghum, and all are grasses with leaves that look like corn, but with shorter stalks and the seeds not in sheathed ears.

We got into Lincoln about 11:30 and found a nice site in the Camp-a-Way RV Park. We feared it would be awfully noisy because it is tucked in a little niche where I-80 and I-180, which go to the civic center, come together. But the park had lots of tall trees (we heard Great Horned Owls at night) and the freeways really were not a problem. It's the only park in town, so we really had no other choice.

After lunch I left Jim in the trailer and went to the International Quilt Study Center and Museum, which was only about ten minutes away. They have an elaborate new three-story building with a big glass front that wraps around the building in a semicircle. That space inside seems to be pretty much wasted. There is a long stairway with shallow steps that are a couple of feet long that you ascend to get to the second floor, where the main displays are. The University of Nebraska has "the largest publicly held quilt collection in the world." It currently has over 3500 quilts of many types from all over the world. It was started in 1997 when a private collector donated 950 quilts and a substantial sum of money to start the Center. They only have 50-75 quilts on display at any time. This time there were two groups. One showed the history of the "modern" quilt from about 1870 to 1940. These are the typical geometrical quilts--log cabin, Dresden plate, etc. I found it fascinating to see how things changed over the years. These quilts were almost always made from cotton, occasionally wool. The quality of the workmanship varied, but not just with time.

The invention of new types of dyes had a profound effect on the colors used. In the earliest period, only alizarin dyes were available, and they came in yellows, oranges, browns, dull reds, dull yellowish greens, etc. Then around 1900, synthetic indigo became available (natural indigo extracted from plants was expensive), allowing rich blues and greens to be added to the palette. During World War I, dyes became scarce (I think because Germany the source of the dyes, but they didn't say so) and the colors used became more pastel. After that war, the US dye industry created a whole host of new colors, so quilts of the 20s and 30s contained just about any color the quilter might desire. So you can almost date a quilt by the colors it uses.

The other display was of crazy quilts. This was a "craze" that started in the 1890s and continued until around 1915-1920. For these quilts, lots of silk was used, along with the other fibers. Unfortunately many of the new dyes rotted the silk fibers over time, so some of the quilts had a few pieces that were in shreds. These quilts

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were usually made with odd-shaped pieces in deep colors and black, and embellished with all sorts of intricate embroidery. Since embroidery is my passion, I spent a lot of time looking at the stitches and floss the women used. The interpretive placards accompanying the quilts always stated the type of fabric used, but never the type of floss, an unfortunate omission. I guess, being quilters, they didn't think that part was important, but it *is* on a crazy quilt, which has so much embroidery. Anyway, it looked to me as though they used a lot of perle cotton, which is as coarse as six strands of embroidery floss, but more tightly twisted. I also saw a little satin stitch done with some very fine fiber, which didn't seem glossy enough to be silk, so was probably cotton. Some metallic threads were used.

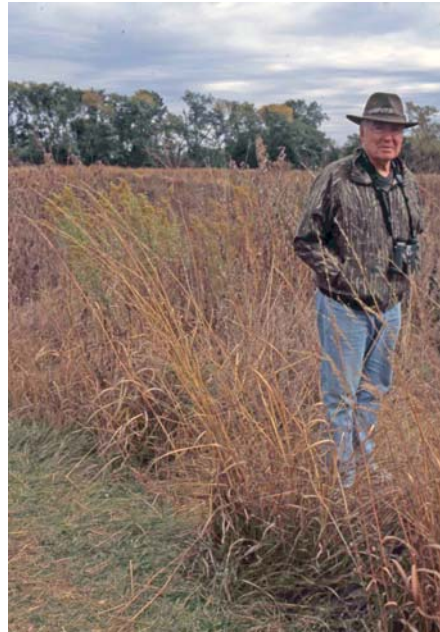
On the third floor there was a recently added collection of mostly applique quilts, all made by the same woman. Most were copies of famous quilts from various museums in the country. Her work was exquisite, but by the time I got to them, I was just about saturated, so didn't spend as long there as I had with the crazy quilts and their embroidery. When I left I discovered I had spent about 2.5 hours at the museum and enjoyed it very much. I was glad Jim hadn't gone along, for he'd have become bored long before I was ready to leave.

There was one quilt that I particularly wanted to see that was not on display. When I was in the bookstore in West Yellowstone and bought a bunch of books, one was an autobiography of Grace Snyder (1882-1982--yes, 100 years), entitled *No Time on My Hands*. Fortunately, I had chosen to read it right away and recommend it *highly*. It was about an intrepid woman who grew up in Nebraska and married a cattle rancher in the sandhills. Her passion from earliest childhood was quilting and she became one of the foremost quilters in the country. Her most famous masterpiece is one called "Basket of Flowers." She got the pattern from a piece of china she had and elaborated on it. It consists of over 87,000 tiny pieces. There is a picture of the quilt on the cover of the book, but I just had to see the quilt itself. How could anyone work with such tiny pieces of fabric? I was confused as to where the quilt was on display and discovered why. It actually belongs today to the Nebraska Historical Society, but the Quilt Museum had it on loan for several months earlier this year, then returned it to the Historical Society. They told me it is always on display at their museum in downtown Lincoln. That museum is also closed on Mondays, so we had to stay over until Tuesday if I wanted to see it--and by that time I really did!

I looked in the Lincoln tourist guide and discovered a Spring Hill Sanctuary, a National Audubon Sanctuary about 20 minutes outside Lincoln that preserves about 800 acres of land, mostly tall-grass prairie. Since that was my main goal in coming this far east, we went out there Monday and walked about a mile of their trail system. The prairie was all I had hoped for. The various shades of olive and bronze, the amazing variety of textures and shapes of the seedheads, the height of the tall bluestem (shoulder-height on Jim, and the late fall wildflowers, all created a tapestry of color all over the hillsides.

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Big Bluestem and Jim
Spring Creek Audubon Sanctuary near Lincoln, NE

It was a cloudy, blustery day unfortunately, but still I exposed almost a roll of film. A delightful morning. The nature center there is brand new, so has very few interpretive displays. The staff was apparently rather busy and seemed anxious to go back to their tasks, so I had little chance to chat with them and find out more about the place and its goals--a disappointment, but you can tell when people are polite but wish you would leave so they can go back to work.

Tuesday morning, Oct. 6, I drove to downtown Lincoln and visited the Nebraska Historical Museum. I asked the attendant at the entry desk about Grace Snyder's quilt. He didn't know anything about it, but directed me to the quilt section. I had no sooner entered that area than I saw a display with her picture, a photo of the quilt, a piece of the china she used as a pattern, and below it all a drawer containing the quilt. When I opened the drawer, a light came on and I could view through plexiglas one of the large blocks of the quilt, not the entire thing, but that was OK. I couldn't believe my eyes. The book had said the blocks were the size of a two-cent postage stamp cut on the diagonal. That may have been the size of the squares of fabric she used, but the blocks themselves weren't more than a centimeter (perhaps as much as half an inch) from seam to seam. How could anyone sew such tiny blocks? And the corners came together almost perfectly; I did see a few where the corners didn't quite jibe, but they were corrected within a few squares. An amazing piece of work and truly a national treasure.

This museum also features a changing collection of quilts and this time they, too, happened to be featuring crazy quilts. These were borrowed from a variety of sources for the display. I actually think these were more elaborate and varied than the ones I'd seen at the Quilt Museum a couple of days earlier. Most were made of silks of all sorts of textures and were relatively small and obviously used as decorations in parlors of the era, thrown over chests or backs of sofas, etc., but a few had large squares of cotton or wool and were more utilitarian. All featured the crazy-shaped pieces and the extensive

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embroidery. The one I liked the best had a different embroidered plant on the large center piece of each square block, with smaller randomly shaped pieces around that center one. The embroidery seemed to all be in perle cotton, sometimes the variegated kind which gradually changes from one color to another. She used all the common stitches that are in today's embroidery books. Another quilt, which was really unusual had used a lot fabrics and felts used in ladies hats. It had lots of rosettes, etc., made from ribbon. Very strange, but very beautiful.

After looking at the quilts, I gave the rest of the museum a quick run-through. It had a special section on World War II and a permanent section on the history of Nebraska. Both were very interesting and I'd have liked to spend longer, but Jim had really had enough of that RV park and was anxious to go somewhere else. That meant I had to get back to the trailer so we could leave by 11:00 check-out time.

We headed due south out of Lincoln, stopping for lunch in Beatrice, and ending up in Tuttle Creek Lake State Park. The campsite was below the dam in the riparian area. It wasn't until the next morning when we made a wrong turn on our way out, that we discovered the nicest section of the park, with sites backed into the bushes, but by then we really had to head on south again.

