

THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE OF NORTH AMERICA – IN TEN EASY WEEKS

I don't keep a diary or journal, except for small notebooks that contain notes on plants and wildflowers species. Friends encouraged me to keep in touch when I set off for ten weeks to walk the wild landscapes in North America, and to have a look at a few cities as well. Email makes this easy. We took a laptop anyway, to download and store digital pictures. We could thus also "plug-in" or use the local libraries. Here below is a travelogue of that journey, made up from the emails I sent back. The last email was written after I got back – only because the walking was more important than the writing in those last two weeks.

SNOW ON SUNDAY – 27TH April 2003

I'M LOOKING AT FOUR INCHES OF SNOW out of the window of our friend's home in Sherwood Park, East of Edmonton, Alberta - the drifts are 24 inches deep. This was not what we expected when we entered Canada, but I get ahead of myself.

It was crisply sunny as we took the "L" from O'Hare downtown to Chicago. Dumping bags, we strode off to the lakeshore to get our bearings. The lake is what makes Chicago the windy city, except that the seagulls, moored yachts and aquamarine waves breaking onto golden sandy beaches makes you think of the coast.

Chicago is a living museum of the skyscraper. Standing in front of the Wrigley building provides a 360 panorama of the old and new, harmonising together and straddling the Chicago River. The river provides the boundary to the Loop - the downtown business centre of Chicago that is served by the circular loop of the mass transit train system, elevated above street level and thus giving it the nickname of the "L". Movie fans can visualise the car chases on the streets under the "L".

The buildings have treasures inside: the auditorium of the Rookery Building on La Salle; the courtyard of the Santa Fe building on Michigan (the American Architectural Association has a display of three visionary regeneration schemes for the city); the Tiffany decorated ceiling dome of the Marshall Fields Building on Dearborn.

North of the Loop runs Michigan Ave, the "Magnificent Mile" of department stores (Nieman Marcus, Saks etc) and side streets of coffee houses and restaurants. Chicagoans eat a lot of Italian American!

A ride out on the Green Line goes through an outer town area of urban grey (flat-roofed walk-ups, small manufacturing, cheaper living) and reaches the suburbs of wider, tree-lined streets with large family homes. Oak Park is at the

end of the line and a few hours of neighbourhood walking can cover almost 30 houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the late 19th and early 20th century. The styles progress, showing more of the horizontal lines that are seen in the later Falling Waters. FLW is another example of the turn of the century designers that we seemed to have forgotten, like Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow, Horta in Brussels and Gaudi in Barcelona. When go back to Chicago at the end of our journey, we will look for more FLW.

We flew via Denver to Edmonton, seeing unusual large circles amongst the green patchwork of the farm landscape (irrigation?) and then snow on the hills of Wyoming. Edmonton is built on oil and four refineries to the east contrast with the fairytale elegance of the downtown - colourful buildings sitting atop a river valley. More bizarre is the west Edmonton shopping mall containing ice rink, funfair with gut-wrenching rollercoaster rides, submarine journeys, dolphins, wave swimming pool as well as providing all the shopping that you may need. This reflects the need to spend half the year indoors because of the climate. The snow may go tomorrow, but our friends have planned an "indoors" itinerary.

Other than the Albertans, we have seen coyote, prairie dogs (cute), eagles, killdeer (bird), deer and hope to see bison at dusk tonight in Elk Island National Park. Snow melting in blazing sunshine. Should be moving on to the icefields of the Rockies near Jasper in next couple of days.

CANADIAN ROCKIES 5TH May 2003

THE ELK ISLAND NATIONAL PARK outside of Edmonton was our first taste of wild Canada, watching beavers dam up water courses, avoiding driving into bison, and thinking that moose really do look stupid.

Some 350 km west, the Rockies introduced us to wild terrain and it really is as beautiful as the books and postcards show. We have perhaps seen a beauty that was unexpected as it decided to become winter again the day after we arrived in sunshine and 25 C. It snowed the next day, plunging everything back

into a winter scene and sheathing the mountains in clouds (and fresh snow). Fortunately, the roads around Jasper are good and it hasn't stopped us getting out and around for some extraordinary walks. The cable car ride up to the top of Whistlers was perhaps less useful as the view was somewhat reduced.

Where the sun has melted the winter snow, the alpine flowers are budding up, and with a bit more moisture (it is still incredibly dry in places) will be in flower soon. One delight has been meadows of Pasque flower (*Pulsatilla*) which didn't seem to mind being bent over after the snow. Juniper is an extensive groundcover in the pine woodland, and we occasionally squeeze a few berries - nearly as good as having the gin itself!

