

# **Calgary Stampede & Alaska 2016**

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# CHAPTER 1. THE BORDER

## Day 1. July 12 – Great Falls, Montana

(Bert) “It’s the people,” Ron comments as he tells me why he likes traveling in caravans. He likes to travel to new places, but it is the people that make it special and enjoyable.

Well, Ron is in for a good one. This caravan is a moving carnival of clowns. At our opening introductions it sounds like a tongue-in-cheek AA meeting. The first one says he is happy to announce he is coming on the caravan after 30 days of sobriety. The second one ups the ante by saying they went on their first caravan when his wife was released from prison and on their second after getting permission from her parole officer. One caravaner, less-than-proficient mechanically, always cozies up to any other caravaner carrying a 20-ton jack and a tool chest.

The small workshop room echoes as a barrel of laughter, supplemented by more laughter when each couple finds out their assigned duty on the caravan. One is responsible for rain, another for frost heaves, one for potholes, still another for black flies. Now that they have gotten the gist of it, when a man picks his responsibility card, he reads it and assigns the sole duty to his wife: Mosquitoes. She takes her job seriously and puts in a plug for Skin-so-soft.

In between laughter Shari and I get down to the orientation agenda of how the caravan will be conducted and what to expect. Owen explains personal radio protocol, the road logs, and the Milepost. I say a few words about tomorrow’s border crossing.



Orientation meeting in the only room we could find – a workshop

Then Terry has a game for everyone. In a way, it reminds me of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, but instead we each have a brown bag with an object inside and we pin the bag somewhere on our body. Then we go around the room and feel each other's bag, trying to guess the object. More laughter! Amazingly, Cathy correctly guesses the contents of 18 bags and wins first prize.



The mixer game: feeling your bag and writing down your guess of its contents

Terry is taking photos that she will collate into a handout for us to start remembering names. I take photos of her taking photos of the caravan clowns. Dave confiscates her camera and Steve hams for his shot. Cheryl jumps into the frame on another portrait couple.







At 6:30 the pizza arrives, Shari brings out the Caesar salad she made with the help of Faye, and Terry supplies the brownies she baked. After we've had our fill, Terry has a surprise cake for the birthdays and anniversaries of the month. The recipients gather around the cake and collectively blow out the candles.

The caravan is off to a good start!



Shari inspects eight giant pizzas



Happy Birthday, Happy Anniversary

## Day 2. July 13 – Hill Spring, Alberta

(Bert) A coyote trots across the stubble of a tightly shorn hay field. Lying in tall grass, the heads and horns of three pronghorns gaze in our direction. We are heading north through Montana toward Alberta.

The landscape is flat with western mountains so distant they barely uplift the horizon. Strangely, our road log warns of steep highway ahead. Then the bottom drops out of the flatness and we drop to Marias River.



A photo through the windshield (and its glare), we descend to Marias River

Shari and I have traveled this highway a handful of times and I remember the steep valley, though not the name of the river. But now, after our Lewis and Clark caravan, the river has new meaning. It was named by Meriwether Lewis for his cousin Maria and it was at the river's junction with the Missouri River that the Corps of Discovery faced a dilemma. At the fork, which river was the real Missouri? Clark led a small group along the south fork; Lewis's party headed along the north fork. After they returned to the confluence several days later they compared opinions and both leaders agreed the south fork was the true Missouri River. However, to a man the Corps members believed it was the north fork. The leaders decided to override that opinion and the Corps of Discovery headed upriver on the south fork. Lewis wrote in his journal, "they said very cheerfully that they were ready to follow us any wher we thought proper to direct but that they still thought that the other was the river." A few days later, the Great Falls of the Missouri proved that Lewis and Clark were right. Had they taken the Marias River they would have found it branches again and heads to modern Glacier National Park. The Corps of Discovery may not have recovered and may never have found the Pacific Ocean.

Uneventfully, we cross the border into Alberta at Coutts. A panoply of colors paint the landscape in a checkerboard pattern. Lemon yellow canola fields dazzle our eyes, interspersed with vibrant green alfalfa fields, and golden grain fields ripe for harvest. As we edge westward the mountains of Waterton National Park loom on the horizon, capped by artful clouds one of which looks like an A-bomb mushroom. In the sky above us Swainson's Hawks soar. Oddly, I see a pink bird atop a telephone pole. As I drive closer it transforms into a plastic pink flamingo, and another on the next utility pole. That's a first!





Canola field



Canola field with distant foothills



Mushroom clouds over mountains



Contrasting field colors spotlighted by canola and a backdrop of mountains





The horizon

To the south, at our backs, a baby blue sky sports cottony white clouds. But to the north, angry black clouds threaten rain. We reach our campground atop a gentle hill overlooking a pond dotted with Ring-necked Ducks and Canada Geese. One by one or two or three at a time, our caravaner rigs radio their arrival and I direct them to their campsites.

Is it going to rain or not? It rains lightly, then it stops. At 5 PM meeting time just after I started a campfire, we all gather and a minute later the rain starts, accompanied by explosive cannonballs of thunder and jagged flashes of lightening. The group tries to huddle under one extended awning, but spill over the edges into the rain. I quickly run for my camera and take a comical group photo.



Group photo in the rain



## CHAPTER 2. ALBERTA

### Day 3. July 14 – Hill Spring, Alberta

(Bert) Hidden in the vast prairies of southern Alberta, where tiny towns are separated by many miles, are some real surprises. Who would guess we'd find the world's largest museum of horse drawn carriages, a World Heritage Site featuring a 6000-year-old history, and a family musical group whose surprise talent entertains us in a low ceiling barn. Even our bus driver Harry is an added delight as he rolls out the history of Canada, the settlement of southwestern Alberta, local farming practices, and factual tidbits on emigrating Mormons and Huguenots, and native American Blackfoot tribes.

We start with a horse drawn carriage ride around the rural 20 acres of the Remington Carriage Museum and then view the bronze statue of local Cardston hero George Woolf riding underdog Seabiscuit, the surprise challenger and winner against triple-crown champion War Admiral in 1938. Our guide tells us the race was the most (by percent of population) listened to sporting event of all time.



George Woolf riding Seabiscuit

We enter the large building housing 306 meticulously restored carriages. It all started when Don Remington was asked one Christmas season to find a carriage to carry Santa Claus. Intrigued by the sleigh, he began to collect and restore all sorts of horse drawn carriages until he amassed a collection of 48 vehicles which he donated to Alberta on the provision it establish a museum in tiny Cardston. In a narrated tour we hear the history of the Phaeton coach, its name derived from Greek mythology denoting a reckless driver, perhaps a warning to the three couples in our caravan that drive Phaeton motor coaches. We see a circa 1910 Doctor's Buggy which probably is similar to the one my grandparents' doctor used to hustle to their home on the birth of their

seven children. From London, is a beautiful Park Drag, circa 1885, with seating capacity for ten passengers plus two grooms. Oddly, a sprinkler wagon represents Studebaker, perhaps the largest manufacture of carriages in North America. Our guide ends with the most valuable carriage in the collection, estimated at \$400,000, a Royal Hansom Cab, circa 1910, formerly owned by Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt of New York.



Doctor's Buggy, circa 1910, built by McLaughlin Carriage Co., Oshawa, Ontario



Park Drag, circa 1885, built by Holland & Holland, London, England





Royal Hansom Cab, circa 1910, built by Forder & Company, Wolverhampton, England

Our next stop is the World Heritage Site, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. On our previous caravan, on June 14, I related the story of how the buffalo jump was conducted at First People's Buffalo Jump. Here is a much more extensive 5-story museum built on the actual cliff of the jump. The cliff marks the demarcation between foothills of the rugged mountains of western Canada and the grassy plains of central Canada. We watch a film reenactment of the jump process and it closely parallels the story I wrote. I learn a few new particulars to the story, namely that the hunt was conducted in fall after the first frost to eliminate the problem of insects gathering over the carcasses, that the Chinook winds carry away the scent of the kill, that it was initiated at dawn when the low sunrise blinded the eyes of the buffalo as they plummeted over the eastern cliff, and that as many as 50,000 to 200,000 Blackfoot Indians gathered for the jump. Archeologists investigating the site through deep excavations estimate the jump was operational for at least 6,000 years and likely longer. It continued until about 150 years ago.



Edge of the cliff at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump



Can you see the Yellow-bellied Marmot on cliff's edge at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump?

This evening we dine on an extensive and delicious buffet in the barn at our campsite. Then we are fabulously entertained by The Great Canadian Barn Dance, an extended family of musical performers with surprising talent. Campground owner couple, uncle, father-on-law, son, and adopted daughter, and a local friend round out the performers who sing and play an array of instruments. Foremost is the teenage son who seems to have the ability to play any instrument, except the harp he claims. He entertains us with guitar, violin, keyboard, harmonica, Hawaiian ukulele, trombone, and even whistling and a strong singing voice. The repertoire follows a



theme of songs written by Canadian Gordon Lightfoot, but is varied enough to include the theme song of 101 Dalmatians, a Patsy Cline number, and an amusing song about a near dormant volcano wanting lava, a song from a Pixar animation. It has been a full and wonderful day!



An amazing multi-talented teenager is part of the extended family of musicians

#### **Day 4. July 15 – Calgary, Alberta**

(Bert) Some days a Wagonmaster's tasks preclude going along with the group on tours. Today we needed to be in two places at the same time. Shari and I leave at 7 AM and head to the first stop and I prepay for Fort Macleod, the Canadian North West Mounted Police Museum, and the Famous Musical Ride. Meanwhile, Shari stops at a shop to buy prepaid minutes for the Canadian phone we bought last year. By the time we finish, some of the group is already lined up for the tours.



Fort Macleod and its Musical Ride





Then we head to downtown Calgary to pick up Stampede tickets. By the time we reach Calgary, the blackened pregnant clouds give birth to a downpour that obliterates the windshield and cascades down streets to the lowest points where our tires wade through the collected pools. Traffic near the Stampede stadium is at a standstill, three lanes are squeezed into two through numerous construction zones or just because the traffic police have blocked them off. Our GPS directs us left and right and sometimes it seems in circles. We are close but cannot figure out the last direction and so we ask a traffic cop for help. He directs us to a yellow barrier and says, "Park there." Shari changes to rubber shoes and puts on rain clothes. I double bag her paperwork for her and off she goes in the downpour. I wait in our RV with the warning flashers blinking. Twenty minutes later she radios me and says she needs another five minutes. When she returns she tells me the first office said she was in the wrong place, the second office said she was in the wrong place, but that she really should go to the first office. The first office calls a supervisor and that lady knows where the prepaid tickets are stored.

Shari wants to check out two nearby stops in tomorrow's itinerary and puts the address in the GPS (our GPS is nicknamed May because May Be she is right and May Be she is wrong). This time May takes us over a bridge—in the rain, mind you—to a residential street. Doesn't look like a museum to us! We puzzle over the confusion and decide the address is probably 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE not 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue SE. Back over the bridge we go—in the rain, mind you—and wind through construction and backed up traffic for 18 blocks. There is the museum, great! Now we find the second destination—a park just around the corner—and I remark that we've been here before when the motorcycle police had one lane blocked, but now it's freed. Mission accomplished, we set May for the campground far far out of the city. We arrive early enough to get the layout of the camp and the parking procedure. In 30 min. the caravan starts arriving in ones and twos, until Owen and Terry arrive with at least six. By now the rain has fizzled to a drizzle. Two rigs pull in with severe hail damage, yet another RV about a mile back from them sustains no damage, marking it a much localized event however disconcerting. At our travel meeting, Shari does an



excellent job of outlining a rather confusing itinerary for the next two days. I hope it isn't raining on our Stampede adventure tomorrow.

## **Day 5. July 16 – Calgary Stampede, Alberta**

(Bert) How do I choose which photos to include today? I've taken over 400 photos, so many I have to delete some to take more so I don't fill the SD card.

In Rope Square a dozen booths with flat grills flip pancakes and fry bacon. We line up for the free breakfast, stopping at several booths for seconds and thirds. We sip on orange juice Owen distributed as we exited the bus in downtown Calgary a few minutes ago. After a visit to Glenbow Museum, we head to the Calgary Stampede.



The Calgary Stampede show starts with flaming trumpets, twirling Native American dancers, brass bands, and cowboys jumping from the sky on nearly invisible ropes.





The first bucking bronco rider has an unfortunate accident when he is thrown head-over-heels over his mount and the horse accidentally steps on the cowboy's head. Fortunately, after that the spills are without incident.





Another rider scores high with a bucking bronco and then jumps off successfully after the buzzer sounds.







But other riders make less than graceful exits too quickly to score.







Another rider is thrown but can't get his hand released from the tight hold he had of the belly rope.



The next event is calf roping where the cowboys show amazing speed and rope the calf and tie its legs in seconds.





Calf wrestling is even faster, five to six seconds, and certainly puts the cowboy into the mud.







For agility and gracefulness my favorite is the ladies barrel racing.







Bull riding strikes me as the most dangerous of the sports. For protection three cowboys dressed in red stay near the bull and run toward it as soon as the rider is thrown or jumps off. Their job is to distract the bull and keep its horns away from the cowboy.





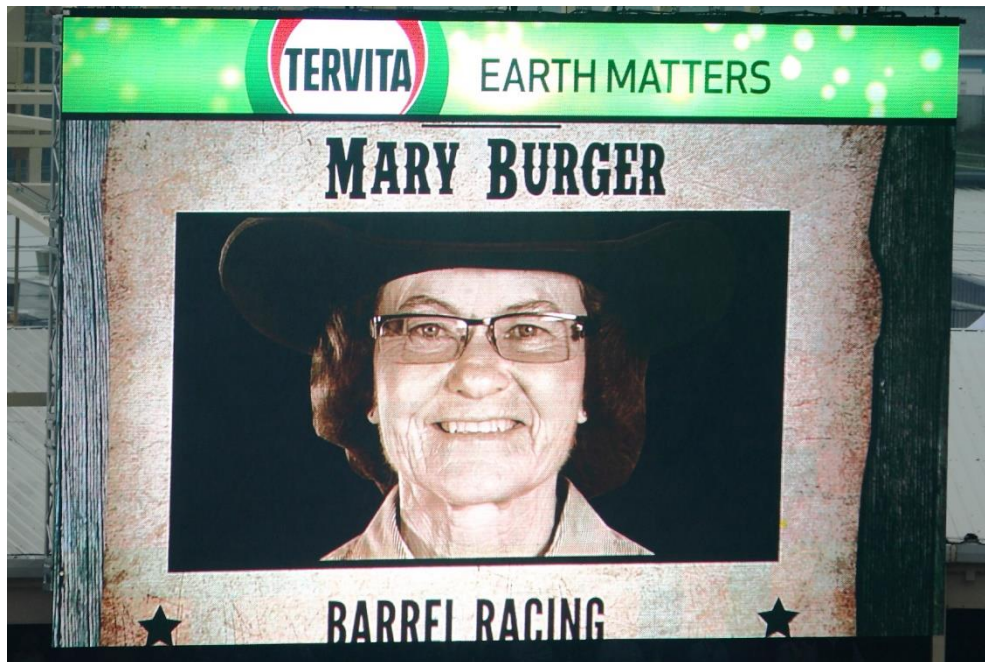
Well, I limited my photos to 16. That was difficult as I have many more rodeo action shots I'd like to show.

### **Day 6. July 17 Part 1 – Calgary Stampede, Alberta**

(Bert) One event stands out in an afternoon of rodeo highlights at the Calgary Stampede. The most cheered participant unquestionably is 67-year-old Mary Burger of Pauls Valley, OK. She certainly surpasses in age the other women in the Ladies Barrel Racing event and she definitely is much older than the young studs doing the calf roping, bronco riding, and wild bull riding.

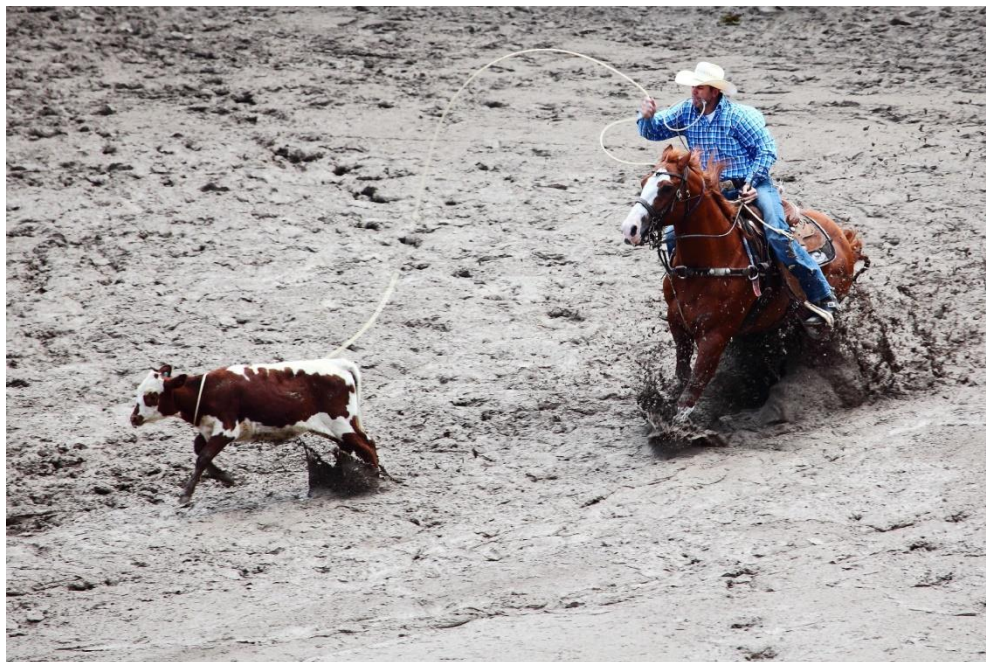
The applause initiates as soon as her face flashes up on the big screen and that applause includes our caravan group as her age is close to the median age of us. She becomes our designated champion.





We cheer her through the semifinals and with a time of 18.12 sec. it puts her in the top 4 (Mary Walker 17.97, Lisa Lockhart 18.01, Mary Burger 18.12, Jackie Ganter 18.14) which means she advances to the finals.

Bull riding is the last of the semifinals, the muddy rodeo field is leveled by a tractor pulling a flat board, and at 4 PM the finals begin, starting with tie down roping.



Tie down roping. Shane Hanchey is the first prize winner of \$100.000



Bare back riding is next. With the final events come the most difficult-to-ride horses and bulls. These animals are specially bred for challenging riding and prizes also go to owners that breed the best. The riders draw for their mount, perhaps hoping for a difficult ride, i.e., a high scoring animal, but not so difficult they fall off too soon. A few of the animals bucked off every rider that has ever tried. The contest ends in a tie between Caleb Bennett and Steven Peebles, both with scores of 87.50, so both riders will need to ride another bronco to clear the tie.



Note, all four of the bronco's feet are off the ground



Ride him cowboy!







Next up is steer wrestling. We all cheer when we see Cody Cassidy break the four second barrier, but the judges say he broke out of the gate too soon and he is penalized 10 sec. So steer wrestling is won by Seth Brockman with a time of 4.7 seconds.



Steer wrestling, amazingly done in under 5 seconds from when steer and horse rider break from the gate

It's time for the playoff on bareback riding. Caleb Bennett riding Up Ur Alley is defeated by Steven Peebles who wins the \$100,000.





Steven Peebles, winner of bareback riding



Caleb Bennett riding Up Ur Alley

When Zeke Thurston wins the \$100,000 as Saddle Bronc Champion, the camera pans to his thrilled girlfriend who probably has some ideas on how to spend the money.



