

2013 USA-RV Trip May 3 – Aug. 14, 2013

Part II, Mt Rainier to AZ

Dave Cox Reporting on Mt Rainier & Crater Lake National Parks, from Weed, CA, Sun. July 28, 2013

Hello everyone. I last reported from Mt Rainier in Washington, but had not yet visited the Park. Mt Rainier is simply a stunning sight traveling southeast from Tacoma. At well over 14,000 feet and at a high latitude, it's volcanic peak is covered with glaciers. I spent 5 days, splitting the time at two small camps right at the southwest entrance to the Park. A number of short hikes on various trails occupied much of my time, but the clear highlight was the climb from Paradise, the main visitor center near tree line, up the Skyline Trail; this is the trail which leads eventually up to Muir Base Camp which dozens of climbers use daily to rest before the ascent to the peak. I, of course, did not do the multiday ascent, which requires specialized equipment and guides for the glaciers. I did climb to the lower glacier edges for spectacular views of the mountain. At this level I finally found the Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch and Yellow-Pine Chipmunks, as well as more Hoary Marmots playing in the wildflowers blooming in the snow-melt meadows. Other awesome sights are the glacier fed river channels, which carry huge mud-flows every other year or so, released by internally dammed water in the glaciers; the flows sweep trees and boulders down slope creating huge scars on the mountain side.

From Mt Rainier I drove to the Yakama Nation RV Park just south of Yakima for one evening. There, for the first time in my life, I spent a couple of hours in a large casino; I did not gamble, but had an extraordinary dinner buffet for about \$11. I did nicely stuff myself. Although the casino had tables for all the games I have read of or seen in the movies, almost no one was playing poker, roulette, 21 or rolling dice. In truth, about 98% of the people (probably about 600 people) were sitting at video slot machines; it seems to me, if one is going to gamble, slot machines must be the most mindless form. You don't even get to pull big mechanical arms.

The next day I drove on down to Bend, Oregon. Famed for 12 micro-breweries, many of which distribute bottled beer, I failed to visit any; my excuse was that I knew I couldn't visit without some serious sampling – and driving in an unknown and twisty town, after brewery fun, seemed unwise. I did, however, buy a couple of six-packs and have enjoyed the beer come evenings. Bend is named for the huge bend in the Deschutes River where the town is sited. The old Lumber Mill on the bend has been converted to parks, walking trails and a large number of popular restaurants and stores. I did birding along the river for two mornings, getting really lucky when a local showed me where to find Virginia Rails with tiny newborns, looking for all the world like hairy black chicken eggs with eyes, beak and legs. I also visited over a period of a couple of days the Newberry National Volcanic Monument just south of Bend. It, along with huge lava flows, a neat cinder cone and lava tubes, had a number of birds in the surround. I finally got to see the very tiny Pygmy Nuthatches, smaller than an Anna's Hummingbird, flocking at the top of the volcanic cinder cone; obtaining water in the forest around the visitor center were a small flock of the unusual Red Crossbills. I hiked 1 mile inside the "Lava River Cave", an extremely well preserved lava tube which perhaps continues unbroken for miles further, but is blocked

by sand at the far end - the entire distance is utterly black, requiring good lights to navigate; the tube stays at a constant remarkably cold 42 degrees.

From Bend I traveled on south to Fort Klamath, just a few miles south of Crater Lake National Park. Crater Lake is really a "jaw-dropper" – spectacularly blue, filling a volcanic caldera measuring about 6 miles from rim-to-rim. The lake is the deepest in the United States (close to 2,000 feet), and the claim is it contains the purest water on earth, setting a world record for clarity some years back with over 140 foot visibility. Finally, after more than a dozen hours of specific searching in 6 different National Parks, I found Pika, the small rabbit like rodents which live in talus slopes at tree line. Downslope from the volcanic crater are "fossils" of fumaroles, the gas emitting vents around active volcanic mountains. Here, the super-heated gases had vented terminally through hundreds of feet of spewed volcanic ash, and the heat actually fused the ash into stone tubes around the vents; over millennia the surrounding ash eroded into a river canyon, leaving the most unusual stone spires, hundreds of feet tall, along the cliff edge of the valley (see photo). Below the park, near where I stayed, I found an Osprey nest with three fully grown juveniles along with a parent, all standing in a perfect photo line; I cried "fish" instead of "cheese" for the obligatory photos.

From Fort Klamath I drove into north-central California to the small ex-lumber town of Weed. Although many commercial references to the name are amusing (T-shirts & mugs engraved with "I 'heart' Weed"), the town, in fact, was named for Abner Weed, who established the lumber mill in the late 19th century. Located at the base of 14,000 foot, volcanic Mt Shasta, it sports the small Mt Shasta Brewery, which I am visiting now; it has the only internet connection fast enough for me to send this email.

