

Northwest Territories 2015

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CHAPTER 1. ALBERTA

En route. May 11 – Bear River Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Utah

(Bert) Posing prettily, the Yellow-headed Blackbird is only a dozen feet beyond the railing on which my elbows prop up my long camera lens. As a category, blackbirds lack the attraction of other songsters. Of course, Red-winged Blackbirds have showy red and yellow epaulets, but what do Brewer's and Rusty Blackbirds have to offer in gaudy dress? The Yellow-headed certainly stands out in a crowd. Who can miss a hood as brilliant as the rising sun? And if not first seen, its raucous call, a drawn-out cackle as scratchy as fingernails on a chalkboard, will certainly direct my attention.

Bear River Migratory Bird Sanctuary is my favorite place to bird in Utah and this morning I'm joined by Bill and Ginny, Richard and Georgia, whose paths crossed with us yesterday, they coming from Southern California and we driving from South Texas. En route to Northwest Territories, we delay a day here at the refuge. Since my last visit the sanctuary has added a Visitor's Center with a paved walkway around a marsh. Four of us travel at birder's pace while Richard and Shari circle the half-mile loop twice. I hold up for photographs of a Marsh Wren constructing a nest in winter-yellowed reeds and photograph another singing his heart out with neck arched skyward, bill hinged open, while wiry feet cling in a stair-step grasp of a bone-dry stalk.

We drive through the refuge, stopping constantly for more bird sightings: a pair of Ring-necked Pheasants, Western and Clark Grebes, and dozens more. My last sighting at the refuge is a hawk of uncertain identity. I take lots of photos of it perched and in flight and after much study decide it deserves the long name of “adult male intermediate morph Swainson’s Hawk, all rufous type.”

Tomorrow we continue our trek north to Calgary for the start of the caravan to Northwest Territories.



Yellow-headed Blackbird



Marsh Wren constructing a nest



Marsh Wren



Ring-necked Pheasant ducking under a fence line



Western Grebe



Adult male intermediate morph Swainson's Hawk, all rufous type



En route. May 12 – Clark Canyon Reservoir, Montana

(Bert) Cold rain gushes outside the RV and I decide I really do not need to plug in our electrical cord, nor deposit our campground payment into the slot just yet. Twenty minutes later, strong winds whoosh the rain aside, leaving a high ceiling of gray skies. I put on my fleece jacket and a hooded windbreaker to venture outside. The birds like the change of weather and are in search of insects. Forceful winds, gaining momentum off the lake, push Mountain Bluebirds up slope, away from nest boxes mounted on utility poles. A Sage Thrasher swoops in and scatters the bluebirds. Farther downhill, a flock

of Audubon's Warblers gather in the protection of lakeside willows, hawking for insects among the springtime leaves. A Uinta Ground Squirrel ducks down one of its many holes when I get too close. Another lies across a pile of lumber while keeping a watchful eye on my camera lens.

The lake is called Clark Canyon Reservoir and I soon find out its significance. The Lewis and Clark expedition camped here in 1805, beside a large limestone outcrop that split the river into two forks. They called the place Camp Fortunate as it was here that they met the Shoshone tribe and Sacagawea was reunited with her people. Here too, they cached their canoes and traded with the Shoshone for horses. The reservoir has flooded the Camp Fortunate site, but the limestone island—now called Armstead Island—is still prominent.



Mountain Bluebird



Audubon's form of Yellow-rumped Warbler



Uinta Ground Squirrel



Armstead Island, site of Lewis & Clark Camp Fortunate

En route. May 12 evening – Clark Canyon Reservoir, Montana

(Bert) Click! Something pops when Shari plugs in the space heater to take the chill out of the evening dampness. Frustrated, she exclaims, “What next?” Shari is already exasperated over other issues, wants no part of this problem and, so, she nominates me as RV repair electrician.

It’s a new RV and my first task is to find the breaker panel. After several false starts I find it and reset the breaker, confident that I, the master electrician, have solved the problem. Disappointed, I discover none of the AC electrical outlets function, yet the microwave and refrigerator are powered.

I check the GFCI buttons and none have popped. I search for more, but find none. I get out the RV operations manual, read the appropriate section, and am none the wiser. At my failure to solve the problem, Shari rechecks everything, but we are still without electrical outlet power.

RV problems are always unsettling, particularly to Shari. Worse is when they occur while we have time constraints. Worse yet is when we are leading a caravan. Shari is already envisioning stretching extension cords through windows. We go to bed without an adequate solution.

En route. May 13 – Grand Falls, Montana

(Bert) When we arise, nothing has changed; the outlets are still not functioning. What did we break? Where will we get it repaired? Will it get fixed in time?

We continue driving north, stopping three times to call the manufacturer and finding the service manager is busy orienting new purchasers to their RV's features. We have already identified three repair shops in Grand Falls and are about to try the first one when we finally get through to the RV dealership. I am barely a third of the way into my explanation of the problem when the service manager knows what is wrong and how to fix it. Ours is a 2015 model, perhaps the first one off the assembly line last August. No little door opens to the hidden switch. The documentation had not been updated. How were we to know?

The manager asks me to lift up one of the twin beds and I remove everything in one section of the under-bed storage. Then I remove the wooden panel below the storage and use a flashlight to find the inverter. I flip the trip switch and presto chango, we have power! As my friend Doc would say, "No problem!" I guess we can lead the caravan now.

En route. May 14 – Coutts border, Alberta

(Bert) Border crossing! Always a bit of tension is in the air because we never know what they will ask or what item they will find for which we are unprepared. You would think that after the hundreds of borders we have crossed in our lives, we would know everything. This time we know about the chicken scare and that Canada does not allow import of chicken products from a long list of U.S. states, so we are carrying no chicken. At the last minute Shari remembers the oranges and unsure if this is a no-citrus border, we quickly peel them and put them in the refrigerator. We forget about the one lemon, so put it on the dashboard, sure that they will want to confiscate it. The one issue we know we will have to deal with is our homemade wine. Not wanting to leave it in hot Texas for the summer, we are carrying more than the allowed three liters of wine across the border. We will tell the border agent and pay whatever duty they require.

The line is long and moving slowly, each vehicle held up for five minutes or more. It must be a very thorough agent in the booth. Finally when it is our turn we notice it is a woman, a signal to both of us that we will face a more thorough interrogation than if it were a man. As I hand her the passports, she asks where are we from. Where are we going? Are we carrying weapons? Are we carrying cigarettes or gifts? She accepts one word answers to each without challenging my replies. Do we have alcohol? I answer, "We have homemade wine." She asks, "How many bottles?" I reply, we don't make it in bottles, but in plastic bags and have a 3-liter bag and a 5-liter bag. My answer is of no interest to her and she returns our passports and wishes us good travel. That's it! Two or three minutes tops! It is probably the easiest border crossing ever. And, she doesn't even want the lemon on the dashboard.

En route. May 15 – High River

(Bert) Wanting to check out Frank Lake this morning for birding, we camped last night at High River. Finding the campground was difficult because the city road was piled with sandbags and one lane had fallen over the edge. The storms and flood were two years ago, yet the evidence is everywhere. Later last night we happened upon a TV documentary on the effects of global warming and it showed aerial photos of flooded High River where water covered the streets and lawns and crept into the homes. All across Alberta, floods reached historic heights.

This morning I am out early, just in time to watch a silvered Red Fox chase a black morph Gray Squirrel. It misses, and the squirrel scolds from the safety of a high branch. I climb the dike just behind our RV site and along the new blacktop walking trail that caps the dike. Now in another episode of torrential rains, the river could rise over 20 ft. before breaching the dike and first would flood the wooded conservation land on the opposite shore before reaching the city side. The TV show scientist stated that global warming increases the amount of water in the atmosphere, causing a concomitant increase in extreme weather. At the current rate of global warming, within the next 50 years we can expect about twice the rate of extreme floods, draughts, high and low temperatures, hurricanes, etc.

Arrived. May 19 – Calgary

(Bert) Actually, we arrived a few days ago and endured Calgary's cold rain for a couple of days while we did our pre-caravan errands. It was Canada's Long Weekend and could not have been much fun for local campers. In Costco the foot traffic was so dense it was nearly impossible to pass with a shopping cart and the nine checkout counters operated non-stop with long lines in each.

Our rendezvous campground is poised on a hillside overlooking the city and within view of the Olympic ski high jump. The jump looks scary even at a distance and I cannot imagine jumping off from it.

Now that the skies have cleared to a sunlit powder blue, I take a morning hike on the wooded trails behind the campground. Spring has just arrived and the Trembling Aspen buds are bursting into baby green leaves. The fuzzy willow catkins have exploded into fireworks of pale yellow. I am told a botanist can identify the 50 species of willows—most of which can be found on our caravan route—by the catkin features, but I'll not even try. The first of the spring flowers—not including the omnipresent dandelions—is Blue Clematis (*Clematis occidentalis*), a flowering vine in the buttercup family. The four violet sepals are centered by an explosion of yellow-green stamens and styles.

Multiple White-throated Sparrows are singing from perches I cannot locate. I do better with the Black-capped Chickadees that respond to my pishing. I've been hearing Clay-colored Sparrows at the wooded edge of the campground for several days and am trying for a photo when a woman with a large golden dog approaches and hesitates at interfering with my photography. The bird moves out of range and I mention to her that it was a Clay-colored Sparrow. She perks up at the comment and asks if I am Bert. She is Bea

and has just arrived to join the caravan. We talk and I move on until I find another Clay-colored and this one allows photography.

By the time I return to our RV, more caravaners have arrived and I expect we will see almost all of them by the end of the day or at least tomorrow, the first day of the caravan.



Rendezvous campground overlooking Calgary



Trembling Aspen bursting into leaf



Willow catkins



Blue Clematis



Blue Clematis



Black-capped Chickadee



Clay-colored Sparrow

Day 1. May 20 – Calgary

(Bert) An earlier 7 AM start on my walk through the backwoods provides a plethora of singing birds, mostly the same species as yesterday, but with much more activity. I tally 12 Clay-colored Sparrows singing on territory and almost as many of a warbler species that is either a Chestnut-sided Warbler or Yellow Warbler. I wade through dense brush trying to get closer to one of the singers, but even after two hours I have yet to see a warbler. Finally, one appears and it is Yellow Warbler. Not once did I hear the familiar “sweet-sweet-sweet-Sweeter-than-Sweet” song of Yellow Warbler, just the sound-alike song so similar to Chestnut-sided to my ears, “please-please-pleased-to-meetcha.”

I hear and then see a White-breasted Nuthatch, take a very quick photo at eye level, and then watch it fly high in an old aspen beyond reach of my camera. Later when I look at the photo I would not have guessed it was the nuthatch, but it is. Check it out below.

Another wildflower has appeared; this one grows along the roadside. It’s called Yellow Pea, which my book tells me is suspected of being poisonous. It resembles lupines, but is in a different genus, *Thermopsis*.

All of our guests have arrived, as of last night. Today at 3 PM we have our orientation meeting. When we go around the group hearing trip expectations we get a few surprises, especially among the birders in the group. While I may be able to locate Three-toed Woodpecker, Great Gray Owl and Canada Warbler, I won’t find Bluethroat—a Siberian bird that drifts into northern Alaska—or would-you-believe a penguin!

In early evening we gather outside for the pizzas that Larry and I picked up after the meeting. The weather has turned warm, or at least warmer, and we stay out until nearly 8 PM, enjoying the heat of the setting sun and the warmth of pleasant conversations.



Hard to believe, but this is a White-breasted Nuthatch



Yellow Pea (*Thermopsis montana*)

Day 2. May 21 – Calgary

(Bert) They call me Bird Whisperer. The Black-capped Chickadee swoops down from the high Balsam Poplar branch and nearly lands on my head, then makes a broad circle

and alights on a thin low branch a few feet in front of me. I stretch out my arm, hand up, and the chickadee springs to my palm and jumps on my thumb. It's hard to imagine how light weight is a chickadee on your thumb. It's more the gentle touch of the claws than any mass. It stays long enough for Cindy to take a snapshot.

We've been birding at Carburn Park, slowly circumscribing the small lake and then following a dirt path along the Drum River. We barely left the parking lot when I hear a Great Horned Owl. We try to pinpoint the source coming from a small wooded island in the lake, but the owl must be on the opposite side. Then one in our group spots an owl in a lakeside spruce and we walk in that direction. It is two juvenile owls in the brancher stage, not far from their nest. A third owlet has flown to the island. The owls are quite the local attraction and the many park strollers and joggers know much about them. We are told the adult male died and now the female—which we eventually see on the island—is caring for three by herself.

Birding at the park in superb weather is delightful and the morning lighting is perfect for photography. I photograph 13 species, a sampling shown here, and we study many others through binoculars before we leave for Heritage Park Historical Village.

The village is billed as Canada's largest living history museum. After lunch at the railway station we visit a vintage car and gas pump museum with an amazing array of impeccably reconditioned vehicles including a 1959 Champion Holiday Trailer complete with a teapot on the stove and cups on the kitchen table. We pile into a convertible for a group photo. In the outdoor park we learn a bit about Calgary's history, ride a steam locomotive from the Native People's (Blackfoot) village to the boat dock, and then luxuriate in the springtime breeze as we glide along the river in a steamboat. Shari and I and a few other intrepid couples circle in an old-time Ferris wheel that propels us much faster than I remembered these rides.



Great Horned Owl (juvenile)



Common Merganser (male)



Common Goldeneye (female)



Red-shafted Flicker in nest hole



1959 Champion Holiday Trailer



Some us at the Drive-in



Calgary's Heritage Park Historical Village



Day 3. May 22 – Drumheller

(Bert) Cindy gave me the photo image she took of The Bird Whisper, so I am including it here.

We left Calgary, heading north, stopping at a pull-out. Surprising us is a robust, healthy looking coyote investigating a Prairie Dog town. With its passive behavior, ignoring us, it takes little interest in trying to catch one of these quick animals. We continue past Drumheller to the Royal Terrell Museum which, in my opinion, is the best dinosaur exhibit in North America. This is my third visit and I am sure I'll still learn something new. Also, there are new exhibits since our 2006 and 2008 visits. In fact, as I read what scientists now know about dinosaurs I recognize that the discovery dates are almost all since I have been in high school and a surprising number of exhibits are of discoveries since our last visit.

At the museum entrance I meet a life size recreation of *Albertosaurus*, the dinosaur native to this part of Alberta and around the corner is a two-story mold of an intact *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton. Interesting to me is the story of two high school boys that went fishing and discovered the skull of *Tyrannosaurus rex*, one of the best preserved in the world. The chemical manganese tinted the bones to a dark shade and the skull became known as Black Beauty.

It is now fairly well known that the most likely cause of the extinction of dinosaurs is a meteor collision that blanketed the earth in dust, notably high in the element iridium, and drastically changed the earth's climate. One exhibit shows a cross section of earth with

the iridium-laden belt clearly shown. Dinosaur bones have been found below this depth, but not above.

The room-sized *Ichthyosaur* exhibit was added since our last visit. It is 21 meters long, the largest known marine reptile. Another skeleton that intrigues me is *Confuciusornis*, one of the earliest known birds. It has a toothless beak, has feathers, but also still exhibits some dinosaur features such as clawed hands.



Bird Whisperer



Shari watches a coyote inspecting a prairie dog town



Coyote



Albertosaurus



Tyrannosaurus rex (two stories high)



Tyrannosaurus rex called Black Beauty



Cretaceous–Tertiary boundary when meteor resulted in dinosaur extermination



Ichthyosaur - largest-known marine reptile



Confuciusornis, a bird that has dinosaur features

Day 4. May 23 – Stettler

(Bert) We board the train in Stettler, heading south through rolling farmlands and duck-filled ponds, a landscape carved by residing glaciers and refilled with a deep rich dark soil. Our destination is Big Valley, a remnant town once larger when in 1913 it was a divisional point terminal for the Canadian Northern Railway, the area mined for gravel, then coal, then oil. Grain fields and tourists are the income now. The short passenger train is pulled by a vintage 1957 diesel locomotive that blows its whistle at every farm road crossing and chugs along the rickety rails, clickity-clack, at a light-breeze speed of 10-15 mph. Our windows are open to the warm summer air, unusual this early in spring. En route we watch for wildlife, finding mostly ducks, but some nice surprises of Mule Deer, a coyote, a pair of White-tailed Jack Rabbits, and a Rough-legged Hawk.

Our travel is interrupted by bandits racing to the train on galloping horses and demanding money. Some riders reach up to the train windows and another dismounts and commandeers the aisle, while taking handouts from passengers. They attempt their escape until the sheriff shoots them and confiscates the money. We are told that the \$400+ collected goes to local children's charities.

At Big Valley, while waiting for the train to come to a full stop, two young boys keep an eye on us without interrupting taking sloppy big licks of a strange turquoise colored ice cream that paints their lips and face in clown like fashion. We walk the quaint town, browse the historic train depot filled with railroad artifacts, visit clapboard shops, learn the history of an old Anglican church on the hilltop, and meet in the community hall for a huge all-you-can-eat dinner.



Shari boarding the Alberta Prairie train



Typical countryside as viewed from the train



Bandits!