We had been watching the weather forecast and Wednesday looked like the last warm, sunny day for a while. I wanted to visit the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. We got there around 11:00 and looked over the small assortment of interpretive displays and watched the introductory video. The preserve belongs now to the Nature Conservancy, but is run by the National Park Service. It consists of seventeen square miles of unplowed tallgrass prairie. The reason it is unplowed is that it is in the Flint Hills, a land of very thin soil atop alternating layers of limestone and chert (a very fine-grained silica, sometimes called flint, especially when it is black). Since it couldn't be plowed, it was used as a cattle ranch. In 1892 the first owner built a huge house and barn out of limestone blocks. Jim was especially impressed by the five-foot-high mortarless wall around the barnyard.



Old Ranch House
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, KS



Old Barn
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, KS

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Mortarless wall
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, KS

The interpretive center is in the barn, and the house has been refurnished as it might have looked in the period. It also houses the gift shop. The original rancher sold out early and since then a large number of different people have owned the land. The house either stood empty or was occupied by various employees. Although beautiful from the outside, it's really not very livable inside. The kitchen is tucked back against the side of the hill and the food had to be carried up a long flight of stairs to the dining room.

The huge limestone barn was unusual: it was built with its front side facing a steep incline which allowed a slightly-sloping ramp to be built right up to the second story. Its floor was built so large and sturdy that teams of horse-pulled wagons could drive up the ramp, discharge their hay load, and then make an inside U-turn to return to the fields. It was certainly very cleverly designed.

The place is free, including the bus tour of the property. This time of year, they're running them only at 11:00 and 3:00, so we ate lunch and rested in the trailer until the 3:00 tour. It took us up-hill and down-dale over the rolling prairie and ended up atop the highest hill on the property, 1400 ft above sea level. From there we could see nothing but the beautiful olive-bronze prairie. The prairie grasses here weren't as tall as those we'd seen at the Audubon Sanctuary, the tallest maybe three or four feet in height. The ranger told us that the tallest grasses grow closest to the streams. I think the thin soil may be part of the difference, too. Although the day had started out totally clear, by the time of the bus tour, it had become completely cloudy with spits of rain. I was disappointed, for I wanted some pictures of the prairie in sunlight.

After the tour, we drove south a few miles to the town of Cottonwood Falls. Trailer Life Guide didn't list any campgrounds in either of the twin towns of Cottonwood Falls and Strong City, but I had searched the internet and found that there was a motel in Cottonwood Falls with two RV sites with full hookups, as well as a city park where we could park with no hookups. We found the Millstream Resort Motel with little trouble and are now in the only one of the two sites that is large enough for our trailer.

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**RV Site, Millstream Motel
Cottonwood Falls, KS**

It does indeed have full hookups, with WiFi, too, but no TV. It's a delightful place! The motel has maybe six units and is quite old and made of random shaped limestone blocks. I don't have any idea what the rooms are like. The grounds are extensive, grassy with scattered trees, shrubs, lawn decorations, furniture, and children's play equipment. They slope down to the Cottonwood River, which is reputed to be good fishing. It's really a beautiful place, but I've had no chance to explore the grounds, for it has been raining almost constantly since we got here.

I had wanted to go back to the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve this morning. The bus had flushed up a lot of birds and I wanted to try to identify some of them. But due to the rain, we decided to do laundry instead. When we got to the local laundromat, we discovered it to be closed and a query to the flower shop proprietor next door revealed that they'd had a fire. So we had to drive 18 miles east to Emporia to find a laundry--and when I was almost there I remembered I'd forgotten one of the bags. I'll just have to do it in some RV park with a washing machine.

On our way back we stopped at the local Pizza Hut and overindulged in the luncheon buffet, which is why I'm writing this up during what would normally be dinner hour.

Before returning to the trailer, we drove around the town of Cottonwood Springs and enjoyed the many beautiful limestone-block buildings and, especially, the Chase County courthouse. It's exquisite--and a national historical monument. When I was at the Preserve bookstore, I saw the book *PrairieErth*, by William Least Heat-Moon, entirely about Chase County, a rural Flint Hills county of only about 3000 people. I read his *Blue Highways* a number of years ago and recalled enjoying it somewhat. I hesitated about buying it, thinking it might tell me more about Chase County than I really wanted to know. This afternoon to kill some time, I read between the lines of the mostly glowing reviews on amazon.com and decided that I probably wouldn't enjoy the book. But they had some really cheap used copies, so I may change my mind when I get home.

It rained most of the day until around 4:00, and it's supposed to start again soon for another three hours per weather.com. It's now 8:00 and Jim is asleep on the couch. I'd better quit and fix the bed for him.

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8:15 am, Saturday, October 10, 2009

Millstream Motel's RV site, Cottonwood Falls, KS

Despite the forecast, we had no more rain in the evening Oct. 8. Yesterday morning dawned cloudy, but the forecast was for gradual clearing as the day progressed, and that is what happened. It even happened on the exact schedule on weather.com.

I walked Toby around the grounds of our beautiful little motel. I chatted with a guest from Texas, who turned out to be good friends of the owner. In fact, she was the one who had told them of the availability of this place for sale. It had previously belonged to her grandparents and she had come here throughout her childhood; she pointed out the tree she planted when she was in elementary school. She said they purchased it in 1971 when their farmhouse burned down. They decided not to rebuild and sold their farm and moved into town.

I still wanted to know when the place was built, but she didn't know that--just that it seemed old when they bought it. Jim asked the owner and learned that it had been completed in 1961, but had been built over a 20-year period by the first owner. The painstaking masonry of the limestone walls demonstrate that it was a labor of love by this man. Unfortunately he ran out of funds and had to sell it a year after it was finished. I don't know how old he was then or how long he lived after he sold it, but I think he'd be awfully happy about the way it is now. It retains the 1930s feel, yet has the modern amenities.

After touring the grounds, I walked out on the old bridge over the Cottonwood River, which is now part of a city park. The new road bypassed the town by one or two blocks, so they didn't upgrade the old bridge. But it's still OK for people to walk on, having a load limit of 15 tons. They use it for community festivals and the like.

I knew Toby would get pretty dirty on the wet grass and dirt after the rain, but didn't let that bother me this time, because when we got back, I plunked him in the tub for an overdue bath.

We then drove the two or three blocks to the downtown area of Cottonwood Falls, found that the museum didn't open until noon, so came back and ate an early lunch and went back. It was well after lunch, but the museum was still closed but with a "be back soon" sign on the window. We waited around and wandered the street and discovered another business "closed today so I can go to a music festival" and another with very strange hours so the owner "can drive the school bus." The young woman coming and going from the real estate office next to the museum pointed out the young museum curator down the street. After waiting a while, Jim finally went into the gift shop where she was "picking out a thank-you card" and asked her how long we'd have to wait to get into the museum. With that, she hurried back.

The little museum was a typical small-county museum and was actually only mildly interesting. They did have a nice covered wagon and a replica of an old school room, complete with textbooks of the 1930s and 1940s. I checked out the treatment of evolution (this *is* Kansas) in the only two science books I could find. Neither had the E-word in the index. Both had references to Charles Darwin, but credited him only for discovering how many earthworms resided in a cubic yard of soil. One did have a small box with a picture of Darwin and a couple of sentences crediting him with the idea that species might have changed with time--not that new species might have developed.

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Even that idea was never developed in any other place in the book. If so, it wasn't in the index.

After our museum visit we went down the street to the courthouse, with its beautiful limestone masonry walls, clock tower, and bright red roof. I took several pictures of it [not very good because the place faces north and the sun never lights it up this time of year], and we went inside and looked at the exquisite walnut stair railing, which spiraled up a couple of stories. (Today there's also an elevator, but I noticed that most people used the stairs.) There were photos all along the hallway of the main street in other decades. The building was built in the 1870s and is the oldest county courthouse in Kansas that is still in use. We had driven by it the previous day in the rain and its nice bright lights shining out through the huge windows made it look like a very pleasant place to work.

After I wrote the previous paragraph, I checked the internet to see if the reader of this diary could see any photos of the courthouse and discovered the Chase County, Kansas, website has several. I also discovered that they had completed the renovation of the place and had a big celebration of it in Oct., 2008. So that's why it looked so wonderful inside and out.

After the clouds were completely gone around 3:30, we drove back to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. I walked a long way on the two-track road that the tourbus had taken, just so I could experience the prairie in the sunlight. I took lots of pictures of the overall scene and the grasses with their full seedheads and shades of green and gold. Some of them were indeed as tall as I was, the two tallest species being Tall Bluestem and Indian Grass. There were no stands so dense that one could get lost in them, as one could in a cornfield, however. The low light of the late afternoon made it ideal for photos, for the back-lit grasses were ever so much prettier than the front-lit ones.



**Tallgrass Prairie & Ponds from Hilltop
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, KS**



**Indiangrass
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, KS**

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Big Bluestem
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, KS

Oh yes, all the birds I could identify turned out to be Savannah Sparrows.

