

Trip from Texas to Colorado - Spring 2006

by Sylvia R. Gallagher

Part 4

9:00 p.m., Mon., April 24, 2006

South Llano R. SP, TX

Not much of interest today, a day of necessities. After finishing up my editing of the latest installment of the diary to mail to Nancy, Jim and I went into Junction to do some shopping. (It's been over a week since we shopped for groceries back in Uvalde.) We also discovered that the site we had last time, number 21, was vacated this morning, so we went over to the office and were told we could have it until Friday and are 4th on the waiting list to stay that night. By the time all the groceries had been put away (always a challenge to fit it all in our tiny refrigerator) and the trailer moved, it was noontime--and well on its way to the 96degrees high we recorded in mid-afternoon. (It's 78 degrees now.)

Jim set up his water drip, etc., and this time stayed inside monitoring it. Three customers came--Lark and Rufous-crowned Sparrow and Mockingbird. Several days of showers and thunderstorms are forecast (and also much cooler weather), so maybe the front will drop out some interesting migrants. A couple of Blue Grosbeaks were in the site across from site we left, and the occupants of the site are birders and very friendly. Jim may try for them there tomorrow, but I wonder if they'll let him get close enough. It would be wonderful if they would come to our site; we've been told there are quite a few here in the park. [I never saw the birds again in the park, so Jim is still awaiting that outstanding photo.]

Junction and the park where we are staying are in a river valley at the northwest edge of the Edwards Plateau. Yesterday most of our drive from Garner SP was up on the plateau. It averages about 2000 ft in elevation and is gently rolling terrain. Vegetation is a mix of junipers (called "cedars" locally), mesquite, and various other small broad-leafed trees and shrubs. All is privately owned, as is nearly all land in Texas. There was a great deal of difference in the stewardship of the various land-owners. Some land was quite lush with plenty of grass, while other plots were shamefully overgrazed, so every stone in this rocky terrain was visible. The stony soil ensures that this land will never be plowed for crops.

We could also tell which land was used by grazers (cattle) and which by browsers (goats, deer and various exotic antelope, etc.) The trees used by the browsers were sheared off several feet above the ground, making the area look like an urban park. The cattle don't eat the trees' foliage, so their skirts come down to the ground.

9:00 p.m., Tues., April 25, 2006

South Llano R. State Park, TX

It's 64 degrees outside now. Last night at this time it was 78 degrees. What a relief. It was hot all night long and 74 degrees when we got up before sunrise. Weather radio (we have it here for the first time in a long while) said humidity was 80%. I took Toby for a walk

around the camping loop, then came back and sat outside. The sky was mostly cloudy, but when the sun came out, it was unpleasantly warm. I never could find a spot where I could sit in the shade and also watch Jim's water drip, so I settled for shade. Around 9:00 the northwestern sky became very dark, and I was sure we were in for a rain storm, but no rain came (forecast was only 50% probability). Then the wind got up, and over a period of only 15 minutes it was so cool that I went inside and put on some long pants and a jacket. The temperature had dropped to 68 degrees from the upper 70's and the humidity had dropped to only 50%. Shortly after the dark clouds passed, the sky lightened considerably, but the day remained mostly cloudy. The passage of that cold front was so dramatic and so quick. It was fun to watch it occur--and also fun not to have to run the A/C at all for the first time in a long time. Best of all, for the next five days the temperature is supposed to remain cool with a small chance of thundershowers.

Jim was waiting for a package from UPS, which was why I remained in the site this morning instead of taking a walk. The package didn't come. Jim was making the rounds of the various blinds, without finding anything worthwhile. So he came back and sat in his own blind for much of the rest of the morning. He was happy with some photos of the interior race of the Rufous-crowned Sparrow and of a Lark Sparrow with scarcely any breast spot. We were disappointed not to have any other visitors.

I spent most of the morning outdoors and didn't add any new birds to my park list. It was fun to bird by ear and hear far more birds than were coming to Jim's water drip. I suggested that he move it, but he likes it where it is, birds or no birds.

I checked out one of the blinds after lunch and found no warblers. Clay-colored Sparrows were in the area in very large numbers, along with a few White-crowns--all the dark-"lored" variety. I don't know whether they're headed for the Rockies (*oriantha*) or the northeastern Arctic and subarctic tundra (nominate *leucophrys*). The two races are essentially indistinguishable in the field. Also present for awhile was a very patchy (red and yellow) immature male Summer Tanager. I wish Jim could get a shot of him, but he's very negative about even trying. He just wants to sit in his own blind and hope for something.

In the afternoon I did little birding, but did work some more on the ABA/Lane guide revision. I discovered I still had some questions about Bolsa Chica and composed an email to Terry Hill, which I'll send when we can find a phone that works.

In summary, a comfortable day after the front came through, but the most notable event was that front.

9:45 p.m., Wed., April 26, 2006 South Llano R. SP, TX

A delightfully cool day with temperatures that didn't get out of the 70's. There was a breeze of around 5-10 mph all day long, even first thing, so recording conditions were so-so. The sky was overcast for the first couple of hours, then it was sparkling clear and dry--like a day in the west.

After taking Toby for a walk, we checked out the places we'd been told were good for Black-capped Vireo. The place in the park yielded nothing, but one of the two spots Clair had told us of proved to be good. To get there from the park, we drove back toward town, turning just past the cemetery on a little road to the right with a sign to a Texas Tech college campus (FM 2869 I think). We drove that road to the stop sign, then turned left on KC 181. We followed that until just past a sizeable bridge across Cedar Creek and just before the junction with Hwy. 461. There we turned right onto a little road with the creek on the right and a steep brushy hillside on the left. The birds were found on both sides of the

road in about the first 100-200 ft. Hwy. 461 is the business route through Junction, but the bridge across the river is closed for reconstruction. One could get to the area from Hwy. 461 off the freeway, but it's kind of hard to describe.

I heard the birds singing as soon as I got out of the truck. I tried recording them, but there was a lot of noise from traffic and bridge construction and the recordings will be so-so. Jim was lucky enough to have one perch so he could photograph it, but afterwards he worried that he didn't have his camera set right. He'll probably go back and try again another day before we leave.

After giving up on getting anything good in the way of recordings, I walked ahead on the little road, which soon comes to a sizeable parking lot where people park for Easter sunrise services. Three bedraggled white crosses are halfway up the hill. I did some recording along the way, and conditions got better as I got the bluff between me and the traffic noise. I got recordings of Black-throated Sparrow and Painted Bunting that probably aren't too bad. I also heard and, I think, recorded the unmistakable call of Western Scrub-Jay. I looked up and saw its silhouette on a wire almost against the sun. Then it flew away. When I checked my field guide, I discovered there is a disjunct population of them in this area. It really surprised me to find one this far east, but the habitat of juniper and various shrubs was perfect.

It was around 11:00 when I got back to the trailer. I sat outdoors most of the rest of the day. In the late afternoon Jim decided to try for Clair's Green Kingfisher and was gone for several hours. He didn't get it, for it only came to its favorite perch a couple of times, and Jim hadn't understood which perch it was. Finally Clair came along and straightened him out. He'll try again tomorrow.

While Jim was gone, I decided to sit close to his water drip because it was the only place in the campsite that was shady. Jim never wants me to sit that close for fear I'll scare away the birds. He shouldn't have worried here, for within 15 minutes of being there, all the species he's been photographing since we got here made appearances.

First a Rufous-crowned Sparrow flew in and moseyed around, singing softly the entire time. After eating a little birdseed, it wandered off under the trailer and out the other side. How I wished I'd had my tape recorder. After he left, I went inside and got it. He gave me another chance toward the end of the afternoon, but unfortunately the recording also has a loud Cardinal in it. That Rufous-crowned was totally unconcerned about my presence and walked within six feet of me. Another time I was seated about three feet from the electrical box, and had both my arms extended out in that direction splitting a long six-strand piece of embroidery floss. That little guy flew into the feeding area from behind me right under my hands.

Other birds came in as well, including Summer Tanager (pair), Bewick's Wren (in the tree only six feet from my head singing and fussing, but before I got my tape recorder out), Lark Sparrow (pair, with one almost lacking a center spot), Nashville Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow. None of these birds paid the slightest attention to me. Jim isn't going to make me stay far away from now on--at least not in this campground.

We went into Junction and had dinner with Clair and Sue at La Familia Mexican restaurant. It was very good. Jim and I had eaten there when we were in Junction last time. Afterwards we went back to their motel and did our Pocketmail and even checked Jim's home email. Afterwards Clair and Sue showed us some of their best digital photos from their trip so far. I was especially jealous of the Flame-colored Tanager and Rufous-winged Sparrow Clair photographed in Arizona. He's going to have a slide made of the latter for me to use in my sparrow workshop next year.

9:00 p.m., Thurs., April 27, 2006
S. Llano R. State Park, TX

A really productive day for both of us. Jim's yield was just one special bird, the Black-capped Vireo. He went back to the same place we went yesterday and feels he got at least three excellent images--plus other more distant ones.

The weather was perfect for a long walk with my tape recorder. The temperature was in the low 60's when I started out around 7:20 (shortly after sunrise) and was probably in the low 70s when I got back 3 hours later. The high for the day was 80' (officially 76 degrees in Junction according to NOAA weather radio). The sky was cloudy nearly the entire time. And best of all, the air was perfectly still the first half of the time I was out, with only a gentle breeze at the end. I walked the trail (actually a two-track dirt road, but only open to official vehicles) that starts out right next to our site (#21). There's quite a trail system through the pecan bottomlands of the South Llano River, and I took the outer loop, which ran along the river for a mile or so. The total distance I walked was around three miles.

The first part was in the uplands with mesquite, Ashe juniper, oaks, and various thorny shrubs. The birds were fairly widely spaced, so I could get many of them nearly as solos. I was especially pleased with the Lark Sparrow recording, something I've been wanting to get really well for a long time. I also got more Painted Bunting, Summer Tanager song, etc.

Later on I was among the huge pecan trees and got Indigo Bunting, Field Sparrow (in a couple of clearings), etc. I recorded almost a full hour of tape during that period, and I can't really remember all I got. There were a couple I'll have to identify later, but others I wasn't sure of came in to playback.

I met only one person the entire time I was out, a woman with her dog near the end of the morning. The traffic on the highway was very distant, and there were only a handful of airplanes, but they were small ones that took a long time to go by.

After I got back to the trailer, the breeze had gotten up, so I set my microphone in the window and recorded the birds that came to Jim's birdseed, etc. I especially wanted the Rufous-crowned Sparrow and got it fairly well. I was especially pleased with a nice "dear dear dear..." sequence. There weren't as many birds at the water today, perhaps because it wasn't a sunny day. Clair and Sue, who made the rounds of the park blinds, said business was slow there, too. (They like the park blinds, partly because they don't have their own and partly because they shoot digital, which has a greater "reach." Jim doesn't like the unphotogenic squirrel-proof wire cages placed around all the feeding logs.) By mid-afternoon, there was too much wind for nice recordings, so I gave up and just embroidered and talked to the neighbors and Clair and Sue for the rest of the day.

The only bad note for the day was Toby. He was impossible--or else celebrating his birthday (7 months). Jim put him in his kennel while he went looking for the vireo, but got him out and left him unattended in the trailer while he was in his blind. He came in a while later and discovered the remains of an entire roll of toilet paper in itsy bitsy pieces all over the place--and he left the mess for me to clean up when I got back! Toby had also hauled a tube of hand lotion out of the same cupboard, taken it up onto the bed and squeezed a dollop out onto the bedspread. Jim had noticed the tube, but not the fact that some was on the bedspread.