Saddle bronc riding



An almost graceful exit from saddle bronc riding





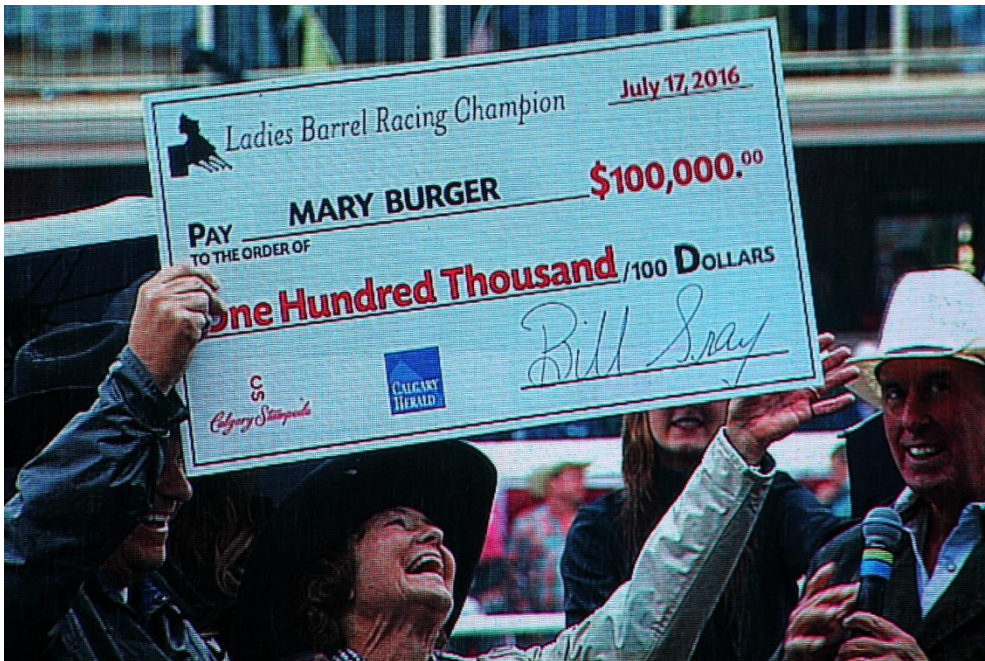
Zeke's girlfriend

Finally, it's time for the ladies barrel racing finals. Mary Burger faces tough completion with women a third to a half her age. Texas is well represented in her competitors: Jackie Ganter from Abilene, TX, Lisa Lockhart from Oelrichs, SD, and Mary Walker from Ennis, TX

Mary Burger rounds the first two barrels with ease, tipping neither. Applause reaches a crescendo as she completes the circuit of the third barrel and races at full gallop to the finish line. Timed electronically, her amazing time is 17.999. When all the times are in, Mary Burger is just 0.01 sec. faster than second place winner Mary Walker at 18.009. Whether it was the cheering or her amazing skill on her favorite horse, Mary won the Ladies Barrel Race and received a check for \$100,000. When asked what she will do with the money she said, "I don't know, I'll ask my husband."



Mary Burger races to the finish line



## Day 6. July 17 Part 2 – Calgary, Alberta

(Bert) In yesterday's blog I only covered the afternoon, but I have lots more to say and show. After an excellent buffet meal in a glassed dining room overlooking the Calgary skyline, we take new seats on the first level very close to the races and the finale show.



Chuck wagon racing is the exciting event of the evening. Ten heats, each once around the track with four teams racing, the race starts in mayhem as each is positioned in the opposite direction of the track. At the gun they drive their teams of four horses each around a different barrel and then head off at a gallop around the track. The muddy race track soon darkens the colorful wagons and blackens the face of the drivers. The horses don't seem to care as they run their hearts out. The finish is a blur of motion. The ultimate winner is veteran Mark Sutherland who finished the circuit in 1 min. 17.01 sec.











While waiting for the stage to be pulled by a huge tractor to the front, over the rodeo grounds, questions appear on two enormous projection screens. One question that gets a loud laugh from the mostly Canadian audience of 120,000 is: “A Chinook is a hot dry wind from: a) over the Rocky Mountains, b) Saskatchewan, c) Donald Trump.”

The show is razzle-dazzle to the eyes as the action on the stage is over a hundred colorfully costumed performers, musicians at multilevels, four drummers in midair above us hanging from sky hooks, a white piano suspended above the stage with player performing, and four singers each contained in a transparent bubble floating through the sky. The finale is more simultaneous fireworks than I’ve ever seen. The Calgary Stampede bills itself as “The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth” and it certainly has my yes vote.











### **Day 7. July 18 – Calgary, Alberta**

(Bert) Today we visit the Heritage Park Historical Village, Canada's largest living history museum. In part it is nostalgia as we remember cars, gas pumps, and farm implements of our youth. Other memorabilia date to our parents, grandparents, and maybe even our great-grandparents. None of us are driving an RV as old as the 1959 Cardinal we check out, but we do remember drive-in theaters and restaurants. Wonderfully restored antique cars and trucks fill the lower level. Audrey takes a turn at cranking a 4-cylinder engine, glad that she doesn't have to do that to get her RV started.



Restored antique gas pumps, the largest collection in the world



At the drive-in





Prospective buyers considering a 1959 Cardinal RV



Part of the huge collection of restored automobiles and trucks



Cranking the engine

It was the railroads that brought immigrants to Calgary and the surrounding treeless plains. We see the original 1894 Prince home, built by the immigrant from Eau Claire, Wisconsin who made his fortune by floating logs down the river to Calgary to his sawmill. We ride the circuit of the large park in one of the railroad cars pulled by a steam engine locomotive. We see the old village of restored buildings: a hotel, courthouse, school, church, synagogue, Royal Canadian Mountie headquarters, and a farm with farm animals. There is also a Blackfoot village where I watch period-dressed children learning about Indian chanting music.



The railroad comes to Calgary





We all take a ride on the train pulled by a steam engine



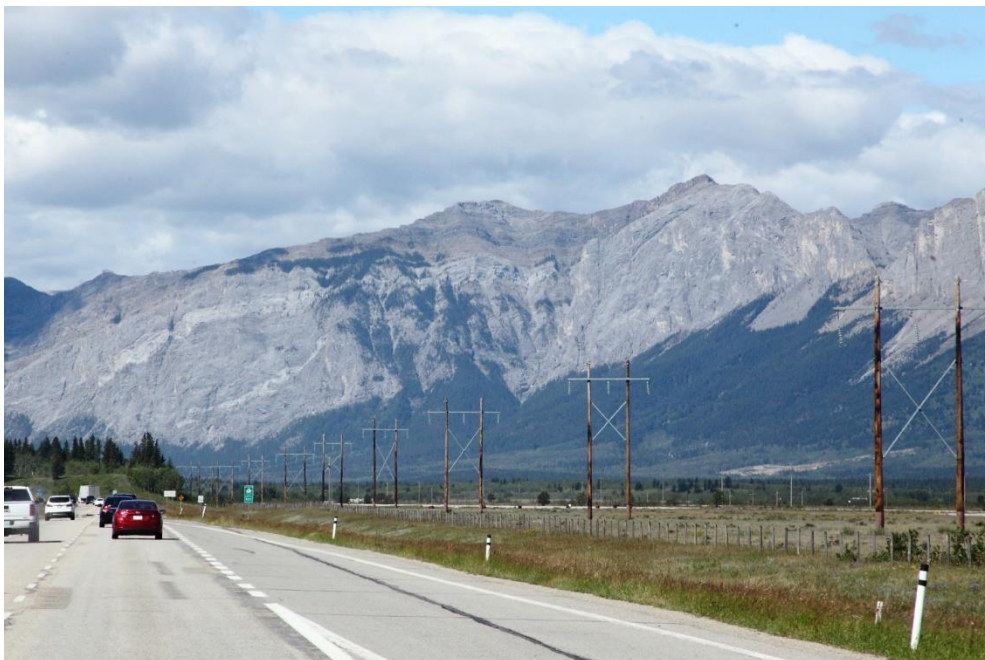
The 1894 Prince home

## Day 8. July 19 – Banff National Park, Alberta

(Bert) West of Calgary we soon reach the first of the Canadian Rockies. The scenery is deserving of more photos, but we don't stop until we reach Banff National Park where we will spend the night. Just as we enter the park I see a Long-tailed Weasel bound across the road. It seems the campground is home to as many Columbia Ground Squirrels as RVs.



Edge of the Canadian Rocky Mountains







Banff National Park



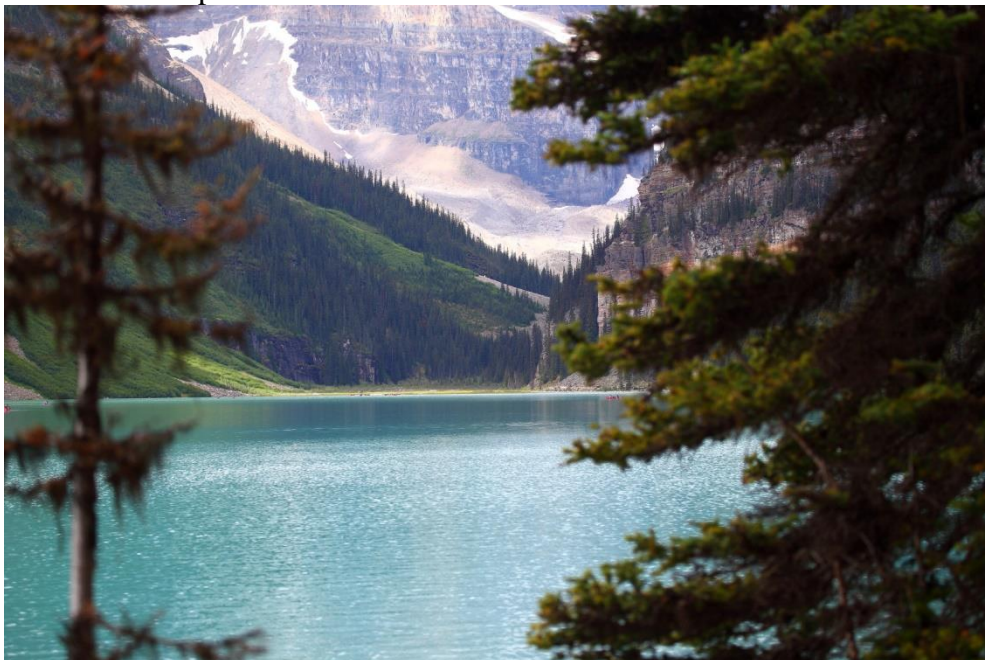
Columbia Ground Squirrel

## Day 9. July 20 – Banff National Park, Alberta

(Bert) Lake Louise pulls at my camera like a powerful magnet. The tranquil turquoise lake is punctuated with red canoes that appear as toy boats in the perspective of Victoria Glacier so distant that it takes 20 sec for the sound of a calving icefall to reach us across the lake. The scene is so beautiful everyone wants it as a backdrop for their portraits.



Red canoes on pristine Lake Louise



Lake Louise and the base of Victoria Glacier





Perfect photo-op

On the rocks bordering the lake I watch a nimble Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel who poses long enough for a few photos.



Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel

We move on to Lake Louise Mountain Resort, a ski area where in the summer they use one of the lifts to carry people high in the mountain to a restaurant. Shari and I eat barbeque at the restaurant at the lift base and watch our caravaners go up and return on the lift. No one reports seeing a bear, which are frequent in this area, but there sure are a lot of Columbia Ground

Squirrels on the expansive lawns. While waiting for the returning mountaineers, I walk the grounds and find a nice variety of wildflowers blooming at this subalpine retreat, plus a few butterflies and birds.



Chairlift at Lake Louise Mountain Resort



Prickly Rose

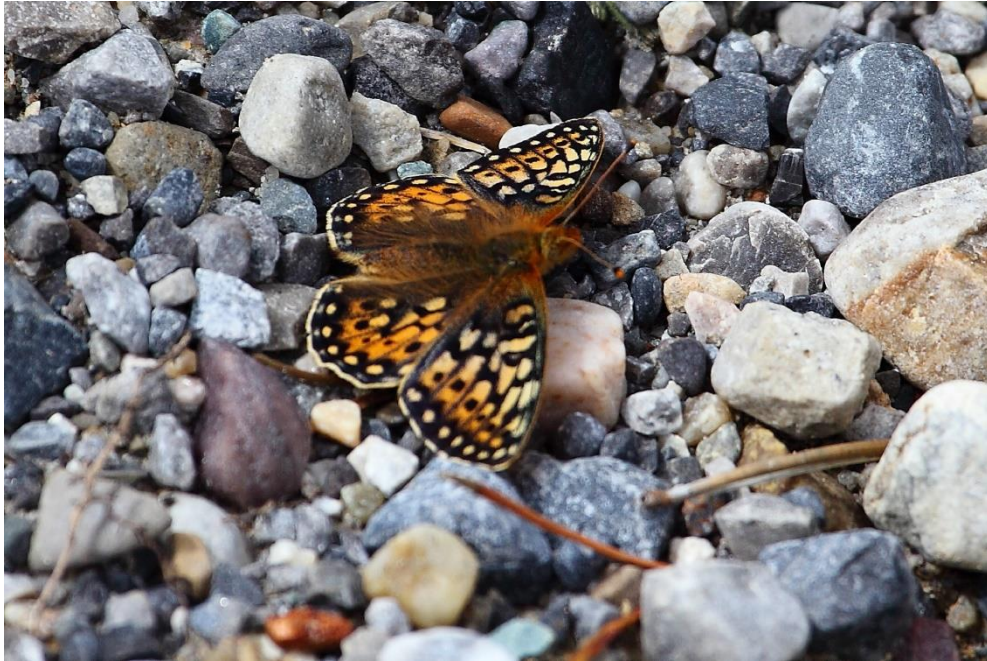




Butter-and-eggs also called Common Toadflax



Field Crescentspot (*Phyciodes campestris*)



Mormon Fritillary (*Speyeria mormonia*)



Scarlet Paintbrush also known as Common Red Paintbrush (*Castilleja miniata*)

## Day 10. July 21 – Columbia Ice Fields, Alberta

(Bert) [The second butterfly photo of yesterday has been identified by reader Barbara as a Mormon fritillary (*Speyeria mormonia*).]



Our drive today is through Jasper National Park, some of the most picturesque landscape in North America and we have the good fortune of excellent weather. Bow Lake, fed by Bow Glacier, is another tranquil turquoise lake, a flat horizontal surface in sharp contrast to rugged vertical mountains.



About 65 mi. into the park three Clark's Nutcrackers fly across the road, the first I've seen this year and the ones I most wanted to see after I gave my presentation during the Lewis and Clark tour. That prompts me to check out the trees as we wiz by. Clark's Nutcrackers feed on the seeds of whitebark pine, but when I stop for photos, I only find lodgepole pines.

Having driven many miles without any manmade structures, when we reach Columbia Ice Fields we are amazed at the large Visitors Center, the dozens of buses, and the huge parking lots, none of which were here when we visited in 2001. At that time there was only a small parking lot at the terminus of the glacier. That lot is still there, but the glacier is much receded, and the area is heavily commercialized. There could easily be over a thousand people here today.



Columbia Ice Field and Athabasca Glacier with small parking lot at base

Shari and I, with the help of others as they arrive, spend over two hours getting our RVs in the lot. It is clearly marked RVs-only, but many cars have entered anyway and taken up the RV parking spaces. I stand at the lot entrance and keep more cars from entering, which upsets some of the drivers because the car lot is filled too. Another caravan is coming in at the same time as ours, so we need over 40 spaces for RVs, many of which are 60-70 ft. long when towing. I block 40-50 more cars from entering while Shari tells me she walked 16,800 steps (about 6.5 miles) on her Fit-Bit as she constantly scans the lot for vacating sites left by cars and RVs who have already viewed the glaciers.



New car parking lot with RV-only parking lot beyond it



At 3:45 our scheduled bus carries us to another parking lot for the mighty all-terrain Ice Explorers that will transport us onto the glacier itself. The ice bus is driven by a hilarious driver who looks like he just got his driver's license a few months ago. Jack says he is 18, the youngest of the drivers, and he proudly claims he is the best. He is entrusted with an Ice Explorer costing \$1.3 million and one of only 23 in the world, 22 of which are here and the last is used in the Arctic by scientists. Unlike earlier prototypes, these ride on very wide and tall rubber tires costing \$4000 apiece.

We reach a steep decline and driver Jack tells us to fasten our seat belts. We have none! He tells us this is the second steepest commercial road in North America. We lean forward at a 32% slope which Jack says is okay since the vehicle is rated for 36%. We reach a grated patch of glacial ice and join the throngs of others that unloaded from other Ice Explorers. Ice cold glacial water trickles down in thin streams on the edge of the grated patch. In spots, we can see blue cavities in the glacier. The pretty blue arises from the absence of air in the compressed ice that absorbs most of the light except the blue part of the spectrum.

In a short section of our return trip Jack drives at top speed: 18 kph (11 mph). Then the Ice Explorer slowly climbs the 32% slope, pushing us to the back of our seats.

Back at the Visitor Center we switch buses and head to the Glacier Skywalk, a steel walkway that eerily projects out of a cliff. The farthest part of the skywalk has a glass floor through which we can see tree tops pointing at us and a rocky slope leading to a raging river far below, complete with multiple waterfalls viewed from above. Glaciers face the highest parts of the mountains while Engelmann Spruce blanket the mountainsides in patches surrounded by avalanche rock slides.

By the time we get back to the RV parking lot, the other caravan has cleared out and most of the other RVs as well. By 8 PM—and still in bright sunlight—we have the lot mostly to ourselves. In prominent view of the glaciers, many in our caravan group gather around two propane campfires supplied by larger RVs who seem to have room for everything. I'm told they later compare flavored varieties of Jack Daniels, but by that time Shari are in bed asleep after an exhausting day.

## **Day 11. July 22 – Jasper National Park, Alberta**

(Bert) When I step out of the RV I'm surrounded by spectacular views. At the rear is a small glacial pond with a backdrop of vegetated sub-alpine capped by barren alpine and a few remnants of snow. At the front are four glaciers and the Columbia Ice Field cap.



Glacial pond behind our RV



The cirque of a glacier is below rock cliffs capped by the edge of the Columbia Ice Field



Surrounded by mountains, we continue our drive through Jasper National Park. Near the town of Jasper I stop when I see the car ahead of me pulled over to the side. There to the right are two elk moving slowly through the woods. I snap my photos, catching the prominent racks between gaps in the tree coverage.



Driving through Jasper National Park



Elk in Jasper National Park



Before we reach the northern boundary of the park we again stop, this time for a few Dall's Sheep crossing the highway.







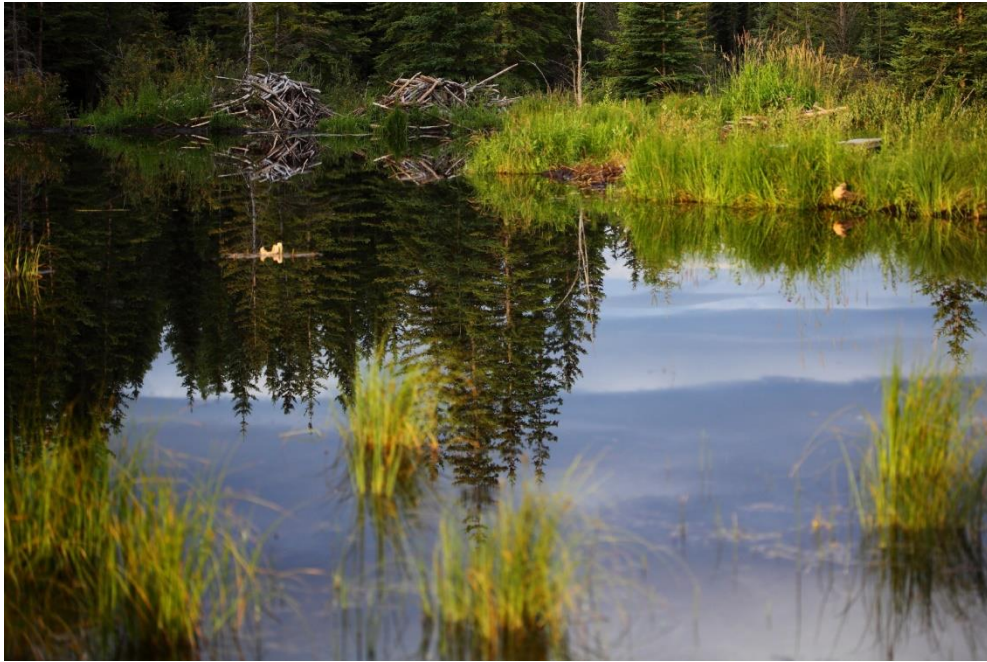
Dall's Sheep, Jasper National Park

## Day 12. July 23 – Hinton, Alberta

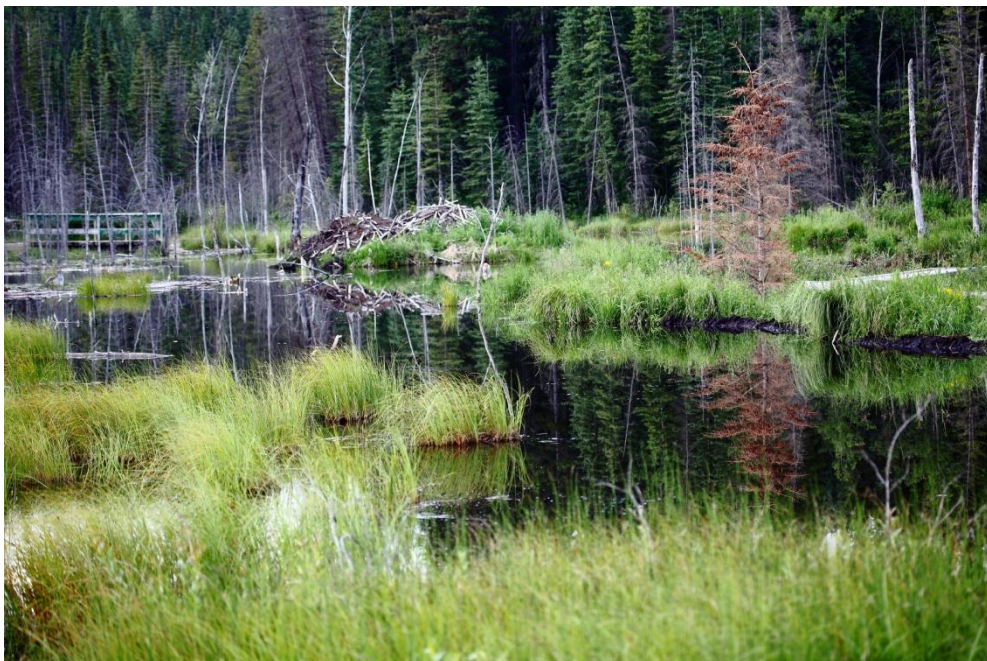
(Bert) Of those that wanted to go on a nature walk this morning, the majority voted yesterday for 6:30 AM. So this morning ten others join me at Hinton's Beaver Pond Boardwalk. I suggested an early start as our best chance to see the beaver. We see the beaver lodge, the beaver dam, the many incisor-sharpened branches and logs, and even a grassy beaver slide between the woods and the pond, but no beaver. I record birds heard or seen: a Song Sparrow showing its breast spot, a singing Common Yellowthroat, a hen Mallard with nearly grown



ducklings, a singing Swamp Sparrow that perches prettily. In the distance I hear an Alder Flycatcher and we walk along another boardwalk where I get photographs. The bird count reaches 14, which may be all we can expect this late in the breeding season.



