

Dear Friends and Family,

Eileen and I have had a mostly good year in 2024. January and the first half of February were primarily devoted to assigning subspecies and varieties to as many of our roughly 29,000 computerized records from the Continental United States and Canada (CUSC) as I was able. In addition, I reread all my hardcopy field notebooks, which I kept continuously from 1977 until a few years ago, when I migrated to electronic form. From this perusal I added about 3600 new bird records from CUSC to our database. This was a major undertaking, which I enjoyed very much – quite a jaunt down memory lane!

In the latter half of February we took back-to-back birding tours with our friends Terry and Rhys to the Dominican Republic and Jamaica with Field Guides, Inc. Remarkably, this was our first trip to the Caribbean, where seven bird families are endemic (occurring nowhere else). Five of these were possible in the Dominican Republic, and we connected with all of them. Of the 30 endemic species of birds, we saw 28, and 44 of the 121 species we saw were lifers (our first sightings ever). Jamaica has 28 endemic birds, all of which we saw; our total list there was 116 species, including 32 lifers. Some of the highlights on these tours were three adorable species of todies (tiny, brilliant green songbirds); Northern Potoo (our last of seven species in this interesting nocturnal family); three species of quail-doves (small, often colorful, always hard to see); and both species of Streamertails (spectacular brilliant green hummingbirds with long tails).

Upon returning, we barely had time to prepare for a Field Guides tour to Bhutan, originally scheduled for 2025 but wedged into our schedule in 2024. This, only our second significant trip to Asia, was one of the best tours we have ever taken, given the fine selection of birds; the beautiful Himalayan scenery; the many wonderful meals served outdoors; and the interesting Buddhist culture. On the flight in from New Delhi, we had good looks at Mt. Everest, as well as Kangchenjunga, Lhotse, and Makalu (the third, fourth, and fifth highest mountains in the world). Favorite sightings from this trip included Ibisbill (a stunning shorebird in its own family); at least six species of rhododendrons in flower; Maned Serow, a goatlike animal and Eileen's 500th mammal species; and six sensational species in the pheasant family. In our 16 days of birding, we tallied 303 bird species, of which 130 were new for us.

While the tour itself was marvelous, our experiences in transit through New Delhi, India, were not; my Garmin InReach, a satellite emergency device, was confiscated by airport security, and I was detained (they are claimed to be used by Pakistani terrorists and thus prohibited). By virtue of a \$2500 bribe, I was given an expedited court date the next day, where I paid the \$12 fine, after which we departed the country on the first plane with seats available. We were grateful for the help of local contacts arranged by our tour company, who were highly supportive throughout our ordeal.

Two weeks later we started a 4.3-month road trip, with two primary objectives: to reach our goal of seeing 90% of the over 2100 native vascular plant genera (plural of genus) in CUSC; and to tour a number of the Civil War battlefields in Virginia that Eileen had not yet visited. In the first, "southeastern" segment of the road trip, we spent two weeks traveling from El Paso, TX to Florida, stayed there almost five weeks, and finished with a week in Georgia and South Carolina. By then, we had searched for 23 new plant genera and found 16 of them. We had also sought 29 new subspecies of birds and located 27, as well as adding nine new mammal subspecies. Highlights included visiting The Nature Conservancy's Abita Creek Flatwoods Preserve in Louisiana, where we found a new, elegant, pink orchid, *Calopogon pallidus* and seven other new plants; enjoying fine paddling, birding, and botanizing south of Tallahassee,

featuring the superb chickory-blue aster *Stokesia laevis* and the intensely yellow-flowered aquatic *Canna flaccida*; finally finding several plant genera that we had searched for repeatedly in past years, such as *Triphora* (an orchid genus) and *Micranthemum* (an aquatic with flowers only 1/16th of an inch across); and seeing Antillean Nighthawk and Mangrove Cuckoo in the Florida Keys for the first time in decades.

In the second segment of the road trip, we spent three weeks touring Civil War sites, including: Petersburg, City Point, Drewry's Bluff, Sailor's Creek, Appomattox, Five Forks, Cold Harbor, Gaines' Mill, Malvern Hill, Manassas, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Spotsylvania Courthouse, The Wilderness, and Cedar Creek, all in Virginia; Antietam in Maryland; and Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. Eileen had visited the latter two sites 35 years earlier, but the rest were new to her. The Gettysburg Visitor Center deserves special mention; constructed in 2008, is very impressive and does a good job of explaining the entire war in an unbiased fashion. Eileen became the most recent Civil War casualty at the infamous Bloody Angle, on the Spotsylvania battlefield, as her left knee, which had slowly become inflamed over several days, flared up dramatically, leaving her unable to walk by the end of the day. We visited an emergency room, where they tentatively diagnosed the culprit as the medial meniscus, and gave her a knee brace, crutches, and Ibuprofen. As I write this, five months later, her knee is certainly improved but remains somewhat problematical, despite a Cortisone shot.

