Alaska Continued 2015

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CHAPTER 1. ALASKA

July 30 – Sex, bumblebees and fireweed

Alaskans recognize the last days of summer when the fireweed blossoms are only at the top of the stalk; fall has arrived and winter is only weeks away. Spring blooms start at the base of the

spike and open sequentially up the spike as summer progresses. But there is more to this story …

We left Fairbanks this morning, intent on camping inside Denali National Park only to find that all campsites are taken. So, we continue south and turn east on the Denali Highway. We've camped many times on this highway, though not on its west end. We stop at Joe Lake and that is where I sit in a lawn chair and watch bumblebees pollinate fireweed.

Fireweed flowers are hermaphroditic, i.e., they have both male and female parts. The male structures mature and grow old first, before the female structures. As a result, the open flowers lowest on the spike tend to be female, while the male open flowers congregate at the top of the spike.

True flies also pollinate fireweed, but they are inefficient in their work because they are indiscriminate about what flowers they land on to gather nectar. They make up for their inefficiency by their sheer numbers. Bumblebees, however, are fireweed specialists.

As I sit here beside Joe Lake I watch a bumblebee in action. It starts foraging toward the bottom of the spike, visiting several blossoms and makes its way to the top of the flower. Then it flies away to another fireweed and repeats its bottom-up visits. Its preference for fireweed and its bottom-up routine makes it the perfect fireweed pollinator, carrying male pollen from the top of one plant to the female flower part at the next.

Some fireweed flowers have shriveled up while others have already fallen off. What remains is the bright red stub that held the flower and as it dries, it splits open to reveal feathery white cottony material that holds the small seeds. If winds are strong, fluffy windblown seeds can carry for hundreds of miles. That explains why the blackened ground of last year's forest fires can be blanketed with the bright pink fireweed by the next spring. On the North Slope I didn't find Common Fireweed in the tundra. However, on ground stripped away for access along the Alaska pipeline, we could see fireweed growing profusely in a 50-ft. strip that was miles long.

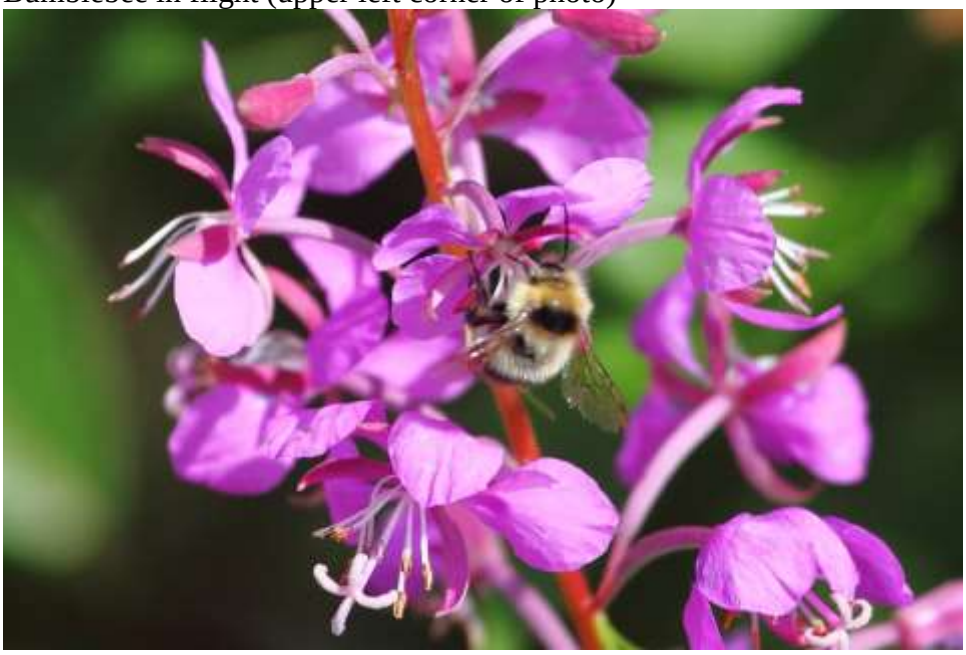
Fireweed marking the last days of summer; the flower stubs contain the seeds.

Fly pollinating fireweed

Bumblebee visiting male flowers at the top of one plant

Bumblebee with wings in action, about to take flight

Bumblebee in flight (upper left corner of photo)



Bumblebee transferring pollen to female parts at bottom of another fireweed plant

Dried blossom stems bursting open

Seeds and their feathery carriages about to become airborne


Fireweed growing atop buried pipeline on Dalton Highway

July 30-31 – Shades of Joe Lake

I have been reading a photography book specific to my Canon 5D and experimenting with camera settings. Here is a picture story of Joe Lake.


July 30 – 3:21 PM

July 30 – 5:01 PM – with sun high in the sky

July 30 – 8:55 PM – catching setting sunlight

July 31 – 12:11 AM - moonlit

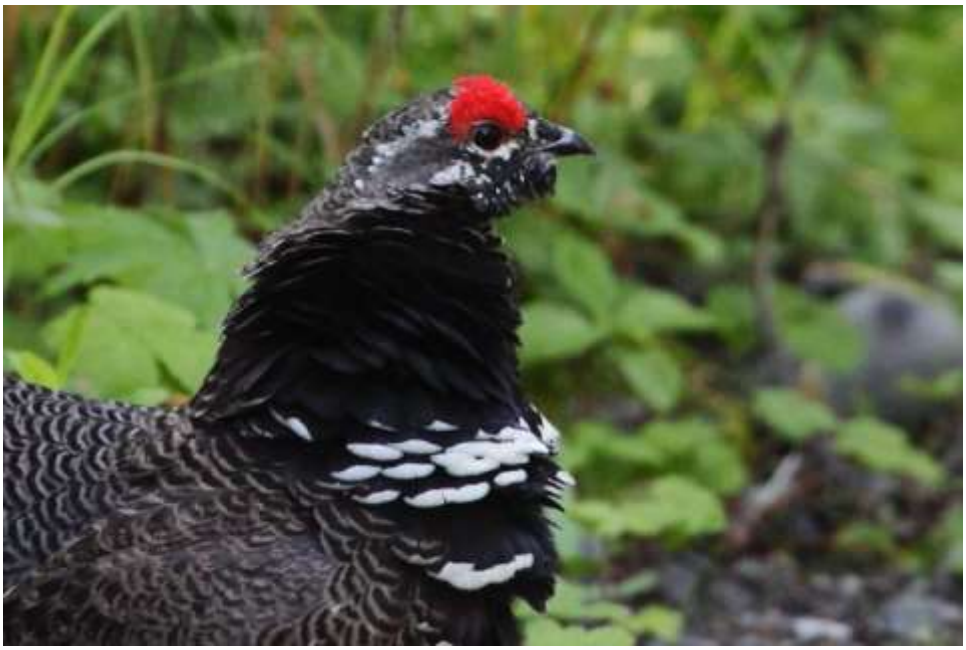
July 31 – 6:51 AM –rising sunlight

July 31 – 8:16 AM – risen sunlight

August 1 – Spruce Grouse promenade

Fanning its tail, peacock-like, the grouse struts on feathered legs. Held vertically, spread like splayed fingers, each jet black tail feather displays tips dipped in cinnamon. A pin cushion of pointed black feathers erupts below the tail, each sharp feather terminally banded in white. The grouse slowly pivots, showing its quilted mosaic back feathers of patterned black and white. Its charcoal gray wings are forced downward, pushing its proud chest forward and upward. A ruff of erect feathers surrounds the neck like a 1920s boa, again with black feathers ornamented with white tips. Most gaudy are the enlarged red eyebrows above jet black eyes and white facial feathers on a slate gray head. The Spruce Grouse struts its stuff, cocky in its confidence of showing its best.

