

Trip from Texas to Colorado - Spring 2006

by Sylvia R. Gallagher

Part 6

8:15 p.m., Sun., June 11, 2006

Sugar Loafin' RV Campground, Leadville, CO

This morning I finished editing my last installment and read most of the Denver Post before we set off for the 65-mile drive to Leadville. We didn't want to get here too early, but I don't think we needed to worry that weekenders would still be here. The place is almost empty--just the way we like it.

We drove west on I-70 to SR 91, then south to Leadville. The stretch of I-70 included the 2-mile-long Eisenhower Tunnel, which avoids Loveland Pass and is about 1000 ft lower. (The companion tunnel eastbound is called the Johnson Tunnel and was constructed about eight years later, but everyone seems to call both of them the Eisenhower Tunnel.)

SR-91 is an excellent road that goes over a 12,000+ foot pass, but doesn't have any scary switchbacks with precipitous drops. It ascends along Ten Mile Creek, then crosses a saddle and descends along the Arkansas River near its headwaters. Jim was able to ascend at 30-35 mph in low gear with no trouble. Gorgeous scenery!

Near the top we pulled off at an interpretive site which overlooks a restoration site started in 2005. The Climax molybdenum (chemical symbol Mo) mine is not far away and the tailings were dumped in this valley--don't know how deep they go. Finally, many years after the mine was closed, they got around to trying to restore the area. It looks pretty barren and awful now, though. An interpretive sign enumerated the things they are doing to restore the land. [I dictated the text of the sign into my tape recorder and need to insert it here, but since I'm editing this using the solar panels and the inverter, I guess I'll wait until I get home and re-edit the entire diary.]

The mine tailings ultimately engulfed three small mining towns, whose residents had to move elsewhere. [Text of that sign needed here, too.]

A mile or two farther we reached the summit of Fremont Pass, and lo and behold there was a huge preliminary processing plant for Mo ore (shipped to midwest for final processing) and behind it a gigantic stairstep up the mountain where ore had been extracted. Some of the ore was also extracted underground. There was about a 5-minute radio message, which we tried to listen to and which I recorded. I say "tried" because the music tended to drown out the talking, and the tone quality was poor on top of it. [Need to listen to it and add information.] The radio piece had obviously been put together by the Climax Mo Company, for it was pretty self-congratulatory in spots, but still interesting.

I read in a tourist newspaper I picked up in the campground that the mine is scheduled to reopen in 2009. I guess Mo prices have increased enough to make it economically feasible to resume operations.

We ate lunch in the trailer at the overlook of the restoration site--nice big parking area--and got here around 2:30 or 3:00.

Sugar Loafin' Campground is three miles off the main highway on the road to Turquoise Lake. (The lake isn't far away, but we haven't seen it yet.) It's all by itself at the edge of a grove of Lodgepole Pines. The tent sites are in the pines, but the hookup sites

are more in the open, with small planted Lodgepoles between sites. The sites are fairly spacious and almost none of them is occupied, so it's a vast improvement over the last place. Across the road from the campground is a sagebrush flat, where in a very short walk I heard White-crowned Sparrows and saw a Mountain Bluebird. The valley where we're located is surrounded on both sides by high mountains, and Mt. Elbert, the highest in Colorado is one of them. It's over 14,000 ft, but several others in the vicinity are almost as high and also over 14,000 ft. The view from the campground is spectacular. The slogan on their advertising is really appropriate: "Scenery Piled to the Sky." Our elevation here is 9696 ft. Leadville is 10,100 ft. We descended and crossed the Arkansas R. then back up a little bit when we drove the three miles from Leadville.

The campground is absolutely overrun with ground squirrels. I checked my mammal books and decided they looked most like Wyoming Ground Squirrels. The range maps in neither book showed them occurring quite this far south in Colorado, but no other similar animal is in this area or occurs as close to here as the Wyoming G. S., so that's what they have to be. Jim will get some photos tomorrow--not enough energy today.

It's been a real problem to keep Toby from barking at the squirrels, but they're visible out every window and we can't keep him in his kennel all the time. I think I finally have him almost convinced that they're just part of the scene and not something to get upset about. Or maybe he just wants to play with them.

We've finally gotten high enough that we don't need the A/C in the afternoon. (I hate its droning, but we had to use it at 7900 ft where we were last. We had no shade and the sun hit us broadside.) High temp. in Leadville today was forecast to be 75 degrees and that's what it was when we drove through this afternoon. (Forecast low tonight is 37 degrees, but we had colder just a week or so ago.) Late in the afternoon clouds formed over the mountains on both sides of the valley and it looked as though rain was falling in many locations. I was afraid it might rain here, and as I was grilling smoked sausages for dinner, I fixed it early. But, as usual, the clouds disappeared before sunset, and the sky is totally cloudless now at 8:45 (still fairly light).

The altitude makes us tire more easily, so think I'll quit now and not take time to listen to those tapes I made today.

8:45 p.m., Mon., June 12, 2006
Sugar Loafin' Campground, Leadville, CO

The scenery really was "piled to the sky" until just a few minutes ago. Some of the puffy clouds of the afternoon are still around, and the setting sun cast a pink glow on every one of them, as well as the mountains on both sides of the valley. With the Lodgepole Pines of the campground in the foreground, it was a magnificent sight.

After all the driving around on mountain roads we've done in the past week, we decided to stay right here in our campground today. It's such a pleasant place after the jammed-in campsite we occupied the past week.