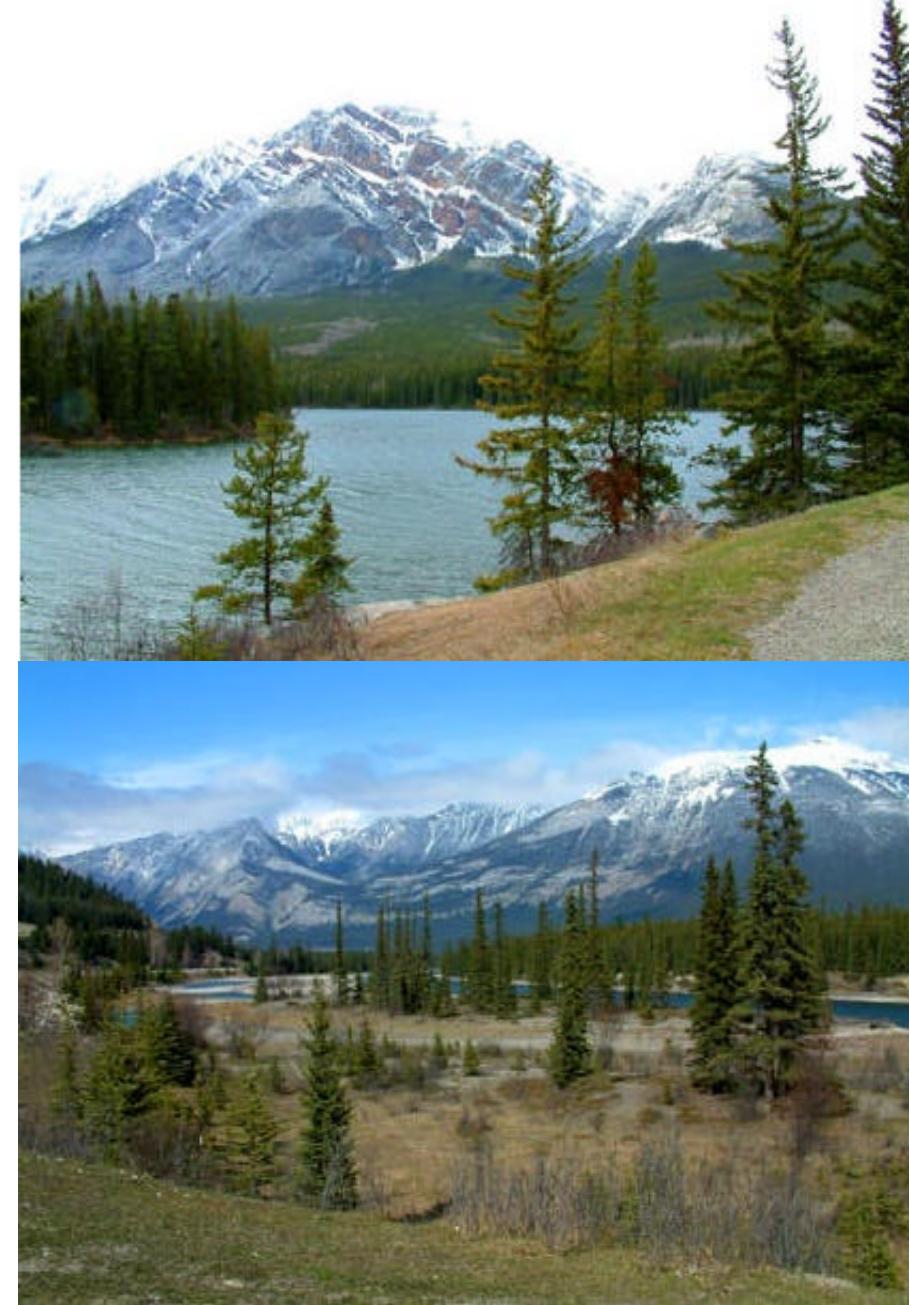
Grass is most advanced around the town, and so herds of mule deer patrol around cabin areas, clipping as they go. There were a few white-tailed deer when we first arrived, and we saw the enormous mountain sheep further up the slopes. We have had a good look at a coyote, marmot and the inevitable chipmunks and prairie dogs, but have only seen tracks of bears in the snow. We turn the bend on each trail with some slight apprehension.