Beaver pond and lodge



Beaver pond and lodge





Mallard



Alder Flycatcher

Little by little people drift off and return to their vehicles until, shortly before 8 AM, only Bob and Susy are walking with me. Suddenly I catch sight of a swimming beaver pushing a leafy branch ahead. I quick-draw my camera and shoot two photos and a third as it somersaults down and into its lodge.



Beaver pushing a branch



Beaver somersaulting

The group splits up and finds other activities. Some go horseback riding through the woods; some take country roads to a coal mining area. At 5 PM we gather again for hamburger cookout prepared by us staff.





## CHAPTER 3. BRITISH COLUMBIA

### Day 13. July 24 – Dawson Creek, British Columbia

(Bert) I have only one photo to show for our drive to Dawson Creek and I'm sure we will have many more scenes like this one. As they say, in the far north they have two seasons: winter and road construction.



In late afternoon we gather for a presentation by Joyce, the manager of Dawson Creek's Visitors Services. Her slide presentation and commentary on Dawson Creek and the Alaska Highway (also known as Alcan Highway) is fascinating, especially since her father was one of the workers that built the highway. Dawson Creek and Dawson City were named after George M. Dawson, the geologist who in 1879 investigated this part of Canada for gold and traveled with 100 horses and mules. In 1931, when the railroad ended two miles from their little town, they picked up the Dawson Creek houses and moved them to the railroad station site.

On March 19, 1942 their population of 518 was hit with the "Friendly Invasion" of 10,000 soldiers and their equipment. The call went out for civilian help as well and 16,000 Canadians and U.S. citizens descended for the jobs. Joyce's mom said, "There was mud and men everywhere!" In a herculean wartime effort, the 1523 mile Alaska Highway from Dawson Creek to Fairbanks was completed in just 8 months 12 days. It remained a military road until 1948 when it was opened to the public. At the Dawson City museum they have a nice selection of construction and wartime photos and I take photos of the photos.





Bulldozer clears a road for supply trucks



Truck graveyard – broken down trucks are scavenged for parts to keep others rolling



Convoy traveling on “completed” Alcan Highway



Crossing one of 133 bridges built along the Alcan Highway





Upon completion of the road, the crews immediately started repairing and replacing the worst sections. Number one for replacement was Suicide Hill.

## Day 14. July 25 – Dawson Creek, British Columbia

(Bert) A Mile 0 we line up for a group photo below the arch and flags, with one of the original grain elevators in the background. With a group this size it's hard to get everyone's face in the photo but I think it happens in one of the six photos I take.





We take individual and couple photos at the marker and then disband to visit the grain tower, museum, photo gallery, and gift shop. In late afternoon I give a PowerPoint presentation on bears, relating the Meriwether Lewis encounter followed by a surprisingly tricky session on differentiating grizzlies from black bears, based on the accumulation of dozens of my photos. Then it's off to Boston Pizza where, as usual, Shari cannot resist taking a photo of food.





### **Day 15. July 26 – Dawson Creek to Fort Nelson, British Columbia**

(Bert) Finally, we are on the Alaska Highway. Each year its condition improves, with hills flattened, curves straightened, broken sections repaired, bridges redone. Not far from Dawson Creek we detour to take the original road and cross over Kiskatinaw Bridge. Now it's a tourist destination, off the beaten road, and is the only original timber bridge remaining along the Alaska Highway.



Kiskatinaw Bridge





Kiskatinaw Bridge

I went back to the travel journals Shari and I wrote in 1996, the first year we drove the Alaska Highway. At the spot we are traveling now, Shari wrote, “I have the unfortunate luck of the draw to be driving when we get to ‘Suicide Hill’, a 9% grade down to a river and time for me to give up the steering wheel. I have a grip on the wheel so tight my fingers hurt. I have already read ahead in the book for road conditions on tomorrow’s route and Bert gets to drive all day. Suicide Hill is enough for me.”

By 1996 this hill had been vastly flattened since wartime. Still, it was a challenge for Shari in our new Class A motorhome. Not so today as switchbacks have been added and the slope is now 6% with a short bit at 10%. Construction is in process again today. When we reach the bottom of the hill we cross the metal bridge over the Peace River, the longest water span on the Alaska Highway.



“Suicide Hill”, Peace River bridge, and community of Taylor, BC



Waiting for “Follow me” car through construction at Peace River Bridge





Driving over the metal grating of Peace River Bridge

Again, I check our 1996 travel log. I wrote, “As we head northwest toward Fort St. John, in the first fifty miles farms and houses still are obvious, but thereafter the spruce forest takes over. White Spruce flow like a sea as far as we can see, rolling through the foothills up to the edge of snow covered peaks flanking our left.”

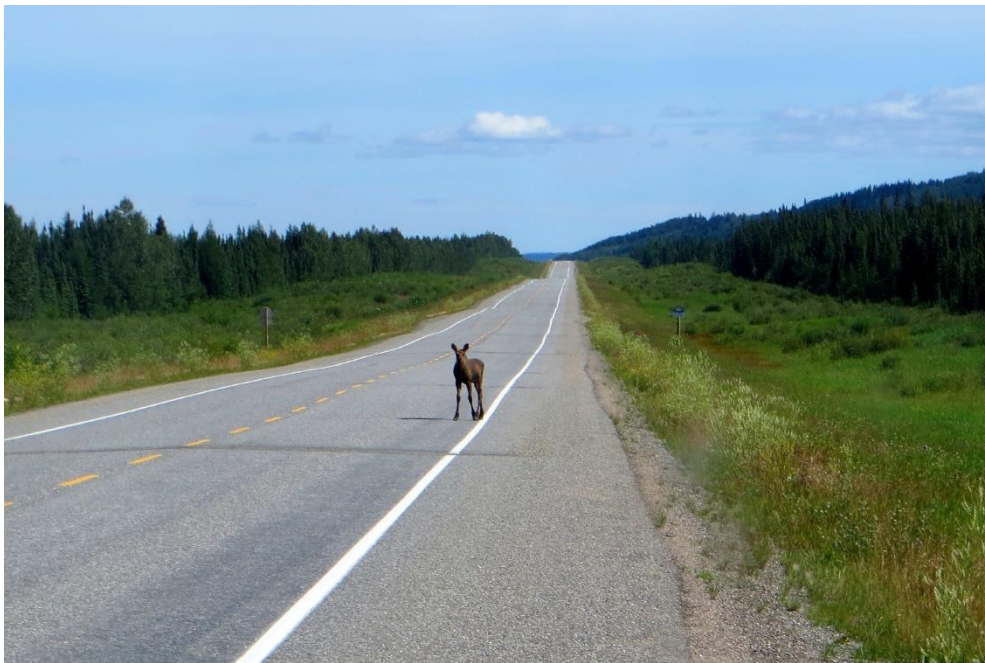
Well, that was in mid-May, so we aren’t seeing the snow covered peaks now. But more remarkable is now it isn’t a sea of spruce, but rather mile after mile of oil-related industry. Fort St. John, once a small blip on the Alaska Highway, is now a sprawling metropolis with one new stoplight after another.

Eventually, we break free of civilization and see a spruce-lined highway and mountain sides. But there is still another change. Once the forest crept to the very edge of the highway; now it is clipped back a hundred yards and shorn to stubble on the uneven ground.



Alaska Highway northwest of Fort St. John

Just as we did in 1996, we spot a moose on the road. This time it is a young calf that seems bewildered about what to do about our approaching RV.







Moose on the Alaska Highway

After we arrive in Fort Nelson I hear reports on wildlife sightings by others. The best is from Bob and Suzy who watched a Lynx cross the road in front of their RV. I missed that, but I got a photo of a mounted Lynx at the Fort Nelson Heritage Museum this evening. Does that count?



Lynx

## **Day 16. July 27 – Fort Nelson to Liard Hot Springs, British Columbia**

(Bert) A good day for wildlife, we are barely out of Fort Nelson when Shari spots a pair of Sandhill Cranes. I watch the roadsides now too and see another pair, then more cranes farther along the road. The grassy roadsides have been mown to the ground and probably unleashed resident insects, an attractive food for the cranes.

Others have seen Black Bears the last few days and now we get our turn, first one bear, then two at another spot, then yet one more. I photograph them and notice they are stuffing their mouths with berries.



Black Bear #1 crossing the Alaskan Highway





Black Bear munching on berries



Black Bear #3 has a mouthful of leaves and berries

We cross Steamboat Mountain, the highest point on the Alaska Highway. On two previous trips we had to stop here, waiting for snowplows to clear the way. Not so this July.

We suspect we are seeing another bear far ahead, a round black ball at the edge of the road. But it is not moving and when we get still closer it is not a bear. When we are almost even with it, the sharply spined ball opens to a porcupine that ignores us as we speed by. I check my watch—9 AM—a bit late for porcupines to be out.



Steamboat Mountain



Pastel shades of distant mountain ridges at 9 AM



Summit Lake is beautiful as usual. The backdrop of Stone Mountain is sheer rock, unadulterated with vegetation. In our many spring trips it has always been snow covered. I see a distant duck but cannot identify it with binoculars, so I take a photo and blow it up on my computer. To my surprise, it is a Surf Scoter.



Summit Lake



Stone Mountain





Surf Scoter on Summit Lake



Looks more like a watercolor painting than a photo! Muncho Lake.

The Not-ready-for-prime-time players are practicing their lines at 4 PM in the vacant restaurant. At 5:30 the caravan crowd fills the restaurant chairs and faces toward the checkout counter. The show begins with our main characters Mike and Phyllis, plus narrator and show manager Barbara. They read their lines from *Hard Luck Harry*, a poem by Robert Service. They act their parts, miss lines, miss cues, and make comical faces and expressions. The audience is in stitches as they watch their friends play acting. After thunderous applause we see the second poem-play, *Bessie's Boil*, also by Robert Service. With a larger cast of Jack, Mike, Steve, Lou, Cheryl, and



Dave, and again Barbara as narrator, the plot is more involved as Bessie visits a string of doctors that all inspect the boil in her hindquarters. If you've read Robert Service you know that both poems, like his others, offer a surprise ending. For our unsuspecting crowd, the applause and laughter fill the room.

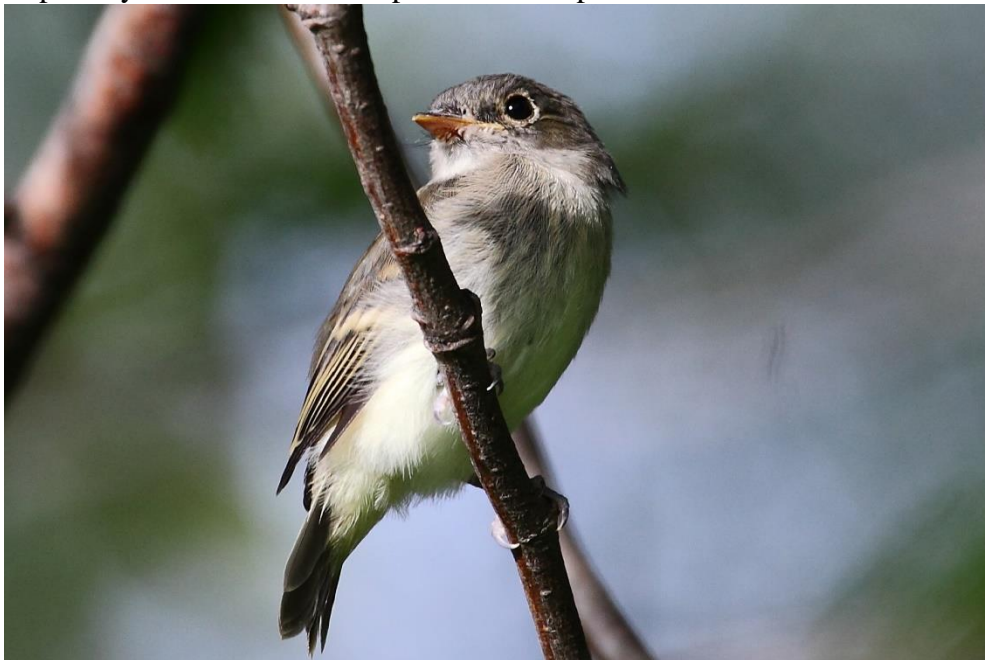


## Day 17. July 28 – Liard Hot Springs to Watson Lake, Yukon Territory

(Bert) With no need to start early this morning, I spend 45 min. looking for birds near our campsite. Over a dozen birds are feeding on insects in a grove of aspen. Best is a Cape May Warbler, the first I've seen in British Columbia and especially noteworthy this far north near the border of Yukon Territory. Another good sighting is a fall-plumaged Hammond's Flycatcher that allowed very close approach. This species is at the extreme northeast part of its range.



Cape May Warbler near the top of a White Spruce



Hammond's Flycatcher



Usually we find bison at Liard Hot Springs and, in fact, I did see a half dozen last evening when I was walking back from swimming in the hot springs. Now the roadsides are recently clipped and offering no grazing grass. So, we drive over 50 mi. before we find a herd of over 50 relaxing at the edge of the highway. They ignore us as we stop for photos and slowly pass by. A half mile farther we see more, including a couple first-year calves.



Herd of bison on Alaska Highway





The Alaska Highway follows the Liard River until we reach the colorful sign announcing we are entering Yukon Territory and stop for a photo.



Liard River





Entering Yukon Territory

By noon we are in Watson Lake. After everyone is parked we walk to the famous Sign Forest, started by a few homesick soldiers during the 1943 construction of the Alaska Highway. Subsequently, tourists mark their passage and advertise their home towns by adding more signs. By 1988 there were 6281 signs. Last year ended with a total of 82,036. And today we added our own sign with all of our names and messages about our trip.



Watson Lake's Sign Forest





Sign Forest, showing a few of the over 82,000 signs



Adding our own sign



## CHAPTER 4. YUKON TERRITORY

### Day 18. July 29 – Watson Lake to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory

(Bert) More scenic beauty, another Black Bear, and our first Snowshoe Hare—which at this time of the year is completely brown—is on this morning’s itinerary. I want to stop at Rancheria River to view the waterfalls where I’ve seen American Dipper previously but it is raining (just as it did last year here) so we pass it up. A bit beyond the recreation site we cross the Continental Divide, but it is still raining so we keep on. The rain lets up and we stop for a photo of the bridge over Nisutlin Bay at Teslin and then at Johnsons Crossing where Shari again buys cinnamon rolls. She just can’t pass up cinnamon rolls.



1917-ft. Nisutlin Bay bridge, the largest span on the Alaska Highway

Between yesterday’s and today’s drive we weave in and out of the border between British Columbia and Yukon Territory seven times and finally stay in the Yukon after Teslin. We cross a bridge over the Yukon River where I saw River Otters last year and then get another view of the steep cliffs flanking the Yukon. We arrive early in Whitehorse, mostly because the rain kept us from stopping.



Cliffs flanking Yukon River

Others soon come in and parking their RVs becomes a circus. Almost all campgrounds along the Alaska Highway and also in Alaska were built many years ago at a time when most RVs were small, 34 ft. being about the largest and not wider than 8.5 ft. Nowadays, they come longer and considerably wider when the slides are pulled out. In our caravan, the average length is 37 ft., ours being the shortest at 26 ft. and 42 ft. being the longest. Ten RVs are 40 ft. or longer. Almost all Class A motorhomes are pulling a car, so the combined length is 65 ft. or more. And, when up to four slides are pushed out they are 14-15 ft. wide. Getting lined up on a camping site perpendicular to the entry path and avoiding other vehicles, utility posts, flower planters, and trees, especially if your neighbor has already extended his slides and awnings is a real driver's challenge. Eventually, everyone gets their RV wedged into a safe spot and we all relax for our 5 PM social hour.







The lawn chairs have circled around a picnic table covered with tempting snacks. Those of you who know of my vast mechanical abilities will see the humor in this next story.

Behind me, someone says, “I can’t get this chair open.”

Ed offers, “Here, let me do it.” Ed struggles, pushing here and there, turning it upside down, then sideways, using more force, but nothing seems to open the lawn chair. Ted lends a hand while balancing a beer can in the other. After taking a dozen photos of the struggle, I head to my RV to get my toolbox. I hand Ed my hammer and he pounds away, forcing open the chair. Then I squirt it with WD-40. Wow, it works! Shari gives me a congratulatory hug. Maybe I can be a Tailgunner after all!





## Day 19. July 30 – Whitehorse, Yukon Territory

(Bert) Docked on the shore of the Yukon River is the S. S. Klondike. Built in 1929, it sank in the Thirty Mile River in 1936. It was the largest sternwheeler on the upper Yukon River and was designed to carry silver ore, i.e. galena, from the mines in the Mayo District. Smaller sternwheelers such as the S. S. Mayo, which we will see in Dawson City, carried the ore on the Stewart River and then it was transferred to the larger S. S. Klondike on the Yukon. The galena ore was carried in 125 lb. sacks, moved by hand carts, and then stacked by hand. The Klondike took the ore to Whitehorse where it was again transferred to the railway to Skagway and then on ship southward. It must have been backbreaking work to move the sacks repeatedly, up to 18 times.

Because the sternwheeler was so valuable, the top decks were salvaged from the river. It was rebuilt with a new bottom the same year and continued to make upriver runs until August 1955. It remained in dry dock at the Whitehorse shipyards until 1966 when it was moved to its present location. An unbelievable move of fortitude, it involving a crew of 12 people over a three-week period, using three bulldozers and eight tons of Palmolive Princess soap flakes, slightly dampened. The route was right through the city streets of Whitehorse.



S. S. Klondike, largest sternwheeler on the upper Yukon River



Cargo and cord of firewood, one cord burned per hour



125-lb. bags of galena ore stacked at dock





Representation of ore sacks stacked on the S. S. Klondike



View of Yukon River from S. S. Klondike Sun Deck

In the evening we go to the Frantic Follies. Shari and I have gone to this vaudeville performance some many times we can predict each act. Some, like Johnny Carson's Carnac skits, are so predictable they are humorous in the rerun. The highlight, though, is when a very pretty long legged young lady picks someone from the crowd. In this case it is Bill, who she adorably calls Pookie. Our crowd howls in excitement and laughter and Bill, alias Pookie, certainly plays his part. Bill and Gail may be married 50 years this week, but Bill's eyes are certainly on the attractive ladies.



Frantic Follies high kicking ladies



Apprehensive Bill, alias Pookie, doesn't know what he is in for





Nice legs!



Bill gets into the act



Watch out Gail, Bill's in love!

## Day 20. July 31 – Whitehorse, Yukon Territory

(Bert) An unscheduled day, everyone free to do whatever they want, Shari and I start our day by going to a Lutheran Church. Although we attend regularly at home, we often don't have the time on caravans. Visiting other churches frequently is an interesting experience, as it is today. This time the congregation, although housed in a very nice church, is so small and so elderly I



wouldn't bet on their congregational longevity, but the sermon suggests otherwise. The pastor is a visitor from Cologne, Germany, and he has a thought provoking sermon. What is your dream? First he takes it literally; what did you dream last night. Then he takes it figuratively, what are your dreams, your ambitions? How are you going to improve the world? He talks about good dreams and bad dreams. He cites John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King ("I have a dream"), Donald Trump, and ISIS. I'll let you fill in the blank on which are good dreams and which he inferred were bad dreams.