I took a walk right after breakfast. Our campground is located where a road forks into three, all going more-or-less westward. The left one goes to the golf course, the right one goes to the lake, and the middle one is unpaved and there was no sign telling where it went. I figured it would have the least traffic and so walked it. I met a runner and asked him where it went. He said it ended in about a mile. I walked 1.1 miles (measured on odometer when Jim came and picked me up) and it showed no signs of ending. The setting is mostly Lodgepole Pine forest with openings here and there covered with Big Sagebrush and edged with Aspens. Not many birds nest in this habitat. I took my tape

recorder, but recorded nothing of significance. Heard distant Cassin's Finch, Hermit Thrush, Flicker, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and a few others. Saw a Red-naped Sapsucker briefly. The road was entirely up-hill, but not especially steep. When I was tired walking, I called Jim on the radio to come and pick me up, because I'd have been directly facing the sun on the way back. I wished I'd taken Toby, because about all I did was photograph Mt. Elbert and Mt. Massive with various beautiful foregrounds--and enjoy a beautiful morning out in the wild by myself. A few pick-up trucks drove by, but otherwise it was deserted. A lot of airplanes were overhead and would have made recording difficult.

Just as I was setting out I spotted the male Mountain Bluebird again. He lit on a post near the entrance to the campground, and I could see he had food in his beak. As a well-trained bird atlaser, I immediately knew there was a nest hole nearby. It didn't take long before he showed me where it was--in a mail box! The trailer right next to the campground entrance seems to be placed where it is permanently, or at least for the season. They've erected a rural mailbox behind it and cut a bluebird-sized round hole in the door. I radioed Jim about it, and he immediately went over there. The trailer owner told him bluebirds have used that box for years. Jim got some nice photos in morning light, but decided afternoon light would be even better. So whenever the sun came out from behind the clouds in the afternoon, he trotted--or maybe trudged at this elevation-- over there and shot a few more frames of the male and female. He got so many with film that he even shot some with his digital camera.

Between bluebird sessions, Jim also photographed the Wyoming Ground Squirrels and tried to get the brownish undersides of their tails--not an easy task. I discovered I'd also brought my "Squirrels of the West" book and looked the animal up in that. It did show them this far south. The map plotted the major rivers, so I could see that their range comes a little ways south of the source of the Arkansas River, which is exactly where we are--right on the edge of their range.

No birds have come to Jim's feeding and watering stations--just squirrels. There are a few Pine Siskins in the trees, but I have yet to see one well. Tomorrow we'll have to drive around and see if we can discover more birds.

8:30 p.m., Tues., June 13, 2006
Sugar Loafin' Campground, Leadville, CO

The clouds that gave us that beautiful sunset last night persisted all night long, so the temperature only got down to 48 degrees. The morning was not only cloudy, but hazy. The haze and the clouds had all disappeared by mid-morning, then around noon the usual afternoon puffies started. Now they're almost all gone, so no beautiful sunset tonight. High temperature was forecast to be 77 degrees in Leadville today, and I think that's about what it was. (Denver is having a heat wave.)

We took a drive around Turquoise Lake, which is very close to where we're camped. It's a 15-mile loop, all paved, but has its ups and downs and curves. Most of the time the lake was far below us and hidden by the trees, so the drive was something of a disappointment.

It's not actually a lake, but a reservoir. We crossed on the dam at the start and drove clockwise around it. At the far end, we discovered where all the water came from this high up--the other (west) side of the continental divide through a tunnel. I looked at my DeLorme Atlas and discovered this part of Colorado is riddled with similar tunnels. We learned of one on the upper Colorado River in Rocky Mountain NP. Thus much of the water that would normally enter the Colorado River drainage is siphoned off for the

megalopolis on the other side of the Rockies. We saw only one sizeable creek entering the reservoir--not nearly enough water for a reservoir of that size.

We checked out several of the National Forest Campgrounds around the lake and decided we're better off where we are. The only one we might like is the one at the far end of the lake. There are some willows and a bit of grassy meadow there, not just a monoculture of Lodgepole Pines with no understory. That habitat is usually totally silent. On the upper slopes where the road went high, there were also Engelmann Spruce and Douglas-Fir trees, but not very many birds there either.

Two new flowers:

Sulphur Flower (*Eriogonum umbellatum*) - in bloom all over our campground. I thought it looked familiar and just checked my database and discovered I'd photographed it at Church Creek Meadow in the northern Sierra Nevada and at Lava Beds NM in extreme northeastern CA. Lena Hayashi photographed it in the Ansel Adams Wilderness. In each instance I found it listed under a different common name. Flower names are not standardized, as this species clearly demonstrates. That's why I always write down the scientific name, too. Of course they change those, too, as taxonomic thought changes.

Wyoming Paintbrush (*Castilleja linariaefolia*) - at far end of Turquoise Lake yesterday; the only paintbrush we've seen so far in CO, and there was only one plant.

9:15 p.m., Wed., June 14, 2006

Monarch Spur RV Park, 8 miles west of Poncha Springs, CO

This morning we drove through the old mining areas on the east side of Leadville. When we were there in 1990, we had been appalled at the runoff of contaminated water, etc. There has been a lot of improvement in this Superfund site since then. [I read in the paper recently that the Superfund has run out of funds because the Bush administration refers to continue the tax on industry for the clean-up.] Carbonate Hill, where much lead/silver carbonate was extracted has been covered over with topsoil and seeded to grasses. There was one trickle of orangish runoff flowing down the gutter, but not what we saw last time. However, last time there were still lots of snow patches to provide water. Today all the snow was gone. We saw one small pond with a fine-mesh fence all around it. It's apparently contaminated and the fence is there to keep small animals out. I guess the birds don't go there--or don't matter.