But I ask why? This is August. The hen Spruce Grouse is busy parading this summer's chicks, poking through the forest, teaching its young how to forage and how to avoid predators. I doubt the hen is looking for sex. So what's the point of all this strutting about? Is it just a solo performance for my camera lens?



August 2 – Trumpeting Trumpeter Swans

I've heard bugling Elk in Colorado mountains. I was serenaded one evening by trumpeting Humpback Whales in Newfoundland. And, of course, everyone's heard an elephant blow its trombone-sized proboscis. Have you heard the twin horns of Trumpeter Swans in flight?

I pull off Parks Highway at the rest stop at Kashwitna Lake. It's a great viewpoint for Mount McKinley. A lady is standing on the rickety pier that is half submerged in lake water. She is

trying to focus her camera on the mountain. From my viewpoint the mountain is hidden by trees bordering the lake, though I can see 14,573-ft. Mount Hunter and 12,240-ft. Mount Huntington far beyond the northern edge of the lake.

The trumpets sound and from the western lakeshore two swans erupt. Exceedingly long necks stretch as leading arrows as if tugging the plump body banjo-like at a rising trajectory. Without my binoculars or camera, the swans are just white dots rising against a blackened forest and then white splotches against a blue-gray sky; they must be a half-mile or more from me. However, through the lens I can see the slow beats of mighty outstretched wings and the gently curved and splayed wingtips as the swans control their climb. The swan song is haunting music to my ears, even more nostalgic than loons on a Wisconsin lake. The swans clear the tree level, disappear briefly beyond my sight, and then turn back toward the lake. The swans continue to trumpet as they circle back to the far side of the lake. They come in for a landing, raising their necks and bodies upward, projecting their black legs forward, leaning back in a barefoot skier stance, and then skidding to a perfect two point landing. The swan song ends.

The lady steps off the flimsy pier. I step forward. Mount McKinley at 20,320 ft. rises above the forested skyline. It doesn't look all that tall until I remember that it is 150 mi. away. I take my photos of the mountain, but today the trumpeting swans make the lasting impression.

The Trumpeter Swans are two white dots on the far shore

Trumpeter Swans rising

Trumpeter Swans circling back to Kashwitna Lake

Trumpeter Swan landing synergy

In detail

Mount Hunter, Mount Huntington, and Mount McKinley span the northern horizon

Mount McKinley

Mount McKinley detail, but over 150 mi. beyond the trees below

August 4 – The reds are running

Chinook, a warm dry wind, snow eater. Chinook, a Native American of the northwest. Chinook, the RV we drove before the Platinum. Chinook, the reds are running. Bright red elongated splotches shimmer in the cold undulating water, hundreds of them, all swimming upstream though not gaining position against the current. A fisherman wades in the stream and casts his trout line. He cannot snag salmon here in this protected Quartz Creek. He catches a small fish, perhaps a Dolly Varden. I'm too far on shore to identify it. He tosses it back into the water.

I walk upstream for a closer view, and perhaps a sharper photo, of the sockeye salmon. The rippling water distorts the reds and causes the green heads to merge colors with the river bottom. Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of the macabre jaw, its decaying head, its death mask. The salmon traveled from the ocean, up streams into Kenai Lake where we are camped. Then they continue up Quartz Creek to spawn. My aunt died today. Humans spawn when they are youthful and spend decades carrying for their offspring until they themselves age, the tables turn, and the offspring care for their parents. The salmon live lives at sea and wait until old age to spawn. They will never see their offspring. They leave this world in gaudy dress, not black funereal garb. Reds celebrate life in death.

Quartz Creek near its outlet into Kenai Lake

The reds are running


Kenai Lake and glaciers of Chugach Mountains

August 5 – Dip netting

A curious sport limited to Alaska residents is dip netting. In our previous Alaska visits we had often heard of this, but we left the state too early to witness it in action.

At the end of graveled Kasilof Beach Road the beach grass clings to sand dunes beside the Kasilof River where it dumps into Cook Inlet, the inlet eventually connecting to the Gulf of Alaska and the Pacific Ocean beyond Kachemak Bay. Aged RVs park in sandy flat spots while tents and make-to shelters litter the beach and dunes. We are probably the only non-residents here, all the others are Alaskans and, as such, they gain permission to dip net for running salmon. The season is short and the rules differ from one river to the next. Here, an Alaskan family can take 25 salmon for the head of the household, plus 10 more per family member. No hooks, no bait, no boats, just a huge net webbed to a large aluminum circle, extending from a very long aluminum handle with an angular extension to make it two-handed and easier to maneuver. We watch as they push the net, held vertically, along the river bottom and walk it deep into the river as far as their rubber hip boots allows. The fishermen, who include many women, young and old, line up along the river where the water is swift as it pours into Cook Inlet.

They wait for salmon to swim accidentally into their nets as they move upstream to spawn. Not much action right now. The offshore commercial fishing boats are coming in for the night, swelling high wakes as they pass upriver to the harbor, showing little regard for the dip netters who must backtrack to shallower water to avoid the waves filling their hip boots. We see a few caught fish including a King Salmon lying beside a Sockeye. Neither has turned red, both are silver, and except for features pointed out by the lady who caught them, they look very similar, though the King is larger.

Many of the fishermen fish all night; others as well as accompanying family members including lots of children spend the evening in the tents. When I visit the beach again in the morning the netting is much better and I see one fish after another hauled to shore, gutted, and thrown into ice chests, some more than half full. The commercial boats won't go out today, so the dip netters have a good chance of reaching their annual limit.

Commercial salmon fishing boat coming off Cook Inlet

Dip netter at mouth of Kasilof River

Dip netters lined up along river's edge

More dip netting fishermen along Kasilof River

He caught one!

Putting his catch on a stringer


A young lady frees salmon from her dip net


Another salmon caught

August 5-6 – A confusion of gulls

The attraction at Kasilof River is more than watching Alaskans dip net for salmon. Gulls are also interested in the salmon run and they opportunistically wait for a fisherman to gut his fish, perhaps cutting off the head, and tossing the entrails aside. A profusion of gulls fly for the free

meal. But it is also a confusion of gulls, so many kinds of gulls. Granted, most of them are Herring Gulls. Nonetheless, many are not.

