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Texas to the Rockies - Spring 2006

by *Sylvia R. Gallagher*

Part 7

8:30 p.m., Sat., June 24, 2006

Tower Falls Campground, Yellowstone NP

We left Grand Teton around 7:30 this morning. Before departure we dumped both our black and gray water because it looks as though the places we might stay in Yellowstone don't have dump stations. The huge campground at Colter Bay has only one dump station, but since the campground isn't full and it was fairly early, there was no one there. Its location is pretty strange. It's oriented so arriving campers can dump, but they have to swerve to the left side of the main road through the campground. Departing ones have to drive all the way around a camping loop to be oriented correctly. Then after dumping they have to drive all the way around again. I wouldn't want to be camped in that loop. There is another dumpstation in the complex, at a gas station, and I went over and looked at it, but it costs \$10.00 to use. Forget it!

Clair and Sue's wildlife places seemed to be clustered around Tower Falls Campground more than any other, so we were determined to get a site there. The book said it has only 36 sites. We had an 80-mile drive, so thought we ought to get here in a couple of hours, but we didn't make it until around 11:30. I made one stop at a bookstore--found nothing. The rest of the time we were actually driving. Most of the roads were OK, but the last 17 miles from Canyon to Tower was pretty slow. It's steep, curvy and

mountainous, and a portion of it is in horrible condition. Furthermore, after we passed Dunraven Pass there were hordes of tourists barely or not off the road, so we had to creep by them. Many had scopes set up and were looking far off for Grizzly Bears and perhaps Wolves--based on what Clair and Sue had told us about the area. With our trailer in tow, there would have been no way to stop even if we wanted to. However, we did see one sow Black Bear with two cubs running across through the open woodlands below us. That was the first bear on the trip.

Before that we had seen large herds of Bison in the Hayden Valley and nearly hit an Elk as she emerged from the bushes and stumbled into the road. If she hadn't found her balance, we would have struck her.

When we got here we discovered that the Tower Falls campground only has a few sites long enough and level enough for a trailer like ours. In the first one we tried, even with all three of our boards we couldn't get it level. A nice man saw our plight and pointed out that site #3 was long, level, and empty. He said he usually likes to take it, but it was occupied until this morning. It's on the edge of the campground, but the front edge--right next to the host, dumpster (drawback: hinge sounds like a bugling elk, of which there are none around here), telephone, pay station, and even a water faucet from which we can fill our tank. We thought it might be noisy, but so far the people are quiet. No generators are permitted in this campground at all, thank goodness. We have a view across toward a hillside with sagebrush and grasses. In the foreground is a mixture of grasses, shrubs, and three species of tree: Douglas-Fir, Engelmann Spruce, and lots of Lodgepole Pines. Even though the sites are crammed together, it's ever so much nicer than the gargantuan campgrounds elsewhere in the park, where we've stayed on previous trips. We promptly signed up for three nights and can, of course, stay longer if we want to.

I spent the afternoon editing the previous installment of my diary, so have done no exploration of the area. Jim went down to the campground entrance, where there is a general store and bought a paper in the middle of the afternoon. He said it was mobbed with people then--probably all those folks we encountered up on the mountainside looking for bear. Some of the people were at the store, while others were looking at Tower Falls, a 100-yd walk.

Weather pleasant with a high in the 70s, I'd guess. It clouded up some in the afternoon and we've heard occasional rumbles of distant thunder, but nothing particularly threatening.

8:30 p.m., Sun., June 25, 2006

Tower Falls Campground, Yellowstone NP, WY

This morning we drove out the northeast exit road toward Cooke City and Beartooth Pass. Much of this area is the Lamar Valley, an open, undulating valley where wildlife is expected. We got going around 6:30, before there were too many other cars on the road.

We hadn't even reached the junction with the Lamar Valley road when we encountered a Red Fox in a patch of forest. This one was quite gray (they range from red to gray), but its white tail-tip clinched the ID. Even though it was pretty shady, Jim thinks he got some nice photos of it.

We hadn't driven too far east when we saw a couple of cars stopped. It turned out to be a very large male Black Bear, cinnamon morph. It was obviously used to people and foraged near the road for quite a while, then ambled across it and foraged some more on the other side. It was difficult to get good lighting on him, because we were heading toward the morning sun, but finally Jim succeeded.

A little farther along we stopped to look at some Pronghorn, most of which were too far out for photos. I spotted a speck way out on the meadow which others told me was just another Pronghorn, but I

didn't think so. When I put my binoculars on it, I discovered it was either a Coyote or a Wolf, but since it had a collar and a blue eartag, I decided it was probably a Wolf. Of course, the scope came out immediately. It was a wolf, the second one we'd ever seen in the wild! Our first was at a place where we stopped to camp along the Dempster Highway in the Northwest Territories--above the Arctic Circle. Jim got no photos of that one either.