Afterwards we returned to town and visited the National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum. This large establishment is an incredible hodge-podge of all sorts of things pertaining to minerals, their extraction and uses. The parts we visited first were really poorly interpreted. Most of the time we couldn't figure out the significance of what we were seeing--or else the displays were not particularly interesting. The mush-mouthed young girl at the entry desk told us in what order to view things, but it wasn't until the very end of our visit there that we saw the most interesting parts of the museum: (1) A series of small dioramas depicting all aspects of early gold extraction from the earliest prospector and his pan to the stamp mills of the end of the period. These were the labor of love of one man and really excellent and put all we've learned piecemeal over the years into perspective. (2) A large walk-through replica of an underground Leadville mine, complete with sound effects and a few moving displays. These two items were well worth visiting the museum. The rest of the stuff was so-so. They did have a spectacular mineral display, but gave only the names of the minerals. As a chemist, I'd have liked to see the chemical formulas.

We then went back to the trailer, had an early lunch, and drove south through the Arkansas River Valley. We had remembered a campground in Nathrop where Jim

photographed Evening Grosbeaks in 1990, but couldn't find anything that looked like it this time. So we kept on going south, then turned west on US 50 at Poncha Springs. I picked an RV Park part way up the grade to Monarch Pass. It was 88 degrees at the lowest point in our route, just before Poncha Springs, but had cooled down to 82 degrees by the time we got up to 8600 ft, where we're now located. The campground is in the fairly narrow canyon of the South Arkansas River and is nothing special. All the sites are pull-throughs, and all face the same way, with the bedroom facing the late afternoon sun. It was pretty hot late in the afternoon. The sites are very close together, but the place is nearly empty, so it doesn't matter. None is shady. The wind was blowing hard all afternoon, so I didn't try to find any birds. It's died down now, so will look around in the morning before we leave. They have syrup and seed feeders. Broad-tailed Hummers are common. We've seen Steller's Jay, Cassin's Finch, and Black-headed Grosbeak at the seed.

9:00 p.m., Thurs., June 15, 2006

South Rim Campground, Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP, CO

I took Toby for a walk before breakfast and was surprised to discover there was more to the camp than I had realized: a section of long pull-throughs up the hill and a tent-camping section that ran along the river east of the RV park. The park roads are sadly in need of mowing. The route to the tent-camping section had really tall grasses in the middle of the two-track dirt road. Toby, of course, prefers the tallest grasses over the nice gravel track. There was some dew this morning, so he quickly made a mess of himself by alternately scrambling in the wet grass and running on the dirt road. When we got back to the trailer, I had Jim hold onto him outside while I went in and got a plastic dishpan full of warm water and made Toby stand in it while I washed the mud off his paws. Then I dried them the best I could with a towel. His paws need trimming badly, so they were still pretty wet, but at least not muddy, when we let him inside. (He's permitted on the couch and the bed.)

While we were walking I discovered that there were a lot of different flower species here and there on the grounds. So after breakfast I went back without Toby, but with my camera and flower books to work them out. Several of them were not in the two Colorado flower books I had bought, which hadn't failed me up to now. But I did find two in another book I'd brought with me, *Flowers of the Southwest Mountains* by Arnberger and Janish (abbreviated A&J below), published in 1982. Their scientific names may have changed since then, but at least I found the flowers. Here's my list:

Beardlip Penstemon (*Penstemon barbatus*) - only in A&J

Wandbloom Penstemon (*Penstemon virgatus*) - only in A&J

Colorado Loco - again

Narrowleaf Puccoon (*Lithospermum incisum*)

Leafy Cinquefoil (*Potentilla fissa*)

A white Evening Primrose. *Oenothera albicaulis* was similar, but it was not that species. Will try to work it out from photos when I get home.

Butter-and-eggs or Toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris*). I've seen pictures of this in many flower books and was thrilled to finally see it--just one plant.

A white composite with both ray and disc flowers. Not in any of the books. I saw it used in landscaping in Gunnison when we stopped there for lunch, so wonder if it isn't an escapee. There was a big patch of it.

Common Mallow (*Malva neglecta*)

There were a few others that are common everywhere and have already been mentioned in this diary.

While I was busy with the flowers, Jim stationed himself at the birdfeeders by the office. He photographed male and female Black-headed Grosbeaks, which he doesn't need, and Hairy Woodpeckers, which he does. The Rocky Mountain race is different from the one in California.

While I was out looking at flowers, I saw a small flock of Cedar Waxwings, the first I've seen in Colorado. Maybe they were late migrants.

We didn't get away from there until 10:30, but we only had 120 miles to drive, all but the last 7 miles on US 50. It turned out to be a rather slow 120 miles, though. The road started out by ascending to 11,300-foot Monarch Pass, then descending. For a while it ran through a beautiful valley where Tomichi Creek meandered through an emerald meadow.

We stopped for lunch at a BBQ restaurant in Gunnison. Jim had a pork sandwich and I had brisket. I forget the name of the place, but it was on the south side of the street more or less in the middle of town. It had lots of cars in the lot, so we figured it must be good, and it was excellent--except for the tasteless cole slaw. [We've had the same type of cole slaw several other places.]

After lunch the road followed a series of reservoirs on the dammed Gunnison River for many miles, then diverged from the river because the banks were too steep. It went up and down and curved a lot and was very slow for quite a ways.

The final seven miles was the spur road to Black Canyon of the Gunnison. It was a very steep, curvy road, almost all of which had to be done in low gear. At one point, we were down to 23 mph, it was so steep, but that part didn't last long and we were able to go as fast as the curves permitted. We'd done it before, so we knew the truck would make it.

When we got up here, we were happy to learn that the campground was not full. We were told that loop B of the three loops has electricity and we were able to find a nice back-in spot that had no reservations. We took it for three days (\$12 a night with Golden Age). After our tedious drive, we decided to save exploring the park for tomorrow.