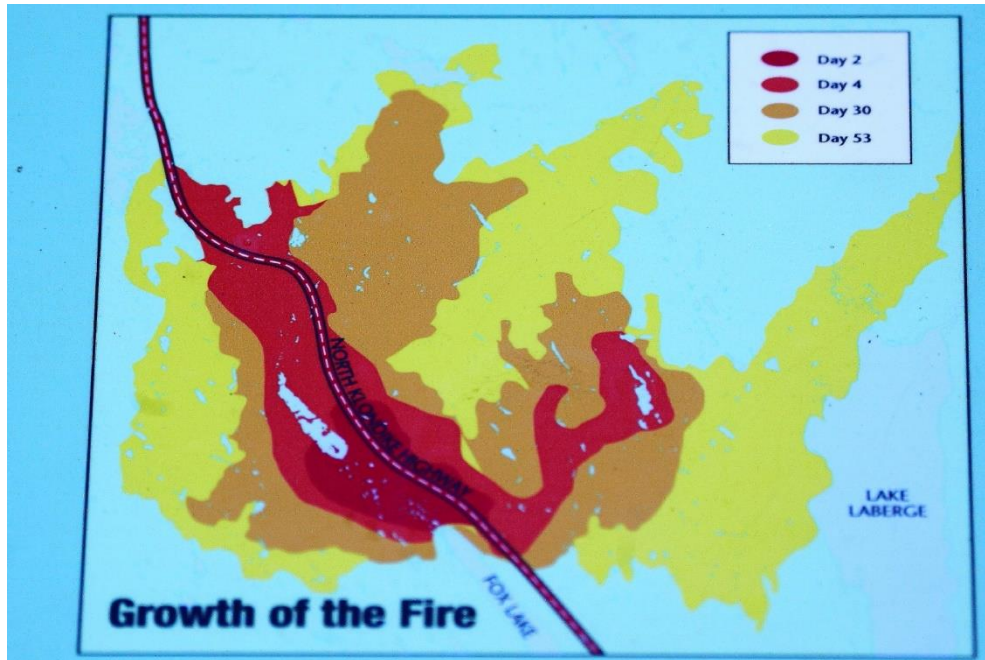
## **Day 21. August 1 – Whitehorse to Dawson City, Yukon Territory**

(Bert) "Look to the left!" I exclaim to Shari. Two elk with spread antlers browse in the nearby meadow. I quickly pull to the roadside and twist my back to aim my camera at the one that had not already disappeared in the forest edge.



Elk off the Klondike Highway 39 miles north of Whitehorse

Every trip through the Yukon I stop at Fox Lake to view the progress of reforestation since the fire we witnessed August 4, 1998. The forest fire had started one month earlier by campers who failed to extinguish their campfire. In the photo below you can see the extent of the fire by Day 30 when we passed through on the North Klondike Highway. In my journal I wrote, "... blackened trees stuck in a sea of glossy mud. Patches of short grass appear like golf greens in a black fairway. In the distance the mountains are hazy and in a couple spots curls of smoke ascend."



The charred spruce tree trunks are still visible, but the green understory is now taller than me, a mixture of willow, aspen and poplar, but no spruce.



Charred spruce trunks remaining from the Fox Lake fire 18 years ago





Recovering hillside at Fox Lake

I stop again at Five Finger Rapid for a pretty view of the Yukon River. A signpost tells me the miners invading the Yukon in 1898 found this rapid a formidable challenge for their overloaded rafts and, subsequently, the Yukon River sternwheelers had to winch the boat to get around the obstacle.



After crossing the bridge at Steward Crossing, I glance at my fuel gauge. We should have gotten fuel at one of the two stations we passed miles ago, but did not. Shari checks the road log and thinks we can get at an upcoming roadhouse. We pass the roadhouse as it has no fuel. The low

fuel light comes on and I drive as conservatively as possible for a hundred miles and watch the fuel gauge slowly slide to 3/32, the width of the needle from E. We coast into the card lock at Dempster Corner, relieved, and I add 22.4 gal. I think the RV tank holds 25 gal. but I've never tested it this low.

We camp in Dawson City only a couple of blocks from Diamond Tooth Gerties where we go for dinner and the vaudeville show, as good as ever. In one skit Tommy and Carl are picked from the audience to dance with the ladies. They perform admirably well, but have difficulty tossing up their skirts to show their legs. No problem! I'd rather watch the ladies' legs anyway.



Diamond Tooth Gerties





Tommy and Carl join the act



Flip up your skirts, boys!

## Day 22. August 2 – Dawson City, Yukon Territory

(Bert) We are fortunate to have Gabrielle again as our guide this morning for the walking tour of Dawson City. We are gathered at the Yukon River when Steve sees a small flat-bed boat crossing and exclaims, “I hope that’s not the ferry!” Gabrielle challenges him, saying he lacks a sense of adventure. One could hardly challenge Gabrielle in that category. She came for a visit

to Dawson City 17 years ago and hasn't left. She lives off the grid, without running water, has a team of huskies, and has to cross the river most days for work or supplies: on the ferry in summer, across the ice in winter, or remain holed up at home during the times of ice build-up and break-up. She says it used to be -40° for a month in winter and more recently for a week and last year not at all.



Gabrielle telling us about the Red Feather Saloon

The permafrost here in Dawson City is 10 ft. deep and we can see evidence in the shifting foundations of the earliest of buildings placed directly on the unstable ground. Dawson City is remarkably preserved to the conditions of the late 1890s and early 1900s, shortly after the Klondike Gold Rush. We walk dirt streets and wooden board sidewalks and visit buildings maintained in their original style. At the bank where gold miners cashed in their nuggets and dust we learn that the Klondike gold ore varies from stream to stream but on average is 80% gold, the balance mostly silver.





Dawson City dirt streets and boardwalks



Dawson City near Robert Service's cabin, looking toward the Yukon River and the cliffs beyond





Old buildings tilt because they were built directly on the permafrost

We see a dilapidated building that was once the bank where Robert Service worked for a year before becoming so famous and wealthy that he quit his job and wrote his poetry full time. In the afternoon I visit his cabin, my favorite activity in Dawson City. This time the story and poetry teller is Sue who used to be the guide at the dredge site. She relates the life of Robert Service, something I've become quite familiar with through the years. One fact I didn't remember is that he wrote over 2000 poems. Then she recites favorite poems such as *The Cremation of Sam McGee* and *The Spell of the Yukon*, as well as one I've not heard or read before, *The Prospector*.



Robert Service cabin today





Robert Service in front of his cabin, circa 1909-12



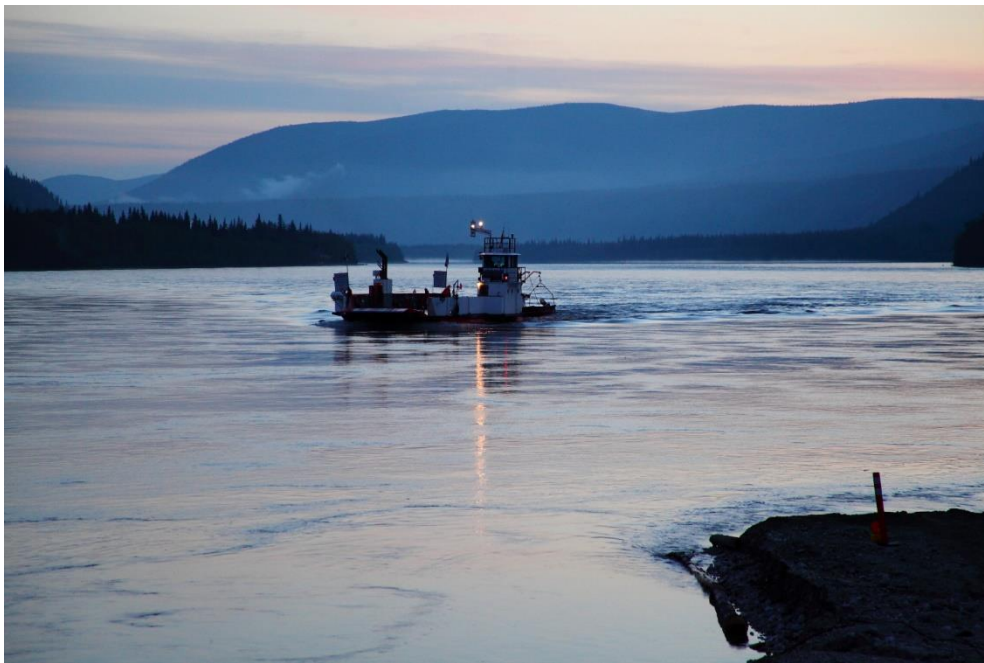
Sue reciting "The Men that Don't Fit In"

## CHAPTER 5. ALASKA

### Day 23. August 3 – Top of the World Highway to Chicken, Alaska

(Bert) The issue of the day is when to cross the Yukon River. Although the distance is short, only one ferry transports vehicles. It runs 24 hours per day but if we leave too early we will reach the Alaska border before its 9AM/8AM (Yukon/Alaska time) opening. Compounding the problem is that two caravans (~45 RVs, many with tow vehicles) must cross this morning, as well as semi's, cars and trucks.

In first light, Shari and I reach the river at 5:08 AM (4:08 Alaska time). Rig #4 is already across and rig #23 left last night and camped on the other side. No one is in line so our small RV is the only vehicle on board. It isn't until much later that we will hear the fate of those behind us.



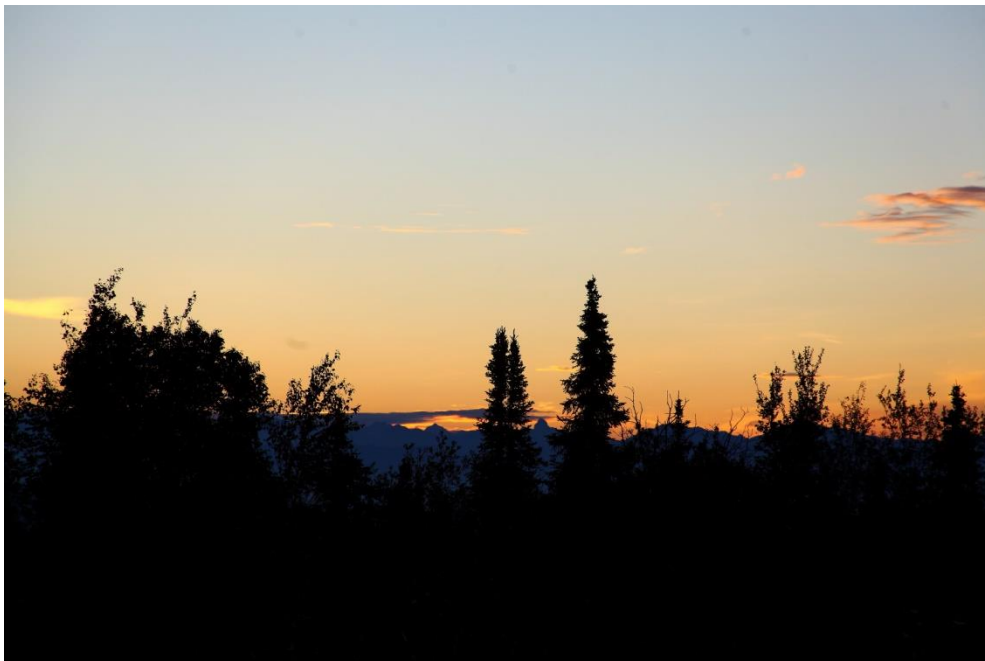
Yukon River ferry comes to pick up our RV





Pre-dawn Dawson City

We climb 1855 ft. on a steep road to reach the first pullout just as the still-submerged rising sun paints the horizon dull orange and makes silhouettes of the spruce.



Top-of-the-world sunrise 5:39 AM

Light now illuminates the distant hills as we climb another 1200 ft. to the highest point on the Top of the World Highway, 4515 ft. It is easy to understand the naming of this highway. We can see a series of mountain tops, ridge after ridge, stretching to the horizon. We ride above the tree line, an alpine terrain, the mountains covered in tundra. Not a creature stirs and only a few

small flocks of birds wing overhead, probably White-crowned Sparrows. The gravel road is mostly smooth, though I drive slowly. I stop frequently for photographs, catching the contrasting light of the mountain folds.







Top of the World Highway treads near the peaks of alpine and subalpine mountains

At 8:11 AM we reach the Alaska border, 11 min. after it opened. This lonely outpost is the farthest north border crossing in the U.S. A small sign marks the population as 3, all border agents who live at the remote site. A cheerful border agent notices the sign on our RV promoting birding tours and says she spent some of the summer with a friend looking for birds in Alaska. She asks me what is my nemesis bird and I answer “Ross’s Gull” since I have looked for that bird three times in the far north, to no avail. Then she passes us through without further ado.



U.S. border crossing

After the border the highway was newly paved last year and except for an enormous frost heave at deserted Boundary (after the cabin burned down a few years ago), the highway is amazingly smooth. As if to compensate for this undeserved treat, the highway then becomes severely potholed gravel. Thankfully, the potholes are shallow.

We follow Jack Wade Creek, a famous gold-mining site and still see a few small and some larger mining operations in process. This road section often has been washboard in the past, but is absent of that annoyance now. We climb the edge of a mountain, steeply uphill on the left and severely downhill on the right. A narrow gravel road, this has been the site of almost annual accidents of RVs plummeting over the soft shoulder. We've warned our caravan drivers on how to easily avoid mishap and, in addition, only a few vehicles meet us so the road is ours to center.





Jack Wade Creek



Shari didn't want me to get farther to the edge for a photo of the drop off

We reach Chicken by 10 AM and find five RVs have already arrived. They had no trouble crossing the Yukon River, although they remarked that the other caravan was lining up and the blockage increasing. Compounding the problem is a gravel bar on the low river that has caused the ferry workers to change procedures and only allow one lengthy RV on board per crossing.



“Downtown” Chicken, the dredge, and part of one of the two RV parks

A few more RVs trickle in and I help them park. At 1 PM I turn parking over to Shari while I tour the gold mining dredge. When I return I find no one else has reached the RV park and none do until well after 3 PM. Then I hear of the problems at the river crossing with long lines and hours of waiting. Shari conducts the 5 PM travel meeting and at 6:15 she leads the group to chicken dinner in Chicken while I wait at the campsite for the stragglers. Finally, at 6:45 two more RVs come in and ten minutes later Owen and Terry arrive too. None are happy; all are very frustrated with the 6.5 hr. wait for the ferry crossing.

Shari and I hear lots of complaints about the road conditions. The irony is that we judged the highway as the best of the eight times we have driven it. The difference of opinion may be experience and/or the type of vehicle driven.

## **Day 24. August 4 – Taylor Highway to Tok, Alaska**

(Bert) After yesterday’s travels, the group is looking forward to better roads. Actually, Taylor Highway is in pretty good shape except for a road construction zone. Two miles out of Chicken Shari and I stop to watch a moose on the highway. Meanwhile, several in our caravan get ahead and I lose track of them as we continue at a leisurely pace. An hour and half later I see six RVs parked about a mile ahead of us. Although we don’t travel in groups, a roadblock can bunch us together. After a 15 min. wait we are on the move behind the “Follow me” truck.





Blocked up caravan following lead truck in construction zone on Taylor Highway



Construction on Taylor Highway



Construction on Taylor Highway

Finally we are off the gravel road, back to the nicely paved Alaska Highway, and it is smooth sailing into our Tok campground. Everyone heads to one of two car wash locations, each with two spots to wash RVs free of charge if you purchase fuel. I'm first in line and do a quick once over on my RV—not as dirty as most years—and then head to the liquor store to buy wine for tonight's party. By the time I help park the RVs at the campground, the arriving RVs are sparkling clean. In the evening we have a popular Welcome to Alaska Wine and Cheese Party and I present a slideshow on RVing in Australia and New Zealand.



Alaska Highway shortly before reaching Tok



## Day 25. August 5 – Tok to Fairbanks, Alaska

(Bert) With an early start, Shari and I see none of our caravan on the road to Fairbanks. About 28 mi. northwest of Tok, I get a short but good look at a Northern Goshawk flying over the road. It's a bird I've only seen ten times before, of which five sightings have been in Alaska.

We stop at the Visitor's Center at Delta Junction to buy certificates and pins for the caravan, marking the accomplishment of completing the Alaska Highway, which finally terminates in Fairbanks at 1483 mi. We arrive in Fairbanks early and as others arrive they are back to washing their RVs again, this time to remove the splashed dirt from driving the damp paved highway after last night's rain. I don't bother, as I know it will only get dirty again. Shari's travel meeting is filled with comments on the many activities we have instore for the next two days.



Johnson River, braided by runoff from the mountains and glaciers

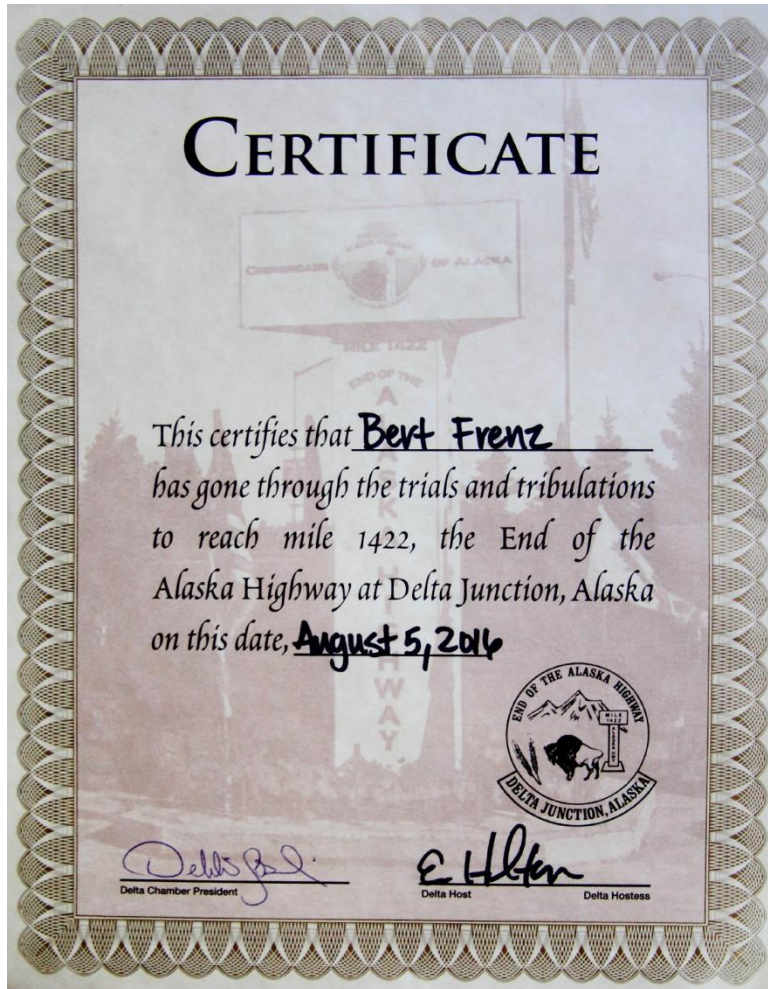


Giant Alaska mosquitos at Delta Junction



Marker commemorating Mile 1422 on the Alaska Highway at Delta Junction





Santa Claus at North Pole, Alaska

## Day 26. August 6 – Fairbanks, Alaska

(Bert) Designed to resemble a breaching whale, an architecturally beautiful building replaces the one we saw in 1996 when we visited the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. And just last year scientists at the university named a new dinosaur *Ugrunaaluk kuukpikensis*, an Arctic Hadrosaur or duck-billed dinosaur. What is most unusual is that this dinosaur species lived in northern Alaska, above the Arctic Circle at Colville River. In addition to the skeletons before us, we view a film showing how students worked with their professor in finding 6000 bones of this plant-eating dinosaur in a very remote area on the North Slope. The 25-foot-long dinosaur is the most completely known this far north.



Museum of the North, University of Alaska Fairbanks





A newly discovered juvenile Arctic Hadrosaur, a duck-billed dinosaur

Another exhibit that fascinates me is of the Steppe Bison they have named Blue Babe. I remember this specimen from my visit 20 years ago because it is so unique, a completely intact bison—underfur, skin, fat and all—of an animal that became extinct after the last Ice Age. Using Carbon-14 dating scientists determined this animal died 36,000 years ago and from an examination of tooth marks they believe the bison was killed by an American lion. The bison lies as it died, with all four legs bent below its body in the same manner as attacked bison today.



Intact body of extinct steppe bison



Be careful, Phyllis, there's a grizzly behind you!





American Gothic, 1985, a gelatin silver print by Charles Mason in the art exhibits at the Museum of the North

After a delicious lunch at Chena's Alaskan Grill we ride the sternwheeler Discovery III on the Chena River, watching a float plane take off and land beside us, getting a demonstration of racing sled dogs, and passing beautiful riverside homes. We stop at a recreated Native American village and learn from attractive high school and college girls about their native culture.



Discovery III on Chena River



Float plane taxiing to a landing





Dog sled racing



Homes along the Chena River, Fairbanks





Native American girl modeling a handmade fur coat, the collar lined with wolverine



Fileted salmon drying in the sun

## **Day 27. August 7 – Fairbanks, Alaska**

(Bert) A day so packed full of activities, I'll skip the Alaska pipeline tour, the train ride through the history of gold mining, and the explanation of how Goldstream Dredge No. 8 operated. Clearly the highlight of the morning is panning for gold. Each of us is given a pouch filled with



pebbles and gravel that presumably includes some bits of gold, the type of material usually passed through the more mechanical methods used to find gold. We each get a metal pan and are directed to sit next to a trough of water. Drawing on what we learned during the demonstration, we tilt our pan of gravel into the water, adding just enough for us to swirl the pan and distribute the contents by weight. Gold being the heaviest settles to the bottom. After repeated swirling, draining, filling, and swirling again, we remove the lighter material and hand pick out the bigger pebbles. After about 10 min. we wash out the unwanted material and reveal the glittering gold. After pinching out the bits of gold and placing them in a small container we take it to be weighed. I am surprised to learn mine is worth \$26, though Shari got the most of anyone in our group, at a value of \$36. That's based on gold today priced at \$1350 per ounce. Back in the days of Dredge No. 8 when the U.S. government was the only buyer and the price was fixed at \$35 per ounce, the dredge operation brought in \$1 million per day. Amazingly, 58,000 ounces were shipped from here to the Lower 48 by U.S. mail.