I believe I've sorted through my photos and identified all of them, but I'll let you test your gull identification skills as you try to identify these. You are welcome to e-mail me your answers. My answers will be forthcoming another day.

If you will be looking at gull range maps, my location is the Kenai Peninsula south of Anchorage. On the peninsula, we are south of Kenai and west of Soldotna.

Gull A

Gull B

Gull C

Gull D

Gull E

Gull F (on left)

Gull F

Gull F

Gull F

Gull G

August 6 addendum – Identification of gull confusion

Here are my identifications of the gulls at Kasilof River, listed below each photo.

Gull A. Adult hybrid Herring Gull X Glaucous-winged Gull. The dark eye with pinkish orbital is consistent with Glaucous-winged. The dark wingtips are consistent with Herring Gull. However the wingtips are mostly black, lacking the white mirrors of Herring.

Gull B. Adult Glaucous-winged Gull.

Gull C. Juvenile Glaucous-winged Gull.

Gull D. Third-year hybrid Glaucous-winged Gull X Herring Gull.

Gull E. First-year Bonaparte's Gull.

Gull F. Adult Slaty-backed Gull.

This gull is rare at this location along coastal Alaska at Kenai Peninsula. I have only seen this species five times before, all in Alaska, but all in the Bering Sea: in Nome 2002, 2006, and 2008 and in Gambell, St. Lawrence Island in 2006 and 2008.

Key field marks visible on the Slaty-backed Gull photos are: very dark mantle, broad white tertial crescent, broad white trailing edge to secondaries, staggered row of whitish spots on primaries, gray underside of primaries, bill of even thickness, pale eyes with red orbital ring.

Gull G. Adult hybrid Herring Gull X Glaucous-winged Gull. Note eye color, orbital ring, wingtips and absence of white mirrors, a mixture of species.

August 7-8 – Wish list penguin

"To see a penguin" was the response from one of the participants on our Northwest Territories caravan when asked what expectations she had for the trip. We were in Calgary, on our way to the Arctic, not the Antarctic.

Today, on Homer Spit, I saw the penguin. At least it looks like a penguin and the early French seamen to the North Atlantic thought so too when then branded most alcids as penguins. Play the guessing game. What would you answer? They are black and white birds. They swim in cold waters. They eat fish. They stand erect on two feet.

I've seen literally thousands, probably tens of thousands of Common Murres. In the North Atlantic and North Pacific it is one of the most common birds and can readily be found just off the coast of northern waters. Most of my sightings have been of huge flocks floating on the water, scared up into flight–or down in a dive below the surface–when the boat approaches too closely. Or in long arrow-straight flight lines just a few feet above the cold water in early morning and late evening as they transition from roosting areas to feeding areas and vice versa. Or lined up like duckpins on narrow ledges of vertical cliffs, on a foothold just wide enough for a murre or its nest. Always in the hundreds and the thousands. If at sea and the ship's engines are silent, you can hear the murres murmur their namesake.

So, having seen tens of thousands, what more can I learn? What more can I photograph? I have the good fortune of being very close to several murres, sometimes only eight feet away, so I can pick up some photo details unavailable to me other years. First is identification. Common Murres are a lot like the much rarer–at least for a birder–look-alike Thick-billed Murre. You can

see two identification marks for Common Murre on my photos: the sooty gray rather than black feathering and the dark hatch marks on the white sides. I know this id was hard for me in Gambell as, in flight, gray looks black and flank markings are invisible at a distance.

Next I noticed the wings: relatively short, good for oars, not for flight. It is more important for murres to "fly" underwater to catch fish then to be Jonathan Livingston Seagull in aerodynamics. Also, the white underwings and the black over wings, consistent with the black back and white belly, are camouflage. Attacked from above, the black murre looks like the sea. Attacked from below, the white murre looks like the sky.

Then I notice a murre that has reverted to winter plumage. The gray-black head and neck is now only a gray-black forehead.

And, next, a juvenile slowly paddles up to the rocks below me and waddles up on a rock. When it stretches its wings I can see they are short and incomplete. The juvenal pin feathers have not yet been replaced with flight feathers. This bird can swim underwater, but I doubt it can fly.

On several photos I notice the breast feathering. You can see that it is a tight quilt of small feathers, a blanket of warmth. The murre spends its life in cold waters wearing a warm feather jacket.

Even common birds can be fascinating.

Penguin?

Breeding plumaged Common Murre (note dark streaks on flanks). Also the eye has its underwater eyelid lowered.

Common Murre’s wings

Common Murre is sooty brown, not black, and has streaked flanks

Common Murre in winter plumage

Juvenile Common Murre

Juvenile Common Murre with stubby wings and pin feathers

Note the dark postocular spur on this winter plumaged murre


Note the warm breast feathering

August 8 – Wandering Tattlers

As I watch the bird bobbing along the graveled shoreline edging Homer Spit's boat harbor I am wondering where Wandering Tattler gets its name. Later I find the answer in my *Birds of Canada* field guide. It is the rapid series of shrill alarm calls that translate to the tattler name, a gossipmonger. For the "wandering" part of the name I need only look at my Birder's Diary to discover the wide geographic range I've found this species since 1996: Oregon (2 locations), Hawaii (3 islands), California (2 locations), Alaska (9 locations), Moorea (South Pacific island), and lastly on St. Paul Island in the Bering Sea. Had I visited Peru or New Guinea, I might have found it that far south, or most anywhere else on the Pacific Rim.

My NGS field guide states, "Generally seen singly or in small groups." All of my previous sightings have been 1-4, so seeing 6 today is surprising. I doubt they breed on Homer Spit, so I must be seeing the start of their post-breeding wanderings. They are skittish and don't want me to get too close. Reluctant to fly, but very fast walkers, the tattlers easily maintain their distance from me until I find a thick mooring post to stand behind. Not distinguishing me from the post, I finally get close photos. A bit later at another location, a tattler pays no heed to me standing behind tall sea grass, so I get another good shot, this time in better lighting.

August 13 – Hiking the coast of Resurrection Bay

For days now we have been sitting on lawn chairs watching the ocean in protected Resurrection Bay. Campfires and bodies of water can sustain my interest, leaving little concern about passing time, a rare thing for my active mind. A book helps though, and I'm on my third since putting down my chair.

Our RV points to the bay, glaciered massifs flank our left, forested mountains rise perpendicularly on our right, the rocky shore only 25 ft. in front of us. Salmon fishermen cast endlessly in front of us and a few times each day they get a strike and haul in a big one. Fishing doesn't sustain my interest (although catching does, but typically the wait is too long for me). Far ahead, perhaps three miles from here, the bay curves outward at Lowell Point. I've watched that point now for several days and finally built up enough energy to walk there, following the narrow gravel road pinned between sea and shear rock cliffs. I strap my camera to my belt and hang my binoculars around my neck. What will I find?