Today was very cool--didn't get out of the 60s--a pleasant change. It was also mostly cloudy. Our elevation here is 8300 ft. We're surrounded by various large shrubs. Haven't worked much on the birds, but have singing Green-tailed Towhees all around our site. Elsewhere I've heard Yellow Warblers and Warbling Vireos. Virginia's Warblers are supposed to nest in this habitat, and I just listened to their song. Maybe I'll find one tomorrow for Jim to photograph. I read that they're pretty secretive when nesting, though.

8:45 p.m., Fri., June 16, 2006
Black Cyn. of Gunnison NP, CO

After breakfast this morning I decided to walk the half-mile nature trail from the campground to the visitors center. I thought I had done it last time, so told Jim to meet me there when it opened at 8:00. I set out with Toby (dogs permitted on this trail only) and my walking stick. There definitely were steps--high ones. After a while the trail seemed to cling closer and closer to the brink of the canyon and my acrophobia started to kick in. Toby jerking at the leash and darting this way and that didn't help either. Finally, when I could see the trail ahead was even worse, I decided I'd had it and turned back. I reached a place where it looked as though I could cut cross-lots to the road. I did succeed, but it was farther than I expected and I had a hard time weaving around the shrubs near the end and began to think I might have to retrace my steps. Finally I did come out on the road. I had been in radio contact with Jim the entire time, so I told him where to come and pick me up.

We took Toby back to the trailer and stuck him in his kennel. (He can't be trusted loose in the trailer, for he gets into everything.) Then we set out for some tamer explorations and trails with railings.

First we went to the visitors center, which is new since we were last here in 1990. It was opened in 1997. I recuperated from my "ordeal" by watching the interpretive video about the people in the early days exploring the canyon. What intrepid folks!

After that we walked out to the nearby viewpoint and then drove to several others. The canyon is really an amazing place and is in many ways more impressive than the Grand Canyon, for when you stand at the brink, you can look straight down to the Gunnison River, not obliquely as at the Grand Canyon. Yes, I can look straight down, so long as there is a railing to cling to.

Geologically the place is also amazing, for it's a deep canyon cut lengthwise through a high ridge of land. The river initially cut through soft sediments, then hit the bedrock. Meanwhile volcanic action was creating highlands on both sides and scrunching up the land in between where the river flowed. The course had already been established, so the river continued to cut through the hard bedrock. Because its incline is so steep, very large boulders were carried along by the current and did a good job of eroding the canyon. Because the canyon is down the middle of a ridge, very little water runs off into the canyon in the vicinity of the gorge. Thus there is almost no side erosion.

We're actually on a portion of the Colorado Plateau. I taught people about the plants of this region in my Deserts Workshop, but hadn't visited the area since then. It was fun to renew my acquaintance with some of the indicator shrubs. I especially enjoyed seeing the Mountain Mahogany (here it's Alderleaf, *Cercocarpus montanus*), which was going to seed. The seed pods are long (3-4 in.), curved, and wire-like. When they burst open, they look like miniature white feathers. Only a few had reached that stage, but I suppose they blow away in the wind and germinate to create more Mountain Mahogany plants. Other shrubs that are present are:

Utah Serviceberry (*Amelanchier utahensis*) - the most common plant in our campsite

Gambel Oak (*Quercus gambelii*) - a shrubby oak, a few in our site

Narrowleaf Yucca (*Yucca angustissima*) - only about 2-3 ft tall

I was exhausted by the end of the morning, both from the trail I failed to complete and from all the short walks down to the various viewpoints (it's 8600 ft here). I took a long nap this afternoon and did nothing the rest of the day. The wind got up in the late afternoon, which kept the birds concealed in the shrubs, so there was little incentive to go out. It was a very cool day with a high in the mid-60s. A few of yesterday's clouds were still around in the early morning, then they went away and the usual puffies developed. All is still and clear now.

8:45 p.m., Sat., June 17, 2006

Black Cyn. of the Gunnison NP, CO

We did little gaping at the chasm today and instead concentrated on the birds and flowers. We drove to the end of the rim road at "High Point," which isn't any higher than the campground. The habitat is different though. It's quite wooded with many large Two-Needle Pinyon Pines (*Pinus edulis*) and a few equally large Utah Junipers (*Juniperus osteosperma*, perhaps in the new genus *Sabina*). Jim photographed a nice female Blue Grouse the last time we were there, but we saw no sign of one today. (A park employee cleaning the rest rooms said he'd seen one on the road as he drove up after we did.)

There's a long nature/hiking trail that sets off downhill from the end of the road, but I didn't think I wanted to attempt that after reading a description of it at the top of the hill. Instead I just wandered around in the woodland and recorded birds. A Mountain Chickadee was singing a one-pitch song. It would sing either two or three notes all on the same pitch. I've never heard a song like that in California.

Then my ears pricked up when I heard a song that I thought could be the Virginia's Warbler. It wasn't quite like the tape, but seemed sort of close--closer to that than to anything else I could think of that might be there. Of course, I recorded it and played it back. I had to do a little walking around before the bird would respond. Apparently I wasn't in his territory to begin with. But when I found the right spot, he flew right in. It was a Virginia's--the first one I've ever recorded. He sang from right over my head and I recorded him some more.

Then I tried to summon Jim on the radio, but evidently he'd inadvertently turned it off or down or something, so I had to go fetch him. When I played the tape again with Jim there, the bird flew in and occasionally perched in the open for photos. I don't think Jim ever got the ultimate side view, but he did get a lot of shots. I got more recordings too. For some reason, the breeze died down, allowing for a quieter recording. Some of the earlier ones had had an airplane in the background, too. We were pretty happy: my first recordings and Jim's first decent photographs, also the first time I've ever seen the bird in its breeding habitat. All the others I've seen have been vagrants in coastal California--and none for many years.