Birds here by the motel have been pretty scarce, but around noon a small group seemed to be all over the treetops, down on the ground, and in between. At one point we could see from our trailer window four species of woodpecker: Downy, Red-bellied, "Yellow-shafted" Flicker, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Also present were Blue Jay, American Robin, Northern Cardinal, Warbling (possibly also Red-eyed) Vireo, Chickadee (probably Black-capped here per the range map in National Geographic's field guide, but I couldn't see the bird well enough to tell it wasn't a Carolina, whose normal range starts only a little bit south of here), Yellow-rumped Warbler (fall immature female Myrtle), "Slate-colored" Junco. Jim put out some birdseed and magic meal (cornmeal & bacon fat). A Blue Jay took a few sunflower seeds and ate them, but never came back. No other species have come at all.

9:15 a.m., Tuesday, October 13, 2009 **Copper Breaks SP, TX**

It's a drizzly, foggy morning here, so I've decided to bring this up-to-date until the fog lifts. The sky has been totally overcast ever since the afternoon I had my nice walk on the prairie four days ago. It also turned quite cold with lows in the 30s and highs in the 40s, with brief periods some days in the low 50s. A couple of nights it rained, but in the daytime, it's been occasional drizzle.

On Sat., Oct. 10, we gave up on seeing the flock of birds and decided to leave. I checked the weather on the internet and it looked as though it was going to be warmer farther south. So we drove about 150 miles due south, chased by a cold north wind the entire time. We stopped around 2:00 for an all-you-can-eat lunch at a Cattlemen's

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Buffet restaurant--can't recall the town, but it was fairly large. We could have ordered steak, too, but settled for fried chicken and BBQ pulled pork, with apple pie for dessert. All excellent. No dinner that night for us.

We ended up at Coon Creek Cove Campground on Kaw Lake (reservoir) in northern Oklahoma. It's a very nice campground (Army Corps of Engineers) and the price was right, \$8.00 including electric and water with our Golden Age pass. The dump station was so awful that we didn't use it the next morning--just carried our gray along with us. The place was mostly empty, except for a group of eight or ten RVs all together. It seemed to be a bunch of men out hunting, based on their garb.

We were taken by the beautiful view of the lake that the sites had and selected the northernmost one with the best view of all. From there we could see myriads of White Pelicans, a scattering of Ring-billed Gulls, and a few Double-crested Cormorants flying over the water, especially toward evening. Unfortunately, we were broadside to the cold north wind. By then the temperature was around 40 degrees. We also discovered that the wind was able to enter through every crack in the side of the trailer, especially around the door and the door handle. Our little electric heater, which usually heats the trailer nicely, couldn't compete with that. I turned the oven on and opened the oven door--no danger of CO poisoning with that wind whistling through! It was still cold. Finally I hung a towel over the door handle and a heated throw over the entire door. That pretty much did the job and I was able to sit by that door in some comfort.

Needless to say, we had no incentive to take a walk in that gale. However, I noticed that the trees right outside the trailer were oaks with beautifully shaped scallopy leaves. I went out and grabbed a few leaves, brought them in and hauled down my tree book. I was wondering if they were Bur Oak, which was one of my quilting patterns on my Birds of North America quilt. The leaves matched the Shumard Oak plate better. When I looked at the text in the latter part of the book, it said there was another tree, the Buckley Oak, that occurred along the western edge of the Shumard Oak range from northern Oklahoma to central Texas. I had to get out my hand lens to see if it had the little hairs on the underside of the leaf that distinguished the two. It didn't have them, so it was a Buckley Oak. I should have photographed it, but it was too dark and windy both that afternoon and the next morning. I don't think I've ever seen either oak before.

On Sunday morning, Oct. 11, it was hard to haul ourselves out of our nice electric blanket-clad bed, and the sun isn't rising until well after 7:00 here on the western edge of the central time zone. But we did get on the road before 10:00 and continued on our southward quest for warm, sunny weather.

It was 1:00 before we found a nice looking place for lunch. We like to avoid chains and gas-station fast food. It was Odell's Restaurant on US-177 in Asher, OK. It's a pretty large place and was nearly full. The church crowd was just finishing, so most of the people were dressed casually--like us. Jim had a Reuben sandwich and I tried the enchilada platter. It was excellent, and the enchiladas were loaded with delicious shredded beef. I brought half of it with me and will eat the rest for lunch today. They also had a wide variety of dinners, but I wanted to fix a nice dinner for us in the evening.

Sunday night we spent at a KOA between Ardmore and Marietta, OK. It was right along a freeway, but we didn't notice the noise. The place was pretty run-down for a KOA, with rutted dirt/gravel roads and everything needing paint. Jim said an elderly man was running the place. When we left, we discovered a "for sale" sign along the

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freeway outside. I guess the old fellow is ready to retire. If the purchasers don't fix the place up, I suspect they'll lose their KOA franchise, for those places are usually really trim and neat.

It was foggy in the morning and drizzly off and on all day yesterday, Monday, Oct. 12, but at least the weather had warmed up and was around 60degreesmost of the day. We had wanted to find a nice birdy campground in the wooded area of northeast Texas and linger a few days, but the forecast was for at least three more days of clouds and rain, so we reluctantly decided we had better head west. Since we usually like Texas state parks, I picked out Copper Breaks State Park, which is about half-way between where we entered Texas and Amarillo. The name sounded as though it might be sort of scenic. We did see some crumbling coppery-colored soil topped with harder rocks as we approached the park, but the campground is atop it all, surrounded by a flat, shrubby mesquite thicket. The campsites are widely spaced, but all angled so the view side of most trailers faces the road, not the brush. Even if it faced the brush, there's a large expanse of grass between the trailers and the natural habitat. We like to back into the bushes and have some privacy. If we wanted this, we'd have gone to a commercial RV park and had WiFi and TV to boot. However, this park does have some lakes and a nature trail that we can drive to, so maybe I'll feel better about it all by the time the day ends. But it's 10:00 now and still pretty foggy. I can barely see the stop sign 100 yards away.

4:30 p.m., Tuesday, Oct. 13, 2009 (same day) **Copper Breaks SP, TX**

The fog cleared a little and we decided it wasn't going to get much better, so we might as well drive down and sample the half-mile nature trail in the "breaks." I took one look at the steps at the start of it and decided it wasn't for me and my arthritic knees. Jim took it, though. Afterwards he said it had some steps that were a couple of feet high, was poorly marked, and narrow with tall grass leaning over from both sides. The latter left his shoes, socks and pantlegs soaking wet from the foggy dew.

I took another trail until it, too, started steeply uphill. The Pease River has been dammed to create a couple of small lakes for fishing, boating, and swimming. Right now the river is reduced to no more than a narrow ditch, and the boat-launch was high above it. The lakes have apparently been stocked with fish. One man was fishing from a small pier and Jim thinks he caught something--hard to see from a distance. I know an Osprey caught something. It flew in, plunged down, and flew off--all in a few seconds.

Even though I didn't walk very far, I found my walk quite interesting. I went along the base of the breaks, so I could look at them closely. The friable layer seemed to be a very fine, bright red clay, embedded with a lot of distinctly bluish-green rocks. At first I told myself it was my imagination and that they just looked green because they were wet and were actually just gray. Then I picked one up and, unlike most which were just plain green, this one had layers of very bright green running through it. It seemed that a copper-containing mineral is actually present here and the name didn't just come from the reddish rocks.

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Clay hillside with copper-containing rocks
Copper Breaks State Park, TX



Copper-containing rock
Copper Breaks State Park, TX

We saw a few birds, mainly where we parked the truck for our walks: Lincoln's and White-crowned sparrows, Spotted Towhee, and a nice view of a fall, immature, female Black-throated Green Warbler--a real treat this far west! (The only birds where we were camped were Common Raven, a single "Yellow-shafted" Flicker, and a Greater Roadrunner that foraged on the grass for a while.) Completing the list for the park were American Crow, Mourning Dove, and Great Blue Heron.

I also discovered that several different species of wildflowers were still in bloom. I was aware that the Chihuahuan Desert gets most of its rain in late summer because of moisture coming up from the south. (In fact that's what's creating this awful fog, which turned to a wet-mop drizzle around noontime.) We're actually not in the desert, but in the southern plains, which are a little wetter than desert. I took photos of several flower species, but will have to wait until I get home to identify them. I didn't think we'd get to Texas on this trip, so left my flower books for this area at home. [My favorite turned out to be Dotted Gayfeather, *Liatris punctata*.]



Dotted Grayfeather
Copper Breaks State Park, TX

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Jim and I both got back from our walks with our shoes caked with red clay. I got a bucket of water, a screw driver (to get the mud out of the grooves) and an old tooth brush and attacked the mess for at least twenty minutes and got the worst of it off. The shoes are now drying on a piece of newspaper.