Water, rivers, lakes and falls are abundant. Surprisingly, some lakes are still frozen and we went on one trail yesterday which relied on walking across two frozen lakes. Bottled out on the second as bright sunlight made it look weak in places. It is breathtaking to come out of woodland on a trail into a clearing that is a vast expanse of white (the frozen lake) and then look up to the craggy, snow covered peaks rising above 9000 ft. - we are mostly at 5-6000 ft. on our walks but we don't seem too breathless! Our problem yesterday was sunburn on our faces; the rest of our bodies were covered in about five layers.

With luck, you should have a picture or two to look at with this email. One is of our favourite mountain - Pyramid - because of its shape and that it rarely gets covered in clouds. The other will be a general view. A couple of days time and we are moving further south to Lake Louise and Banff.

BLACK BEAR 9th May 2003

THE THING WE HAD BEEN HOPING FOR happened on Tuesday - we saw a bear!!! Big, black and beautiful and scrabbling for something to eat in the gravel under the railway line (found something, maybe worms???). It was amazing and although we kept our distance (they recommend 8 bus lengths) we still had a great view. Occasionally it would look up at us - and presumably decided that we were not good food. Brilliant!



We moved on from Jasper on Wednesday, travelling south on the Icefield Parkway. Unfortunately, visibility was poor in the morning and we only got glances at some of the peaks each side of the road, some towering to 11,000 ft. About half way, we came to the icefields centre where we hiked out to the edge of the Athabasca glacier. Bit scary as we couldn't see the trail under the snow - and they beat you to death with warnings about crevasses and thin air! Again, an incredible experience and presumably an alpine experience but made slightly easier.

On to Lake Louise, picturesque but frozen and then fetched up in Banff. More commercial than Jasper and the day trails much less interesting (and badly mapped). Made up for it by some stunning drives up windy mountain roads with walks around stunning aquamarine lakes. Still plenty of wildlife - large antlered elk grazing in the centre of town etc. Bird life much more here - wakes you in the morning! All kinds of ducks, grebes, loons and very colourful terrestrial birds.

Snowing this AM - hence in Banff library to do this. On to Canmore (cheaper than Banff to stay) and probably will have a day trip into Calgary - YEEHHAAA!! W/E weather looks good and so we will set off for Vancouver on Sun or Mon

CALGARY BUT NO STAMPEDE 13TH May 2003

BANFF WASN'T MUCH TO OUR LIKING - poor trail markings, expensive accommodation and a distinctly tourist feel. So we moved 12Km down the road to Canmore, a much cheaper and more homely place (i.e. real people) and a stunning 360-degree view of snow covered mountains. We drove up a track on our first night there and negotiated a bend with sheer rock to our inside and a massive drop to a lake on the outside - scary stuff. It was then riding on a high plateau between the mountains and the lakes until we lost our nerve that the cars suspension could take much more (for those interested, a Mitsubishi Galant).

Next day we drove the 110Km to Calgary for the day. Another compact city with a stunning skyline of new buildings. The main centre is a mixture of old and new, with blue, green and gold coloured glass fronted skyscrapers. Much as many Canadian cities, life goes on inside during the winter and so there are second floor walkways that cross streets between blocks, and you could cross downtown completely inside. However, the jewels are on the outside and 8th avenue is a pedestrian paradise through the downtown - the cowboy boot shop smelt intoxicatingly of leather and stampede - YEEHAAAA!. Mass transit runs

on a parallel street (tram-like trains) and is free for the length of the downtown before heading out into the suburbs.

While 8th is "downtown", 17th avenue is definitely "uptown" and the place to go to be seen. Its a bustling street for the young, hungry, fashion conscious - and the arts - and the best place to hang out and watch the cruising to and fro of classic cars and motorcycles (and women).

We strode out to the round-up ring just so we knew where the stampede takes place (two weeks in the year - don't know what happens in the buildings for the rest of the year?) and also the Saddledome, the ice hockey arena that is the home to the Calgary Flames (you have to be over 40 and a hockey fan of the 1980s to be excited by that!).

Next day saw us hack up to the Lake Barrier Lookout, a gain of about 2000 feet through pine forest and on snow covered trail. The summit (around 6000ft) opened from the pines and gave us an amazing alpine scene of a lake and snow covered mountains. It was breathtaking. Probably foolishly, we made it a loop walk and went down a snow-covered ridge, through snow filled woods (2ft deep in places) and finally found a trail marker signing the turn for the return trail. Down through pinewoods and past frozen brooks, some looking like miniature glaciers as they have frozen in successive layers. Reached the lake to find people enjoying the "beach-like" conditions in contrast to our somewhat Scott-like expedition of 13km.

