

31 December 2016

Dear Friends and Family,

Eileen and I hope that you are doing well. As you probably know from an e-mail I sent in October, we've had a year with major life changes (not quite complete as of this writing). We also did fit in a bit of field work, though the least we have done since 2006, the last time we completely upended our lives.

Eileen read 44 books this year, a number of them classifiable as tomes. Some of her favorites were: "The Man Who Lives with Wolves" by Shaun Ellis (an animal researcher who integrated himself into a wild wolf pack!) and the coincidentally similarly titled "The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses S. Grant in War and Peace" by H. W. Brands. My favorite pair of books, sharing one common author, were "Who Needs a Road" by Harold Stephens and Albert Podell, and "Around the World in 50 Years" by Albert Podell. The first book describes the longest around-the-world automobile journey ever done, and the latter describes the author's quest to visit every country on earth. The automobile journey was a truly extraordinary and genuinely dangerous endeavor, and the broad perspective of the latter book was fascinating. We're now doing the bulk of our reading on our Kindles, and we have recently signed up for the Kindle Unlimited program with Amazon, which looks to be a good deal. It costs \$10 per month and allows us to borrow up to ten books at a time, with no limit on total borrowed items per month.

I had a business trip to Salt Lake City in February, to evaluate a start-up company, so Eileen and I took advantage of it to visit friends and do a little winter birding in the interior of the continent. Unfortunately, Eileen's cousin Kevin was out of town when we were there, but we were able to have a nice dinner with Mindy and Walker MacKay, who guided the two rafting trips we've done through the Grand Canyon. We also spent a fine day in the ski village of Alta, at 8500 feet elevation, well above the murky inversion layer that blanketed the city. Here, among about 150 Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches of two subspecies, we found three exquisite Black Rosy-Finches, Eileen's 700<sup>th</sup> bird species in the continental U.S. and Canada! Pine Grosbeak was a nice bonus. Back in California, just over a week later, I was scoping an impoundment at Merced National Wildlife Refuge, and came across a Ruff (a Eurasian shorebird), which was #701 for her, and possibly her easiest-to-see remaining species.

In late March we took a week-long camping trip with two main purposes: (1) to see Greater Sage-Grouse doing their spectacular courtship displays in northeastern California; and (2) to see the floral displays in Death Valley, which were the best in a decade. On the first day, while driving through Sacramento in rush-hour traffic, we had a tire failure and had to limp from the leftmost of 5 lanes to the narrow right shoulder, where we waited about an hour and a half for a tow truck (the police did not want us to attempt to change the tire on the roadside). What happened was that the tread delaminated from the tire, without the tire deflating. The half-

detached tread, which was about four feet long, smashed up the side panel of the truck as the wheel rotated.

After this memorable start, things went more smoothly. We were able to park overnight on a dirt road with a view of the sage grouse lek (mating grounds) from our bed. Before dawn, we lowered one wall of our cabover (where we sleep, above the pickup cab) and clamped the telescope onto a heavy metal piece, so we could enjoy the spectacle from the comfort of our sleeping bag! Eileen had not seen this display well before, and I had not in a long time, so it was a great treat for both of us. We also were thrilled to finally see one of the fanciest Great Basin wildflowers, Beckwith's Violet, which blooms just as the snow melts. After birding some around Honey Lake, we headed south and spent the remainder of the week in Death Valley. This is one of our favorite national parks, not only because of the geology and botany, but because it is the only one we know of that allows dispersed camping (parking vehicles and sleeping in them, outside of campgrounds). Generally all that is required is that you are at least two miles from pavement, so there are many spectacular and remote places to camp!

We were well after the peak of the displays, in part because there is usually greater diversity (numbers of species) after the peak (numbers of individuals). The floral display was good because of several rainstorms in late fall and early winter, including a storm in October that produced massive floods and did a great deal of damage. Our principal target was Golden Carpet (*Gilmania luteola*), a plant found nowhere else on earth, and which we had searched for several times during drought years, without success (as an annual, it may not germinate at all in dry years). We scoured the Golden Canyon area for hours until Eileen located a single plant about the size of a quarter. A few days later, I spotted a plant the size of a dinner plate, while we crept along the Artists' Drive at a few miles per hour. It was very satisfying to finally meet up with this iconic and unique species! Another favorite from the trip was Ringstem (*Annulocaulis annulatus*), which we had not seen in flower before.

I had another business trip in April to Idaho and Oregon, which Eileen and I extended to good advantage, easily finding Idaho and Piute Ground Squirrels near Boise, leaving us missing only three squirrel species (out of 35) in the continental U.S. and Canada (hereafter, "North America", though that should more properly extend south to the Panama isthmus). While in Idaho, we also enjoyed a day hiking at lovely Bruneau Dunes State Park. One particularly neat feature was the Vortex Crater, where spiraling wind currents drill down through the tall dunes all the way to the wet sand substrate, creating a steep-sided hole dropping over 200 feet just off the edge of a high sand ridge! We had less luck in Oregon, looking for the most primitive rodent, *Aplodontia* -- despite using night vision equipment at holes with fresh diggings, cold and wet weather defeated us in the Lolo Pass area of Mt. Hood.

