

25 December 2023

Dear Friends and Family,

This has been one busy year, featuring five international trips and a six-month road trip! Last winter, with three upcoming tours packed in five months, we realized we'd be in El Paso long enough to rent an apartment, the minimum lease length here being six months. This was so much nicer than living in an extended stay facility that we decided to keep the apartment, despite the fact that it will be empty most of the time. It's a two-bedroom, 750-square-foot, student-quality apartment. But it seems like the height of luxury to us, after six years of alternating between a 100-square-foot camper and 300-square-foot motel rooms. Its best feature is that it is just a six-minute walk from a nice park, the first time in El Paso that we have had somewhere pleasant to do our ten thousand steps per day.

There is not much that's positive to say about getting older, but Eileen and I are relieved to finally have started Medicare in 2023 after the last six years of abysmal private health insurance. What used to determine how early most people could retire was when their last child would finish college, but these days I think health insurance is more commonly the limiting factor. We chose the Plan G option, giving us a significant premium but no pre-authorizations, referrals, network limitations, or out-of-pocket expenses beyond the \$240 Part B deductible. A nice bonus is that I really don't have to look at medical bills any more. Another notable milestone is that we will start social security in February, a bit before the full retirement age. But calculations show that on average we should come out slightly ahead, compared to waiting longer, because of investments we won't have to cash in.

In January, we headed to northeast Brazil for a month to take two back-to-back birding tours with Field Guides, Inc., which were excellent! These were led by Bret Whitney, who has described more bird species new to science than any other living person. The first tour was co-led by Marcelo Barrios, with whom we would travel two more times in 2023. Bret and Marcelo are both fabulous leaders and contributed greatly to making 2023 such an exciting year. Some of the top sightings from this trip were Indigo Macaw, Araripe Manakin, Buff-fronted Owl, Horned Sungem, and Northern Maned Three-toed Sloth. We saw a total of 455 species of birds, 119 of them new ("lifers"), and 10 mammals, 6 of which were new.

In March we took a two-week foray in the camper to San Diego and back, looking for a dozen new plant genera and finding ten of them. But the highlight of the trip was finally seeing *Glinus radiata*, an obscure annual that flowers in mud exposed as ponds or other still waters dry up, usually to be inundated shortly after fruiting, making this scarce species especially difficult to find. Its significance was that it belongs to Molluginaceae, the last remaining native vascular plant family in the Continental U.S. and Canada that we had not seen! We had been working hard towards this goal since 2018, and it was a thrill to finally achieve it!

Shortly after returning from the foray, we flew back to South America for ten days of birding in Guyana, a country with vast tracks of unspoiled wilderness. A highlight was visiting Kaieteur Falls, which can be reached only by charter flight; the falls are said to have the tallest sheer drop in the world, at 741 feet. Here we visited a lek (mating grounds) of one of the most spectacular birds in the world, the fluorescent orange Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock. A favorite experience was when a Common Potoo was called in just after dark, using a recording of its vocalization. This bird, a bit like our Whip-poor-will, sat on an open branch at close range and repeatedly sang its mournful and haunting song as we watched (you can hear this vocalization [here](#)). This trip yielded 332 species of birds, including 95 lifers.

Our main road trip ran from April 14 to October 6, with interruptions for two birding tours. The road trip was organized around finding new plant genera, as in 2021 and 2022, and we visited all the states from the Rockies west, before finishing the year in Minnesota for some canoeing. Between the earlier two-week foray and the main road trip, we spent 142 days in the field in the U.S. During that time we found 197 new species, all but five of them plants, an average of 1.4 per day. We conducted a total of 141 searches for 115 new plant genera, locating 96 of them. We now need just 19 genera to reach our goal of seeing 90% of those in the continental U.S. and Canada.

The 2023 road trip was notable for its high-quality camping. On the negative side of the ledger, with our target genera scattered all over the west, it entailed a bit too much driving, with an average of 137 miles per day, compared to a reasonable 103 last year. Perhaps the highlight of the road trip was finally seeing, after seven or more previous attempts in at least five different places, an Aplodontia! This large and unusual rodent is the only member of its family. It lives in underground burrows and is mostly nocturnal, so it is quite challenging to see. Forty years ago, I named my first vehicle “The Aplodontia”, so this encounter was a long time in coming. Other highlights among many were fabulous wildflower displays in western Colorado and eastern Utah after a wet winter; camping at the remote “Lunar Crater” in central Nevada and finding the small annual *Johanneshowellia crateriorum*, which grows nowhere else in the world; and watching a Gray Wolf trying about 15 times (sometimes successfully) over a 90-minute period to steal meat from a Bison carcass attended by a Grizzly Bear, provoking the bear to chase the wolf each time!