This morning we set off in sunshine from Canmore to go back up to Lake Louise, and turn west on Highway 1 to start the long trip over to Vancouver. Small national parks line the highway, and the only difference is in the names - they all have stunning mountains, partly covered in snow and shimmering in the sun. I think we are pretty much done out on this alpine snow thing and thus it was a delight to drop down as we headed west, watching signs of warmer weather and the greater advance of spring - there are leaves on the aspens down here. We are also starting to see more flowers at lower altitude - which makes up for the fact that I totally screwed up taking close-up pictures of a coyote just before Lake Louise (I just have the back half of a magnificent creature).

A couple of stops on the highway, one just after Golden and another just before Revelstoke, has got us snapping pictures of flowers: yellow-flowered mountain avens, the white flowered Canadian pansy (and a yellow one to go with the ubiquitous blue) a clematis, a few pea flowers, some juneberries - and a whole swampland of skunk cabbages!!! (really amazing sight). This has whetted our

appetite as we head over to the warmer maritime coast at Vancouver and the wildlife parks there.

Thus one night here in Revelstoke (our cheapest stay yet at 50 dollars). Still a few mountains around but also the Columbia River - which is big!!!

RAIN IN VANCOUVER 18th May 2003

REVELSTOKE WAS A 'BORDER' TOWN between the Rockies and the rest of British Columbia. It had early 20 century charm in its main street, a splendid location next to the massive Columbia river, and like many was built on the back of the railroad. We moved on through to Vernon and then headed south through the Okanagan. The biggest change we saw was the climate and thus the vegetation. Past Revelstoke, we moved from semi-upland with its woodland flora and occasional swamp - where lots of skunk cabbage grew - towards more open land of hillsides and lakeshores with much warmer weather and less moisture. And we started to pick up many more flowering plants such as the iconic Indian paintbrush, a shrubby mauve penstemon and a stunning fritillary. We did not lose the wildlife as we thought we might - a chance walk up a logging trail had to be abandoned as we came across our second bear!!! Although it had brown tinges, we think it was probably just another black bear rather than a grizzly.

The Okanagan is renowned as a fruit growing area. Frankly, in many places it looks just like the Mediterranean. South facing gentle slopes going down to lakes often had vineyards and orchards, and the waterside communities just seem to fit the overall pattern. It was surprising and became even more unusual when we came across areas of sagebrush mesa, an arid, sandy habitat where we found sages (not *Salvia* as we think of sage, but *Artemisia*) prickly pear, *pyrus* and long-stemmed phlox. This was unexpected - and weird. But after a while, we came to understand that these areas may have rivers and lakes with water coming down from the mountains, but they themselves are quite dry.

We stayed a night in Kelowna, in the heart of the Okanagan, and marvelled at the size of Lake Okanagan. It's a bit of a cultural capital, but we can't think what else people get up to there to justify its size. From Kelowna down past Penticton (only 40Km from the USA border) we then headed back up into hills, but only small ones this time. They still had snow on in places, but the flat valley bottoms had been improved for pasture, making it look like the hills were rising out of the baize of a billiard table. Even here, farmers were irrigating their pastures to lush them up before folding animals on.

Made a tactical error on the road that went over Allison Pass in Manning Provincial Park - should have filled up with gas in Princeton before ascending but took a chance that we had enough for the 130km stretch over. Got to the Pass after endless climbing and twisting and turning and found we still had 100km to go with the gas needle plummeting. Turned back to Princeton to fill up and found I needed to unwind in a Dairy Queen with a coffee and chocolate blizzard (disgustingly good ice cream).

Reached the outskirts of Vancouver in a traffic jam on Wednesday. Found the motel we had identified (cheap and in the Asian area of the Vancouver suburb of Surrey - OK so there is New Westminster and Richmond as other suburbs!!). The Skytrain ride to Downtown takes about 45 min and gives you great views of all the districts on the way and the mountains to the North (still covered in snow). Downtown Vancouver looks a little tired - it is obviously older than Calgary and Edmonton, but it is also more mixed and somewhat seedy. The wonderful views into blue bays and onto to the various islands are not easily obtainable from downtown, even though it has a waterfront. Thus the picture postcard view is not as expected.

Vancouver is also very large, has a real traffic problem, a burgeoning indigent population, a huge Chinese origin population and influence, and not enough mass transit. It took us over an hour to drive the 20 miles from University of BC back to Surrey Township - every junction has traffic lights and every crossroad is a junction. Probably the most efficient transport here are the water planes that take off and land anywhere there is a short stretch of water.