Wildflowers are wilted, dried, and gone, so it is with surprise that I find a large patch of Butter and Eggs. The bright colors make a pretty picture with the deep blue sea as the background. A mile farther I feel a chill in the air and then hear falling water. Well hidden in a dark vertical crevice is a 200-ft. waterfall. No, actually a hundred waterfalls, a vertical cascade of liquid crystals descends from a hundred rocks. I play with camera settings until I capture the fluid motion.

I am keeping an eye on the sea, looking for anything unusual. Almost always the bird life is a Black-legged Kittiwake or a Glaucous-winged Gull. I spot something different. Not the easiest to identify, but the white polka dot near its ear is a giveaway, a pair of female Harlequin Ducks.

On the beach at Lowell Point, where the mountain stream drains to the sea, the gulls collect. Whenever gulls gather by the hundreds, there is a chance of something special. This time it's a dozen Mew Gulls segregated from the mix of countless Glaucous-winged. And, one Mew Gull is different: pale legs not yellow; drab bicolored bill, not yellow; very narrow white primary tips, not extensive.

I follow the stream to the bridge and notice two bicyclists staring over the side. I join them, watching salmon struggling upstream. A concrete slope, perhaps five feet on the diagonal, is skimmed with an inch or two of running water. Try as they might, the salmon cannot surmount the manmade hurtle. I wonder if they will spawn where they are, although the steam above looks like better habitat for food and survival of the fry.

The mountain slopes here are gentler, the Sitka spruce taller, the alder more full. I hear birds chattering and zero in on an immature Yellow Warbler and a more brightly colored bird that keeps escaping my binoculars and camera. Finally I get a couple of shots of Chestnut-backed Chickadee, the farthest north I have found this species.

On the long walk back, I stop to watch a Sea Otter munching on a clamshell and then photograph a gull floating in an undulating sea, smooth folds shiny like polished lazuli.

Butter and Eggs against a blue sea

Cascade

Harlequin Ducks

Second-winter Mew Gull with adult Mew Gull

Chestnut-backed Chickadee

Sea Otter

Floating in an undulating lazuli sea

August 14 – Sea watching

Yesterday's long walk ended with a gull I don't remember ever seeing before, or at least not identifying before. This morning I see two more just a couple dozen feet in front of my seaside chair. August birding is a study of juveniles.

This time I have a good size comparison as these two are about the same length as the Black-legged Kittiwakes. Mew Gulls are easy to identify as adults, most easily by their yellow bills and yellow legs combined with a petite, gently rounded white head. The bird has a delicate porcelain profile.

These gulls have the same gentle curves, but the darker scaled patterns distract. The feathers are new, only a few weeks old. The dark centers of the back feathers are trimmed in white. The blueness of the sea lends color to the juvenile Mew Gulls, giving them a blue-gray tint that the field guide drawings show as grayish brown.

August 27-28 – Alaska State Fair

Ever since our first visit to Alaska in 1996, Shari has wanted to go to the Alaska State Fair. Although other years we have been in south-coastal Alaska as late as early September, we always left the Alaska heartland by mid-August. This year we stayed in the Seward and Anchorage areas the last few weeks, biding our time until August 27, the first day of the state fair in Palmer and, coincidentally, our 49th wedding anniversary.

When we were dating and early in our marriage we would visit the Wisconsin State Fair and the Texas State Fair regularly. And, when I was a kid I went to the Ozaukee County Fair every year for at least seven in a row, the years I was in 4-H and exhibited my garden vegetables, rabbits, and forestry & wildlife collections, usually awarded blue ribbons. So it is a nostalgic memory lane as we walk the isles of exhibits, food vendors, and performances. While Shari listens to a demonstration on making millet skillet, an Italian dish, from millet, a grain I always considered birdfeeder food, I check out judged exhibits on artwork and photos. One I admire is a photograph of a Ruffed Grouse flapping its wings–called drumming–while perched on a fallen log. Coincidentally, the teenage photographer is there admiring his blue ribbon. His mother tells me her son stretched out on the forest floor and patiently waited for the photo opportunity.

Only at the Alaska State Fair would it be possible to see a caribou in the farm animals building. I move on to the rabbit show and particularly to the breed called Californian. That's what I raised, sometimes 50 or more, when I was a teenager. I am happy to see one of them wins Best in Show and, remembering all of the features that mark a winning rabbit, I can see this one is a beauty.

Around the corner in another room are the vegetables and, particularly, the contest for the largest vegetables. I think that may be the reason Shari always wanted to see the fair and its famous giant vegetables grown in a valley of 20 hours of summer sun per day. This year center stage is a 107-lb. cabbage, surrounded by an 18-lb. zucchini, 2-lb. onion, 5-lb. cucumber, and 78-lb. rutabaga. The second prize 19-in. sunflower is small compared to the prize winning 24-in. sunflower. In fact, the front page of an Alaskan newspaper shows the winner holding her sunflower as it broke the all-time record by 4 in. and she grew it in an alley near downtown Anchorage.

Moving on, I watch a young woman trying to win an athletic contest as she bench presses 185 lb., 14 women preforming Zumba dances, a high school student singing and drumming native Yup'ik songs, and then my favorite of all, the Birdman of Las Vegas and his Birds of the World Show. He brings out a parrot that can carry on a conversation and then sing a verse or two of four songs, including *Ol' MacDonald had a Farm*. Next is an Abyssinian Ground-Hornbill that flies to the ceiling to grab a snack in mid-air. Most beautiful is a Bateleur, an African raptor at the verge of extinction with only 2000 left in the wild. The Birdman got his from Siegfried and Roy when they decided a bird act didn't mix with their feline performances. An Andean Condor is nearly flightless on stage as it depends on heights to soar, not floor to table jumps. Nonetheless, its wingspread is incredible when perched on the Birdman's wrist. This Andean Condor is part of a captive breeding program and, later, Birdman collects dollar bills for their support with each bill handled by a trained Galah (Rose-breasted Cockatoo) that deposits them in a collection box.

We spend the night in the vast grassed parking lot, along with 600 other RV's. Next day we are back at the show. Today's best is Fred Scheer's Lumberjack Show. It reminds me of similar shows at the Wisconsin State Fair. In fact, this show originated in Hayward, Wisconsin. After many competition acts, it culminates with the log rolling contest where contestants attempt to stay on a floating log while it spins freely. One show follows another, we visit all the booths, eat

junk food you only see at fairs and, in the evening, watch a fireworks display from our RV parking lot. As Ed Sullivan was fond of saying, “It was a really good shew.”

I was at the Fair


Fairway rides

Ruffed Grouse drumming wins a blue ribbon

Californian wins Best in Show

Division champion 107 lb. cabbage

19-in. sunflower in front of the all-time winning 24-in. sunflower

Bateleur at Birds of the World Show

600 RVs camping at the Alaska State Fairgrounds

Fred Scheer's Lumberjack Show

Log rolling contest


Kids rolling in water balloons

August 29 – Snowing in Alaska

The thermometer dropped into the 30s the last two nights, a signal that it's time to leave heartland Alaska. From Palmer we drive the Glenn Highway up into the mountains that flank Matanuska Valley, Chugach Mountains on the south, Talkeetna Mountains on the north, the valley forged from a glacier that is but a remnant of its former glory. The farther we climb, the more colorful the landscape, as chlorophyll degrades to colorless tetrapyrrole and opens up the window to yellow xanthophyll, orange beta-carotene and red anthocyanin. Crowning the blanketed mountainsides of forest and tundra are peaks feathered in white fairy dust. Even a few ice crystals float gently down upon us. We crest the mountains and descend toward Glennallen. Across a broad valley of scattered spruce and autumn-painted marshes are the Chugach Mountains, a white snowbank.