Farther out in the valley there were several large herds of American Bison, as well as many smaller groups. Of course, Jim had to photograph them, too.

We stopped at the beaver lodge Clair and Sue had told us about, but of course the animal wasn't out. We also saw a nearby Lodgepole Pine that it had gnawed deeply all around and was well on the way to felling. It must have had a trunk diameter of at least a foot. Curiously enough the pine was on the opposite side of the highway from the creek where the lodge is, but there were no trees--not even willows--in the creek, so I guess it was hard-up.

We turned around at the end of the valley where the road started to ascend through a narrow canyon. Clair and Sue had told us there were sometimes Mountain Goats and Sheep high up on the mountainsides, but we weren't interested, having seen those animals closer on other occasions, so we turned around at the 2nd campground out the road and came back. We saw little of interest on the way back--just the same Bison and Pronghorns--and lots more traffic.

It was a little early to return to the trailer for lunch, so we headed out the road towards Mammoth for about three miles, then turned north for maybe a quarter of a mile to the trailhead for Hellroaring Rapids. This was where C & S told us to look for Pika. We saw the rocky slope where the animals no doubt are, but didn't see any. However, we didn't look very hard, for we had no sooner gotten there when we discovered a Williamson's Sapsucker nest. It was at

eyelevel for Jim if he clambered up the slope a little ways--not an easy place to stand for half an hour or more. Jim thought the female looked different from those in California, the head being more stiped and less plain. I really couldn't remember, so will have to check the slides of California ones and compare them with these when we get home.

While he was busy with the sapsuckers, I wandered around the small parking lot and out the trail a little ways. I heard a song that reminded me of a MacGillivray's Warbler, except that it was coming from high in the treetops and was one-parted, not two-parted as I expected. I tried for a while to see the bird, but finally had to go back and get my tape recorder. By then the bird had quieted down, so I had to stand around for ten minutes waiting for it to sound off again. Finally it did, first from a distance and then from closer up. I recorded it and played it back. After a lot of fly-bys high in the Douglas-Firs, I finally got a look at it singing, and it actually was a MacGillivray's. I watched it singing that song and recorded it again. Most of the time there were a lot of people arriving and departing from the trailhead, but fortunately at that time no one was around.

We went back to the trailer very happy. It had been a really productive morning.

Weather most of the day was clear with almost no breeze. Late in the afternoon it clouded up and we had a few mild thundershowers. They dropped a fair amount of rain, but brought no wind. The rain half-way quenched all the campfires around and they have filled the valley with smoke, which doesn't help my allergies, which are bad enough from the pine pollen.

Have to quit now. Toby is pestering me to play with him. He's always extremely active in the evening. I've had to stop him a half a dozen times from trying to chew the electrical cord from the inverter in the bedroom. It's a new toy to him--and he dearly loves anything new.

9:15 p.m., Mon., June 26, 2006

Tower Falls Campground, Yellowstone NP, WY

Jim didn't want to go hunt for the Pika because of the mosquitos, and I didn't want to drive back up the road toward Canyon because of the awful road, so we decided to redo yesterday's jaunt out to the Lamar Valley. This time we didn't see anything to photograph. Even the Bison and Pronghorns were far from the road. We drove it slowly both ways; it was 10:00 by the time we got back to the Tower Junction.

So we decided maybe it was time to look at the scenic sites between the junction and Tower Falls. We pulled into the Calcite Spring parking area and were about to take the short trail to the overlook when I happened to glance ahead on the highway and saw a bunch of parked cars. It had to be a bear jam or something, so Jim grabbed his longest lens and camera and dashed off. As we approached the area, we kept looking for what everyone was seeing. It wasn't until we were almost there that we realized the subject was not way off, but right beside the road, with the people standing right across the narrow road from it.

It was a mother bear and two adorable cubs, who were gamboling and tussling all over the place. Much of the time they were in the sun, so Jim took lots of photos. He had to stand back because of the long lens he had brought. The mother bear was less photogenic. She spent most of her time with her head down in the ditch beside the road munching vegetation. We learned that this bear has been named Rosie and frequents this stretch of road most of the time. She's obviously totally used to people and not overly dangerous.

There were two rangers directing traffic past the place and keeping people from getting too close to the bears. They didn't keep them very far away though, another indication that this is a people-tolerant bear. He really was exasperated, though, when a passing

car stopped right next to Rosie in the ditch, and the woman on the side next to the bear jumped out to snap a photo.

We watched the antics of the cubs for at least half an hour while they were in plain view (lost track of time, it was so fascinating) and then for an equal length of time when they were back a little ways in the forest, hoping they'd come back out. (They didn't.)

In addition to keeping people from approaching the bears, the rangers also spent a lot of energy trying to keep them from standing on the low rock guard wall. On the other side was a slippery sandy/gravelly slope that was only 5-10 ft from the cliff face. Only a week ago (we read about it in the paper) a woman got on the other side of the wall to get a better photograph and slipped and fell to her death--with her ten-year-old daughter watching! Believe me, I showed that article to Jim!!