I had thought I would travel until the summer heat breaks in southern Arizona, usually mid September, but I am reconsidering. I have grown a little weary of the journey as I have traveled south through Washington and Oregon. It will be 90 days this week since I set out from Tucson, and over the last 12 years I have found 3 months to be the optimum travel time for me; it has little to do with returning "home," but rather to do with the fatigue of travel itself. I was looking forward to the prospect of visiting the great National Parks of California (Yosemite, Kings Canyon & Sequoia), but my current research indicates the next 4 weeks to be the absolute height of tourist season, and the worst possible time to try to visit those parks for interests in nature. Also, the weather has been so unseasonably hot since my last days in Montana, almost 4 weeks ago, coupled with my current location in the mid-latitude deserts, that I see little advantage to avoiding Tucson heat just from a weather perspective. I am contemplating postponing the California Park's visit until a better season, and traveling instead across the "Loneliest Road in America," Hwy 50 through Nevada, into Utah and back south then to Arizona. I will stay here a few days deciding what to do.

I have included photos of Mt Rainier with some Alpine flowers and Nisqually glacial mud-flow Canyon, Crater Lake and fossil fumaroles, plus hoary marmot, grey-crowned rosy finch, Douglas squirrel, juvenile Townsend's solitaire, female red crossbill, Virginia rail with chick, 4 ospreys at nest and pika. Later, Dave



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Dave Cox Reporting on Lassen Volcanic, Great Basin & Bryce Canyon National Parks, Aug. 8, 2013

Hello all. I last wrote from Weed, CA. after visiting Crater Lake NP in Oregon. Since then I have driven across the Northeast corner of California, across Nevada on Hwy 50, and into Utah to Bryce Canyon. I first stopped for a few days to visit the little known Lassen Volcanic National Park in California. Consisting of a set of quite geologically recent volcanos (Lassen Peak, which is the largest plug volcano in the world, had a fairly massive eruption in 1915), it is the southernmost end of the Cascade Range. It has a number of geologically active thermal areas; though not, perhaps, comparable to Yellowstone; the names clearly are more interesting – including “Bumpass Hell” thermal vents. Lassen exhibits all four major classes of volcanos, surrounded by some pretty lakes.

From Lassen I drove down to Reno, Nevada and spent one night in an RV park at the Grand Sierra Resort Casino. Although I used the pool and did visit the casino, I find I have little interest in trying my hand at gambling. I did a little birding along the river walk right beside the casino, and for the first time photographed the brown creeper, along with the ash-throated flycatcher. Highway 50, officially designated the “Loneliest Road in America”, starts both in Reno and Carson City, the two alternates joining just west of Fallon. I drove the first day to Fallon, where the “lonely” part of the highway commences. 2007 statistics show sections of the road averaging around 500 vehicles a day, just over 1/10th of 1% of the busiest highways in North America; this still seems busy to me compared to some of the roads I took across the northern outback of Australia, and the state route I later took through southwestern Utah where I passed only 8 other vehicles in over an hour. Hwy 50 across Nevada parallels

much of the Pony Express route, and ruins of some of the stations, arranged roughly at 10-mile intervals, are still evident. It later served as the Butterfield Stage route. So – it was a famous passageway from Kansas City to the Pacific, but lost much prominence when Interstate 80 was aligned to the north.

Just east of Fallon lies Grimes Point with a large collection of unusual petroglyphs pecked into the very dark smooth boulders strewn across a small hillside. These petroglyphs range from an estimated 7,000 years ago to much more recent; the oldest are small pecked semi-spherical depressions along with long wide grooves (see photos). The next day, continuing east I detoured just east of the tiny town of Austin to drive up to the Hickison Petroglyph Recreation Area, with several panels of petroglyphs thousands of years old, but little understood. These petroglyphs were made by the desert archaic hunter-gatherers which lived in the Great Basin area from 10,000 years ago when it was much wetter. The panels are located in a low mountain pass, and almost certainly had significance related to hunting animals driven through the pass. That night I spent in Eureka, NV. From Eureka I continued on to Baker, just before the border of Utah, where I spent 3 days visiting the Great Basin National Park. I hiked twice from the end of the road, at about 10,000 feet, up towards Mt Wheeler (over 13,000 ft). At a wind-blown desolate spot near tree line is a large grove of bristlecone pines, the oldest living things on earth. Here I found two trees which had been dated by core samples at over 3,200 years old, having sprouted about when the great Ramesses II of Egypt fought the Hittite Empire to a draw in Kadesh in the 13th Century BC; the trees were over 1,200 years old when Julius Caesar ruled Rome and Jesus was walking the Sea of Galilee – and the trees live today. A few trees (unmarked and off the trail) are dated to 5,000 years old, half way back to the last ice age. Amazing. On day two I hiked up to 11,000 feet to a small glacier looking for the very rare black rosy-finch. I had previously sought and found the grey-crowned rosy-finch at the foot of the glaciers of Mt Rainer, and hoped to score a significant bird-find by getting my second rosy-finch species. I failed, but enjoyed the effort. While searching for sage grouse in the lowlands (I failed at that also) I came across a roosting place for common nighthawks. I had seen them every afternoon flying over my lonely campground with the summer rain storms (they usually are night birds). They are peculiar birds in that they normally roost on tree branches aligned with the branch; at this roosting site they also sat on some old power cables, looking funny sleeping parallel with the line (see pic).

