

Trip to Western States - 2008

by Sylvia R. Gallagher

INTRODUCTION. My husband Jim is a bird photographer and I am a bird sound recordist. We use the photos and sounds in Birding Skills Workshops and other programs I prepare for Sea and Sage Audubon. When home in Huntington Beach, California, I work hard (too hard this past year!) preparing and presenting workshops. Then we try to take off for several months each year in our Chevy Suburban with our old 26-foot trailer in tow and get more photos and sounds—and also get some time to just relax and enjoy being in beautiful places. Our two-year-old miniature poodle, Toby, accompanies us.

Part 1

Mon. & Tues., Mar. 31 & April 1, 2008
Black Rock Campground, Joshua Tree NP

No entry.

4:45 p.m., Wednesday, April 2, 2008
Hole-in-the-Wall Campground
Mojave National Preserve, CA

We're on the road for three months this time—no timetable to be anywhere at all. Hurray! We left home Monday around 10:30 a.m. after spending three grueling days packing the trailer. It was only a short drive to our first stop, Black Rock Campground at Joshua Tree National Park. However, it turned out to be longer than we had hoped. At one point on the freeway there was a lot of tangled up industrial-strength water hose all over the lane we were in. Jim tried to straddle it, but it was impossible to get out of the lane, so he apparently ran over it. A few miles farther down the road, a guy pulled up beside us and pointed at the rear of the trailer—the usual, “You’ve got a flat tire.” signal. But when I opened the window, he yelled, “Hose dangling from the rear of your trailer.” Jim pulled over on the shoulder and found that we had been dragging some 20 feet of the heavy hose several miles after running over it. Fortunately he was able to disconnect it from the underside of the trailer and pull it out with no trouble. We drove on, much relieved that it wasn't a flat tire.

Unfortunately, when we stopped to eat lunch at Denny's in Moreno Valley, we discovered water flowing profusely from underneath the trailer. That hose had apparently damaged our water tank. (It was the fresh water tank, because it was clear water flowing out and it didn't stink.) After slow kitchen service in Denny's and a gobbled lunch, we recalled an RV repair place we'd patronized last November in Hemet, so headed down there. I thought I remembered how to find the place, but misremembered the street. We drove several miles east on Stetson, then north until we came to Acacia, which also sounded familiar. We started back on that, but by then Jim had lost all confidence in my ability to find the place. So we headed south to where our large-scale map indicated there was an Auto Club office. It showed it on

the corner, but it wasn't. I went across the street to a gas station/minimart, but the clerk was new in town and no help. Even the yellow pages he had didn't list the place—it was some off-brand of yellow pages. He did know the AAA office was just down the street, so we went there. In that office they had a better yellow pages, which even had an ad for the place. It WAS on Acacia. So we went up there.

We had been afraid we'd be stuck in Hemet forever getting a new water tank for our 1987 trailer, but it turned out to be just the drain valve that was knocked out—and the threads weren't even damaged. They were able to put a new one in and we were on our way. He advised against filling our tank with Hemet water—bad tasting.

Despite the delay we arrived at our destination by 3:30. It turned out the water in the campground was probably just as bad as the Hemet water. The campground is very near the town of Yucca Valley, so it's probably their city water. We had to fill our tank with that. The entire campground is subject to reservations, so we were only allowed to sign up for two nights. It turned out the site we selected was reserved starting Wed., so we'd have had to move. We hate to make reservations.

Except for a little walk with Toby around the campground, we just collapsed for the rest of the day. I had brought a casserole for dinner, so it was easy to stick it in the oven. The campground wasn't particularly birdy—no standing water, wildlife feeding prohibited. Jim set up his water drip, which may have been legal, and surreptitiously cast a little birdseed. We did attract Western Scrub-Jay, Gambel's Quail, White-tailed Antelope-Squirrel, and California Ground-Squirrel. He really didn't need pictures of any of those and didn't dare call attention to his set-up by sitting outside with his camera anyway.

Yesterday I walked around the area for a couple of hours trying to find something to record. The most interesting was Pinyon Jays in a couple of places. I even heard their calls a couple of times, but got no recordings. Spent the rest of the day reorganizing the contents of the trailer, napping, reading, doing embroidery, etc. We were both exhausted from the hurry of getting ready to go, so it was actually a very pleasant day. Unfortunately, in the process I discovered that I had left home the photos I was copying in my embroidery—a Hooded Oriole beside a huge sunflower, the same one that's in the painting by Pat Cabe that we have on the wall in our front entry. I emailed Bettina Eastman, who lives in our next-door house, and asked her to mail them to me. We were pleased to discover we had a super-strong cell-phone signal and could send Pocketmail right from our front couch. (Of course, Jim first made a trip to the office to where I had thought I had seen a pay phone.)

By then we were tired of Black Rock Cpgd. I was trying to think of where to go next, and Jim, who nearly always makes me figure out where to go, suggested, "How about Hole-in-the-Wall?" We'd been there a couple of times many years ago and loved it. It's twenty miles north of I-40 in the Eastern Mojave Desert. I was happy to discover the road is now paved all the way; before, the last 10 miles were gravel.