When the action moved a bit away, I started looking across the canyon of the Yellowstone River. I saw a couple of Osprey nests. One had an adult and some very young nestlings atop an extremely narrow column. Another was on a ledge, and the well-grown juveniles had walked off the ledge onto a flat place on the cliff. When they were all bunched up together, I thought they were a single Mountain Goat. (People were seeing goats farther along in the canyon.) But binoculars showed they were juvenile raptors. I went back to the car and got my scope and discovered three large, healthy-looking ones and one with less of the adult feathering sprawled out on the flat place. I saw it flutter its wings feebly once, but I doubt it'll make it.

After enjoying them for a while, I decided to walk along further and see if I could find the Mountain Goats. I couldn't. I had intended to walk back and see what Calcite Spring was all about, but before I got very far, Jim came along with the truck. The bears had moved off into the forest. We decided to check out Tower Falls instead. It was mostly hidden by forest trees, but pretty. Calcite Spring

tomorrow.

This afternoon Jim was talking to the camp host, who told him that it was Rosie we had seen way up the road on the day we arrived. Usually she doesn't go that far away. There had also been a wolf trying to get the cubs. Rosie had sent her youngsters scrambling up a tree and stood confronting the wolf. The host said a camper had shown him a full-frame shot of Rosie facing down the wolf! Clair and Sue had told us that wolves are regularly seen up that road, so maybe I'll have to screw up my courage and accompany Jim up there tomorrow.

8:45 p.m., Tues., June 27, 2006

Tower Falls Campground, Yellowstone NP, WY

This morning we decided we should drive up the road toward Dunraven Pass. It is reputed to be the best place to see wolves, and is the area where Rosie and her cubs encountered one. I discovered the road wasn't as bad as I feared, although coming back the narrowness of it accentuated the dropoff, a steep slope. I can't help contrasting the lousy roads in this park with the beautiful ones in Canada's Banff and Jasper. There the entire highway is beautifully wide with shoulders the entire length so one can pull over wherever there is something worth looking at. This road is probably only 18-20 ft wide and where the pavement ends at the edge, the road ends. The blacktop is piled high, so there is always a drop off of around six inches. There are occasional small turnouts and a few larger ones.

We left around 6:15 and drove up very slowly, peering down into the canyon and up the slope for bears, wolves, or whatever. Very few people were out and about at that hour, so it was OK to poke along. However, we were astonished to discover at the top two long pull-outs full of vehicles. One of them seemed to be an organized group, but I don't think the other one was. They were well equipped with binoculars and scopes, and I can only think they were looking for wolves.

We stopped and scanned for animals at a lot of the turnouts, but all we saw was a lone female elk. I think the people at the turnouts were prepared to spend hours in their vigil. We didn't think it was worth waiting because any wolves would be far below in the valley--far too distant for photos.

So we returned equally slowly back down the road and spent a little time at the tourist viewpoints in the Tower area, especially Calcite Spring, which we missed yesterday. We looked in vain for the Peregrine Falcon nest that Clair and Sue had told us was in that area. We did see one distant, lone raptor chick of some sort that had walked out of its nest. We couldn't see the nest, and no adult came in to feed it while we were there. It was way too far for photos anyway and could barely be seen with the scope.

Then we decided to drive the first part of the Lamar Valley road once more. We first encountered a large mixed herd of Bison and Pronghorns some distance from the road, but a bit farther along there was a beautiful male Pronghorn quite close to the road. I was driving and pulled past him so Jim could get shots of him lit up by the sun.

A slight distance farther were two females, one with an udder full of milk. We never saw her youngster. Jim got some shots of her, too. We drove on to the end of the first valley and the start of a narrow canyon and turned around. On the way back, we encountered a lot of cars at the two female Pronghorns, so slowed down to see what was going on. To our amazement, there was a Wolf out with the Pronghorns on the right side of the road. I pulled over to left side of the road where there was a bit of a shoulder--down 4 inches, of course.

Jim's still mad at me because I didn't stop right in the middle of the road to let him out, but I got chewed out by a ranger a couple of days before for doing that. He says to be sure to put in my diary that I made him miss 15 wonderful shots by taking those few extra

seconds to park correctly. I told him he's being silly. Anyway, I'm sure he got lots of wonderful images, because after I was parked and had gotten out, I watched the Pronghorn attack the Wolf. She raised herself up on her hind legs and tried to come down on it with her front hooves. It all happened so quickly, but I think the Wolf ran right under her and out the back. The Pronghorns chased that Wolf along parallel to the road for a hundred yards or so, then across it and off into the meadow. Jim followed along and got more shots of the Wolf, but I don't think anything of the action. While he was down the road, I spotted a second Wolf right where the action had started. It moseyed around, then crossed the road about 100 ft from me and disappeared after the first one. I wonder where the baby Pronghorn was hidden. Wherever it was, the Wolves didn't find it while we were there.

