

Trip to Western States - 2008

by Sylvia R. Gallagher

Part 2

Sunday, April 20, 2008
Sunny Flat Campground, Cave Creek Canyon, AZ

No entry.

11:00 a.m., Monday, April 21, 2008
Sunny Flat Campground, Cave Creek Canyon, AZ

Our drive from Sierra Vista via Bisbee and Douglas was uneventful, except for our failure to find a decent looking place for lunch in Douglas. I don't think we found the new main business street, just the old run-down center of town. Perhaps all the new stores were on the road to the border-crossing into Mexico. We had to stop at a roadside pull-off north of there and fix lunch in the trailer. (It's always fun to eat out for variety when we're traveling.)

We got here about 2:30, just after the 2:00 check-out time. Despite being told by Maya that there were lots of spaces, we got the very last site our trailer would fit into. There were a couple of other short ones, but all the rest were occupied, many by tent-campers or those with campers on the back of pickup trucks, who could have used the short ones. On our way up the hill from the main highway 80 we met three RVs, one of which was quite long. We imagined that it had just vacated our site. Fifteen minutes after we were in the site, another largish trailer made the rounds looking for a site and drove out. This campground can't accommodate really long rigs. Our 26-footer is close to the limit, although a few sites seem longer than our number 5. The site is a very nice one. It gets morning and mid-day sun for the solar panels, but filtered afternoon shade from oaks and junipers so it doesn't get too hot. Right now it's very pleasant.

The campground has had considerable upgrading since we were here before (early 1990s I think). Then the roads were uneven and just dirt. We had to ford the creek on an uncertain rocky bottom. Now there's a bridge across the creek and the roads and sites are paved. I think they've made it somewhat smaller, too, and the site we were in is no longer in use.

Jim set up his feeding log, water drip, hummingbird feeder, and (a new item) a dish of grape jelly. Then we took brief naps and went down to Portal to touch base with Maya Decker. Her house is about one-half mile from the main village of Portal and situated on about 4.2 acres. It's an elegant house with beautiful wood and tile work (some new with inlays created by Maya herself) and large rooms. It also has separate buildings where she has her laundry room and garage, but those buildings obviously have room for other uses, too. It's probably larger than she really wanted, but she couldn't resist the setting. On one side of her property is some beautiful

riparian woodland with oaks, sycamores, and junipers. The edge of this is right next to the house. On the other side is desert scrub with lots of mesquite. The walled-in yard is nicely landscaped, and she has set up seed and syrup feeders all over the place. To top it off, she said it's all paid for using the money she got by selling her 1600-square-foot condo in Dana Point. It had an ocean view, but wasn't right on the ocean front.

Yesterday afternoon we sat outside and watched her feeders. I tallied a list of over 20 species in her yard during the hour we were there, including a Peregrine Falcon flying over and a Blue-throated Hummingbird with a nest and two chicks under the eaves outside her office. The list included three species of oriole (Hooded, Scott's, Bullock's) and five species of hummer (Magnificent, Blue-throated, Broad-billed, Broad-tailed, and Black-chinned), two towhees (Canyon and Green-tailed). She's had some pretty rare birds in the three years she's been here, including Berylline and Lucifer hummers. She also enumerated some of the mammals she's seen, including Ringtail, Coatiundi (large family group), and Bobcat. I really can't remember them all. No wonder she loves her place. We're invited back to dinner tonight. Hope I can get this installment finished in time.

Back in 1972, Mother and I stayed in a place called "Cathedral Rock Lodge," which consisted of two new housekeeping units in a single building. When I told Maya about it, she said, "This is that place!" I had a hard time figuring out which part of the place we had stayed in. But all I could really remember is the sliding glass doors that look out at a gorgeous view up the canyon. Maya mentioned some ugly green carpeting in the kitchen area that she took out when she moved in. I think it was there when Mother and I were there, for I do remember green carpeting. It certainly would have been ugly by now if it was there all that time. Maya says the place has had all sorts of uses over the years, including a restaurant. (It's a terrible location for a restaurant, being 1/2 mile off the paved road on an obscure dirt road.)

Portal is a special community because up the canyon is the field research station for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Many people come here year after year to do research and in the process come to love it so much that they retire in the Portal area. So there are lots of stimulating people and stimulating activities. A marvelous little library, all run by volunteers, is loaded with reference books on all aspects of the area. It also has three computers (we checked our Yahoo email that we use at home) and WiFi for people to use their own computers.

Maya volunteers one morning a week at the library and was there when we went in today. She also belongs to a native plant group and takes classes in painting and woodcarving. She says she's never attended so many potluck dinners in her life as she has since she moved here. She had to go on-line to find new recipes. Her biggest responsibility is as President of the Board of Portal Rescue, the emergency fire and healthcare service, which is working hard to improve these functions. She's made all sorts of new friends and is having a fantastic time.

The main drawback is there is absolutely no place to buy anything, not even simple groceries, closer than Douglas, which is 60 miles away. Maya says she drives down there about once a month and eats lots of canned and frozen foods. She also goes into Tucson occasionally to Costco and Trader Joe's. (She selected Tucson doctors so she'd have to go there occasionally.)