Nevertheless, having been here three days, we seemed to have got the measure of it and have begun to explore the treasures. Any piece of woodland (and there is lots about) is worth diving into to look for plants. There are many small woodland preserves dotted about with good trails. The massive amount of shoreline provides beaches of many different sorts, and waterways that still get used to transport trees - many of the shorelines have carcasses of washed up trees (remember those lumberjack movies of the 40s and 50s where logjams on the rivers used to get cleared using dynamite??). Went down to White Rock today (5km from the border) and found a woodland/waterfront community that has graceful living at its core. It would do me as it has my two favourite habitats in abundance.

Tomorrow, we are going to spend the day in Stanley Park, a conservation reserve almost next to the downtown area. It has the mix here of untouched woodland within which clearings have facilities for sports, leisure etc. Very much the North American way. Monday, we will set off up the Sunshine Coast of BC, driving and catching ferries, until we reach the Powell River from where

we will take a longer ferry ride over to Comox on Vancouver Island. We want to go out to the Pacific Rim National Park on the western coast of the island to see yet another different habitat. When we finally get back to Vancouver, I think we will be taking a bus down to Seattle.

RAIN FORESTS 25th May 2003

STANLEY PARK WAS NOT AS WILD as we hoped - in our search for specific flowers - but we did find some enormous purple starfish on the shore (slightly unsettling) and said hallo to a couple of very cute racoons who appeared at the slightest rustle of a pretzel packet. We left Stanley Park to the gentle constitutions of the locals and headed off for Lynn Creek Regional Park, across the water above North Vancouver and going into the hills that surround it. We set off on a trail that would give us elevation and a view - a bad mistake as the trail was rocky and steep and ended up going through the snowline - again!!!! The view wasn't that good.

Off next day on the Sunshine Coast which is a "drive and ferry" route north on the BC coast. You take a ferry and then drive and explore and then take another ferry (no continuous road). Stayed the night at Powell River, which has its place in history for its paper mill - and also explains why the coasts everywhere are littered with washed up tree logs. Collected on the way the red flowered columbine (*Aquilegia*) which we hoped we would find. Ferry over to Vancouver Island at Comox and then a trip along the Oceanside route before heading off across the interior to the western coast of the island and the Pacific Rim national park. On the way we dropped into some provincial parks to marvel at trees nearly 1000 years old (slightly big!) and a brilliant groundcover flora of western wake robin (*Trillium grandiflorum*) false lily of the valley, vanilla leaf, foam flower, but it was the trillium we had been hoping we would find in flower.

Fetched up in a small harbour village of Ucluelet, where we heard again a strange barking noise we had first heard in Powell River the night before. Sure enough, it turned out to be sea lions and local knowledge suggested we go down to the harbour when a fishing boat comes in. Soon after, the dockside is teaming with sea lions hoping for a feed - these are big seals with very cute eyes. Also, very cheeky sea otters who somehow get onto the boats hoping to grab snacks.

The Pacific Rim park has rainforest - it is an amazing world of small creek valleys, moss covered branches and glorious stands of ferns covered by towering trees: fantastical. The coastline is pristine with many flowers and lots of small, tree-covered islands near to shore. Many bald eagles making them

more common than gulls!!! It's a magical place and it would have been better if we didn't have to keep dodging showers and rain while we were there.

Drove back across the interior today (dropped in to see the trilliums again and took pictures of the huge white flowering dogwoods) and then down to the ferry just below Nanaimo. The two-hour ferry trip was cast in clouds and we returned to the mainland in rain. So, one more night in Canada, and then tomorrow we take a ride down to Seattle in the USA. Lots in common between Canadians and Americans, but they wouldn't agree.

SUPER SEATTLE 30th May 2003

WE LEFT VANCOUVER by bus, passing over the border to America about 30 miles south of the city. Quite funny really as the bus had to be completely emptied of passengers and luggage, going through one door, then coming out another door and troupng back onto the bus!!! At least we got another 90 days on our visa waiver!!

A couple of hours later and we were in Seattle, birthplace of Jimi Hendrix (unfortunately the section on him in the Experience Music Project museum was under repair). It is a great city of beautiful old and new buildings, culture and art, crazy markets, serious sport (baseball and grid iron) long waterfront, harbour trips, Sky Needle and the most incredible backdrop of Puget Sound, a snow covered Mount Olympia across the Sound to the west, and the volcanic but snow covered Mt Rainier to the SE.