It was about a 150-mile drive, and we got here around noon. We were happy to discover that the campground has been greatly enlarged, with nice spacious, well-separated back-in and pull-through sites and a campground host. Very few people were in residence. (Before, it had been pretty primitive. The sites were impossibly small and tilted for any kind of RV. The only place to park was a large open area; we had just pulled up to one edge. Furthermore, all the riff-raff in LA or wherever arrived noisily with their ORVs late Friday night.) It really looks nothing like what we recalled

and it may turn out that the day-use area down the road is actually the old campground. We'll have to find that out tomorrow. Right now we're happy just enjoying the new campground.

Before selecting a site, we filled our tank with good water. Unfortunately, it was still half-full of bad water. However, there's a water faucet not far from our campsite, where we can get drinking and cooking water while we use up the bad water for washing. We had already decided to stay here five nights and have Bettina send my embroidery pattern to us in Needles; we can pick it up Monday.

Weather has been delightful—nights in the 40s and days in the 60s and low 70s. Breezy, but not really windy.

As the preceding account shows, we've really accomplished very little since we left home. Looking forward to a little relaxed exploring the next few days.

Thurs., April 3, 1008
Hole-in-the-Wall Campground

No entry.

11:15 a.m., Friday, April 4, 2008
Hole-in-the Wall Campground

Just before dinner, Wed., Jim took Toby for a walk, using his favorite "flexi-leash." Toby, of course, took full advantage of his freedom and waded around in the weeds, sticking his nose into everything. When they came back, he was absolutely full of Filaree seedheads. Those are the little twisty things we used to call "clocks" when I was a child. We'd take them out of their pods and watch them twist up. They're also just the thing to twist themselves into soft poodle fur. We had to take him out onto the picnic table and brush and comb him for 15-20 minutes to get them all out. Now Toby has to walk down the middle of the campground road. Filaree is an introduced European species and is all over the place here.

The wind got up late in the day and blew a gale all night, shaking the trailer and making it hard to sleep. I finally put my earplugs in and pretended the shaking was just Jim turning over.

Yesterday morning the wind was dying down, but still too breezy for much recording. We had decided we'd rather be in a different campsite with our dinette window facing the morning sun, instead of the afternoon. So we spent a while moving, then drove to the new visitors center. It has a short video on the reserve—very nice—and a small bookstore. I found one book that's turning out to be quite interesting—on a couple who traveled through the southwest on burro-back in the 1930s—just for the adventure of it all. [Note added later: The book is called *Burro Bill and Me* by Edna Calkins Price. Published by Death Valley Natural History Association, PO Box 188, Death Valley, CA 92328. I've finished the book now and recommend it highly.]

The visitors center and nearby picnic area are in the vicinity of where the old campground used to be, but still nothing looked very familiar to us. We did find the trailhead to where you have to clamber down a steep groove in the rocks using heavy metal rings anchored to the steep sides of the narrow passageway. (I wasn't tempted

to even try the first few steps of the access trail, let alone those rings.)

Lots of Rock Wrens were in the area, along with a few Say's Phoebes, House Finches, and Phainopeplas. We took a few scenics of the spectacular rock formations, some with beautiful blooming Mojave Yuccas in the foreground.

The origin of the term Hole-in-the-Wall is obscure—may even have been named by an early rancher who came to the area from a place with the same name in Wyoming. There are actually hundreds of holes in the steep cliffs lining the trails there, the remains of volcanic activity. They also could have been the origin of the name.

This morning there was just a light breeze, so I went out between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m. with my tape recorder. Brewer's Sparrow, Gambel's Quail, and a virtuoso Northern Mockingbird were singing up a storm—and I was able to get solos from all of them. After breakfast I walked the nature trail from the campground to the visitors center—about a mile. Lots of interesting plants were identified, and most of them were in bloom. Wish I'd carried my camera too. I also got some very good recordings of Black-throated Sparrows because there still wasn't much wind.

Just as I arrived at the visitors center another busload of kids arrived, so recording the Rock Wrens was out of the question. Jim had arrived to send email and to pick me up when I was ready. I was ready, so we came back to the trailer and tried to figure out how to use Jim's new I-Pod. Donelda had said it was easy and could be done with one hand. We had trouble figuring out how to use it, period. Jim still thinks it won't work well with one hand, so back we went to the trusty old tape recorder, which he can hang around his neck and run with one hand, holding the camera on its monopod in the other.

Lunch time.

4:15 p.m., Saturday, April 5, 2008
Hole-in-the-Wall Campground

I found the best way to make Jim a handy tape for luring in a bird was to bring up the sound from the commercial CD under Raven Lite on my computer, make a sonogram, mark out the portion I want to reproduce, attach to my computer that wonderful little external speaker that Jim bought (thanks to Donelda) to connect to his I-Pod, place the mic of the tape recorder up to the speaker, and play the sound over and over as many times as he wants. Very fast and efficient. He had tried to do it with the I-Pod, but had to be so careful not to get extraneous announcements, sounds, etc. This is especially bad when the CD has two species on the same track, as it did with the Black-throated Sparrow. (They do this so they can cram all the sound data onto fewer CDs. A CD can only hold 99 tracks.)

