26 December 2025

Dear Friends and Family,

This was quite a busy year for us. Just after sending out last year's Christmas letter, I spent three days in a hospital because of a neuropathy flare-up, this being just a week before we were due to relocate to Tallahassee. But we did manage the move, which went pretty smoothly. We camped on the 1450-mile drive and while waiting for the movers to deliver our stuff two weeks later. The apartment is lovely, having been built in 2023; it's about 1600 square feet, similar in size to the two houses we owned. Eileen is thrilled to have a laundry room in the apartment; a soaker tub for baths; and a nice patio with a pleasant view, for her coffee. Within a few minutes' walk of the apartment, we have a large pond, two intermittently wet swales, mixed forest, and openings. Our "yard list" so far has 92 species of birds, including Anhinga, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Wood Stork. We've heard six species of frogs from our patio, and Squirrel Treefrogs are present on our windows and patio walls most days in warmer weather. Aided by good parking, better workspace, and more storage at our new apartment, I made a number of improvements on our camper this year. The largest undertaking was completely removing the rear seat from our flatbed truck, and constructing additional storage in the volume that was opened up. I also added another lithium battery and portable solar panels to increase how long we could camp without having to replenish power.

Six weeks after moving in, we headed off on our Spring Road Trip through Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky, finishing at the Civil War battlefields at Chickamauga and Chattanooga. In the Florida Peninsula, we canoed on the Santa Fe, Withlacoochee, Ocklawaha, Myakka, and Peace Rivers, of which the Ocklawaha, both upstream and downstream from Gore's Landing, was our favorite. Eileen spent an afternoon in the Peace River sifting sand through wire mesh and was rewarded with finding six ancient shark's teeth from two species, Snaggletooth Shark (*Hemipristis serra*) and Lemon Shark (genus *Negaprion*). But we had some difficulties securing campsites in Florida, where reservations increasingly are needed far ahead, and so skipped some sites and took a short break back in Tallahassee before continuing to the Atlantic Coast. There we visited Forts McAllister and Pulaski in Georgia, and Fort Sumter in South Carolina, all three well-preserved Civil War sites. We also toured the U. S. S. Yorktown, a World War II aircraft carrier, which was an astonishing engineering feat.

Heading inland, we explored the Carolina Sandhills, a geological formation composed of sand deposited by ancient rivers in what is now the inland edge of the Piedmont of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. As is so often the case with isolated occurrences of nutrient-poor soils, an interesting collection of locally-adapted species has evolved here. We were excited to see one of the most noted examples, Little-leaf Pyxie-Moss (*Pyxidanthera brevifolia*), which is not a moss but a miniscule flowering plant in the Diapensia family, found in only ten counties in the Carolinas. Further inland, we found an unusual grape fern, *Ophioglossum vulgatum* (Southern Adder's-Tongue Fern), near Athens, GA. Crawling around on hands and knees in leaf litter for quite some time, on the marvelous Oconee Bell Loop Trail in Devil's Fork State Park, SC, yielded a true treasure, the tiny saprophyte *Monotropsis odorata*, a new genus. We sampled some interesting habitats in Tennessee, including a sandy spring at Schoolhouse Bog in Shady Valley; limestone near Erwin; and extremely rich forest in Laurel Run State Park near Kingsport. In these areas and along the very scenic Little Shepherd Trail, east of Kingdom Come State Park, KY, we saw a number of interesting plants but were particularly taken by the variety of trillium species. Between this region and the Tallahassee area, we saw ten species of trilliums this Spring, of which seven were new!