Seattle was surprisingly uncluttered considering it is a sizeable city and that there was a three-day folklife festival going on over the Memorial Day holiday weekend. The whole of the open space of Seattle Centre (a park area with museums, concert house and theatre) was full of exhibitions (folk craft such as wooden boat building, kayaks, traditional clothing and other crafts) and an array of traditional folk and country dancing and music - plus lots of food stalls and buskers. My attention was taken by a young lady clarinettist whose repertoire was as impeccable as the live snake that cheerfully nestled in her cleavage. She got my vote and my buck donation in her instrument case! Diana and I really enjoyed the festival and made comparisons with our own Festival and particularly with the Mela. We think Bradford has a lot to learn about how to get local people involved and to enjoy themselves so wholeheartedly.

Near the harbour front, you have to go to Pikes Place market. It sprawls indoors over acres and is lively and full of colourful produce. One fish stall is called Flying Fish - because each order is barked out by a seller who then throws it up to be weighed. Simultaneously, the other sellers repeat the order in unison, and

it is anyone's guess as to how the order ends up being caught successfully? I'm talking big fish of probably 20lbs or more! Great entertainment.

Gaining height for a view means you either go up the Sky Needle or, like us, much more classically the Smith Tower, one of the first skyscrapers to be built in the USA. Only 40 floors, but it has an elegance of the 1920's (exquisitely decorated lifts) and a viewing room decorated in the Japanese style (in honour of a visiting Japanese Admiral). The older and original part of Seattle around Pioneer Square has some fine brick buildings and is undergoing renaissance. The modern buildings are just amazing, particularly the new library building going up which is at steel frame stage and sticks out all over the place. Amazing conceptual use of space.

We hired a car and drove out to spend some time in Mt Rainier National Park. American parks are not like the Dales etc. People and agriculture have been banished from these areas allowing just wildlife to flourish. Think about it - deer roaming around as though they own the place BECAUSE THEY DO! Mt Rainier has some amazing glaciers at its top of about 10,000ft. Yup -still in snow country, but we were mostly down at around 4000ft and lower and did some amazing trails with wonderful woodland and plants, and breathtakingly amazing rushing rivers and waterfalls. The water is from snow or glacier melt and it cools the air above it has it rushes down the mountain causing a cold air blast. This can be quite unsettling the first time you walk from a warm zone into a cold zone within a matter of feet. We have made friends with yet another type of squirrel (Douglas squirrel - yellow feet, chestnut legs and very dark brown body) and another type of cheeky jay that will nick the food right out of your hands. (We have found a whole book devoted to North American squirrels.)

We came back to Seattle today and wallowed in a hot tub to ease the aches of the trails (quite a lot of motels have them) Packing up fully again for a flight down to Oakland tomorrow - rough count is that we have stayed in 14 different motels so far. Somehow it is cheaper to fly to Oakland, only 11 miles from San Francisco, than it is to fly to SF airport itself. We have considered going by train but it travels overnight and we would miss sight of much of the north Californian coast.

BOBCAT 2nd June 2003

ARRIVED IN OAKLAND, hired a car and drove out to the Californian coast below San Francisco. Staying in Santa Cruz on the Monterey Bay, 5min from beach and 5min from downtown. Walking along fabulous coastline, both sand dunes and rocky, with hills as a backdrop and the whole covered in a carpet of flowers. Saw a bobcat as we walked in Wilder State Park - we upset its siesta

under a tree lupin and it looked really aggrieved! Ground squirrels are funny and sea lions bask on rocks. Off to Big Basin State Park today to see 2000-year-old redwoods.

COASTAL FOG 5th June 2003

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS on the Pacific Coast is sea fog. Inland away from the coast and hills can be bright sunlight, but the immediate coast and up to the hills can be covered in fog all day. It's not exactly cold, but it gives an eerie feel. When the fog lifts, the sun can be really burning and fits with the often-arid nature of the landscape.

I forgot to tell you that last Sunday, Santa Cruz had a gay pride procession through the town centre. This was grand entertainment, with big motorbikes, square dancing, salsa, other forms of exotic dancing, and the complete range of cross-dressing. Being California, everyone is more comfortable with diversity, and comes along in support and for a lot of fun. This Saturday, they have a carnival procession where I guess quite a lot of the same people will be involved - its a happy place!

The coastline here is magnificent. Sandstone headlands with sandy beaches below and sand dunes. Beach access is mixed from open tourist beaches to those hidden spots known to those that can tramp few hundreds yards along dusty tracks to find wonderful coves with beaches and cliffs.

The cliff tops look like gardens - covered in tree lupin, yellow and purple sand verbena, various hues of Indian paintbrush, and a range of orange flowering shrubs that have a slightly pungent but spicy aroma. Critters include dolphins cruising along the coast, grey pelicans in V formations of upto 20 birds flying by, sea otter looking really cute as they float on their backs in seaweed masses, silly ground squirrels, cormorants, and the ever present sea lions and seals that occupy any rock off the coast.