This morning I took a walk on the trail that goes downstream from the campground through dense riparian woodland. I took my tape recorder and got the best recordings ever of Acorn Woodpecker drumming. It had a fantastic sounding board on a hollow sycamore trunk. I also got some excellent Black-throated Gray Warbler songs before the breeze got up. One bird was plucking twigs off a shrub and flying off with them. I followed it and discovered where he was building his nest. It was about 20-25 ft high in a steep "Y" in a juniper. Although I could see the bird working on the area, it wasn't a good photo opportunity because too much of it was hidden. Also singing on the cliff-face were Canyon Wrens, one of my favorites. Got back in time for Jim and me to go the post office and library.

On my walk I saw an unusual looking bird in the willows. Yellow Warbler seemed the best ID. It was very bright, signifying a male, yet it had little or no breast streaking. It also looked as though it had a tinge of red on the head. It was silent, unfortunately. I wondered if it might be a southwestern race that I'm not familiar with, but I hadn't brought either of my warbler books. The Portal library came to my rescue; it had the Dunn and Garrett book on Warblers and there was my bird. It was a perfect match for a male *sonorana*, the common breeding race in the southwest.

Jim stayed by the trailer photographing what came in, most of them species we had in Madera Canyon. His main self-assigned challenge is to photograph the Magnificent Hummingbird as he backs off from the feeder and is showing both of the colors of his gorget. He thinks it can be done and he almost got it once.

Just a few minutes ago Jim came in to tell me about a White-breasted Nuthatch imitating a Cliff Chipmunk that came in to the feeding log. It fanned its wings and spread its tail and made itself look very large. He said this happened twice. [Later: I saw it do it a few times myself—apparently a common behavior.]

Afterthoughts:

Last night at Maya's, we saw a couple of cottontails (males?) about three feet apart, staring at each other. Suddenly one made a slight move toward the other, whereupon it jumped four feet straight up. Then both rabbits scurried off into the mesquite.

Maya brings her syrup feeders in at night. One morning she discovered her quart-sized ones completely empty and was told the fruit bats drink it. We've been trying to remember bring ours in, too, but one night we didn't and had no problem.

Interesting plants:

Squawroot, Conopholis alpina, var. mexicana. Seen along trail downstream from campground. It's yellow cylinders (1+ inch in diameter, 2-3 inches high, in bunches) with little fleshy protuberances sticking out. It reminded me a little of our snowplant in the Sierra Nevada. I looked it up and learned it's saprophytic on decaying vegetation under oaks (here), also pines, cypress & madrone. [Later I was told it mainly blooms in May, so I saw an early one, and that the bears love it.]

Arizona Penstemon (Penstemon pseudospectabilis). Tall pink stalks all over the campground. Hummers go for it. I wish Jim would try to get one using it, but he says the birds move around too much when

they go from flower to flower on the stalk and the penstemon stalks wave in the wind.

Tuesday, April 22, 2008
Sunny Flat Campground, Cave Creek Canyon, AZ

No entry.

4:30 p.m., Wednesday, April 23, 2008
Sunny Flat Campground, Cave Creek Canyon, AZ

Monday evening Maya invited us to her place for dinner. She also invited Noel and Helen Snyder. I had heard of Noel, because he worked for years on the California Condor recovery program. He and Helen are both raptor experts, but interested in all birds. They've written a beautiful big book on the raptors of North America—has beautiful color photos and life histories of all. I saw it in the library. It was an honor to meet them. They've lived in Portal for many years now. We had a very enjoyable evening.

Yesterday morning I mixed up some pancake batter and then stuck it in the refrigerator for an hour, as I usually do. I went out with my tape recorder to find what I could in the campground before everyone else got up. Found a couple of Virginia's Warblers, which could nest in this type of location. Unfortunately they were silent and I haven't seen them since.

Just as I was about to start fixing breakfast, Helen drove up and asked if we wanted to see where a Whiskered Screech-Owl is nesting. Of course, we did. It was a couple of miles down the road and right outside the entrance to the Idlewilde Campground. She said the bird would come out at 7:10 in the evening.

That pretty much dictated the timetable for the rest of the day. I went back to the trailer and fixed those pancakes, along with some bacon, etc. By the time we were through it was approaching 10:00, so I decided I might as well take Toby for a walk on the same trail I'd taken the day before. The weeds aren't too bad—just nice native-looking grasses. Because of our late breakfast and 7:10 date with the owl, I decided we'd eat just two meals and fixed hamburgers around 3:00. It was really hot then and we had little appetite.

Jim wanted to go back to Maya's yard in the late afternoon to see if he could get some birds to pose on her nice agave stalk. (Spent agave stalks are popular decorations in local yards.) We'd no sooner gotten into the yard when a roadrunner hopped up on the wall and posed. Jim got off many shots of it posing in the wall. It eventually came down onto the ground in the yard and wandered around, paying no attention to Jim or to a man who was doing some yard work. Jim also succeeded in getting both Scott's and Hooded Oriole males on the agave.

Our evening date with the owl was fast approaching, so we returned to the trailer. Jim did some photography for about a half-hour, and he stayed at it a little longer than he should have, not allowing enough time to put his gear in the truck. So we dashed down there, arriving at 7:02. Then I discovered I'd left my tape recorder on pause all day, so the batteries were low. I had an awful time changing them—got them in backwards, couldn't get the cover on, etc., all because I was in a hurry. (It