We spent the rest of the day trying to keep Toby out of more mischief, but in the afternoon when we were only briefly out of the trailer, he pulled my folded AAA Texas map off the dinette table and chewed off a corner, which produced a small hole in west Texas

and a larger hole that included Crawford and Waco. I decided he was expressing his opinion of our President, so forgave him a little. After much searching I found the pieces around Waco and taped them back in place, but don't know where the rest of the scraps are--most likely inside Toby. Fortunately I didn't plan to go to Crawford anyway, but am not happy with the wrinkled, ragged map. If we're in a town with an AAA office, I'll go in and get a replacement.

As I've been writing this, I've had to chase Toby out of the front window (it backs up to the sofa), where he loves to try to catch moths and other night-fliers--and knock things off the shelf in the process. (Everything on the shelf is in plastic containers, which we bought at the 98¢ Store before we left home for the express purpose of keeping him from snitching items.) I've also had to keep him from chewing the drawstrings of Jim's hooded sweatshirt on the couch and his shoes on the floor. I won't enumerate all the other things he's tried to get into during the course of the day. Right now he looks like an angel lying on the couch waiting for me to go over and join him. Raising a puppy can be trying, and today was probably the worst. He can be so sweet, but oh, so mischievous.

I've complained about the management of many state parks we've been in and the inscrutable policies they have about signing up for another night. This park is a pleasant exception. We were able to put ourselves on the waiting list for the coming weekend when we first decided to stay that long. This afternoon a park employee came to our trailer and asked if we still wanted to stay, for they had a vacancy now. We thought that was very nice. We'd expected to have to go into the office and inquire each morning. We think the reason there were so many cancellations is that thunderstorms are forecast for tomorrow night and Saturday.

8:15 p.m., Fri., April 28, 2006
S. Llano R. State Park, TX

Last night I decided I'd go out recording birds today if it was calm or go do the laundry if it was windy. It was windy. There are two laundries in Junction. I went first to the one Sue had used, because she said the other was crowded when she checked it out. It had a big sign on the window saying it opened at 7 am. It was 7:20. A woman came to open the next-door cleaners, but said she didn't have a key to the laundry, but that the man would be along in "15 or 20 minutes." That was enough to send me to the other laundry. There was no one in it, and I had it to myself the whole time. It took me all morning to wash the laundry, put it away, and make the bed (always an enormous task because of all the stuff around it that has to be moved and the tight quarters). As my readers of previous diaries know, we always take a tremendous amount of clothing and then do an enormous laundry every three or four weeks. This time I had five machines going at once, and then all four decent-looking driers. (There was also a long row of decrepit old ones, only three of which were working.)

The only person I saw while I was there was a local woman who ostensibly had the assignment of cleaning the place. She spent at least ten minutes leaning on the washing machines staring into space. Then she volunteered, "I really don't feel like working today."

I replied, "What will the boss say when he finds you haven't done anything?"

Her answer: "I have until noon to get it done. Then I have to go over into Mexican town to clean houses." She explained that is the part of town on the other side of the bridge, which is closed for repairs. She herself is Latino, but with only a slight accent.

I asked her if she had lived in Junction all her life. She said, "No, I was born in Van Horn." I asked her how she liked Junction compared with Van Horn, and she said she likes

Junction better. I can certainly understand that. To us Van Horn is the nadir of dismal, decaying, dying, west Texas towns. We sometimes stay in the KOA there.

She eventually did some desultory sweeping, including opening all the driers (those big commercial ones) with a key and cleaning the lint out of them.

The humidity was back up again to 80%, although the cloud cover probably kept the high around 80 degrees. I didn't check the thermometer.

Around 3:00 a park employee came around and said we were under a tornado watch from then until 9:00 p.m. I turned on the weather radio, and pretty soon the loud alarm beep sounded. It was a tornado-producing storm west of here about 50 miles. Every so often the alarm sounded again as the storm moved across 20 miles north of us. I don't know if it ever touched ground, The Doppler radar just looks for circulation in the clouds, which could become a tornado.

Around 6:00 to 7:00 a couple of minor thunder storms brushed by, one of which dropped considerable rain for about 15 minutes. Then it all cleared off. Now I hear rumbling again in the southwest, the direction from which all this weather is coming, and the campground host came by to tell us another one is on its way, but so far there's been no beeping from the weather radio, so maybe it isn't too strong.

Guess I'd better turn off the computer. I don't have the battery in and don't want to lose work if the electricity goes out. There's really not much else to say today.

9:30 p.m., Sat., April 29, 2006 **S. Llano R. State Park, TX**

The 9:00 storm dropped a lot of rain, but the thunder and lightning was never very close. Then NOAA extended the tornado watch until 2:00 am for two counties, ours and the one north of it. They let it expire for the rest of west-central Texas. Despite this, there were no more alarm signals, but we did have a doozy of a rainstorm from around 12:30 to 1:30 am. Not too much close lightning and no hail, thank goodness. I guess the lack of hail is the reason they didn't warn us about it.

After the final storm was over, it was a nice cool, quiet night. We awoke to clear skies and no wind. The temperature high was in the low 70's with low humidity. An absolutely glorious day.

I tried to do some recording before the breeze got up, but it turned out the place I chose was close to the tent-camping area, and there was a group of noisy Boy Scouts, one of whom had a noisy dog. I never saw the dog, but Clair said it ran through the feeding area of the Juniper blind he was in three times while he was there. He reported it to the host, for dogs in this park are supposed to be leashed. He doesn't know how it turned out, for he went to another blind.

The park has four very nice observation blinds, all named, and Clair and Sue have spent lots of time in them in the two weeks they've spent in Junction. (Sue likes the Acorn blind best--the one nearest the campground.) Jim has done very well with his own setup. He loves his own blind, in which he can set up two cameras and thus shoot different sized birds nicely. It's also very comfortable.

I walked on past the scouts, but the trail sort of went uphill, so I was never completely out of earshot from them. There weren't any bird sounds I really needed, though. The most interesting species I found was another Golden-cheeked Warbler. It wasn't vocalizing, just foraging in the treetops. I watched it, hoping it would show me its nest, but it eventually flew away and didn't return. I hung around for 5-10 minutes hoping it would return.

After that, I decided I really should look at the other two blinds that I hadn't yet visited. One of them, the Agarita blind, is near the headquarters, but has its own little parking area. It's a short walk from there to the blind along a nature trail with labeled plants. (Agarita is one of them, a gray-green shrub with holly-shaped leaves.) Clair was in it. There were lots of birds in view, especially a large number of Painted Buntings, mostly males.

The final one is called the Barn blind because it is next to an old barn. It had the fewest birds of any of them.

All these blinds were designed by a birding couple, who have served as campground hosts for a number of years. They also maintain them during the months they're here. The rest of the time, Clair said, the park staff keeps them filled with birdseed. Each one has a water feature, with a water drip (one even has a mister) and a flow of water across a large, almost flat rock--perfect for bathing. The problem for photography is that this water feature is too far from the blind for good pictures--unless you're shooting digital.

Late in the afternoon I walked Toby from the campsite to the day-use area, which is in the pecan bottomlands. I was hoping to see some warblers in the treetops there, but had no luck. But Toby had a good 1.2 mile walk. He didn't seem to tug at the leash as badly as usual. Maybe he's learning. He found the old, fallen pecans a nice change from the usual sticks and stones that he dearly loves to pick up. The highlight of his walk, though, was a "life mammal:" An armadillo moseyed across the road behind us, and Toby instantly wanted to go play with it, or something. He set up a fit of yelping and jumping up and down and tugging in that direction. The armadillo paid no attention and, of course, Sylvia wasn't about to allow Toby access to the animal.

We went into town with Clair and Sue and had dinner at the Y Herd Steak House. It was very good. They insisted on driving us in and back, even though their motel is in town. When we got back, they came in and romped with Toby for a while and waited for dusk. I had promised they'd hear Chuck-will's-widows behind our campsite, and they were not disappointed. It was the first time they'd heard that bird. Clair caught sight of one flying across the trail, but we couldn't find it with the big flashlight. (I've never had much luck seeing those birds, although I've heard them many times.)

Tomorrow Clair and Sue head south to spend a week at Neal's Lodges, and we head east to Bastrop State Park. Don't know if our paths will cross again this trip. They intend to work north through the midwest eventually and, especially, to try for the Sharp-tailed Grouse near Valentine, NE, as we did successfully last year. We have a lot in common with those two and have really enjoyed our week together here.

8:45 p.m., Sun., April 30, 2006

Bastrop State Park, Bastrop, TX (ca. 30 miles east of Austin)

Our last morning at South Llano and it was hard to tear ourselves away. It got down to a downright crisp 46 degrees last night and dawned crystal clear and totally calm. I fixed pancake batter, then went outside to record for about an hour while it "developed."

I didn't stray very far from the trailer, for I wanted to get the birds around our site before the neighbors awoke and started slamming doors, etc. They're actually extremely quiet people. I especially wanted the Rufous-crowned Sparrow's soft songs and calls. I couldn't have asked for a better sample of the "dear dear dear..." calls. Those two little flying mice scooted around literally at my feet--within a foot of my toes once and often within a yard. They might have been a mated pair, for their interactions weren't particularly aggressive, although I really saw nothing that looked like courtship either. They called

often, and even tolerated my moving my mic to follow them around. Needless to say, I was really thrilled to have those little birds so close.

After breakfast, it was still pretty calm and cool, so we decided to stay a while, even though we had a 185-mile drive ahead of us. I walked out the trail that starts by our campsite (#21), but this time didn't go all the way to the river. I took the trail that went on the south side of two little oxbow lakes, one or both called Buck Lake.

When I was by the more easterly of the two lakes, I heard a vireo singing, and to be on the safe side played its song back. It was a Yellow-throated. Curiously enough, there seemed to be some soft sounds of other birds on the tape, for when I played back, the tree (ID? not oak or pecan or mesquite) above me was suddenly alive with Black-crested Titmice and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, plus the vireo. No vireo song came from the tree, but I heard an extremely loud, repetitive scold, which could have been titmouse or vireo. Of course, I recorded it and played it back to find out. I had an awful time actually seeing a bird doing that scold, but finally determined it to be the Yellow-throated Vireo, too--seemed pale like a female, but I'm not sure. It occasionally also made the very soft scold I'd heard so much near the nest at Garner. No doubt there's a nest around there, too.

To top off my stop at that position, as I emerged from under the tree canopy and looked up, I saw a pair of Mississippi Kites circling just above the treetops. I'm sure they were migrants, for I don't think they breed this far south. We met Clair and Sue as we were leaving the park and when we told them about them, they said they'd seen two high in the sky as they were driving down from Junction. Could they have been the same ones?

We didn't get on the road until nearly 11:30. As we were driving around Junction doing a couple of errands, you could have shot the traditional cannonball down Main Street. Every church parking lot was full of cars, and no one was on the street. Even the gas station/convenience store had no cars in it--unheard of.

We hoped to eat a German lunch in Fredericksburg, a town settled by the Germans in the mid 19th century and thought we'd get there around 1:00 after the church crowd had left. But when we got there, I discovered that the town has become far more touristy than it was when I was there many years ago with Mother. The streets and shops swarmed with people and cars. There was no conceivable place to park our truck and trailer, so we reluctantly drove on through. We stopped for lunch around 1:30 at a cafe in connection with a gas station. It was actually a rather large cafe and quite nice. We had the Sunday special, roast pork, and it was very good.

The road continued on and passed through the south edge of Austin. There was quite a bit of traffic and some incredibly poorly coordinated traffic signals, so it was frustrating.