Matanuska Valley and Chugach Mountains

Chugach Mountains

Matanuska Glacier

Matanuska Glacier

Sheep Mountain in the Talkeetna range

Nelchina River lowlands and Chugach Mountains

September 1 – Aboard M/V Malaspina

After a two-day hiatus transiting western Yukon Territory and a small corner of British Columbia, we are back in Alaska at the coastal town of Haines. We traveled the Alaska Highway through Beaver Creek, Destruction Bay, Haines Junction, and then took the Haines Highway climbing through the mountains of Kluane National Park, descending into British Columbia, and finally crossing the U.S. border about 30 mi. from Haines.

Our arrival at the Alaska ferry terminal is perfect timing for the 5 PM departure of the M/V Malaspina. Before boarding, I photograph an American Pipit just outside the ferry dock parking lot and now, aboard ship, the pipit flutters on the forward deck where the crewman is loosening the massive ropes that secure the ship to the dock. The captain calls down to the deckhand, "What's that bird on the deck?" Although they likely know seabirds, neither captain nor deckhand is familiar with this stowaway looking for a less exhaustive migration south. I shout to the deckhand, "It's a pipit."

I stay on deck as we depart; Shari retreats to a warmer spot in the enclosed observation deck. A large flock of Black Scoters rests on the waters and then takes flight as the ship closes in on them. Birds and whales are a bit sparse as we cruise over gentle waters flanked by massive glacier-capped mountains. I photograph a loon crossing Lynn Canal, but have to wait to see the photos on the computer before I recognize the Pacific Loon in winter plumage. Nearly a dozen Dall's Porpoises leapfrog through the sea and I record five Humpback Whales too distant to photograph.

By the time we drive our RV out of the ship's hold at Juneau it is dark and we have trouble making the correct turns to a campground, neither GPS giving us accurate directions. The clock reaches 10 PM, the Cinderella time that the gates close at the campground. We've missed it and instead spend the night at the parking lot facing Mendenhall Glacier.

Klukshu Lake, Kluane National Park, Haines Highway, YT

Kluane National Park, Haines Highway, YT

Trumpeter Swan family at Twin Lakes, Haines Highway, BC

American Pipit

Malaspina ferry

Pacific Loon crossing Lynn Canal

Glaciated mountains border Lynn Canal between Haines and Juneau


8 PM sunset an hour north of Juneau

September 2 – Juneau, the longest city

I'm not sure it is the longest city in North America, but Juneau sure must be close to it. Encompassing 3250 sq. mi., it stretches 43 mi. from downtown to Echo Cove.

When I awaken, a Varied Thrush is singing outside the RV and as I look out the window I see Mendenhall Glacier in bright sunlight. It will be a rare clear sunny day in Juneau. Park staff people are hustling about, blocking off parking sites and arranging tents in anticipation of the arrival of the President's Science Advisor. President Obama himself is expected in other parts of Alaska and will be making the announcement renaming Mt. McKinley to its original native name Denali.

Mendenhall has receded significantly since our last visit in 2012, especially on its left flank which is now bare rock. My attention is diverted to a junco, an Oregon Junco. Throughout Northwest Territories, Yukon Territory, and mainland Alaska I've been seeing the other form, Slate-colored Junco. Cruise ship tourists are the most common species, arriving in a dozen buses, with population counts in the hundreds. They migrate down the hiking trails, often blocking my passage upstream. Shari and I retreat to the boardwalk paralleling the river, but the crowds are here too. Elbowing my way to the railing I take a few photos of the Coho Salmon swimming upstream, their decaying flesh already bright red as they near their spawning pools.

We leave Mendenhall and its crowds, head out on the long highway sandwiched between the coast and the steep mountainsides, and stop at various parks en route. At Eagle Beach hundreds of gulls cover the gravelly coast and Common Mergansers swim in Eagle River. We reach the terminus at Echo Cove where a couple of Harbor Seals frolic in the shallows. On our return, we

stop at another fish stream. Hundreds of Pink Salmon, called Humpy, are congregated in a small pool just before a fish ladder, the first rung too high to jump until the tide comes in. The fish density is so great, one gets the feeling you could walk across the humpbacks to the opposite side.

In the evening we return to Mendenhall Glacier, but this time park on the opposite side of the river, the place where rubber rafts and canoes disembark and the same place where we took a river raft trip many years ago. I stay at the shoreline to watch the sun set against the glacier.

Mendenhall Glacier (note people in lower right for size comparison)

“Oregon” Dark-eyed Junco

Coho Salmon in creek feeding Mendenhall River

Eagle Beach on Lynn Canal with Chilkat Range on the horizon

Humpy Salmon in tannic waters just below fish ladder

Mendenhall Glacier in shadows, 7 PM, one hour before sunset

September 3 – The Inner Passage: Juneau to Petersburg

Away now from the cold interior of Alaska and the Yukon, the weather has been superb and continues today. We start with a morning hike through woods bordering Mendenhall Glacier, stopping once more to view the glacier and to photograph a Golden-crowned Kinglet, the first I've seen this year. Then it is off to the city for errands and a mandatory stop at Alaskan Brewery where they offer free samples. We leave with a dozen bottles of APA, their version of IPA, exchanging India for America Pale Ale. We line up for the ferry and by 5 PM we continue our journey along Alaska's Inner Passage.

I count eight Humpback Whales; Shari says there are more. Better than the count is the antics, though. One leaps out of the water, clearing all but its tail in a vertical explosion skyward. Then in show-off frenzy, it repeatedly slaps its flipper, raising it straight up and then slamming it down hard against the surface. Some whales blow high plumes of wet vapor as they exhale. Several float gently at the surface and then hump their massive backs, slowly raising their tails until their triangular flukes sink below the water. And, another is apparently asleep as we stare at a log-like back floating idly and wonder if it is dead wood or dark flesh. As the ship nears the object I can make out the circular folds of the whale's blowhole.

We spend the evening in our cabin, disturbed briefly when the steward announces the 12:45 AM arrival at Kake, a small town we visited in the daytime in 2012. And, we are disturbed again, when I hear the thumping of a wooden broom handle against the metal walls of the hallway. Shari gets up and peeks outside, but the noise stops. She insists it was a dog barking. Nonetheless, it keeps us long awake, only to fall soundly asleep again before the 5 AM announcement that we are approaching Petersburg.