We next headed for Rochester, NY, where we stayed with Andrea and Allan, and saw many of our friends from the Kodak days. Allan joined us for a couple of nights of camping in the Adirondacks; on the way, we stopped at the interesting Clark Reservation near Syracuse, NY, where we added a grass genus *Patis*, leaving us just one to go to reach the 90% milestone. We spent two glorious nights and a day camped at Helldiver Pond in the Moose River Plains, the heart of the 200 square kilometer area where we did our six-year study of vascular plants starting in 1995 ([link](#)). We ultimately found 522 species and collected just under a thousand specimens plus many duplicates, all of which have been donated to museums in New York State.

Continuing north, we spent three weeks in Canada, largely devoted to canoeing. We visited Algonquin, Esker Lakes, and Kettle Lakes Provincial Parks in Ontario, and Opemicon National Park in Quebec. While there, we worked on learning a bit about the mosses and lichens that are so prevalent in boreal habitats, which was fun. In Algonquin, on our 25th and final day of paddling for the year, the parking lot at the boat launch was full, so I dropped off Eileen (still using crutches) and the canoe at the dock, and drove to overflow parking. Walking back, I noticed an odd plant, and immediately realized it was *Omalothea*, a new aster family genus, and our 90% milestone!! This was a very exciting way to reach our goal, as it was in one of our all-time favorite places, and was a serendipitous find – I was not looking for it specifically, but just stumbled upon it. Given how scarce and/or obscure our unseen genera are, this was a very unlikely event -- not a single one of our last 130 new genera were found serendipitously! This was an unexpected and very satisfying culmination of four field seasons of work.

Our fourth and final road trip segment, lasting four weeks, involved a lot of driving. We first drove for three days straight to Alabama, where we had a lovely visit with my niece, Sara, a tenured professor at Auburn. Six days of driving west, with detours for three successful genus searches, found us in Big Bend National Park in West Texas. Here, on our sixth try, we finally found *Bonamia ovalifolia* in bloom, with delicate blue flowers; known in the U.S. from only one county, it was one of our greatest plant nemeses. The next day, while making repairs on the camper using a lightweight, folding ladder, a gust of wind snapped it shut on my finger. It took four hours to get to an emergency room, where I got a few stitches, for the first time in my life. The last ten days of the road trip was spent looking for plant genera in southeastern Arizona and southern New Mexico, with eight successes. The most exciting find was the

handsome fern *Phanerophlebia auriculata*, another nemesis, on a fabulous hike in Sycamore Canyon, west of Nogales, AZ. In total we covered 15,004 miles in 131 days (115 miles per day), finding 140 new species (1.1 per day). We finished the year with 9,543 species, subspecies, and varieties of native plants and animals in CUSC, a number we'll try to push to 10,000 in the coming years.

Our last trip of the year was a three-week Field Guides tour to South Africa, our third to the continent. It started off as badly as possible, with the news that Eileen's mother, age 96, had suffered a serious heart attack. Fortunately, Eileen had had a long, good visit with her just before we left, and I had seen her as well. She suffered very little, but only lasted a few days, mostly without being conscious. We faced the very difficult decision of whether to try to return, but would not have made it back while she was alive.

With that huge caveat, this was another truly excellent tour, visiting, very roughly, the southwestern 10% and the eastern 30% of the country, sampling what I would consider ten distinct habitat types. Eileen and I personally recorded 446 species of birds, 49 mammals, and 18 herps (reptiles and amphibians). The mammal list was our second best on any of our 30+ international trips, trailing only Kenya, where we had 61. The herp diversity was also excellent, tying Madagascar for our top total. We saw and enjoyed many plant species during the trip, but time precluded photographing and identifying more than a handful. Eileen added 186 birds to her life list, including her 4500th species, Orange-breasted Sunbird, and I gained 190; we each had 23 new mammal species.

An annotated list of favorite sightings could easily fill a whole page, but I am running out of space and will list just a few, in no particular order: both species of rockjumpers and both species of sugarbirds, representing two families found only in southern Africa; four species of albatross including Atlantic Yellow-nosed; Southern Right Whale; nesting colonies of Cape Gannet and African Penguin; Cape Batis (an utterly adorable songbird); Honey Badger; Knysna Turaco (a crested, rich green bird somewhat resembling a cuckoo); many colorful species of sunbirds (the Old World analog of hummingbirds), especially Southern Double-collared; Leopard; Greater Painted-Snipe; Blue Crane; White Rhinoceros; Little Bittern; and seven species of bustards (large to massive ground birds with remarkable mating displays).

Our last bit of news is that we have decided to relocate to the Tallahassee area, in the eastern part of the Florida Panhandle, which has marvelous canoeing on a number of rivers, fine birding in St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, and nice rustic camping and botanizing in Apalachicola National Forest. This will give us a wide range of outdoor winter activities, and we are particularly excited at the paddling opportunities. The movers are scheduled to arrive in about two weeks.

Despite the move, our contact info (below) will not change. We hope you are well and we'd love to hear from you! Happy holidays!

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Clockwise from top left:

Ibisbill, Paro, Bhutan

Vervet Monkey with baby, South Africa

Eileen feeding Red-billed Streamertail, Jamaica

Brian with Cherrybark Oak, South Carolina

Mt. Everest (left) and Makalu (right), Himalayas

Hyena, Kruger National Park, South Africa

Drakensberg Rockjumper, Sani Pass, Lesotho

Swamp Lily, *Crinum americanum*, Florida