I think these were the same wolves we saw two days ago, for it was very close to the same area. Both of them had radio collars. (I'm not sure I could have told them from coyotes otherwise. They're pretty similar and size is hard to judge in such an open setting. Of course, if they radiocollar coyotes, I'll have to look carefully at the photos to be sure.)

We got back to the trailer around 10:30 and Jim decided to drive that Lamar Valley section one more time. This time I stayed in the trailer. He didn't find anything of interest.

Around noon the sky clouded up and by 1:00 we were having a first-class thunderstorm, which lasted an hour or so. It's been cloudy and cold all afternoon, but is clearing off now. I can see pink clouds over the hill outside the window.

8:15 p.m., Wed., June 28, 2006

Norris Campground, Yellowstone NP, WY

Not much to report today; it was moving day. Even though it was only a 50-mile drive, it took us the better part of the morning to accomplish it. Since we weren't going animal-hunting this morning,

we slept in a bit, getting up closer to 6:00 than to our usual 5:00. Jim had to carry the last of the gray water in buckets to the john and fill our tank from the faucet, which was conveniently close enough to connect a hose.

We drove westward to Mammoth, then took a five-mile side trip into Gardiner to shop at a "real" grocery store and get gasoline, which was somewhat cheaper than in the park. There was a flagger along that stretch of road. We thought it was construction, but when we read the Billings newspaper, we discovered that yesterday's rain storm had triggered a landslide and closed the road for hours yesterday. They were in the final stages of clean-up, but it was still one-way traffic when we went through.

We were anxious to get to Norris as soon as possible, not knowing how many sites we'd be able to get into. We arrived at 10:30, having averaged about 25 mph on the slow roads. We drove loop A and found it essentially full, then we tried loop B and half-way around it fell in love with a beautiful site, B-35, that looks out across a long meadow through a thin veil of young Lodgepole Pines--and a few older ones. We never got to loop C. The site is pretty level left-right, but it tilts up-hill pretty steeply. To level us up, Jim had to raise the front end as far as it would go, then put down the jacks in front, raise the front end jack again and put more boards under it and raise it some more, then lower the front jacks again. (We call this two-stage levelling, and this is the first time we've had to do it on this trip.)

Not many birds here--typical of Lodgepole Pine forest. Have only seen or heard Mountain Chickadee and Chipping Sparrow so far. However, Toby looked out the window and discovered a BIG "dog," so big that he didn't even bark or gruff at it, merely whined. It was a bull Bison just down the campground road a little bit, grazing on the roadside vegetation.

This morning when he was buying gas in Gardiner Jim discovered a piece of metal embedded in one of our truck tires. There was a tire store there, but the lot was so jammed full that we decided it would take forever to get service. So we continued on in order to get a campsite. After his nap he drove the 12 miles to Canyon Village. It turned out all the tire men were out on long rescue operations and wouldn't be back for a while. So Jim pulled the thing out there--turned out to be a screw with a blunt tip that was a little over an inch long and perhaps 3/8" in diameter. It was embedded at a 45 degree angle, as we determined by the wear on the head. When he removed it, no air leaked out, so maybe the tread is deep enough on this sturdy truck tire. He did it there so if air escaped, he could wait for a tire man to get back. We'll watch it for a few days as we drive slowly around Yellowstone. [The next day he had the idea of putting "Shoe Goo"--a tough tacky adhesive sold by many other names--in the hole. We've had no further trouble with the tire, and the Shoe Goo is still in place.]

We plan to stay here through the weekend and probably till the 4th, which is next Tuesday. Norris is pretty centrally located for sightseeing trips in various directions. We definitely want to return to Mammoth 20 miles north in hopes of seeing a Grizzly Bear. That's the only megamammal we've not encountered yet. Clair and Sue are retracing some of our steps in Colorado while we do theirs in Yellowstone. We enjoyed Sue's message tonight from Leadville and thought you'd like to read it:

"After yesterday's recital of your wolf episode [after the bear one the day before], I was beginning to find your emails more annoying than interesting (only kidding, just jealous). . .

"For a day of mainly driving from Point A to Point B, it was great. Such gorgeous scenery throughout this area.

"Thank you for telling us about Mt. Evans. We started the day hiking a bit near the top of Trail Ridge (Medicine Bow Curve) in

Rocky Mountain NP looking for ptarmigan with no luck. It was about 9 am before we finally got up there [from Longmont], and the ladies leaving the parking area as we arrived said they had seen one in their scope part way up the mountain. We tried, but no luck and none in finding moose down the other side of the park. [Clair's message sent at the same time said they walked over a mile on the tundra at over 12,000 ft., carrying heavy camera gear, of course.] "So we continued south to Idaho Springs. Beautiful sunny weather when we started up the Mt. Evans road. We didn't see much along the way except for the fantastic scenery, gorgeous wildflowers, a few marmots and one pika who quickly left his rock. We got to the top of the mountain, and Clair said there was a mountain goat right at the Visitor Center rocks. By the time I got out of the car with the camera, the goat had gone into the visitor area and was licking minerals off the floor. Not a very good picture, but at least we got to see a goat."