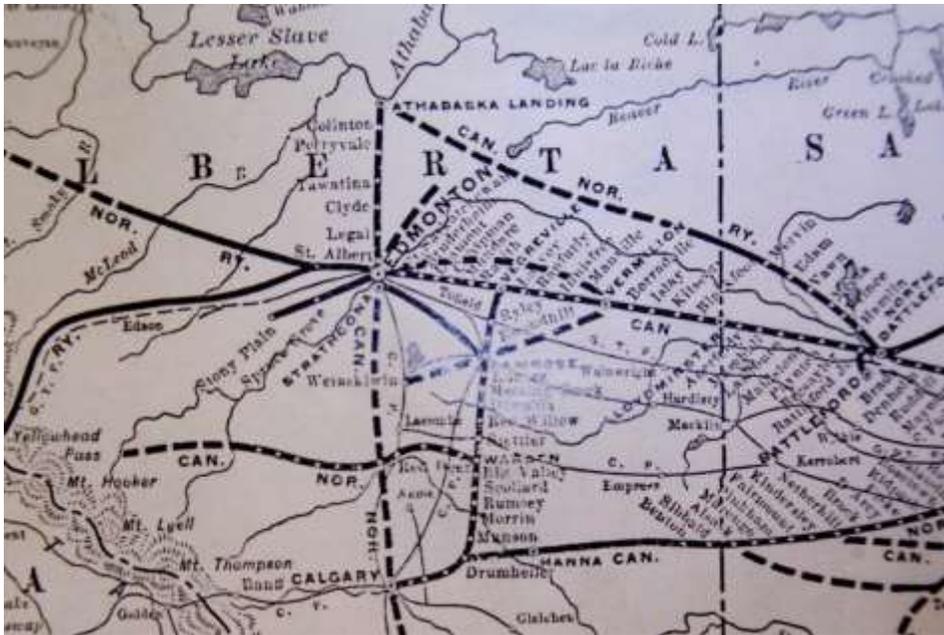
Enjoying an ice cream cone on an unusually warm spring day



Big Valley, Alberta, population 351 (once 1025)



All-you-can-eat Dinner



Old railway map. Our route is part of dotted line from Drumheller to Stettler

Day 5. May 24 - Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village

(Bert) I am surprised when I hear that the woman lives in the tiny sod house. She recently came from the Ukraine and will be here throughout the summer. We learn about her garden through Christiana, a college student who acts as translator and our guide. Another lady proudly shows us her larger home where she has lived for five years. She speaks accented English with fluency as she points to a spot in the outer wall that needs repair of its mud and straw composition. She shows us her sheep who love to eat dandelion flowers from our outstretched hands. The Ukrainians started coming to this part of Alberta in 1881 and the heritage village depicts their lives through the 1930s.

The floorplan of the onion dome church forms a cross. Inside, it is ornately decorated. The paint of lowest panel simulates marble, the material they would have used in the old country. The highest is the blue of the skies, interjected with a scene of Jesus preaching from a boat in the Sea of Galilee and another scene of an early church leader baptizing hundreds in a river.

The tour is not without frequent interruptions of bird sightings, most notably the male Ruddy Ducks with their brilliant blue bills. Strangely, several of us watch a Red-winged Blackbird riding a raven, its claws digging into the raven's back as a warning to keep away from its nest.

We finish our tour with traditional Ukrainian food that included pirogues, stuffed cabbage, and borsht.



Sod house at Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village



Straw and mud home with thatched roof



A needed repair



Ukrainian church



Jesus preaching from the Sea of Galilee



Ruddy Duck

Day 6. May 25 – Elk Island National Park

(Bert) Bea has a discerning ear. We are standing on a gravel road looking toward a marsh and the unseen bird puts forth a steady monotone cadence much like a Chipping Sparrow or a Dark-eyed Junco. Bea notices that this bird chips at a slower pace. In fact, a Chipping Sparrow's trill must be at least twice as fast, too fast to count the stuttering notes. A Dark-eyed Junco is also fast, but in short bursts, much like a telephone ring, or at least what telephones used to sound like before the iPhone made any ring possible. We pinpoint the sound to a hedge of 6-ft. willows. I recognize it immediately, but others are less certain, as the field marks of a spring Swamp Sparrow are different from winter.

We climb a hillside bordering Astotin Lake and giving us a good view of the sheltered bay below. All the Red-necked Grebes are paired, staying close together, sometimes facing each other and kissing bills, then turning and swimming side by side. Ron says last night he witnessed their mating ritual: raising themselves up erect, balancing with half-stretched wings like a tightrope walker, and dancing across the water on paddling feet. Their distinct call can be heard even when we are deep in the woods a quarter mile away. When Shari and I went to investigate last night the dance was over, but another entertainment was in process. Just 20 ft. in front of us, hidden in the reeds and brambles, an American Bittern boomed in its deep-toned voice that sounds like a water bubble gurgling up its long neck and reverberating a bass string. No amount of searching gave us a closer look and just as we were about to give up, two other bitterns flew past us and into the marsh opposite the bay.

This morning Jack and Gail are joining us. They started the tour as the two least interested in nature and birds, but I think that may be changing. Gail at least is showing great curiosity in identifying birds on her own and learning how we identify others. And,

she is quick to photograph the birds, as well as the butterflies we are seeing. Speaking of butterflies, today's sightings are Canadian Tiger Swallowtail, Satyr Comma, and a small blue butterfly that perhaps is an Arrowhead Blue, maybe Silvery Blue, or else in the Spring Azure Complex. The butterfly people in this readership maybe can identify it for me. [One of the readers later suggested it is an azure, most likely *Celastrina lucia*.]

Two others are joining us today, our special guests Bob and Dusty who did two Mexico tours with us, as well as the Birder's Reunion last year. They live in Edmonton, about 45 min. from here. Ever since Dusty gave me a book entitled *Red Serge and Polar Bear Pants*, the biography of Harry Stallworthy, RCMP, I have wanted her to meet our group and tell additional stories about her Uncle Harry. Firstly, what is fascinating about the book is how it talks about many places we are visiting on this tour, places he was stationed while a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman in the early part of the 20th century, outposts connected by horse drawn winter sledges or husky led dog sleds. Secondly, the book tells of his adventures and misfortunes while stationed at Ellesmere Island in the 1930s at a time when Canada claimed the territory adjacent to Greenland but knew next to nothing about it, nor had anyone living on the large, far north, snow bound island. This evening Dusty spins additional tales learned from her close relationship to famous Harry, including the story of how the box of letters and police reports salvaged from her aunt's estate came into the hands of Professor Emeritus William Barr who wrote the entertaining biography.



Swamp Sparrow



Canadian Tiger Swallowtail



An azure, most likely *Celastrina lucia*



Satyr Comma



Hilda, Harry and their niece, Elaine Mellor, Timberlane.

From the book, “Dusty” (Elaine) with her aunt and uncle

Day 7. May 26 – Elk Island National Park, Alberta

(Bert) The Red-necked Grebe is sitting on her nest, the same tiny grebe-made island of reeds that I saw her on last night. It is in a swampy border to Astotin Lake just down the grassy slope from my viewpoint. The grebe climbs out of the nest and inspects her two eggs. They are large, goose-sized, and snow white. She floats near the nest, maybe

stretching her legs after a tedious session of sitting so long in one position. Suddenly a crow descends from the sky, claws extended, intent on dropping onto the nest and snatching a breakfast egg. The grebe squawks loudly, a scolding warning “Keep away!” The crow pivots its wings, arresting its drop, and climbs out of its dive a few feet from the nest. While the grebe continues its inspection, the crow makes a broad circle and like a warplane it comes in for a second attack. This time the alarm is twice as loud because the grebe’s mate has been aroused and swims to her aid. The crow retreats a second time, circles the area and tries yet again to no avail. The vigilance of the parents has saved the eggs, at least for today. Three strikes, you’re out, the crow withdraws for easier targets.

It’s a free day and by 9 AM everyone has left camp, heading to Edmonton or taking one of the many trails and roads in the national park. Shari and I hike, first up to the lake lookout and then along the shoreline trail and boardwalk. We eat a hearty breakfast at the golf course clubhouse and then take our RV to circle the Bison Loop where we find a herd of Wood Bison retreating over a grassy plain, a scene that could easily have been 150 years ago as it is today.

We stop at Hayburger Trail, named after the settlers who farmed here a hundred years ago, but now a path through acreage reestablished as aspen woods, meadows, and wetlands. Shari is tired after our earlier hike and takes a nap, so I head out on my own. At a dry marsh I hear the same call as yesterday morning and this time I am intent on getting a good look at the sparrow. I especially want to photograph its crown stripe: gray if it’s a Nelson Sparrow or pale if it is Le Conte’s Sparrow. I gingerly creep over the dry reeds, trying not to disturb the singer, until I finally pinpoint the songster. It’s a clear shot in good light and it’s Le Conte’s. I also captured the buff-streaked back, not white-on-dark as in Nelson’s Sparrow.

Shari’s awake and we drive to the start of the Shoreline Trail. Invigorated, Shari gets way ahead of me while I stop to listen to the birds. I hear the Yellow Warbler song and try to find the bird. Out pops a warbler and I aim my camera lens at its high perch. Click, click, click ... but something seems wrong. This bird is not yellow. I stop to examine the photos in the view finder. The bird is pale below, darker above, looking like a Warbling Vireo or a Tennessee Warbler, but that can’t be. I can’t be that wrong about the song. Later when I examine the photos on the computer it is indeed a Tennessee Warbler. I must have photographed one bird while another nearby was doing the singing.

(Shari) We do an incredibly stupid thing today and we know better. But more on that later. At 7:30 we are already taking a walk along the shore. After about 1½ miles we come to the golf course café and have a delightful breakfast and walk back to the RV. I attend to caravan paperwork writing Wagonmaster reports for every day that I have put off and Bert attends to journals I think. About 11 AM we decide to drive the Bison Loop and stop at the visitor center. We are treated to about 20 adult buffalos, some with young, very close to the road. I try to take a picture of one rolling in the dust but am too slow on the draw with my camera.

Now comes the stupid thing. Bert wants to hike some trails. I do too, but easy ones. We agree on Number 10, which is purported on the trail map to be easy. Thinking we will be gone only about 20 min., I leave water, map, phone, GPS, and radio in the rig. Off we go. The added coolness of a breeze feels good on this sunny warm day. The trail is paved and we meander between forest and open fields with lots of birds and insect noises. Periodically I find a bench and wait for Bert to catch up. When he reaches a signpost he says he will walk back to get the rig and will meet me in 2 km. I think that is only 1.2 mi., maybe 25 min. I can do that. I realize that I really do not know what the trail is like ahead and I sure as heck do not want to walk back, so I forge forward anyway. At the 2 km mark, there is no parking lot. Ah oh, now what! I can walk back or go on to the 3 km mark that I vaguely remember as being on the map. What is Bert going to do? Go back to our starting point or go to the 3 km mark?

I choose to walk forward. I see bison poop on the trail and know I could come across one at any time. We just talked about the woman who got mauled by a bison in Yellowstone. I know I could run into a moose. Needless to say, I keep my eyes peeled, thinking all the time that this is stupid to be walking without phone or radio or water. By now I am thirsty too and have put on about 5000 steps on my Fitbit. I sit on one of the frequent benches and ponder the situation. I continue forward and all of a sudden I see Bert. He was worried and asks where have I been? He forgets that it takes me 20 min. to walk a mile and 50 min. to walk 2.4 mi. He gives me a hug so I know he was worried. That is so sweet. So it all turned out in the end, but it still was a stupid thing to do.



Red-necked Grebe sitting on eggs



Wood Bison



Wood Bison crossing Bison Loop



Le Conte's Sparrow



Tennessee Warbler



Sunset over Astotin Lake

Day 8. May 27 – Athabasca

(Bert) I remember the year we tried to find Great Gray Owls north of Edmonton. We didn't find the owls, but I do recall the transition from farmland to boreal forest. So, today, as we take a parallel northerly route, but farther east, I pay attention to habitat changes. We pass the last of the grain elevators and then see very few wheat fields. Fewer farms now, mostly pastures and hay fields, and several feedlots of Black Angus and Herefords, are replaced with parkland, a term to describe groves of Trembling Aspen interspersed with vibrant grassland prairies. We stop at Athabasca, bisected by the Athabasca River. The river played prominently in the exploration of northern Alberta and Northwest Territories for it was the thoroughfare by which beaver trappers and gold seekers invaded the far north. We continue along flatter land, not undulating as before, and reach our destination on the eastern shore of Lesser Slave Lake.



Day 9. May 28 – Lesser Slave Lake

(Bert) Nicole reads the thermometer and announces 1°C. And it feels like it is freezing. Yet at 5:45 AM the birds are active and Nicole and Jacob have eight in little cloth bags, birds that were caught in one or another of the 14 mist nets stretched across parts of the aspen forest adjacent to Lesser Slave Lake. Our group piles into the small building where a table with a desk lamp is set up for the bird banding project. Nicole deftly removes a bird from its bag and quickly attaches an Aluminum ring band to one of its legs. As she works, she explains how she sexes the bird, determines its age by the shape, coarseness and condition of its feathers, measures its wing chord, and weighs it while it is held tightly in an empty toilet paper roll. For some of the birds she extracts a tail feather that will be tested in a laboratory to get the ratio of light and heavy hydrogen isotopes obtained from the water consumed by the bird. This ratio will give ornithologists information about where these migrant birds last nested. Then she releases the bird through a trap door to the outside. Were it not for the thorough explanation she gives us, she could probably process a captive bird every two to three min.

I take lots of photos of the birds and banding process, especially of a captive Canada Warbler which is on Georgia's list of birds she most wants to see. Lesser Slave Lake is one of the best places in North America to find this threatened warbler and later in the day Barbara finds one next to her campsite and points it out to Jeff and Richard. Georgia isn't nearby and when she comes the bird is gone. Thinking back to this morning when she watched the captive bird, Georgia says, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."



Removing a Canada Warbler from the mist net



Attaching a ring band to a Swainson's Thrush



Measuring the wing chord on a Magnolia Warbler



Inspecting the tail feathers on an Ovenbird



Inspecting the wing feathers to determine the age of a Canada Warbler



Finding this Lincoln's Sparrow is about to lay an egg



Recording the observations and measurements for a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher



All done! This Mourning Warbler is ready for release.

Day 10. May 29 – Lesser Slave Lake

(Bert) Yesterday it was captured birds; today we want to see them in the wild. We have a good start when, next to my campsite, I hear a Mourning Warbler and sharp-eyed Barbara pinpoints it high in an aspen. We walk through the campsite and I hear a robin-like song I do not recognize. Whenever that happens, it is almost always a worthwhile find, so we search until I see the Western Tanager singing from atop the highest spruce. Sporting yellow and red feathers with contrasting black and white wings, it is the most flamboyant bird we've seen this trip. I try for photos, but it is too high above us for good shots and the piercing sunrise transforms the yellow bird into a glaring sunspot.

We take to the wooded trail that parallels Lesser Slave Lake and soon I hear another prize, a Canada Warbler. We watch it for a long time and, again, Georgia is not with us until the bird is gone. Within two hours we locate seven warbler species singing from their nesting territory, adding Ovenbird, Yellow Warbler, American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, and Tennessee Warbler. Just as we are about to quit on our morning walk, I am watching a distant Rusty Blackbird when I hear peeping very close to me. I take a few steps forward and peer into a muddy pit filled with water that drained from a small beaver dam. Mother Mallard, wary of my presence, is trying to hasten her newborn chicks into retreat, but the chicks can't seem to get up the muddy sides and keep slipping back into the water-filled depression. I photograph the darlings before they finally make their escape into the deep grass.

In late afternoon we drive into Slave Lake for errands and a L.E.O., the abbreviation we use for Let's Eat Out. Almost everyone decides to dine out and almost all order the barbequed ribs meal that Shari arranged at an attractive price. She also orders a huge plate of hors d'oeuvres for the whole group to share.

The day is not yet done. Georgia, Bea and I decide to try to find a Yellow Rail. We leave the campground at 10 PM. Bird bander Nicole had drawn a map of a place she heard one when she participated in a Birdathon a few weeks ago. We reach the place penciled on the map, but it is all forested. No Yellow Rail lives in a mature forest. We check more closely and through the forest we see a tiny wetland overgrown with trees. This must be the place, but I have serious doubts any self-respecting rail would tarry here for more than an overnight stay. We stand perfectly still, barely shifting a muscle, surrounded by trees and only two feet from water's edge. Far in the distance, the forest reverberates in the songs of Swainson's Thrushes, melancholy verses of slurred sharps and flats. To this, White-throated Sparrows blend their own version of a minor key serenade to nightfall. A trio of Boreal Chorus Frogs is chirping like a 60-piece orchestra. The chorus goes on non-stop for 15-20 min. and then abruptly stops. What happened? Did the rail appear? Is it a muskrat swimming too closely? We see nothing. We hear nothing. The silence is deafening. Just as suddenly as it stopped, it restarts at full volume. Ten or fifteen minutes elapse. Out of the sky plunges a Green-winged Teal, plopping down on the mirrored pond, sending circular ripples shimmering in moonlight. The teal makes subtle chirping noises as it swims in our direction. We remain rigidly transfixed, frozen in our stance behind a fence of small trees. The teal beeps and glides closer. Suddenly it changes plans and rockets straight up into the air as if exploding from a cannon barrel. Stillness ensues. Nothing moves. Minutes expire. Legs tire. We keep our vigil past 11:30 and then retreat. In the forested darkness I can barely see how we made our way to this spot and hope I don't misstep into the swamp. On the gravel road, under a three-quarter moon, I dial my iPhone to owls and see if any will respond to recordings. No response. I check the northern sky. Maybe the Aurora Borealis will show. A coal dust sky is smudged with thin gray ribbons of eerie clouds stretching along the horizon, but no northern lights. It is midnight and time to head back to camp.



Canada Warbler



Mallard ducklings





A Yellow Rail moon

Day 11. May 30 – Peace River

(Bert) Campground manager Albert asks me, “Why does the Eskimo wash her clothes in Tide?”

“I don’t know,” I reply.

He answers, “Well, it’s too darn cold out’tide!”

I ask him, a man in his 70s, how the town of Peace River got its name. While pointing to his father’s farm on the distant hillside overlooking the river, he, a lifetime resident of the community, tells me the town got its name from the river.

I ask, “How did the river get its name?”

Albert replies, “Darn if I know. It has always had that name.”

He can’t help me with that question, but he can answer the next when asked, “Where is Twelve-foot Davis buried?”

Albert points to the high hill across the river, adjacent to his birthplace, and says, “Over there.”

I ask Albert, “Who is Twelve-foot Davis?”

Now, Albert tells a story. Henry Davis, born in Vermont, tried his luck during the California Gold Rush, arriving too late to stake a claim. Next, he tried other areas until he came to the Cariboo region of British Columbia. Again, he was too late for these gold fields, the best ones already taken. Henry couldn’t read or write but was good at numbers. He discovered that a 12-foot strip between two of the best claims had been mistakenly filed. So, Davis filed a claim for the 12-foot strip and soon found gold estimated at \$12,000 to \$30,000, quite a sum in those days. Henry was a short man of

only 5ft. 7in. stature, yet he got the nickname Twelve-foot Davis because of his famous claim size.