Golden-crowned Kinglet at Mendenhall Glacier

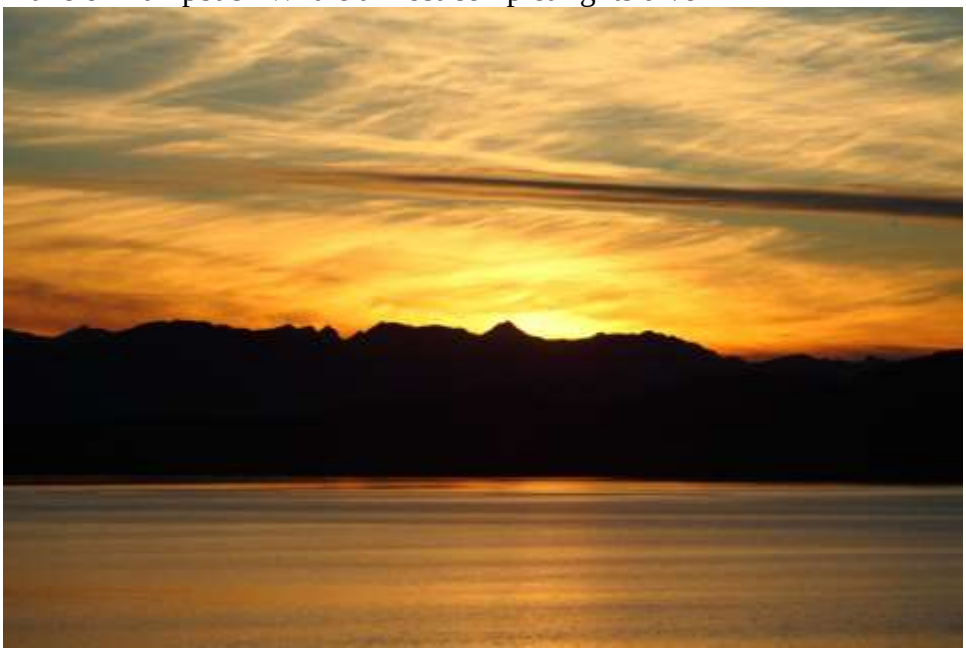

M/V MATANUSKA
APPROX. ARRIVAL
PORTS OF CALL
DEPARTURE
SKAGWAY
HAINES
JUNEAU
AUKE BAY
FRI. 12 :45 AM KAKE 1 :30 AM FRI.
FRI. 5 :30 AM PETERSBURG 6 :15 AM FRI.
9 :30 AM WRANGELL 10 :15 AM
FRI.
4 :15 PM KETCHIKAN 6 :15 PM FRI.
SAT. 12 :45 AM PRINCE RUPERT 4 :45 AM SAT.
VOYAGE
3 1 6 4
ALASKA TIME
PASSENGERS ABOARD
1 1 9

Juneau

Common Murres in Auke Bay

Humpback Whale slapping its flipper

Fluke of Humpback Whale almost completing its dive



Sunset on the Inner Passage


Petersburg, 5:21 AM

September 4 – Following Mitkof Highway

We are parked at Sandy Beach, facing the rock-strewn mudflats at low tide. Greater Yellowlegs and Killdeer busily poke around the seaweed, a flock of 16 Harlequin Ducks float listlessly, and a Belted Kingfisher scoops up a minnow and perches on a boulder in the bay.

I hike a coastal trail through the rainforest. Every square inch oozes with chlorophyll: mosses blanket rocks, gigantic umbrella-leafed skunk cabbage open from clustered stalks, fanciful ferns lie below massive Sitka Spruce that tower as pillars in a cathedral ceiling blocking out the sky, and from them hang long strings of Old Man's Beard and Witch's Hair. Watering this verdant garden is an annual rainfall of 109 in., most falling September through December. We are fortunate that no rain is expected today.

We head out on Mitkof Highway, a coastal paved road following Wrangell Narrows, then Blind Slough, succeeded by Sumner Strait until it meets the mud flats at Dry Strait, two-thirds of the way around Mitkof Island. We stop at Blind River Rapids and meander through muskeg on a raised boardwalk. The dominant tree here is Shore Pine which seems out of place to me as I usually think of pines as seeking higher drier land. Although the surrounds are taller pines, those in the muskeg are multi-branched shrubs, both favored by Oregon Juncos and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. Sports fishermen are returning from a morning's attempts at the river; most are empty-handed although one caught a single salmon.

At our next stop I throw out a guess at the number of King Salmon in the linear array of concrete tanks, saying to the fish hatchery worker, "I bet there are a million salmon in there." A man of few words, he replies, "1.2." He spreads fish food from a bucket, like sprinkling fertilizer on a lawn by hand. Instantly, the surface boils in fingerling fish snatching mouthfuls.

Nearly to the end of the road, we decide to camp at a small picnic area adjacent to a boat launch. I walk the mile to the end of the road, adding a few more species to my day list, but mostly enjoying the pleasant weather and the juxtaposition of island rainforest and narrow sea passageways. At the road's terminus, at the rocky mudflats, a Great Blue Heron waits and in the distance a Bald Eagle screeches like a rusty door hinge. I return to the RV as bear hunters on a scouting trip for moose return in their boats and pull them out on trailers, just as daylight dims.

Sandy Beach Park

Rainforest

Petersburg’s harbor fishing shacks

Shore Pine at Blind River Rapids

Oregon Junco at Blind River Rapids

A few of the 1.2 million King Salmon fingerlings at Crystal Lake Fish Hatchery

Feeding fingerlings

Binoculars atop a harvested tree give measure to its broad width


There's a Great Blue Heron in this photo, but the scenery won the focus

September 5 – Petersburg, what's in a name

One of the tourist brochures notes that the local goose is Vancouver Canada Goose. That name isn't in my bird guidebook, so when I see a flock at Greens Camp Recreation Area, I stop for photos. The geese are very dark and I suspect they are Dusky Canada Geese, the *occidentalis* subspecies, and a probable name change.

Perhaps more exciting to the non-birder is the many porcupines and deer we see. One porcupine is a cute young one, if you can call an animal covered with threatening quills cute. It seems as curious of me as I of him and allows very close approach. The numerous deer are the petit Sitka Black-tailed Deer. They are so small compared to most deer in the Lower 48 that one would think them a separate species, but they are just miniature forms of Mule Deer normally three to four times their size.

At the Visitor's Center I ask where Petersburg and Mitkof Island got their names, as the latter sounds Russian and the former could be named after a czar. The attendant doesn't know, so we go to the museum. Petersburg is named after Peter Buschmann, a Norwegian and the man who started the community and its chief industry, commercial salmon fishing. Peter built the dock and cannery, choosing this harbor as it is sheltered from the north wind. Three fish processing plants and the dozens of fishing boats are the backbone of the town, supplemented by logging and the Alaska Forest Service.

Later in a brochure, I also find where Mitkof Island got its name. Russians named it after Capt. Prokopii Planovich Mitkof of the Russian Navy who in 1836 was assistant chief manager of the Russian American Co.

