

25 December 2020

Dear Friends and Family,

I am writing this letter from the Flamingo Campground, in Everglades National Park, Florida. This is the third Christmas Day we have spent here, the others being in 2003 and 2004. One delight of being here is watching birds such as Roseate Spoonbill and Wood Stork fly overhead, against a blue sky with fleecy clouds.

Eileen and I hope that you and your families have made it through 2020 without too much hardship. Like everyone else, we've had a challenging year because of COVID-19, and we have also found the severe polarization that has developed within the U.S. to be very distressing. The California CZU fire affected friends and destroyed the house we lived in for ten years in Boulder Creek. But the worst event of the year for us was in late May when Eileen's father died at age 91 from cardiac failure. We were close enough to west Texas to arrive in time to join the family vigil and attend the limited services that were permitted.

We left El Paso in February, and so were caught on the road by the coronavirus. It negatively affected our plans repeatedly, but we were still able to do interesting and rewarding things all year. We wear masks even on hiking trails, and enter public buildings for more than a few minutes only about once every two weeks, to shop, so we have been able to maintain something of a mobile quarantine. We have not had a meal in a restaurant since March 12, and I recently finally risked getting my hair cut after 9 months, when we found that people in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas were exceptionally careful (because the coronavirus devastated the area in late summer).

Our plans for the year were to explore thoroughly the Great Basin (principally Nevada and western Utah) in spring; visit the Colorado Plateau and botanize in the Colorado Rockies in summer; paddle in Minnesota in September; and make a big arc east to visit friends and family later in the fall. Between COVID and weather, we ended up skipping the Colorado Plateau and the Northeast, though we added some time in southeast Arizona. We planned to return to El Paso on Nov. 18, but at that time it was the worst place in the U.S. for COVID-19, being featured in national news for a number of weeks. We decided it was unsafe to go there, as hospitals were past full and any type of significant illness would require airlifting to another city for treatment. We therefore spent extra time in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and then headed to Florida to wait for things to settle down (although Florida is hardly safe, its hospital system is still within capacity). Our route over these past ten months is shown in the map at the end of this letter.

Some yearly statistics: this year we have driven 23,900 miles in 310 days, an average of 77 miles per day, slightly lower than our lowest previous full year in retirement. About 150 nights were spent dispersed camping (not in a campground). We got in very little paddling in our first six months of travel, but have made up for that since. We took advantage of being in Minnesota to replace our canoe, which was 17 years old and had carried us for 2260 miles, but had significant damage from ultraviolet radiation. The new canoe is exactly the same model, a Wenonah Spirit II

Kevlar Ultralight, which is 17 feet long but weighs only 42 pounds. In total in 2020 we have paddled 29 times, covering 201 miles, and we will be back on the water in the next day or two. Our longest paddle of the year was 16 miles, in the new canoe, in Voyageurs National Park. This was our last national park in the Lower 48, and our last in the U.S. that can be reached by road. We don't keep similar statistics for our hikes, but we did some hard ones in Colorado, with our best accomplishment being a 6.5-mile round-trip hike with 1500 feet of gain, made quite challenging by the starting elevation of 11,100 feet.

On the natural history front, we added about 320 new species this year, including 261 plants, 34 butterflies, and one bird, Crescent-chested Warbler, which was Eileen's 700th native bird species in North America (north of Mexico)! In addition, Rufous-capped Warbler was new for the U.S., though we have seen it on multiple trips to the neotropics, and a Black-capped Gnatcatcher was only our second ever. The average of just over one new species per day is slightly below last year's value. Of particular note, we tracked down four of our remaining eleven native vascular plant families (out of 239) in North America: Burmanniaceae and Basellaceae in Texas, and Clusiaceae and Piperaceae in Florida. We have leads on five of the remaining seven families, but the last two seem hopeless. We had fantastic views of comet NEOWISE one night from the Colorado Rockies, and enjoyed the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn from the Florida Keys.

Our plans for next year, made pre-COVID, were very ambitious, but with the pandemic there is no telling what we will actually do next year, so I won't speculate. You can check out our blog (details below) if you'd like to know before next Christmas!

Our contact info, which has not changed, is given below. We'd love to hear from you! Happy holidays –

Brian and Eileen Keelan

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