By the time we got here at Bastrop SP, the temperature was 91 degrees. We asked for the same site we had Dec. 19-20, 1989 (#19); it was marked on the map of the campground that I had in my files. That site was occupied, so we took the one next to it (#18), which I think is actually better. It's nice and shady. Bastrop SP and its twin Buescher SP ten miles away are in the Lost Pines of Texas, 100 miles west of the continuous piney woods.

The only other time we were in this park was 16 years ago. We often tell the tale of how cold it was that time. The temperature was bitterly cold when Jim was photographing a few common birds, but then the TV news that night said, "Tomorrow evening at this time the temperature will be 12 degrees." A "blue norther" was on its way. Jim's response was, "I don't want to be here then." So the next morning we arose very early and headed west as fast as our wheels could carry us. We were hoping to get west of the storm, but that was not to be. It was getting late in the afternoon when it started to snow, so we cut off the

freeway to Balmorhea SP. That night it got down to 9 degrees and the toilets in the rest rooms froze solid and cracked open, spilling a mess all over the floor. It was beautiful, though, for there was snow over all the bushes outside the trailer. It was still snowing a little, but we left anyway were happy to get to sunny Arizona a couple of days later to spend Christmas with Jim's mother. Every time we return to Balmorhea, Jim recounts to the office staff person the tale of being there when the toilets froze and broke--and they always remember the event, too.

I don't remember if that was the trip we spent a night at Rock Hound SP in Deming, NM, but I do remember leaving that place in a snowstorm and driving in it for an hour or so. I didn't like it! (All of the above is from memory. I didn't keep a diary on that trip. It was before I had a decent laptop computer. I did keep some handwritten diaries on earlier trips with Mother, though. Others were in the form of long letters to Fern Zimmerman, who saved them up and gave them to me when I got home.)

Jim set up his bird attractants--except the hummingbird feeders, which he accidentally left at S. Llano (have to buy more)--but so far we've had no customers. I did see a hummingbird and something else out the back window, but both flew off before I could grab my binocs. With the A/C on, I couldn't even listen for them either. After it cooled off (it's 75degrees now, 9:15), I did hear a Summer Tanager and a Blue Jay (the first of those for the trip). I heard some tiny calls in the treetops when I walked Toby just before dark. ID?

It's supposed to be just as hot and increasingly humid for the rest of the week, with thunder showers developing by the end of the week. Then a day or two of cool weather and it all starts over again. Jim says he wants to set off for Canada tomorrow.

8:45 p.m., Mon., May 1, 2006
Bastrop SP, TX

Last night was pleasantly cool and probably got down to the low 60's. The temperature topped out at 90 degrees today, about what it was yesterday, but the humidity is up. It's still 80 degrees outside, so I guess we'll have to use the A/C for part of the night again. It's supposed to be 91' tomorrow, then start to cool as the clouds for a new round of thunderstorms start to develop.

We did our weekly shopping this morning, then decided to take a drive around the campground. There's a ten-mile scenic drive between this park and Buescher SP, too. But we had hardly gone any distance at all when we decided to take a look at the other camping loop of this park (Copperas Creek)--and fell in love with it. The first loop we were in was atop a ridge, but this one was down by a creek, as the name indicates. The other one was nearly full (probably golfers, for the park has a golf course next to the campground), while this one was nearly empty. The other one had pull-through sites, while this one had back-ins. The trees are much taller here and the sites are shadier. (The others had shade, but not this much.) We selected the shadiest of all, #71, and went back to the office and switched. By the time we had moved over here, it was lunch time, and we never continued with our drive. Note: #69 was almost as nice, but not quite as shady. #70 would be 3rd choice while the rest are all about the same. All the full-hookup sites here are shady and nicer than those in the other loop, we think. The only drawback is that it is even closer to the noisy expressway, and the constant traffic roar prevents me from doing any decent recording.

Just as we were getting out of the truck when we arrived with the trailer, we heard, very close, the deep decelerating drumming that could only be a Pileated Woodpecker. It repeated it once, but we never heard it again.

Despite the heat, I sat outside in the deep shade most of the latter half of the afternoon--until time to go fix dinner at 7:00. There weren't a lot of birds--mostly Cardinals and hummingbirds (all females, but probably Ruby-throated based on the park checklist). But I did see Downy and Red-bellied Woodpecker, Great Crested Flycatcher, and heard Black-and-white and Nashville Warbler.

The best experience, however, was a Pine Warbler that actually came clear down to the ground. It twiddled around near Jim's water drip, but didn't discover it. but I was able to observe it extremely well while it was there. It's the first one I've seen since I presented the warbler workshop several years ago, so it was fun to try to recall all the field marks. I had been hearing the song in the treetops for some time, so wasn't surprised to see one. After all, we are in the pines, and this is a warbler of the southern piney woods. (I must admit, I had hastily written down Chipping Sparrow based on that song, for that is what I've been hearing up till now on the trip--and Jim had photographed that species when we were here in 1989, a very cold, puffed-up individual. But I never saw any Chippies on the ground, and the sound was emanating from the highest treetops, where that bird is unlikely to occur. So I listened more closely and realized it wasn't nearly as dry a trill as a Chippy and had already changed my list.)

Jim sat inside all afternoon and didn't see the Pine Warbler. Besides its brief visit, all we had was Cardinals and Eastern Fox Squirrels, and he doesn't need any more photos of either of them.

I was curious as to why there are pines here nearly 100 miles from others. I picked up a Visitors Guide to Bastrop in the office, and it said, "The pines here are some of the Lost Pines of Texas, about 80 miles west of the main pine forest of East Texas. The pines supposedly [Was this word used to make the Creationists happy?] got started here during the Pleistocene Period because climate was wetter then and because the soil was and is porous and acidic due to deposits laid down by the Colorado when it was a much smaller river." Texas has a Colorado River, too, and it's a major waterway, though it doesn't rival the one farther west.

We've been surprised at how few mosquitos we've encountered since we left the coast. Here we're right next to Copperas Creek, which has lots of standing pools of water. The water is copper-colored, so I suppose that's where it got its name. I don't know the source of the color, but whatever is causing it may deter mosquitos.

South Llano River SP may not have had mosquitos, but it certainly had ticks. Jim and I both were bitten several times. And they were deer ticks, too, the ones that could carry Lyme Disease. (There were plenty of White-tailed Deer around, wandering all over the campground.) We don't know how we picked them up, for we were very careful about not brushing against bushes. The locals claim their ticks can fly, and I'd be inclined to believe it. There were also a few ticks at Garner, and Toby was bitten by one, but when I pulled it off of him, it was dead and not engorged--unlike a couple I've pulled off myself. Furthermore, it didn't leave a red itchy patch on him. He's on Frontline, which obviously was working. Why don't they have a comparable product for people? It's so easy to apply it to him--once a month between the shoulder blades. It lasts through baths, etc.

8:15 p.m., Tues., May 2, 2006
Bastrop SP, TX

It was another warm and muggy night, with a low of around 72-74 degrees. The morning TV news said the dewpoint was 68 degrees. Skies were overcast.

After breakfast I took a short walk on the trail that goes along Copperas Creek. It was so warm and humid that I didn't feel like walking very far. I did see another Pine Warbler on the ground in the walk-in campground (unoccupied), and this one was gathering something fuzzy that looked like nesting material. It flew off through the shrubbery, so I couldn't figure out where its nest was. While I was sitting there, a Pileated Woodpecker came to within 50 ft of me and proceeded to forage near the bottom of a tree trunk for at least 5 minutes.

I radioed Jim to get some cotton balls and tear them up into little bits and maybe "our" Pine Warbler would come down for them. He did it and sat and watched for the bird to come, but it didn't.

After I got back around midmorning, the temperature was already up to 81 degrees, so we decided to climb into the air-conditioned truck and take the 10 mile drive to Buescher SP through the pines. The road was paved, but narrow and winding, requiring a speed of around 20 mph most of the time. We did stop once to take a look at a creek that crossed the road and startled a Red-shouldered Hawk, but that was the only bird we saw on the entire drive. Buescher SP is also in the pines, but they're smaller and have more oaks, etc., mixed in. We looked at the EW loop, and it looked all right, but not as shady or inviting as where we are. The park seemed to be totally devoid of people, so that would have been a plus. We're ready to try another area in Texas though.

We returned to Bastrop SP via the expressway, which was of course much faster. When we got back, I wandered down to the creek and surprised a waterthrush. From the song I'd been hearing all morning and not being able to identify, I think it was a Louisiana. The song fits that description pretty well. (I'm rusty on waterthrush songs) I didn't get my binocs on the bird, but its supercilium looked pretty flared at the rear to my naked eyes. That would fit Louisiana. I told Jim about it, and he took his chair down there and watched for it for several hours, with a break for lunch. I sat down there, too, and kept hearing the song for a long time in a tangle about 50 feet farther upstream, but it never returned. Finally it got too hot (forgot to check thermometer), so we came inside the trailer to cool off and take a nap.

Around 3:30, when we might have been thinking about braving the heat again, I started to hear raindrops on the roof of the trailer and rushed out to rescue my chair. We had a respectable thundershower for about an hour, which tapered off to light rain, then tree drips from wind in the tops of the tall Loblolly Pines. The rain probably prevented the high from getting to the forecast low 90's, for it stayed in the 70's after the rain stopped. It's 74 degrees now (8:45), and I could see the moon when I went outside to check it.

The only thing I accomplished in the late afternoon was a bath for Toby. He's getting better and better about baths. Although Jim had to hold his head while I brushed his legs, he didn't fight it as much as before. Maybe the groomer in Uvalde taught him how to behave, as well as giving him a first-rate haircut. He still looks darling.

Tomorrow we're going to drive 225 miles east to the heart of the piney woods. We could go to the coast and visit Bolivar Flats, High Island, and Sabine Woods, but Jim really doesn't want to, and I want to be sure we're camped in the shade on these hot days. I doubt there's a shady campground near any of those places. All the campgrounds we've stayed in, including Village Creek SP in Lumberton just north of Beaumont, have had pretty

uninteresting campsites. This is Jim's trip, and he only wants campgrounds where he can set up and shoot birds right by the trailer. We'll see how our next place works out. We've never been there.

Wed., May 3, 2006

Martin Dies, Jr., State Park, between Woodville & Jasper, TX

No entry.

8:40 p.m., Thurs., May 4, 2006

Martin Dies, Jr., State Park, TX

So little of interest happened yesterday that I didn't bother to get the computer out.

We drove another 225 miles almost due east to the heart of the piney woods of east Texas, arriving around 2:30 p.m. We stopped for lunch at a Golden Corral and were lucky enough to find a large tree that hung over the only place in the parking lot big enough for the trailer--perfect for keeping Toby cool.

I searched in vain for a campground really close to some of the interesting sites in the Big Thicket, but all are 30-40 miles away. B. A. Steinhagen "Lake"--actually a reservoir on the Neches River--had two campgrounds listed in Trailer Life and written up on the Texas Birding Trail. We debated which one to go to and finally decided to head for the state park. The other, Magnolia Ridge Park, is a Public Corps (Army Corps of Engineers) facility and has considerably fewer sites. There was no sign on the main road directing traffic to Magnolia Ridge, so that made us suspicious of the place's viability.

When we drove into Martin Dies SP, we were immediately struck by the tremendous number of downed trees in the forest and suspected one of last fall's hurricanes. Sure enough, it was Rita, which struck Beaumont 50 miles south of here and did so much damage. It turned out that only a couple of camping loops are open. The rest are still in need of repair, including all the back-ins, which we prefer. All the sites that are open are pull-throughs on either side of a central road. We were permitted to select our site, but thought from what they said that only one loop was open, so we settled for site #7, which isn't too bad, but this evening when I took a walk with Toby, I discovered that #29 is much nicer. It's in the next loop and is obviously open because there were several trailers elsewhere in it. We'll have to see if they'll let us move over there for Fri. and Sat. nights. It's not prudent to arrive at a new campground before a weekend, and last time we stayed at Caddo Lake SP, our next destination, I recall they only let us stay one night for that reason.