In the evening we camp at Beach Park as rain falls. The same array of birds spans the bay, this time joined by a flock of twenty Surf Scoters. I am sitting in the front seat reading a book when I look up to see swirling masses of thousands of gulls, first over the bay, then spiraling higher against the gray Horn Cliffs until rising to the open skies above the mountain top glaciers of the Wilkes Range.

Dusky Canada Geese

Young Porcupine

Sitka Black-tailed Deer

Yearling Sitka Black-tailed Deer

September 8 – Mysterious petroglyphs of Wrangell Island

No one knows how old the petroglyphs on Wrangell Island's rocky beach are. Etched in stone, some petroglyphs take the shape of a crude sketch that might represent an animal, but most are just spirals of pseudo-concentric circles, resembling a bull's-eye target. Tlingit tradition does not mention the petroglyphs, nor is it part of their art form, so the assumption is that they were drawn by a culture prior to the arrival of the Tlingits, which could make them a thousand of years old or older.

Nor are the circles unique to Wrangell Island. Similar designs have been found in the French Alps, southwestern United States, Mexico, Ireland, and Korea. What do they mean? No one knows.

We walk gingerly over the beach boulders at a minus 4 tide, perfect for inspecting the boulders. Shari is quick to find the circles and I soon catch on too. There are dozens etched into the black rocks. Here are a few of my photos.

Petroglyph beach on Wrangell Island

September 8-9 – Night ferry

An awkward schedule, the ferry to Ketchikan does not leave until 3:30. AM, not PM! After petroglyphs, we visit the Wrangell library, one of many we have used as a convenient and comfortable source of Wi-Fi Internet connections. For dinner we walk to a harbor side restaurant and order the most unusual items on the menu: fried razor clams for Shari, elk meatloaf for me, and we share each half-and-half, both delicious. The library reopens for the evening and we visit again, nearly until 9 PM closing. Then what? The small town's streets are rolled up and the lights are turned off.

We drive to the ferry dock parking lot, ours the only vehicle in attendance, the office closed. Shari sets her iPhone alarm for 2:45 AM and we sleep restlessly.

When the alarm rings, others have gathered and ferry workers are busy. An attendant asks me to keep my headlights off as I drive down the ramp so as not to blind the workers giving me directions. Aboard, we head to the cafeteria, one of the few places with illuminated ceiling lights as most passengers are sound asleep. Until the restaurant opens over three hours from now, I read Virgil.

It's an odd book for most people to read. Several libraries now have offered excess used books for sale for a dollar, paperbacks 50 cents, and I've purchased a dozen now. I saw the complete works of Virgil and was tempted to add it to the lot, but refrained while selecting others. Then the library attendant pulled a few books from the selection and put them in a box to discard, thinking that no one would ever buy these. I snatched up Virgil, elegantly bound in the Britannica Great Books collection (I have the whole set at home), and added it to my stack. Upon finishing *Darwin's Ghost*, I start *Virgil*. I doubt I have ever read a complete book of

poetry, and certainly not poetry that is over 2000 years old. It's a fascinating read, however, and of unusual topics, such as plant and animal husbandry, bee keeping, and the Trojan War.

The dining room of the M/V Columbia features cloth tablecloths, china, and silverware at discrete tables positioned against wall-to-wall windows overlooking the trailing wake from the aft section of the massive ferry. It is 7 AM and morning's Inner Passage panorama is the backdrop for Spanish omelets and French toast.

M/V Columbia ferry


6 AM pink sky illumines mountains floating on clouds

First rays of sunlight illuminates mountain tops

M/V Columbia wake

Inner Passage islands

Ketchikan, 9:36 AM

September 9 – Of dippers, murrelets, and sea lions

Our stay at Ketchikan is short: enough time to buy groceries, refuel, and an hour hike around Ward Lake. I've visited the lake in different seasons: spring, summer, and now in autumn. The giant Western Hemlock, Red Cedar, and Sitka Spruce remain the same, but the aged Skunk Cabbage is beaten down, its stalks snapped, and its large yellow flowers absent. Most of the birds now have flown south, though flocks of gulls remain. And, as elsewhere this fall, salmon are returning to spawn.

Another ferry, the same day as the last, we board in mid-afternoon. This one is much smaller, the M/V Stikine (pronounced *Stick EEN*), named after the pristine river running through British Columbia and Alaska mainland to Wrangell Island. While awaiting departure, I talk to a birder who works at Padre Island National Seashore, a few miles from our campground resort site on Mustang Island, Texas. He is vacationing at his cottage on Prince of Wales Island, where our ferry is destined. I ask him if he knows a location to find American Dipper, a species I've missed so far this year. He gives me directions.

Surprisingly, shortly after the ferry departs, while we are cruising beside the Ketchikan airport runway, I spy a dipper flying ahead of the ship. While I've often found dippers on fast moving streams beside dense stands of trees, or feeding submerged in waterfalls, this is the first time I've seen one on salt water. It is a small chunky bird, dark as charcoal, torpedo-shaped with fore and aft reduced to points, and tiny wings flapping at near hummingbird speed. It outpaces the ferry, although I watch its flight a foot above the calm sea for a couple of minutes before it disappears.

Quite the contrast is the flight of a Marbled Murrelet just a few minutes later. Although similar in size and shape, though brown in color, the murrelet has spindly wings, like a swift, and in flight the wings chop the syncopated rhythm of old-time movies with too few frames per second.

I keep deck watch of the sea, yet sightings are few, so I retreat to the observation lounge to read more of Virgil. Once though, looking up, I see a rock island covered with Steller's Sea Lions. Although distant, I take a few photos in the dim light of near sunset. Later, when I take count of the sea lions in the photo, the island must have held at least 60.

Golden marble-like berries on False Lily of the Valley, Ward Lake

Ward Lake

Skunk cabbage

Steller’s Sea Lions

Happy Face welcome to Prince of Wales Island


Prince of Wales Island

September 10 – Totems

Totems tell stories known to the elders of the Tlingit (coastal Alaska Native Americans) and the Haida (coastal British Columbia First Peoples), but for modern visitors they are cultural art. No place I've visited has a better collection of totem poles than Hydaburg and Klawock, small villages on Prince of Wales Island. I see the long bills marking ravens, the hooked bills identifying eagles, the exaggerated dorsal fin of Orcas, and the exaggerated bright eyeshadow blue eyelids and lipstick red lips on faces of historic characters, along with chipmunks, murres, wolves, and kingfishers.

History lessons were disintegrating in the cracked and rotting wood, faded of its bright colors, and collapsing under its own weight. So, already in the late 1930s, 25 wood carvers led by chief carver Walter Ketah constituted the Civil Conservation Corps project to duplicate the 21 mortuary totem poles from Tuxecan, the winter village of the Heinyaa Kwann. They constructed Klawock Totem Park. In 1993 the city of Klawock commissioned more Tlingit totems and in 1998 they commissioned more poles to be restored, preserving the old poles from Tuxecan. A similar totem park was constructed in Hydaburg with the restoration of Hiada totems in the 1990s and more recently.