At the height of the fur trade era, he used his fortune to bankroll a trading post built on the Sagitawa hillside overlooking the convergence of Peace River and Smoky River, as well as a string of other trading posts, all in competition with the Hudson Bay Company. Later in life he retired to Fort Vermilion and in his will he said the Peace River hillside is where we wanted to be buried. Unfortunately, his will was not read until after he was buried at the mission in Lesser Slave Lake in 1900. When they discovered his will, they moved his bones to the Sagitawa hillside and that is where his grave is still today. His epitaph reads:

Twelve Foot Davis

Pathfinder, Pioneer, Miner and Trader

He was Every Man's Friend and Never Locked his cabin Door

Day 12. May 31 – High Level

(Bert) I thought we had run out of farmlands, but since we started heading west and then north the hayfields, pastures and grain fields form a patchwork within aspen parklands and black spruce lowlands. We are in the land of oil sands and high prairie, twin enterprises signified by oil trucks, pipe yards and pump jacks sharing the countryside with grain silos, oversized tractors, and fields of golden stubble. Thousand acre tracts of forest have recently been sheared to bare ground, timber extracted, leaving gathered piles of shrubby debris drying on the flat ground. Will they replant the trees or convert it to more farmlands?

From the Mackenzie Highway near Paddle Prairie, we turn right onto a side road heading to La Crete ferry and a bit of history. Not old history, for this area wasn't settled until 1914 when La Crête Landing was established. When the first Mennonites arrived in the 1930s, they settled a short distance southwest of the original settlement on the current site of La Crete. When the first highways were built in the area in the 1960s, the population began to increase as new settlers arrived, and in 1979, La Crete was created as a hamlet. During the summer months the La Crete Ferry, also known as the Tompkins Landing Ferry, is one of only seven ferries still operating in Alberta.

A few of us with smaller RVs cross the river on the ferry; others park on the west side and walk on board. The ferry is a strange contraption in that the direction of vehicle entry is perpendicular to the direction of motion. Jack, Gail and I are the first to arrive at the small picnic site where I saw an American Three-toed Woodpecker in 2012. That's another species on Georgia's most wanted list, but what are the chances the woodpecker will still be at the same spot three years later? Within minutes I hear a likely call and then see a dark woodpecker fly from one tree to another and keep on moving. I play a recording to confirm it is the three-toed and Jack agrees that is what we heard. I head back to the RV to wait for Georgia and the rest to arrive. When they do, we hike the trail through the woods. The woodpecker is nowhere to be seen, nor heard. However, we

follow another familiar song and get a good look at a Canada Warbler, this time with Georgia present. Georgia now has “one in the bush” as well as “one in the hand.”

(Shari) Well, we did it again. After a wonderful driving day, albeit with drizzle most of the afternoon, we have a great grilled steak dinner that I arranged for the group at the golf course clubhouse. It is within walking distance of our campsites and it really hits the spot. We are so full afterwards that I get the bright idea to take a walk. I read the first 20 min. of walking burns off sugar. So I intend to walk 20 min. We head out along one of the abandoned fairways, the golfers long since retired for the evening. After a good time walking, we find one that says number 6. I figure we will go around the course following hole 7, 8, and 9 and then head back. As par for the course, I am without radio, cell phone or GPS. How hard can this be? After hole 7 we get to hole 15. Now what? I see three flags in the distance which seems to be in the wrong direction of our RV. We walk back in the direction of which we think is right only to come to confusion corner. I mean literally, the sign says “Confusion Corner.” Hole 3 is one way and hole 14 is another. Now what? Keep on plodding, hoping to see the clubhouse or something familiar. All of a sudden Bert says, “I think I will go this way”. I turn around and low and behold, I see our RV! It is way off in the distance to our left. We just made a hug circle with our RV in the middle. How did that happen? I don’t know and I don’t care. It was an hour’s walk and I burned off more than sugar.



La Crete Ferry



CHAPTER 2. EASTERN NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Day 13. June 1 – Twin Falls Gorge

(Bert) After driving north a bit over 1000 mi. since leaving Calgary, we cross into Northwest Territories. The border is colorfully marked with a sign announcing the 60th parallel which defines the southern border of Northwest Territories and the northern border of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Here we are approximately twice as far away from the Equator as from the North Pole. At this latitude the sun is visible 18 hr., 52 min. on summer solstice. Other countries at this latitude are Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, and Greenland.

At the border the biting wind chills the already cold air and the treetops sway in its force. We continue on NWT Highway 1, also called Mackenzie Highway or the Waterfalls Route. Most of our group stops to view Alexandra Falls while Shari and I continue to our campsite at Louise Falls so that Shari can finish her preparation of Waterfall Noodles, her name for the spaghetti dinner we will all share tonight. I walk to the waterfalls, stopping to photograph a few more wildflowers that have started to bloom: kinnikinnick, bog rosemary, and high bush cranberry. They say the territory is short on rainfall, but the falls seems about the same to me as when we viewed in August, 2012. The many contours to the waterfall and the tannin colored water as it pours over the edge offers many tantalizing views for my camera and it is hard to choose which photos to include in this journal, so I've added four.

While setting up for our outside dinner, I hear a Merlin calling and then we see it flying overhead, chasing a raven. A bit later an immature Bald Eagle passes overhead. Before our travel meeting, I give a presentation talk on Whooping Cranes and then we have

Shari's spaghetti dinner. By this time the weather has improved—no rain, no wind, and warmer—but you can still see us dressed warmly as we enjoy dinner.



Shari, standing next to our RV at the border



Bog Rosemary



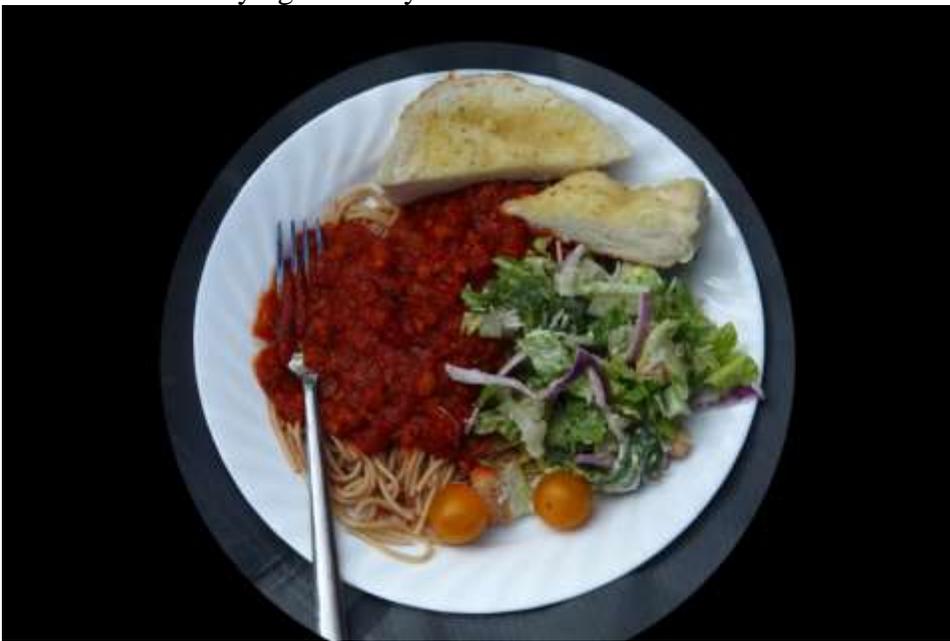
Louise Falls







Common Raven flying over Hay River near falls



Shari's Waterfall Noodles



Day 14. June 2 – Wood Buffalo National Park

(Bert) The contact I have in Fort Smith told me forest fires were so bad last summer that the highway was closed. Today we see the burned black poles that once were foliated spruce and pine. The local weather has been warm, almost hot, these past weeks and a fire ban continues. Yet, most forest fires here are caused by lightning strikes and Smoky the Bear's warning "Only you can prevent forest fires" rings hollow since fires are natural and required. Life has adapted to fire. Spruce and Jack Pine require intense heat to open their cones and release seed. Insects thrive on dead wood; woodpeckers attack the insects. Fresh growth of young trees, flowers and shrubs are food for others.

Along the highway through Wood Buffalo National Park we see lots of signs of life: Red-tailed Hawks, kestrels, ducks—especially more than a dozen Buffleheads, each pair on its own tiny pond—Gray Jays, Sandhill Cranes, and of course the large mammals, including Black Bears, Wood Bison, Red Foxes, Woodchucks, and Red Squirrels. An odd couple surprises me, a cinnamon Black Bear paired with a black Black Bear. I particularly focus my camera on the cinnamon bear because it provides a good comparison to similar photos I have of cinnamon Grizzly Bears in Alaska, highlighting the difference in body structure between the two species.



Gravel road through Wood Buffalo National Park



2014 forest fire at Nyarling River



Looks as if a woodpecker pecked this burnt Jack Pine searching for insects



Wood Bison beside the highway



Wood Bison



Black Bear follows the edge of the forest, paralleling the highway



Bears are close to the highway, in the green space edging the forest



Cinnamon Black Bear with black Black Bear



Cinnamon Black Bear



Gail's photo of a silver Red Fox eating an egg

Day 15. June 3 – Wood Buffalo National Park

(Bert) Look at a range map for American White Pelican. The summer range in Canada is shaped like a seal on its hunches, its belly stretching across eastern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and narrowing as its nose points due north. Our current position is at the circus ball balanced by the seal, the farthest north for this species. It is called Rapids of the Dead and is part of a chain of rock-festooned whitewater categorized as a 5 or 6 at the top of the charts in difficulty for kayakers. South of here, just a bit upstream on the Slave River is their rookery and here we are so close to the border that

the rookery is in Alberta and the fishing waters just reach into Northwest Territories. I count about 60 pelicans sitting on rocks on the opposite side of Slave River, but there may be more since the sunrise glare is severe. A small flock floats downstream with the current.

At 9:30 the group gathers at the national park headquarters where we meet Amy, Sharon, and Greg who will be our guides for a hike to the Salt Plains. We drive a lengthy one-lane gravel road winding through forest burned last year, two years ago, or five years ago, depending on our position. Suddenly the forest opens up to an incredible vantage point overlooking the vast Salt Plains several hundred feet below the observation deck. The plains are the home of Whooping Cranes, Sandhill Cranes, and roaming bison. We hope to see a distant Whooper, but our chances are slim since, except for one nest, all the cranes are nesting far south on the Alberta side of the national park, a remote area only accessible by air or all-terrain vehicle.

To reach the Salt Plains, we descend on a steep switchback trail through the wooded hillside. The plain itself is sand, sometimes dried mud, or pure salt in other spots. The salt was deposited as sediment from a drying ancient ocean. Now it leaches from the hillsides in thin underground streams, ten times saltier than the ocean, and springs out near the base. The water evaporates, leaving piles of deep salt. I sample the salt, pure sodium chloride, and attest to its saltiness.

We finish our Salt Plains hike and struggle up the steep incline to the viewing platform. While we did not find a Whooping Crane on the plains, neither did the group that stayed on the platform and scanned the vast area with spotting scopes. Jeff points out a herd of bison far in the distance and notices that the herd is moving our way. We watch for long minutes as they get closer, even noticing that they sometimes gallop. I count 33 bison, including calves, in the herd, but I may have missed some as they weave around copse of trees. They keep coming in our direction and we wonder what they will do when they reach the steep hillside. On they come, right up the same trail we struggled along, but they climb faster and without exertion. Suddenly one of the large cows stops and stares at us, undecided about how to proceed. Never mind. Those pushing from the rear simply pass the cow and continue with a slight detour about a stone's throw from us and then disappear in the forest at the top of the ridge. Park Ranger Amy remarks that only once has she seen a bison herd on the move and never up this ridge.

In midafternoon Jeff, Barbara, and Cindy join me in a hike to Mountain Rapids on the Slave River. It's about a mile walk along a high rise and then through the woods to a narrow viewpoint of the river. Next is a very steep decline, so Cindy holds back while the three of us struggle downhill to the shoreline. We are now in excellent view of the pelican colony rookery, a rocky almost barren island in the middle of the fast flowing rapids. The pelicans are about halfway through the incubation period and we see many sitting nearly side by side, but without any apparent nest. Other pelicans stand nearby, perhaps males, and others fly in flocks in and around the islands. It is really a remarkable sight, made even more amazing when one considers how far north we are.

(Shari) It is her birthday and she is having a party for us. Toni and her husband manage the campground. Yesterday, she asked me if we would like bannock, traditional First Nation bread on a stick. I jump at the chance to have it. Marlene and I were trying to find a recipe and we were going to make it for the group, serving it with the gooseberry jam that Dusty gave us last week. So, I bring the jam along to the group fire pit. The sticks, actually stout poles shaved at one end, are already cut and Tony passes them out to each of us, telling us to put them in the fire but not to scorch them. She has the dough already prepared and has a big tray of very fresh fruit inside the shelter. We oil our hands and rub the top of the stick. We take about a quarter cup of dough and wrap it around the stick. Then we put the stick in the fire, constantly turning it so the bread does not burn. After a while, the bread gets a nice toasty brown color and turns easily on the stick. It is done. We take it off the stick and fill the hole left by the stick with Indian butter, gooseberry jam, fresh fruit, or honey. Yum, yum! Tony gives us the recipe for the bannock but somehow I do not think it will ever taste as good as the ones we have here tonight.

(Bert) After the evening dessert of bannock on a stick, Bill, Cindy, Bea and I walk to the nearby sewage ponds. What birding trip would be complete without a visit to sewage ponds? I had been here last night with Jeff and Barbara and we had some amazing sightings, including migrating Stilt Sandpipers, paired Solitary Sandpipers, nesting Lesser Yellowlegs, feeding flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes, and a family of Red Foxes. All are here again tonight except the Stilt Sandpipers that must have continued their trek to the Arctic Ocean. The Red Foxes entertain us so long it was hard to leave at 10 PM. I'll show you one of my many photos of the mother fox and her four kits.



American White Pelican at Rapids of the Dead



Descending the ridge into the Salt Plains



Salt Plains



Salt deposits



Black Bear tracks on the Salt Plains



Bison herd crossing the Salt Plains



American White Pelican rookery at Mountain Rapids



Bert wrapping bannock around greased stick



Baking bannock on a wood fire



Red Fox kit

Day 16. June 4 – Fort Smith to Hay River

(Bert) Yesterday's agenda was so filled I could not write about everything and I skipped one story worth relating. Georgia has been searching at every appropriate habitat for American Three-toed Woodpecker. Judging by the bark removal on the Jack Pines around our campground, a woodpecker must be at work, yet no one has seen one until late yesterday afternoon when Ron finds one working the pines above his campsite. He soon has the whole group gathered around watching the woodpecker flip pine bark chips like a Las Vegas card shark dealing poker. Georgia is delighted, overwhelmed in fact. It's a lifer for her and several others in the group as well.

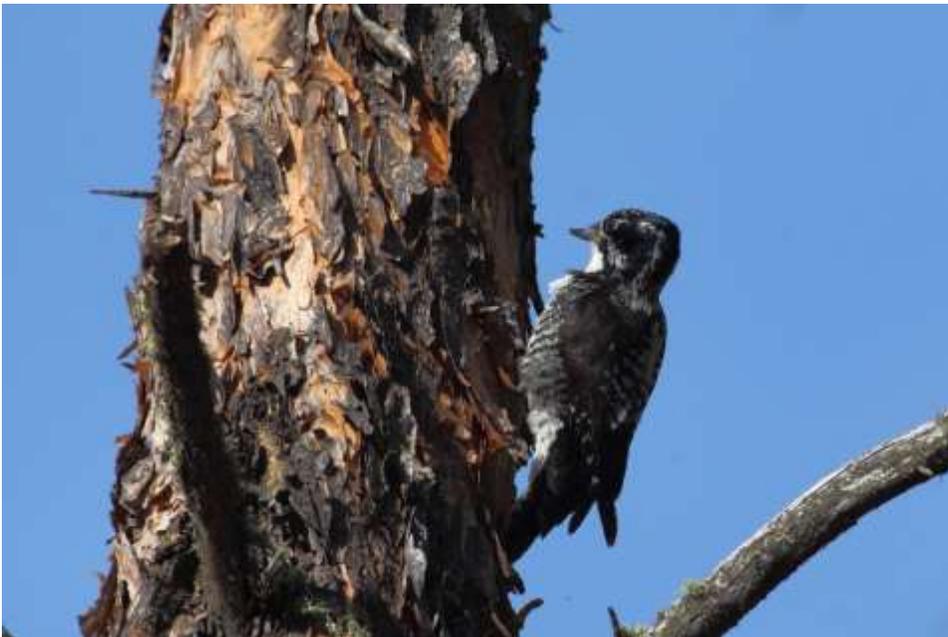
Two woodpecker species specialize in extracting insects from beneath tree bark, especially dead trees. The other is the Black-backed Woodpecker. When Jeff and I stop at Angus Sinkhole, I suggest we cross the highway and follow a trail into a forest devastated by last year's fire. I notice how the scorched Jack Pines have opened up, a good sign for regeneration. Suddenly a woodpecker darts to a dead pine and chips away at the blackened trunk. Yellow crown marks it as a male. Black back tells us we've got the Black-backed.

Before I move on to another subject, I'd like to answer a question posed by one of our readers. Although fire destroys spruce and pine in Northwest Territories, what about beetles like the ones wiping out our forests in Colorado and other Rocky Mountain states? I asked MLA Bob Bromley that question and he said the beetles have reached the southern part of Great Slave Lake and continue moving north as winters have been getting warmer—global warming!—and not killing off the beetles.

Along our route today, retreating through Wood Buffalo National Park, we are again seeing Black Bears. Shari and I see three single bears, the second curiously nipping off dandelion flowers like a kid stuffing down candy, and the third, a young two-year-old, undecided about what to do when it sees our RV. First it retreats, then it gallops to the highway but stops short of crossing, and finally it scampers back to the woods and ducks inside cover. I thought we have the best bear stories today, but Ron and Carol top ours with their sighting of a mother bear with three cubs.

I stop when I see a grouse near the road. It heads to the woods, a particularly blackened section barren of undergrowth but thick in branchless charred trunks. By the time Jeff and Barbara arrive, I've located three Sharp-tailed Grouse and we watch them browsing the blackened earth, apparently finding something worth eating.