Just about as soon as we got our campsite set up yesterday, it started to rain, and rained off and on for almost all the rest of the afternoon. It did quit around 6:00 p.m., but seemed too wet to sit outside--and besides the sky kept looking as though it might start to drip again.

The temperature yesterday topped out in the mid 80s, but was very muggy. It had cooled down to 74' by the time we went to bed and seemed to be in the upper 60's towards morning.

This morning after breakfast we went by the office to find out if there were any other parts of the park that were open for day use. It turned out that the large area north of US 190 had some of the road open, and we were told we could walk the closed camping loop. (All the trail system except for one short nature trail is closed.) So we went over there and

spent several hours. I didn't walk the camping loop, because it was too close to US 190, but I did walk some of the other roads doing some recording. There was no wind, and I got nice recordings of Prothonotary Warbler and Acadian Flycatcher. Jim photographed the former, but he's not sure how well. The flycatcher almost got its photo taken, but it seemed as though whenever it came down low enough, it was either behind foliage or else took flight too soon for Jim to get it. He has yet to get a very good picture of that bird. He has excellent Prothonotaries, including one in our back yard.

Afterwards we decided to check out the Public Corps campground, Magnolia Ridge, but a sign at the entrance said, "Closed Until Further Notice." Obviously they haven't repaired the hurricane damage there.

By then it was noon, so we came back and ate and hoped something would come to our feeding station, but all we got was Cardinals, Tufted Titmice (occasionally) and ravenous American Crows and Eastern Gray Squirrels. I did hear lots of birds in the treetops, including a couple of warblers I should have known, but didn't recognize. The most vociferous one I recorded this morning, but it wouldn't come in for playback. I'll probably have to figure it out when I get home.

The temperature topped out at 84 degrees today, and it didn't stay that very long, for some clouds came in. Widely scattered thunderstorms were forecast, but today we didn't get one.

9:00 p.m., Fri., May 5, 2006
Martin Dies SP, TX

I just came in from a short session outside the trailer recording the frog band. They sound like an amateur (are any of them pros?) jug band, with a few members that can't keep time. People talk about a chorus, but to me these frogs sound more like a tinny band. I could detect three species, but will have to wait until I get home to figure them out. I have a few commercial recordings to compare them with.

We decided to stay here a couple more nights. We moved to site #29, which is closer to the forest and promised a wider variety of birds. Acadian Flycatchers are calling--or maybe calling for--"pizza." all day long and into the dusk period. Back on the short nature trail through the forest, I got more Prothonotary Warbler songs, as well as another warbler that wouldn't come in to playback. I'll definitely have some work to do figuring out these sounds when I get home. A Green Heron went "kek kek" a few times, but never got fully warmed up.

Probably the bird of the day was a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in our campsite. I heard it briefly in the late afternoon giving its "kuk kuk kuk kow kow kowlp kowlp" song once and knew instantly what it was. When a large bird flew into the thick tree nearby and somewhat later gave me a glimpse of its flailing long tail, I knew there was a chance Jim might get a photo. The bird perched and preened quite a while almost totally in the open for me, but Jim would not have been able to see it if he got close enough to photograph it. Then it flew briefly to a branch from which he could get two or three shots. He's not sure how good they'll be. It all happened so quickly. He still needs a really good photo of that bird. I was thrilled with the look I had, probably the closest and longest one ever.

Another muggy day--and no clouds in the afternoon to moderate it. High was about 87 degrees and no afternoon breeze, so it was pretty uncomfortable. Still we both sat outside just in case something came along. Toby stayed in the cool trailer--and behaved himself for a change. (He more than made up for it later when we were both inside with him. I caught him chewing Jim's glasses, among other things.)

8:45 p.m., Sat., May 6, 2006
Martin Dies SP, TX

A rather uneventful day. I awoke briefly around 4:45 to the tune of a distant pair of Barred Owls, the first of the trip. Then at 5:30 I began to hear distant thunder and soon heard raindrops on the roof. That made me get up for good, because I had left a small table outside last night and didn't want it to get all wet. The rainstorm was never more than moderate and the thunder and lightning were always distant. According to weather radio, there were some fairly strong thunderstorms northeast of us.

After the rain was over, the sky cleared to partly cloudy the rest of the day. It wasn't as warm as those we've been having. I didn't check the thermometer, but it seemed to be in the low 80's. This morning the radio said we should expect a 70% chance of disorganized thunder storms tonight--probably not any severe ones. Right now the sky is almost clear and there is no wind, so don't know what to expect.

I spent most of the morning editing the last two weeks of this diary, expecting to mail it off to Nancy. Then I got an email saying she'd be on vacation until around May 25, so I'll continue to add more installments.

Then after the roads dried up somewhat, I took Toby for a long walk. Of course, he wanted to drink from every puddle, as well as pick up everything in his path. I didn't let him.

This afternoon we sat outdoors. The Yellow-billed Cuckoo made several foraging forays through the shrubs behind our site on the edge of the marsh. Jim had his camera set up and ready, but it never gave him a clear view.

In the late afternoon, I spotted a pair of Great Crested Flycatchers showing great interest in a nice low cavity in a nearby tree. One even seemed to have a large insect in its bill. It perched on the edge of the cavity a long time, then entered the hole and emerged soon afterwards. Its mate was hanging around the area, and both birds were calling loudly. When I called Jim's attention to this, he immediately set up his camera about 25 feet away and focused on the cavity. Then he connected a long remote cord to the camera and sat another 25 feet farther back. He spent several hours like that, but the birds never made another trip to the hole. Also, I never heard them again--and I'd been hearing them in the treetops constantly both yesterday and today. Curious.

Jim just told me a little more information he learned from the park office man. He said that in order to open the campgrounds after Rita, they had to take out 500 truckloads of downed trees--an average of six trees per load. There's still a lot of smaller debris in many sites, especially the ones that aren't open yet. I guess they'll just move it out of the way. There are also a lot of sawed up logs lying here and there in the forest. I wonder if they'll let it decay or saw it up gradually and sell it for campfire wood.

It's curious to look at the hurricane damage where no salvage has occurred. Some patches look undisturbed, while the next acre will have tree trunks leaning on each other at crazy angles. The thing was very erratic. I suppose when a few trees fell, that subjected their neighbors to the full force of that particular gust of wind--like Tiddly Winks.

9:00 p.m., Sun., May 7, 2006
Caddo Lake State Park, north Marshall, TX

Since we only had 145 miles to drive today and didn't want to get here until after the 2:00 checkout time for weekenders, Jim decided to watch Meet the Press at 8:00 and we got on the road around 9:30. We drove east to Jasper, then essentially due north.

The day was overcast, with a temperature of 72 degrees when we first got up. As we were driving along, the outdoor thermometer seldom got out of the upper 60's. The coolness was a pleasant respite from all the heat. Of course, the forecast is for it to warm up again starting tomorrow, and I don't expect any relief from the mugginess until we head west or get an honest-to-goodness cold front, not the puny little "cool fronts" that are coming through now. Of course, the fact that there's little contrast between what's north and south of the fronts is what makes the thunder storms not very threatening, so we should be grateful, I guess.

Since it was Sunday, Jim was hoping for a repeat of the home style roast pork dinner we had a week ago on our way from South Llano to Bastrop state parks. I told him we have to get in whatever restaurant we choose before noon, or it'll be full of church people and we'll have to wait forever to be served. It seemed it would have to be San Augustine. The highway bypasses the main part of that 2500-person town, but usually there are restaurants catering to travelers on the bypass. We had almost given up when I caught sight of Mary Kay's Diner on the north edge of town. There was room in the lot (barely) for the trailer and the church people we knew would be coming, so we went for it. The place was almost empty, but they had a pot roast buffet table set up, with mashed potatoes, rice, four types of vegetables, pasta salad, peach cobbler, and beverage--all for \$8.25. We selected it and didn't even look at the regular menu. It was all very tasty--comparable to last week's pork dinner.

We entered the place at 11:40, and at 11:45 when we had just sat down with our plates, the church crowd started arriving. The preacher must have had a short sermon.

Caddo Lake SP is set in a thickly forested area, but what makes the place so beautiful is the lake itself--a shallow one dotted with Bald Cypress trees and water lilies or other floating vegetation. We stayed here once before. The birding is nothing special, with very few birds singing around our campsite. I just wanted to see that lake once more.

Around 7:00 I walked Toby down to the lake and out on the little fishing pier and just stood there and took it all in. It was so quiet and peaceful, and no one else was around. The sky was still almost totally cloudy, but the silvery look of the late sky gave everything a subdued beauty--not like the spectacular scene we had last time with blue sky and puffy white clouds.

After our noon feed, supper tonight was a can of soup and a salad, which took no time to prepare.

We're in site #30--the last one in the Armadillo Run camping loop. Jim thought it would be really quiet and secluded, but it turns out that it's almost back to the highway (SR 43 visible 100 yd away through the trees) and has some traffic noise, but I don't think it'll bother me much, and it's much less now than it was earlier.

8:30 p.m., Mon., May 8, 2006
Caddo Lake State Park, TX

Each week there seems to be just one night cool enough to sleep with a blanket, and last night was it. It even cleared off, and I could see the moon through the vent in the roof when I went to bed. It had all clouded up by morning, but was still cool most of the day. The sun came out for a few hours in the late morning and late afternoon. I'd guess the high, which occurred in late morning, was around 80 degrees. There was little or no breeze. Altogether a comfortable day. But the humidity and temperature are going up as the wind shifts once again to the southeast. That Gulf of Mexico is a mighty heat pump!

This time the next cold front is due Wednesday, so only one day is expected to be hot--near 90 degrees in nearby Shreveport per TV news.

As I was walking around this morning, I looked over the rest of the campsites and was taken by #37, but when Jim inquired about moving, they told him it was reserved. We kind of wanted to get away from the traffic, but it really isn't a serious problem. There's almost none at night.

There's a little tour boat that goes out a couple of times a day into the swampy lake. We decided to take the 10:00 tour. The sign said \$12.00 for seniors or \$50.00 total if fewer than five people sign up. We were the only ones, so I expected she would not go, but she did and didn't ask a premium. She said, "It's more fun than sitting around here" in the shop. She went first along a conventional channel with vacation homes along one bank and natural habitat on the other. Then she steered off into a marked swamp "road," where we could really get the flavor of the place. Glassy-still water broken only by the blunt prow of the boat was open where the channel is, but covered with bright green algae and dotted with water lilies (?) everywhere else. But the thing that makes the place so wonderful--and what makes it a swamp--is the Bald Cypress trees that dot the lake. It really is a beautiful place, even on a cloudy day. We saw only a few birds, and only two were species I hadn't already tallied in the park itself: a pair of Mississippi Kites and several Great Egrets.

Before the tour went out at 10:00, I wandered around the park, especially the bottomlands areas. My bird list for here after one day exceeds what I had at Martin Dies after four. New to the trip were Scarlet Tanager (one, most are Summer [turned out to be the only one on the entire trip]), Ovenbird (heard only), and Wood Thrush. The latter I didn't hear yesterday at all, possibly because it was so cold, but they were singing both morning and evening today, and occasionally the rest of the time. In fact, the magnificent notes of the Wood Thrush were the last sounds I heard before the night sounds started. For a while I heard a sound that might have been the Texas Toad, for it sounded a little like "sheep bleating," which is the way the sound was described in the visitors center. It's stopped now, or I'd be out recording it.