Goldstream Dredge No. 8



Panning for gold



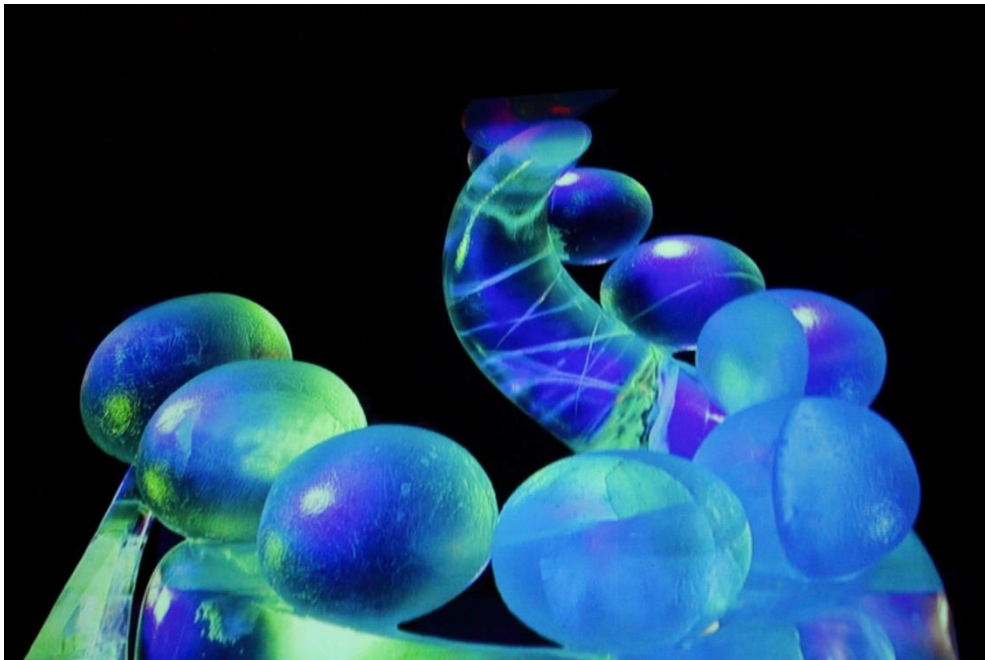
Removing the gold from the pan





“Flash in the Pan”

In the afternoon we visit Fairbank’s Ice Museum. Each March Fairbanks has an ice carving festival with competitors from anywhere, although the top prize often goes to Chinese artists. We see a movie depicting winning designs, all built out-of-doors and all bigger than room-sized. Then we don jackets and enter a large refrigerated room set at 20° F. This story is best told in photos.









Through the window of a house built of ice



Fast action on the ice slide

For dinner we are at the Alaska Salmon Bake followed by the stage show at the historic Palace Theatre. It's all you can eat and includes much more than salmon: prime rib, cod, and a wide assortment of sides and desserts. The show, Golden Heart Review, is a hilarious musical comedy about the early history of Fairbanks. The funniest skit is a woman trying to tell a man the names of the sled dogs. It's a routine quite similar to the comedy routine "Who's on First?" made famous by Abbott and Costello. We are amazed that these two characters can memorize the complicated rapid-fire conversation, delivered without a flaw.



Confusing names of the sled dogs

## Day 28. August 8 – Fairbanks, Alaska

(Bert) After such a filled day yesterday, it's good to have a free day. I use the adjective "free" rather loosely. Many fly off to Barrow and the Arctic Ocean. Others visit more Fairbanks sites. Shari and I stay in the RV to catch up with caravan work. In the afternoon I hear a bird singing outside so go to investigate. I tried to find the bird two previous days, but could not. I'm sure it is in the finch family and probably a crossbill which I hear rarely. I find it 45 ft. above me at the top of a spruce tree, singing its heart out. Binoculars, song recording, and my long lens tell me it is a White-winged Crossbill.





White-winged Crossbill





Close-up of the curved and crossed mandibles for picking seeds from spruce cones

## **Day 29. August 9 – Fairbanks, Alaska**

(Bert) Somewhere in conversations I mentioned this summer is our 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary and I repeated the fact when we all autographed the sign we posted at the Watson Lake Sign Forest. Thereafter, several people have been trying to find the exact date. Perhaps from another slip on my part I mentioned it was in August, but Shari was quite adamant that the exact day not be released because she wanted no fuss made of it. When Ron could not get an exact date he and Carol decided any date in August will do. So he planned a celebration. I knew something was up when Ron confessed he was having trouble booking a restaurant room and he wanted to make sure nothing conflicted with this Tuesday. Shari remained in the dark about the plans.

As usual, at 5 PM we often gather for a social and Ron came over to invite us to a group already meeting a few RVs from us. When Shari and I arrive, a 3-piece musical group is playing and singing, a huge anniversary cake rests on a table, and a great variety of food is set on other tables. Two center-of-attention chairs are set aside for us and everyone is applauding. Shari is overwhelmed, brings her hands to her face, and starts crying—the happy kind of crying. And, they hand us an anniversary card signed by everyone.

I recognize the singer in the group who plays banjo, guitar, and violin. It's Earl Hughes, Alaska's Ambassador of Country Music, who was the performer on the train we took on yesterday's gold mining tour. Two others accompany him although they leave early because they have other prior music commitments, so Earl is joined by his daughter Dawn who also sings and plays guitar and violin. Although Earl is now a Fairbanks resident, he spent 12 years in Hawaii playing with Don Ho, famous for his song "Tiny Bubbles." His bio includes appearing



with, or opened shows for artists like Charlie Daniels, Alabama, Lee Greenwood, Charley Pride, Ricky Skaggs, and Bobby Vinton.

P.S. The actual anniversary date is August 27.



Fairbanks sky at 2:30 AM



Giant soap bubble floating in front of spruce trees at the Tanana Valley State Fair



Bert & Shari's 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary celebration (photo by Ted)



Earl Hughes







### **Day 30. August 10 – Fairbanks to Healy, Alaska**

(Bert) Ahead of us, on the road south about 30 mi. from Fairbanks, I see a tall white peak. Shari and I have never seen Denali from this direction and I wonder if it is possible. After ten more miles the image becomes clearer and now I'm confident it is Denali. At the pull out where I take photos, we are over 80 mi. from the entrance to Denali National Park and, using Google Earth, I calculate the distance to Denali (formerly Mt. McKinley) is 101 mi.



Denali is 101 mi. south from this viewpoint





Denali (formerly Mt. McKinley)

We join a large group of people waiting at the doors to a dining hall south of the Denali National Park. Out comes a bearded man dressed in an apron and looking like kitchen help. He welcomes us and then in an animated recital he delivers *The Cremation of Sam McGee* by Robert W. Service. He is joined by others who double as wait staff, actors, and singers for the Alaska Cabin Nite Dinner Theatre.



Alaska Cabin Nite Dinner Theatre

Dinner is served with a lot of hoopla of waving our red cloth napkins above our heads and shooting for more food. The food is plentiful helpings of ribs, salmon, salad, corn, beans, and potatoes. As we finish dessert, the prettiest lady, heavy on makeup and rosy red lips suggests for a dollar she will kiss any man. Soon \$1 bills are waved above the heads of men by their friends. While she sings “I want to be loved” she applies an extra portion of lipstick, the kind that rubs off with a kiss, and then plants a big one on the forehead or cheek, accompanied by roars of laughter from the audience and especially the friends who put up the money. Steve doesn’t know what is coming as lipstick lady stands behind him. Of course, Bill is in action again, this time with a double kiss when two \$1 bills are waved.



Watch out Steve!



He looks like he is enjoying it!





Lipstick on his forehead

From the audience Ron is picked as a character in *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. As the actors recite lines from Robert Service's poem, Ron plays the role of the mysterious, weather-worn stranger and another guest standing across the long room plays the rough-neck prospector Dan McGrew. As the poem unfolds Ron grimaces a plethora of appropriate faces and Dan echoes a grimacing laugh every time his name is mentioned and the audience boos. If you know the ending, you know Ron lies dead on the stage only to be swooned over by "the Lady that's known as Lou" who then grabs his poke of gold.



Ron, the stranger, is handed his stage pistol



The Lady that's known as Lou



Wild man!





The stranger buys drinks for the crowd



The stranger aims his pistol at Dangerous Dan McGrew



The Lady that's known as Lou is about to steal the strangers poke

### **Day 31. August 11 – Denali National Park, Alaska**

(Bert) What strikes you first is the enormity of it all. Few places on earth give you an incredibly long view terminated by multi-colored, gigantic, iced mountains and separated by glacially carved valleys, braided streams, kettle lakes, and wild animals.

I wish my camera could do justice to the amazing scenery we see, but the lens is not wide enough to capture its breath, the focus does not zoom enough to enlarge the animals, and the camera misses the kaleidoscope of colors. Nor does the camera show us just how close we are to falling off a cliff from its narrow gravel road clinging to the edge.

The road through Denali penetrates just a portion of a national park larger than many countries. It's a well graded, though narrow, gravel road snaking the edge of mountains, traveled by modified school buses. To limit human exposure to the wild animals, we remain inside except for designated rest areas. Our photos are through the narrow bus windows and we are regularly admonished to maintain silence, although that request is hard to honor given our excitement of repeatedly sightings of grizzlies, caribou, Dall sheep, and moose.

They say the chance of seeing Denali (alias Mt. McKinley) is slim, perhaps 1 in 4. We roll snake eyes and our good luck gives us multiple times to see Denali shining in the sun. Looking at my camera times as we roll along the road, I photograph Denali at 7:11, 7:15, 7:37, 7:46, 9:06, 9:46, 10:59, and 11:27, each offering a different face of the snow-covered 20,301-ft. Denali.

Except for our tour in 1998, this is only the second time we have taken the bus all the way to its terminus at Kantishna, the old mining town, now populated by a few resort lodges. We eat a delicious lunch and have an hour of free time which I spend exploring the botany trail. Then it is



backtracking on the same gravel road, still finding more animals and reveling in the multicolored scenery. Bob has been keeping a tally of the animals we have seen. He reports 31 caribou, 7 moose, 53 Dall sheep, 5 grizzly bears, and 8 ptarmigans. To his list I would add 2 red squirrels, several Arctic ground squirrels, 1 Golden Eagle, several Common Ravens, 1 Black-billed Magpie, 1 Northern Shoveler, 1 Greater Scaup, 1 White-crowned Sparrow, 1 Northern Goshawk, and 1 Northern Harrier.

My story is best told in photographs, but even they merely hint on the grandeur. This is one trip you must experience firsthand to appreciate.



First view of Denali at 7:11 AM



Savage River



Woodland Caribou



Cliff edge gravel road





Polychrome mountains



Denali at 9:47 AM



Woodland Caribou



Grizzly Bear





Swinging bridge at Kantishna



Vibrant green tundra clings to raw red mountains





Dall sheep in secluded mountain basin



Strange caribou





Colors!



Braided stream



Compare size of the grater on the road to the immensity of the mountains



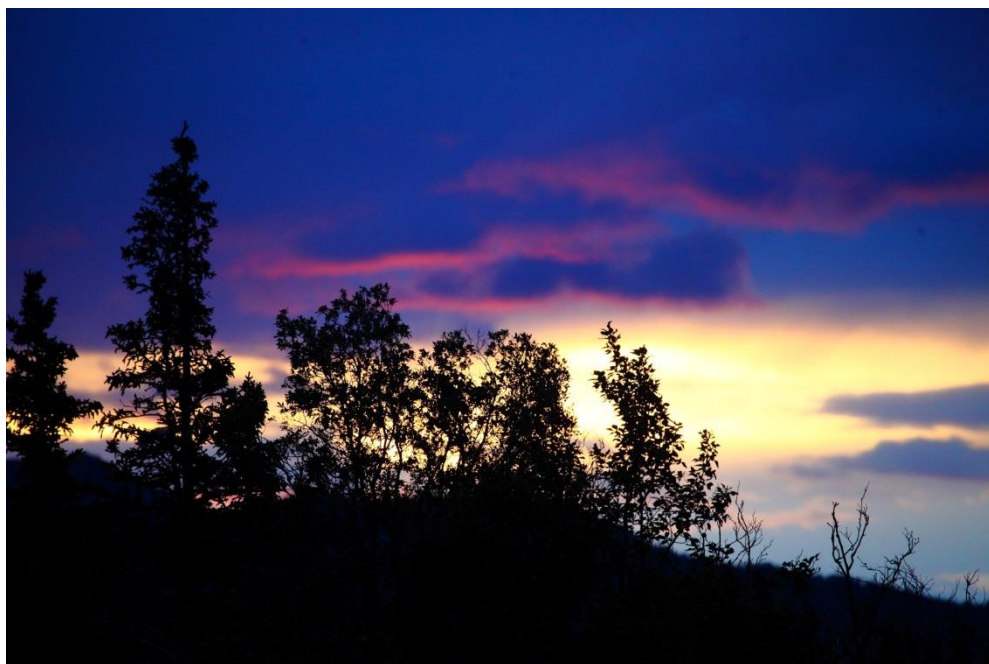
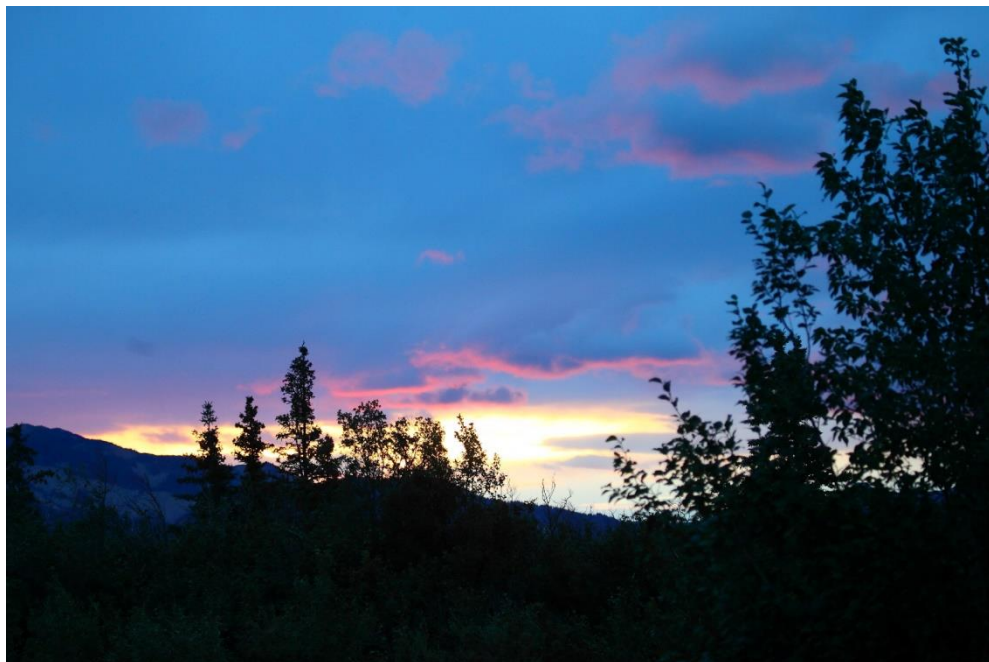
Well-hidden bull moose



## **Day 32. August 12 – Denali National Park, Alaska**

(Bert) Yesterday was a long 6 AM to 7:30 PM excitement-filled day, so a leisurely day sounds good to me. Not so for others, especially those on their first visit to Denali National Park. Some went river rafting and reported back that they had a great time navigating Class III and IV rapids. Others explored graveled Denali Highway and found it muddy, the proof of which is splattered on their cars. Still others visited the publically-accessible forefront of the national park and reported getting good close views of moose and caribou. As for me, I photographed the 5:45 AM sunrise, wrote journals, edited photos, confirmed reservations, and took a nap.







### Day 33. August 13 – Denali National Park, Alaska

(Bert) Everyone's on their own again today, mostly exploring more of Denali National Park. Five others join Shari and me for ATV riding in the hills at the edge of the national park. We wear warm clothes and rain jackets, but as it turns out the weather is mild and rainless. Not far from our campground is manmade Otto Lake, shallow enough that a 6-ft man would wade across without getting his nose wet. That's where we start, heading uphill to two viewpoints that give us a grand view of the lake and surrounding mountains. Then we head to a glacier riverbed abutted by a strange gravel hillside that was sliced away by the moving glacier.



Ted is ready to go!



Otto Lake



These two are pros on ATV





Scenic ATV route



Glaciated river and gravel hillside seen from viewpoint miles away





Shari at the wheel



Strange gravel hillside carved by glacier and subsequent rains



## Day 34. August 14 – Anchorage, Alaska

(Bert) We have lots of caravan errands to attend to before the RVs start arriving in Anchorage, so Shari and I get an early start leaving Denali National Park. We again see heavily shrouded Denali from one viewpoint though subsequently it disappears in cloudy skies. I try once more to see the mountain from Kashwitna Lake where I've often seen it before, but the clouds remain.

Parking at the Anchorage campground is challenging for the large rigs. Only Catherine and Shari have no trouble parking with the small rigs. The problem with 40- and 45-ft. RVs is turning into a site at 90° from the access road, especially when the site is narrow and flanked with boulders, trees, and utility posts. The campground boasts that these are pull-through sites, but they cannot be accessed with a tow car attached and obstacles make it easier to back into than pull through. After several tries and some switching to different sites, we are all sandwiched in place.



Kashwitna Lake

## Day 35. August 15 – Anchorage, Alaska

(Bert) I was wrong; the Alaska Native Heritage Center is not just another museum, this one dedicated to Alaska natives. In fact, it is more varied and more interactive. Young high-school and college-age natives from far-flung Alaska are leaders in Alaska games, dance, and explaining traditional customs. Furthermore, the games are not as I anticipated. Patterned after the Olympics, the games are athletic challenges that originate from various parts of north and western Alaska. In some cases, the games train skills used in traditional daily work, such as jumping from ice floe to ice floe and maintaining balance. Another game called Stick Twist requires amazing agility as demonstrated by a young lady. I videotaped the event and you can

see the competitive 3.8 sec video at <http://www.bafrenz.com/birds/Alaska16/StickTwist.mp4>. The record time is close to 3 sec.

An unusual game called the Alaskan High Kick is to start on the floor in a crouched position, maintain balance on a hand or fist plus one foot, spring high to hit a suspended ball with the other foot, and land again on the first foot and hand only. It looks impossibly difficult even for a teenager, yet the young lady reached a ball nearly her height and the young man exceeded reaching one over his height. The native game record for this event is 6 ft. 11 in. for a woman of height 5 ft. 5 in. and 8 ft. for a man of 5 ft. 11 in. The men's record is amazing, but as a partial explanation his arms are so long he can touch his knees without bending.



A game of pain endurance as the player is suspended by only his wrist as he is carried around a gym floor trying to beat the record time





A game of three jumps followed by pushing a marker beyond the reach of his opponent

After games, I tour the various housing units used by native groups and then return for native dances. The only similarity I see between these dances and those throughout North America is the monotonous chanted singing. Handheld circular drums provide the only percussion. The frames are made of driftwood as no trees grow in the regions of Alaska represented by the dances. Across the hoops are stretched walrus skin, although some of the drums use modern materials: one ordered from Amazon with goat skin and another made with airplane fabric. Dancing by women is done in place, without moving their feet. The reason is that the dances were held in winter, indoors where space was so limited that the dancers could not move around. Instead, the women gracefully move their hands a bit like the Hawaiian luau but without the exaggerated hip movement. When men join the dance the graceful movements change to loud foot stomping in tune with loud whacks on the rims of the drums. The songs have special meanings and are personal, often telling stories in the movements.



Traditional Tlingit lodge



Native dancing accompanied by drums and chanting



After lunch Cathy and I go to the Alaska Zoo which I had not visited previously. Best known for its Alaskan native animals, it also has a few oddities such as a Siberian Tiger and a Snow Leopard. Best for me is the two grizzlies doing a bear hug and play-fighting with their jaws.