After lunch we went to the visitors center, which has a very nice little museum telling the history of this area. It was occupied by the Comanches, then the cattle ranchers. There was a display of copper ore from the area--and even some native copper. I had wondered why it hadn't been mined out long ago, and the display explained why. It seems they tried, but couldn't get the copper compound separated from the red clay and when they tried to fire it to reduce the compound to pure copper, they fired the clay brick-hard, so they gave up.

When we entered the park yesterday, we passed a herd of Texas Longhorns in a large enclosure. There must have been a dozen in view. I've seen Longhorns before, but these fellows had longer horns than I'd ever seen. They were beautiful animals and each had a different coat color and pattern.

I've always wondered why Texans favored these animals originally and why they converted to other breeds. The museum explained that: The Longhorns are notto tick fever, which was rampant in these parts. Then a few ranchers started introducing Herefords and Angus. Most of them died, but a few bulls survived and passed their immunity to their offspring. Later, drugs were developed against the disease. Now Texas Longhorns are a curiosity and a point of pride for Texans. The state maintains an "official" herd, and these animals are a part of it. We've seen them at other state parks, especially Palo Duro, which we plan to revisit in a few days.

Jim wanted to stop and photograph the cattle when we first saw them for fear they would wander off into the mesquite, but I thought we should get a campsite first. Then he could go back. When he did go back, the cattle had indeed disappeared and he came back mad at me. Fortunately he had expressed his interest in them when he was in the office. About an hour later a park employee drove up to our site just to tell him the cattle were out by the road again. He hurried down there and was successful in getting nice pictures of two or three of them.



Texas Longhorn
Copper Breaks State Park, TX

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He'd like to get more different animals to show how varied they are and has gone back right now for today's umpteenth time to see if they're out. It's only a mile or two from the campground. . . They must not be out, for I see him driving back right now.

8:15 p.m., Thursday, October 15, 2009
Caprock Canyons SP, TX

Wednesday, Oct. 14, we drove the 100 miles from Copper Breaks SP to our current location. It was foggy and drizzly off and on all the way--our sixth day of this kind of weather. Our lunch stop was in the tiny town of Turkey, population not more than a few hundred. The old downtown is sheer Texas with covered sidewalks and a real western feel. A few artists look as though they've set up shop there, but it's mostly just the old businesses struggling on. There's no Wal-Mart very close, so they'll probably make it. Right across the street from the attractive little café where we ate (Galvan's) is an old Phillips 66 gas station straight out of the 1930s, complete with the old pumps. It's actually just a museum piece; if the pumps work, they certainly aren't in use. The little building has been attractively painted in shades of red and orange, picking up the colors of the old pumps.

Caprock Canyons SP is three miles *north* of the less charismatic town of Quitaque. (The location on our AAA map of Texas is wrong.) We were pleased to discover that the campsites back up into the brush and there isn't a bad site in the whole RV section. Jim decided to set up his water drip and feeding log--just in case. After he was through doing it, his hair, shoulders, and the entire back of his black T-shirt were covered with yellow powder. We soon discovered it was pollen from the red-berry juniper. When we gave one a gentle whack, a big cloud of pollen came off. This morning when it was a little breezy, some areas looked like they were smoking.



Redberry Juniper and pollen cloud
Caprock Canyons State Park, TX

There are also quite a few flowers in bloom, watered by the late summer and fall moisture that has come up from the south.

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While we were napping, the fog cleared away! We awoke to clear blue skies, the first in a week. It's been dreary here all that time, too, according to weather.com.

Late in the afternoon we decided to explore the canyons for which the park is named. Because of a stretch of 16 degree grade, trailers like ours are not allowed down below. They only have tent-camping there. As soon as we reached the edge of the fairly flat plain, we were awe-struck by the landscape in front of us--tall bright-red cliffs in every direction with bright green mesquite in the foreground. As we descended and could see the layers better, we discovered that there were narrow white layers alternating with the much wider red ones. The red clay is what weathers rapidly, but a capstone of a much harder gray rock is what controls the erosion and allows there to be sheer cliffs. The red and white layers have eroded into beautiful shapes, and the whole valley rivals a scene in Utah, only with more green vegetation.



Overview of Canyon
Caprock Canyons State Park, TX



Gypsum and Clay Layers
Caprock Canyons State Park, TX

As we drove the short part of the road down into the canyons area, we crossed the North and South Prongs of the Little Red River, which apparently helped to carve the canyons. We were interested that here rivers have "prongs" instead of "forks."

I learned today that the white is gypsum, which precipitated out of the water during relatively dry periods. The red is silt from upstream, which washed down and settled out during wet periods. Both were formed during the time when the Permian seas covered this area. These badlands (often called "breaks"— or "llano estacado" in Spanish) mark the dividing line between the rolling plains to the east and the flat plains to the west.

Birds are even scarcer here than they were at Copper Breaks. I sat outside all afternoon in the nice warm weather and neither saw nor heard a single bird. My entire bird list has five birds on it: one each of Flicker, Raven, Red-tailed Hawk, and Pied-billed Grebe, and two Rock Wrens. So I had to content myself with grasshopper-watching while I was sitting outdoors working on my embroidery. There were two or three kinds that I could hear and see jumping around here and there all over the ground.

In the visitors center there was a map of the prairies and I discovered that this park is right on the border between short-grass and mixed-grass prairie. Due to overgrazing, most of the prairie that is not plowed fields has been overgrazed and gone to mesquite-juniper scrub. But they've removed this scrub and planted prairie grasses in one field and it's doing very well. Really pretty. I heard one type of sparrow-like

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"sss"--most likely Savannah; it came from several locations. I couldn't walk out into the prairie because it was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence.

Right now Jim is outside with his camera hoping the critter that tipped over his feeding log last night will come back. . . Later: It was almost 11:00 when he gave up. . . Next morning: the log is still unmolested, except for a few nibbles of magic meal from some small creature.

8:15 p.m., Monday, October 19, 2009 Palo Duro State Park, nr. Amarillo, TX

On Friday, Oct. 16, we drove another 100 miles or so to Palo Duro State Park, arriving around noon. Unfortunately when we arrived at the gate, the attendant told us the park was full for the weekend because of some sort of race. I really wanted to spend some time in this beautiful place, so I suggested we go back and put in a couple of nights at a decent looking RV park just off I-25 where we'd turned to come to the park. I figured I could find a brochure on Amarillo there and figure out something to do for a couple of days. I personally had several housekeeping jobs to do--laundry, defrost refrigerator, and change the bed (a major project in the trailer).

The Palo Duro RV Park in Canyon (similar name, but different place) had a very nice, fast WiFi signal and Jim and I spent a lot of time looking up things on it. One I was particularly curious about was why the Redberry Juniper was producing pollen in October and how it compared with other junipers. I also had noticed that only some of the trees produced pollen, while the rest produced red berries. Are there male and female trees? After checking half a dozen or more sites, I finally found my answer. The Redberry produced pollen "from late summer to mid-autumn." The Ashe Juniper, also in this area, produces pollen from December to February, and the Rocky Mountain Juniper produces pollen in the "spring," the arrival of which depends on latitude and elevation. So my surmise was correct: The Redberry uses the moisture from the late summer rains for its growth spurt, while the other junipers use the winter rains. I also was correct about my other observation: All junipers are *dioecious*, meaning that they have male and female trees.

I found a nice brochure on things to do in the Amarillo area. There's a wonderful museum in Canyon only a couple of miles from where we camped, but we visited it when we were last here. Nothing in Amarillo seemed particularly appealing except for a nature center on the outskirts of the city. It was only 20 miles from where we were camped, half of it freeway and the rest a limited-access beltway around the city with just a few signals.

On Sat., Oct. 17, we got to the Wildcat Bluff Nature Center just after they opened at 9:00. That may seem rather late, but here we are on the extreme western edge of the Central time zone and still on Daylight Saving Time, so the sun doesn't rise until 8:00 a.m. It turned out we were the only visitors that morning. Another person was arriving just as we left.

A very friendly young naturalist was on duty that day and I learned a little about the place from him. It's a private center entirely supported by donations. They use it mainly for school tours. I told him about the classes I teach and how my adult education program helps educate the Sea and Sage docents for our children's program. He was

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interested in that, for he'd thought they should do some adult education, but the Board of Directors wasn't interested. All the school tours are led by paid staff, which limits the number of kids they can educate. He was *really* interested when I told him we run our programs with one Education Director, an assistant, and the rest volunteers.

The nature center is about 600 acres in size--nearly a square mile--and has a nice variety of habitats for this part of the country--short-grass prairie, mesquite-juniper scrub, riparian, badlands. Five miles of trails wind through the habitat. I particularly wanted some short-grass prairie to complete my collection of fall prairie photos. There were a couple of nice stands with varied types of grasses and I took a lot of photos--more than I really wanted, but it was cloudy when we walked out the trail and then the sun came out before we came back.