After the boat trip, which lasted about an hour and a quarter, we went up to the office, which has a nice little visitors center. I knew Caddo Lake had some connection with the "Great Log Raft" of the late 1700's and early 1800's, but was very fuzzy about the actual story. The visitors center cleared it up.

When Americans first explored this area in the 1770's, they found a vast swamp created by a tremendous log jam in the Red River. It apparently started when a few too many logs clogged the waterway, which in turn blocked the movement of others, until the entire thing was 100 miles long and 25 feet high in places--and all filled in with silt and mud. Men could ride their horses across it in places. The log jam backed up the water into all the tributaries in the area. They overflowed their banks and then silted in forming one vast convoluted lake with many channels and islands, now called Caddo Lake for the Indians in the area.

Indian legend disagrees with the above and has it that the river became dammed up in a great earthquake, but the only one known to have affected this area was the New Madrid quake in the early 1800s (I don't recall the exact date), so scientists discount that story.

When Americans began to travel and settle in this area, they tried to break up the raft, using saws, dynamite, and even a specially built log-smashing steamboat, but it wasn't until 1873, when the Army Corps of Engineers decided to tackle the thing, that the log jam was blasted out and navigation on the Red River was possible. Over the course of the

years, the water level in Caddo Lake decreased dramatically, ruining a very special ecosystem in the process.

Curiously enough it was the oil industry that saved Caddo Lake. When the water level was high, they could navigate on the lake and haul out oil from their wells at the far upstream end. Without the log jam, they couldn't, so they persuaded the Corps of Engineers to construct a new dam on the Red River. This was done in 1914.

The effect of all this on the Bald Cypress trees is interesting. When they were left high and dry, many of the old ones died, but new ones germinated on the newly exposed lake bottom. (Cypress trees can't germinate under standing water, but once established do nicely there. Thus many of the trees today germinated when the water was at its lowest--between 1909 and 1914, when the new dam was completed.) But there are also some as old as 350 years. I'm not aware that we saw any of those.

Today Caddo Lake is a very popular recreation area, with lots of hunting and fishing. These provide jobs for the local residents, so they are very supportive of maintaining the ecosystem. The main problem today is a couple of invasive plants, water hyacinth and hydrilla. It's felt that raising and lowering the water level to simulate normal seasonal rising and falling should keep these under control.

Just heard, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-awwl?" Too far away to record, but it's fun to hear the Barred Owl's calls resonate through the forest. Our campsite is shaded by extremely tall pines and deciduous trees with only a little understory. I sat outside all afternoon in my reclining chair and spent a good bit of the time just looking up at the beautiful forest. Birds were hard to see, but my ears told me what was there. The Red-eyed Vireo was most vociferous.

Everything is quiet now (9:20) except for a few crickets. Even the traffic on the highway has essentially stopped. This is really a beautiful park. Even without taking the boat ride, the view from the fishing pier has to be one of the most beautiful scenes in Texas.

8:45 p.m., Tues., May 9, 2006

Beard's Bluff Campground (Corps of Engineers), Millwood Lake, AR

We finally said good-bye to Texas after about six weeks. We drove north and crossed into Arkansas at Texarkana, then drove north about 18 miles and east 15 to Millwood Lake, actually a large reservoir. There are two campgrounds here, a state park and the Corps of Engineers one we're in. The ABA birdfinding guide to Arkansas recommended this area for birding more than it did the state park. Our campground is down a short, fairly steep road at the base of Beard's Bluff and right beside the lake. It's quite small and is 3/4 full, but we found an acceptable, but not wonderful, site (#18). Most people prefer the waterfront sites, but we don't. We'd rather be back in the bushes in the shade.

What brought us here is the small overlook park at the top of the bluff. It's supposed to be a great place to sit at a picnic table and watch warblers migrate by in the tops of trees whose roots are well down the bluff. The lake itself diverts them around it, apparently. I went up there this afternoon and saw a few birds, mainly Orchard and Baltimore Orioles, but nothing special. I'm hoping that the cold front that's going to come through tonight or tomorrow morning will improve things.

I also hope the cold front will improve the weather. It couldn't have been muggier than it was today. The temperature here was in the upper 80s and went higher whenever the sun came out, which luckily wasn't very often. We've had the A/C on ever since we got

here, and where it blows on one window, moisture is condensed on the outside so we can barely see out.

Despite the unpleasant conditions, I sat outside in the late afternoon after sun got low enough that there was shade beside the trailer. The trailer itself has full afternoon shade beneath some large trees. Interesting site birds included a Painted Bunting, a Cattle Egret (flew in about 50 ft away to a largish grassy area behind the trailer, full alternate with a burnt orange bill), and an *Empidonax* flycatcher, which I'm pretty sure is a Willow or an Alder. The latter was foraging in a narrow weedy ditch beside the trailer and was frequently so low that I couldn't see it. When I looked high up in the treetops once, I counted at least six Baltimore Orioles all in one small canopy. Jim has put a couple of orange halves out, but so far they haven't found them.

We've signed up for a couple of nights (\$6.50 a night with our Golden Age Pass, includes EW). I can't wait for the weather to improve so I'll feel like exploring the woodlands.

8:30 p.m., Wed., May 10, 2006 **Beard's Bluff Campground, AR**

I'm afraid the weather will have to be the main subject of the past 24 hours. From about 10:00 until 1:00 last night line after line of severe thunderstorms came through. I had weather radio on all the time, and all featured 60 mph winds and penny-sized hail with the possibility of a tornado. Every time an announcement of a new storm came on, it always started out with the county, which could be here in Arkansas or nearby in Oklahoma or Texas, so I had three maps open all the time. Two of the storms passed by as close as ten miles--one to the south and the other to the north. We had strong rain and wind, but nothing severe. For one of them I grabbed Toby and ran for the nearby restroom to wait it out, but I couldn't convince Jim to go, too. He always stays in bed and tries to sleep through these things. This noon we heard a loud siren going for five minutes, apparently a test. I suspect that would have sounded had there really been a tornado, but I didn't know about it last night.

The storms all seemed to be southeast of here after 1:00, so I finally went to bed and slept till 6:30, late for me. I lay there in bed for another half-hour birding by ear. I love listening to the dawn chorus and often add birds to my list then. Around 7:00 it started to rain lightly and continued for several hours. Around 9:00 it got really dark, then rained and blew hard for about 15 minutes, with accompanying electrical effects. There was so much rain for a while that it was running in sheets down the trailer windows on both sides. The center of this storm also was about 10 miles away, and it, too, was a severe one. No tornados hit the ground in the listening area of the Shreveport TV station we watched, but the same weather front did create damaging tornados north of Dallas, and two people were killed. These things always shake me up--and the loud "beep" of weather radio when a new alert comes on doesn't help. You never know until you listen to it whether the warning is going to be close or far away.

Finally around 10:00 a.m. the sky suddenly cleared to glorious blue. It was still pretty humid, but not too hot, and there was no wind. So we decided to drive up to the top of Beard's Bluff and see if any new birds had come in overnight. The traffic on the highway wasn't very heavy, so I was able to get some nice recordings: Baltimore Oriole, Hooded Warbler, and Summer Tanager were especially nice. I played back all three to be 100% sure of my ID. The Summer Tanager was one of those patchy red and yellow ones that

I've been dying to have Jim photograph. And this bird was a performer! He came in and perched on a low bare twiggy branch of a tree to try to find the rival.

I immediately called Jim over on the radio, then played it back again. The bird did a lot of fly-bys, sometimes barely missing my head. Then he sort of quit responding. I tried lowering the volume of the playback, fearing I was intimidating him. It worked like a charm. He came in and perched again on one of those twiggy branches and sang and looked around for the rival. Jim blazed away, flash and all, and got quite a few nice shots. He's been in a funk for the past several days because no birds would pose for him. This cheered him up.

After lunch, we both took nice naps to make up for last night's excitement. While I was sitting outside afterwards, the wind started getting up--harder and harder. The post-frontal dry air had finally arrived. By 6:00, when I took Toby for a walk, it was really blowing a gale down by the water, but was not too bad in our site. Toby found the wind exhilarating and was even more acrobatic than usual. Every leaf had to be pursued, and he jumped around and dashed here and there in between. It really makes me laugh out loud to see his antics. And he always gets a smile from other campers. When we were out near the water, the wind must have been at least 35 mph, and that was a little too much for Toby. Something about the wind blowing his rear end bothers him, so he always sits down facing the wind. He really looked funny with his ears, and even the poodle-puff on the top of his head, blown back. A little pep talk from me, and we were on our way again, though. We were soon out of the strong wind and in the bluff-side forest, where the wind was only evident by the way the treetops 50-100 ft above us were whipping and swaying. We walked up one road to the top of the bluff, then down the other. Tomorrow morning, if the wind is calm, I want to walk that area with my tape recorder. One of those roads goes along the side of a hill, so I can be on a level with the middle story of the forest. The wind is already much calmer than it was, now that the sun has gone down, but there's still some.

I was surprised to hear the "cuh-cah" of Fish Crows, as well as the typical high-pitched "caw caw" of American Crows, but my ID was confirmed by the bird list for the area. Incidentally all the American Crows we've been hearing in Texas and here have much higher caws than those in the west.

Thurs., May 11, 2006

Queen Wilhelmina State Park, north Mena, AR

No entry.

9:00 p.m., Fri., May 12, 2006

Talimena State Park, north Talihina, OK

I didn't write up my diary last evening because we didn't have an electrical hookup.

Yesterday and today have been glorious clear, dry days with highs in the 70's (maybe lower 80's this afternoon).

We stayed in Beard's Bluff until late morning. I walked Toby up the hill simply because it was such a delightful, cool morning. The wind was pretty brisk most places, but one spot (right where you park to register) was sheltered from the wind and yielded several warblers that were new for the trip: Tennessee, Hooded, Black-throated Green, Chestnut-sided, and American Redstart. Also present were Yellow, Yellow-throated, Pine, and Common Yellowthroat. To top it off, a Bald Eagle flew overhead. Jim stood in front of the birdiest area for an hour or two, but the birds were just flitting around too rapidly and he got

no shots. A few were singing, and I used playback to find out what a couple of them were, but they only would show themselves briefly. It was really interesting how those birds concentrated themselves where there was least wind. I wandered around the entire area to see if any were elsewhere and found almost nothing.

While I was standing next to the entry road, a friendly, semi-toothless, sixtyish guy driving a noisy, bright red, diesel pickup truck chugged up the hill out of the campground and stopped to see how I was doing. He said something to me, but I just couldn't understand him over the noisy truck engine. Finally he turned it off and drawled, "Y'all kitch'n innythang?" I guess he thought my recording gear, which had the mic sheathed at that time, was for fishing, though how I would catch one in that dry grassy roadside ditch is beyond me. Of course, I explained what I was doing.

We got on the road around 10:30 and drove 125 miles. Our stop for lunch was not as good as the last two, but you can't win them all. Our destination was Queen Wilhelmina State Park, which is near the top of the second highest mountain in Arkansas (both about 2700 ft). We took the Talimena Scenic Byway (SR 88 in AR, SR 1 in OK) from Mena. There's a visitors center at each end of this 54-mile road. I stopped at the first one and picked up a map of the drive. It was only 13 miles to the state park. The road quickly ascended, then followed along a gently rounded ridgetop to the park. The park is located on the site of an old resort of the 19th century, which was named for the queen of Holland, who never came there, but was enormously popular all the same. There have been two other hotels on the site since and today the state park runs one. It's kind of a resort-type place with all sorts of entertainment in the summertime (volleyball courts, miniature golf, miniature railroad all around the grounds, etc.)