In May we took a week to visit northwest California, meeting up with Carol and CJ Ralph for several nights of camping at Cook and Green Pass, which was great fun! Though it was cold with

some snow falling, we still enjoyed seeing this location earlier in the year than it is usually visited, and the candy-striped Lewisias were spectacular (photo below). Farther west, near the town of Happy Camp, we had two rare orchids, Clustered and Mountain Lady's-Slippers (*Cypripedium fasciculatum* and *C. montanum*), both in fruit. Another highlight was a long hike in rainy weather to an old location for a genus we had missed finding many times in California (*Lithospermum*). The likelihood of success was so low I regarded this mostly as an opportunity to rack up steps (we still both do 10,000 steps per day, around 4 miles). We finally reached the area, and no plants were visible from the trail, but we walked parallel swaths off-trail through an area that looked interesting, and there they were, in full bloom no less! It was a thrill to finally see this genus in California, as it was a favorite of ours when we lived in the East.



*Lewisia cotyledon*, near Cook and Green Pass, Siskiyou Co, Calif.

We did have one scary incident on the trip, when camped on the side of a forest service road in Trinity Co. At about 3 a.m., several drunks who were driving by stopped, woke us up, haranguing us and making multiple threats. They finally left but it felt like it took forever, and once they were gone we high-tailed it out of there. This was one of the reasons that we now have a DeLorme InReach, a GPS device that allows text messages to be sent via Iridium satellites,

anywhere in the world, with a 24-hour emergency center that will respond to SOS calls. We were camped there to look for an obscure genus in the aster family (*Cacaliopsis*), which had eluded us for years. On the way home, we detoured to try again, in the daylight, and this time quickly found the plant, and just about as quickly, headed out, counting ourselves lucky in several respects.

In June we spent a week on Kauai, to celebrate our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We had been to Hawaii once before, visiting Maui, the big island, and Oahu, but we were not able to visit Kauai on that trip, because of recent hurricane damage. So we made a single-island visit this time, which made for a very simple and relaxing trip. Kilauea Point was our favorite location, with its nesting Red-tailed Tropicbirds, Laysan Albatross, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, and other seabirds. A particular treat was seeing a pair of Kermadec Petrels, which potentially behaved as if nesting, which has not been documented in the Northern Hemisphere. Nearby, at Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge, Eileen saw her 3000<sup>th</sup> native bird species, Hawaiian Duck!



On Kauai for our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

On our anniversary itself, we took an all-day catamaran trip along the scenic Na Pali coast and well offshore to Lehua Crater, where we enjoyed the nesting seabirds, Spinner Dolphins, Christmas Shearwater, and good snorkeling. Songbirding in the highlands of Kauai was somewhat disappointing – the native species continue to decline and saturated trails (dangerously slippery even with hiking boots and trekking poles) limited our access to the better areas. We did manage to identify a good number of native plants, which was fun, with Whisk Fern being a particular highlight. Near the end of the week we finally caught up with two charismatic species, Hawaiian Monk Seal and Green Sea Turtle, on the south shore beaches. In total we had 9 life birds, 2 life mammals, 41 new native plants, and a few new fish. Although the plant number might seem low, it includes only native species, and the vast majority of plants seen below 3000 feet elevation are introduced.

Our last significant field work in California for the year was over Fourth of July weekend, when we visited two areas in the South Coast Ranges of Monterey County, Cone Peak and Tassajara Hot Springs (where I, but unfortunately not Eileen, saw Western Spotted Skunk). After that weekend we unpacked the truck and camper, cleaned them thoroughly, and turned them over to an RV dealer to sell on consignment.

In August, we did another mammal big day with Peter Pyle and Floyd Hayes, and it was again an enormously fun experience. We found 40 native species, compared to 42 last year. Although it would have been fun to break last year's total, which had tied the world record, we did very well -- especially considering that we had serious fog at Pt. Reyes, costing us two or three species. We tried a new route this year, which was very successful – instead of an 8-hour boat trip to the Farallons, we chartered a fast zodiac for half that time and efficiently chased down one good cetacean after another on Monterey Bay. A highlight of the boat trip was Fin Whale, which we had only seen previously in the Atlantic.

Also in August we traveled to Catalina Island for 4 days with our friends Rob, Tam, and their two-year-old daughter Sierra. There were high numbers of Black-vented Shearwaters visible on the 1½ -hour boat trip there. We did a lot of different tourist activities, but a favorite was a semi-submersible boat, in which the lower level is below the water line and has many glass windows, allowing a scuba-like experience. Between this and some snorkeling we saw a nice assortment of fish. We also ate a lot of good food and came to know the famous miniature golf course well.