"We got back into the car and snow was falling. We drove around two turns and there were goats just right off the road--females with kids. Clair got shots, and then the snow was really falling and thunder was growing louder. The goats decided to move along, and the kids were adorable romping about. Sort of looked and acted like a whiter Toby. On down the road farther, another goat crossed the road in front of us.

"And finally about half way down the mountain, some Bighorn ewes and lambs ran across the road in front of us. They were really hightailing it, but again great to see, and who can't use more sheep butt shots?

"Clair said the best part of the trip down Mt. Evans Road was it was snowing so hard you couldn't see over the cliff!" [The drop-off is on the right side of that narrow road most of the way down, and nary a guardrail.]

Analyzing the above, we can see they did in one day what we spent at least a week doing. We still don't know how they do it day after day. Both ways seem to work, for they get great photos of some things, while we get others.

9:00 p.m., Thurs., June 29, 2006

Norris Campground, Yellowstone NP, WY

Around 9:30 last night after Jim was sound asleep in bed and I had pulled down the shades, Toby and I heard a sound right outside the window that could best be described as "schlumpf. . . shlumpf. . . schlumpf. . ." It kept getting closer and closer, and Toby decided it was definitely something alarming and started barking. (Jim continued to slumber.) I had sort of figured out what it was, so to keep Toby from seeing it and going berserk, I put him in his kennel before raising a blind. Of course it was the Bison biting off large mouthfuls of grass, flowers, etc., from immediately outside the trailer window. He couldn't have been more than five feet away. The neighbors from both sides were soon all over our site and right outside the bedroom window where Jim was now only trying to sleep--a gross breach of campground etiquette.

Finally the beast wandered off, but still later when it was practically dark he came back and ate some more. Then he went over to a dead snag of a Lodgepole Pine that still had some bark left and proceeded to rub some of the last of his winter coat off his back. We collected it as a souvenir this morning. Toby is fascinated by its odor and frantic to have access to it, so we have to keep it well away from his grasp. Jim thinks I ought to spin it and knit a sweater, but it would have to be for a very small doll, not me, unless I find a whole lot more.

We haven't seen the Bison at all this evening--so far. Jim just went to the phone and a little girl told him there is one in loop A right now. Don't know if it's the same guy. [By the time we left there, we had figured out there were at least two bull Bison in the

campground area and no females. They differed markedly in how much fur they had shed.]

This morning we got up at 5:30 and drove without breakfast up to the Mammoth area and took the Upper Terrace Drive, where C & S told us they'd seen Grizzly Bears in the evening. We drove the loop once looking for bears and a second time enjoying the thermal features, which I think are my favorites in the park. Their delicately sculptured features, tinted with various colors by thermal bacteria, are so beautiful. I especially enjoyed Orange Spring Mound and Canary Spring. The latter was just a large pool from above, but I climbed down a flight of stairs to where I could view where the pool overflowed, forming a beautiful set of terraces.

We went into Mammoth village and bought some breakfast. After that I walked around the lower portion of the terraces and discovered that Palette Spring was the most attractive feature there. People had told us that Mammoth is "no good any more, because it's all dried up." Actually, according to the brochure I picked up, the water moves around and moistens some areas for a while, then others. The famous Minerva and Jupiter Terraces that I remember from my first visit decades ago are just stark and white, with the deposits falling off in spots, but the other places more than make up for them.

Mammoth is the only place in the park where hot water saturated with carbon dioxide flows over calcium carbonate--reacting with it and converting it into soluble calcium bicarbonate, then redepositing it as insoluble calcium carbonate somewhere else as the water evaporates. This accounts for the delicate ripply details in the formations, which I never tire of watching, especially when there's water sheeting over them and they're tinted various colors. The colors are produced by bacteria, with the color ranging from yellow to orange to red to green to brown as the water becomes

increasingly cool. Different species are responsible for different colors.

After that we returned slowly down the road back to Norris, stopping at every conceivable feature. We saw lots of Elk and Bison, but no bears of either species. At one point on the road there was a large lake out in the middle of a meadow--Swan Lake, I think it's called. Since there was a large parking lot near it, we stopped. I couldn't find any swans, but with my naked eye saw a couple of specks on the water, which turned into a whole lot of ducks when I put my binocs on them. So I got out my scope to see what they were. I was able to identify Canada Goose, Lesser Scaup, Mallard, Ruddy Duck, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck and possibly Common Merganser. Another birder with a scope pulled up shortly afterwards and we both were watching them for a while. He left before I did.