Less than two weeks after returning, we headed out on a three-week birding tour to Angola. This country is on the west coast of Africa, a bit over halfway from the Cape of Good Hope to where the continent bulges westward. This was our fourth trip to Africa; we had previously visited Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa. Angola turned out to be a rather difficult destination in many respects, including few flights to and from the country; abysmal roads (rated third worst of 144 countries in 2019, when the roads were better); and inability to use U. S. credit cards or ATM cards. There were some good birding areas and several very scenic regions, but also stretches of the trip that were mediocre in both respects. In total, we saw 350 species of birds, of which 86 were new species for us. Some of our favorite birds of the trip were Yellow-bellied Hyliota (in a small family we had only seen poorly before); Red-crested Turaco; White-fronted Bee-eater; Angola Helmetshrike; Swierstra's Spurfowl; and Angola Cave-Chat. Twenty-seven years of civil war has left much of the country nearly devoid of mammals; we saw only nine species. But one of these was fabulous: Thick-tailed Greater Galago (*Otolemur crassicaudatus*), representing our 16th and final primate family! Another trip highlight was seeing a new habitat, miombo, which is dominated by a few species of rather widely branched, flat-topped acacia-like trees. This pretty woodland has an interesting suite of bird species. Our favorite locations in Angola were Tundavala Gap, a very narrow defile with vertical cliffs approximately 3300 feet high; the scenic Namib Desert below Leba Pass; and Pedras Negras, with its ponderous, rounded rock formations composed of conglomerate, which we had previously seen only in small surface outcrops.

Four weeks later, we left on our long-anticipated birding tour to Papua New Guinea (hereafter PNG). This has been our top-priority destination for years because of its seven endemic bird families and being the home of nearly all the species of birds-of-paradise. We went with Field Guides, Inc., the 26-day trip being led by Doug Gochfeld and Jesse Fagan. New Guinea is the second-largest island in the world, after Greenland, and the country of PNG occupies its eastern half. We sampled both lowlands and highlands (to 9600 feet elevation) and also visited New Britain, an offshore island with a distinctive avifauna. There were far too many highlights to list, but when each person in the group was asked to pick just a few favorites, ours were Mountain Owlet-Nightjar, Black-breasted Boatbill, Tit Berrypecker, New Guinea White-eye, Papuan Pitta, New Guinea Woodcock, and New Britain Masked Flying Fox. We reached two major milestones on this trip. First, by virtue of seeing three species of Owlet-Nightjars, we finished off the last of the 46 orders of birds, an exciting event for us! Second, I saw my 5000th native bird species, Forbes's Forest-Rail, a secretive bird that is very challenging to observe -- a classy milestone bird! In total, we saw 261 species of birds and 12 species of mammals well, with 189 life birds and 10 life mammals. We saw at least one species in each of the seven endemic bird families, a good accomplishment, and also found three other families new to us, which also occur in Australia. As a result, we've now seen 230 of 250 extant bird families (92%).

After taking 72 hours of travel to get home (our luggage took 92), we had a three-week break before heading out on our Fall Road Trip, which lasted 9 weeks. The first half of the trip was spent in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and nearby parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota. We greatly enjoyed the canoeing in the Upper Peninsula, with its nice mix of rivers and lakes, our favorites being the Manistique River through Seney National Wildlife Refuge (where we saw our first Yellow Rail and aurora borealis in 1987) and Crooked Lake in Ottawa National Forest. It was exciting to finally track down the near-mythical, and rather obscure, submersed aquatic plant *Littorella americana* in Wisconsin, a new genus for us. Interesting locations at which we saw plants with narrow distributions along Great Lakes shorelines included The Ridges Sanctuary on the Door Peninsula, with its remarkable series of parallel dunes and swales; Manistique Township Park on Lake Michigan, where we saw *Solidago houghtonii* (a goldenrod), *Cirsium pitcheri* (a thistle), and *Tanacetum bipinnatum* (a native tansy); and Pictured Rocks National

Lakeshore on Lake Superior, with its world-class perched dune system. We finished the first leg of the trip at Sax-Zim Bog, Minnesota, where we saw Gray Jay, Black Bear, and Porcupine.

