

How do you top a day like yesterday?

letter to family – 20 May 2016

Don't even try!!

We had plans to be up early and drive up to Oxbow Bend for daybreak photos. Between travel log writing until 11pm and rising at 5am to see cloudy skies, we just headed back to bed. DOH! When we opened our eyes again the sky was blue and the clouds had left the mountain. But I think we were better for having the extra shut-eye.

We packed up our electronics and drove north about 30 minutes to Jackson Lake Lodge (a favorite place) for breakfast, for Dave to make some business calls, and to access real internet. The lodge has several dining facilities, our favorite being a throw-back to a diner with a serpentine counter and all seating is at the bar. The summer hire wait staff come from all over. Our server this morning came from South Carolina. This was his second season. He came last year, fell in love with the area, and was excited to come back.



our favorite breakfast diner

We always love hearing the staff background stories, they are all interesting folks, but by far the best stories are the

tourist stories (aka Darwin Award Stories according to Steve). We of course lamented the recent story about the baby bison that a tourist thought was cold and put in his car, and the publicity seeking idiots that damaged the Grand Prismatic spring by walking off the trail. Just two days into the 2016 season and some tourist has already tried to pet a bison and others get way too close for selfies. Some woman was mad that they didn't let the animals out often enough – she had been here for two days and hadn't seen a single animal! At breakfast our count was 35 different species in 3 days. She must have just stayed in her room!

Dave conscientiously took his call outside so as not to bother anyone in the lobby. His reward: watch a moose graze in the scrub below the patio – and I missed it! Mind you, I did not suffer. This is where I was hanging out, front row center...



lobby of Jackson Lake Lodge

I was able to upload photos to my Teton album on Facebook – without it taking two hours to load 4!! Did a few other

electronic chores, and divided my time between using binoculars to scan the fields – this is where the bear we saw last night had come from. I saw elk in their usual spot, and about a dozen all white birds at the limit of my binoculars take off from the lake edge and spiral up and up like the Blue Angels gaining altitude to fly over Mount Moran. Never did spot the moose. Or I just stared at the amazing vista before me, not really thinking about anything. Dave joined me and got a lot of work done. Even with four busloads of Chinese tourists flooding in and trickling out.



work desk with a view ... and a bar!

Next on the list was to rent a bike for Dave for a day or two – until the weather turns cold and rainy again. We got him suited up and he road the loop from Moose north to Jenny Lake, twenty miles all told. I left the car at the cabin and walked up to the barns on Mormon Row, thinking I might scope out vantage points for early morning light photos. I also remember seeing bison over by a particular barn years ago and thought I'd see if I might get lucky.

Just as I turned down the lane I could see three bison cross the road! I still had a pretty fair distance to walk and the

bison moved into gullies behind the barn, so were challenging to capture. And there were other photographers there – and there is unspoken etiquette regarding stealing someone's shot (while they are standing there!) Anyway, I think I got my first bison photos with the Tetons as a back drop.





I never really got a good profile shot, but I am hoping, that since these guys are within a mile of the cabin (I can see the trees from the kitchen window) that maybe we'll see them near

the cabin in the morning. One can always hope!

I walked back along the road, and low and behold as I get a few hundred yards from the cabin, there in the middle of the road, is a fox! I just hope I can get the lens cap off, aim, zoom, and click before he is gone! I needn't have worried. He took a leisurely stroll up the lane, turned in at the neighbors' cabin, had a look around, sniffed the air, and laid down to curl up! I quit taking pictures as the neighbors might be unnerved to have a stranger standing in their drive with a camera pointed at their house. ☐





Dave arrived from his bike ride. I made another simple dinner and as Dave was doing the dishes at the sink he saw the fox go behind our car. We both grabbed cameras and headed out – me in stocking feet! She is hunting in the front yard!



Looks like she caught a vole. She came out of the bush and started trotting down the lane with her prize. Then hearing something, she put down dinner, and went hunting again. You could watch her working – and the camera almost caught her in mid pounce. No luck this time, so she picked up first prize and trotted off into the bush to dine elsewhere. I still can't get over the fact that this happened within ten feet of our door!







Just another amazing day in paradise.

Up Early

*Oh I could hide 'neath the wings
Of the bluebird as she sings
The six o'clock alarm would never ring
But six rings and I rise
Wipe the sleep out of my eyes
The shaving razor's cold and it stings ...*

After the five o'clock alarm rang, Dave checked the skies and

declared the atmosphere clear enough and worthy of our heading out. I could barely discern the ragged outline of the mountains as I rummaged through my gear, trying to decide what to wear for standing around in 32 degrees. Thirty minutes later we were headed north, but missed the alpen glow hitting the peaks. We'll have to leave earlier next time ...ugg. A few bison were having breakfast along the side of the road. We saw a fox cross just inside the park.



Wildlife was the heart of the reason we chose Oxbow Bend this morning. And we were rewarded in spades. Crowds of folks lined up in the parking area to take shots like this one of Mount Moran, crown in the clouds, and face reflected in the slow moving bend of the Snake River. I grab a shot or two up here too, but then I walk along the shoulder to get a different angle on the scene.



There are usually 95% fewer people down in this corner of the bend so composing your photos can be more relaxed – your bright red coat is not likely to be in someone else's shot, and it is less likely they will wander into yours. The embankment was closed off to create a buffer zone around a bald eagle nest in the elbow (we couldn't see it) and so we couldn't get the camera close to water level this time. But we took our time along the bluff, keeping an eye on changes to the light and clouds, and for possible animal activity. You can see you get quite a different flavor here.



the wake of a not bird



One of the first animals I spotted, I thought was a river otter. They make a sharp 'V' as they move through the water, just as the ducks and geese do, but with less real estate above the water. I followed his wake across the river, but he was in the shade and my photos reveal him to be the color of the mudbank. He swims across again, and I can see the brown lump moving. It takes Dave's binoculars to see that it is a beaver! Our first ever!!