We camp at a provincial park in Hay River, a community with the same name as the river which here terminates near the southern extremity of Great Slave Lake. In early evening we walk to the beach and survey the sandy shoals and points jutting into the lake. Caspian Terns and Bald Eagles rest on the sand and Surf Scoters float where river meets lake. A Caspian Tern range map will show you Great Slave Lake is an isolated location for these terns, the only one in Northwest Territories, and the farthest north in Canada.



American Three-toed Woodpecker



Black-backed Woodpecker peeking around the backside of Jack Pine. Note the bark chip in midair.



Jack Pine cones popped open during last year's fire



Healthy Jack Pine with tightly closed cone, bottom center



Star-flowered False Solomon's-seal, Hay River



Freija Fritillary, Hay River



Hay River beach with Great Slave Lake in background

Day 17. June 5 – Fort Providence

(Bert) The Mackenzie Highway takes us northwest past spruce-pine forests highlighted by several territorial parks en route. McNallie Creek Territorial Park features an attractive waterfall, narrow with a long drop into a deep bowl of granite walls. McNallie was a highway engineer that explored the creek by canoe until surprised by the waterfall. He and his companion jumped to shore and the canoe went over the falls.

Fluttering among the dark spruce, low to the ground, is a dark non-descript butterfly. I photograph it for identification and later find it in my Butterflies of the Northwest Territories guide. It's a Persius Duskywing, a skipper, which I doubt I've seen before. In the sunlight many flowers grow in the sandy soil and I photograph Northern Yellow Oxytrope which has delicate pale yellow pea flowers and I see my first Shrubby Cinquefoil of the season, a very common shrub with five flower parts and five leaflets, hence the name cinquefoil.

Our next stop is Lake Evelyn Falls, a much larger and more dynamic falls. Across the river, it sprays a fine mist which splits light into a rainbow of colors. Each waterfall has a different topography and this one is differentiated by its breadth and sharp fall line, bowed at the center with a water drop unobstructed by boulders. Shari video-tapes the panorama; the roar is as dramatic as the visual.

We pass Kakisa River just slowly enough for me to see Cliff Swallows circling the bridge. Others tell me later that the swallows were inspecting last year's nests, but have not yet started remodeling those or building new ones, three months behind the schedule kept by central Texas Cliff Swallows.

We reach the mighty Mackenzie River at Dory Point. Strings of American Wigeons float downstream at the speed of a rushing freight train. A pair of Bonaparte's Gulls circles close by, tipping wings on turns so that we can see the white panels in their primaries. Leaving the point, we cross Mackenzie River on the new bridge which was still under construction when we passed here in 2012.



McNallie Falls



Northern Yellow Oxytropis



Shrubby Cinquefoil



Lake Evelyn Falls



Lake Evelyn Falls



Bonaparte's Gull



New bridge across Mackenzie River

Day 18. June 6 – Yellowknife Highway

(Bert) Shari and I leave by 6:15 AM so that we can finalize plans for our activities in Yellowknife. This early in the morning bison outnumber vehicles. We encounter four groups from 6:26 to 7:10. I pull off to survey Chan Lake. Happily I find a pair of Pacific Loons as I expected, along with many White-winged Scoters. We stop once more at North Arm Territorial Park to view the north side of Great Slave Lake.

Having finished our errands, we stop at the laundromat for one more chore and there meet Jack and Gail already at work folding laundry. By 11:30 the temperature in Yellowknife is 76°. A local lady tells me it is too hot and she prefers winter when it is cold.



North Arm Territorial Park on north shore of Great Slave Lake



Great Slave Lake



Route so far: Enterprise, Fort Smith, Hay River, Fort Providence, Yellowknife

Day 19. June 7 – Yellowknife

(Bert) Arriving at Yellowknife is like Dorothy finding the capital city in *The Wizard of Oz*, a gleaming golden metropolis of skyscrapers at the end of a long highway through wilderness. And, now that Yellowknife's gold has all been wrenched from the earth the city turns to diamonds for its next source of wealth. Only discovered as recently as 1991, the three new mines have already put Canada at the number 3 position, behind Russia and Botswana, in annual production value (130,000,000 carats, \$12 billion).

My interest leans toward the geology and crystallography of the diamonds, rather than the gems. Diamonds were formed far below the earth's surface under intense temperature and pressure at a time in earth's history when such conditions existed. The diamonds were part of the magma shot to the surface by ancient volcanos. At the Visitor's Centre and again at the Diamond Centre, I study pieces of wood that were pushed aside in the magma flow. Curiously, the wood is Dawn Redwood, a piece of cedar related to California Redwood and a marker for the temperate climate that existed here 50 million years ago when the volcano erupted. In time, the volcano cone was worn down to the surface and here in this part of Northwest Territories the ice age glaciers scraped off the surface ground and exposed the ancient igneous and metamorphic rocks that once were miles below the mantle. Kimberlite pipes extend down the shaft of the former volcano. Kimberlite is an igneous rock known to harbor diamonds, although rarely. It took two knowledgeable men a dozen years of searching the Canadian Shield to discover the diamond source in a remote lake 300 km northeast of Yellowknife.

To reach the diamonds, the mining machines excavate a circular cone spirally below the earth's surface, thereby building a coiled roadway for the giant trucks to reach the source. The kimberlite is removed, crushed into pebbles—the hard diamonds do not crush—and

pass along a conveyor belt, past an x-ray beam. The exhibit in the Diamond Centre says the “diamonds glow under the x-ray light,” but what I think they mean is that diamond crystals diffract the x-ray beam. (In a former life, I was a crystallographer and used x-ray diffraction to determine molecular structures of single crystals). Once a diamond is detected by the photomultiplier, a blast of air pushes the diamond aside into a separate bin. Each tonne of ore yields less than 4 carats of diamonds.



Representation of a Kimberlite pipe at Visitor's Centre



Aerial view of diamond mine in winter



Diamond mine in summer, showing roadway spirally downward



Kimberlite, an igneous rock



Dawn Redwood swallowed by the 50-million-year-old volcano



Bea, learning how to polish a diamond

Day 20. June 8 morning – Yellowknife

(Bert) Is there any other airline in the world that provides daily passenger service via DC-3 airplanes? And, that's not the only vintage airplanes that Buffalo Airways flies regularly. One of the first questions I ask our guide Christina is why use old airplanes: the novelty or the utility? The answer is utility, but seeing what other artifacts owner Joe McBride collects, I suspect the hobby aspect factors in as well.

I saw my first Buffalo Airways DC-3 when we were walking along the beach at Hay River a few days ago. I photographed the old propeller plane shortly after take-off as it was rising above Great Slave Lake. Its 45-min. route would take it across the length of Great Slave to Yellowknife. Now I see it or its twin parked in front of the hangar at Yellowknife. We are allowed to climb the retractable stairway and enter the plane. A smoothly curved ceiling limits headroom, the windows are square, not circular portholes, and the cockpit is cluttered with analog gauges, heavy metal levers, and a pair of cracked green leatherette seats. A sturdy metal strap secures a stout tool labeled "crash axe."

Buffalo Airways flies its fleet of five DC-3's because they operate at lower temperatures (-50°C, -58°F), far below the capabilities of other planes, and thus are ideal equipment for traveling the far north in winter. And, as is the case for the C-46, they can land anywhere, including on ice. The DC-3's were built in 1942 and sold for \$85,000. Now they cost \$250,000 if they can be found. Repair parts are scavenged from other planes or manufactured in house. Besides passenger planes we are shown water bombers and fire suppression planes. A DC-3 water bomber can scoop 12,000 lbs. of lake water in 10 sec. and then dump its load just as quickly while flying 50 ft. above the burning forest fire. Many of the planes have a war history. One DC-3 was flown on D-Day and has a riveted

and patched belly where it sustained bullet damage; two DC-4's were used in the Berlin Airlift; and a Curtiss Commander C-46 flew over the Himalayas "top of the hump" carrying cargo. All of these are still in operation, doing cargo and fire duty in the far north. Buffalo Airways is truly a living museum.

(Shari) The day is full, yet relaxed. We have scheduled a tour with Buffalo Airways at 10 AM and Christina tells us how they use old planes, built during World War II, up here in the north. If you have ever heard of the show Ice Pilots, this is where it is filmed. The planes use regular fuel from the 1940s because the fuel does not freeze and the engines can start on a dime in -40°C weather. One we are allowed to board is a passenger plane that makes the 40 min. commute to Hay River daily. Other planes are used for water bombers during forest fire season. Unfortunately they might be used in record numbers this year, since it is so dry and hot.



DC-3 in flight from Hay River to Yellowknife



World War II vintage DC-3 used for daily flights Yellowknife to Hay River



DC-3 equipped for passenger service



DC-3 crash axe



Jeff inspects D-Day damage in belly of plane still in service



Curtis Commander C-46 flies and lands anywhere



Note the square propellers on this Electra used for far north flights



Small fire suppression plane in Buffalo Airways hangar

Day 20. June 8 afternoon – Yellowknife

(Shari) At 2 PM we trek to the Diamond Centre and learn about the diamond industry in Yellowknife. Yellowknife proclaims to be North America's biggest producing diamond mine. I am amazed at how expensive these diamonds are. $\frac{1}{4}$ carat earrings are \$1500 to \$4000 depending on cut, clarity, and color. Little specks of pink diamonds are \$12,000 each.

At 3:30 we tour the Northwestern Territories Legislative Assembly, a beautiful building set on the shores of a small lake. We enter the caucus room and see that it is round with no assigned seats, symbolizing the consensus form of government practiced in the Northwest Territories, i.e., there are no political parties and everyone runs as an independent. The whole of the territories only has 47,000 people, but speaking 11 different languages. I tend to forget that this is wilderness with half the people living in Yellowknife and the other half scattered for miles and miles in little villages and towns of 100 to 2000 people.

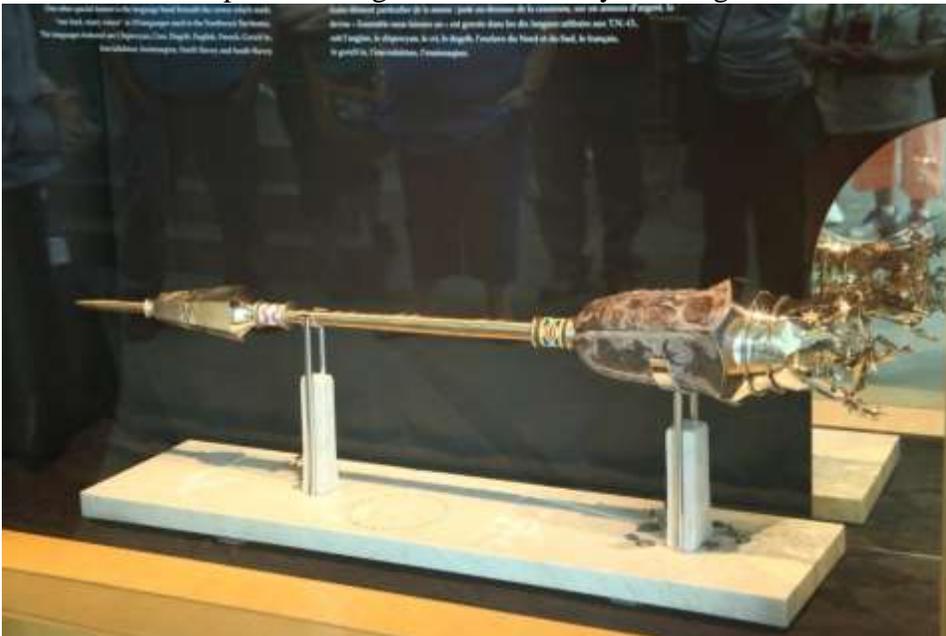
The highlight of the day is the boat tour on Great Slave Lake and a private fish fry over an open fire on an island. The weather is just perfect for it. The group is divided in three. One boat can handle 6 and another 5 people. Also limiting us is the availability of parking at the start of the tour, forcing us to car pool and making sure dog owners can arrange walking and feedings either before or after the 5 PM start. Finally the groups are decided and Bert goes with the first 11 people. I come an hour later with the last group and we meet for our fish fry. We are having fresh whitefish from Great Slave Lake, fried in a light cornmeal coating. After dinner the first group departs and an hour later, the boat picks us up for our tour. Greg, our captain, takes us through the Yellowknife Harbor where the colorful houseboats are docked. He tells us some history of the houseboats,

who lives in some of them, and that his son built the colorful red one at a cost of \$250,000. My goodness! No way! There is no indoor plumbing for that amount of money and the house is smaller than our 1100 sq.ft. home in Texas. Besides that, few look much better than shacks. But the view is priceless!

(Bert) This time I read Shari's journal before writing. She about covers it except for our photos.



Horned Grebe in ponds at Legislative Assembly building



Ceremonial mace used when legislative assembly is in session



One of the boats for Great Slave Lake tour



First People's native village of Dettah
(in winter, kids get to school on an ice road across Yellowknife Bay)



Bonaparte's Gulls harassing a Bald Eagle



Bald Eagle sitting on nest on tall spruce on an island



Picnic on Horseshoe Island in Great Slave Lake



Yellowknife skyline viewed from rock hill on Horseshoe Island



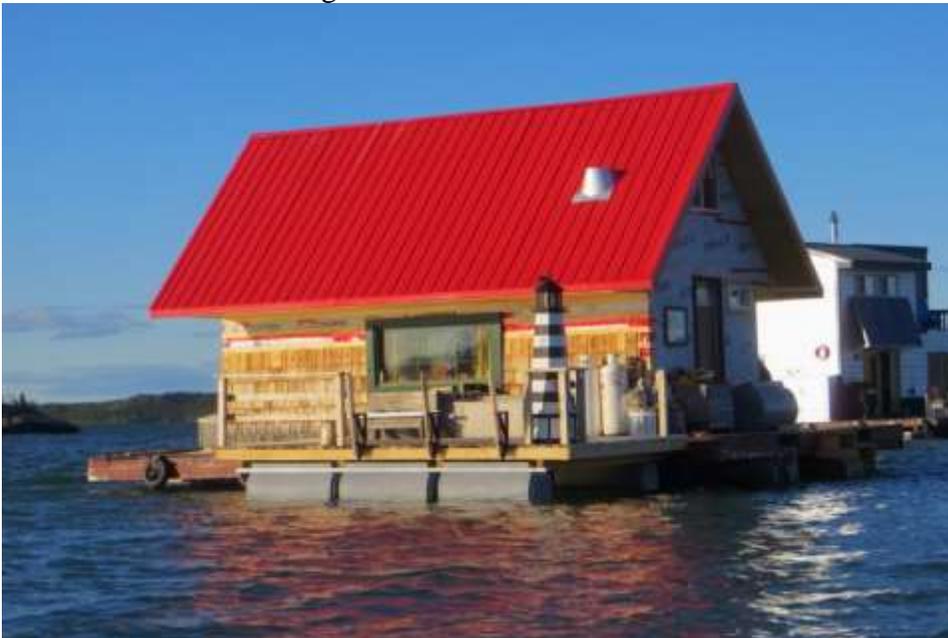
Putting whitefish fillets on hot skillet on open campfire



Time to eat



Arctic Tern at tern nesting island



\$250,000 houseboat in Yellowknife harbor

Day 21. June 9 – Ingraham Trail

(Bert) Ever walk across three-billion-year-old rocks? Today, Jeff, Barbara, and I do it on a 3 km trail on the Canadian Shield at Prelude Lake.

I first took interest in the Canadian Shield during our Trans-Labrador tour last year. The shield, also called Laurentian Plateau, stretches from where we are at Yellowknife to

Labrador and from the Arctic Ocean to the Great Lakes. As in other areas around Yellowknife, here on the Ingraham Trail the Canadian Shield is exposed. Once 50 or 75 miles below the surface, now on the Prelude Lake Nature Trail we can walk atop the Precambrian igneous rocks that were pushed up by ancient volcanoes. Geologists have measured the oldest of these rocks to be 3.9 to 4.1 billion years old, the oldest on Earth.

Our trail starts on sand deposited by glacial Lake McConnell. After the retreat of glacial ice some 10,000 years ago, water covered an enormous region that geologists call Lake McConnell and it included the present day lakes: Athabasca, Great Slave, and Great Bear. Now the sand underlies a forest of well-spaced Jack Pines. Soon we reach the granite rocks, huge interlocking bedrock, worn smoothly rounded by the elements through the centuries. Much of it is flattened; some elevation changes provide a hiking challenge.

Granite is an igneous rock that was formed beneath the surface. Pausing in our hike to look down, we see its crystalline texture: large sections of reddish feldspar, inclusions of white quartz, and the reflective microplates of mica that catch the sun like imbedded diamonds. Everywhere the rock is splotted with spreading black lichens and taller pale yellow-green reindeer lichens. Stunted Jack Pines have found a toehold in rock crevices, perhaps filled with the peaty debris of smaller decayed plants. The pines send out exposed roots across the rocks, seeking another crevice to give it stability and sustain its growth.

The rock trail is almost devoid of birds: just a trilling Chipping Sparrow, a single Bonaparte's Gull standing sentinel on a distant spruce, a phone-ringing junco beyond eyesight, and a pair of Gray Jays checking us out when our trail returns to the sand forest.

Although I count my Canadian Shield experience as fulfillment for a day, I'm sure our birding success will pale compared to what others found today on the Ingraham Trail. Soon I see Gail photographed Surf Scoters and White-winged Scoters, Bea and Cindy got a Rusty Blackbird and a Hooded Merganser, and I know earlier that Richard identified a Merlin, and Ron found the first Northern Waterthrush, singing atop the highest spruce in the forest. Everyone finds a special bird; Barbara and I are happy with rocks.

(Shari) Today is more or less a free day but most of the group starts at 7:30 with us to follow the Ingraham Trail to its end and back. At least that is the intention, but you know Bert, he has to identify every darn duck in a patch of water over and over again. I do the driving, because we heard the road was in terrible condition and since I watch the road and not the birds, the ride is much smoother. I get out at the first stop and walk around a bit but soon get bored so I retreat to the camper and read my book. At another stop I lock Bert out of the camper so I can remind him to make it snappy on re-entry. The last time I spent a half-hour killing 10 mosquitoes and still did not get them all. I do not want any more inside. By noon we still have 10 mi. to go to reach the end of the road. That would take us two hours at the current rate of travel and I am ready to turn around. Some have already been to the end, some continue on, but we eat our lunch and return to Yellowknife. By the way, the road is in wonderful condition, contrary to what we were told.