From the Great Basin Park I drove into Utah and down to Bryce Canyon National Park, from where I wrote this report. I was there 4 days and must say, leaving aside only the Grand Canyon, the geologic views may be the most stunning I've encountered. No description in words can really describe the view over the "amphitheater" from Bryce Point; I, of course, have attached a couple of photos – but even these, to be fully appreciated, must be blown-up to poster-size with impressive detail. My digital photos will, of course, meet such standard, but I can only send small jpegs with this report, which do not do justice to reality. Hopefully they will incite in you some memory of seeing much larger panoramas.

From Bryce I traveled the short distance down to Zion National Park, which I will visit and report on later. I have embedded in this report photos of, in addition to scenics of the Parks, a juvenile American coot, ash-throated flycatcher, 3,200 yr-old bristlecone, mountain chickadee, common nighthawk, mule deer bucks in velvet, Uinta chipmunk, golden-mantled ground squirrel and a juvenile western bluebird. Later, Dave



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Dave Cox Reporting on Zion & Grand Canyon National Parks, Wed. Aug. 21, 2013, from Tucson, AZ

Hello everyone. I last reported on visiting Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah. From Bryce I drove just a little over an hour to the little town of Glendale, UT, where I stayed for a few days to catch up on mail, and visited Zion National Park. Like Bryce Canyon (and Arches, Canyonlands, Grand Canyon and the other southwester parks and monuments), Zion is comprised of the most stunning geologic scenery. One can talk all one wants of the world's highest sandstone cliffs, the stunning pallet of colors, the sculpted peaks, rills, hoodoos, escarpments – but nothing paints the picture like a picture (see attached), but the pictures don't adequately convey the size or immense sense of depth experienced by actually being there.

Zion Canyon, the main touristed part of the Park, now is closed to private cars (except for those staying at the historic lodge). The excellent shuttle service operates from 6am, and one seldom has to wait more than a few minutes for a shuttle. As with all other parks in July and August, I generally found myself alone in the Park from sun-up until after 9am – from mid-morning and for the rest of the day, most trails are crowded and all parking lots are overflowing. Zion Canyon not only has a perennial stream running through it (which, of course, created the canyon), but has numerous cliff faces from which water seeps out of the sandstone forming little water falls and pools. Among other short hikes, I hiked up to visit the 3 sets of Emerald Pools mid-way up the canyon, and got to see and photograph a canyon tree frog, a seeming rarity outside the moist tropical rain forests. Most of the features in the canyon were named by early Mormon settlers, so one encounters names such as “Court of the Patriarchs” with its 3 peaks, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the “Great White Throne” and “Angels Landing”. The eastern part of the park, which differs considerably from Zion Canyon, is reached after navigating 7 huge switchbacks, and then passing through the edge of one of the sandstone cliffs via a 1.1 mile tunnel, which, at the time it was built in the early 20th C, was the longest tunnel in the US. In the eastern section of the park on the higher elevations, I once again encountered bighorn sheep.

From southern Utah I drove a week ago Sunday down into the strip of Arizona which lies to the north of the Grand Canyon; I never have visited this strip before. I set up camp in a Kaibab National Forest campsite at Jacob Lake, and the first day drove down from the high plateau to the base of the Vermillion Cliffs National Monument; here one is just below the point on the top of the cliffs where the endangered California condors have been released back into the wild (they have been raised by hand in San Diego since the 1960s, when fewer than a few dozen breeding pair existed). I was able to spot 7 or 8 condors at a great distance landing in the area of the release cages, and occasionally flying above the cliffs with large groups of ravens. From Jacob Lake it is just an hour drive to the north rim of the Grand Canyon, where I spent the day on Saturday. Although I believe the view is less spectacular than that from the south rim (partially due to the sun's trajectory to the south, and partially due to the fact the south rim lies much more directly over the Colorado River and the deepest part of the Canyon), the views nevertheless are stunning. The main advantage of the north rim is that it receives considerably fewer tourists; in fact, it is the only national park I have visited where the visitor center parking lot does not fill by mid-day. I took a number of photos from the Bright Angel Point. I also enjoyed an immense breakfast buffet at the historic Grand Canyon Lodge, before hiking several short trails.