I took my penultimate week of work off so we could attend one more bat workshop while our rabies titer tests were still current, allowing us to handle bats. This workshop was in the Mammoth Caves area in Kentucky, a favorite spring wildflower area, but one we had not visited since becoming particularly interested in bats. In addition to lectures in the morning and early afternoon, we set up in the late afternoons and trapped bats each night. Eileen worked most of

the time at the data collection table, logging bats that were captured, following a strict protocol to avoid transmission of white nose fungus. She really enjoyed seeing, handling, and releasing so many bats.

I focused on recording of echolocation calls. We had several nights where large numbers of bats were captured, and extensive open areas nearby allowed them to be released for recording. Each bat was equipped with a barely adhering LED light, the flashing color of which identified the species. It was then released in the center of a circle of people with ultrasonic detectors, to obtain voucher recordings of free-flying, positively identified individuals – the gold standard for acoustic identification and automated algorithm training. This was really fun and yielded many high-quality recordings. During the workshop I learned a lot about the new detectors and about recording in the presence of katydids and other insects that produce ultrasound at frequencies similar to those of bats.

In total, we both caught and recorded 10 species of bats, 7 of which were lifers. Of particular note, Eastern Small-footed Myotis, a tiny and very nimble bat, was my 223<sup>rd</sup> native mammal in North America, bringing me to the long-anticipated milestone of 50%! Avian highlights of the week were great looks at Barred Owl, hearing and seeing Chuck-will's-Widow, and listening to Eastern Screech-Owls at several trapping sites.

Our post-retirement activities and plans have been described in our new weblog, entitled Nomadic Naturalists. It is our intention to post a short entry to this blog every two to four weeks, typically describing where we have been traveling and what we have been seeing. We encourage recipients of this Christmas letter to sign up to follow the blog. By doing this, you'll receive an e-mail when we post, which will contain the text and photos of the posting, so it will be easy to keep up to date. After our sign-off below, I've included instructions on how to subscribe to the blog, and have provided a one-sentence summary of, and link to, each of the 6 posts to date, in case you would like to catch up on entries that might interest you.

Although the blog gives more detail, I'll briefly summarize the last four months of this year. After I retired on Sept. 9, we spent two hectic weeks clearing the house, filling both a box truck from the local thrift store and a garbage trailer. The only things we sold were the truck, camper, and my car. We drove off to El Paso, Texas on Sept. 23, in a U-Haul and Eileen's car. The house was put on the market a few days later and the sale went very well, closing only 5.5 weeks later, for 2% over our asking price. In El Paso, we moved into extended stay housing (like a long-term motel room) and put the gear that would go into the new camper into storage. We've done a lot of organizing and have completed a great deal of research since arriving. In early December, we finally got our Texas drivers' licenses, signed all our new estate documents, and became residents of Texas. Finally, we just got back from three weeks in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, where we identified a number of native subtropical plants and butterflies that were new to us.



White Peacock butterfly on native Texas Lantana, Mission, Texas.

While here in El Paso, it's been nice to see the southwest contingent of Eileen's family while we've been here. Most nights we stop over at her parents' house. In addition to her mom and dad, Eileen's brother Paul and his boy Diego are usually there, too. We also regularly see Eileen's brother Rob, his wife Mahrla, and their boy, and our godson, Enzo. Eileen's parents are both from Illinois, so there was strong interest in the dramatic World Series and cause for celebration when the Chicago Cubs won the seventh game! Over Thanksgiving, Eileen's brother Tommy, sister Kathleen, and two of her children, Claire and Corey, drove down, making a festive holiday.

Although the new Alaskan camper and the aluminum flatbed are done and await us in Washington state, our Ford chassis cab truck still has not been delivered, though it was finished being manufactured on Nov. 15. Ford had a major redesign and botched product launch this year, which has put us months behind schedule. But if there is any justice in this world we will be on

the road in our new camping rig in January. We plan to spend about ten months each year on the road, and two months each winter in El Paso, seeing family, attending to medical appointments, catching up on research, and having a break from traveling. In 2017, our primary focus will be on exploring the North American prairies, which have gotten short shrift in our previous travels.

Eileen and I hope that you and your families are doing well. Our updated contact info (same as in September e-mail) is given below. The address is that of our mail-forwarding service, which will allow us to get mail while we are on the road. So please do write; we really enjoy cards and letters in addition to e-mails. Happy holidays!

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Below are one-sentence summaries of each of the 6 posts to date, and a link to each, in case you would like to catch up on entries that might interest you.

[A New Blog: Background](#) Summarizes how we came to decide to sell our house and live nomadically on the road.

[Preparations and Plans](#) Explains the type of truck camper we will live in, how we downsized, and where we will domicile.

[Trials and Tribulations](#) Reviews our activities in last months before we left California, particularly preparing the house for sale.

[Financial Strategy](#) Addresses the question of how we decided we had enough money to retire.

[Natural History Quests](#) Lists some past quests (e.g., seeing 200 species of mammals in North America) and some new ones (like reaching 10,000 species, lifetime, worldwide).

[South Texas Interlude](#) Describes the first half of a 3-week trip to the Lower Rio Grande Valley, while we wait for our truck to arrive.