Jim immediately took the tape outside along with his camera. In no time he had the bird atop the bush he wanted it on and got his pictures. According to Jim's account in an email he sent to a friend, "After I played the tape, the male flew right at my face and fluttered just above my head as though he was considering landing on my hat. After photographing it for a while, I went back to the trailer and told Sylvia of my success. She grabbed her recorder [a five-minute process] and went out and recorded it for a while. I was standing next to her. When I had the photos we needed

and were walking out of the meadow, the bird followed us for at least 100 yards, perching repeatedly near us, scolding us and raising some little feathers on its wings. (We have photos of it with those feathers raised—don't recall which feathers they were.)”

Last night the wind got up again and blew hard all night long, rattling everything. It blew the lid off the Rubbermaid carton I carry my BBQ supplies in and we searched all over the desert this morning for it, but couldn't find it. It was pretty windy most of the morning, but is calmer now.

Because of the wind, I couldn't record this morning. We went over to the Hole-in-the-Wall picnic area, where we had heard the legendary “banshees” two mornings ago. They are sounds made by the wind blowing through all the holes in the rocks. This time the wind must have been coming from a different direction, for I heard no “banshees.” I had been planning to record them today.

Our only recreation today was to drive north nine miles on a rough, washboardy, dirt road to the Midhills Campground. Much of the area, including two-thirds of the campground, was very badly burned in a 2005 fire. A distressing amount of the beautiful—and scarce in this area—pinyon-juniper habitat was destroyed. We'd never take the trailer up there anyway because of the rough road. Also, most of the sites are too small. (It wouldn't be impossible, though.) Saw no birds, but did see a few wildflowers—nice stands of Sand Verbena and, in the campground where there were still some trees, Fremont Phacelia around their bases.

Came back, took Toby for a spin around the campground loop, and it was lunch time. Jim decided to place a Black-throated Sparrow atop a Mojave Yucca blossom. The bird got the idea immediately and was duly photographed.

Sunday, April 6, 2008
Hole-in-the-Wall

No entry.

5:45 p.m., Monday, April 7, 2008
Squaw Lake BLM Campground, Imperial Dam, near Yuma, AZ

Yesterday about all we did was attend the geology walk given by the park ranger. We learned a lot about the volcanism in the area and saw a wide variety of features within a hundred yards. Right next to the ranger station is a typical lava bed surmounted by a volcanic throat, i.e., a cylinder of basalt that protrudes above a horizontal bed. The whole thing looks like an inverted cupcake with plenty of frosting, according to the ranger. It was all revealed when the sediment in the valley wore away over many thousands of years.

The Hole-in-the-Wall area is a place where water from a spring seeped down into the molten magma, building up to tremendous pressures. The whole thing exploded in a split second, spewing foamy ash all over the place. When the foam cooled and coalesced, gas holes were left. These were enlarged by erosion over the millennia, producing the holes we see today. This is one possible origin of the name of the place. The hole could also be the deep throat of the volcano, although no one

knows exactly which depression it is.

Across the valley we could see about seven different layers of lava, interspersed with sediment, the result of various quiet lava flows over many years.

The ranger's presentation was very interesting and informative, but his attitude was a little bit irritating. He'd occasionally ask a question, obviously not expecting anyone to know the answer. When someone did, he acted annoyed because they'd spoiled his story—given away the “punch line” so to speak. Although this was a geology walk, he asked if anyone knew what the growth in the catclaw bush was. I said it was mistletoe, which annoyed him. Then he asked how it got there, and I said, “Phainopepla.” He'd obviously never heard of that bird (maybe didn't know it was a bird) and quickly changed the subject.

Most rangers would be delighted to learn something new and I could have told the group some interesting information about that bird. There were six of us, and the other four were teachers and seemed like fine folks. They also gave away the “punch line” occasionally. By then I'd learned to say nothing when he asked a question. Too bad, for he really did know a lot of geology and was otherwise quite friendly. I doubt he realizes the impression he gives.

After the walk I tried to do some recording in the relatively sheltered Hole-in-the-Wall area. Between the noisy hikers and the quiet birds, I had no luck. (I had heard a Canyon Wren sing a few songs during the geology walk.)

Did little the rest of the day because of the cold wind, which also blew most of the night.

We arose around 4:45 this morning because we had a lot to do in Needles: gasoline, propane, post office (had to wait 15 minutes for it to open), groceries. The guy in the place where we bought propane pointed out to Jim that the front tires on our truck were pretty worn and one even had a bulge, so he succeeded in selling us two new ones. He also wanted to replace the rear ones, but Jim said not yet. (They do look as though they need to be replaced soon, however.)

Our drive was 225 miles, and we got here around 3:00 p.m. We're dry-camped in a BLM campground near one of the reservoirs between the all-too-many dams on the Colorado River. This seemed like the closest place to the Mitty Lake area (another reservoir), which is supposed to have Black Rails calling this time of year. I've never seen or heard one and have proclaimed for decades that I don't even believe in the bird, but I hope I'll have to eat my words this time. This place doesn't have hookups either and the temperature has been in the mid-80s today, but we decided not to spend \$50-\$70 (according to Trailer Life Camping Guide) a night at the only place nearby that has hookups. (We hate those snobbish places.) It is closer to Mitty Lake, though. The breeze is nice, so we haven't been too uncomfortable since we got here around 3:30 p.m.

Tuesday, April 8, 2008
Catalina State Park, Tucson, AZ

No entry.