From the north rim, I travelled east between the Vermillion cliffs and the Colorado River to Lee's Ferry, where the road crosses the Colorado at Marble Canyon, and from there headed south across the Navajo Reservation to Flagstaff. I spent the night in Flagstaff and was rewarded to find one of my favorite ex-partners, and fellow bird lover, passing the summer in the cool of the Flagstaff mountains. Art treated me to a terrific lunch where we passed a couple of hours discussing, among other subjects, birds of course.

From Flagstaff I drove straight through to Tucson last Wednesday – it was just 104 days after my departure, on May 3, to pick up my new RV in Minnesota. On reflection, this was the longest trip I have undertaken in the last 13 years of travel, measured both by time and by distance traveled on the ground. The longest previously was 91 days passed in Australia, where I traveled just over 10,000 miles (16,000 km) by campervan. This trip, I put 11,600 miles (18,560 km) on the Outback's odometer. The distance is comparable to traveling from Arizona to India on land, that is, half way around the world. Considering the direct distance to drive around ½ of the US is less than 6,000 miles, this indicates that I spent fully half my mileage exploring surrounding countryside, which seems about right.

I have included just a hand-full of photos, including a couple of the sandstone formations of Zion, the bighorn sheep of Zion, a canyon wren, a rufous hummingbird, and the grand canyon from Bright Angel Point. I also have included one final image of Bryce Canyon, for two reasons. First, as I previously have stated, this Canyon, to me, is one of the most stunning visual scenes on earth. Second, although the jpeg photo attached gives no indication of its size, the tiff original in fact is the largest and highest resolution photo I have ever produced (though by no means the best image), and I am displaying a little pride. For those so inclined, I briefly discuss the technical aspects of the original photo below. For the rest, adios – life continues to be good. I do not know what my next journey will be. Dave

[Technical Aspects of Bryce Canyon Original Photo: The photo is a composite of 55 handheld images made shortly after sunrise, from Sunrise Point in Bryce Canyon. The 55 images were taken through a Canon 70mm "L" lens mounted on an APS-C sensor body, so the effective focal length (compared to a full-frame sensor) of each of the composite images is about 110mm. The use of the full frame lens on the APS sensor means the recorded images employed just the "sweet spot" of the lens' images (the central portion which always comprises the sharpest part of the images); the images were further cropped to the extent of the "overlap" when combined into the composite, meaning only the very best part of each image was employed, where pixel to neighboring pixel contrast was maximized. All images were recorded RAW at 14 bit color depth. The composite image has the effective coverage of a 21mm lens on a full sensor (35mm) body, meaning a very wide angle perspective. Due to the composite construction, all usual wide-angle lens distortion was effectively removed, and the image is properly rectilinear (a true perspective, if viewing the image, would require the image to be curved into a partial cylinder around the viewer's eyes). The image measures 27,831 by 14,422 original, sweet-spot, pixels, for a total of just over 400 million pixels (megapixels); contrast that with the Canon Professional 1D's 22 megapixels. The largest format, professional, digital camera backs today have from 33 to 46 megapixels, barely 1/10 of what I was able to achieve with composite image technology. (There does exist in the world a digital sensor somewhat larger than 400 megapixels, but it is cryogenically cooled, and resides in a phone-booth-sized camera box attached to the world's largest telescope in Chile). Anyway, the photo

is capable of being printed to a billboard sized print while retaining the close-up detail one would expect in most high quality magazine print reproductions. In other words, one would be able to “walk into” the billboard sized photo and continue to see minute detail even upon inspection as close as the eye can focus. I have found a local processing shop I am using for some reasonably large prints (I have gone as large as 32 X 48 inches – hanging in the living room), but this reproduction would require one to reverse the process used to create the original image, that is, the image would have to be broken into sections corresponding to the largest paper size the commercial printer is capable of printing (in my shop that is a 40 inch wide strip). Each strip would then be separately printed, and the end results re-composited into a single photo. If I were prepared both to spend the money and hire a professional to engineer a mount, I would have the image printed to cover one of my house’s walls. But as the printing cost escalates with the area of the photo, this one would set me back in the range of \$3 - \$4 thousand just to create the printed strips; how to mount the strips would be a real problem. The tiff image file size? - exactly 3 Gigabytes.)



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