It took quite a while to scan the entire pond and study them all. When I turned around to return to the truck, to my amazement I discovered 15 vehicles in the lot and more pouring in. The people were all milling about trying to figure out what the attraction was. Without binoculars, they couldn't see the ducks--and wouldn't have cared if they could. Most of them didn't even know why everyone else was stopped there. For the rest of the day we've been laughing at the Duck Jam I single-handedly created.

I didn't dare confess my "guilt," for a few days ago when I was trying to figure out the MacGillivray's Warbler song, a woman came up to inquire what I was watching. When I told her, she disgustedly turned to her daughter and remarked, "Just a bird!" Other birders (especially Terry Hill) have told me they've had similar experiences there. People can be downright rude, as this woman was. Imagine what 15 carloads of people might have done to me!

We photographed a few geological features and I also got some shots of the forest recovering from the 1988 fire. One place had

seen little recovery and a display explained that this hillside had burned in 1976 and the new trees from that fire had not matured enough to produce cones--and seeds--when the firestorm of 1988 burned the area again. Thus the seeds for germination had to arrive via other means.

We got back to the trailer around noon. Again it clouded up in the afternoon and we had a very short thunder shower. Before that it was pretty warm--but still in the 70s, not the 92 degree forecast for the lowlands.

We stayed in our site in the afternoon, leaving the park to the crowds. Early rising and quitting at noon work best for us. It gives us several hours before the traffic gets really thick on the roads. We notice that some of our fellow-campers don't get back from their sightseeing until 7:00 or later.

The campground seems to be completely full tonight, and I suspect most of these people plan to hold onto their sites all weekend. Certainly we do. I walked Toby around loop C and have decided that our site is the nicest in the campground.

8:45 p.m., Fri., June 30, 2006

Norris Campground, Yellowstone NP, WY

Not too much exciting today. We spent the morning exploring one of the loops of the nearby Norris Geyser Basin, a walk of 1.5 miles with plenty of ups and downs. This is the most active of the geyser basins and the most varied. It also contains Steamboat Geyser, the tallest active geyser in the world, which erupts when it feels like it with intervals from days to years. It last erupted about 13 months ago, but was still impressive today with some spurts of 10 to 15 feet every minute or so.

The reason for this basin's extreme activity is that it lies at the junction of three faults. This also explains the fact that each geyser, pool, mudpot, etc., is quite different from the one before. I

purchased one of their new full-color trail guides (published in 2005, 50¢ and well worth it). It explained the geology, chemistry (silica based here, so different from Mammoth), microbiology, etc., of the basin in general and the features in particular. I had obtained one yesterday for the Mammoth area.

It was 11:00 by the time we got back to the truck, having started out at 7:00. We really poked along, enjoying each feature. I recorded the sounds from some, and Jim photographed many. I never tire of watching these thermal features and look forward to seeing them again whenever I come to this park. I'll have to take in the Porcelain Basin another day. It is a shorter walk, but involves more elevational change than the portion we walked today.

Afterwards we drove north and south on the park roads looking for any large mammals that "needed" their pictures taken, but found none. Late this afternoon in the campground we had a visitation of one of the two male Bison--not our late-night visitor--and Jim pursued it all over the place, photographing it digitally. (There are two large male bison that roam the campground area. We can tell them apart because one has lost much more of its winter coat than the other.)

It clouded up around noon and was cloudy most of the afternoon, which isn't good for our solar panels. Our batteries are on the low side, so I'll curtail this episode. I wanted to include more of what I learned about the scientific aspects of the thermal features, but won't.

Sat., July 1, 2006

Norris Campground, Yellowstone NP, WY

No entry.

9:00 p.m., Sun., July 2, 2006

Golden Stake RV Parks, Brigham City, UT

We had to leave Yellowstone before we really wanted to because our batteries were just too low. Even though our site was pretty open, the only time of day there was much sun was rather early in the morning, when it was shaded. The rest of the time, we had lots of clouds, so our solar panels just weren't doing the job. Our refrigerator flashed "lo DC" over and over, and when we checked the voltage it was below 11 volts. Lights were dim, pump barely worked unless we turned all the lights off. The last night we were there I read by flashlight after it got dark. The forecast was for several more similar days, so we knew we had to go where there was an electrical hookup, and with the long holiday weekend in progress, we might as well head for home. So that is what we did this morning.

Upon reflection, Jim thinks maybe he depleted the batteries by using the power jack to raise the front end of the trailer so much. He's resolved to do it manually in the future when we're camped without electricity. It's not that difficult, and he did it for years.

Our voltage was so low that I didn't dare try to fix breakfast in the trailer, so we decided to drive to West Yellowstone 27 miles away and find a restaurant. After driving through the town and not finding anything that was both appealing and open, we parked just past the town on a wide parking area and fixed breakfast there. By that time the voltage had come up a little from being hooked up to the truck. Then we continued on US 20 to I-15 and drove about 315 miles, arriving here in Brigham City around 3:00 p.m. This is a rather crowded RV park, but very shady--nice when the temperature got up to 95 degree. Our converter box has been working steadily and our voltage is now up in the green. Haven't checked what that corresponds to on the voltmeter.