We went to Big Basin redwoods on Tuesday. I first went there 20 years ago when I was attending a conference in San Francisco and went off for a day. The memory of the size of these trees didn't do justice to them; they can have a circumference of nearly 70 feet at the base. There is also a distinctive smell from the trees that stays in your clothes. Unfortunately, not many flowers flourish in redwood forests, and so I had to concentrate on the trees for once.

Yesterday, drove 70 miles up to San Francisco for the day. Still a city of hills and at least the cable cars are working this time - 20 years ago, the cables had been ripped up for re-setting. Had time to go to the cable car museum and find

out how this extraordinary system works. A continuous moving cable under the road that follows a route for miles. The cable cars have arms that grab or release the cable when they want to move or stop.

The architecture is as usual a mix of old and new that works very well, and we did a few walking tours looking at the historic buildings, particularly around Jackson Square. Then of course on down to Fisherman's Wharf, which is the typical tourist destination, but in Californian style as it is always educational, with free museums on the wharves. The mechanical museum had the most brilliant collection of penny arcade machines that have marvellous tableaux of moving events such as funfairs, ghost houses etc. and of course mechanical peep shoes - wonderful.

We've pretty much stayed our time in Santa Cruz - its been a great base, but we are moving on to Yosemite to get in amongst the really big mountains - hopefully without any snow.

MOSQUITOES AND SNAKES 14TH June 2003

MARIPOSA IS A SMALL TOWN at the edge of the Sierra Nevada with a population of about 1000. It considers itself to be the birthplace of California, and it has every good reason to think so since it was in the quartz of the surrounding hills that gold was found, leading to the goldrush of 1849 (the '49ers travelled out from the east in search of their fortunes, travelling in wagon trains that at one time reached a line of 10,000 stretching back over the mid-west).

America had undergone a large expansion when Napoleon sold the land to the west of Louisiana in 1805, but the west was still Spanish America, run by the Missions and Padres of the Mexican south and farmed by the ranchios with little need for improvement. The Miwoks were the local native Americans and they didn't even need to farm since the rivers and forests were enough to feed them. San Francisco then had a population of only 200, and it was the coastal towns of Monterey and Santa Cruz that were the gateways into these lands.

Gold changed it all. A few exploring pioneers who sought out routes across the mountains from the east, bought land cheaply, and to their surprise and good fortune found themselves sitting on a mother lode of quality gold. Initially, the gold was extracted from surface tails, using the expertise of Mexican gold workers. When surface gold was exhausted, mines were dug and whole valleys were covered with stamping machines - large scale stone crushers used to pulverize the quartz so that the gold dust could be separated by mixing with mercury to form an amalgam that could then be separated by heating.

The wealth for these few landowners led them to BUY California from the Mexicans and it became the 31st state of America in 1853, and soon the west was connected to east by rail. This is capitalism at work - self interest leading people to achieve exceptional things.

From the Californian coast, you cross the San Joaquin valley to get to Mariposa, and this is a parched flat landscape with temperatures rising to 100 and over. And yet it is a mass of intensive horticulture. Almonds, cherries, oranges, peaches and irrigated by a filigree of canals - and the water comes from the mountains of the Sierra Nevada, which is why we had travelled to Mariposa as it is the gateway to Yosemite, a national park in the Sierras.

Yosemite is another landmass created by glacier action. The best view of Yosemite Valley and the 2000ft drop of its main waterfall, is from Glacier Point (7200ft) with its sheer face and a drop of 3000ft. into the valley. Yup, we're back in the land of snow on top!!! We just seem to need to crunch through some snow every few weeks or so!

Yosemite is just stunning in a hugeness, bigness and geological way. Flowers aren't bad either, but I got bitten badly by mosquitoes in the valley, so we stayed out of it. Above the valley to the north lies a subalpine meadow at about 8,500ft. We went for a walk there in search of more flowers, but had to make do with watching marmots, as the snowmelt had been too recent for a good flush of bloom. In fact, we were caught out when surrounded by a thunderstorm that had impressive lightening, and even more impressive hail that came down the size of large marbles. To cap it all, our trails on the return were awash with floodwater as the creeks and rivers filled and so we had to paddle through ice-freezing cold water. Got back shivering, but all you need is to drop a couple of thousand feet and you are back in the warmth of the sun. It is perhaps surprising to consider that the water that we waded through eventually ends up in San Francisco, taken there through gravity and by a series of grand canals.