We have also been told that there is no water in Fort Providence, our stop the day after tomorrow. The water here is on boil warning, but we have no choice so we drive to the public RV fill and fill our tank. We purchase groceries and get propane as it will be a week before we reach another grocery store. To conserve our tank water, we return to the campground to take showers and alert everyone about the water situation.

At 5, Bert and I drive to the weekly Farmer's Market. That's quite a misnomer as the last chance for frost just ended and certainly no produce could have grown that quickly. Nevertheless, half the town is at the market, standing in long lines to buy a hot dinner: a plate of Indian food, fried fish, bakery, or brats. I purchase a frozen whitefish and smoked lake trout for another day, but am saving myself for the promised Boston Pizza. It serves our favorite pizzas and I am delighted to see Yellowknife has an outlet. The Mediterranean pizza we share is very good but I think Boston pizza is out of my system for a while. With the medium-sized pizza we shared, along with a Greek salad and a pint of beer each, the cost is \$71.19, including tax and tip. Yikes! I suppose when the average salary is over \$100,000, people can afford \$71 for pizza.

When we get back to camp Larry tells us that Fort Providence has good water. So off I go knocking on doors to let people know before they fill up here in the morning. It is too late for us and a few others, but those with bigger rigs appreciated hearing the news. With all the diddling around, I noticed my pedometer reads 9722 steps. Makes me want to walk outside and walk another 300 steps, but I don't.



Jack Pines growing in sand deposited by glacial Lake McConnell



Hiking on the Canadian Shield



Feldspar granite with lichen patches



Pale Corydalis or Rock Harlequin growing in a rock crevice



Jack Pine spreading roots above impenetrable granite



Osprey flying from a nest a local person said was that of a Gyrfalcon



Picnicking residents enjoying the warm evening weather at Farmer's Market

Day 22. June 10 – Fort Providence

(Shari) At 7:40 we leave the campground and head west and then southwest toward Fort Providence. I take the first driving shift because the road is full of frost heaves and I do not want to bounce all the way to kingdom come. Remember, Bert birds and drives, ignoring road conditions. It is extremely windy, but as I notice my mileage creeping up to 19.5 mpg I do not mind the wind. Fortunately it pushes from our back. This little Sprinter is a dream to drive and I hardly notice its 25 ft. length as I cruise down the road.

(Bert) I can visualize the TV ad now. “Need a little extra spending money? Join hundreds of other Albertans and drive on up to Northwest Territories. Earn \$1000 to \$1700 per day. We pay top dollar, on the spot, and last year our dealer handed out over a quarter million dollars of cold hard cash in just one month.”

What do you do to earn that much money? Pick mushrooms, of course. We drive for miles along Mackenzie Highway and see dozens of haphazard campsites: orange tents, ragged lean-tos, slide-in campers and even a few trailers. They’ve been camping out for a few weeks now, just waiting for the rains. Some have already gone out picking with success.

If this all seems a bit farfetched, let me explain. They are not searching for ordinary mushrooms, but rather they seek morel mushrooms: Fire Morel (*Morchella conica*), Yellow Morel (*M. esculenta*), and Black Morel (*M. elata*). Pickers earn \$10-\$13 per lb. or about \$150 for a bucketful. Although the morels can be found throughout the forests of Northwest Territories, they don’t pick just anywhere. The fungi live underground, seemingly dormant, perhaps for years. Then a forest fire and the next year, perhaps with the aid of a little moisture, the fungi put up its fruiting bodies. It is massive fruiting and reproduction and the dispersion of millions of mushroom spores. From mid or late May to about mid-July, this can go on annually for up to four years and sporadically for up to eight years, but the first or second year after the fire is the best. If cut carefully, it’s like picking apples off a tree, and the underlying fungi live for another year.

The pickers put the mushrooms in 5-gal. buckets punctured with holes to aerate and drain moisture. Then the morels are dried on a screen, often with a warm breeze fanned from a fire. Dried morels weigh 1/9 to 1/6 as much as fresh wet mushrooms.

(Shari) Again we see lots of tents set up along the roadside on this return trip as the morel mushroom pickers are still awaiting rain. I forgot to look in the grocery store in Yellowknife to purchase some of the mushrooms. Ron had gotten a little bag of dried morels from a camper next to him last time we were in Fort Providence. I was surprised at how small they were, not much bigger than a fingernail when dried. I’d love to see them growing. Some pickers this morning were departing from their car with 5 gal. buckets. Now that is optimism!

We read a sign saying that the highway is open but there is reduced visibility. Apparently at this start of the fire season there are 20 times more fires this year than last. The air does smell a bit smoky. Eastern Texas has more rain than it needs and it is bone dry up here. Last year the highway was closed for 85% of the summer. These people were locked in and I wonder what happened to tourists like us. We like it that it does not rain on our activities but these people are just crying for rain.

We stop for the night at Fort Providence where we had stopped a few days ago. Tonight, however, we are going to enjoy one of my favorite potlucks. It may not be the healthiest but it sure is fun. Everyone brings a heavy appetizer to share. Tonight we fill ourselves with taquitos and guacamole, honey-glazed chicken wings, jalapeño stuffed mushrooms

and mushroom stuffed jalapeños, stuffed tortellini, crab spread, pepperoni sticks, two kinds of devilled eggs. I know I missed some, but you get the idea.



White-winged Scoter on Chan Lake



Bison at edge of burnt forest where people are picking morel mushrooms



Morel picker camped beside the highway



More morel pickers



Morel picker with 5-gal. buckets to hold mushrooms



Morel mushroom buyer's sign at side of highway



Morel mushroom buyer

Day 23. June 11 – Sambaa Deh, Northwest Territories

(Bert) Perhaps the Yellow-shafted Flicker is young and it is the first spring of nest building. Maybe it is just bad luck. Whatever the reason, it should have picked a better tree. The aged aspen is rotting within. That was good for easy hammering and swift pulp removal, but the nest was not a stout structure. And it wasn't using engineering skills when it built the second nest so close to the first. Things looked good yesterday when I saw it flying in and out of the nest hole. Sometimes it stayed inside for a long time, so I suspected it or its mate was sitting on eggs. Last week when Larry and Marlene parked at this same campsite, Larry told me about the nest. Then the flicker was probably still in the nest building stage. Now it shouldn't be long before the eggs hatch.

Larry visits our RV very early this morning to tell me about the egg. I quickly finish up our departure preparations and drive to the site that this time is occupied by Bea. When I get there, both Larry and Bea are studying the grave situation from a distance. Looking at the old tree, I quickly see the problem. A foot below the new hole facing the Mackenzie River is the old hole facing the RV site. In the old hole lies a single pale white egg, plainly exposed in the open. During the night it must have rolled down the decaying trunk from the hidden upper cavity to the exposed lower one.

Raymond at Sambaa Deh Territorial Park is the friendliest and most talkative park manager we've encountered. Maybe it is a lonely job, with few visitors here in the wilderness, or else he just likes people. He shows us a sketch of the park and how to reach Coral Falls upstream and Sambaa Deh Falls downstream. He relates the excitement of the mushroom pickers that came in droves last year and the intense forest fires the year before. He offers to make a fresh pot of coffee for the caravaners as they come in vehicle by vehicle. It is hard to pull away from him, but we are anxious to see the waterfalls.

The Trout River roars as it gains speed toward an ever increasing elevation drop and a severe narrowing of its passageway through walled limestone layers. The limestone was laid down from a shallow sea 370 million years ago and contains the fossilized remains of sea creatures. On the riverside sandy soil grow yellow Alpine Arnica, lavender Douglas Aster, and pink Northern Gentian Felwort. The Arnica petals are strangely contorted, misshaped goldfingers.



Male Yellow-shafted Flicker peering from its new nest



Flicker egg lying in old nest



Winter ice road to Trout River, not used in summer



Trout River at Smbaa Deh Falls Territorial Park with Coral Falls in background



Fossils along river at Smbaa Deh Falls (photo by Jeff)



Another fossil photo taken by Jeff



Alpine Arnica



Samba Deh Falls



Trout River cuts through layers of limestone

Day 24. June 12 – Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories

(Bert) I read that the most birds in Fort Simpson were along river, so that is where we walk this morning. The statement was correct, but what it didn't say is that almost all of the birds are the same species. It is very difficult to photograph an incoherent flock of

swallows as they ping pong across the open sky above the river: swirling, diving, spinning, crossing, tucking in their wings, spread-eagling, perpetually moving, never stopping. With binoculars I try to keep pace with one, then another. They are brown above, pale below, with a chest band. Bank Swallows. If I can't get a photo of a single bird, I'll try for a wide angle sky view. One patch of a quilted sky is squared in my photo. How many birds do you count? I'll give you the answer at the end of my blog.



Bank Swallows in motion over Mackenzie River. How many do you count?

An easier task is photographing their nest holes, deep horizontal burrows in the muddy cliffs. I read in eBird Canada that Bank Swallows are now threatened, listed in 2013 by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. I find Bank Swallows every year, but on fewer days each year, and maybe only one or two nesting colonies each year. The reason for the decline is a mystery, though insect populations may be a factor. The article states, "Over the last 40 years the Canadian population of Bank Swallows has declined 98%."

Fort Simpson lies at the confluence of Liard River and Mackenzie River. Here a trading post was built in 1822, one year after North West Company merged with Hudson's Bay Company. Named after George Simpson, the company's chief representative at that time, the trading post was headquarters for fur trade and transportation until 1910.

When I think of a fort, I picture a stockade with tall upright timbers guarding buildings and citizens inside. So, when I see a 1940 photo, I am surprised that the outside perimeter doesn't look like it could withstand a browsing moose. Our young local guide, Sharon, tells us her mother used to work at the fort. During the walking tour one of our stops is the Papal Grounds, the grassy flat field where the pope visited in 1987. It must have been an incredible event here in this very remote part of Northwest Territories only recently then accessible by highway. She says 5000 people came for the event, probably increasing the population a multiple of a hundred. I ask her if so many in her village are

Catholic as to prompt a papal visit. Her answer circumvents the question when she says a couple of years ago the Catholic church building was falling apart, so they tore it down and she doesn't know when it will be rebuilt.

After dinner—Shari calls it Trapper Steak—the main course prepared by Shari, with sides added by the group, most of us walk into town to see Louise Moreau. Louise, also a First People's Dene, has learned an interesting trade, not taught by others, but learned after much practicing. She produces works of art using moose hair. I ask her how long this craft has been practiced by the Dene. She says “for a long time, since the 1960s.” Well, since almost all of her caravan audience was in high school in the 60s, it doesn't seem like a long time ago to us. She demonstrates how she takes a tuft of moose hair gathered from the nape in winter when it is white, knots it, and with a needle pulls it through the cloth. She trims the hair tuft into a rounded hemisphere. For other parts of the artwork she dyes the moose hair. She makes it seem simple, but clearly it is not. Take a look at the end product in my photo.



Cropped section of the first photo, showing two of the Bank Swallows



Mackenzie riverbank with nests in the upper mud level



Bank Swallow nesting tunnels (the dark holes)



Mackenzie River (background light blue in front of dark blue tree line) mixing with the muddier Liard River (foreground). The black spots are Bank Swallows.



Sharon, a native Dene, telling us about the Papal Grounds



Photo taken in 1940

Fort Simpson, trading post for Hudson's Bay Company
(the site is now the Papal Grounds)



Moose hair artwork

The answer to the number of Bank Swallows in the first photo is 98. By my estimate the total flock size surrounding me was 750-1000 birds.

Day 25. June 13 – Liard Trail, Northwest Territories

(Bert) “I’ve never been so far away from everything,” remarks Jack. While Jack is thinking of Wi-Fi and gasoline, the observation could apply generally. After the ferry takes us back across Liard River we head south on Liard Trail, NWT Highway 7, a gravel road so smooth a speed of 50 mph is like gliding on ice. In 97 mi. we pass not a single house, business or human structure. The paucity of wildlife along Liard Trail is remarkable. Sightings are so rare I keep a complete list of everything: 1 woodchuck, 1 Green-winged Teal, 2 ravens, 4 Yellow-shafted Flickers, and only 1 vehicle, a small automobile. We are surrounded by mature, unburnt, tall boreal forest from which almost no wildlife can be seen. Even the single marsh we pass is devoid of birds or mammals. Yes, if I stopped to listen, I might hear birds, but later when I do so at Blackstone Territorial Park, my list of heard-only birds is six species, one of which I see, a robin and that’s in two hours of walking.

The day didn’t start so empty of life when we were still in Fort Simpson. We gathered around a campfire made by Larry and were served hot oatmeal made by Shari. We adorned our bowls with raisins, other dried fruit, almonds, fresh bananas, brown sugar, and milk. We checked e-mails at the free Wi-Fi at the Visitor’s Centre and, upon leaving, we were surprised by the golfing cranes across the road. The golfing party included 35 Sandhill Cranes, most in the fairway, some in the rough, and one that made it to the green. And, of course, there was lots of human life where we clustered our RVs at the ferry before passage across the Liard River. Then the wildlife vacuum began.



Oatmeal breakfast around campfire



Golf course Sandhill Cranes



Sandhill Crane on the green



Liard Trail gravel road



Red Osier Dogwood



Prickly Rose



Liard River and Nahanni National Park viewed from Blackstone Territorial Park

CHAPTER 3. BRITISH COLUMBIA

Day 26. June 14 – Alaska Highway, British Columbia

(Bert) The wildlife has returned; what a difference a day makes! Only five miles from last night's campground we see our first Wood Bison of the day and then two Merlins chasing a Bald Eagle. Before we cross the border leaving Northwest Territories, we see a herd of Bison blocking the road, as well as Black Bear, Snowshoe Hare, Red Squirrel, and our first Moose of the trip. The prize bird of the day is awarded to Gail, also seen by Jack and Ron. It is a Great Gray Owl displaying its characteristic ruffed collar. I hear about it when we refuel at Fort Liard at gas pumps completely unattended this early Sunday morning. A credit card is all we need. I wish I'd seen the owl, actually two, the second unidentified. Yet, I did get to see two Tundra Swans at Hay Lake when Shari and I stopped there for breakfast.

(Shari) A Black Bear, a Moose and 30 to 40 Bison: not bad for 40 mi. of driving! Some in the group even saw a Great Gray Owl! We depart 20 min. earlier than our posted departure time because the mosquitos are eating us alive. I find out that Jack and Gail left at 5:30 due to their mosquito problem. Seems everyone has mosquitoes and we are all looking for the ways that they enter our RVs. We have never had so many mosquitoes on the other six trips we have done to Alaska. But then again, we are a month later this year, and, we are in Northwest Territories, not Alaska.

We stop at Hay Lake campground in Fort Liard. The community has spruced it up: the road is nicely graded, the shelter is cleaned out, and the sites are nicely mowed. It looks pleasant and not like I remember it. Three years ago a nice couple was managing

Blackstone, but now another person manages it. We had trouble finding her upon check-in. someone was in one of our reserved sites and the woman's shower did not work and the men's toilet would not flush. I requested toilet paper to be placed in the pit toilet outhouse and the shelter to be unlocked. The first request she forgot, the second request she brought the wrong keys, and the third request went unheeded. The promised wood never arrived for our fire either. Luckily it did not rain, and we had our meeting and social in Ron and Carol's site where someone had left plenty of wood. Larry built a fire which provided warmth and mosquito deterrent.

Blackstone is far from civilization. This is the first time we are left without Wi-Fi and fuel for over 100 mi. Jack tells me he has never been so far away from things as today. There is not even electricity. Little does he know there is deeper wilderness ahead.

(Bert) We cross the border into British Columbia and after 105 mi. of excellent smooth gravel this morning, we trade for pocked and ribbed blacktop on the Alaska Highway. The scenery has upgraded to majestic mountains and crisp clear streams. Long gone are the shrubby Jack Pines, traded for tall Lodgepole Pines. The White Birches reach their maximum height, walling the roadsides in Dalmatian black-spotted-white wallpaper. We climb Steamboat, the highest mountain on the Alaska Highway and photograph two Black Bears before we reach Summit Lake. Except for one time when we passed through in August, Summit Lake has always been frozen over and the surrounding mountains white with snow. Now it is intensely blue with the only ripple a "V" towed by a Muskrat. The mountains wear green pants and dark shirts, with a few white hairs of crevassed snow at their crowns. We hear later that Beth, Larry and Marlene found Stone Sheep at Stone Mountain. At Toad River we see a beaver towing a leafed branch toward its house and then pulling it below the surface. That brings our mammal count for the day to seven species. The bird species count climbs at Toad River, our campsite for tonight. I tally 30 species, all seen from the campground, plus 19 more seen en route, plus two species others saw but I missed, bringing our day total to 51 species.



Moose at side of Laird Trail



Bison blocking Laird Trail



Alaska Highway at Steamboat Mountain



Yet another Black Bear, Alaska Highway



Summit Lake



Alaska Highway through Stone Mountain Provincial Park



Alaska Highway



Alaska Highway



Beaver towing aspen branch to its lodge



Bert in Ron's kayak at Toad River

Day 27. June 15 – Muncho Lake, British Columbia

(Bert) I am out at 7 AM and see others have already gathered at the edge of the lake and wetlands. Even after a high bird count yesterday, we continue to add species to the list this morning. Quite surprising is the variety of swallows at Toad River. Most plentiful, and nesting, are Tree Swallows, Barn Swallows, and Cliff Swallows. One pair of Cliff Swallows has constructed an odd nest above the door frame to the men's bathroom. Usually constructed of mud gathered from the water's bank, this nest is made instead of small pebbles. Also, instead of having a rounded ceiling with a small opening at the side,

this nest is completely open at top and shaped like a wide bowl. Barbara is the first to notice that we also have a few Violet-green Swallows which are at the far eastern edge of their range. I point one out on a distant branch and we line up spotting scopes on it. Bea notices a second bird on the same tree and surprisingly, it is a Bank Swallow. This time I get good photos of the Bank Swallow, as well as the Violet-green and a Tree Swallow in the same branches.

(Shari) No one wants to leave this idyllic place, especially on a sunny day. But, as I tell the group, we have things to do and places to see. After a breakfast at the little café, we have a cinnamon coffee cake for Barbara's birthday. Then it is time to depart to travel 75 mi. down the road. Today we find a small group of Stone Sheep on the highway that do not seem very concerned about our presence. We stop at picturesque pull outs to drink in the scenery and take pictures.