Yesterday morning we explored some areas south of where we'd gone the day before. We didn't get a particularly early start,

because I was already aware of the voltage problem and didn't want to turn on the lights to prepare breakfast.

Jim drove very slowly, and we both looked for animals. We were rewarded by a beautiful male Elk with a huge rack in fresh velvet. As with most roadside Yellowstone animals, he paid no attention as Jim photographed him. He was pretty much in the shade that early, but Jim felt he got some nice images anyway. Interesting enough, on our way back, the same fellow was the cause of an "Elk jam" and was out in a meadow nearby. Unfortunately he was lying down in the tall grass with his back to all the gawkers, but Jim still took some pictures of that beautiful rack.

We took the 1/3-mile walk to Artists Paintpots. They were mildly interesting, but two beautiful blue flowers caught my eye more. I photographed both of them and also took some notes. I identified them with no difficulty from my Yellowstone/Teton plant book that evening.

Roundleaf Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*). I had a bit of trouble with this one, because it didn't have round leaves. But when I read the text, it said the round ones are basal and wither early. It has linear leaves that clasp the stem. It also noted that the buds are upright, but when the flowers come out, they droop or or horizontal-to keep rainwater away from the pollen, according to the book.

Fringed Gentian (*Gentiana detonsa*). I had heard of this flower and guessed what I was seeing, for it looked like some of the gentians I'd elsewhere on other trips. The petals were finely fringed. There was a dense carpet of them one place on the trail. The book says this is the official flower of Yellowstone and blooms throughout July and August. They must be more widespread later in the summer, for these were the only ones I saw in the park.

We walked the short loop trail around Terrace Spring and I walked the half-mile trail around Fountain Paint Pots. This latter area is

justifiably famous. It had two geysers that are active most of the time, Clepsydra and Spasm, and I was able to photograph them both in the same picture. Other features are close together, too, and highly varied. The paintpots are a large pool of boiling mud with bubbles all over the surface and a variety of colors around the edges--again due to various colors of bacteria that like different degrees of cooling.

This boardwalk trail was mobbed with people, speaking many different languages. Several tourbuses had let their passengers out to walk the trail, and the parking lot also had lots of cars. We happened to arrive at the same time as a group of Japanese tourists were setting out on the trail. Whenever I encounter crowds like that, I make a point of walking the trail the opposite way from most people. This way if anyone is particularly annoying, I don't have to put up with them the entire way around. The Japanese weren't exactly annoying, just numerous and loud.

In situations like that, I seem to spend almost as much time watching the people as I do looking at the scenery. Everyone seemed to be very busy taking pictures of each other, often with the most uninteresting backgrounds. In order to take the picture, the photographer would stand on one side of the boardwalk and the subject(s) on the other, blocking traffic until the job was done. One lone Japanese(?) woman, who didn't seem to be with the tour, asked me to take her picture near the paintpots. She'd definitely not chosen the best place for the picture, but there was some of the feature behind where she was standing. I tried to put her in the left half of the picture and the paintpot in the right, but she kept stepping into the middle of the scene, which offended my sense of what constitutes a good picture. Finally I told her where to stand and got some sort of picture for her. She had a digital camera with a little screen viewfinder. It was such a glaringly bright day that I could barely see to compose the photo. That really made me thankful I was shooting film. (Actually my digital camera does have

an old-fashioned viewfinder option, but I don't know if the little one this woman was using does.)

After that mob, we decided it was time to turn around and drive back to the trailer and leave the park to the crowds for the rest of the day. When we got back, Jim hooked the truck up to the trailer and ran it for about an hour and a half, hoping it would charge the battery. It seemed to boost it almost to 12 volts, but it didn't last. As I noted earlier, the voltage was abysmal last night.

The clouds were really thick all afternoon, and around 1:30 we had a strong hail storm that lasted maybe 15 minutes. Fortunately the hail was only pea-sized, so it didn't do any damage. We always worry about our vent covers and solar panels. Of course the mid-day darkness didn't help our batteries.

We've been really impressed by the new Lodgepole Pines growing all over the park. They all germinated after the 1988 fire and are all about the same size--ca. 6-10 ft tall--and crowded extremely close together. I suppose the taller ones will eventually shade out the slightly shorter ones and thereby thin out the forest. Even so, mature Lodgepole Pine forests are pretty tightly packed. I'm sure the park has learned its lesson and won't suppress all fires as they did in the past. Patches of burned areas serve as natural firebreaks, and in 1988 there weren't many.

Usually when we've been on the road this long, we're ready to go home. Unfortunately, this time we aren't. However, the summer crowds are out, and the breeding activity will soon be finished, so I guess we'll have to put Yellowstone on our list of places to go back to soon. Clair and Sue were there in early June and had much smaller crowds to contend with. We'll have to do that--maybe next year.