**Shortgrass Prairie with distant Soaptree Yucca & Mesquite
Wildcat Bluffs Nature Center, El Paso, TX**

Jim returned by another trail, but I went back on the prairie one to redo the shots. There I heard a snatch of thrasher-like song. I knew it wasn't a Brown or a Sage thrasher, which could be here. Curve-billed was the only one that fit the snatch I heard and it wasn't shown in this area in Kaufman's birding guide, but I looked in an annotated checklist in the office and found it was OK here. The naturalist thought he'd seen them and gave a reasonable description. (He'd be a good candidate for a student in an adult birding class.) I also saw a handful of other birds.

When I told him I had succeeded in getting the prairie shots I wanted, he told me that the Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge has lots more and better short-grass prairie. When I looked at my map, I discovered it was only ten miles from our RV park, so I resolved to go there on Sunday morning. (I did the laundry in the RV park laundry room that afternoon and postponed the other two tasks.)

On Sunday morning, Oct. 18, we drove to the Buffalo Lake NWR and got there around 8:15, fifteen minutes after they opened. The place was sort of a disappointment. Although there was lots of prairie, it didn't look as varied and natural as that at Wildcat Bluff Nature Center. Furthermore, we learned that the property was acquired in the 1930s, along with lots of other NWRs. Then in the 1940s and 1950s they planted 50,000 trees--cottonwood, Chinese Elm and tamarisk. These trees

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seemed to dot the prairie wherever we looked--and where there were no trees, there was a line of high-tension poles. The signs didn't even suggest that the elms and tamarisks might have been a bad idea either. In fact they said it they made wonderful wildlife habitat for deer and mourning doves. Just the thing for the hunters!

We drove the tour route, mainly through grasslands, but we couldn't walk out on the prairie because it was fenced in. One sign said they graze cattle on the prairie fairly heavily every other year, to simulate the wanderings of the bison that are no longer there.

And what about Buffalo Lake? When I looked at the refuge bird list on the internet the afternoon before, I saw a whole host of water-related birds. But when we got there, we found the lake was totally dry and learned it had been so for years. According to the sign, this is due partly to the recent drought in this area, partly to the use of water from its source streams for irrigation, and partly to the widespread overuse of water from the huge Ogallala aquifer, which underlies most of the midwest.

To top off a disappointing morning, the wind got up stronger and stronger as time passed. Before it got too strong, Jim did get a nice series of shots of a fall-plumaged Western Meadowlark on a barbed-wire fence. It was a side view in good light--should be wonderful.



Western Meadowlark (fall plumage)
Buffalo Lake Natl. Wildlife Refuge, TX

We got back to the trailer around 11:00. Checkout time at our RV park was 1:00, but we fudged a bit and left around 1:30, in time to get to Palo Duro State Park around 2:00, their check-out time. We found there were plenty of campsites, just as we had been told, and we were given just what we asked for, a site that backs into the bushes and trees.

I sat outside the rest of the afternoon in my comfortable chair. That was about the only thing that was comfortable, though. The wind wasn't as fierce as it had been up on the plains, but was still strong down in the canyon. Also it was pretty warm (forecast high in Canyon, the closest town, was 83 degrees) and there were myriads of flies!! Whether they were from the deer, the Wild Turkeys, the horses, or the nearby trash dumpster, I don't know. Still I stuck it out most of the afternoon because the place is so beautiful. Lots of hackberry and cottonwood and other trees and shrubs. Beautiful red cliffs sort of like what we had at Caprock Canyon SP.

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This morning, Monday, Oct. 19, we got up at 7:00 (still totally dark). I made pancake batter and while it was resting for an hour (makes texture better to have gluten develop a bit), I changed the bed and defrosted the refrigerator. We spent the rest of the morning driving the park road *very slowly* and investigating every picnic area and camping loop we found along the way. We found a few birds, but nothing for Jim to photograph. Actually the best place is right in our campsite. A flock of 11 Wild(?) Turkeys meanders by every so often.



**Wild Turkeys and Jim
Palo Duro Canyon State Park, TX**

Jim broadcast some birdseed to keep them around and coming back. He also put out his water drip, but they showed no interest in it--and they were very close. I sat outside from 4:00 on and watched the turkeys practically at my feet. The flock seemed to have only females and their nearly full-grown youngsters. The adult males are elsewhere. We also saw a White-tailed Deer doe with a half-grown fawn. (At breakfast yesterday we saw a doe with two fawns.) The only other wildlife in the area is a pair of Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, which we occasionally get to see out the window on the trees.

This afternoon was even hotter than yesterday. This time I took a thermometer out with me and it topped out at 93 degrees. The forecast high in Canyon was 88 degrees, which they said was almost the record for that date. I wonder if the record was broken. There was much less wind. The flies weren't quite as bad as yesterday, but still troublesome. Do they not like the heat or was it because the trash man came this morning and emptied the nearby dumpster? It could also have been the fact that there was less wind. The shade was on the lee side of the trailer, and the flies could get out of the wind there.

I sat outside in the heat doing my embroidery and really enjoying those turkeys. It seems to me that with a little work one could identify each individual. They all seemed to have slightly different plumages--some with brighter colors or broader stripes or something. But their appearance also changed with the way they folded their wings, so I was never sure. . . But it gave me something to occupy my mind while I pulled my threads in and out of my embroidery and tried to ignore the heat and the flies. Jim and Toby stayed inside the air-conditioned trailer. Toby slept except when he woke up to bark at the turkeys or the deer--and consequently get sent to his kennel to sleep some more. How he knows when they arrive is a real puzzle. The turkeys make soft, mellow clucks and two-tone calls, but couldn't possibly be heard inside the trailer with the air-

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conditioner roaring. The deer are silent. I guess Toby just stirs and peeks out a window every so often to see if there's something to bark at.

Most of Palo Duro Canyon State Park is down in a canyon below the level of the plains, although there is a Texas Longhorn impoundment up on top (no animals visible). The road down is a couple of miles of 10 degrees grade, and the canyon has a more or less level bottom with walls of the same rock formations we had at Caprock Canyons SP. They aren't as steep, though they're just as colorful. In one place the soft clay had completely washed away leaving a bridge of broken capstone rock. We took photos of the bridge with the sky showing through. Another place there was a relatively small piece of gray capstone at about a 30 degrees angle atop a short pillar of red clay. It looked like an odd mushroom. Off in the distance we could see a much taller column; I'm pretty sure has a name, but forget what it is. I think we have telephoto shots of it from our last trip here.

8:45 p.m., Thursday, October 22, 2009
KOA, 15 miles north of Carlsbad, NM

While we were eating breakfast on Tuesday morning, Oct. 21, a male White-tailed deer strolled through our campsite. Jim was able to get a very close-up picture of it. It appeared so tame that he thought that he could have hand-fed the buck if he'd thought to buy some deer corn. Besides him, we've seen two different does, one with two juveniles, the other with one. I know they're different does because the juveniles were markedly different in size, but, of course, well beyond the spotted stage.

After breakfast I walked the trail that more or less parallels the park road beyond the camping loop we were in (Hackberry). I've always found lots of birds there in the springtime and my fall walk was pretty good, too. I've been so discouraged about hearing bird sounds on this trip that I've given up carrying my tape recorder. This time I wished I had it. Although I heard no new sounds, I think I could have improved on some of my flicker recordings, as well as a few other species. When I came to a place where the trail came out to the road, I radioed Jim to bring my tape recorder. With it I retraced my steps, hoping to hear some of the same sounds, but the day was getting warm and the birds had already said all they were going to for a while. Another reason for calling Jim was that I had watched a Ladder-backed Woodpecker foraging for a long time in the same place not far off the ground. He even chased off a Downy Woodpecker that came in too close, then returned to the place. But the bird had left the area when I got Jim there.

While I was walking, Jim spent his time in the campground. I had found a Golden-fronted Woodpecker excavating a hole in a campsite picnic shelter support pole across the road from our site. Jim found it continuing with the project and said he got some nice photos of it.

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Golden-fronted Woodpecker (male)
Palo Duro Canyon State Park, TX

Palo Duro Canyon is the northernmost extent of this bird's range. Jim has photos of it from other parts of Texas.

We left the park around 11:00 and drove west to Oasis State Park in New Mexico, between Clovis and Portales. Along the way, we were treated to dramatic cloud formations, with thunder storms visible on both sides of us. We didn't encounter any rain ourselves, though. Our site in the park was shaded by trees to the west, but had good views in all other directions. We could see strong thunder storms moving by from southwest to northeast on both sides of us, but as long as it was daylight, we had no rain.