The bird seldom, if ever, called. (That may be typical, for the Stokes tape only has the song on it.) I did get some soft "tsik" calls, but there was another pair of birds in the area at the time chasing each other around and giving aggressive calls and might have also been giving these. They sounded a little like Warbling Vireos sometimes, but other times they sounded like nothing I'd ever heard before. After I went back to dump my tape recorder and get my camera and flower books, I also heard a Black-throated Gray Warbler singing; the calls could have been from it. (I was sorry not to have the tape recorder. I could use more sound from that bird.) Anyway, I recorded the "tsik" calls and may find I have a recording I can compare with them when I get home and find out if they could have been Virginia's. I rather think they were.

I photographed the habitat and also a couple of flowers, neither of which I could find in any of my books. One was a low cholla-type cactus with beautiful yellow flowers. The other was a fuchsia-colored umbel on a six-inch stem with no leaves. I looked a little like an onion, but wasn't what was in any of my books.

We stopped at one overlook on the way back, "Cross Fissures." Jim thought it sounded like it might be different from some of the others we saw yesterday, and it was. There were tall columns in the canyon that were just as tall as the actual walls. Apparently the river had changed course or something. (No interpretive sign was at the stop.) Again I screwed up my courage and leaned over the railing to look at the white-water river 2000 ft below.

The afternoon was warm enough to sit outside (72 degrees high) and I set up my chair in the shade of a tall but shrubby Gambel Oak with a shrub-like juniper mingled in. We'd been seeing an *Empidonax* flycatcher from the trailer window and I had thought it was a Gray, but this time the bird (actually a pair) was flitting all around where I was sitting and I could see that it was a Dusky. Then it flew into the juniper right next to me and disappeared. The only explanation could be that its nest was there. I peered at where I had last seen the bird with my wonderful close-focusing Brunton binoculars and there was the bird on the nest about five feet away. There's no way Jim can photograph it, for it's

deep inside the shrub. (He does have a nice Dusky on a nest from Yuba Pass.) For the rest of the afternoon, the birds came and went from the nest, sometimes leaving it unattended, sometimes exchanging incubation duties. (No food was ever brought, so I know they were sitting on eggs.) Jim said one of the birds came to his water drip for a drink and he photographed it.

He also said he photographed five different male Yellow Warblers. He counted them because each new one was dry and the ones that had left couldn't have dried out by then. I wonder about that, for the air is pretty dry.

We were going to drive to Grand Junction tomorrow afternoon, but the forecast is for a temperature of 98 degrees there, so we've decided to stay here one more night and drive the 75 miles first thing Monday morning. We've got to go there on a weekday for a couple of reasons: (1) Jim's been having trouble with the trailer torsion bar staying attached and needs to see about getting it fixed. (2) We've decided that we've really done all we want to do in Colorado and don't have to go home yet. Clair and Sue De Beauvoir have been sending us tantalizing emails from Yellowstone, so Jim said, "Let's go there." We didn't bring any books and maps with us for Wyoming or other northwestern states, so have to go to AAA. Grand Junction's is the only office between here and Yellowstone. (We don't want to go to Denver or Cheyenne.) We plan to meet Clair and Sue enroute, for they're heading for the Denver area to visit Clair's daughter. They're also going to Rocky Mountain NP. So we'll exchange advice--again. (You may recall we were together at South Llano River SP in Texas some time ago.)

Sun., June 18, 2006
Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP, CO

No entry.

9:00 p.m., Mon., June 19, 2006
KOA, Craig, CO

We did so little yesterday that I didn't bother to write it up. In the morning I walked the Upland Trail, which I figured wouldn't get close to the precipice, and I was right. I got on it from the main park road, although it actually starts from the cliffside nature trail that turned me off the first day. It winds through a variety of habitats, including some grassy areas with scattered Big Sagebrush. This habitat I had not seen from the park road, and it contained one more bird for my list, Brewer's Sparrow. I never saw one, but they were singing. It was interesting to have them and Chipping Sparrows both singing on territory in the same area. The Chippies seemed to be using the fairly large Gambel Oaks that were nearby.

Before I even got to the start of the trail, I saw a Blue Grouse cross the road. I called Jim, but it was gone by the time he got there with his camera.

I didn't hear any Virginia's Warblers, and the vicinity of the campground was where I was told by the man in the visitors center to look. He did admit that he wasn't much of a birder.

The trail came out at the road just beyond the visitors center and crossed it. Since that portion of it looked like it was pretty close to the gorge, I decided to walk to the visitors center on the road. There I called Jim on the radio to come and get me. I didn't want to walk all the way back to the campground on the road. Besides, it was mostly up-hill. I suppose I had walked only about a mile, but it was getting warm.

The temperature topped out at 82 degrees, the warmest day we'd had. We were glad to be on the mountaintop and not down in Grand Junction, where it was predicted to reach 98 degrees.

I've come to the conclusion that the folks who compiled the park bird list made a few mistakes. They listed Blue-headed, not Plumbeous Vireo. They also listed Black-capped Chickadee as common and Mountain as less so. I only found Mountain, and I doubt that Black-capped are seen very often there, if ever. I really have no way of judging some of the other records. I do agree with their Empid assessment, for they listed Dusky as common and the others as less so. Dusky was what was breeding in our campsite.

We were surprised that there were more people in the campground Sunday night than any of the previous three nights. Two possible reasons come to mind: (1) People expected it to be full on the weekend, so waited til Sunday to arrive. (2) It had been cool in the lowlands, but heated up on Sunday, so they sought the cool high country.