Wolverine

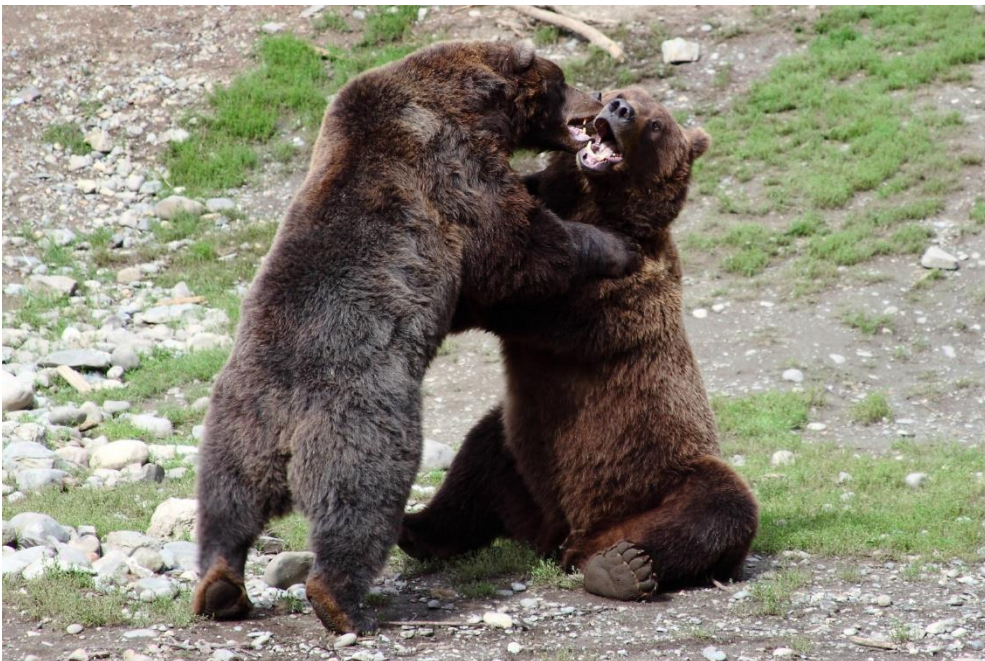


Finally, a close-up of a Dall Sheep





Bear hug



Play fighting grizzlies



## **Day 36. August 16 – Anchorage, Alaska**

(Bert) For us, it was a quiet day at camp. For others, many flew to Kodiak Island to view bears. Others explored Anchorage and Potter Marsh and came back with good reports and photos.

## **Day 37. August 17 – Homer, Alaska**

(Bert) We drive under overcast skies followed by light rain, arriving in Homer in a bit over 5 hr. I don rain pants, rain coat, and high rubber boots as I help park RVs from 12:30 to 3 PM. Fog and low clouds shroud the mountains across the bay. The sky reminds me of my favorite Newfoundland song, “Grey Foggy Day” by Eddie Coffey. The clouds dissipate and by our 5 PM travel meeting, the skies are sunny. I hope it stays that way for our halibut fishing trip tomorrow.



Kenai Peninsula, 8:24 AM



Near Copper Landing, 8:34 AM



Kachemak Bay, Homer, 1:09 PM



## Day 38. August 18 – Homer, Alaska

(Bert) At 6:30 AM we are standing in front of the boat charter headquarters to find out which slip harbors our boat. Nineteen fishermen, dressed in clothes to handle rain or cold, we board the fishing boat and see the rods and reels lined up like a gun rack, with a large bucket of frozen bait fish at the side. Most of the group enter the cabin and sit on benches around tables. I stand at the stern so that I have a wide view of Kachemak Bay to watch for sea life. The rising sun pokes ragged holes in dark navy blue clouds, casting glimmering trails on the undulant sea. Flocks of murre, heading to feeding grounds, string in lines a few feet about the water's surface. Oddly, I spot one Horned Puffin in the mix. A few scattered Sea Otters lounge casually, floating on their backs like rubber rafts dipping up and down in the waves. The farther we are away from shore the more I see Northern Fulmars and Sooty Shearwaters. The bulbous fulmars flap their short wings, alternating with short glides. With longer wings the shearwaters limit wingbeats and extend their glides, skimming just inches above the waves.



Rods and reels with heavy lead weights



7:14 Kachemak Bay



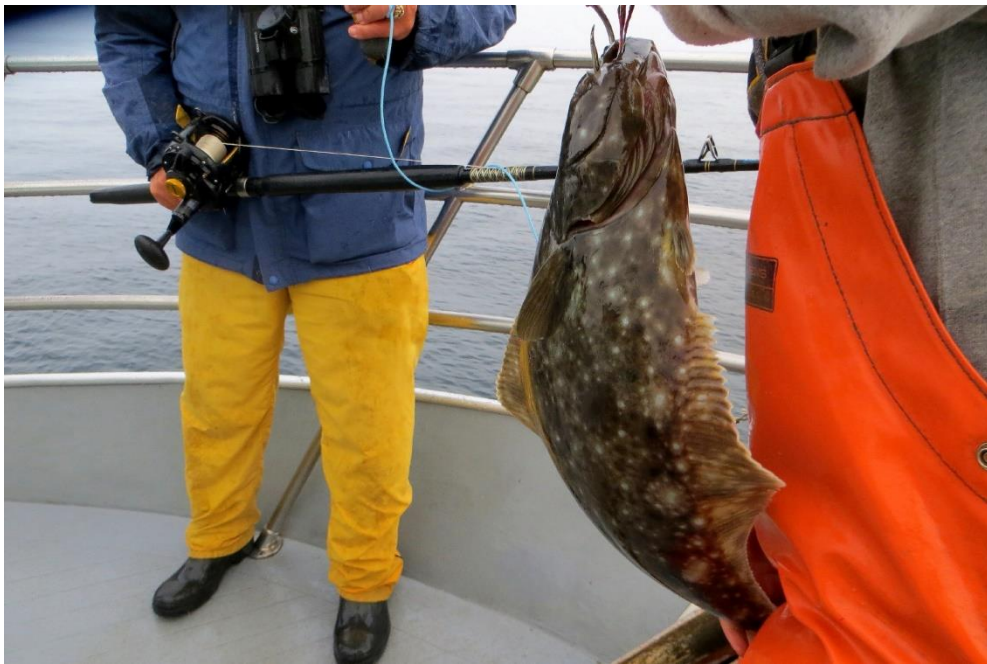
Sea Otter

En route one of the deckhands has been cutting each herring into three chunks and then attaching a piece to each of the wicked hooks. After two hours we reach the halibut marine habitat. The flat bottom-feeding fish lie 180 ft. below us. More dangerous than the vicious hooks, the large heavy weights that will sink our lines to the bottom are what our fishing guide tells us to hold tight. When dropped overboard, the lead weight feels like “fish on” and zings off the nylon line as it plummets to the bottom. Most times it takes only seconds to feel the tug of halibut nipping at the bait. I soon have my first catch, a keeper. Others are pulling in fish too.





Cut bait: slicing herring in three



My first catch



Lou lands a halibut. Should he keep it or try for one larger?

The sea is rough enough that we need a firm wedged foothold or a tight brace against the side to maintain balance. The boat keeps drifting and at first we can only throw our lines over one side of the boat to keep our lines from being overrun by the vessel. Light rain and overcast skies prevail, but we are prepared for that and it is little bother. Later, the captain anchors the boat and we maintain a rotation, casting our line from the bow and slowly moving to the stern until we either pull in a fish or reel up a hook that has lost its bait. Then it's back to the bow for another chance. Unfortunately, after my first easy catch, the next ten times I come up with a bare hook. Finally, I switch poles with one of the fishing guides and immediately catch another fish, though too small to keep.

Others are more successful. Petite Carol keeps pulling them in. I am amazed at her strength since it is hard to reel up the lead weight, much less a 15 or 20 lb. halibut which maintains a horizontal barn door attitude. The pole twists with every turn and it only takes three or four cranks to induce a rest break. Some think they will have sore arms tomorrow. Mike and Lou seem to be gluttons for punishment as they bring in fish after fish, only to toss back all but the two keepers.





Carol pulls in fish after fish

Most, including Shari, now have their limit of two halibut. After my multiple bare-bait tries I still need my second. I have another bite on my new pole and so does the deckhand next to me. We are reeling up the fish at the same time and we decide that I'll keep whichever is larger. Simultaneously, they break the surface and are pulled into the boat. He says his is larger, so we keep that one, although they look pretty close to the same size to me. That's the last fish of the day.

The boat heads back to Homer, most of the passengers move inside, but I stay outside for photos. The deckhand dumps the tub of halibut on the stern and hoses them down. Some flap with life still in them. Each catch has been tagged with a colored band designating the fisherman who caught it. In sets of two for singles or four for couples, they strip each halibut into four excellent fillets and pluck out the cheek. Then each set is tossed into a white plastic bag that is tied off at the top with a colored band.



Flounder catch of the day



Cutting fillets



I keep watching the sea and am distracted by a Pomarine Jaeger chasing kittiwakes, trying to steal food. I watch flocks of a dozen or two Red-necked Phalaropes flutter on the heaving surface. Glaucous-winged Gulls follow in the boat's wake, waiting for the deckhands to toss overboard halibut carcasses and then diving to the surface to snatch up the free meal before it sinks.



Black-legged Kittiwake being chased by Pomarine Jaeger



Glaucous-winged Gull looking for discarded halibut carcasses

By the time the two deckhands finish cleaning 38 halibut, we are almost at Homer and by now the day is glorious sunshine. Wearily, Shari and I return to the campground. I use our bathroom scale to weigh the cleaned fillets. Between the two of us we have 19 lbs. which at current local prices is worth about \$400 and much more in the Lower 48. Shari cuts the fillets into 1 lb. packages and puts them in our freezer. I take a nap.



Homer Spit

### **Day 39. August 19 – Homer, Alaska**

(Bert) Another day where everyone is off in a different direction, for me the highlight comes at our steak dinner prepared by caravan staff. Ken and Carol, caravan wagonmasters currently building a house here in Homer, are our guests. Bright clear skies, a far reaching view from our campground of Kachemak Bay and surrounding glacier mountains, and a delicious meal mark this as a beautiful August day in Alaska.





View from our campground of Kachemak Bay



Glaciated mountains



Ribeye steaks for all



How do you want yours cooked?

## **Day 40. August 20 – Homer to Seward, Alaska**

(Bert) A Moose forages beside the road shortly after we leave Homer, then another a half hour later, though the best is when we see three together. Five in one morning is a record!



After stopping for groceries and fuel at Fred Meyer, Shari drives to our next stop at Tern Lake. The nesting Arctic Terns are not around and probably have begun their migration to the Antarctic. Instead, I watch two Whistling Swans and a pair of Common Loons.

By the time we reach Seward the sky is almost cloudless and our campground is in a valley, bounded by a glacier fed stream, and overlooked by mountains.



Moose



Tern Lake



Tern Lake



Seward campground





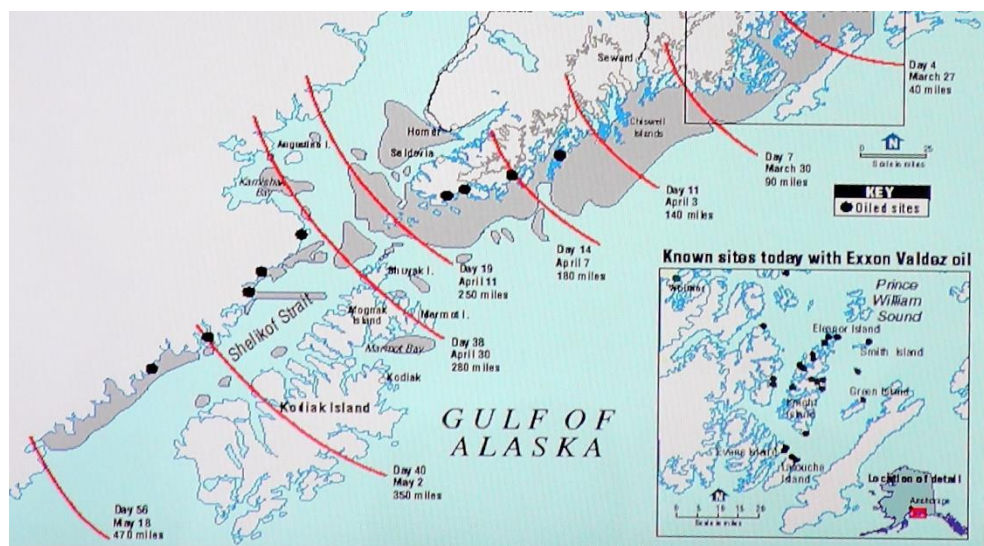
Seward campground



Stream next to Seward campground

## Day 41. August 21 – Seward, Alaska

(Bert) Until the 2014 Deepwater Horizon disaster, the worst oil spill in U.S. history was the 1989 Valdez spill at Prince William Sound. It still holds the record for oil spillage when 10.8 million gallons poured out March 24. Even today, pockets of oil can be found in the beaches of southeast Alaska. That's the bad news. The good news is that the Exxon settlement paid for the Alaska Sealife Center where we visit today. It's both a showcase of sea life with an educational agenda and a research center. The Exxon Valdez disaster highlighted a research problem: although some 250,000 to 500,000 seabirds died and many more were affected, no one knew how many survived, i.e., was that kill number significant or not? The same was the question for the deaths of 250 Bald Eagles, 1000 Sea Otters, 300 Harbor Seals, 22 Orcas, and billions of salmon and herring eggs. Also unknown was the long term effect of spilled oil on the environment.



Two highlights today stand out: the outdoor 2-story exhibit of seabirds, both above water and below, and the private talk presented to our group on the subject of puffins. Although the majority of our group takes only passing interest in birds, they sure are interested in puffins, especially when Amy brings live birds out of carrying cages. She starts by telling us puffins are alcids, something I already knew, along with their characterization as pelagic, webbed feet, stout bodies, short wing span, etc. Something I didn't know was that they had nails on their toes for climbing and that puffin chicks are called pufflings. Even my spell checker doesn't know about pufflings. Amy also tells us that they are only able to tell the sex of a puffin by doing a blood test or observing its mating behavior.





Horned Puffin, free flying and diving in large 2-story housing at Alaska Sealife Center



Tufted Puffin

Amy parades around a Horned Puffin named for the two black feather spikes protruding from the eye, a Tufted Puffin named for the obvious feather tufts on its head, and then she brings out a Rhinoceros Auklet which she calls a puffin by another name. I had not thought of it that way since the three named puffins (including the Atlantic Puffin) are in the same genus and the Rhinoceros Auklet is in a different and unique genus. I try for close-up photos of all three birds, but especially the Rhinoceros Auklet since the closest I've come to it in the wild is about a hundred yards. I like my photo of its rhino horn.



Amy holds a Horned Puffin that is showing us its short wings and stout body

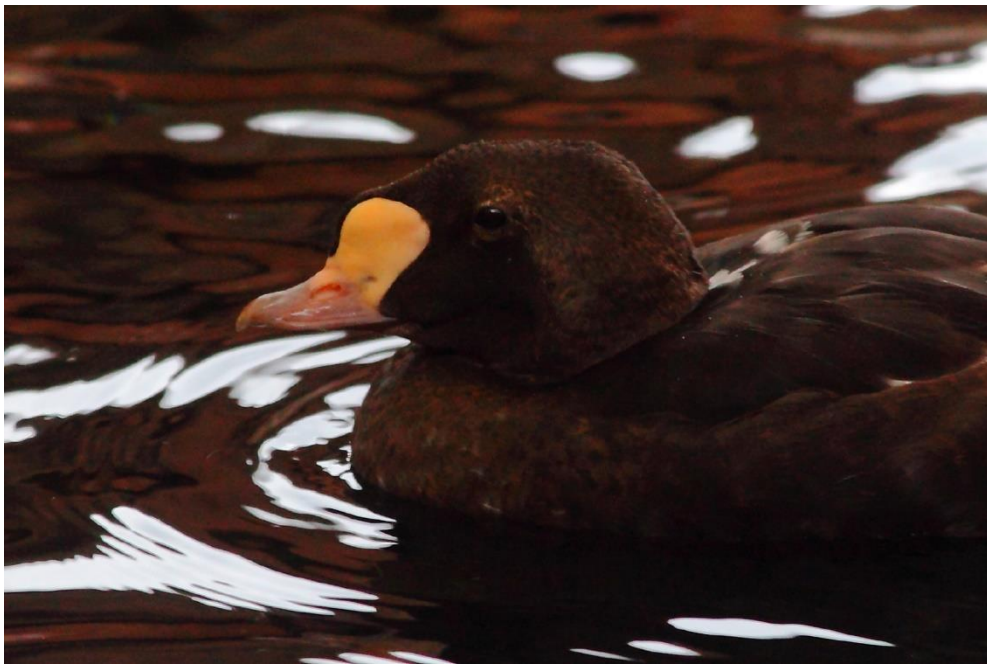


Everyone wants a cell camera photo of a puffin





Rhinoceros Auklet



A male King Eider can be hard to recognize in eclipsed plumage



Incredible underwater views of swimming Steller's Sea Lion



Spotted Seals don't seem to mind swimming upside down





This group has fun everywhere!

## **Day 42. August 22 – Seward & Resurrection Bay, Alaska**

(Bert) As we gather on the covered porch, protected from the drizzle, Shari holds up a sunshine sign. We may not see the real sun today, but you could say we are experiencing the real Alaska along its southeastern coastal rainforest. Fortunately, we have reserved seats at the dining tables on the enclosed and heated second floor of the cruise boat. Light intermittent rain continues all day but doesn't prevent us, in raingear, from going outside on the deck to watch passing scenes. Two adult Bald Eagles in bedraggled feathers rest on a channel marker. However, the pelagic birds don't seem to mind as they are usually wet anyway.



Shari shows the sun



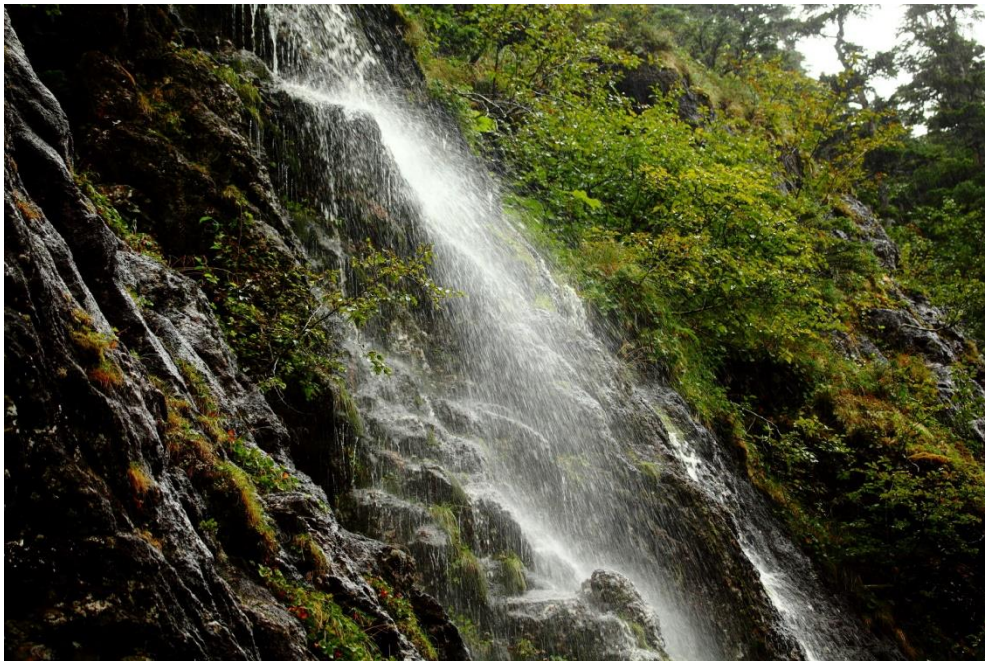
Bald Eagles in the rain



After the boat clears the harbor and passes the last of Seward, we enjoy our dinner of salmon, prime rib, and sides. The onboard national park naturalist points out three cirques—circular glaciers trapped in a bowl—though fog limits the horizon and low clouds shroud the tops of the glaciers we pass. My camera records shades of gray and only photo-editing brings out the contrast and colors. The captain gently nudges the boat to the very edge of a steep rock embankment, so close we can feel the waterfall pushed towards us by light winds.



A secluded bay with a remote off-the-grid cottage



Almost under the waterfall



Lush coastal rainforest

Although we have nearly a complete wall of windows, beads of rainwater distort and obscure the scenery. I try using a plastic sign to scrape off the water until Shari gets a squeegee from the boat crew. Now I go around all the windows of the second deck and soon become the hero of the day. In time the windows again accumulate raindrops, so I make the circuit three times in the afternoon.





Bert, the window cleaner

For photography I still step outside and use my completely enclosed camera's rain jacket to protect the body and long lens. The naturalist announces a group of Stellar's Sea Lions lounging on an island rock. I spot puffins and the naturalist calls it a circus of puffins. I photograph both Horned and Tufted Puffins, as well as Pigeon Guillemot, Pelagic Cormorant, and a bird too small to make out with my binoculars. Later when I examine my photos on the computer I see it is a Parakeet Auklet, undoubtedly the rarest find here as the small nesting colony is some 35 miles away and this one probably is a post-breeding wanderer.