After dinner, the thunder began to be audible and we began to get some light rain, so we realized the thunder storms were closer. The lightening got intense some distance from us, so Jim went outside and got under the picnic shelter next to the trailer to try to photograph the lightning. After about an hour, there was suddenly an extremely strong burst of wind and sudden heavy rain. Seconds later, Jim burst into the trailer. The wind had suddenly and without warning blown the rain horizontally and soaked him to the skin. While he was in the bathroom changing to dry clothes, an extremely loud clap of thunder came simultaneously with a bolt of lightning. Jim came out and remarked, "It wasn't too smart for me to be out there, was it?" I hadn't realized it, but he'd been sitting on a metal picnic table under a metal picnic shelter roof. Anyway, I hope his lightning shots come out, but he's afraid he may have set his camera wrong. He doesn't do this kind of photography very often. [Later: For his efforts he did get one exceptional shot. It was on fine-grained Kodachrome-25 film and it showed many, many tiny filaments of lightning springing off the main lightning bolt. We're not reproducing it here because the detail would not show.]

After a few more really close lightning strikes, the sound effects continued from a respectable a distance for a couple more hours, diminishing to rain where we were. I heard on the news the next evening that Clovis had had 1.63 in. of rain. I suspect we had about the same.

Toby handled the thunder storm like a trooper. When it got sort of loud, he lifted his head and looked around. When the extremely loud clap came at the same time as

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the lightning, he was as startled as I was and looked over at me. I just said to him in an upbeat fashion, "That was a loud one, wasn't it?" He then went back to sleep. Some dogs are terrified of loud noises, but not Toby. He took it all calmly--or as calmly as I did.

Oasis State Park is located in a sand dune area where a spring brings water to the surface. There are quite a few trees and shrubs, and a man-made lake with concrete walls that has water from the spring. The graveled campsites are well spaced and on little loops parallel to a paved road through the dunes. I was astounded when I looked out the window the next morning to discover that all that water had soaked in except for a couple of puddles on the paved road. I walked around on some of the trails across the dunes looking for birds and was happy for the easy footing on the wet sand dunes. Not many birds, though. We'd actually done better during breakfast when we'd seen a few species out the trailer window--flickers, kestrel, etc.

We didn't feel any desire to linger in the park, but it was a much nicer place for an overnight stop than a commercial RV park would have been, especially in the ugly towns of eastern New Mexico.

We were headed for Bosque del Apache NWR, but I came up with a couple of detours along the way, since we have a couple of weeks before we have to be home. Several years ago we visited the Living Desert Botanic Garden and Zoo State Park in Carlsbad. It was a blustery day with rain threatening and eventually arriving, as I recall. I've always wanted to go back to the place.

I selected a KOA fifteen miles north of town, thinking being out in the country might be nicer than being in an RV park in town. I could have selected Barnsley Lake State Park, but it seemed to be just a barren park beside a reservoir--and the KOA had WiFi and cable TV. The KOA turned out to be just a huge, barren, overpriced (50degrees higher than other private parks we've patronized recently) parking lot. The sites are widely spaced and the showers are outstanding, according to Jim. But the place is just too manicured for our tastes. No shrubs, just a few scrawny trees, not even a dumpster to mar the perfection of the place. (Dumpsters are way out front--so far you have to drive.) The WiFi is fine, but the TV picture is poor and the selection of stations is worse. There are only fifteen, including ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, and Weather. However, the only all-news channel is the highly biased Fox News--no balanced CNN or liberal MSNBC. No PBS either. Disgusting! Jim wants to tell the world how awful the TV is here. In desperation, he watched Fox News for a while this afternoon and complained loudly the whole time about how awful it was and how they were glorifying Dick Cheney's criticisms of Obama.

This morning we spent several hours at Living Desert State Park, on the north edge of Carlsbad, and enjoyed it very much. It really does a nice job of interpreting the Chihuahuan Desert and its plants and animals. There's even a pack of endangered Mexican Gray Wolves. Most of the time they were down on the ground behind the bars of their enclosure, but once one sat up on a rock against the sky and Jim got some photos of it.

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Mexican Gray Wolf (captive)
Living Desert State Park, Carlsbad, NM

(He said I shouldn't tell anyone it was a captive, but of course he didn't mean it.) He also got photos of a few other animals and birds through bars or wire mesh: Bald and Golden Eagle, Gray Fox, Mountain Lion, etc. I especially enjoyed the various Chihuahuan Desert plant communities and took photos of a number of the plants, which were leafed out after the fall rains. Most of my previous trips to this desert have been in the springtime, when it isn't very wet. The Chihuahuan Desert is noted for being greenest in the fall.

8:30 p.m., Saturday, October 24, 2009
Oliver Lee Memorial State Park, south of Alamogordo, NM

Yesterday, Friday, Oct. 23, was a day of driving. We drove back north to Roswell, then west and finally south to Alamogordo. When we were almost there, we stopped for lunch in a very attractive Mexican restaurant, Casa de Sueño in the small town of Tularosa. They feature a luncheon buffet. For only \$6.95, we had a huge selection of Mexican items--tamales, enchiladas (red and green), tacos (make your own using their selection of ingredients--and delicious spit-roasted chicken, along with salad and dessert (little squares of Mexican cake). I enjoyed everything very much except the green enchiladas (too much garlic, to which I'm allergic) and the cake (funny tasting frosting). The restaurant is on the west side of the main highway on the south edge of the little town.

We drove through Alamogordo searching for a Wal-Mart, which we didn't find. Later we learned there was one because they adopted a stretch of highway for trash pick-up, but I still don't know where it is. I had hoped to drop off some prescriptions to be filled and picked up today. Oh well, I'm not out of the items yet. Even more important to Jim, we were searching for a Dairy Queen. Jim has become addicted to their Blizzard (with extra chocolate pieces added, please). I like them with candied pecan pieces added. When we buy a medium-sized one, we eat the part that protrudes out the top, then put the cover on and pop it in our freezing compartment for a treat the next three days. Unfortunately, we didn't find a Dairy Queen in Alamogordo.

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Although there are lots and lots of commercial RV parks in Alamogordo, we decided we'd had enough of those after that KOA and headed for Oliver Lee State Park, which is eight miles south of town on US 54, then 4 miles east on a local road. When we got there, we discovered we were at the very top of the steep bajada with spectacularly shaped mountains rising above it.



Dog Canyon
Oliver Lee State Park, NM

I've never had a chance to examine the upper bajada of the Chihuahuan Desert, so I was really pleased. There are only 16 sites with electricity and we got one of the last ones that we could get into, even though it was only about 1:30 when we arrived. From our trailer we can look out one side at the mountains and the other side at the valley, with lush vegetation in the foreground on both sides. Sites are nicely spaced, so we feel as though we have the entire valley to ourselves. They aren't as level as they could be and we had to use three boards under the tires on the left side of the trailer and then it still was a little low on that side.

We hadn't been here long before I saw a couple of birds on the gravel right outside the trailer, a Curve-billed Thrasher and a Canyon Towhee. A little ways out in the desert, I saw a Rock Wren calling from atop a Soaptree Yucca. Jim set up his feeding station and water drip, but nothing came back until almost dark, when a towhee and a probable Rock Wren came in.

The only lights are by the rest rooms, several sites above us, and along the highway four miles away in the valley. I sat outside after dinner for a few minutes until my eyes got adjusted to the darkness, hoping to see the Milky Way, and was not disappointed.

The park is on the property of an old-timer named Oliver Lee and the park offers occasional tours of his house. I really don't know who he was, but will probably learn when I go to the park visitors center.

Today we had to drive back to the southern end of Alamogordo, then southwest on US-70 to White Sands National Monument, a total of 22 miles. We got there just a few minutes before the Visitors Center opened at 8:00. I wanted the light to be as low as possible for photos. The park actually opens at 7:00, but I was glad we went to the visitors center first. The orientation video was essential for us to recognize some of the

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subtle ecological features when we saw them. I found the whole thing extremely fascinating. Jim was considerably less excited about it, but put up with me.

These dunes are especially white, but still not snowy perhaps because they were damp from the recent rains or because they were dirty. They are not the usual silicon dioxide (quartz) found in most sand, but instead they are calcium sulfate dihydrate. This compound is slightly soluble in water and washes down from deposits in the mountains like those I described earlier from a couple of Texas parks. Then it ends up in the Tularosa Valley, which has no outlet. Lake Lucero is the lowest point in the valley and is actually mainly a playa. When the wind blows more than 17 mph, it picks up the gypsum and blows it. The strongest winds are in the springtime and usually from the southwest, so most of the sand dunes are northeast of the lake. The dunes are moving at a rate of 30 feet per year, and have been accumulating since the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago.

There is an eight-mile spur road that goes out into the dunes, with the vegetative cover less and less with each passing mile. Near the beginning of the road is a stop with a one-mile interpretive trail through the dunes. The signs were mainly about how animals adapt to the heat and dryness, although a few plants were identified by their common names. I took lots of photos, including two plants which I think may be the obligate gypsophiles I learned about at the visitors center. They put down roots to the water table three feet below the surface of the soil below the dune. As the dune gets taller and taller, the plant just puts out more and more foliage at the top and extends its root system to keep in contact with the water. Then when the wind blows the dune on its way, the roots of the plant stabilize the sand there, leaving a mound around the plant. Sometimes the sand blows away so much that there is only a column with the consistency of extremely soft sandstone. I scratched one of the columns and it gave some resistance, but still it was easy to get some sand to fall off.