4:30 p.m., Wednesday, April 9, 2008
Catalina State Park, Tucson, AZ

The trailer was pretty hot for fixing dinner in at Imperial Dam. I was happy we'd had a fairly big lunch at a café in Parker on our way, so could just fix something simple. It turned out we had chosen the absolutely worst site for getting the last glimmers of the setting sun between the levee and the mountains. It did cool off fairly well at night. The forecast is for even warmer days ahead.

Yesterday morning we got up around 4:15 because I wanted to go hunting for Black Rails at first light—not any earlier because I was afraid I couldn't find the road. My calculations were just right. There were slight glimmers of dawn as we pulled out of the campsite. Mittry Lake Road is a gravel road along the east side of the Colorado River between the Imperial and Laguna Dams. We found it OK and drove slowly along, stopping and listening at all likely rail habitat—short-grass marshes with shallow water. According to information that Terry Hill obtained, the birds call as late as 7:30 a.m., so that gave me an hour and a half to mosey along about six miles of road. Unfortunately nary a rail, Black or otherwise, did I hear—unless you count coots. The other birds were pretty mundane, too.

We considered camping along Mittry Lake at a likely location and listening that night, but rejected the idea for two reasons: (1) The first half of the road was incredibly washboardy and would shake the trailer and its contents terribly—and there didn't seem to be any right speed. (2) We didn't think we wanted to endure the heat for another day. It did look like a nice thing to keep in mind for the future. There are lots of secluded little pulloffs and camping is free for up to ten days a year. If we had approached the area from the south, the first part of the gravel road was fairly smooth—and that part looked most promising for Black Rails.

We got back to the trailer around 8:30 and were on the road to Tucson soon after. Stopped for lunch in Gila Bend. Jim wanted to eat at Dairy Queen—or, rather, buy a double-chocolate Blizzard to put in the freezer of the trailer—but it was mobbed with customers, even at 11:00 a.m. So we continued on and found a combination Mexican and Subway almost back to the freeway. (It would have been easiest to find by getting off at the farthest east exit.) The Mexican section appealed to us. Jim ordered nachos with chicken. The server took a huge plastic plate and loaded it with multicolored chips, chicken, lettuce, beans, cheese, cheese sauce, sour cream, salsa, cilantro, and maybe more. By the time she was finished, I said, "That's enough for both of us," and he agreed. We decided to take it out to the trailer to eat so it would be easier to divide up. It was only around 79° then, and there was a nice breeze. The food was delicious, and I think we only paid around \$6.00 for it. What a bargain. We didn't even finish it all. Would recommend that place for sure.

We got to Catalina State Park on the north edge of Tucson around 3:00. Jim asked at the gate/office if we could go choose a site before registering. The volunteer working there inquired of the manager and was told it was OK. We found a really nice site—right next to the one we had last time and even better—and went back to register. It turned out that they don't assign sites at all. All we'd have had to do was register as we came in. Why the woman didn't tell us that is a mystery, but she didn't seem very bright.

Jim set up his feeding and watering station, deciding not to put up his blind, but to sit at the campground table instead, the weather being reasonably cool. I sat outside the rest of the afternoon watching the birds start to discover the area. Nothing especially remarkable, but I did see a Lucy's Warbler flitting through the trees. Jim could improve on his photos of that bird. Temperature was perfect, and I got lots of embroidery done, too. After working on my quilting at home for months, it was fun to do something more creative for a change. I'm doing a huge sunflower with a Hooded Oriole below it on a shirt right now.

(For those who don't know, I embroidered a bird for every state and province in North America, and pieced them into a quilt. I've been doing the quilting for a year now—a highly repetitious task, but one that goes well with watching TV in the evening at home. It's much too big to bring along in the trailer, though, and, besides, it would get dirty. The quilt has to be finished by fall because I've volunteered to give a program about it at the November Sea and Sage Audubon meeting. Each bird is one I've had a special experience with in that state/province, and I'll tell some of the stories, show slides of the quilt blocks and of Jim's slides from which some of them were embroidered.)

Dinner last night was pretty skimpy, too, after our huge lunch, so I didn't have to come inside very early.

This morning dawned cloudy and breezy. A front is passing north of here and dropping snow in northern Arizona. I had Jim drive me to the trailhead parking lot and walked the bridle trail back to the trailer. Between the overcast, the coolness (high not much over 70° today), and the breeze, the birding was disappointing. To make matters worse, I had put on a sock with a loose cuff that kept slipping down into my shoe.

Jim went into town to get a part for the trailer and do several other things. He came back happy with all missions accomplished—and the part fit. To top it off, he didn't even get lost—at least not very badly, whatever that means.

I tried sitting outside this afternoon, but it was just too cold and blustery, so I came in after about an hour. Jim stayed outside, sitting at the campground table shooting birds at his birdbath and feeding log. He came in a few minutes ago very happy with the Lucy's Warbler shots he got at the birdbath.

Time to fix dinner.

Thurs., April 10, 2008
Catalina State Park, Tucson, AZ

No entry.