8:15 p.m., Mon., July 3, 2006
Country Aire RV Park, Cedar City, UT

Last night our bedroom in Brigham City was pretty warm. Not only was the air warm, but the converter box puts out a lot of heat and it ran all night long.

Just a day of driving 310 miles. The traffic through the Salt Lake City to Provo megalopolis wasn't bad. I guess a lot of people had the day off. That, of course, portends heavy traffic all the way from Las Vegas home tomorrow. We'll make the decision whether to stay in Barstow when we get there.

A hot day, with a high forecast here in Cedar City of 93 degrees, and I think it was probably about that when we arrived around 3:00. It was really uncomfortable in the bedroom for an hour or so. However, clouds were building and later in the afternoon we had a couple of good thunder showers, and it's been raining lightly and steadily for an hour or so. Temperature turned comfortable when the clouds and rain started. The trailer cooled off quickly, for there was a lot of wind, too. According to the paper, there are 8 to 10 lightning-caused fires burning throughout this corner of Utah. Don't know if this rain was widespread enough to quench any of them.

As we drove through the high country along the road, we were astounded at how many dead Utah Junipers ("cedars" locally) we saw. They seemed to be in patches with abrupt cut-offs to healthy ones. The prolonged drought in this area is responsible for the die-off, I believe I've been told.

11:00 a.m., Thurs., July 6, 2006

Home

I awoke at 4:30 a.m. on July 4 and promptly got up. I hoped that if we got an early start Jim wouldn't want to spend a night sweltering in Barstow. We had clouds, patchy rain, and some thunder and lightning almost all the way to Las Vegas. Despite that, it was 88 degrees as we were driving through St. George. Cedar City had clearly been the place to spend the night. I think it was in the high

60s when we left in the morning.

We stopped for lunch in Barstow, leaving Toby in the truck with the engine and two A/C's running. (It was 95 degrees.) Even so, I worried that somehow the truck engine would stop or something and gulped my mediocre hamburger. But it all worked out OK. We got home around 3:00 p.m., having gained an hour enroute. We drove 430 miles; 300 is our usual day's drive towing the trailer, especially on freeways like those in California, which mile-for-mile are even worse than Utah's. We have to use the right two lanes, which are in terrible shape from trucking.

I'm wondering if some of the dead junipers in Utah weren't caused by fires. As we drove along I-15 between Cedar City and St. George, we passed the area that was afire when we came through there last year at about this time. Many skeleton trees were evident in that area.

Getting home is always hard. Temperature was warm and muggy, so it was a sweat literally as well as figuratively to get everything unloaded from the trailer. I've been doing laundry for two days and will do one more blanket and the throw-rugs tomorrow.

Toby has been busy getting acquainted with his "new" home. He's spent more of his nine-month life in the trailer than any other place--three months here before we left and four months on the road.

I took him for a walk around the neighborhood yesterday afternoon, and he decided the fire hydrant across the street was another strange animal. He crouched down about six feet from it and started gruffing softly at it and whimpering. Then he approached it very cautiously--something he was never permitted to do with strange wild animals. When he got up to it he cavorted around it trying to get it to play with him. (A man driving by in his car was grinning all over his face at the performance.) I thought it was curious that a dog that has seen Moose, Bison, and all sorts of

lesser animals would find a simple urban fire hydrant new and strange.

We've been cautiously letting him have the run of the house, and I'm finding he's not as mischievous as I feared. He seems to want to stay near me, which is what I prefer anyway. I wanted a loving little companion, and that's what he's turning out to be--although he isn't as little as we hoped. I just weighed him on the bathroom scale--about 11 lb. (Charlie was 7 lb when he was healthy.)

He's a great traveller--curls up in his little bed in the truck, no matter how long the drive, and even stays there when we leave him alone in the truck. In the evening he wants to play and is forever snatching things he shouldn't. He always wants something new. Jim just went to 99¢ Store and bought him a pile of new stuff, including a precious little stuffed dog that looks just like him--he'll probably never get a chance to tear that one up, it's so cute. We gave him the beach ball, which he chases all over the place. The other stuff we'll deal out gradually.

In retrospect it really was a wonderfully relaxing trip. The screw in the tire, which Jim removed and plugged with "Shoe Goo" was the closest we came to either car or trailer trouble. I didn't have the serious goals that I'd had on previous ones. No workshop depends on what we were able to photograph or record. So we sort of went with the flow and figured out where to go next after we were tired of where we were. Mosquitos weren't bad, so I spent many delightful afternoons outdoors embroidering and enjoying the setting and its wildlife. Our jaunt to Yellowstone was a spur of the moment decision--and a wonderful one. Staying in the smaller campgrounds was a wise decision. We had a great time there. My only regret is that we had to leave the park prematurely.

Return to page telling about [Sylvia's Trip Diary](#).

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