**Dune stabilized by Skunkbush Sumac (*Rhus trilobata*)
White Sands Natl. MOnument, NM**

Two plants with more general distribution also grow on the dunes, Rio Grande Cottonwood and Soaptree Yucca. As a dune overtakes the cottonwood, sometimes only a few slim, leafy branches protrude from the top of the dune, but the rest of the tree is still there, including the roots in the water below the soil. Then after the dune passes,

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the tree regains its original shape. I photographed the protruding leafy branches and also a nicely shaped tree between the dunes. The Yucca behaves a bit differently. It continues to extend its stalk higher and higher to keep above the dune. Then when the dune passes, the stalk may be too long and the plant topples over and may die (according to the video).

I didn't see any dead Yuccas, though. Instead I saw some that had sprouted from where they had tipped over. I think I saw evidence of dead Yuccas though. In one place there were several tall columns of compressed sand with no plant visible at the top.



**Dune stabilized by long-dead plant
White Sands Natl. Monument, NM**

Probably the above-dune part of the plant had disintegrated, but the root system was still stabilizing the remains of the dune. We took photos of all these phenomena. Some of them were telephotos, which Jim took for me.

I was even interested in the grasses that grow between the dunes. Near the edge of the dune field, three or more different species grew. They were identified and I photographed them: Indian Ricegrass (*Oxyzopsis hymenoides*), Alkali Sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*), and Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*). The latter I had seen in the prairies; here we're in what is considered the northern part of the Chihuahuan Desert. As we got to the center of the dune field, where the dunes are moving faster, only one plant could get established before the dune overtook it, Alkali Sacaton. This is a widespread plant. I've seen it in other parts of the west.

I only saw three birds all morning, a Loggerhead Shrike, a Say's Phoebe, and a Chihuahuan (probably) Raven, the latter in flight high overhead.

This morning Jim discovered that night creatures had consumed all the Magic Meal and some of the birdseed he had put out. He replenished the supply before we set out for White Sands NM. It was all gone when we got back. After lunch Jim sat outside the rest of the afternoon and got photos--or at least opportunities for photos--of Curve-billed Thrasher, Canyon Towhee, Rock Wren, Black-throated Sparrow, Cactus Wren, House Finch, and Lesser Goldfinch (the male an intermediate form--green-backed with black blotches around the edges; interesting).

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**Lesser Goldfinch - male intermediate between green-backed and black-backed forms
Oliver Lee State Park, NM**

I heard a Great Horned Owl in the distance when I was looking at the stars last evening and saw a raven high in the sky, probably Chihuahuan.

There is a steep canyon, Dog Canyon, that comes out near the Oliver Lee visitors center. I think there's some sort of a spring there, but will have to learn more about it tomorrow. According to the bulletin board, there is a nature trail and/or a boardwalk trail. One of these (or it) is closed now due to a recent flood. Again, I'll learn more about it tomorrow.

We've really had some dramatic examples of temperature changes in the desert. When we awoke this morning, the temperature here at Oliver Lee State Park, high on the bajada, was 55degrees, but when we got to the bottom of the valley at White Sands NM, it was 38 degrees. Although the two parks are 22 miles apart by road, they couldn't be more than 15 miles as the raven flies. The cold air sinks at night, and we had strong downslope winds last evening. No doubt there was a strong upslope wind in the late morning as the valley heated up, but we weren't there to observe it. [We did observe it a couple of days later. The next day it was swamped out by a front coming through.]

A few New Mexico-isms we've discovered along the road: (1) Towns don't have "bypass" routes to keep you from having to drive right through the center of town. Instead they have "relief" routes. We've seen them in Roswell and Alamogordo. (2) Most towns have signs that prevent trucks from making a lot of noise when they slow down. They're usually have signs saying things like "No engine brakes" or "No Jake brakes." Here they say "No retarder brakes." I thought all brakes were retarder brakes.

We had been planning to leave tomorrow, but we've now decided to stay one more day here in this park.

**8:15 p.m., Monday, October 26, 2009
Oliver Lee Memorial State Park, NM**

Well, we stayed two more days. This is the first place on the trip where Jim has had a chance to do the kind of photography he loves best--sit in a chair and photograph birds coming to his feeding log, strewn birdseed, and water drip. He spent all afternoon Saturday and all day Sunday and Monday doing just that, without even taking time for

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his usual nap. On Sunday he set up his blind so he could have two cameras set up, one for the larger birds and the other for the smaller ones, but today he said he'd pretty well gotten the big ones, so just sat in his chair in the open. In addition to the species listed above, we've also had Rufous-crowned (interior form) and White-crowned (Gambel's) sparrows, a nearly totally black-backed Lesser Goldfinch, and Pyrrhuloxia. A Canyon Wren has teased us several times, but all it seems attracted to is the wheel wells of the truck and trailer. I guess it's picking bugs out of there. Out in the desert, but from the campsite, I've also seen Say's Phoebe and Ladder-backed Woodpecker. Completing my list for this place was a Bewick's Wren that I saw when I took Toby for a walk around the camping loop. (That makes four wren species here.)

Yesterday morning, Sunday, Oct. 25, we went up to the visitors center to look at the displays. It's a small center, but the displays are very interesting and well done, including several dioramas with beautifully painted backgrounds and one of a waterfall area up Dog Canyon, which we can't see. (Dog Canyon was an important Indian trail in the early days.) I discovered that there are two trails and the interesting one up the riparian area was washed out. I was not interested in the one that zig-zags up the mountainside, but we've seen quite a few hikers on it from our site.

On the picture window looking up the canyon they've placed a transparency showing the various geological layers on the mountain side. If you stand just right, the transparency superimposes perfectly on the scene. I learned that the layers that I had thought might be volcanic are actually sedimentary limestone (calcium carbonate) and dolomite (calcium magnesium carbonate), precipitated out when these mountains were under the sea. Dramatic magma uplift raised what is now the Tularosa Valley and scrunched up the mountains on either side. Then the magma collapsed and so did the valley, leaving the mountains where they were. I had wondered why no one was climbing the steep rock faces of these mountains, but I guess limestone and dolomite are too brittle for that--not like granite.

We learned a lot about the history of this area. It was originally homesteaded by François-Jean "Frenchy" Rochas in the mid-1880s. He built a small rock cabin and later added an adobe room. This has been partially reconstructed. He was murdered in 1894, although the authorities called it suicide. It is felt that the murderers were cattlemen who owed him money. During his short tenure here he built rock walls up the slopes of the canyon entrance, which seem to be around 45 degrees from horizontal. What a feat to carry all those rocks. Nothing was said about his using a burro, so apparently he just carried them.

While Frenchy was alive he and Oliver Lee, who had a homestead farther downhill, built an irrigation ditch together. After Frenchy's death Oliver Lee acquired the land and eventually over a million acres in this part of New Mexico. His home has been reconstructed and refurbished. Tours are offered on weekends at 3:00 p.m., but we didn't bother to go. He was a very colorful character. A Democrat in a region of Republicans, and a rich one at that, he wasn't too popular with most of the people in the area. Before he acquired the land outright, there were lots of squabbles over use of the open rangeland and Lee was indicted for several crimes, including murder of another prominent New Mexican. After much legal maneuvering, he finally stood trial in a court he considered fair, and was acquitted because all the evidence proved to be circumstantial. Later he served in both houses of the state legislature. He lost most of his land during the Great Depression of the 1930s, but still remained a well-to-do man.

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I wondered why they called this place Dog Canyon and asked the ranger in the office. He told me that in the early days the Spaniards fought the Apaches for the canyon, the Apaches retreated up the canyon and escaped, but left one of their dogs behind. (Dogs were common beasts of burden.) He also said New Mexico has lots of other Dog Canyons, mostly named for the same reason.

After leaving the little museum, I wandered through the botanic gardens in the vicinity of the visitors center. The ranger told me that all the plants are native to the New Mexico portion of the Chihuahuan Desert, but not necessarily this park. Several beautiful flowers were in full bloom, and I photographed three, which the ranger identified as Paperflower (yellow), Autumn Mint (rich fuchsia), and Turpentine Bush (a shrub absolutely covered with tiny yellow flowers).

Saturday and Sunday the temperature topped out in the mid-70s and I sat outside each afternoon. But last night it got really windy and we had some rain. Today was cloudy most of the day and the high was around 60 degrees, so I stayed inside. (It's cleared off now, so tonight will probably be pretty cold.) The couch isn't as comfortable as my chair, but I could see the birds just as well and my embroidery better. Outside the glare contracts my pupil making it hard to see my work. Before I had my cataract surgery I had prescription trifocals with the upper part dark and the lower two lenses uncolored. They worked perfectly for outdoor reading and embroidery. I'm going to get another pair made in December--when my insurance will pay for another pair of glasses. I've already used this year's insurance for regular glasses, as well as paying for a couple pair myself.