12:45 p.m., Friday, April 11, 2008
Catalina State Park, Tucson, AZ

Yesterday I left Jim in the campsite hoping for birds to photograph and took the truck to the trailhead at the upper (east) end of the campground road. Just as I was getting out my gear, another birder drove up—a very friendly man named Dick from Denver. He wanted a birding companion. I told him I was going to be doing

recording, but he'd be welcome to come along if he had the patience to stand quietly while I recorded the birds. He said that was fine and that he really wanted to learn more about bird sounds. I discovered he was a low intermediate-level birder, but a good companion and I enjoyed his company all morning. He was fascinated with how one describes bird sounds and was, I think, impressed when I opened the front cover of my Kaufman field guide and showed him the checklist of ways to describe bird sounds that I'd developed for the Learning California Bird Sounds workshop that I had just finished presenting.

I was particularly interested in getting good Lucy's Warbler recordings and what I got are probably pretty good, but not totally without other sounds. It was fairly breezy, too. I also got Bewick's Wren—one of those simple two-buzzes songs—and Rufous-winged Sparrow. Other species were incidental.

At the end of the morning I brought Dick back to the trailer and demonstrated sonograms to him. I think he was impressed by their value as a learning tool and will install Raven Lite (free software from Cornell) on his own computer.

The afternoon was breezy, with a high in the mid-70s. Almost too cool to sit outside and work on my embroidery, but I did it anyway, because that was the only way I could see the birds coming to Jim's water and food. He put it way back at the rear corner of the trailer, although to my eye there was just as good a place right outside the trailer window. He swore that it wasn't nearly as good a tree.

Although there's not much left that we want to do, we've decided to stay here for the weekend; it's iffy to try to find a site in a new campground on Friday.

This morning I walked the 1/3-mile loop trail to the Romero Ruins. It turned out that a rancher named Francisco Romero built a rock-walled dwelling there around 1850 and lived there for several years—until the Apaches scared him out—while the Hohokam native Americans lived there from around 500 to 1150 and there is lots of archeological evidence of their presence. Why they call it the Romero Ruins trail is beyond me, when he only lived there 3 years and the Hohokam lived there centuries; their village ruins are still visible, too. All you can see of Romero is the walls of his cabin and the tumble-down walls of another building. Being considerably older, the Hohokam ruins are harder to discern.

The trail starts by ascending about 90 (according to brochure) steps, then leveling off and making a loop through the archaeological site. Excellent signs explain everything. As many as 500 people are estimated to have lived there at one time. Below the village is the confluence of two creeks, which ran more of the year than they do today. If they got dry, there were springs up the canyon not too far away. The Indians farmed the flood plain where today's campground is. I took photos of the ruins and also of several of the wildflowers that were along the trail. There are actually lots of flowers in bloom all over the park. I really should get more photos of them—maybe tomorrow. Photos:

Phacelia sp. - rangy shrub sprawling all over underneath the mesquite on the north-facing slope up from the creek. Don't know the precise species—there are many in AZ according to my plant book. Some are called Scorpionweed, and this may have been one of them.

Fairy Duster, *Calliandra eriophylla*. A shrub with beautiful pink flowers that look a bit like bottlebrush, but are spherical (ca 1.5 inch diameter), not cylindrical.

I think I recall seeing it years ago at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

Sat., April 12, 2008

Catalina State Park near Tucson

No entry.

9:45 a.m., Sunday, April 13, 2008

Catalina State Park near Tucson

The weather is on a warming trend, so before breakfast yesterday morning I took a long walk. Got nice recordings of Bewick's Wren and Lucy's Warbler. The Bewick's Wren was especially interesting. Usually they sing the same song over and over for as long as you care to listen. This one changed his tune every 2 - 10 songs. It sounded like I was hearing at least three different songs, but will have to check the tape more carefully to be sure. I did no playback; that often causes a change in song type.

While I was gone, Jim took Toby for a long walk around both campground loops. We have to keep him out of the weeds here, too. They get caught in his soft fur. At least they're not filaree or foxtail.

In our walks around the park loops we came upon two of the largest RV rigs that one can imagine. Jim couldn't stop talking about them, so I let him write the following: "The larger of the two was a converted semi cab tractor. Behind the cab they had added 25' of living space making it about 35' long—and the strangest part was that it was connected to the longest semi trailer allowed on the road, a 53-footer(!), making the whole rig nearly 90' long." (The trailer in question could probably carry 6 full-sized automobiles if stacked 2 high.) Fortunately Catalina State Park has some very long drive-throughs. It only stuck out in the roadway 3 or 4 feet at each end. If they had gone to a regular RV park, it appears that they would have had to rent two spaces and disconnect to get them off the interior roads.

"The other unit wasn't as long as the previous one, but it towed a trailer that garaged a Hummer." I think the living space was longer and the trailer was shorter, but the whole thing was still enormous.

After a late breakfast, we drove south on Oracle Rd., the main road toward the main part of Tucson, and did a lot of shopping. It was nearly lunchtime when we got back. We immediately turned on the A/C, but after our naps, we went outside and found there was a nice breeze and it was really pleasant in the shade of the trailer. We still kept the air on because the trailer really heats up when it's not parked in the shade.

This morning I changed the bed. It took me the better part of an hour, because I have to haul all the stuff out from the foot of the bed to get at it, then put it all back. Furthermore, I had to get an item out of just about every container down there; I'd postponed getting them until bed-changing day. Right now my back is killing me and I don't feel like doing anything else. I was going to work on my quilt stories on my computer, but sitting at the dinette bench typing is hard on my back, so I think I'll just

go lie down.