We saw several Western Tanagers in the park, the first on the trip. I was surprised that we hadn't encountered them in the Rockies farther east.

This morning we got up at 5:00. (The robins had been singing for 15 minutes, having started when dawn was barely perceptible.) We were on the road by around 6:30-6:45. That brought us into Grand Junction at about the right time.

On the road into town we spotted a trailer service shop, which advertised used parts--just what Jim was hoping for. Unfortunately they didn't have any torsion bars our size--just larger and smaller ones. However, the man pointed out a couple of simple things that would probably solve the problem we were having of the bar coming loose. A little cleaning of gunk out of the attachment and a little banging with some metal object to squeeze a spring were the fixes. I guess it worked, for Jim said nothing about it coming loose. (I think he still has the clamp on, too.)

We found Wal_Mart (the star, _ , is what they use on their sign, so just for fun I hunted up the character) and AAA with no difficulty, bought gasoline, and were on the freeway out of town at 11:00. We drove northeast on I-70 to Rifle, then north on SR 13 to Craig, where we're situated in an ordinary commercial campground, a KOA. Most of the sites were sunny, but we got in around 3:00 and found one that had quite a bit of shade. The temperature was 93 degrees when we got here and the trailer was thoroughly heated up, so it took a long time for the A/C to cool it off. I tried to take a nap, but the bedroom was just too hot. Newspaper says it's supposed to cool off to 44 degrees here tonight. I hope it's right. It's still pretty balmy outside now.

9:45 p.m., Tues., June 20, 2006

Sleeping Bear Ranch RV Park, 9 miles S of Lander, WY

Since we only had 244 miles to drive today, we slept in a bit (it did cool off nicely), then shopped for propane and gasoline on the stupid one-way streets in the very small town of Craig. Why that town needs one-way streets is beyond our ken.

We drove north on SR 13, which changed to SR 789 at the WY border. I actually think we were on 789 the rest of the day, but several US highways joined it. Anyway, when we got to I-80, we drove east to Rawlins, then northwest on US-287 to one mile short of its junction with SR 28 south of Lander.

The TL Guide lists two Sleeping Bear RV parks, this one out in the country and another right in the town of Lander. This one is in a beautiful rural setting. No shade, but we have a view of round-topped red-rock "hills," which glowed enchantingly as we were

eating dinner. In the foreground is a small river, not visible from the trailer, but beyond the river are brilliant green fields dotted with gray-green Russian Olive trees. (I know they're pest trees, but they certainly are pretty in this scene.)

This idyllic setting is a nice contrast after a rather austere drive through sagebrush-covered country with barren hills. Only near the end did we start to see the snow-capped peaks of the spectacular Wind River Range. I look forward to seeing them better tomorrow.

The 50 miles between the WY border and I-80 were the worst of all, for they are dotted with what we finally decided are natural gas wells. At each station there is a large metal tank and some smaller equipment on a huge bare patch of ground. How it all functions is unclear. In a couple of places there were some long buildings that might be dormitories for workers. They seemed to be modular in construction--a lot of similar-looking buildings strung together. Of course each wellhead has to be connected to the highway by a road, so the whole country is interlaced with bare dirt roads.

The above is exactly what an article in the Denver Post a few days ago was referring to when it told about the decline of the Greater Sage-Grouse due to habitat fragmentation.

Clair and Sue are not meeting us here as we originally agreed. Here's Sue's excuse, from the email she sent us: "We tried; we really, really tried....to leave Yellowstone. We, too, got our act somewhat together and left our motel in Gardiner [Montana, north of the northwest park entrance] this am only to find an eye-level Flicker nest in Mammoth Hot Springs. So we HAD to sit and photograph till noon. Then we drove to the Fishing Bridge area and right past there we stopped for lunch, having decided we'd better go to West Yellowstone for the evening. We lost about an hour in a buffalo traffic jam and then another 15 minutes in an elk traffic jam (a large male with a huge rack, especially since it's only June) and it was getting to be mid-afternoon.

"While we were stopped at a turnout at Yellowstone Lake, a car pulls up right behind us and out comes a scope to check the Bald Eagle nest way up the hillside. I said a few words to the lady and mentioned that we were bird photographers, so we enjoyed seeing the Eagle, but it was too far away for a shot. She then asked us if we had seen the Harlequin Ducks and told us where they were, about ten miles back. So we thanked her, turned the car around and proceeded to drive to the spot, hoping they would still be there. When we pulled into the area, those people were behind us and then proceeded to ask us if we had seen the Osprey nest at Tower Falls and the Peregrine nest there also. We hadn't, got the info. and we again thanked them.

"They went on their way and we went down to the Yellowstone River at LeHardys Falls and, sure enough, five male Harlequins. We spent probably an hour or more there and then headed back for the Tower Falls area and finally back to Gardiner, where we intend to spend two nights."

Incidentally, the above is only a little bit more hectic than their usual days. Jim and I don't know how they keep up the pace. We usually poop out around noon and enjoy the afternoon in our campsite. They're staying in motels, which are not as attractive as campsites, so that may be part of the reason they're reluctant to quit each day.

We'll probably stay in Grand Teton NP the next couple of nights. I have to do the rest of my laundry tomorrow morning (3 loads done, two to go) and wash Toby before we leave. (They only have three washing machines, and besides I didn't feel up to changing the bed in the sweltering late-afternoon--upper 80s--heat. The A/C just doesn't cool the bedroom well at all.)