We were going to leave this morning, but the black-backed Lesser Goldfinch came in and I really wanted Jim to get it. Also Jim hoped to get the Canyon Wren. It came around a few times, but never to the feeding area, just to the wheelwells. When I walked Toby, I heard it in the wheelwells of a newly arrived RV. So I think we'll leave tomorrow. But it's definitely a place we want to return to sometime.

8:30 a.m., Wednesday, October 28, 2009 **Bosque Birdwatchers RV Park, San Antonio, NM**

After spending quite a bit of time in Alamogordo's Wal-Mart yesterday, we drove about 165 miles north and west to this location, which is right outside the entrance to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. There was a strong south wind all day and it got cloudier and cloudier the farther we went. During the westbound portion of the route, Jim could really feel the wind buffet the truck, but it wasn't so strong that he had any control problems. When we checked the TV (one station, Fox, comes in, poorly) last evening, they said we were in for a cold, rainy, windy day today, with gusts of up to 60 mph possible. We're really glad we're not on the road today.

We've stayed here several times before and usually it has been almost empty. We were aghast to discover it was nearly full. In fact we wondered if it had any sites left at all. Not daring to hope for a positive answer, Jim told the owner we were birders and would really like a site on the edge of the park. At first, he said all those sites were occupied by permanent people, and that was true of the sites at the back of the park, but then he got in his truck and led us to one that is at the front end of the row, overlooking a nice piece of desert between the site and the road. It turned out to be a

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row where he usually places the big rigs, but he told me, "Why should the big rigs always get this choice site?"

There is a narrow stretch of gravel between our site and the edge of the campground, which is used as a road for access to the row of sites we're in. On the other side of the road is a very nice patch of desert scrub. Jim threw out a lot of birdseed and in no time we had several dozen White-crowned Sparrows. Shortly after that other species came in in droves, too: Gambel's Quail, Inca Dove, Eurasian Collared-Dove, White-winged Dove, House Sparrow, House Finch, Canyon Towhee, Curve-billed Thrasher, Red-winged and Brewer's blackbirds. Sometimes there are over 100 birds here at once. It's lucky that Jim still has lots of the birdseed he brought from home.

The wind blew hard and not-so-hard all night long. Shortly after daybreak we had some rain, but it's stopped for now, but what a wonderful place to be stuck on a rainy day. I expect to spend the rest of the morning working on my *Learning More California Bird Sounds* revision.

4:15 p.m., Friday, October 30, 2009 **Grande Vista RV Park, Willcox, AZ**

I don't know what's "grande" about the vista here. It's just an RV and mobile home park surrounded by an undistinguished residential area, right in town. There is a bit of vacant land over the fence from us and three quail wandered by a few minutes ago, so it's not all bad. It is neat and tidy and well away from the freeway and railroad, and that is a plus. I think it is better than where we stayed last time we stopped in this town.

After spending the rest of Wednesday, Oct. 28, watching the weather from the cozy trailer, we were ready for some birding on Thursday. It dawned partly cloudy, but a cold front had come through in the night and the temperature was 24degrees with a brisk wind. It never got above the 40s all day and the wind didn't abate. We got a late start, so didn't see the cranes and geese leave the ponds right beside the road just south of the Bosque Birdwatchers RV Park. (The park is just outside the refuge on the north side.) Still there were quite a few ducks and a mixed groups of Long-billed Dowitchers and Greater Yellowlegs. It was so cold that Jim didn't want to try to get pictures of any of them, because he would have had to get out of the truck.

We stopped at the visitors center, where I looked over the really nice selection of natural history books in their bookstore. I discovered the mammals guide in the Peterson Series had been completely revised a couple of years ago and bought it. I always hear about new revisions of bird books, but not mammals books. I'll have to see if I like it as well as the mammals book in the Kaufman Focus Guide series.

We then drove the twelve-mile tour route around the refuge. We stopped at the boardwalk out over a pond and marsh. Jim shot a couple of pictures of some Neotropical Cormorants, but they were a little distant and mostly had their backs to us, but I identified them by their longer tails, compared with Double-crested Cormorants. He also got a few shots of a Ring-necked Pheasant in an area where he always gets shots of that bird whenever we visit the refuge. We wonder how long pheasants live or if the adults pass their fearlessness on to their offspring. Usually pheasants disappear into

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the brush whenever we stop. We drove the rest of the route slowly, but saw very little and got back to the trailer around 1:00.

What had started as a partly sunny morning had become a mostly cloudy day. We even had a sprinkling of snowflakes in the early afternoon. Bosque del Apache is in the Rio Grande River valley, but from our trailer we could see snowstorms passing on both sides of us in the highlands. There was always some sun illuminating portions of these storms, so the effect was really beautiful. I worked on my embroidery for several hours in the afternoon, enjoying the ever changing weather patterns.

This morning we decided we might as well head for home. Street sweeping is Tuesday afternoon and we either have to get home well before it so we can get the trailer emptied out, or else not arrive until Wednesday morning. That seemed a little late, so we decided to make a leisurely drive home, with a couple of overnight stops along the way. The cold wintery weather in northern New Mexico and Arizona made us decide to head for I-10. I had been hoping to stop a couple of places in north-central Arizona, but we wouldn't have had much time to enjoy them anyway. So we're on our way, and Wilcox is just a place to park for the night on this trip, even though we've spent many wonderful days in the past birding in this area. Tomorrow night we'll stop in Yuma or El Centro, then get home early in the day on Sunday.

7:45 p.m., Saturday, October 31, 2009

Sans End RV Park, Winterhaven, CA (across Colorado R. from Yuma)

The drive today was one we'd made many times. We stopped at an RV park we've stayed at before, a modest one, but with interesting landscaping, which includes a lot of palms and some native trees and shrubs. The temperature here was probably over 80 degrees when we arrived and, although our site has a tree in it, it isn't where it shades the trailer. The voltage was somewhat erratic, but eventually settled down, but the bedroom of the trailer was pretty hot for an hour or so--and Jim had the couch for his nap.

Late in the afternoon it cooled off and I sat outside for a while watching the birds. Saw a Green-tailed Towhee, not unexpected in the desert, but still not super-common.

More interesting was some behavior I observed between two Mockingbirds. They were on the ground about 18 inches from bill-tip to bill-tip, facing one another. Every few seconds they'd simultaneously jump up about a foot, then come back down facing each other as before. Gradually one of the birds jumped forward slightly, while the other jumped backwards. In the course of eight or ten jumps, the action moved maybe three or four feet. Finally the bird that was moving forward turned its head at right angles from the other bird and started pecking at the ground in a calm fashion. Immediately thereafter the other bird flew off. No sounds accompanied this behavior.

I tried to recount the behavior without interpreting it, but I hypothesized that the bird moving forward was asserting dominance, but it was curious that it stopped the action without actually chasing the other bird off. The bird that flew away apparently realized that because it was backing off, it was losing the "battle."

Other species here include White-crowned Sparrow, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Gila Woodpecker, Mourning Dove, Eurasian Collared-Dove, House Sparrow, Great-tailed Grackle. I didn't walk around the grounds. These are just what I observed from our site.

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Tonight is Halloween, but no Trick-or-Treaters. This is an RV park for people over 55 years of age.

Sunday, Nov. 1, 2009

Home

Today it was just an uneventful drive home.

WRAP-UP. When we set out, we had no intention of driving all the way to eastern Nebraska, but the wildlife in the Rockies was so disappointing that I thought it might be fun to explore western Nebraska. Seeing the beautiful mixed-grass prairie in Chadron State Park made me want to see the tall-grass prairie farther east. I'd only seen them in the late spring and early summer. Reading that wonderful book about the creator of that phenomenal quilt clinched it. I just had to go to Lincoln and see it.

Other prairies followed in Kansas, and then the encroaching early winter chased us south, then west. Since we didn't have to get home for a little longer, we lingered in the Texas panhandle and New Mexico and then headed for home.

Upon reflection, I realized that we'd seen all the prairies and all the deserts of North America, the prairies and the Chihuahuan Desert for the first time in the fall.

Prairies: Mixed-grass - Chadron State Park, western Nebraska.

Tall-grass - Spring Hill Audubon Sanctuary, nr. Lincoln, Nebraska
and Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, Kansas.

Short-grass - Wildcat Bluff Nature Center, near Amarillo, Texas.

Deserts: Drove through Mojave and Great Basin deserts en route to Boise.

Spent lots of time in Chihuahuan Desert of New Mexico.

Drove through Sonoran and Colorado deserts en route home.