We really love Catalina State Park, and Jim was very happy with the photography he did in the campsite. During the time that we were here, he photographed Lucy's Warbler (described above), Abert's and Canyon towhees, Gila Woodpecker, Northern Cardinal, Cactus Wren, and Rufous-winged Sparrow. To have a Rufous-winged Sparrow come to his feeder log was a real surprise and a real thrill for Jim as the last time he was here he could only get shots of it up in the trees—and here it was posing perfectly for him.

Around noon we're leaving—hoping for a site in Madera Canyon, but there are only about three we can fit into, so we may have to go somewhere else. We don't want to go any earlier because we need to wait for any weekenders to leave.

Monday, April 14, 2008

Bog Springs Campground, Madera Canyon, AZ

No entry.

11:30 a.m., Tuesday, April 15, 2008

Bog Springs Campground, Madera Canyon, AZ

As the heading indicates, we were successful in getting a campsite in Madera Canyon. In fact, it was our favorite one, number 12. We got here around 3:00. Other campers arrived around 4:00 and, I'm sure, would have taken the site we got, even though theirs was just a camper on the back of a truck and could fit nicely into the smaller site across the way. This campground has only 13 sites. We signed up for three nights, but may stay longer.

This nice level site is on a rock-walled dirt pad that is elevated over the surrounding hillside. Right outside our trailer window we look down on the top of a large boulder that looks like basalt. It has a few small depressions on the top of it, and Jim placed his water bag tripod so the water drips into one of them, forming a little drinking pool. It's a bit too small for most birds to bathe. Of course, he put up all the other attractants—bird seed, orange half, hummingbird feeder, Magic Meal in the tree trunk and on the rock. Some previous campers had slung a woman's stocking filled with suet and birdseed over a tree branch and a little of it is left. Some of the birds go for that, too. There seem to be rips in the stocking, which is how the birds get the food out.

The major drawback to the set-up is that Jim has to sit in the blazing sun most of the day. Of course, he set up his blind, but that's not much protection from the heat. It got up to 90° yesterday in the trailer (95° in Tucson according to WeatheRadio) and was pretty uncomfortable for a couple of hours in the early afternoon. But we were pleasantly surprised when it started to cool off around 3:30. Today promised to be just as bad, but there's a strong breeze and it may be OK.

Yesterday we stayed in the campground all day long, and this morning as well. My back is still bothering me and a small amount of walking and a lot of sitting in my comfortable camp recliner is helping. I had hoped to do some walking in the canyon and, especially, go to a B&B where a Flame-colored Tanager is seen regularly. However, I was told that you have to park down the hill and walk up to the place if

you're not staying there. Between the heat and my back, I've not done it yet.

Jim's major goal here was to photograph the Arizona Woodpecker. We've had distant views of them in the treetops down in the canyon on other trips, but never up here. (Bog Springs Campground is 0.6 miles up a steep dirt road from the main creekside road in the campground and is on the west-facing slope.) Yesterday morning as we were eating breakfast a male came in, briefly checked out the Magic Meal in a tree cavity, and then flew off. Jim was sure it would be back. He sat in his hot blind for hours—maybe ten—yesterday, photographing all sorts of other birds, but not the Arizona Woodpecker. Several Acorn Woodpeckers came in regularly, and he was afraid they were a deterrent to the Arizona. This morning we got up before daylight and he sat out there several more hours. Then at around 10:30 I hear a loud “peek” that sounded like a Hairy Woodpecker, but seemed rougher. Since we hadn't seen a Hairy, I looked up, and there was the Arizona! It went to the Magic Meal and ate quite a bit. Jim got several photos (three maybe) and thinks they'll be good. What a thrill. After it finished there, it flew down to where I was sitting in the shade below the rock and fiddled around on the tree trunks right in front of me, so I got the best looks I've ever had of the bird.

Despite staying in the campsite nearly all the time, except for short Toby walks around the campground loop, I have a list of around 25 species. Regulars are Mexican Jay, Acorn Woodpecker, Dark-eyed (Gray-headed) Junco, Chipping Sparrow, White-breasted and Red-breasted (the latter rare per checklist) Nuthatch, and the beautiful little Bridled Titmouse. Today for the first time we saw a pair of Scott's Orioles and a male Cassin's Finch. While sitting away from the trailer, I've seen and heard a Cordilleran Flycatcher, seen a possible Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and heard a probable Dusky-capped Flycatcher [confirmed later when I listened to the sound on a CD]. During our early breakfast, before the sun rose to backlight the birds at the feeder, I identified Rufous, Black-chinned, and Broad-billed Hummingbirds [Magnificent later]. Other birds I've seen or heard from the campsite include Hutton's Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Lesser Goldfinch (curiously not at the feeder), Bewick's Wren.

We'll probably stay here a few more days.

Wednesday, April 16, 2008

Bog Springs Campground, Madera Canyon, AZ

No entry.