We watched him get in and out of the water a few times. He sat on his haunches and seemed to wash his face. It was hard to tell for sure at that distance, but anyone watching a pet bunny or cat rub their face would find familiarity with the motions. He worked his way along the shoreline and then was lost to us around the corner.



American Peican resting on a sandbar at Oxbow Bend on the Snake River

Turning our attention back to the landscape, the sun turned a spot-light on the marsh bank and the aspens at the waters edge, where a pelican was having a relaxing start to the day. Not far from the pelican, two other bright white spots proved to be a pair of trumpeter swans. I was swinging my telephoto between the beaver's antics on one shore and the swans in the middle of river when we realized the swans were about to begin their running launch into the air. My photos do not do them justice. They were stunning to watch!



two trumpeter swans taking off from the Snake River at Oxbow Bend

Dave was having a fine time playing with his camera and capturing the scenery. I stopped looking through the lens for a little while,



Dave, deep in the brush of the hillside taking a photo of early light reaching the heart of Oxbow Bend

just to sort of step back and reassess what other opportunities there might be. As my eyes wandered over shifting light and dark, green and brown, trees and water, snow and sky, I realized that the bird noise that I was only notionally aware of had become a rather insistent – and close-by – song! I was standing next to a large soon-to-leaf shrub that was ten feet tall. On one of the top most branches, singing his/her heart out was a white crowned sparrow. It was lots of fun to try and time the shutter with the singing so you could see just how much energy she was putting into her music this morning! Eventually I think I *might* have taken just enough photos [13] of this bird and return to scanning the area.





Dave says we need to head back, but I can't stop myself from looking. I move my eye from just surveying the river bank to the spit of land in the elbow (the oxbow bend) of the river to see if I can find any eagles or marsh birds over there. Maybe a moose?? And all of a sudden a dozen panicked elk bolt from the tree line, cross the beaver pond, duck into some high brush before popping out again and swimming across the river. Upon gaining the other bank they launched themselves up the embankment and ran across the meadow for cover. I have never seen the elk move at anything other than a stately parade pace. We didn't see a wolf or anything, but they ran like it was worth burning calories for!



What are they escaping from?

Okay, we mean it. We are going to leave now.

But I see the tell-tale 'V' wake of the not-a-bird in the water in the direction of the car. I pop a few zoomed shots and keep walking. Then it gets out of the water on the far side. It is definitely not a beaver. It is a muskrat! Carrying something back to his den at what would be the water's edge if the river were higher. The crowds left long ago, but we got to see these amazing animals all before 8am!



We decided to have breakfast at the Signal Mountain Lodge just to check it out before driving back to the cabin. I spot two pronghorn behind the cabin and get a few long range shots. All this accomplished before 10am!! Time for a nap!! There is a lightning and thunderstorm promised for this afternoon so it will be interesting to see what the time lapse camera captures today.



breakfast at Signal Mountain
Meanwhile a book and a fire await

20 May: Cold, Wet, and Foggy

Clouds of rain (and snow?) cloaked the range from tip to foot this morning. Who knew you could hide an entire mountain range? I'd say it wasn't fit for man nor beast, except that we could see the swish of the neighborhood's fox's tail like a periscope in the sea of sagebrush beside the cabin. From the road the vegetation looks to be about ankle high – but tromping through it I can report that it is at least knee high to elbow high.

At 9:30 we packed up and headed into town. We saw Dornan's increased gas prices by 15 cents overnight. Truly, the official start of tourist season. The traffic on the road heading north toward Yellowstone, in particular RVs and DIY campers has picked up significantly. Driving south felt like a DC reverse commute!

We found the county library with no problem. The architecture was wonderful. A blend of the best of materials of Parkitecture and the simplicity of Swedish modern building design. The siding outside the two story atrium (fiber optic chandelier inside) used different materials of analogous colors to color block the exterior – in a way that reminded me of the Dutch artist Mondrian. It was one of the most pleasant libraries I have ever been in. Dave got per-mission to use one of the study rooms for 2 hours, and he worked like crazy. I was happy to add some photos to the Facebook album.

Main mission accomplished – it was just after noon and time for lunch. We walked across town to the Persephone Bakery (<http://persephonebakery.com>) rated number one by Trip Advisor. Very yummy, and comfortably warm eating at the sunny picnic tables outside.

Back to the car and on to grocery shopping. They must have a fascinating zoning rule book here – because this Albertsons looked more like a mountain lodge with its massive log and

stone portico. ... and stone fireplace inside!! Seriously, the fireplace was functioning, and surrounded by folks sitting deep in lounge chairs next to the deli section. Even Staples blended in. Seriously, why can't they use their imagination on their stores around the rest of the country!

Finally back at the cabin. With binoculars I can see bison in the field out behind us. The sky looks like swiss cheese with bright holes in the clouds right next to dark curtains of rain. Dave prowled the cabin and finally decided to go on a 4 mile hike around Jenny Lake. I declined to get soaked, and have settled on the couch and have just started reading *My First Summer in the Sierra* by John Muir.



PS> Yes, you can lose an entire bison in the sage brush when they are resting!

PPS> Dave's back from his adventure! A lot of the trails in the area he was hiking are under (re)construction and he took

a wrong turn somewhere off the "flat" hike and ended up following the ridgeline. As he reached the crest of one climb the trail turned a corner and there, twenty feet away was a very large moose sharing the trail! Luckily, this one did not have an attitude and let Dave calmly back away. When he had distance and thought about his camera, she was already gone, whisper quiet into the bush. He'll never forget her!