The campground was an extreme disappointment. The sites were all lined up as close together as they could cram them. To make them level, they'd had to bring in a lot of fill, so behind each site it was quite a drop down to the narrow strip of grass between the line of sites and the forest. We drove to the end of the line, hoping the last site would be better. We searched for the electrical box, because the literature hadn't mentioned that a few sites lacked them. These sites were a bit farther apart and the last one had forest on one side as well as the back, so we took it. We had been planning to stay there all weekend, but not after we saw the place!

I heard practically no birds yesterday afternoon, probably because of the brisk wind. So I was surprised to wake up and hear several out the bedroom window. One of them really had me puzzled. It sometimes gave a two-parted song, sometimes three-parted with a final group of notes. I was sure it was a warbler of some type. When I finally got it to show itself with playback, I discovered it looked like a Lazuli Bunting, but with a deeper blue head than I expected. It definitely had strong wingbars, light blue back and wings, and light bill. I didn't see its front. Upon reflection, I realized it was singing an Indigo-like song, but not the multitudinous phrases they usually did. Its song was too slow for a Lazuli, but I have heard Lazulis give two- and three-parted songs. (These are often confused with MacGillivray's Warbler songs in the west.) I concluded I was dealing with a hybrid. How I wished I could have seen him better. The only other interesting bird there was a Hooded Warbler--and we also saw a Woodchuck yesterday when we were driving back and forth between the campsites and the lodge, where we had to register.

Since the campground was so awful, I had to scramble to try to figure out where we could go and find a site for the weekend. I considered two places, but finally settled on Talimena State Park. The other one was more of a resort-type place beside a lake. Talimena State Park doesn't take reservations, while the other one does. Jim liked the idea

because he thought he might be able to attract birds with his water drip if there was no lake to distract them. (So far he hasn't.)

We had found the drive to Q. Wilhelmina a bit boring yesterday--just a ridgetop road through fairly small trees with occasional viewpoints of the valleys on the north and the south. But when I found there were actually a few birds in those trees, we decided it might be fun to drive the rest of the Talimena Scenic Byway. This east-west oriented road soon crossed the border into Oklahoma. At about the halfway point, it descends almost to the valley, where a major road crosses. If we had it to do over, we'd get off there. The western half of the road went up and down and up and down hill after hill. Jim had to use low gear on a lot of the ascents and descents. It wasn't fun to drive. One place, the Kerr Nature Center near where the highway crosses, was in a deeply forested area. It isn't a nature center as I think of one--with a building and staff. Instead, it just had a picnic shelter with a few display signs and then a lot of nature trails. If we had had more time, it might have been fun to walk some of those trails, but we wanted to get situated for the weekend. Now that we're situated, I definitely don't want to drive back there on that road.

Talimena State Park is just one mile south of the east end of the Scenic Byway. It has only ten sites, all EW, and also has a shower building, which Jim says is fine. We needn't have worried about getting a site. All were vacant when we got here--and still are. We have the place to ourselves. In the late afternoon a group of about 30 people came in and had a sedate picnic (someone's retirement), but they went home some time ago.

The park is typical turf and trees, but surrounded by fairly tall forest. I sat outside all afternoon. It was pretty cool in the open, so I moved to the shelter of the trailer when the sun got low enough to give me shade there. In that still air, I was annoyed by termites landing on me and crawling around. Finally I discovered their source when Jim called my attention to a stump in the edge of the forest that had huge holes gouged out of it. He was sure they had been done by a Pileated Woodpecker. When I glassed the stump, I discovered termites pouring out of it. The sun was shining directly on it and heat often makes them fly.

Pretty soon an Eastern Phoebe perched atop the stump, which was only about three feet high and sawed off at the top, and made six-inch forays to catch those termites. Unfortunately by the time Jim decided it would make an interesting photo subject (he already has good pictures of that bird), the bird was apparently stuffed full of termites and had left and didn't come back. However, there was also a little lizard atop the stump catching them. Jim photographed that, and I'll have to ID it from the slides. I didn't approach the area for fear of scaring the subject(s) away.

While we were eating dinner, I heard a distant sound and said, "I think I just heard a Pileated." A minute or so later, one flew past window. So that species is definitely around. Wonder if it'll work on the stump tomorrow.

Right after dark, the woods behind the trailer were reverberating with Chuck-will's-widows--more than I've ever heard all at the same time. I recorded them out the back window of the trailer, and a couple were very close, others farther away. Then after about ten minutes, they all stopped as suddenly as they started, and I haven't heard them since.

We went into Talihina, a small town 7 miles south of the campground, to buy gas and groceries. (We almost ran out of gas--maybe 1_ gallons to spare, enough to go 15 miles under good conditions--for we hadn't planned to drive that entire drive. We thought we'd just go back to Mena after the weekend was over. Also that up-and-down drive must have really guzzled the gasoline.) While Jim was pumping gas, right along the row of sundry businesses I saw an Eastern Bluebird atop a rusty pipe next to the highway,

foraging on a minuscule patch of weeds. That really surprised me. (They're in our campground, too, but that's more what I'd expect.)

Sat., May 13, 2006

Talimena State Park, OK

No entry.

8:30 p.m., Sun., May 14, 2006

Honey Creek, State Park, Grove, OK

So little happened yesterday that I didn't bother to get the computer out. We stayed in the Talimena SP campground. Jim wandered around a while in the morning to see if he could find anything interesting to photograph. There was an Eastern Phoebe nest under the eaves of a picnic shelter nearby, but it was back in a little groove right under the roof and barely visible. So he gave up and went inside the trailer.

I spent the morning trying get things organized. I put away all the brochures I'd been accumulating for the past several weeks, then planned our route for the next several stops--until we get to the Rockies of Colorado. I don't have any bird-finding guides to Oklahoma and Kansas. (I know I have a Kansas one, but must have left it at home.) So I just picked a few places that sounded interesting. We'll see what develops.

The rest of the day I spent outside. It was a little warm (we had the A/C on in the trailer because of its sunny site), but pleasant in the shade. I think it topped out in the mid 80's, but the wind was from the northwest and dry. I finished embroidering my Sharp-tailed Grouse square (came out very well, if I do say so) and picked out threads for a new one--an Indigo Bunting, which should be easy, for a change. Coincidentally, we received an email from Clair and Sue that they had spent yesterday morning in a blind at Valentine NWR, NE, where we had our wonderful experience with Sharp-tailed Grouse a year ago. I don't know if it was the same blind, though. That one was quite a hike, especially in the dark. (See last year's diary for an account of that adventure.)

Last night a dry front came through and today was much cooler, with a high in the upper 60's. It started out mostly sunny, but gradually became totally cloudy. According to the TV news we're on the edge of a huge low centered much farther northeast and these clouds are not going to drop any moisture. We drove 185 miles north through the beautiful eastern Oklahoma countryside. The roads were a bit winding and up-and-down, but we had anticipated that. One section along the Illinois River was especially scenic, but all of it was beautiful. We had been in a mixed oak/pine forest at Talimena, but we got out of the conifers rather quickly and the trees were mostly oaks. It was oak savannah in the valleys and solid oaks whenever we ascended into the hills. I don't know if it was that way originally or if people had removed a lot of trees to create pasture where the ground was more or less level. There were lots of cows and a few goats.

We had lunch around 11:00 at a blah Chinese buffet (food very bland) in Tahlequah. Today is Mother's Day, so we made a point of stopping early.

We got here in Honey Creek State Park around 1:30. The park is right on the edge of the town of Grove 0.8 miles off the highway. It's on the end of a peninsula that juts out into the Grand Lake O' the Cherokees. The RV campground is atop a ridge, but the park has day-use and/or tent sites down by the water. Very few people are here, so the fact that

the sites are pretty close together doesn't bother us. We're in a beautiful stand of oaks with turf underneath (no shrubs.)

The first bird that caught my eye was an American Robin, the first one we've see in a long time. We must be finally back "up north." Certainly the weather is in accord with that, but I've been mighty hot in Oklahoma at this time of year and even earlier. Then we discovered that there were quite a few Red-headed Woodpeckers flying around, and Jim thinks he knows where one nest is--too high to photograph, unfortunately. However, the birds seem pretty tame and land on the trees and posts right outside our window frequently.

Jim put some birdseed on his log on the picnic table next to the window and soon had Tufted Titmice and Carolina Chickadees eating from it. But then five Eastern Gray Squirrels discovered the food and have monopolized the thing ever since! They're totally unchaseable, too. Before the squirrels became such an item, we also had Cardinals and Blue Jays. The latter are usually pretty wary and stay in the treetops, so it was fun to see one up close. Even though these are all common species, we haven't had them this close in a long time and are enjoying them.

An added drawback to the squirrels is that Toby insists on barking at them. I suppose we ought to let him out to chase them away, but don't know how far he'd go. He's still not totally trustworthy about coming when called, although he's getting better. (He really wants to stay with us.)

I forgot to mention it the day it happened, but a few days ago, we got out of the truck and were talking to some people. The truck windows were wide open, and Toby jumped out of one to the ground! He ran up to us and was easy to scoop up, but that was quite a jump and one I don't want him to repeat. It's just one more thing we have to be careful about. Raising Toby takes constant vigilance.

8:40 p.m., Mon., May 15, 2006
Honey Creek State Park, Grove, OK

This morning we went to Har-Ber Village, which is only a short drive from here. This place is a collection of around 100 old buildings of various sizes--some small cabins, others rather long sheds used for displays. Some of the buildings are outfitted as they might have looked in the early days of Oklahoma--say from the 1870s to the 1920s. Others had a mind-boggling array of antique items of every possible description--glassware in one bldg., farm tools in another, buggies, butter churns, wedding dresses, toys, clocks, and on and on. All items are behind glass and apparently hermetically sealed, for no dust was visible on anything--unusual for places like this. There must be a fortune in antiques in this place.

The setting is in a very shady woodland on the steep slopes of the Grand Lake O' the Cherokees and is extremely attractive and fun to walk around in. All the trees are identified, and there are lots of birds to look at. We visited here once before--June 10, 1988. Jim got his first photos of Tufted Titmouse then. There are bird feeders several places on the grounds.

It was established in 1968 by Harvey and Bernice Jones (Har-Ber, get it?). He owned a trucking company and apparently made himself rich in the business. What a wonderful way to spend one's fortune. Both he and his wife are dead now, but their legacy remains for all to enjoy. He died in 1989 and she in 2003.

I was disappointed that the place didn't have a store. I was hoping to buy some books to read. I've read almost all the ones I brought from home and only bought one so far on the trip--and read that. I think I'll have to make a special effort to find a book store soon. I can't embroider all the time.

We spent around three hours wandering around the place, then decided to have lunch in a restaurant. We tried an attractive-looking Mexican place, but finally walked out. We were told to wait a couple of minutes standing inside the door while they cleared a table. Ten minutes later we were seated. When we looked around, we discovered all but one table had only beverages and no food. We decided we didn't want to wait forever, so tried a local coffee shop with lots of cars out front--so-so.

This afternoon Jim tried sitting in his chair to see if the Red-headed Woodpecker would come in while he was there, but it wouldn't. Finally he set up his blind late in the day. There has been a slight threat of rain all day, so he hadn't set it up earlier. We've decided to spend another day here in hopes he can get really good photos of that bird. The ones he got last year in Pierre, SD, were somewhat flawed.