3:30 p.m., Thursday, April 17, 2008

Bog Springs Campground, Madera Canyon, AZ

During the early afternoon, Tuesday, the hottest part of the day, we decided it was a good time to drive down to Green Valley's Wal-Mart for a few items we discovered we needed. We took Toby with us and I stayed in the truck with him with the A/C on while Jim went in. According to our truck's thermometer it was 92° in Green Valley. As we drove up the grassy bajada returning to Madera Canyon and were just crossing the three one-lane bridges, the last of which is Florida Wash, it was still 88°, but when we got to our campsite, it was only 81°. What a dramatic

change in just a few miles. According to WeatherRadio, Tuesday was almost as hot as Monday in the flatlands, but it was much cooler in the mountains and was never uncomfortable.

We got back around 3:00, allowing plenty more time to sit outdoors and watch the birds while working on my embroidery. I sit on the opposite side of the big boulder where Jim's set-up is, so I can't see what he's seeing most of the time. We keep in contact with our little FRS radios so we don't have to shout. (Shouting doesn't work very well anyway with Jim's hearing loss.)

I was thrilled when Jim announced he'd just photographed "part of" (he didn't say which part) a female Arizona Woodpecker (it had been a male earlier) eating his Magic Meal. He later said that only the head and breast were visible. Some time later she came back and began to peck at an orange half and he told me he was able to shoot "the rest of her." But still he didn't have the classic profile that shows all the field marks, as she mostly had her back to him.

Late in the afternoon, I was in the trailer looking out the window when a Painted Redstart came in and bathed vigorously in the minuscule pool beneath Jim's water drip. Afterwards it went up and preened furiously for a long time. I carefully noted that it was an "under the wing" preener. Some birds are "over the wing" preeners and geneticists/taxonomists attach great significance to this difference in behavior. I don't really know why. It liked the bath so well that it came down and bathed twice more, each time followed by a thorough preening. I don't know if there's any natural water very close to the campground, so maybe this was a real treat for the bird.

That night the wind blew a gale for hours. (We've really had a lot of night winds, it seems.) Jim finally got up and closed the front awning, but says it's really in bad shape. We hope it'll last the trip—or we can find a new (or used) one somewhere. Jim worried about it the rest of the night and did little sleeping, but I just put in my earplugs to cut out some of the thumping and whistling of the wind and didn't try to decide if the movement was from the wind or from Jim tossing and turning. Actually I slept better than I had for several nights because my back is finally feeling better.

Jim's blind withstood the wind very nicely and didn't blow over or break apart. The ground where it's placed is like cement—and may actually be cement with a thin covering of dirt. He usually uses tent stakes and Bungee cords to hold it down. This time he got some huge rocks for three corners and weighted down the ends of the cords. For the fourth corner where there wasn't really room for a rock, he had the idea to fill one of the six-gallon water containers that he uses to carry water from a distant faucet to pour into our trailer's tank. He placed that next to the last corner and Bungee-corded it to the blind. It's all rock solid—and he can just pour the water into our tank when we leave.

My morning project yesterday was to try to find a place to send some emails. The brochure on the canyon said there was an outdoor phone at the Santa Rita Lodge, but I couldn't find one. I asked a guy who was staying there, and he said there wasn't one, but that his cell phone worked at the Proctor parking lot near the mouth of the canyon, so I drove down there. I got a signal that was often the maximum, but then down to one or two or even none. This can be OK for a telephone call, but is no good

for PocketMail. By this time it was 9:00 and the gift shop/office at the Lodge was open. So I went back there. The manager was on the phone (ordering a lot of bar soap for the lodge) when I entered the store, so I looked around and found a book (a newer edition of the AZ bird-finding guide than I had) and decided to buy it and ask her to use the phone at the same time. This she permitted me to do, but she wasn't very friendly about it. Actually, she wasn't very friendly at all, for she hadn't said "hello" to me when she finished talking on the phone and didn't yet know I was going to ask to use her phone. I decided we'll just have to go without email for the rest of our stay in the canyon. It's really a shame that the telephone company has taken out so many public phones.

The day was considerably cooler and the wind had died down to a brisk breeze. I wore a light jacket most of the time I was sitting outdoors. Nothing new was added, but Jim got more and better pictures of the female Arizona Woodpecker. The male has not come back at all, so he has only three shots of him, but he thinks they're first rate.

This morning at breakfast Jim finally announced, "I'm really tired staring at that tree," referring to the Alligator Juniper with the orange half and the Magic Meal (cornmeal & bacon fat). This was my cue to suggest that it was time we went down and looked for that Flame-colored Tanager. The instructions we had were that we were to park in the Amphitheater/Nature Trail parking lot 0.1 mile short of the Madera Kubo B&B cabins and walk up the hill to the B&B and look for the bird from the road. I had listened to the call of the bird on a CD of the Birds of Southeastern Arizona; the song wasn't on it. The literature said both the song and the call are very similar to the Western's. When I compared them directly, sonograms and all, I could tell no difference in the calls. The variability in the Western's "prit-er-ik" seemed to be so great that it encompassed the Flame-colored's. The books said the songs are very similar too. Anyway, as I approached the B&B, I could hear a song like a Western Tanager's coming from the treetops. Several birders were there before us, and they confirmed that it was the Flame-colored. In no time I had my binoculars on the bird. What an exquisite thing. It really is flame-colored, a brilliant red-orange.