(Bert) After a leisurely morning start, we are on the road again traveling through a panorama of turquoise lakes, pristine rivers, and majestic mountains. I stop at the Salt Licks and while Shari naps I hike through the woods to the cliff overlooking Trout River. An eroded hillside exposes minerals that wash down toward the river and the signs say Stone Sheep come to lick up the minerals. I've been here several times in the past, but not seen licking sheep. Instead, we usually—and again today—see the sheep at the side of the highway, licking up salt distributed in winter to thaw ice.

(Shari) When we arrive at Liard Hot Springs, I prepare the potatoes for our baked potato bar. Larry is so good at cooking on the open fire with his tripod and he does a superb job with the potatoes. Everyone brings a topping and although heavy on the chili dishes, we do have a nice variety. I especially like Georgia's chicken Alfredo. Jack and Gail bring tofu chili and after laughing about tofu, I find that it is quite tasty. Barbara lucks out and gets two birthday desserts today. Marlene has made brownies. The group has finally come together. This group has taken longer than most but now I can say we enjoy each other. The evidence is in the fact that we stay longer and longer at the socials just talking and laughing. I think it is after 8 PM when I finally call it quits.

(Bert) After dinner at Liard Hot Springs Barbara and I walk along the boardwalk toward the springs. A moose splashes water as it stumbles through the wetlands. A Wilson's Snipe is calling and in good photographic view, catching the soft rays of the setting sun.



Toad River



Bank Swallow at Toad River



Western Tanager at Toad River



Cliff Swallow in strange pebble nest with extra wide opening



Muncho Lake



Stone Sheep with broken horn at Muncho Lake



Larry baking potatoes over open fire



Moose at Liard Hot Springs



Wilson's Snipe at Liard Hot Springs

Day 28. June 16 – Liard Hot Springs, British Columbia

(Bert) For most visitors the allure of Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park is the pleasure of luxuriating in naturally hot water ranging from tepid downstream to scalding upstream. A clean and modern change room and several convenient staircases into the clean pools is an added plus. Most of us take at least one dip into the hot springs.

However, we spend more time on the boardwalk leading to the springs, looking at wildflowers, birds, a moose, and a certain single dead spruce trunk. Bathing passersby question what we are looking for, but if it isn't a moose or a bear, most soon lose interest. A few are curious about the woodpecker holes in the dead spruce, especially when we tell them the third large hole from the bottom, under the tuft of moss attached to the stump of a long fallen branch, is the home of a Black-backed Woodpecker. We know this because Lynnea, the park attendant who controls the gate, told us she saw the pair of woodpeckers carrying food into the hole. We stand, or sit, vigil for an hour but see no woodpecker. Some of us hear a woodpecker head-knocking on a distant tree deep in the forest and by the drumbeat I recognize it as Black-backed. Later when I talk to Lynnea again she tells me the feeding started 10 days ago, so we suspect the young have fledged. Coincidentally, when I invite her to go birding with us after her work shift ends we find an American Three-toed Woodpecker which turns out to be a life bird for her. And, we add another to her life list, a Western Wood-Pewee.

Near the hot springs we again hear and see a Hammond's Flycatcher, a specialty of this park. I've now found it at this park many years and in many locations. It seems to be common, so I am surprised that this location is not shown in the range map in *Birds of Canada*. Perhaps it is unique as is the case for many plants that grow in and near the hot

springs. One in particular has my fancy and it takes me awhile to find its name in the dozen plant books I carry in our RV. Finally I find it in the Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba book. The fanciful flower is called Round-leaved Orchid (*Orchis rotundifolia*). The genus *Orchis* derives from Greek mythology where Orchis was the offspring of a nymph and a satyr, a creature of unbounded passion. The myth goes on, “He attacked a priestess at a festival of Bacchus and the crowd fell upon him and tore him limb from limb. The gods refused to put him back together again. Instead, they decided that since he had been such a nuisance in life, he should be a satisfaction in death and they changed him into a beautiful flower—the orchid.



Hot springs source



Hot springs pools



Waiting for the Black-backed Woodpecker



Nesting tree of a pair of Black-backed Woodpeckers



Hammond's Flycatcher too high up for a better photo



Round-leaved Orchid (*Orchis rotundifolia*)



Mew Gull warning intruders to keep from a nest I suspect is below

CHAPTER 4. YUKON TERRITORY

Day 29. June 17 – Watson Lake, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Just another day on the Alaska Highway ... same old stuff ... bison beside the road, black bears munching flowers, mountain scenery, river scenery, lake scenery, yet another splashing waterfall, a pair of juvenile bald eagles playing sky games. Other caravaners contribute red fox, a lynx crossing the highway, trumpeter swans with cygnets, a brown black bear, yet another black-backed woodpecker ... same old stuff on the Alaska Highway. Not!



Smith River Falls



Black Bear and first lupines of the year



Crossing into Yukon Territory



Lincoln's Sparrow at Wye Lake

Day 30. June 18 – Whitehorse, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Shari wants a few photos of the Sign Post Forest as we pull out of Watson Lake. Travelers have been putting up hometown signs for decades. I wonder how many signs are posted now.

What starts as an overcast early morning turns many shades darker. The mountains are lumbering giants barricading the horizon in blackness, formidable and foreboding. They

smoke with wisps of gray cloud mists. The dark waters of Little Rancheria River and the greenish black forest add to the funereal gloom. Raindrops start lightly and then intensify to snare drum staccato, accompanied by the bass drumbeat of windshield wipers. We pass the Rancheria trail where we intended to stop to see the American Dipper walk in the waterfall. The rain is too heavy for a hike through a pine forest to the falls.

(Shari) This is the latest in the season that we have ever started our caravan passage along the Alaska Highway. Because of the late start, lakes are not frozen, snow is gone from most of the mountain peaks and the trees are full of newly green leaves. Our theory was that the wildlife would be less but we are proven wrong. Every day we see bear, moose and/or sheep. That is always a treat for me. The first time we drove the Alaska Highway—1996—it was a bumpy single lane road with lots of construction under way. This year, the road is as smooth as any Texas road and paved with wide shoulders. We have had one patch of construction where it looks like the workers are widening the road. The road now has wide paved shoulders to pull off on when an animal is spotted. Unfortunately most of today's drive is in rain and we are unable to stop and smell the roses along the way. I am looking forward to stopping at Walker's Continental Divide. I told the group about their cinnamon rolls. You can imagine how disappointed I am to find that the place has closed. So many of the businesses that were thriving years ago, have now boarded up. Instead, we eat breakfast cereal at a rest stop not far ahead.

(Bert) Shari is anxious for the next anticipated stop. She loves cinnamon buns on the Alaska Highway and the cafe at the Continental Divide is a favorite. Closed! More and more, each year, we see closed signs on establishments we visited previous years. I guess now with excellent highways, better fuel economy, fewer mechanical breakdowns, and a rushing mentality, these establishments died for lack of visitors. Or else, the owners retired, their kids moved to Washington or California or Calgary, and no one wants to buy them out.

Black Bears have not left the black forest; birds remain hidden beneath boughs of pine and spruce. Life waits out the rain.

I stop to read a sign about the Continental Divide, pulling out a jacket first as yesterday's shorts-and-T-shirt weather has chilled to 56° and sporadic rain. "Drop a leaf into the Rancheria River to the east and it would float to the Liard River near Watson Lake, continue to the Mackenzie River in Northwest Territories and eventually reach the Beaufort Sea (Arctic Ocean)." That's pretty much the route we have already taken and we will catch up with the Mackenzie River again in a week or so and follow it to Beaufort Sea.

The sign continues, "Drop a leaf into the Swift River to the west and the current would take it to Teslin Lake and the Teslin River. The Teslin flows northwest to the Yukon River which cuts across northern Alaska en route to the Bering Sea." That route is still ahead of us this summer.

A raven appears. It is not carrying an olive branch, but still is metaphorically Noah's dove as the rain now stops. Little birds flutter out from nowhere, excited like school kids left out for recess. A Moose stands in the shallow water of a lake. A sliver of blue sky becomes a patch and black clouds become gray, then white. We reach Swift River to another closed establishment, old enough to have posted regular at \$1.09.

At Teslin River I stop for another descriptive sign. Chinook Salmon swim upriver, following from the Bering Sea, crossing Alaska, then Yukon Territory to reach Teslin, all without feeding, relying on fat reserves. That journey to spawn is 1840 mi. We will cross the Yukon River many times in the next month.

(Shari) All is not lost. We stop in Teslin and I find they have cinnamon rolls too. All the pecan ones are already gone but I find caramel ones on the shelf. We cut the roll in four pieces and eat half for a snack and freeze the other half for another time. We arrive in Whitehorse a little past noon with the group not far behind. Travel meeting is cut short tonight as it starts to rain.



Sign Post Forest at Watson Lake



Teslin River



Salmon route up the Yukon River to Teslin

Day 31. June 19 – Whitehorse, Yukon Territory

(Shari) A Free Day my eye! The only free thing about it is the Tim Horton treat for breakfast. Otherwise our day is filled with errands.

The visitor center tells us there is indeed gas at Dempster Corner. So many were worried that it had burnt down. It did burn down but because the junction is so important, someone put a refueling place there. No restaurant or campground though.

The Yukon government office sends us to Canadian Tire to get Yukon territorial park campground passes. Canadian Tire says only Yukon residents are allowed to get passes. More misinformation! Then we have the treat: Tim Horton breakfast sandwich and a mocha latte.

On to the grocery store. Bert takes a cart with our personal grocery list and I take a cart for the caravan list. Bert pays for his groceries with our credit card and walks to the RV. Ten minutes later when I try to pay for my groceries with the same card, the card is declined. I walk back to the parking lot requesting a check and another credit card from Bert. Meanwhile the checker has shut down her lane and is waiting for me. Here I am rushing with my sore knee. Did you ever see a grandma try to rush with a limp? I apologize profusely and pay for the groceries with a Canadian check. Now that is dumb; if my credit is not good with a credit card why take a check? I was not going to argue.

Back in the rig, I call the credit card company ... put in the calling card number, put in my code number, put in the number I want to call. Let's try that again. I missed one of the numbers. Finally I get connected and am told we did not tell them we would be traveling. Come again? We just have been traveling for the past 2-1/2 months! And, we

did tell them months ago. Oh well, they straighten it out and we can go to another grocery store to pick up the items that the first grocery store did not have. I just cannot find tomatoes and green chilies, green chilies or enchilada sauce. We try a third grocery store and I find the enchilada sauce at \$7 a can. Oh dear! I decide to only use half as much and only buy two cans. By the time we get back to camp it is 3 PM and we had skipped lunch. Some free day this has been! I make fish sandwiches.

At 7 PM we leave again to get group tickets to the Frantic Follies, a show we have seen before but thoroughly enjoyed. The cast is new this year and the acts have been updated, but some of the old jokes are hilarious and the skit using Robert Service's poem, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, is cute. Gail gets picked from our group to be serenaded by a group of men, barbershop quartet style. Usually someone in our group is signaled out and I know this ahead of time but never tell. I never know who they will pick though. Everyone is a good sport.



Banjo-playing at Frantic Follies



Cute dancer!



Serenading Gail

Day 32. June 20 – Whitehorse, Yukon Territory

(Bert) “They should rename this Eagle Valley,” Ron remarks. I knew we would see Bald Eagles as soon as we turned on to Fish Lake Road, but I am surprised as how the population has grown. What starts as a family of four soon grows to six, then eight, and I cross out that number too and write 10. Most are juveniles. Without studying them more closely, I am not sure what age they are since it takes four or five years for eagles to reach adult plumage with white heads and white tails, but most of these look like first-year. We see them gliding past, perched on tall trees, and perched near eye level. Great

for photography! We move on to another bird stop, this time at rock cliffs overlooking McIntyre River. More eagles! This time my hash marks total to seven. Our third stop is McIntyre Marsh and, again, more eagles including many soaring in circles around the wind turbines atop a mountain. That brings the total we've seen this morning to an amazing 40 eagles, all in one valley.

In the afternoon Georgia drives a truckload of passengers to Swan Haven. Although we check out Marsh Lake from several viewpoints, we are disappointed in not finding any swans. In spring migration in April, as many as 2000 swans can be seen here in a day.

We do have an afternoon highlight, though. At the Alaska Highway bridge over the Yukon River two River Otters entertain us. They swim past us and then somersault below the surface of the fast moving water and come up with something in their mouths. At first we think it is garbage, until we notice it is large chunks of fish including a tail. They repeatedly dive for more, gorging themselves on the fish.



Immature Bald Eagle





Adult Bald Eagle



Canyon cliffs above McIntyre River



Yellow Sedum (Stonecrop Family, *Sedum lanceolatum*)



Eye-to-eye with a River Otter in the Yukon River



River Otter eating a fish

Day 33. June 21 – Carmacks, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Which do you want first, the good news or the bad news? The good news is the encouraging regrowth of the forest following the fire we witnessed here at Fox Lake in 1998. What was once a spruce forest is now an aspen forest, with a few Balsam Poplar, White Birch and willows in the deciduous mix. Most have surpassed my height. This is a natural succession, one that is common and required by nature.

The bad news is in the air when I photograph the forest beyond the lake. Only the foreground is clear, the background is grayed by the smoke drifting here from a forest fire in Mayo. If it were just one more fire started by lightning, it would be natural. But with diminished rain and unsubstantial snow fall, the timber is unusually dry and forest fires are much more common than usual. When we were birding at Yellowknife, we were joined by an air standards specialist for Northwest Territories. He attributes the excess forest fires and the abnormally dry conditions to climate change.

We have never passed this way without stopping at Braeburn's either for their giant cinnamon rolls or the plate-sized hamburger. Today we order both, splitting the hamburger between us and nibbling on the edges of the cinnamon roll. The rest goes home with us.

We camp tonight in Carmacks, a town not much bigger than the combination hotel-store-campground and gas station. Newcomers Ron and Judy join us tonight and will travel with us through this tour and the next. Our 5 PM travel meeting is rained out, so we stay cozy inside our rigs and at 5:30 I announce over the personal radios that the rain has

stopped and our meeting can commence. Rain has only been a blip in our schedule so far on this trip.



1998 Fox Lake forest fire



Regrowth of aspens



Smoky haze paints the horizon



Braeburn's cinnamon roll



Braeburn's hamburger to share and then some

Day 34. June 22 – Tombstone Territorial Park, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Shari and I leave at 6:15 AM so that we can get campsites for the group at a territorial park that does not allow preregistration. This section of the Klondike Highway is abundant in Arctic Ground Squirrels and I begin counting. In the 67 mi. stretch from Carmacks to Pelly Crossing, I count 33 squirrels beside the highway. Almost all are this year's young and the little critters scurry away, jerkily going from rigid rest to bullet speed as if their legs are mounted on springs. The Lynx should have a bountiful crop to prey on this year.

At Pelly Crossing the fire smoke is thick and the highway worsens. Much of it is under construction or in the process of construction with graders scraping off the old pavement and exposing underlying gravel. This is the worst road thus far, but reasonably tolerable.

We reach Dempster corner, the T-intersection of Klondike and Dempster highways. The burnt old building has been removed and only the concrete foundation remains. The campground is boarded off and overgrown with vegetation. The unattended fuel pumps are operative, but only after going through a convoluted process outlined by three different sets of instructions, none of which is obvious. A British Columbia couple is arguing in a mixture of German and English, each blaming the other for the fact that neither can get the machine to operate. They are sure it is broken until Shari and I take charge, pump gas, and Shari instructs the man in the procedure. The most confusing part is that a credit card has to be inserted three times before the transaction is complete. For our group that follows, I write down and post a fourth set of simple instructions emphasizing the need to insert the card multiple times.

(Shari) With a twinkle in his eye, Norm asks me if I intend to stay in this campground. He says this after he has watched Bert and me circle our RV past his site four times. Each time we are doing something different to save camping sites. We need 12 sites and after circling once we count only 12 spots available. We circle again and put a chair or table in the sites in addition to an occupied sign. The third circle we put the official date envelop on the post. Once more we circle. I say we, but by this time it is Bert walking the circle, putting the names of the people and their license plate numbers on the envelope stub. This is after everyone has arrived and backed into their respective site.

Meanwhile, I am making taco soup. Bert informs me that our meeting and dinner is going to be way on the other side of the campground from our site. I just do not see how I can check on the soup every 15 min. from that distance. He says we will drive and share the site with Norm during the evening activities. So that is what we do. He gives a geology talk but I do not get much out of it, maybe because I am up and down checking on the soup or maybe because I do not like geology. We welcome Norm and Cindy to the group and give Judy and Ron an anniversary card.

(Bert) Having read Shari's journal, I will comment on my geology talk, which was entitled Periglacial Effects. As I say to birders, there is so much more in nature than birds. As I say to others, there is so much more in nature than pretty scenery. To wit, witness strange geologic formations along the Dempster Highway that are the result of periglacial effects. A simple definition is changes in ground and rocks resulting from repeated freezing and thawing. The one all northern travelers experience is frost heaving, the bumps in the road caused by resorting of road building materials. For others, I show a series of photos on my iPad illustrating periglacial effects, including among others, frost splitting, ice wedges, solifluction, pingos, polygons, thaw lakes, and drunken forests.



Juvenile Arctic Ground Squirrel



Pelly Crossing and forest fire smoke



Klondike Highway in need of repair
Photo is washed out by the smoke of a distant forest fire



Dempster Highway, a gravel road, through Tombstone Territorial Park



Dempster Highway through Tombstone Range



Bert giving talk on periglacial effects



Taco soup eaters in campsite beside fast flowing mountain stream

Day 35. June 23 – Engineer Creek, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Birds are noticeably absent on this morning's nature walk. The trail leads us from the wooded campground which I would label boreal forest into an open area which I'd label taiga because of the waist to shoulder high dwarf willows and birch, sprinkled with a few random spruce trees of up to 20 ft. White-crowned Sparrows have become our most common bird. However, we do add a new species to our trip list, Wilson's Warbler.

Mostly, though, I point out flowers I know and those that I don't, I photograph.