A portion of Haida Totem Park in Hydaburg

Haida totems at Hydaburg

Klawock Totem Park

Tlingit totems at Klawock

Tlingit totems at Klawock

September 11-13 – Old growth forests

Of the more than 2000 mi. of roads lacing Prince of Wales Island, we now have driven 273, almost all on nicely paved highways. What we haven't driven is the numerous steep single-lane gravel roads, formerly logging roads. The roads seem endless, mile after mile, connecting a handful of small coastal villages. En route scenery is trees, trees, and more trees. A rainforest with an annual precipitation of 120 in. offers gigantic hemlock, cedar and spruce.

What we haven't seen is Old Growth forests. I am sure they are here; we just haven't found them. The vast island has been logged since the 1950s. I saw one logging truck with a semi load of only five logs, probably all from the same tree, which must have measured at least four feet in diameter. On some forest hikes I saw old decaying tree stumps 6-7 ft. in diameter. Sitka Spruce can mature to heights of 225 ft., diameters of 8 ft., and age to 700 years. Western Redcedar can occasionally reach an age of 1000 years. Virtually everything I see is secondary regrowth, which can be amazingly fast growing with this much rain. So, if you aren't paying attention to size and aren't looking through the understory to see what's lurking, it all seems pretty natural, with the illusion that's the way it has always been.

A tourist booklet states, "the glory days of timbering ended in the 1990s" after the 50-year contract with the U.S. Forest Service expired. One sawmill in Klawock continues in operation and local residents hope for a restart, but so far environmental interests have blocked the Old Growth timber sale in the courts. Meanwhile, Nature Conservancy and the Forest Service are developing an experimental forest to study the best ways to manage secondary forests. Left to its own devices, nature responds to clearcutting by sprouting myriad new trees, so dense that in as little as 15 years it chokes out the understory, thereby limiting habitat for wildlife. The best management response is to trim the excess trees to allow fewer trees–300 per acre–to grow to sizes suitable for selective harvesting and at the same time promote wildlife.

It is in these managed forests, forests so silent I can hear the slightest wildlife movements that I find a few birds. Beyond the nesting timeframe, the birds are no longer territorially singing and only their browsing rustling or quick movements give away their positions. The Pacific Wren lurks in the broken sphagnum-enveloped trunks and branches of fallen trees, flitting beneath arched ferns, and perching momentarily on club mosses and lichen-encrusted twigs. Although my eyes easily adjust to the dim light of the densely canopied rainforest, my camera struggles. I adjust the Canon settings to shade, then over compensate the white balance +1/3, then try +2/3, and settle on +1 or still higher, a drastic adjustment. When I snap the photos, the ISO speed is a whopping 3200 with a shutter speed of $1/100^{th}$ second. Now, if the Pacific Wren only came a bit closer than the 25 ft. distance it accepts as safe from me. I click away and later use computer software to enhance the image, not publishable quality, yet clearly a Pacific Wren. Later, along another forest trail, I experiment again on photos of a pair of Varied Thrushes 30 ft. up and the same distance out, and, if anything, in even darker forest.

Clear-cut mountainside with some regrowth

Second growth forest originally harvested in 1988 by Sealaska Corp.

Old Growth stump (on the left edge you can see the cut where the logger inserted a board to stand on so that he could make the main cut to fell the giant)

Trimmed second growth forest

100 mm lens view of forest with the Pacific Wren

400 mm view of Pacific Wren (1/100th sec, f5.6, exposure comp. +1, ISO 3200)

Cropped image from above photo showing Pacific Wren

400 mm view of Varied Thrush (1/80th sec, f5.6, exposure comp +1-1/3, ISO 3200)


Cropped image from above photo showing Varied Thrush

September 13-16 – Leaving Alaska

Our Alaskan story nears its end. From Prince of Wales Island the M/V Stikine returns us to Ketchikan, past forested mountains, shaded in morning blues, some shorn to tree stumps, some regrown in dense spruce stands. The ship rounds the northern shores of Gravina Island where Humpback Whales gather. Three play together, than another three: cruising, blowing wet air, humping, fluking. Soon they will be south to warmer waters of the Baja or Hawaii. Nearby are rafts of murres, hundreds of murres, now in winter plumage.

The ferry churns through the strait between Gravina Island and the Ketchikan mainland. The passageway is shared with fishing trawlers, cruise ships, and float planes that skim the tops of tall masks, descending until their parallel floats bounce along the calm water. On the island, they pull up like beached turtles onto docks adjacent to the runway stretched for the international jets. A small ferry transports passengers between island airport and mainland city.

In Ketchikan, we drive the length of Tongass Highway, to the south end at Silvis Lake Trailhead where I get better photos of Pacific Wrens investigating a fallen tree in bright sunlight. I'm surprised to photograph a Hermit Thrush still in migration. We spend the next two nights at the north end of the Tongass Highway, at a bayside campground we used in 2012. Surprisingly, we take one of the last open campsites, the others still occupied by seasonal visitors mostly from Washington State. They are pulling out their fishing boats, cleaning the hulls, and preparing for the trip south. Their freezers are packed solid with salmon caught during the summer and fall. Many RVs, towing boats, pull out for the Prince Rupert ferry departure. Colder weather has set in, even here on the coast, with daytime highs in the 50s and nighttime lows in the 40s.

The last of the cruise ships spills thousands of tourists onto the downtown streets and into the myriad shops specializing in diamonds and artwork. A few passengers carry their newly purchased treasures onto the ship, boarding a ramp extended into the belly of the cruise ship. Soon the shops will close up for the winter, no tourists to entice.

Our next night is at Wade Lake where one campground is closed for the season and the other has only a few sites not already closed. Even the fee station is closed for the winter and the camp host has abandoned. The humpies are still trying their best to swim upstream; the creek is so shallow they must flop along the gravel bed to reach another pool of water. We hike Frog Pond Trail that leads farther upstream. Amazingly, we find still more salmon now trying to surmount the formidable rapids. Their discolored bodies are decaying, their energy zapped, but still they fight on, although some die in the effort, pollute the creek banks, and are gingerly probed by Mew Gulls already satiated by the ample fish meals.

While we have enjoyed dry sunny weather the past few days, today cold rain pings the windshield as we wait in line for the M/V Columbia, bound for Bellingham, Washington. At 5:40 PM, the ship slips slowly from the dock, picking up speed when clear of the harbor clutter. Except for a few gulls, seabirds must have already reached southern waters, for I see none. We eat in the aft dining room with a view of the ship's wake as its reflective glow dims under the shroud of night. Tomorrow, when we awake, we will be in British Columbia waters. But now, with the words of Virgil in *The Aeneid*, "When Sleep slid lightly from the stars on high," I say goodnight.

Denuded mountains of Prince of Wales Island

Common Murre

Gravina Island

Float planes share harbor area


Pacific Wren at Silvis Lake Trailhead

Hermit Thrush at Silvis Lake Trailhead

Hiking forest trail at Settler's Cove State Park

Salmon stream