In June we reached the Bay Area, where our friends Rob, Tam, and Sierra were kind enough to host us before and after a tour – we really enjoyed visiting with them! Perhaps our most exotic trip of the year, our destination was Borneo, the third largest island in the world (after Greenland and New Guinea). It has the second-most biodiverse forests in the world (after the Amazon) and is both a top birding and mammal-watching destination. The tour was led by Megan Crewe of Field Guides, Inc., and was excellent. One of the most exciting sightings occurred one day at dawn, from a very tall tower that reached just above the forest canopy. I was scanning the treetops with a thermal imager and found a warm, large mass in a distant tree. I put our spotting scope on it and it was an Orangutan on its nest -- our first great ape in the wild! When it turned around, we saw that it had an infant, which followed its mother as she foraged. Another exciting mammal found later in the trip, again using a thermal imager, was a small primate, the Western Tarsier, which was a major milestone for me – mammal # 500! And Eileen reached her own major milestone when she

saw a nice Gray-hooded Babbler for her 4000<sup>th</sup> bird species! We did have one really scary experience, in which a lodge's electric vehicle lost its brakes at the top of a hill, and rolled back down the hill, crashing into a ditch. Megan, our friend Terry, and I were each injured, but fortunately were able to continue the tour. Final statistics were 220 species of birds seen (111 new) and 25 species of mammals (21 new).

We took one other tour while on our road trip, this one to the central Amazon. We staged the trip from the Twin Cities area so we could go canoeing in northeast Minnesota after the tour. The trip was led by Bret and Marcelo, and based in Manaus, close to the confluence of the main Amazon River with its largest tributary, the Rio Negro. I think this is the best location to visit to obtain a broad perspective of Amazonia. The Amazon is a whitewater river, the Rio Negro, blackwater. Terra firme forest can be reached by land, and flooded forest by boat. (The depth of the Amazon varies by about 30 feet (!) during the year, and everything living in the annually flooded forests must take to the trees for months at a time.) We spent half the tour on a lovely live-aboard boat, exploring archipelagoes and tributaries of the Rio Negro, and a massive sand island in the Amazon. Eileen was especially thrilled to be able to hand-feed wild Amazon River Dolphins, a salmon-colored, bottle-nosed species. In total we observed about 297 species of birds and 16 species of mammals. I got 61 life birds and 10 new mammals; Eileen added 69 birds and 9 mammals.

Our last birding tour of the year was to Chile for three weeks in November. The trip was led by Willy Perez of Field Guides, Inc. We really enjoyed doing so much open-country birding, with a marvelous assortment of water birds, after a year dominated by dense tropical forests. We covered a latitude range equivalent to traveling from Goose Bay, Labrador to Mexico City, and birded from sea level to 15,100 feet of elevation. The Atacama Desert, where some locations have never recorded measurable rain, was fascinating. Highlights of the tour included our longest sighting ever of Mountain Lion; extremely close views of the scarce Spectacled Duck; repeated encounters with the elegant Tawny-throated Dotterel; stunning views of nesting Inca Terns; and wonderful scenery in Torres del Paine and Lauca National Parks. We saw 282 bird species, a remarkable 83% of those on the tour checklist. Of these, 122 were lifers. We found 11 native mammal species, 5 of which were new, leaving Eileen hanging at 499 lifetime species!

Now we're relaxing in El Paso and doing research for the coming year. We hope you are well and we'd love to hear from you! Happy holidays –

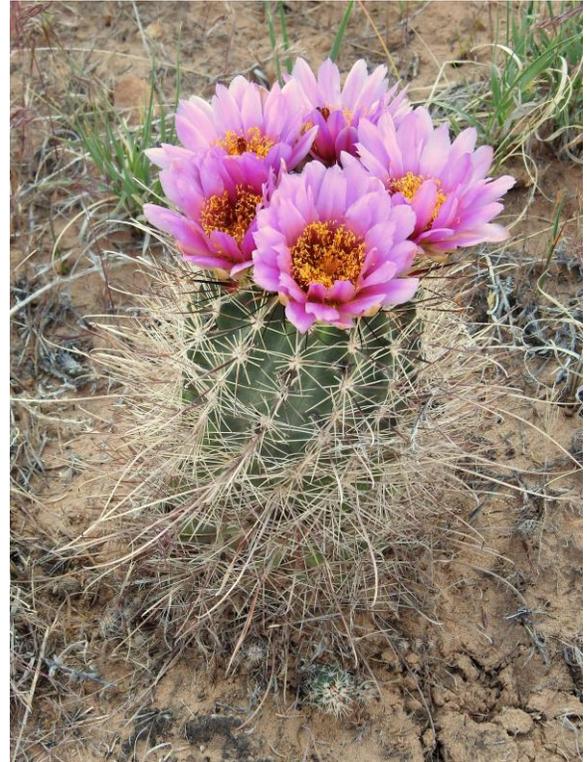
Brian and Eileen Keelan  
[keelan@warpmail.net](mailto:keelan@warpmail.net)  
[Blog](#) [Home Page](#) [Photos](#)  
831-331-1507 (Brian's cell)  
831-331-9590 (Eileen's cell)  
249 Rainbow Dr. #14941  
Livingston, TX 77399

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Eileen with Amazon River Dolphin  
Mountain Lion, Chile  
Kaieteur Falls, Guyana



Whiskered Treeswift, Borneo  
Araripe Manakin, Brazil  
*Sclerocactus parviflorus*, Utah