We are back on the Dempster Highway, continuing northbound. Our first stop is a viewpoint of the Tombstone range, including distant Tombstone Mountain. Several stops later we pull to a streamside rest area and Ron asks me if I saw a thrush en route. I say no, but remark that this is good habitat for a Gray-cheeked Thrush. As if on cue, immediately a Gray-cheeked Thrush sings and an instant later it pops up on a low Balsam Poplar branch. Later, Bea says she just saw a Chipping Sparrow. I say the habitat is wrong. Could it be an American Tree Sparrow? Up pops the bird confirming my suspicion.

The highlight of the day is watching a falcon on a nest with two chicks. This is a confusing story, so let me start from the beginning. In our travel meeting yesterday I informed the group of the exact location of a Gyrfalcon nest that has been inhabited for many years. First to arrive at the site, eagle-eye Gail spotted a falcon on a nest clinging against the near vertical cliff wall far above. When Georgia arrived she aligned her spotting scope on the spot and they saw two white chicks in the nest. When I arrive they tell me they have found the Gyrfalcon on the nest. I train my binoculars on the well-known location of the nest and find no birds. They insist there are three birds on the nest so I get out my spotting scope and try again. No birds. I go to Georgia's scope and see the birds and quickly realize the scopes are aimed at different spots on the broad, high cliff. However, it looks to me like a Peregrine with a prominent vertical black line extending down each side of its head: black sideburns on a white face. Others see the same feature and also come to the conclusion it is a Peregrine Falcon. We try for photos, but even with my long lens it is a stretch. The question comes up: would a Peregrine Falcon build a nest only a short glide away from a Gyrfalcon? No one has an answer. Back at camp, Jeff shows me Barbara's iPad with the photo she took through Jeff's spotting scope. The curious feature is that the perched falcon has a tail extending well beyond its wings, a sure sign for Gyrfalcon. So the question turns to why this Gyrfalcon has such vivid "sideburns."

(Shari) We depart at 6:30 so that we have plenty of time to get to the campground and reserve our sites. Not a soul is present when we get there right after lunch. We go about putting "occupied" signs on all the sites as there are only 12 sites and we have 12 rigs. The mosquitoes are ferocious but luckily there is a nice screened shelter present. With a little bug spray and my "smoker", we rid the screened room of insects. At 3, I teach a few ladies how to make crocheted necklaces. Before the trip began I had bought yarn in shades of blue, orange or red. I thought the red would be nice for Christmas, but no one choose that color. Within an hour the necklaces were finished and it was time for Bert to give his talk on the tree line is an ecological Berlin Wall, separating species of the taiga from those of the tundra. We have a travel meeting and then give Larry our grill meat to cook on his tripod over an open wood fire. Tonight is our grill meat potluck. I remember doing that on one of my first caravans and bringing a sausage link for Bert and me. Everyone else brought steak and boy was my mouth watering. Needless to say, whenever I do this meal now, I bring steak.



White-crowned Sparrow



Arctic Wintergreen (*Pyrola grandiflora*)



Ice edges to mountain stream



Tombstone Peak, using Shari's camera



Tombstone Peak using Bert's camera



Gray-checked Thrush



Dall Sheep on highway near Gyrfalcon nest



Adult Gyrfalcon on nest with two white chicks



Cropped photo of Gyrfalcons and nest



What the Gyrfalcon sees when watching us

Day 36. June 24 – Eagle Plains, Yukon Territory

(Bert) The Dempster Highway abounds in stunning scenery although today it is foreshortened by a smoke veil that transforms the mountain ridges and sky into overlapping waves of increasingly lighter blue-gray shades. First it was the Mayo fire, but now the smoke could be coming from any of a dozen small fires started by lightning strikes hitting the dry timber. Except for omnipresent White-crowned Sparrows, bird life is sparse when viewed while driving. When I spot a soaring bird I ask Shari to stop. I first think it is a Golden Eagle, but when I see its dihedral wings I know it is a hawk.

Even after watching the soaring hawk for many minutes I see no colors; it is all black, the expected form of Red-tailed Hawk in this part of North America, a Harlan's Hawk.

(Shari) Playing hopscotch along the Dempster, some leave before our 7:30 Wagonmaster departure. Some depart when we do and some leave later. We catch up and pass the early birds, the latecomers pass us up along the road, but we all end up within an hour at camp. We stake out our sites and enjoy the pretty view marred a little bit by smoke from a distant fire.

I hate to even say my next thought but the road is in the best condition ever. This is my fifth time driving it and it has been smooth sailing these past three days. I hope I did not just jinx my good fortune by announcing it. I could have driven 45 to 50 mph the whole time but then Bert would not be able to see the birds. I personally do not think we find very much but reports come in of moose sightings and dark phase hawks, whatever that means.

We get in early enough for Bert to take an hour nap; poor guy has a terrible cold. It will be a miracle if I do not get it. I am loading up on Vitamin C and Zinc to help my immune system ward off a cold. After our travel meeting and social, we walk to the restaurant for dinner, meeting Georgia and Richard and Marlene and Larry. The company and conversation is a whole lot better than the food however. I remember thinking dinner was great three years ago. I wonder what I ordered then.



Rock formation called The Notch



Elephant Rock, miles away, is still visible through the smoke



View of valley from Ogilvie Ridge



Harlan's Hawk



Winding gravel road through endless taiga of Eagle Plains

Day 37. June 25 – Rock River, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Just beyond last night's campground is Eagle River crossed by a metal framed bridge, the only bridge along Dempster Highway. We stop beside the river, looking for birds. Long minutes of silence are ended with a friendly Gray Jay, a fly-over Yellow-shafted Flicker, a floating Green-winged Teal, and a distant Ovenbird calling. Later we hear that Ron saw White-winged Crossbills and Gail saw a Horned Grebe too. Ten miles farther I stop for a flock of Common Redpolls mixed with a few Pine Siskins close

enough to photograph. That sounds like a good start, but we add few others throughout the day.

A milestone event for those who have not previously traveled this far north is when we cross the Arctic Circle. Having done so several times before, I am surprised this time on how warm is the temperature. Of course, though, July is the warmest month in the arctic. We are surrounded by tundra, reflected in the plants I find, such as the Arctic Sandwort, Oeder's Lousewort, Low-bush Cranberry, and bearberry that I photograph

We descend to Rock River where we camp for the night. Shari has prepared the pizza ingredients for pudgy pies. We have six cast iron makers that we rotate around the group, each person making their own pudgy pie with most of us eating two pizza pies and one dessert pie. Tasty!



Common Redpoll



Pine Siskin



Photo-op at the Arctic Circle



Arctic Sandwort at the Arctic Circle



Alpine Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos alpine*) if the green berries turn black or Red Bearberry (*A. rubra*) if they turn red in fall



Rock River



Making pudgy pies over open wood fire

CHAPTER 5. WESTERN NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Day 38. June 26 – Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories

(Bert) Three RVs are pulled off to the side on a wide section of the gravel road, which fortunately has been extensively widened since the last time we drove the Dempster Highway. Georgia must have something good to see, so we pull off and park in front of

the line. Georgia tells me they just saw a Long-tailed Jaeger and a Smith's Longspur, a target species for many on the tour. Although the birds are out of view now, I hear a Smith's singing at the top of a low hill nearby.

Ron and Bea join me as I hike in the direction of the sound. I no longer hear the Smith's but instead am rewarded with Horned Larks with juveniles and soon after that a couple Lapland Longspurs. The mosquitos on the tundra are ferocious, so I return to the RV for bug spray and to tell others of our finds. More have arrived and when Cindy pulls up I direct her to park in the front of the line where it is safer. Now with a larger group of birders we spread across the tundra, watching the birds sing and perch on what few rocks or clumps of vegetation rise above the plain. The juvenile Horned Larks are so drab I would not have identified them but for the nearby adults. The Lapland Longspurs, however, are in brilliant color with burnt orange napes offset by a zigzag cream boundary and a black face terminating in a yellow-orange bill. An American Golden-Plover arrayed in black-and-white tuxedo plumage perches in the distance and then flies overhead with loud calls. Not to go unnoticed are the array of arctic flowers, especially Pink Plumes and Eight-petaled Avens that surround us.

(Shari) We are stopped on the side of the road with our warning flashers blinking. Bert must hear something as he starts to walk fast into the tundra. The group follows, looking like penguins as they waddle after him carrying binoculars and scopes. Meanwhile I sit in the rig electrocuting mosquitoes with my wand. Every time Bert comes in and out, he brings 10 more bugs with him. Outside the bugs are worse as I see people battling them with their hands and Jeff rubbing his bare legs. Still the group stays outside. After an interminable length of time, something good must be spotted as the group trots off in another direction. Many minutes later, Cindy pulls up with all of her 55 ft. length rig. Now we have a large train parked on the side of the road. This makes me very nervous and I honk my horn, but the group moves farther away and I think we are sitting ducks ready to be hit by oncoming traffic. More minutes pass; this is ridiculous. I honk again. To shorten the story, the group takes over an hour to come back. I tell Bert that I will not stop on the road again for that long. In his defense he never heard the horn. Would that have made a difference?

(Bert) We soon cross the border and enter Northwest Territories again. The mild temperature is surprising as I recall a snow blizzard when we stopped here one August. Here at Wright Pass the gentle winds keep mosquitos away but unfortunately we seen no birds this time. As we move on through some of the best tundra habitat I am surprised we do not find bears or caribou. We do see a Moose, however, wading in a small pond. Later, Gail shows me a photo of a Grizzly she found. She always finds mammals and birds we others miss.

At the Peel River ferry the gravel has not been carefully excavated, so our RV bounces and the tail end rides on the safety rollers. I am sure glad our RV comes equipped with the rollers, as it has happened more than once that an incline is too acute. Ron and Judy have a more severe problem with their long RV and large trailer. The ferry workers will

bring an excavator to this side of the river to smooth the entrance. We leave them behind as our Tailgunner will be there to assist later.

(Shari) At our stop at Midway Lake, I notice more shacks have been built since three years ago. When I say shacks, I mean shacks: bare plywood construction not much bigger than 15x10 ft. with roofs covered with tar paper. Not my idea of a summer cottage, but then again they may only be used for the one-time summer music festival. Most now are empty and boarded up. I do see two people building yet another shack. They probably wonder what so many RVs are doing here today and don't know about the Pacific Loons that Bert tells me nest at the lake.

As we approach the ferry, we notice Ron and Judy on the side of the road. Word drifts back that he tried to get on the ferry but could not make it. He intends to walk on and check out the other side, maybe unhooking his trailer and using his jeep to haul the trailer over. Ron and Carol are in front of us and I see the back of their motorhome really take a dip as they board. Oh my goodness! When it is our turn, our back end drags and I hear scrapping for at least 5 sec. Fortunately we have wheels in the back and I think that is what I hear. No tank water seems to be leaking. That is a good thing.

At 2:30 we depart for a tour of the Fort McPherson Tent & Canvas Company. Our "guide" and I use that term loosely, tells us about the operation. She tells us only after prompting her with questions: How many employees? Are you going to show us the sewing machines? Where do you get the canvas? Etc., etc.



Hiking across the tundra, Yukon Territory near border



Birding the tundra. White spots are Cottongrass. White lines are snow patches on mountain.



Adult Horned Lark with short black crown feathers that look like horns



Nearly invisible juvenile Horned Lark to right of Pink Plume



Lapland Longspur



Pink Plumes, also called Bistort (*Polygonum bistorta*)



RVs lined up crossing the Northwest Territories border
(haze is smoke from distant forest fires)



Best looking “shacks” at Midway Lake



Peel River ferry near Fort McPherson

Day 39. June 27 – Inuvik, Northwest Territories

(Bert) Extensive taiga continues as far as the eye can see, millions of skinny Black Spruce. Bird life is sparse with few highlights—Bohemian Waxwing, Pacific Loon, Tundra Swan—and mammals are limited to a moose with calf and another moose later, as well as the usual Snowshoe Hares. The Mackenzie River ferry crossing goes much smoother mostly owing to an excellent deck hand who demonstrates great care in checking for the best position on and off and the optimal use of boards and extra gravel to

keep the path level. A surprise is to see dozens of Cliff Swallows nesting under the captain's deck.



Approach to Mackenzie River with tiny village of Tsiigehtchic on the horizon. The village is on bank of the Arctic Red River at its confluence with the Mackenzie.



Waiting for the ferry with the river veiled in smoke and fog



Pilot's chamber has Cliff Swallows nesting below (dark spots). How do the swallows keep track of their nest locations?



Mackenzie River looks wider than it really is, owing to the fog/smoke.



Deck hand puts extra gravel at ramp for smoother exit



Endless Black Spruce



Alpine Hawksbeard



We've arrived!

Day 40. June 28 – Inuvik, Northwest Territories

(Bert) Really, we cannot complain about the weather. It has been great almost every day, but not this morning when ten of us are ready for a hike around Boot Lake. The temperature dropped considerably when we reached Inuvik, so our coats are welcome. We lose Bea almost immediately when she discovers she didn't bring her bug screen. Squadrons of mosquitos are in enemy attack mode. They land in droves, stilettos unsheathed, piercing with thin hypodermic needles loaded with anti-coagulate injections.

Have you ever had three simultaneous injections in the palm of your hand? Bug spray is applied liberally; bug nets, bug hats, bug vests, and bug coats protect the innocent. Why aren't the birds gorging on these mosquitos? In fact, where are the birds? Cindy drops out and heads back to her truck. A third of the way around the lake we reach the cemetery. Most graves are marked by white wooden crosses with black lettering identifying names and dates. Many, too many, are graves of young people. I wonder if they died from mosquito bites. Then it starts to rain. Actually, that's not so bad as the rain shoos away the mosquitos and we are all wearing raincoats. We decide to continue around the lake, except for Richard who heads back. We hike and we hike, a mile or two more through the woods and around the lake. What have we seen or heard? Six Arctic Terns, a handful of warblers (Yellow, Wilson's, and Yellow-rumped), and a Pacific Loon: not much to write home about. But this group has some real troopers: Ron, Jeff, Barbara, Georgia, Norm, Cindy. Neither rain, nor cold, nor mosquitos, nor hundreds of graves will keep them from a hike in Inuvik!

The continuing drizzle has no dampening effect on our tour of the Igloo Church. The white hemisphere crosshatched in rectangular blocks forms, perhaps, the biggest igloo in the world. Built in the late 1950s, it was designed by a man with a 5th grade education at the instigation of Father Adam. Brother La Rock sketched his plan on plywood sheets and piece by piece the igloo was formed into an extremely sturdy structure of 2x4's and 2x6's (at a time when these really were measurements in inches) and plywood sheets. One modern day architect described it as 50% overbuilt because of the extra wood supports. Again, at the encouragement of Father Adam, a 14-year-old girl who exhibited artistic talents in the school began a series of Biblical paintings that adorn the complete peripheral of the Catholic Church. She later went on to become a well-known artist with some of her work selling for up to \$10,000.

Our second tour is of the community greenhouse, an amazingly ambitious project that started with the conversion of a hockey stadium. It now encloses dozens of small household gardens, providing fresh vegetables at a fraction of the price at the grocery store, especially when considers the high cost of transportation along the Dempster Highway, and at substantially better freshness.



Igloo Church more formerly known as Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church



Interior of Igloo Church facing the altar



Peripheral of Igloo Church and its Biblical paintings



Good Shepard painting by 15-year-old Mona Thrasher



More recent painting by Mona Thrasher



Inuvik Community Greenhouse



One of the private plots within the greenhouse

Day 41. June 29 Part 1 – Flight to Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories

(Bert) Offhandedly, Nagia mentions her age as 26 and being only about a third of her passengers ages I jokingly ask her, “How many months have you been flying?” She misses my tongue-in-cheek humor and seriously answers, “Oh, I’ve been flying for five years.” She commands the six-seater single-propeller Cessna 207 with the ease of a veteran flyer and we soon are airborne over Inuvik. Carrying more of our group, a second plane follows. From the air, we spot our campground and Boot Lake where we hiked yesterday. On the outskirts of town we see the new highway under construction. Two or three years from now there will be a road to Tuktoyaktuk (“Tuk” for short), but now it requires an airplane or else a long, private boat trip along the Mackenzie River to the Arctic Ocean.

A tightly knit green carpet of spruce canvases the earth, making the taiga appear denser from the air than it does from ground level. We follow the Mackenzie River as it fans into a delta, often exhibiting more lakes than earth. We fly over the reindeer station that was operative in the 1930s when herders drove 3500 caribou across the Arctic over a period of four and a half years. Then we pass near the DEW Line station, built and operated during the Cold War. Recall, DEW was the Distant Early Warning line, a series of radar stations operated by the U.S. and Canada.

The terrain now is tundra with the only trees visible in deep hollows carved out by streams, and even they soon disappear. I see patches of patterned ground and point one out to Jeff since this artifact was something I discussed in my talk on periglacial effects. Numerous lakes show the characteristic rounded edges for thaw ponds, another effect of permafrost freeze/melt cycles.

Nagia is flying low to the ground, ducking under the low cloud ceiling. Weather conditions at Tuk were supposed to be sunny and clear, but now it is cold and dreary. On the plus side, we get to see the Arctic tundra habitat up close. The small coastal town, population 1000, is now visible. Strong crosswinds challenge our young pilot and she approaches the runway at a sharp angle, banks the plane and makes a somewhat bouncy landing. We've landed safely at Tuktoyaktuk James Gruben Airport.