When we were in eastern Colorado several weeks ago, I recall complaining about how awful the roads in the state were. That changed when we got into the mountains. Nearly all of them were in fine shape--except for their stinginess with guardrails. That's

always been a Colorado failing, and I hate it. Today as we drove from Craig to the WY border, we were back to narrow roads with poorly graded roadbeds. Things got better when we crossed into WY. There were three small farm towns right across the border and all those gas wells along the road, both of which were an incentive to keep the road up. In Colorado, there was nothing between Craig and the border. (We've noticed many times in many states that the road between the last town and the border to the next state is neglected.)

8:30 p.m., Wed., June 21, 2006
Colter Bay Campground, Grand Teton NP, WY

We arose around 5:30 and I stuck the remaining two loads of laundry into the washing machines. I went back to the trailer and set the timer for 35 minutes--the time I estimated it would take to run the washers. Then I made the bed, using the sheets I washed yesterday. Some of you have remarked to me about the big deal I make about changing the bed. This time I actually discovered how long it takes, for I had just finished doing it when the 35 minutes were up. It really is a major project, and I hate it more than anything else connected with the trailer. I have to move a whole bunch of stuff from around the foot of the bed so I can get at it. Then I have to stand in about a foot of space there and try to bend over and wrestle the sheets onto the mattress. Jim is so tall he always kicks the top sheet untucked, so I discovered I could use one of those elastic things they sell for that purpose; they have a fastener like an old-time garter belt on each end. That has to be finagled under the lifted up corner of the mattress, all the while standing in an awkward position. The rest of the task is not so bad, but just takes time. Then, of course, I have to replace all the stuff where it was. (Don't anyone say my diary is all about birds!)

We ate breakfast while the clothes were in the drier. This took 40 minutes from start of preparation to finish. Jim's dish-washing time was in addition. (I'd never timed that operation either.) Finally I bathed Toby, who needed it badly. I knew we wouldn't have hookups for some time and had to use my hair-drier on him. He hates being brushed and fights it fiercely, so Jim has to hold him while I brush him. He was pretty tangled in a few places, especially on the outsides of his hind legs, which surprised me. Fortunately his fur is exceedingly soft and silky, so the tangles brushed out fairly easily.

After all that work, it was still only 8:30 when we got on the road. I was ready to sit back and relax as Jim drove us the 150 miles to Grand Teton National Park. We debated checking out a private RV park just outside the park. It was in a nice setting, but the sites were jammed pretty close together, so we opted to go on to the park, even though we knew there would be no electricity. (I'm running my computer on the inverter, which converts DC to AC.)

The drive was labelled scenic all the way on the AAA map, but it wasn't until we got to Crowheart that it became at all remarkable. The first part was through a bedraggled Indian reservation, the landscaped dotted with shabby houses surrounded by collections of junky cars. Indians seem to prefer not to congregate in towns and instead have homes that sprawl all over the place. The map showed that the Wind River range of mountains, with several 13,000+ ft high, was close on our left, but only occasionally did a snow-capped peak peek over the top of the foothills.

Crowheart is also on the reservation, but it's pretty trim and attractive. About that time the backdrop was becoming colored cliffs like Utah. The first cliff we saw was especially colorful, with layers of gold, red, purple, lavender, and white. The gold and red are due to iron compounds, while the purple and lavender have manganese. (There's your

next chemistry lesson, folks. Maxine Dougan has been picking up on my lessons and commenting about them in emails to me, so this is especially for her.) A bit farther along the reds became extremely brilliant with tall cliffs beside the road.

All this color ended just about the time we got out of the Indian reservation and were approaching the town of Dubois. Now the scenery became that of the beautiful Wind River meandering through a lush, green valley. Tree-covered mountainsides were on both sides, but the tallest mountains were behind us.

Dubois is an attractive town of 900+ people, but far more people live or have vacation homes all along the highway for miles. We ate lunch at Chandler's Ranch House Restaurant on the west edge of town (next to the Super 8 motel). It was excellent. Menu wasn't any different from lots of others, but it was extremely well prepared.

Audubon Camp in the West is somewhere in the Wind River Mtns. near Dubois, but I have no idea where.

After leaving Dubois the road continued upward along the Wind River and the mountain scenery became ever more beautiful. A chain of 12,000+ peaks began to appear on the right, and they showed much better from the road than the Wind River Range had. We had extra time to enjoy the scenery, for there was quite a bit of road construction with flaggers and unpaved stretches where we had to drive slowly. The grade topped out at 9658 ft, still below treeline. Then it descended through similar habitat, but this time we'd occasionally get a teasing glimpse of the spectacular Grand Teton peaks. Finally the road descended into Jackson Hole. Flowers were more numerous and spectacular on this side of the pass.

We had no trouble getting a campsite at the Colter Bay Campground. In fact it's probably less than one-third occupied this evening. We were disgusted at the awful campsite we were originally assigned, so picked out one we liked and went back and asked for it. Although we prefer back-ins, nearly all the campsites here are little loops on either side of the campground road and have less privacy. For sites of this kind, though, it's fine--and no one is across the road from us in the site we rejected. [It remained vacant the entire time we were there.]

When we registered, they asked if we had a generator. We were pleased to learn that they have a few camping loops for people without generators, so they don't have to listen to them from their neighbors. Unfortunately the next loop over is a generator one, so we did hear the roar of one for a while this afternoon. It's sort of the same idea as those restaurants which have smoking and no-smoking sections--and then they seat you in the non-smoking booth right next to the smokers. (We really appreciate the law in California when we travel to states which still permit smoking in public places.)

It was 3:00 by the time we arrived and got settled in the campsite. I sat outside for a while. Then we went to the General Store and Visitors Center nearby, where I bought books on bird-finding, easy trails, geology, and plants. I guess it's time I quit nattering on and started looking over some of my new books. We plan to explore the park tomorrow.