We've added a few more species coming to our food: White-breasted Nuthatch, Chipping Sparrow, Swainson's Thrush. The latter likes the Magic Meal in the same tree that the woodpecker does. Jim did get a photo or two of them.

8:00 p.m., Tues., May 16, 2006
Honey Creek State Park, OK

Jim was successful in getting lots of good photos of the Red-headed Woodpeckers at the Magic Meal he put in an oak tree. He sort of hoped to get some at the water, but they weren't interested in it. The temperature the last couple of days has been very cool--high in the 60's, low in the upper 40's--so the birds haven't used it much.

I took a walk down to the lake and around and back up another road, hoping to get recordings of the Fish Crows that have been there when I've taken Toby on that walk the last couple of days. This time there were no crows there. Besides, there was loud equipment of some sort running constantly across the inlet in the lake, so the recording wouldn't have been very good anyway. (I do have recordings of that bird from other trips.)

Most of the rest of the day I spent working on my chapter in the ABA Bird-finding Guide to Southern California. It's been too cool to sit outside. I think I just about have it licked. I emailed a couple of people for some final data. When I get that in place, I can send it off and forget about it.

Wed., May 17, 2006
Riverside West Campground, John Redmond Reservoir, north Burlington, KS

No entry.

8:30 p.m., Thurs., May 18, 2006
Riverside West Campground, John Redmond Reservoir, north Burlington, KS

Yesterday we merely drove from Grove, OK, to Burlington, KS. I took Toby for a walk before we left, so we didn't get a very early start. It wasn't a long drive (150 miles), and we got here around 3:00 p.m.

I didn't know anything about the place, except the Flint Hills NWR is in the upstream portion of the reservoir. I've read about the Flint Hills as being a nice grassland area, with much of it restorable. I thought maybe this refuge might have some of the grassland birds in its uplands, especially Greater Prairie-Chicken. However, the campgrounds (3) are all clustered around the dam, an Army Corps of Engineers area, although it's hard to tell that from the Trailer Life Guide. It gives different directions for getting to each of them. Stupid!

I tried to get information about the area in the visitors center in Burlington, just south of here, but it was closed with no sign on the door stating when it might open. I was able to get information at the headquarters of the dam, though. The ranger at the desk gave me a map of the area, information about the NWR (mainly a refuge for waterfowl), and told me how to get to its headquarters. When I told him we were looking for birds, he recommended the campground on the west side of the dam.

We've not left it since we arrived. It's a gem of a place and really worth a side trip for any birder passing through Kansas. It's heavily wooded and sort of an island of woodland in a sea of prairie. It's surrounded on one side by the spillway from the dam, on another by the old channel of the Neosho River, and on the third by the embankment next to the dam with the reservoir on the other side. As soon as we drove in, birds scattered in front of us. The sites are beautifully shady (ours is totally), and many of them back into their own private alcove in the forest with the Neosho River at the rear. We looked at them, but some of them weren't level and the two we might have liked were reserved for the weekend. We didn't want to have to move if we decided to stay that long. And it looks like we'll at least stay Friday night.

The birds in our site yesterday afternoon didn't seem too exciting or different from what we've been seeing, and we didn't have the energy to explore anywhere else. In fact, it seemed so little had happened yesterday that I didn't even write up my diary.

But as it was getting almost dark, I was sitting in the trailer with the windows open and hearing all sorts of birds: Swainson's Thrush, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, plus several others I'd detected earlier. Then after it was totally dark, I heard a low squawky sound that resembled the "You-all" portion of the Barred Owl's repertoire. That sound had stopped by the time I got my tape recorder on, and the bird(s) had moved farther away, but it did get a few chattering, squawky sounds, I think.

This morning I decided to walk around the campground with my tape recorder before we drove over to check out the NWR. It was almost noon by the time I got back, so we never went there. I wandered through the wooded campground and also out in the open, where there are some areas with stands of native grasses, dotted with a few trees.

The waterways describe above added other habitats. The only thing missing was forage for shorebirds. The bare shoreline under the spillway was very rocky--probably flint. The only shorebirds I have on my list are Killdeer and Spotted Sandpiper, the latter a pair in a highly wooded, intermittently dry creekbed right behind the trailer.

My bird list stands at 51 species, all within walking distance of the trailer. Not all are identified, for I have recordings of a couple of warblers(?) I'll have to figure out later. The songs are familiar, but I seem to have trouble keeping all the songs straight, when I don't hear them very often. Most of the warblers are Yellow, but I also have Tennessee, Nashville, Northern Waterthrush, and American Redstart, plus a probable Orange-crowned (heard poorly). I saw the first Warbling Vireo and "Yellow-shafted" Flicker of the trip, and also the first Black-capped Chickadee. We crossed the dividing line between it and the Carolina yesterday. Natl. Geog. shows no chickadees here, but Kaufman's maps (in his field guide) do show Black-capped in this location. (I really like Kaufman's range maps and have often found them more accurate than those in NG or Sibley.)

Over the waterways I added Black Tern, Franklin's Gull, Double-crested Cormorant, Wood Duck, Canada Goose. The grasslands contributed Eastern Meadowlark and even a lingering Clay-colored Sparrow.

After walking around all morning, I was happy to sit outside embroidering my Indigo Bunting this afternoon--and trying unsuccessfully to see the warblers making the sounds I

was unable to identify. The trees are so tall and the understory so dark that it's hard to get anything but silhouettes at best.

The highlight of Jim's day--and also one of mine--was not birds, but a mammal. There are several Red Foxes in the campground, and one of their burrows is easy to see from the trailer window. Jim staked out it and a couple of others and says he got some very good photos this morning. I thoroughly enjoyed watching one behaving in an unwary fashion from the trailer window. Another sat a long time and watched me while I was sitting outside. Of course, I was also watching it--through my binoculars. Then we both got tired of the endeavor, and I returned to my embroidery and the fox trotted off.

Tomorrow we'll go to the NWR and drive the tour road and inquire about tall-grass prairie birds in the area. I also want to drive through the other two campgrounds, which are at the other end of the dam--one by the reservoir and the other on the downstream side of it--opposite the one we're in [we never made it to those campgrounds, but from the road, they looked more open than ours]. I'll no doubt add more species to the tally. (I've been recording my bird lists for each place in a database and will convert them to a form that Nancy can add to this diary when I get home.)

9:00 p.m., Fri., May 19, 2006

Riverside West Campground, John Raymond Reservoir, KS

A scorcher snuck up on us today. I hadn't been listening to weather radio, thinking it was going to be in the mid 80's all week. Today the high was 94' in the closest town and tied the record in Topeka with 96'. A dry cool front is supposed to come through tonight, and tomorrow is supposed to be back in the mid 80's, where it's been for several days.

We went to the Flint Hills NWR today, stopping first at the headquarters in the pretty little town of Hartford--population couldn't be more than a few hundred and it's on no main roads. The NWR doesn't have a designated tour road--too few visitors, I suppose. However, the receptionist gave us a few suggestions. Then she told us to be sure to check out the bakery and hardware store downtown. Finally she presented us each with four little packets of cranberries to munch on the road.

We checked out a nature trail with a boardwalk, which turned out to be a disappointment. The trail was only about 100 yards long and the boardwalk was simply a pier, maybe 25 yards long. I did see a flock of White-faced Ibis from the pier, but they were pretty far away. They were firsts for the trip.

Then we decided to take the Indian Hill drive, which was her only suggested driving loop. The road went through some beautiful country--a mix of trees, grasslands, some private farms and pastureland, wooded swamps (heard Ovenbird), marshes, ponds, etc. Not too many water birds. I think the place is mostly for wintering or migrating waterfowl. When we had gotten about 2/3 of the way around the loop, I looked ahead and saw water clear across the road--and it looked deep! I then realized that we'd been seeing muddy tire tracks for the last 100 yd or so where vehicles had backed up and turned around. We figured we'd better do likewise.

On our way back we caught sight of a farmhouse with lots of birdfeeders in the front yard. They were sort of behind a veil of trees, which was why we hadn't seen them before. I backed up the car so we could see them better. In no time, out came the man of the house yelling and waving at us. I thought at first he was chasing us away until I figured out what he was saying: "Drive on in and have a cup of coffee!" So we did. He had a multitude of birdseed feeders, syrup feeders, Purple Martin houses, etc., all over the yard. All were well patronized. I didn't see anything especially novel, but did add a few new birds

to my already long list for this area. It's turning out to be a much longer list than others I've been keeping recently. It stands at at least 80 species, with a few pending identification of sounds from my tape. Not only does this area have a variety of species, but the individuals are much more numerous than they've been almost anywhere on the trip. It seems as though every tree and shrub is full of little flits that have to be examined, even though they may turn out to be just another Yellow Warbler, Red-eyed Vireo, Carolina Wren, or . . .

We sat in the shade of Larry Truax's front yard (wife was in town doing the weekly grocery shopping) for the better part of an hour watching the birds and conversing. He is a retired truck driver--retired only a year ago. He isn't particularly old, but he has a serious hand tremor, which might have caused the early retirement. He owns 160 acres, but has hired others to farm it for a long time. After a while we had exhausted the subject of his birds and bird feeders. (He doesn't know the names of a lot of them, and calls most of the others by wrong ones.) Then he brought up the subject of indian arrowheads, which he has been collecting all his life. He brought out a bunch and insisted on presenting Jim with several of them. He also had a display of some of his choicest ones in a case in his house. He told us an amazing amount of information about them--how the indians made them, what each was used for, etc. Since we know nothing about that subject, we can't assess its accuracy.

We finally tore ourselves away and went back to Hartford. We ate lunch in the little cafe, which is right beside the bakery on the main street, which is only a block long. Excellent hamburgers with onion rings that had a very light, tempura-like batter--the best I've ever had.

After lunch I went into the hardware store, which reminded me of the one in Loyalton, Sierra Co., CA. Some of my readers may have been in that establishment when we had our field trips up there. This one was in an ancient building that had all the windows covered up. We would have thought the place was defunct had we not been told not to miss it. The door stuck a little, but a sign on it said to just push hard, so I did. Inside it looked like a long narrow room about 20 ft wide and maybe 60 feet long. An assortment of counters ran down the center, too. All were very tall and absolutely jammed full with all sorts of merchandise.

I voice from the back called out asking if she could help me. I'd been trying to find a tea kettle. The paint is chipping off ours, and it looks tacky. That's when I discovered that there was more to the place. The voice belonged to a tiny, elderly lady. She walked into a side room and halfway across and pulled the chain to turn on the ceiling light. Then she walked into the next room and did the same. Because of all the display counters, I had to walk into the 2nd room and back into the first one by a different route--and there were the tea kettles. She had some small ones like what I had rejected at Wal-Mart, but she also had a larger version, too. It was much nicer than the ones I usually find, but I bought it. I'll use it at home for my classes and put the one I have there in the trailer. As I was paying for it, I happened to mention that we were from California and just spending the day birding the refuge. She then reached up on the shelf and pulled down a ball-point pen and gave it to me. When I looked at it later, it had a smiley face with a crown and said, "Get the royal treatment from Bill's Hardware and Electric." I wonder if Bill was her husband and is no longer alive. I also wonder what will become of the business when she can no longer run it. She certainly seems competent now, though. I'll bet people come there from miles around to get things not available anywhere else.

My final stop in Hartford was the bakery. The French proprietress was not in (gone to a final-day-of-school event for her child), and a friend was substituting. I'd have liked to meet the owner. Anyway I bought a loaf of oatmeal bread and a couple of pastries. I'll eat

mine when I get through writing this up. Jim's was chocolate, and he said it didn't have enough chocolate, but I doubt that's possible.