Steller's Sea Lions



Horned Puffins



Parakeet Auklet is hard to see even through a 400mm lens





Parakeet Auklet (same photo as above, but blown up on computer)

After completing a wide circuit of Resurrection Bay, the boat cruises beside a long peninsula and above its line of trees we can see the tops of floating icebergs. Given the distance we are from them, they must be huge.



Icebergs floating on other side of peninsula



The illusion that an iceberg rests in a forest

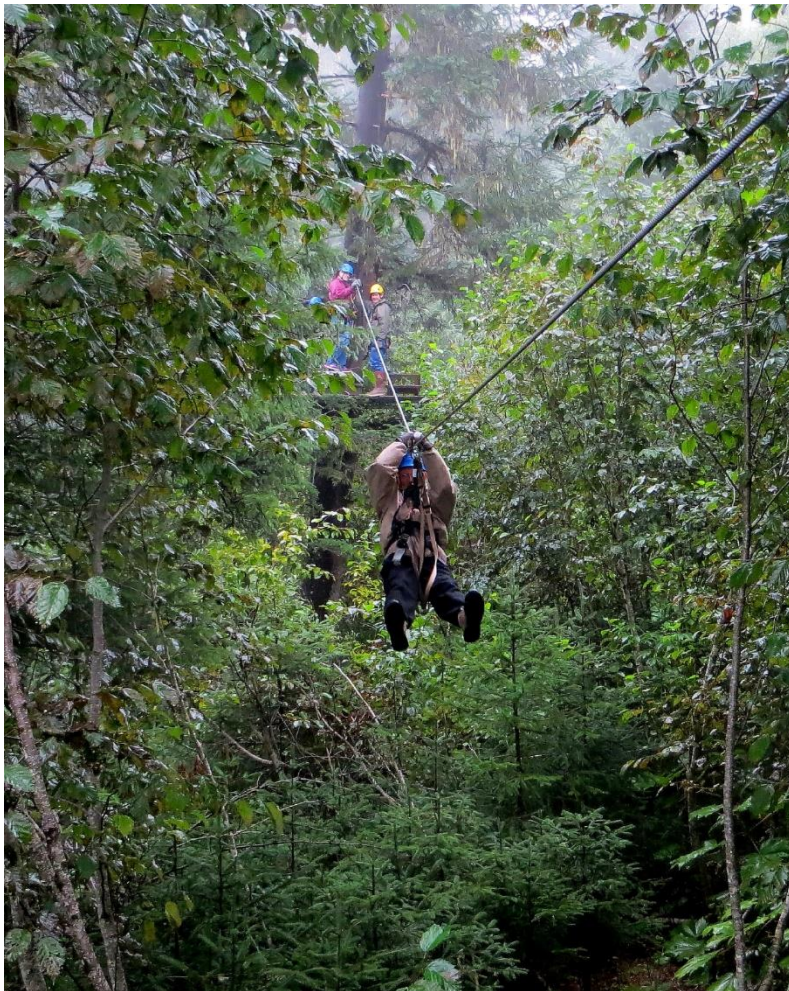
### **Day 43. August 23 – Seward, Alaska**

(Bert) Eleven of us go ziplining this morning and for almost all of us it is a first experience. It is hardly a Tarzan and Jane tree vine adventure, but it certainly puts us high up in the tall Sitka Spruce and Western Hemlocks. First is training school where we learn how to break our descent and gently land on the wooden platform. We also learn how to pull ourselves along the cable if we stop short of the platform. Although it may seem risky to be suspended so high up off the ground and perhaps even more so when standing on the narrow platforms, at all times we are clamped with two cables to a secure base. We start with short ziplines, thrilling enough for our first try. The eight ziplines become longer until one is about 1100 ft. and stretches high across a pond. All told the ziplines traverse about a mile through the tall trees. Twice we also rappel down from a tree platform and twice we cross a wobbly suspension bridge. The photos included here are a mixture of mine and Dave's as we went in two different groups.





















## Day 44. August 24 – Palmer, Alaska

(Bert) The Alaska State Fair starts tomorrow and as we pass the fairgrounds in Palmer we can see the rides and exhibits are set up in anticipation. I'm sure they will again have contests for the biggest vegetables as they did last year when we attended. On a walk around the campground I notice that vegetables are not the only things that grow large. I spread a dollar bill across a colorful mushroom to emphasize its size.



Probably poisonous *Amanita muscaria*

Autumn is upon us as we start seeing more tree branches turn yellow. I suspect we will see many more when we leave here to climb out of the Matanuska Valley. The fireweed has lost its blossoms and my photo clearly shows the age difference of its female (bottom) and male (top) flowers. The male parts are still held tightly together in stalks while the female parts have split open and are releasing the white fluffy seeds.



The edge of autumn





Common Fireweed's contrasting male and female maturity

## **Day 45. August 25 – Palmer, Alaska**

(Bert) “I wouldn't have missed the experience of the colony for a million dollars, but I wouldn't do it again for two million,” states the quote on the wall.

Anchorage, started in 1914, was just a tent city near Ship Creek and didn't become much more than an airplane hub in the 1930s. Meanwhile, the Palmer area was growing with 700 residents in the Matanuska Valley in 1917 and a big spurt when Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration introduced the Matanuska Colony Project in 1935.

Today while touring the Palmer Museum and Colony House Museum we meet a lady who came with the Colony Project when she was five years old and another lady who was born in the colony shortly thereafter. We see firsthand an original project home filled with period furnishings and hear the stories of how Palmer grew from that catalyst. Touring the home reminds most of us of our parent's or grandparents' homes. We recognize the rubberized

linoleum, the Singer sewing machine, the over-stuffed furniture, wooden rocking chairs, small metal frame beds, and assorted toys.

As elsewhere, the Great Depression impacted farmers in northern Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota who had no work, no money, and were dependent on the government for survival. The Colony Project offered them free transportation to Alaska, 40 acres of land, a house, and farm implements if they signed a 30-year \$3000 mortgage. Coincidentally, Shari reminds me that her parents bought their first house in Wisconsin a decade later for the same amount of money. Two hundred three families made the move to Palmer, Alaska. Those that stayed built three churches (Lutheran, Catholic, and United Protestant) and a school where children arrived from the far-flung farms by eleven school busses. Soon they produced an electrification cooperative and a telephone utility. Since that time, farming has mostly disappeared, but locals are still proud of the giant cabbages, carrots, and turnips they grow each year under 20+ hour days.



Women and children from Michigan and Wisconsin changing trains May 24, 1935





Matanuska Colony House, constructed in 1935 from materials transported by ship and train from the Lower 48



Bedroom in Colony House



Homesteader carries three turnips with a combined weight of over 50 lbs.



1936 United Protestant church called the Church of a Thousand Trees





Inside of the Church of a Thousand Trees

One of the ladies at the Colony House grew up on the Lentz Farm which is now the Musk Ox Farm that we visit next. The barn is the original 1935 structure although Lentz increased its size and added a concrete floor. Now it houses a small museum about Musk Oxen. We take a tour of the farm and are entertained by a very animated guide who has a comical way of describing the antics of the animals. The goal of the farm is to domesticate Musk Oxen and harvest their fur, called qiviut, which is exceedingly soft and very precious. The fur is eight times warmer by weight than sheep's wool. They hope that the idea, as a form of financial support, will catch on by the native tribes in the far north where Musk Oxen survive the cold winters. After 30 years, though, theirs is the only farm of its type.



1935 barn built for and modified by Farmer Lentz



Musk Ox skull showing its split horns





Adult Musk Ox



Musk Ox calf

#### **Day 46. August 26 – Glenn and Richardson Highways, Alaska**

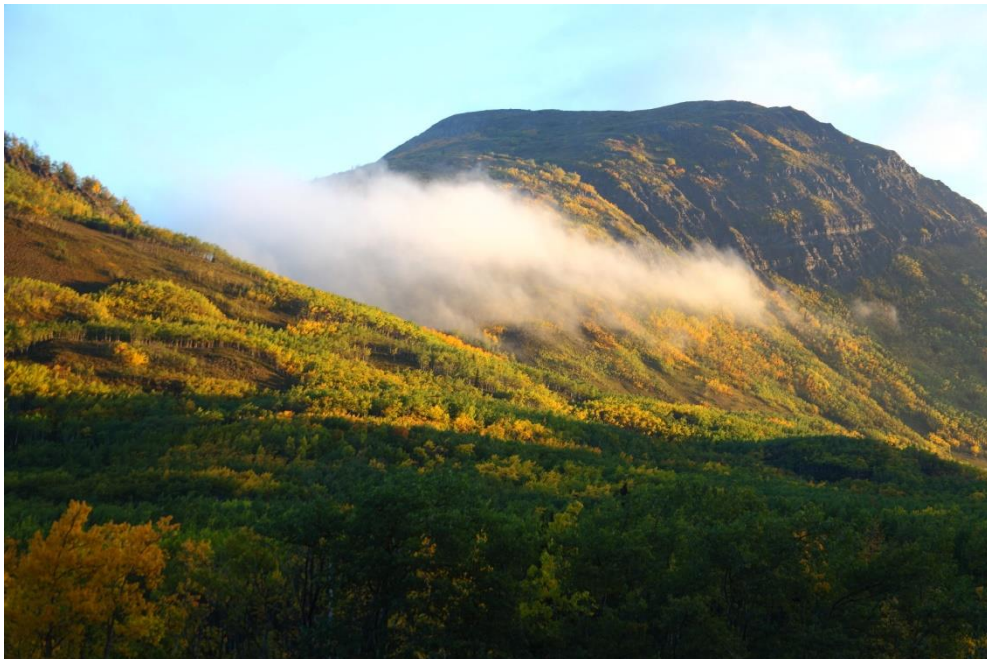
(Bert) We start before the sun rises over Matanuska Glacier and has yet to add sparkle to autumn's golden aspen. As we ascend the winding Glenn Highway the unseen sun paints pastel shades of pink and blue on dark clouds. The tops of mountains are illuminated, but shadows cloak the valley, though the glacier glows ice blue as if lit internally. As sunlight spreads its



glow, the aspens light up like Japanese lanterns. Soon the full glory of nature's colors blankets the mountainsides. A distant glacier-capped mountain looms on the horizon, dark earthen peaks are footed by creeping fog, and in the foreground trickles braided Matanuska River with islands of fall colors.



Matanuska Glacier







We crest Glenn Highway and continue blindly driving toward the sun dead ahead. Turning south on Richardson Highway, the sunrise perfectly illuminates mountains to the west, crowned with a cloudless cyan sky. Shari is driving now and I keep taking photos of the scenery as over each hill and around every curve is another scenic wonder. By the time morning concludes I've taken 120 landscape photos and even when I pare duplicates and marginal photos I keep 74. I make the hard choice of a few favorites to show here.





Richardson Highway



Tsina River





Worthington Glacier



Worthington Glacier





Blueberry Lakes



Horsetail Falls





Near Valdez



Outskirts of Valdez



From our Valdez harborside campsite

## **Day 47. August 27 – Valdez, Alaska**

(Bert) Without any hoopla, Shari and I celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> by doing one of our favorite things: going out for breakfast. I especially like my king crab omelet smothered with Hollandaise sauce. I guess, in a way, we will do what many couples do on their anniversary: take a cruise. Only ours will not be weeks in the Caribbean, but rather a one-day cruise in Prince William Sound and it will be tomorrow. Today, though, we all gather for a potluck dinner outside on picnic tables with a gorgeous view of Valdez Harbor.









## Day 48. August 28 – Valdez and Prince William Sound, Alaska

(Bert) Sea life, birds, glaciers, icebergs, waterfalls, and stunning scenery, that's the billing for today's cruise on Prince William Sound.



Sea Otters



Bald Eagle catching a salmon





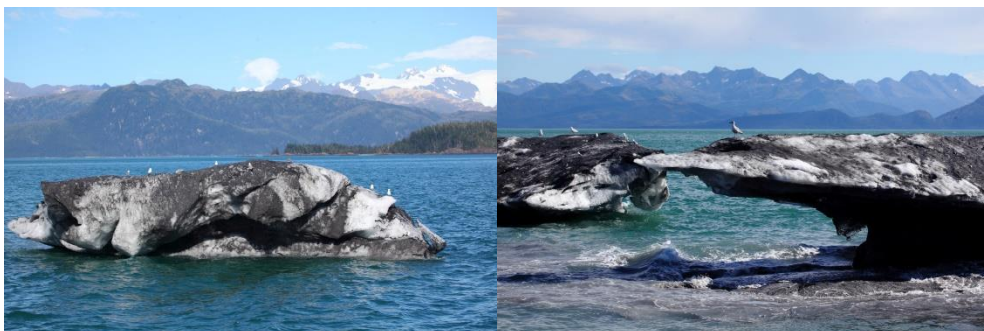
Steller's Sea Lion catching a salmon and biting it in half



Orca whales (the male has the taller dorsal fin)



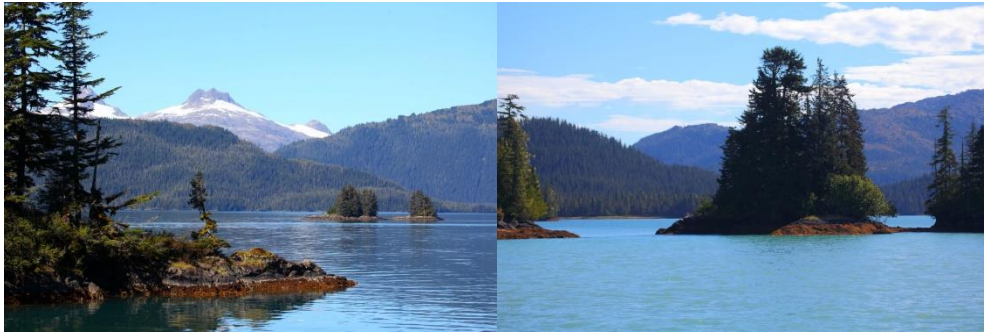
Dall's Porpoises are mostly big splashes



Dirty icebergs from Columbia Glacier



Clean, deep blue, icebergs from Colombia Glacier



Stunning scenery



A portion of Meares Glacier (a half-mile wide)



Mew Gull





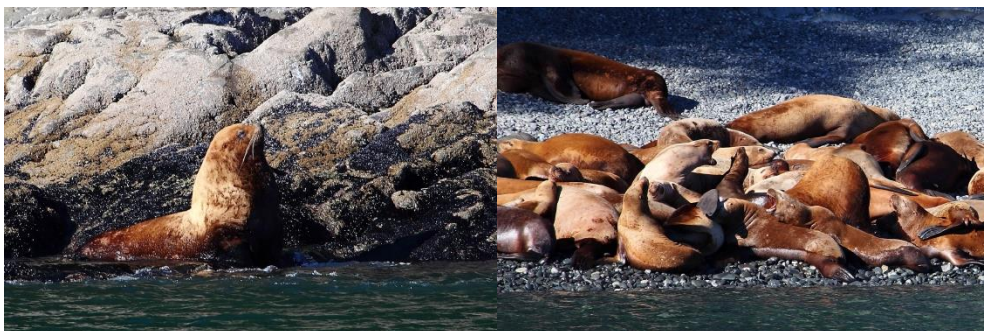
Harbor Seals floating on icebergs at Meares Glacier



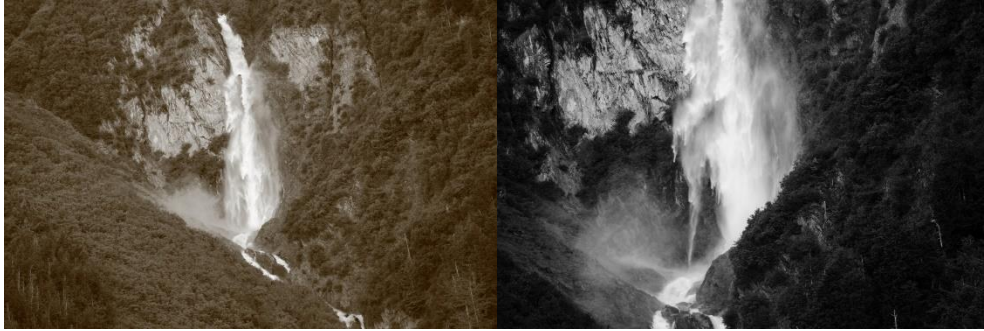
Humpback Whale and Horned Puffin



Horned Puffins in sea cave



Steller's Sea Lions



Anderson Falls in sepia and black & white, a la Ansel Adams



Red-throated Loon at Valdez oil tanks



The way home

## Day 49. August 29 – Tok Cutoff & Tok, Alaska

(Bert) Tok Cutoff lives up to its historical reputation as being the worst frost heave road in Alaska, although the damaged sections seem shorter each year. We move from a balmy seacoast to a frigid inland town where the temperature will probably hover just above freezing. After we all arrive in Tok we have an ice cream party with lots of toppings.





Along Tok Cutoff



Root beer floats and ice cream loaded with toppings

## Day 50. August 30 – Destruction Bay, Yukon Territory

(Bert) The sky is on fire as we leave Tok and head out of Alaska to the Yukon Territory. Although it is only a red sunrise, the crimson sky looks like we are heading into trees ablaze. We cross the border without incident; the most important question we answer is how many RVs are following us.



We drive through the Shakwak Valley between geologically fascinating mountain ranges. The valley with its lakes, streams and low-lying areas encompasses the Denali Fault which separates the rocky mountains of the Wrangellia terrane and its tall glaciated St. Elias Mountains from the old plate of North America, the Yukon-Tanana terrane. This is where tectonic plates collided. To the south are the jagged peaks etched by glaciers, snow covered and touching the clouds. To the north are the old, worn, rounded, and lower elevation mountains, a remnant of Beringia which survived the ice ages unglaciated. We reach Destruction Bay on Kluane Lake which broadly fills the Denali Fault.





In the afternoon some of our group attend a beading class using tiny beads to make attractive jewelry. After our travel meeting we enjoy a steak dinner followed by entertainment. A Yukon Territory music teacher playing guitar and harmonica sings songs composed while he attended second and third grade school classes, using subjects they were learning. One hilarious song is about bats and Christmas and how Santa uses the bats for nocturnal navigation. Then owner/manager Loren joins with his guitar and also tells his life story on how he ended up in the Yukon. It was a thoroughly enjoyable evening.







## Day 51. August 31 – Skagway, Alaska

(Bert) Only the far shore of Emerald Lake hints at its spectacular colors, the rest reduced to a washed out pallor by overcast skies, although the nearby autumn trees brighten my photo. Intermittent drizzle keeps me inside when we reach “the world’s smallest desert” at Carcross, so I take my photo from the driver’s seat. Although the sand hills may cause some to think of a Sahara desert scene, the humidity and the tall pine tree edging gives away the secret that this is the remnant of glacial lake deposits, sand drifts from nearby Bennett Lake.



Emerald Lake, Yukon Territory





Carcross Desert, Yukon Territory

The hillsides are ablaze in color as we cross into British Columbia. Shortly thereafter, we are again in Yukon Territory and now the landscape is more aptly called a moonscape. Almost devoid of vegetation, the raw granite bedrock is sharply deformed from thousands of years of glacial action.



British Columbia – Yukon Territory border



Moonscape of granite bedrock

Shortly after we are all parked in the campground we are off to see the seaside town of Skagway. Those of us that visit in early afternoon are mixed in a throng of thousands of vacationers that poured off the four huge cruise ships at dock. Streets are nearly impassible as people spill off the sidewalks for lack of walking space. Nonetheless, by early evening as we all gather at the entrance to the Soapy Smith show, the tourists have retreated to the ships, a couple of which have already departed for their next port of entry.





We have the theatre to ourselves since the caravan has booked a private show. Preceding the show we are entertained in gambling with playing chips complimentary with our tickets. Although I never gamble with real money, I'll play for fun. I have a winning streak at blackjack and start betting bigger bets, especially when I know we are getting close to show time. Carol does the same and keeps doubling or quadrupling her chips. I lose my stack of chips, but Carol keeps on winning until the playing stops. At the show she collects a prize for being the highest winner.



The dealer explains the rules



Carol is most successful gambler

The Days of 98 Show is based on the true Skagway story of conman Soapy Smith, leading up to his death in a shootout in the heyday of the 1898 gold rush. More comedy than tragedy, the show diverts when the showgirls select Steve from the audience. He plays his role well, especially when the girls lead him upstairs, presumably to the brothel and he returns 15 min. later dressed in pajamas.



Steve being led to an upstairs room by two brothel ladies



Steve returns in colorful pajamas



Later the girls solicit Shari and Terry from the audience to join them in the chorus line. They perform admirably as they kick nearly as high as the cast.



Terry and Shari join the chorus line



Silent Skagway at 10 PM

## **Day 52. September 1 – Skagway, Alaska**

(Bert) A free day when others visit Dyea, Skagway, and Klondike Highway, Shari and I complete errands. In late afternoon, we join eight others for drinks and dinner at Skagway Brewing Company. Strangely, later, when we are buying groceries and Dave and Faye are buying souvenirs at a different store we discover the restaurant waiter exchanged our credit cards. We all look for our receipts only to find out the waiter gave us none.