Tuktoyaktuk lies on the coast of the Arctic Ocean



Our pilot Nagia



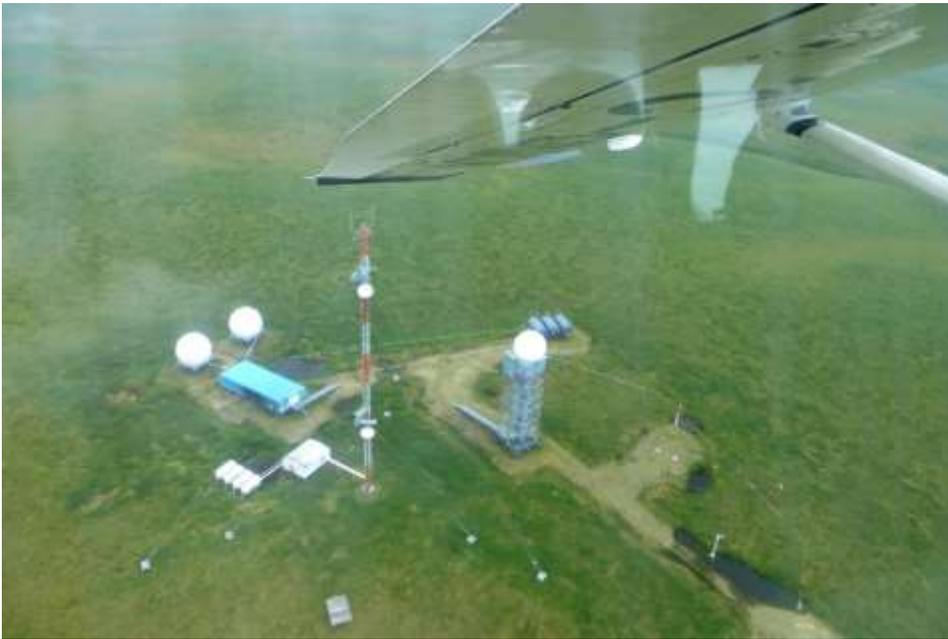
Inuvik cemetery and Boot Lake (right) where we hiked yesterday



New highway under construction to Tuk, here through taiga



Mackenzie River and delta



DEW Line station



Patterned ground, a periglacial effect



Thaw lake, another periglacial effect



Tundra at Arctic Ocean coast line



First Nations hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk



Tuktoyaktuk James Gruben Airport

Day 41. June 29 Part 2 – Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories

(Bert) Eileen meets us at the airport and takes us to her house where we will wait for the second plane to arrive. Meanwhile her husband Billy shows us the furs of Arctic animals he has trapped as well as the skull and horns of a muskox. He also displays polar bear pants which remind me of the book I read, *Red Serge and Polar Bear Pants*, the biography of Harry Stallworthy, RCMP (see Day 6). Billy is quite knowledgeable on birds and, in fact, once led bird artist Roger Tory Peterson for a two-week Arctic tour. Billy reported seeing an Eskimo Curlew in the late 1980s before the species was presumed extinct.

While waiting for the plane, we go outside and look for birds in Tuk and the adjacent Arctic Ocean shore. Within minutes we tally 11 species, including Red-necked Phalarope, Lapland Longspur, American Pipit, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Glaucous Gull, and Hoary Redpoll. In this harsh treeless environment it seems contradictory to see blooming flowers. I photograph Raup's Indian Paintbrush, Tall Jacob's Ladder, and River Beauty.

The other passengers arrive and we enter Eileen's kitchen for a generous sampling of her traditional food: Reindeer stew, Eskimo donuts, dried whitefish, fried muskox, and two Beluga Whale dishes, one of the skin and the other of the meat. I ask her how often they eat traditional foods and how often they get food from the grocery store. She says most of their meals are traditional, but sometimes for variety she gets food at the grocery. However, the grocery food is expensive and leaves them hungry, whereas the traditional food does not. I like all of the sampled foods. The whitefish is a lot like smoked herring with less smoky taste; it reminds me of the dried capelin I ate at the Viking feast in Newfoundland but not as salty. The fried muskox is small black chunks that are dry, cold

and hard. The Beluga Whale skin is sliced so that half is white and half is a gelatinous flesh-colored portion. It also is cold. The dark Beluga meat is tastier, but also cold. All of their traditional food is caught locally and they also dine on ducks, geese, and Tundra Swans. Two Beluga Whales have already been caught this season. They must be harpooned by hand from boats, usually by teams of two or sometimes three if a young man is in training.

The French called people like Eileen Eskimos, which mean meat eaters. She and her community prefer to be called Inuvialuit, which is one of Canada's First Nation groups. I am familiar with the Innu and the Inuit, especially from last year's trip to Labrador; Eileen says they are similar groups and although they speak a different dialect, she can understand them.



Bert at Tuktoyaktuk, Arctic Ocean, Northwest Territories



Carol wearing polar bear pants



Red-necked Phalarope in Tuktoyaktuk



Raup's Indian Paintbrush growing on Arctic Ocean coast



Cindy and Eileen before meal of traditional foods



Beluga Whale meat (left); dried whitefish (right)



Beluga Whale skin (white dish); Eskimo donut (far right)



Eileen displaying her mother's handmade coat with wolverine collar complete with claws

Day 41. June 29 Part 3 – Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories

(Bert) Eileen drives us around the hamlet in her large van and we stop to see the Beaufort Sea beach where Jeff and Ron walk barefoot in the Arctic Ocean. For the first 30 sec. Jeff says it isn't cold, but after a minute he feels the chill. We see Eileen's smokehouse where whitefish are hanging to dry. We stop to visit the traditional Ice House, built by her father and other townspeople in 1963. It descends 30 ft. below the surface into permafrost and there splits off in different directions and forms rooms for different families. Here in below freezing temperatures year-round, families store food. Now most of them use refrigerators. Even though Eileen is only one generation removed from traditional methods, she and others now have comfortable homes, high-definition TV, and 3G Internet service. A few nurses are in town—with a population of 1000—and a doctor and dentist visit monthly. For more severe medical needs, they fly to Inuvik or Whitehorse at government expense.

At a beachfront we see two dilapidated sod houses, a traditional style home no longer used, these being built for Prince Philip's visit years ago. I photograph a fly-by Glaucous Gull and then swing my camera left to catch a jaeger in flight. We follow the jaeger and I get photos and views good enough to recognize it is a Pomarine Jaeger. We also see several Tundra Swans on the tundra.

Frequently throughout our tour we see the famous pingos from various angles. Tuktoyaktuk is noted for these enormous pingos, some of which even have local names. They are formed from a frozen lake that covers with ground and that expands and contracts owing to the permafrost, pushing up earth during expansion and refilling with water during contraction until over a period of a thousand years it is over a hundred feet

high and a half-mile wide. Our final view of the pingos is from the air as we fly back to Inuvik with Nagia.



Jeff walking in Arctic Ocean



Whitefish drying in smokehouse



Traditional sod house



Ice house for year-round freezing food storage



Ladder descending 30 ft. to rooms built in permafrost



Pomarine Jaeger



Tundra Swan



One of Tuktoyaktuk's famous pingos (for size comparison, note the boardwalk)

Day 42. June 30 – Nitainlaih Territorial Park, Northwest Territories

(Bert) Early start ... dump gray and black tanks ... get fresh water while swatting swarms of mosquitos ... get diesel, no, station is closed ... find another, no, it's closed too... look for propane, no, but find first fuel station is now open, get diesel ... breakfast at Tonimoes, \$5.95, best meal bargain in Inuvik ... get e-mail, finally! ... get propane, operator knows Eileen and will go to Tuk tomorrow for Beluga hunt ... pick up jacket Ron left on yesterday's bus ... finally leave town ... late start.

The highlight of our drive south is when I spot a Sharp-tailed Grouse and her chick in the middle of the gravel road. We stop for photos just as a huge semi comes thundering toward us from the opposite direction. The hen grouse scurries into the brush on the right side of the highway while the abandoned chick stays in the middle of the left lane. Fortunately, the attentive truck driver assesses the situation and slows to a crawl while the chick slips off the left embankment. The truck passes and the chick comes back onto the gravel, chipping frantically for its mama. The hen does not appear, but perhaps the chick can hear her response call and so heads in that direction off the right shoulder and there the small family is reunited.

We reach the Mackenzie River and line up for the short wait for the ferry to return to our side. Then it is back on the Dempster, which here is in excellent condition. Although the gravel road could support much higher speeds, we limit our speed to 40 mph, a safer speed to avoid potential travel hazards and especially flat or low-pressure tires caused mostly by imprinting stones. We stop short of the Peel River, staying the night near Fort MacPherson. It has been a warm and sunny day and at 10 PM when I go to bed, the outside thermometer reads 76°.



Sharp-tailed Grouse chick calling for its mother



Sharp-tailed Grouse



Mackenzie River



Lined up for Mackenzie River ferry



Dempster Highway, Northwest Territories

Day 43. July 1 – Peel River, Northwest Territories

(Bert) “Stop!” she commands. I push hard on the brakes, put the RV into park, and step outside to inspect the damage.

A few minutes earlier as I approached the ferry ramp I asked the deckhand for permission to enter from the left side and swing to the right at an angle. Request denied. Well, she’s the one with the experience, so maybe she thinks we can get on without hanging up. It looks rough and rutted to me.

I inspect the damage. The driver's side rear bumper is submerged in gravel. The sewer pipe is pinched up against the RV body, as are the dump pull-handles. The deckhand tells me to back up. No way! I already have loose gravel surrounding the bumper, so backing up would push the RV deeper into the severe slope. I suggest we get boards for leveling and a shovel too. Meanwhile the ferry operator has come down from his second story cabin and is studying the situation. He decides he should pull the ferry farther into the river. The deckhand attempts to shovel the gravel from underneath the RV, but she is too weak to be effective, so I take the shovel from her and do it myself. The ferry movement lowers the RV's front end and somewhat raises the rear, allowing me to shovel out more gravel. Our actions are being viewed by the occupants of eight RV's, two semi's, and five pickup trucks, all waiting patiently/impatiently in the ferry line. Now with boards in place, the ferry repositioned, the gravel shoveled, I slowly drive the RV onto the ferry without further mishap.

When we get to the opposite shore I notice two RV's that have not moved, even though they were on the previous ferry crossing. We inspect the damage to their RV's. A leveling jack, totally inoperative, is twisted at right angles to its normal position on the 5th-wheel. On the van the extended luggage compartment from the rear bumper is twisted so that it swings out at a 45° angle. Trying to force it back into position will probably crack the steel I-beam.

Now begins the long process of filling out paperwork for a claim against the ferry operator company since it was the fault of various employees that caused the damage: (1) the deckhand for giving bad instructions, (2) the rubber tired loader that was supposed to fill in gravel and level the ferry entrance and exit, (3) the ferry operator for not positioning the ferry at a level position, (4) the ferry supervisor who was not monitoring the situation and, instead, stayed in his office on the overlooking hill. The ferry operator has some sample forms but does not know anything about the procedure. I ask for his boss, finding him up on the hill, and the supervisor has to call his office in Inuvik for advice. After much paperwork, photos, and a run back to Fort MacPherson for photocopies we are on our way again, three hours late. In the meantime, the rubber tired loader works for an hour smoothing the surface and the remaining RV's in our caravan embark and disembark without mishap.

The good news of the day is when I ask Shari to exit into a pullout when I thought I saw a Northern Wheatear at The Gorge. I grab my camera, leave the RV, and look up to see a large nest with a Golden Eagle staring down at me. It shares the nest with two snow white nestlings about the size of basketballs. The wheatear is nowhere to be seen, but I motion to Ron and Carol and, later, to Bill and Ginny to stop to see the eagles. The adult continues to stare at us eagle-eyed, with a stern countenance—if that is possible for a bird—but otherwise unperturbed.

Our troubles are not over. Recent rain has damaged the gravel road and a grader is hard at work regrading. In the process the grader digs deep into the gravel base, turning up larger and sharper stones. As much as possible, we avoid the work-in-process gravel, but

sometimes there is no choice in where to drive. We come upon two of our caravan rigs parked at the side of the road. One pickup truck has a flat rear tire and the driver will wait for our Tailgunner to arrive to help put on the spare or else plug the deflated tire and use his air compressor to inflate it. When we reach tonight's campground we wait a couple of hours for everyone to arrive. Last is the pickup with the flat, accompanied by Tailgunner Larry. Larry needed to use a plug and inflate the tire several times. He tried using one of the two spares but it was somehow wedged beneath the truck, as I understand it, and he tried the second spare but found out that it was not a match for the damaged tire and had no appropriate lug nuts. And, that's not the only flat tire. One of the 5th-wheels had a flat also, the spare was mounted, but the original will need repairs tomorrow. Drinking a double Scotch in the company of survivors is a fitting end to our tale of woes.



Peel River ferry



Rear of RV after ferry operator pulled forward and raised the rear end



Twisted stabilizer jack



Bent I-beam supporting storage container



Gravel semi's throw dust storms, but not stones



Golden Eagle nest with white nestlings



Golden Eagle on nest with white nestlings



Flat tire, one of two today

CHAPTER 6. WESTERN YUKON TERRITORY

Day 44. July 2 – Engineer Creek, Yukon Territory

(Bert) After yesterday's events, a quiet sunny day of uneventful travel through the countryside is welcome. Ecoregions transition as we move south across the Eagle Plains, climb to higher elevation at the continental divide and then descend into the Ogilvie River Valley. We pass Jack and Gail, the usual frontrunners each day. A half-mile farther we hear Jack on the radio, telling us Gail spotted Harlequin Ducks, the most attractive ducks in North America. I've never seen a Harlequin Duck in the Yukon, so I ask Shari to turn around. Easier said than done, we drive several miles until finding the road wide enough to make a Y-turn. Fortunately, the flock of five Harlequins is still at river's edge when we arrive. At this spot is a graveled peninsula formed at the fast moving confluence of mineral laden Engineer Creek with the pure waters of Ogilvie River.

At camp tonight, Shari has arranged entertainment. She has corralled several in our group to be actors in her narration of Robert Service's poems, *Hard Luck Henry* and *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. Jeff performs dramatic acting ability as Henry, complete with cracking a raw egg on his forehead when he hears he has lost his dream of marrying Peg, played by Barbara. Bill really gets into his part as The Stranger in his frenzied attack of ukulele strumming, his panting love for Lou, played by painted lady Bea, and his shooting of Dan, played by Jack, while Richard plays background ukulele at the Malamute Saloon. Shari follows her poem readings with her movie comprised of trip photos she and I have taken, plus several recorded videos, all accompanied by music. It is a fitting reminder of the wonderful times we have had together on this tour.



Taiga



Eagle Plains



Ogilvie River Valley viewed from Ogilvie Ridge



Squirrel Tail grass at continental divide



Dempster Highway winding atop continental divide



Harlequin Ducks at Ogilvie River



Confluence of Engineer Creek (red with minerals) and Ogilvie River (blue-gray and clear)



Hard Luck Henry by Robert Service



The Shooting of Dan McGrew by Robert Service

Day 45. July 3 – Dawson City, Yukon Territory

(Bert) The Dempster Highway was amazingly smooth sailing on our trip north and except for a few rough areas damaged by rain, it was acceptable on the way south. Except today!

We start early, leaving Engineer Creek shortly after 6 AM while others are still sleeping or just arousing. We need a head start for organizing activities at Dawson City for this caravan now finishing and the next caravan starting the same day. Little evidence of the high-in-the-sky sun is visible in the gray gloom of overcast skies laden with precipitation slowly squeezing from the dark clouds. We stop briefly at the Gyrfalcon nest. I stay inside, avoiding the light rain, and peer at the nest site through binoculars. I don't see an adult Gyrfalcon and if the nestlings are present they are hunkered down deep in the nest, avoiding the inclement weather. Scanning the cliff tops, I find the adult perched at the edge, facing away, head drooped, apparently asleep. I photograph the very distant falcon, a dark shadow against a featureless gray sky and an opaque rocky cliff.

The road gets sloppier as we continue in the drizzle. It is amazing how a little rain can transform smooth gravel into potholes and washboard. By the time we reach blacktop at the end of the highway, our RV is caked with a thick film of gray mud, increasing in density toward the wheels. Our first stop in Dawson City is a self-serve carwash and eight loonies later and about 20 min. the RV is shiny new again. I wish I had taken "before" and "after" photos.



Do you see the sleeping Gyrfalcon?



Close-up of the above photo

Day 46. July 4 – Dawson City, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Preserving a history best commemorated in the poems of Robert Service, Dawson City is an historical step backwards to the turn of the nineteenth century when the Klondike mining town boasted a population of 35-45,000 people, today reduced to 2000 registered citizens. Still dirt streets, wooden sidewalks, and dozens of antique buildings, many of which have been restored by Parks Canada, Dawson City is where we take our walking tour this morning. Led by full-time resident Gabrielle, dressed in period clothes,

we hear the colorful history of this boom town that metamorphosed into a prominent city on the Yukon in a remote territory of Canada.

In the evening we have dinner followed by the show at Diamond Tooth Gertie's. The performance of singing and dancing, with accompaniment by rag time piano and drums, is a throwback to goldmining days. Every show seems to have an audience participation segment and this time one of the dancing ladies chooses Tailgunner Larry. On stage, Larry steals the show with his antics, hugging the star singer and host Diamond Tooth Gertie, dancing with the skimpily-legged ladies, making a dramatic production of removing the garter from the attractive leg of his dancing partner, and then putting the garter on the top of his head like a royal crown.



Paddle wheel boat on Yukon River



Bank where famous poet Robert Service worked



Restored BNA bank that bought gold from miners



Old photo of interior of Red Feather Saloon



Red Feather Saloon restored in fine detail; Gabrielle behind the bar.



Restored Post Office



Dancing ladies at Diamond Tooth Girtie's



Larry hugging Diamond Tooth Girtie



Larry keeping up with the pros



Larry very slowly removes the garter

Day 47. July 5 – Dawson City, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Time to do the laundry—it has been weeks since we've seen a machine—and to catch up on e-mail, photos, and journals, I finish in time to attend the Robert Service recitals at the cabin where he lived in the early 1900s. I've attended these on each of our visits to Dawson City and consider them to be the highlight of each visit. Actors change, as does the selections they choose, but always it is entertaining as well as educational when they tell of Service's history from Scotland to California, Vancouver, Whitehorse,

Dawson City and then to Europe. Since I've heard so many of his poems, the one I found most interesting is the one I haven't heard before. In his old age, Service wrote a hilarious poem for his grandchildren about the time Grandma disposed of benzene in the outhouse, under Grandpa's favorite seat.

In the evening we gather at Klondike Kate's for our Farewell Dinner. The weather is pleasingly warm and the atmosphere congenial while we wait outside for our table to be set. Someone suggests a group photo, so they gather below the restaurant sign and stand on the wooden boardwalk. It is almost a group photo because we soon recognize Judy is missing, having gone back for some postcards to mail, and I'm taking the photo so I'm missing too. This independent group is hard to get in one spot at the same time, so this is the best we can do.



Original log cabin where Robert Service lived and wrote in Dawson City



Robert Service reciter and historian



Almost a group photo at the Farewell Dinner



Dessert