We then went back to the NWR headquarters. I wanted to tell the receptionist about the road being out so she wouldn't send anyone else that way. We also hoped to meet the biologist/birder and get some information about Greater Prairie-Chickens. We had been told in the morning that he had them on his own personal property and might be able to help us see them. We didn't broach the subject of photography. Unfortunately he was out on a wildlife survey and wasn't back even when stopped back at 1:00, so we'll have go go chicken-less once again. Jim's become pretty negative about that bird after several unsuccessful attempts last year.

We asked about a road for our return trip to the campground. One road that went directly across the refuge looked shorter than the way we came. But after our experience with the washout, we thought we'd better find out if it was open. One of the guys in the office said he'd just driven it and it was fine. It turned out to be a first-rate gravel road that could be driven almost as fast as a paved road had we wanted to. It also turned out that its route was a little different from either of the two maps (NWR and Corps of Engineers) showed--and the two maps didn't agree with each other. Furthermore, it became paved halfway across, which neither indicated.

The best part of it was one pond that was absolutely full of shorebirds. Despite the heat and the heat shimmer, I had to get my scope out and see what I could identify, for these were the first shorebirds since we left Goose Island in Texas, and there hadn't been very many there. I identified Wilson's Phalarope, Black-bellied Plover, Pectoral Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, dowitcher which had to be Long-billed according to the birdlist (Short-billed accidental), and possibly Dunlin (pretty far away). I wished we had known about that road and taken it on our way over. It was easy to find on the way back, for it's the only road that goes east out of Hartford. Then we just followed the indicated curve signs until we ended up on US 75, then south to the road to the dam where our campground is.

We got back around 2:00 and released poor Toby from his six-hour confinement in his bed (can't be trusted loose in the trailer). Since our campsite is fully shaded, the trailer wasn't too hot, but we quickly turned on the A/C--and it's still on now (10:00) . . . I just went out and checked the thermometer. It's gone down to 75', so I'll turn it off when I go to bed.

I took Toby for a walk after dinner when the temp. was around 82'. We got him a no-pull harness at Wal-Mart in Grove. I'd read about them in a dog handbook I bought. He pulls so hard on his leash that he practically strangles himself. Poodles are subject to tracheal damage, so I've been kind of worried about it. The thing works like a charm! When he reaches the end of his tether on the retractable leash with that harness, he just stands there till I catch up--or runs off in another direction. No more pulling at all. The book said there were some disadvantages in design to the harnesses, but all the drawbacks it cited are not true of this model. It's really ingenious--and he doesn't object at all to having it put on him. The label said, "works instantly," and it did.

Toby always picks up all sorts of stuff and carries it along until he finds something else. Today I discovered something bright reddish-orange in his mouth that wasn't the usual stick or pine cone or clump of grass from the lawn mower. When I took it away from him (he always relinquishes things willingly and even lets me run my finger through his mouth to see if I'm getting it all), I discovered it was about 3 inches off the end of an Eastern Fox Squirrel's tail, complete with fur. Jim and I agreed that it had probably been lopped off by one of the many foxes in the area.

Last night at this time I heard the Barred Owls again. This time I had my tape recorder all hooked up, so I slipped it on and went out and got their unusual sounds, most of which I'd missed the night before. They were a bit distant, but interesting.

Sat., May 20, 2006
KOA, WaKeeney, KS

No entry.

8:30 p.m., Sun., May 21, 2006
Foster Grove Campground, Bonny Lake SP, CO

Yesterday we reluctantly left our idyllic shady site and headed west. We pretty much stuck to back roads, although we had a couple of short stretches of freeway. We always think we get a better feel for the countryside when we avoid the freeways, and brief slowdowns as we drive through small towns help relieve the monotony.

We thought we might stay at Cedar Bluff State Park, a 261-mile drive, which is also beside a reservoir, but were aware it was Saturday night, a poor night to arrive at a recreation area. When we got there, we decided to check out the campground first, so drove past the building where we were supposed to register and then around the camping loops. They weren't completely full, but all the more-or-less shady sites were taken. Furthermore, many of the people seemed to have speedboats of various types. The habitat was pretty barren, so it didn't look very promising for birding either.

So we drove 20 miles farther and stayed at the KOA in WaKeeney. It was just a typical freeway-side campground with the typical KOA high price. We paid \$27. Our nights at John Raymond Reservoir had been \$7 each with our Golden Age passport (\$14 for younger people). The Trailer Life guide promised shady sites. There was one small tree at each site, with a slightly larger one here and there. We got there early enough to get one of those, but we had to enter the site the wrong way and then get out our long extension cord and water hose to reach the hookups. We couldn't reach the sewer, but dumped in the neighboring site after those folks left this morning.

We only had 162 miles to drive today and didn't want to get here before check-out time. For most public parks it's 2:00 p.m., but it turned out to be noon here. Anyway, we had a leisurely breakfast of pancakes, etc., and then I bathed Toby. We got away around 10:00 and got here at 1:30, having gained an hour when we entered Mountain time. The Trailer Life guide only lists one campground here at Bonny Reservoir, but the AAA camping guide lists two. I read the long chapter on the area in the ABA/Lane guide to Colorado and decided the Foster Grove Campground sounded more interesting. The AAA guide said it was "deeply shaded." That is not true. It does have quite a few old, half-leafless cottonwoods but they're scattered and most of the 13 electric sites have no shade. Only one site was occupied--the shadiest one, so we took another that isn't too bad.

The temperature was nice and cool last night--upper 50s I'd guess, but had climbed to around 88' by the time we got here. So all we wanted to do was go into the trailer and turn on the A/C. Thunderheads were building in the southwest and by the time we finished naps they were seriously threatening. It was still too hot to be pleasant outdoors anyway. Around 4:30 we had a short thundershower that dropped almost no rain, but brought intermittent winds. It did cool the air down to the upper 70's, and it's even cooler now.

For these reasons, we really haven't done much birding in the area, although the habitat looks varied and promising. I've heard Western Wood-Pewees, Bullock's Orioles,

and Western Kingbirds. On the other hand, Red-headed Woodpeckers are in the treetops and a Blue Jay flew into a bush as we drove from the highway to the campground. It's obvious that east and west meet here. I also heard a flicker, which could be an intergrade, the book says. [The next day I got a glimpse of yellow wings as one flew by.]

Bonny Reservoir is surrounded by a dense riparian woodland, which we could see as we descended from the high plains to the somewhat lower South Republican River valley, where it is located. We'll explore the area tomorrow.

8:30 p.m., Mon., May 22, 2006

Foster Grove Campground, Bonny State Park, CO

This place has proven to be a disappointment, partly because of the drought and partly because of the weather.

This morning I tried to walk to where the ABA Guide says you can scope the reservoir. A road leads out of the south end of this campground to a small picnic area a couple hundred yards away. From there a path seems to lead further. I suspect the lake used to be right there, but now it's all clogged with tall shrubs. (Our neighbor in the campground told us this area has been under severe drought for eight years.) An overgrown trail disappears after about 20 ft. So much for that. I called Jim on the radio, so I didn't have to walk back on the road, which just went between barren agricultural fields. (The neighbor also told us that the winter wheat crop had failed this year for dry-land farmers.)

We decided to explore the south side of the lake and look at the other campground. We returned first to the highway and just before reaching it stopped at a marshy area. Despite the fact that the sun was 30' above the horizon, the frogs were holding forth strongly. I recorded two or three species, along with a lot of Red-winged Blackbirds. Will have to figure out what they were when I get home.

Then we drove south on the highway about a mile and turned left on the south shore road. We stopped several places where the book said the birding was supposed to be good, but found nothing we hadn't had in our campground. Besides the day was heating up fast, and the wind was at least 15 mph, making it difficult to either hear or see birds. The trees are all cottonwoods, which are about the noisiest tree in a wind.

We looked at the other campground and found it shadier than the one we're in. It had very few sites occupied, but I'd hate to be there when it is full. The sites were awfully close together. It's much larger than this one and has a marina, store, visitors center, etc. Ours and presumably the other one now have new rest rooms with flush toilets and showers. Neither Trailer Life nor AAA guides were aware of that. The showers are coin-operated.

As we were leaving the campground, I caught sight of a snake lying in the road. Jim got out and said he got good photos of it. We think it was a Gopher Snake, mainly because all of those we've found seem to assume a zigzag conformation whenever we find them. I'll have to ID it conclusively from the photos.

We could have driven on around the lake and crossed over the dam, but by then we had lost interest in the whole place because of the heat and wind, so we just came back to the trailer. I sat outside until noon, by which time it was 86'. Only that strong wind kept it tolerable, for there isn't a lot of shade from those drought-struck cottonwoods here. I found the largest one, with a three-foot diameter trunk and kept moving my chair to stay in the shade of that.

After lunch I just stayed inside and got a lot done on my Indigo Bunting embroidery, while enjoying the Eastern Bluebirds out the window. As the day wore on the sky began clouding up and around 7:30 an almost dry front came through with a lot of wind plus a few spits of rain. It's much cooler now and almost calm.

8:30 p.m., Tues., May 23, 2006
Greeley RV Park, Greeley, CO

A day of necessary jobs. We left Bonny Lake fairly early and arrived in Wray just as the laundry was opening at 8:00. I spent a couple of hours there, then we completed our day's drive of 168 miles by driving west on US-34 to Greeley, stopping for a forgettable lunch in the only cafe in Akron. (We passed through Yuma on the way, making us wonder where we were.)

We've decided that Colorado takes the prize hands-down for awful roads. At least half of the drive today was on horribly broken up pavement. No other state we've been in, even Arkansas, has had roads like these. In fact, Arkansas roads were fine this time.

Ever since we entered Colorado we've passed more cattle feedlots than I've ever seen anywhere. And some of them were absolutely gigantic. Fortunately the strong wind was usually blowing the aroma away. After we passed the gate of one of the feedlots, the pavement suddenly improved and was good all the way to I-76. The cattleman, or his \$\$\$, undoubtedly had the attention of the local politicians.

I was going to go to the Fort Collins area, but the only two RV parks listed there were super-expensive resort-type places, which we hate anyway. The park here is adequate, but nothing special. Jim was happy that it has WiFi so he can check for messages on the email address he uses at home. Again his son, Kelly, sent him a message to that address, despite being told several times that we rarely check it. It's really exasperating that he won't pay attention. The rest of the messages were nothing special.

Last night we had a couple of loud thunder storms, the last one ending at about 1:00 a.m. They dropped a lot of much-needed rain, but no hail. We did see one wheat field this morning that looked like it had hail damage last night.

Toby is always his most active late in the afternoon. And he's always looking for a new toy to chew. His own toy box full of stuff is old-hat. Usually he confines his endeavors to scraps of paper, pencils, clothespins, shoes, hats, etc. But this afternoon he snatched and crunched on Jim's \$600 hearing aid from atop the TV where he usually doesn't take things. It's probably ruined. A few minutes later, he was working on the remote control for the TV, but I rescued that in time. But right now, as I'm finishing up editing this diary at 11:00 p.m., he's sound asleep at my feet and looks like a darling.

7:15 a.m., Wed., May 24, 2006
Greeley RV Park

I thought I was finishing up at 11:00, but my computer locked up and I had to reboot it. I discovered I hadn't saved for an inexcusably long time and had to re-edit a lot of stuff. So I hung it up and finished it up this morning. It locked up again twice, but I think I have it now. This cheap computer with a Celeron processor doesn't like large files--and this one is a biggy. . . It just did it again, but I had everything saved and simply rebooted.

Today we head for the high country. Have picked out a U.S. Forest Service campground with electrical hookups that doesn't take reservations. I hope it'll be a place we want to spend the Memorial Day weekend.