## **Day 53. September 2 – Skagway and White Pass, Alaska**

(Bert) To reach the Klondike in the 1898 gold rush, most would-be prospectors boarded a ship from Seattle to Alaska, getting off near future Skagway only to face formidable coastal mountains. Many made multiple trips up and down the old Tlingit First Nation Chilkoot Trail from Dyea, each person transporting a year's supply of goods as required by the Canadian Mounties. Others hiked nearby White Pass, but either way it was a difficult uphill passage.

The White Pass & Yukon Railway was completed in 1900, making the passage much easier and Dyea became a ghost town, plummeting from a peak population of 5000 people, 50 hotels, and 39 saloons. Even after the gold rush ended, the railroad was the mode of transportation inland until the Klondike Highway was completed in 1978. The railroad closed until recent years when it was reopened as a tourist attraction. So, today we are riding the White Pass train.

The train ride gives us a close vantage point from the mountain sides to the steep valleys below, passing glacial streams, waterfalls, views of the Klondike Highway, and an ever changing landscape. We pass beside Soapy Smith's burial place and an old wooden trestle bridge fallen into disrepair, and pass through a couple of dark tunnels. Our climb takes us from seacoast to subalpine lakes. On the way back we even see a few white mammals, although they are so distant I can't tell if they are Dall Sheep or Mountain Goats.





White Pass & Yukon train ready to leave the Skagway station



Looking back to the seacoast at Skagway



Mountain stream in White Pass



Original 1900 wooden trestle





Another stream cutting through the steep mountains



Near our turnaround point





Steam engine number 73 as Tommy leans out to take its photo



Etched in stone, the yellowed remnant of the climbing trail used by thousands of miners to reach the Klondike in 1898





View of the engine and train cars ahead of our car



Railway edges the White Pass cliffs

## Day 54. September 3 – Juneau, Alaska

(Bert) Although Shari and I have been to Juneau several times by Alaska ferry, we have never taken the fast catamaran from Skagway. It skims along the water at high speed under flawless blue skies, a rarity the captain says happens only a dozen days per summer season. Usually our view is limited to the water and perhaps the shoreline, but today we can see the stupendous mountains, many capped with glaciers. Bald Eagles are common and the adults' heads are easy to spot as white golf balls atop tall dark green spruce. We soon exit Lynn Canal and are at the coastal town of Haines where we boarded the Alaska ferry south last fall. Three playful sea otters, looking like wet rats, are bounding on the boat dock. We pick up four more passengers and except for them our caravan has the boat exclusively. When leaving the dock I spy a boat with Shari's name inscribed and even spelled the same way.



Backdrop of glaciated mountains behind Sitka spruce forests





Haines, Alaska



A Sea Otter out of the water on the boat deck at Haines



Check out the name on this boat

Multiple flocks, each of 50 or more Surf Scoters float near shore or fly in straight lines. I am at the stern when the captain spots a Humpback Whale. This excites the group as we have only seen one small humpback at a distance thus far in our Alaska tour. So, the group all crowds toward the bow and around the captain. I come with my camera but can aim it only through gaps between their heads. Fortunately, sometime later we see two more that are more active and much closer to the stern, so I get two complete sequences of photos of each at the surface, arching their backs and fluking in dives.



Surf Scoters by the hundreds





Humpback whale showing its flukes while diving

The captain slows his boat again when we reach Little Island where hundreds of female Steller's Sea Lions visit in fall. They bark at each other and flop around unwieldily, so clumsy on dry land. Our group is thrilled about the large mammals and Bald Eagles, but show little interest in smaller lifeforms. On the other hand, I tally Black-legged Kittiwakes, Herring Gulls, an unidentified jaeger species, Red-throated Loons, Marbled Murrelets, Common Murres, Common Mergansers, and Black Oystercatchers.



Steller's Sea Lions

In Juneau two cruise ships are at dock. Shari and I walk to the Flight Deck, a seaplane dock where small planes are each taking six passengers up for an aerial view of the city, sea, and glaciers. We order seafood for lunch and later stroll around the downtown, stopping in the tourist shops that are now offering end-of-season 50% off sales. We meet Steve who just bought a mounted sign made of clipped license plates letters spelling “Enjoy the journey,” an appropriate slogan for our tour.



A single photo taken from downtown Juneau that looks like a collage of photos



Many had lunch at the famous Red Dog Saloon in downtown Juneau



The bus picks us up for a trip to Mendenhall Glacier. The amazingly clear bright skies illuminate the glacier and make an excellent backdrop for Christmas card photos. We have plenty of time for some to walk to the waterfalls and others to watch the movie about the glacier and ice field before the bus takes us back to the boat.



Mendenhall Glacier makes a nice backdrop



Note the relative size of the person standing to the right of the waterfalls

Although a few clouds have muddied the blue skies, photography is still great especially when the setting sun casts shadows. As on our cruise to Juneau, we again see many “rooster tail”

splashing Dall's Porpoises on the return. I take many dozens of photos, hoping to catch a few with their black and white bodies in view. I get proof photos, but none razor sharp because of the fast action and the long distance to the porpoises.



Distant Dall's Porpoise finally shows the black-backed mammal with white flanks and tall dorsal fin



Near Haines





Setting sun reflects on sea



8:21 PM after sunset, but still showing glacial glow

## **CHAPTER 6. YUKON TERRITORY AND BRITISH COLUMBIA**

### **Day 55. September 4 – Klondike and Alaska Highways, YT and BC**

(Bert) We hope for an early start but are confounded at the U.S.-Canadian border which reportedly opens at 7 AM Alaska time or 8 AM Yukon Territory time. I am sure we crossed earlier in previous years, but now we are stopped by a barricade at the U.S. customs building, which is many miles from Yukon Territory building. By 7:05 when they lift the gate, we have six or seven RVs behind us, plus several trucks and cars.

Reaching the border is a steep uphill climb through White Pass, a distance of 13 miles. Our Mercedes Sprinter chassis records miles per gallon and I notice in the climb we only get 7.8 mpg which is half of normal. So, for the large fuel-guzzling Class A motorhomes, they each probably consumed nearly 4 gallons of diesel to make the climb.

We are at least a half hour behind schedule by the time we pass Canadian customs, so Shari and I make only two stops en route, one for fuel and one at Rancheria Falls. I am only 75 yards down the wooded trail to the falls when I see two people photographing something in the forest. I'm excited when I see what it is: a Ruffed Grouse on a drumming log. The couple does not know how special this sighting is. I correct their identification as a ptarmigan and then explain why it is so unusual to find a grouse perched on a fallen log. The log marks the male's feeding territory that is prime for tree and shrub buds and it is also the pedestal from which he drums. Drumming is performed by standing erect on the log, leaning backward, and vigorously beating his wings forward, an action creating an air vacuum that makes a very deep-pitched sound. On other occasions I've heard the drumming from a quarter mile away and then walked through the forest in the direction of the sound. Only thrice did I locate the log and only once was I able to photograph the grouse on the log. That time, in Haines Junction, the intervening branches somewhat obscured the grouse. This time I have a perfect close view.





The Ruffed Grouse blends in well with its surroundings



Ruffed Grouse on its drumming log

## **Day 55-56. September 4-5 late evening & early morning – Junction 37, Yukon Territory**

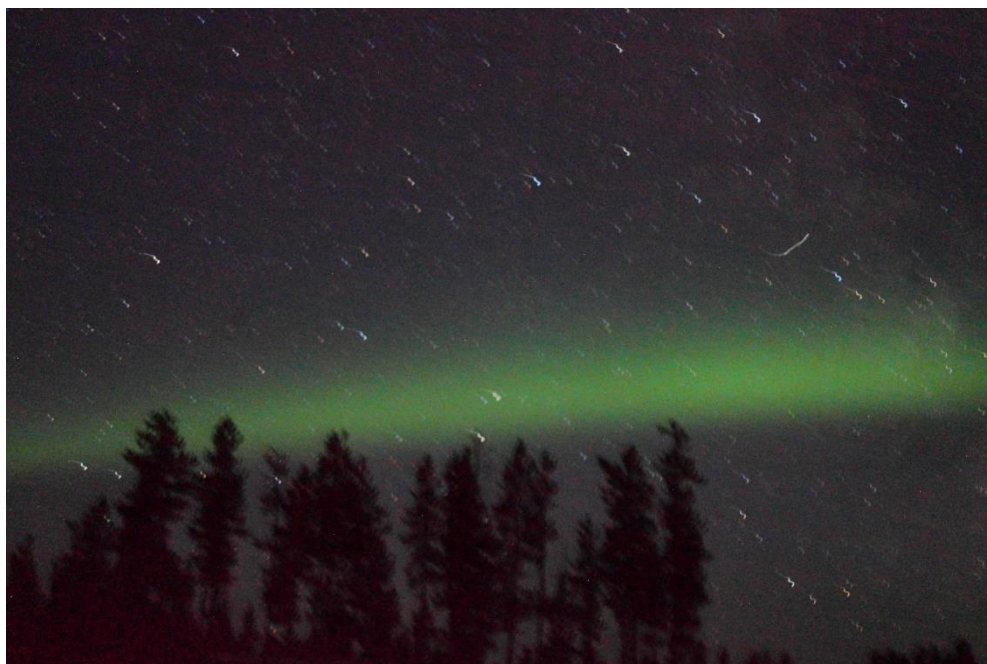
(Bert) I awaken at 10:30 PM to noises outside our RV and immediately think someone has spotted the Aurora Borealis. We had talked about it at our travel meeting since the skies were cloudless and the campground managers had said they saw the northern lights the night before. I dress quickly and hustle outside. When I see the streaked green horizon I go back inside to retrieve my tripod and camera. Others are already gathered for the display. To the north the green streaks rise vertically and to the south another longer streak stretches horizontally. The southern streak does not waiver, though the northern one slowly undulates. My photos dramatize the light and even show shades of purplish red, something the eye does not detect. Most of my exposures are at ISO 6400 for 10-20 sec. and thus concentrate the light.

My last photos are at 11:30 and I go back to bed. My alarm sounds at 1 PM when I originally planned on getting up for the show. I turn it off and go back to sleep, but in the morning I hear that others got up and the Aurora Borealis show continued.



View to the north

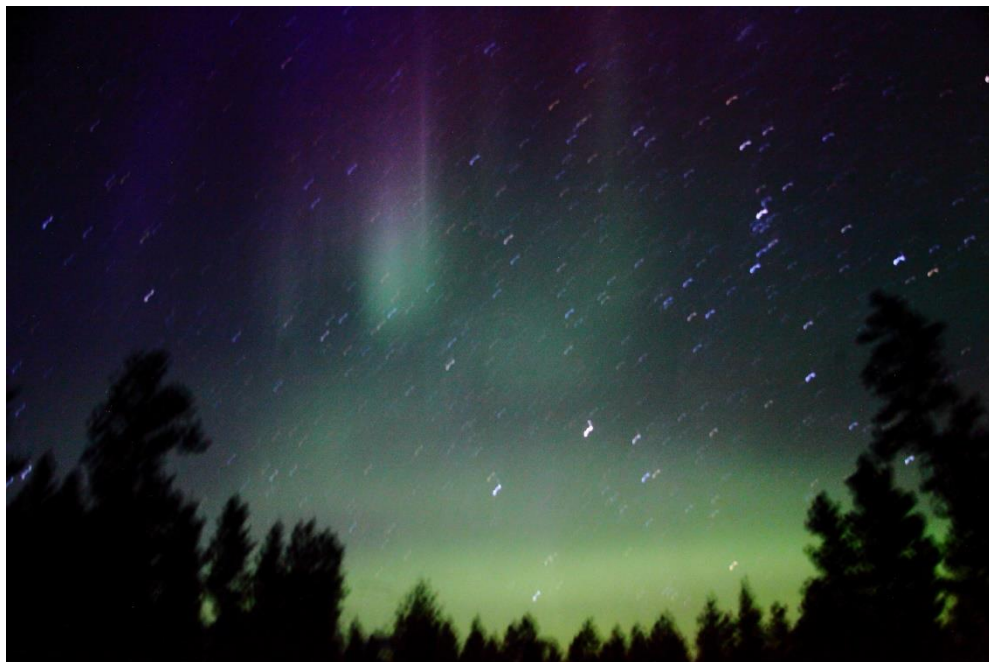




View to the south



View to the west showing Big Dipper







### **Day 56. September 5 – Cassiar Highway, British Columbia**

(Bert) When we traveled the Cassiar Highway in 1996 and 1998 the road was gravel and with the rain it muddied our RV so much that the color and model were unrecognizable. By our 2008 trip some of the road was paved. Today our entire route is smooth dry pavement, a pleasure to drive. In addition, the skies are clear and the scenery vivid.



Tree trunks stripped in a fire a prior year



The mountains seem to float above the forest and lake

One of the few stops along this mostly unpopulated road is Jade City. It's a one store, one family "town" in the heart of 90% of the world's current jade mining. Jade boulders litter the yard and a series of oversize electric saws are aligned for cutting the jade. The store sells cut jade into jewelry, knickknacks, and souvenirs. Shari cannot resist buying a few items and when I hear from others, it seems they bought plenty also. When we leave, the photogenic scenery continues.









Our campground sits in a flowered valley reaching to a small lake and a backdrop of mountains. As we are gathering outside for our 5 PM social a Red Fox trots beside one of the RVs and comes out into the open lawn for a photo. Dinner is hot dogs grilled on sticks over an open campfire, with lots of side dishes to go with them. Dessert is s'mores.









## **Day 57. September 6 – Cassiar Highway, British Columbia**

(Bert) Again the Cassiar Highway is excellently paved although today wet with light rain. We stop at a lodge at Bell 2 for breakfast. Service is slow and the food mediocre, but the décor is fancy for this remote location. While waiting for my meal I study a wall-sized topographic map of the area's mountains and then ask the clerk at the desk about the operation they are running. It is the largest helicopter-skiing facility in the world. Guests, mostly European, stay at the lodge and hire a helicopter to take them to the tops of hundreds of named ski hills. The helicopter can be rented privately or shared by small groups and the pilot will shuttle skiers between mountains, top and bottom.

We reach the access highway to Stewart, BC, one of my favorite drives. However, this time the rain and low clouds suppress the view. I see the rushing stream and snap a photo of the glacier dipping to a small lake. Clearly, the glacier has retreated since our 2008 visit.

In light rain, I help drivers park RVs into campsites. Why is this so difficult for almost all campgrounds? We have a short 5 PM travel meeting and then a few of us head across the Alaska border into Hyder. We are late in the season for bear watching. Most of the salmon have swum upstream and are now dead or dying. Bears have had their fill and are fat for the winter. If the bears show any interest at all, their behavior is like picking at dessert after having eaten six already. Fortunately, we find a Black Bear checking the Salmon River. It catches a salmon in its jaws and even though the distance to it is long, I get a pretty good photo.





Glacier on entrance highway to Stewart has receded greatly since our last trip



Black Bear catches a salmon

We continue to the National Forest bear-viewing elevated walkway and watch another Black Bear walking in tall grass, too tall for a good photo. Bald Eagles circle above us and gulls are plentiful, inspecting the dead or dying fish, but like the bears they seem to have had their fill. Dead fish carcasses litter the stream, though dozens are still swimming upstream, some Chum Salmon still looking healthy, though the Pink Salmon look haggard and decaying.



The flesh of the Pink "Humpy" Salmon are starting to decay



The Chum "Dog" Salmon still look healthy





Silhouette of Bald Eagle circling above salmon stream



The stream is littered with dead salmon after spawning

## Day 58. September 7 – Hyder, Alaska and Salmon Glacier, British Columbia

(Bert) We have a bit of a late start while we wait for a tire repairman to check out one of our RV tires. It became flat after yesterday's drive and looks much worse today. Shari is assuming the worst, assuming it cannot be repaired, assuming no replacement tire can be found, assuming we cannot drive on three rear tires, etc. In fact, the repairman finds the problem to be a loose tire valve extender and soon has everything back together again.



Still a light drizzle falls, but it does not diminish our interest in searching for more bears. While Bill, Gail, and I are watching Bald Eagles in Hyder at the long pier Mike says they just saw bears at the metal dump. We further explore the Salmon River delta and I count an amazing 43 Bald Eagles. Then at the metal dump we find the mother Black Bear with two young cubs. They amble away from us, though leaving lots of photographic opportunities.





Hyder Black Bears



Bears wet with light rain

We check out the bear viewing stands, finding mostly dead salmon being picked over by Mew Gulls. We continue on the gravel road following Salmon River and then ascending the mountain toward Salmon Glacier. The weather is not being cooperative but we do get frequent photos of the glacier surrounded by low clouds. Fortunately by the time we reach the glacier viewpoint almost all of glacier is visible, including the way it splits left and right, one fork leading to Salmon Lake with icebergs and the other toward the river to the sea. Because of the refrigerating effect of the glacier the surroundings are subalpine. I am surprised to find birds at the viewpoint.

I photograph a Golden-crowned Sparrow and also watch White-crowned Sparrows and a Hermit Thrush.



Mew Gull in creek filled with dead and dying salmon



Salmon Glacier has a medial moraine and looks like a flowing river or a two-lane raceway





A trick photo that makes it appear we parked at the edge of the glacier when in fact the glacier is several hundred feet below us.



Looking down on Salmon Glacier from the viewpoint where it splits left and right



Golden-crowned Sparrow in subalpine habitat

## Day 59. September 8 – Smithers, British Columbia

(Bert) After another day's driving on excellent highway, we reach Smithers. I start a campfire and at our meeting we celebrate September birthdays and anniversaries. Then we play a Trivial Pursuit type game, dividing into three teams, and challenged with a series of questions whose answers we should have learned sometime during this Alaska tour. I am surprised that each team is able to answer almost all of the questions. Reader, can you answer the questions?

1. What year did Alaska become a state?
2. What is the Alaska state flower?
3. What are the five types of salmon in Alaska? Give two names for each.
4. What bear has a dish face and short ears?
5. How many provinces are in Canada?
6. Name all the provinces of Canada.
7. What year did the gold rush start in Skagway?
8. What year did the White Pass Railroad start in Skagway?
9. What is the name of the Native American tribe along the coast of southeast Alaska?
10. What is the capital of Alaska?
11. Where was Ann Purdy a teacher?
12. What is the name of the town Chicken was originally to be named?
13. What is the name of the bay in Seward?
14. Why was the Exxon Valdez so far to one side when it ran aground?
15. What is the name of the man who has a glacier named after him but he never saw it?
16. What is the difference between a male and female Orca whale?
17. What are the two kinds of puffins in Alaska?



18. Where is Robert Service's cabin?
19. What is a cheechako?
20. What was Robert Service's occupation before he became a poet?
21. What is the name of the highway connecting Dawson City and Whitehorse?
22. What year was the Alaska Highway completed?
23. What is the name of the most treacherous hill on the Alaska Highway?
24. What is the name of the famous horse whose statue is at the Remington Museum?
25. What is the name of the glacier we walked on?
26. What is the name of the glacier where we saw dozens of Harbor Seals sitting on icebergs?
27. What is a burl?
28. What is permafrost?
29. What is a glacier?
30. What is the name of the bird that sits on a drumming log?

## **Day 60. September 9 – Prince George, British Columbia**

(Bert) Our last day of driving and our last campground, we arrive in Prince George. In the past five days we have traveled somewhat more than half the north-south length of British Columbia, but are still nearly 500 miles from the Lower 48. Shari and I stop at the golf course where we will be meeting tonight in a private dining room at the club house. The tables are set, including the ones for the buffet. We check out the audio-visual equipment and attach Shari's computer and external speakers. Everything is working.

We head to the campground and I help get RVs parked as they arrive, pay the campground bill, and return to the golf course. Shari has a table arranged with farewell gifts for everyone and hands them out as guests arrive. On another table I have the jump drives and flash drives belonging to those in our caravan and on them I have copied 1291 photos selected and edited from my 6682 saved photos from over 12,000 photos taken. I've also copied some portrait photos Bob took of each member of the caravan as well as the movie that Shari is about to show. Our buffet begins with a tempting array of food, including salmon, pork, and chicken with stuffing. The desserts are to die for.

After dinner Shari passes the microphone around the room and each person tells us what they liked most about the tour. Although the answers are varied, we hear two common refrains. Not surprisingly, the incredible scenery we witnessed is oft stated. Most had simply not expected Alaska and the western Canadian provinces to be so beautiful. The second theme probably would not surprise those that have traveled on caravans, but it may be unexpected for those that have not. And that recurring theme is the people we have been traveling with. It is stated in various ways: fellowship, comradery, support, kindness, helpfulness, getting along so well, great group of people, etc. The comments echo back to the first travel blog I wrote on Day 1. Repeating those lines, I wrote, "It's the people," Ron comments as he tells me why he likes traveling in caravans. He likes to travel to new places, but it is the people that make it special and enjoyable."

On that high note, Shari starts her movie, a concatenation of my and her photos and videos presented in chronological order and accompanied by various segments of upbeat music and sound clips. Glancing at the audience, I can see the group reliving the wonderful experiences we had together and reminding them of just how many places we visited in the past 60 days.