The second half of our Fall Road Trip was a botanical exploration of Missouri and nearby sections of bordering states. Missouri was chosen as our focus because it has one of the best vascular plant references in the world, and we wanted to have a chance to use the three-volume work in Autumn, having previously only visited this area in Spring. Three habitats were of particular interest to us: tallgrass prairies, oak savannas, and glades. The latter, also known as barrens, are areas of bedrock with little or no overlying soil. They are challenging for plants due to: low nutrient levels; being saturated after rains but bone-dry in between; and usually having high pH because of limestone/dolostone bedrock chemistry. These conditions lead to a very interesting plant community, as demonstrated by our finding four new species of plants within twenty yards of our vehicle in the first glade encountered! We were late enough in the season that not too many species were still flowering, but quite a few were in fruit. A lot of attention was paid to the two classic autumnal groups: asters (14 species identified, 5 new) and goldenrods (4 new). We even scored one new plant genus, *Leitneria*, called Corkwood on account of its low-density wood; this rare species is taxonomically quite distinct, sometimes being placed in a separate order from all other plants. Some of our favorite places in Missouri were Prairie State Park and the nearby Shelton L. Cook Meadow; the Glade Top Trail in Mark Twain National Forest; the Coakley Hollow Trail and Grandglaize Arm (by canoe) in Lake of the Ozarks State Park; and Mooner's Hollow Trail in St. Francois State Park.

One of our goals in moving to Tallahassee was to be able to canoe more, and in this we were pretty successful, getting out 40 times in 2025, and covering 242 miles. The paltry average of only six miles per paddle is barely over half what we did twenty years ago, but we're happy to be still canoeing and don't take it for granted. Another goal was to take advantage of the fascinating natural history of the Florida Panhandle, particularly the interesting plant communities, and this endeavor also went well. Despite not actually having all that much time in Tallahassee because of travel, we did spend about 37 days in the field exploring within a couple of hours of town, finding 103 new taxa (species, subspecies, and varieties). Combined with the 83/82 new taxa on the Spring/Fall Road Trips, we added a total of 268 new taxa in the Continental United States and Canada (CUSC), bringing our total to 9814. Although the vast majority (about 89%) of the new taxa were vascular plants, we did also add species of reptiles, amphibians, molluscs, fish, lichens, liverworts, mammals (subspecies only), dragonflies, damselflies, butterflies, moths, and other insects. We won't have much time for field work in CUSC in 2026, with plans to spend six months in Australia, as well as short trips to Belize and Mexico, but we should stand a good chance of reaching our goal of 10,000 taxa in CUSC by 2027.

Despite the move, our contact info (below) is the same, except the street number is now 101. We hope you are well and we'd love to hear from you! Happy holidays!

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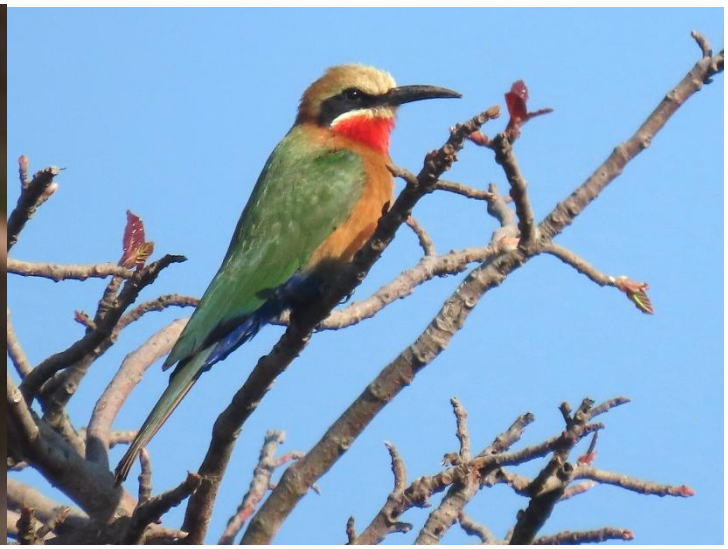

Top left to bottom right: *Parnassia grandifolia*, FL; White-fronted Bee-Eater, Angola; Raggiana Bird-of-Paradise, PNG; *Gentianopsis crinita*, MI; Prothonotary Warbler, SC; *Trillium underwoodii*, FL; Brian after native bird #5000, PNG.