9:00 p.m., Thurs., June 22, 2006
Colter Bay Campground, Grand Teton NP, WY

Today we "did" the standard tourist drive. I had purchased a bird-finding guide to the park, so I tried to spend a little more time at the places the authors indicated to be good. However, we saw little that was particularly notable, and our photography was confined to scenery and flowers. Oh yes, Jim shot one distant frame of a group of Common Mergansers. The only flower I was able to identify was:

Skyrocket Gilia (*Gilia aggregata*) - tall, spectacular, red

The other was a yellow composite, and I'll have to see the photographs and check the book to be sure which one it is. I think it's probably in the plant book I bought yesterday.

It was a gorgeous clear day. Low last night was 36 degrees, rising to a high of around 70 degrees, I'd guess. The only drawback for our scenery is that a few puffy clouds might have made the mountains even more spectacular. Everyone has either been to the Tetons or seen pictures of them, so I won't belabor their beauty.

I checked out a couple of places where the book suggested American Three-toed Woodpeckers might be found, but the book was published in 1994 and the fire that cleared the land for the birds was in 1985. The habitat has pretty much recovered from the fire, so the birds are obviously off in some new burned-over patch.

We did see several large mammals, but all at a considerable distance and with multiple vehicles stopped to look at them: Elk, Moose, Bison. We were spoiled on Elk and Moose at Rocky Mountain NP.

We bought tasteless sandwiches at the deli at Moose Junction, ate them at a roadside viewpoint, then drove back to the trailer, arriving around 1:30. My main accomplishment for the rest of the day was to finish the embroidery of my Cardinal (started June 7, took about 2 weeks).

8:15 p.m., Fri., June 23, 2006

Colter Bay Campground, Grand Teton NP, WY

We decided to spend one more day here. Clair and Sue finally tore themselves away from Yellowstone and met us here this afternoon. In the morning we drove the Buffalo Valley Rd., which more or less parallels US 26 east of Moran Junction. The trip was outlined in the bird-finding guide.

It was a beautiful drive. Much of it followed the course of the Buffalo Fork River (a fork of the Snake, I guess). We had no sooner turned onto it than we spotted an Osprey nest almost at eye level and not too far away. It was atop a utility pole, but the road was above the level of its base. Jim shot it a few times, but the light wasn't quite right and he said it was a little far away. An adult was incubating, so was settled down, not standing up. It gave its guard calls intermittently, but didn't seem upset otherwise. Certainly it didn't fly off or threaten us.

Most of the road was just a little bit above the river, which meandered in a continuous series of S-curves through the marshy, green valley dotted with willows, etc. With the snow-capped Tetons in the distance, it was easy to overdo the scenic photography. On the slopes right next to the road were willows, alders, and sagebrush in turn. The sagebrush had carpets of wildflowers intermingled. Most were Sulfurflower, Sticky Geranium, and Skyrocket Gilia. The latter was mostly past its prime, but the others were gorgeous. They were so plentiful and we were out of the National Park, so I picked a small bouquet, which is on my table right now.

Two other flowers were only in a few places, but profuse where they occurred. I took photos and snatched samples to identify later. These two wilted before I could get back to the trailer, despite the fact that I put them in water as soon as I picked them. I identified them as:

Field Chickweed (*Cerastium arvense*)

Prairiesmoke (*Geum triflorum*), a member of the rose family, but like nothing I'd ever seen before. In color it was a dusty rose, a most unusual flower color. The flowers were

little globes. A few had gone to seed and they had curious, long "bristles" like a paintbrush with a fat, round base.

After ten miles the road crossed the Buffalo Fork and ascended steeply for four more miles. This portion of the road was unpaved and sadly in need of a date with the grader. The ruts and washboards were all too evident. This portion went through a coniferous forest with lots of Douglas-Fir in addition to the usual Lodgepole Pine. By the time we got there we were running out of time, so didn't stop and bird the forest. In fact, we got a late start this morning, so didn't really have enough time on any of it.

Except for the last four miles, which were in the National Forest, the road was dotted with a few homes (some occupied, others for vacations) and a couple of guest ranches, etc.

The road came out to US-26, which was a fast way back to Moran Junction--five miles shorter and much straighter. It descended a 6% grade for much of the way, and we were surprised to discover how much we had ascended.

We were almost back to the trailer when we encountered a large number of cars beside the road. It turned out to be a mother Moose and her very young calf. The calf was very hard to see in the shade of a pine tree. The mother was behind willows feeding in a pond close to the road, but gradually worked her way out into the open. Jim was able to get nice pictures of the adult in its natural habitat, eating pond plants. The baby remained in the shade, impossible to photograph.

While Jim was photographing her, I drove back to the trailer to leave a note for Clair and Sue about the Moose, then went back for Jim. Then all the way back to the trailer we worried that we'd meet them on the road, so looked carefully at every oncoming vehicle--and there were a lot of them. But it turned out just fine. When we got to the trailer, they were just getting out of their vehicle to see if there was a note on the door.

We went to lunch at the nice restaurant here in the Colter Bay complex. Food was fine. Then we came back to the trailer and got the scoop on where they had seen the various animals and birds in Yellowstone. It looks as though Tower Falls Campground will be the most centrally located for pursuing them. We'll leave early tomorrow to drive the 80 miles to get there. It takes no reservations, which is good. (Public campgrounds that take reservations normally don't do so for last-minute arrivals. You have to know several days to a week in advance. This is not like private campgrounds or motels, which you can call on your arrival day. We never know how long we will want to stay anywhere, so try to avoid having to make reservations.)

The next installment will include our experiences in Yellowstone.