It was much too high for Jim to photograph. All the people there were talking and shuffling their feet, but I still had to get a desperation recording. I announced loudly, "recording," which sometimes gives people the clue to be quiet, but these people didn't understand. After we'd all had excellent looks, I asked them to be quiet "for thirty seconds," but they still didn't understand that foot-shuffling is as bad as talking, so I gave up. Fortunately the bird sang all morning and there were times when the people were either not present or naturally very quiet, so I eventually got quite good recordings.

I found it interesting that the bird was singing almost constantly for at least an hour before it started calling. Then it called constantly for a long time. Then it sort of alternated between the two, calling for a few seconds to a few minutes, then singing for a while.

From time to time the bird came down to the orange halves and grape jelly (I think) that the B&B owners had put out. Jim got a few pictures, but doesn't think any will be really good. He kept having trouble with his equipment, too. First he broke a monopod and had to trudge back to the truck for another. Then he couldn't find the

batteries he had gone to fetch along with another monopod –they were in his pocket all the time—and then broke another monopod. (He had two flashes plus his camera on the poor thing—just too much weight. It probably would have been OK without the flashes.) By then he had discovered that there was parking for two or three cars beside the road near the B&B, so he brought the truck up the hill on his second trip. This time he set up his tripod, which he hates because he can't swing it around in all directions as he can the monopod. Despite all his troubles, he did get some photos, so he can count the Flame-colored Tanager as a new life bird. He only counts birds he photographs. It was a lifer for me, too. I use ABA rules—just have to see or hear it. (Actually I had to see this one, since its voice is so much like Western's.)

I actually think there were two of the birds there. Once I was watching one bird eating from an orange while another was singing in the treetops. The one I was looking at seemed duller and didn't have such a streaked back. I hadn't taken my National Geographic guide with me to look up the difference between the sexes, but when I checked later, I discovered that a female would have been yellow. The book did say that hybrids with Western are reported regularly in southeast Arizona. I wonder if that's what I saw. If Jim's photos of it come out, maybe I'll be able to tell.

Oh, I almost forgot. There was a male Arizona Woodpecker at the Kubo B&B this morning, and Jim shot the better part of a roll of him, so now he has lots of pictures of both sexes of that bird.

We hung around the B&B from about 8:30 to 11:00 this morning, then decided things were slowing down. We drove to the top end of the road and wandered around the picnic area for a while. It was pretty quiet, but I did find a male Townsend's Warbler for my list. This surprised me, for I had thought it was mostly a Pacific coast bird, but the book showed a wintering population in the Mexican mountains south of here and migration throughout the west.

Then we went to the Santa Rita Lodge and sat on the benches watching the birds come to the seed and syrup feeders. Both Cassin's and House Finches were present, and I was astounded to discover how much bigger the Cassin's are. A man sitting next to me looked it up in his Sibley, and he showed only a quarter-inch difference. I looked it up in my Kaufman, and it showed a half-inch, which seems more like it. Often both species were together in the same seed tray. For a time both sexes of both species were present, along with a Lesser Goldfinch. Then I realized that Jim should photograph them. By the time he got his camera out, all were no longer there at once, but he did get some nice shots of a female Cassin's and House together. They are amazingly different looking. A bit later a female Lesser Goldfinch joined them in the picture. Look out, students! They'll be great practice slides.

The weather today was very cool. When we came back to the trailer at noon, the truck thermometer read only 58°. What a change from Monday's scorcher. There's almost no wind.

Friday, April 18, 2008

Mountain Vista Mobile Home & RV Community, Sierra Vista, AZ

No entry.

Saturday, April 19, 2008

Mountain Vista Mobile Home & RV Community, Sierra Vista, AZ

Yesterday morning we accomplished very little. I decided I'd gotten the best recordings I could of the Flame-colored Tanager, but Jim felt his photos could be improved. So I had him take me and Toby to the end of the road and we walked downhill to the Kubo B&B. I carried my recording gear, but heard almost no birds—and nothing close or particularly interesting. That seemed surprising. When I got to where Jim was standing, he reported that he hadn't improved on his tanager shots. So we decided we might as well leave.

We stopped for a long time at Wal-Mart in Sahuarita (town north of Green Valley). It took me an hour to do some shopping—and we had to wait an additional 20 minutes before the two prescriptions I'd ordered were ready. (Usually Wal-Mart pharmacies are much faster than that.) By then it was nearly noon. I'd discovered a Carl's Jr only a short distance from where we had the trailer parked on the far end of the parking lot, so Jim went over and got us some sandwiches.

Finishing the 95-mile drive to Sierra Vista was uneventful, although some of the roads could have used some work. The town has two RV parks and this looked like the better of the two, but it's sort of a dump and is certainly not in the best part of town. But it has the full hookups we need for a night or two.

Since we were in town, we thought it might be fun to eat out for a change. Jim had noticed an attractive Chinese Buffet restaurant not far from the RV park, so we went there. It was awful—greasy, funny tasting. I kept sampling different dishes, hoping for something really tasty, the result being that I ate too much. I awoke in the middle of the night with severe heartburn, and this morning had diarrhea, too. We decided to write that place off—nice looking restaurant though.

We had planned to go today to the San Pedro River bottomlands and wander around, but the day promised to be pretty hot. Also I still wasn't feeling very well. Both Terry Hill and Maya Decker, whom I talked to on the phone last night, recommended it.