Mariposa was a good base for a few days, homely, historical and mostly friendly despite the variety of snakes I kept stumbling into. We headed back over the San Joaquin, up over the intermediate hills (covered in wind turbines around Altamont) and headed north of San Francisco to Novato to explore the Point Reyes Maritime national park. This is a large, mixed area park on the coast. Rugged coastline, great coastal flowers, natural wooded hills (covered in bay laurel and ceanothus) and stalked by Tule elk growing some very large antlers. We had two good days exploring this area and fitting in Muir Woods, a 'small' national monument park of coastal redwoods - big trees. We dropped down into Sausalito one night for dinner and to get a great view of downtown SF across the bay. Sausalito used to be regarded as the place for graceful

wooded hillside living next to the North Bay coast when I first visited this area 20 years ago. It still is. I also found a secluded Laurel Canyon in the hills above Point Reyes - any fans of John Mayal and his music may get the reference.

Today, we left Novato and moved across the bay to Oakland for a quick get away from the airport tomorrow. Spent the day in SF looking at the late 1800s speculative building that mixes Italianate with Queen Anne and the just bizarre. SF is just such a fantastical place, always a viewpoint with something interesting, always another hill to climb, and if wasn't for the coastal fog that robs the day of sunshine, and it may be a heaven on earth.

For those interested, street farmers' markets here are full of fruit, vegetables, nuts, flowers and occasionally some cheese and honey. Very rarely see any meat.

Off to Denver tomorrow for a spin around the American Rockies. And then for me, a departure home by the end of June. Diana is staying on, moving down to Florida, but I will soon be sated with this odyssey and carrying on any further may make it become mechanical.

MILE HIGH PLANT HUNTING 19th June 2003

DENVER REALLY IS THE MILE-HIGH CITY. At nearly 6000ft above sea level, it is hard to think that downtown Denver has rarer air than the summit of Ben Nevis. To all intents and purposes, you might as well just be at sea level since the surrounding area is flat and the daytime highs in the early 80s make it quite comfortable. Except that there are peaks to the west that have snow on them, and each day that we have been here has seen very localised and very violent thunderstorms, leading to flash flood warnings. (One of today's thunderstorm started as we had just finished our walk in Roxborough State Park - we were lucky as the lightning and subsequent deluge were devastating - as was the fact that it contained hail as well - again. Tonight's thunderstorm over our motel forced us to drive to the diner, rather than walk the few hundred yards - well, we are in America).

Getting to Denver was circuitous as we saved a couple of hundred bucks by a cheaper route of flying back from Oakland to Seattle and then flying on to Denver. The second leg was delayed and so it was a long day in airport lounges. We also faced a haggle over price with the car rental we had reserved, ending up with a good deal on a Dodge Durango, which for fans of transportation with grunt is a midsize SUV with a 5000cc engine. Diana looks rather small in it.

First off we went to Denver Botanical Garden, which has a whiff of the cultured classes about it, but it also makes a reasonable fist of representing the plantlife of local habitats as well as the purely ornamental. This was a big break as we found a book that has 50 wildflower walks around greater Denver. THIS BOOK HAS TRANSFORMED our plans for this area. Rather than spend most of our time in the nearby Rockies, we are now working through the plant walks in this book and discovering some amazing geology, climates and habitats in the front range hills of the Rockies - and clocking up nearly 50 new (to us) plant species.

Downtown Denver centres on 16th Street, which is pedestrianised (like Calgary) and mixes the local red/brown stone buildings of 100 years ago with the modern and in keeping. 16th has a free bus service up and down its 1 mile length, and the view each way at intersections reveals more of the character of the city, including the baseball and football grounds. Unfortunately, my one bad experience of panhandling has come in Denver when the threat of a firearm was used to encourage me to give more - fortunately, this punk didn't have the necessary hardware to back up the threat.

The vast ring road around Denver is dominated by high tech. corporations, universities and research institutions. Denver may have started out from silver, but it now seems to be about information and innovation. Vast new subdivisions are springing up with complex apartment houses and new build residential that all seem like palaces compared to our miserly housing - and the big ring road (partially tolled) links them all together.

We have been stunned by the variety and quality of the habitats around Denver, all at 6000-7000ft- who'd a thunk it? We have walked along cold water creeks through canyons made of colourful conglomerate rock, marvelling at flatiron hills in deep red rock and walked through natural prairies stuffed with distinct grasses and very colourful flowers - and not just in ones and twos, but in swathes (hard to do justice in photos). These are mesic short grass prairies. While there are shrubs and trees around them, they continue to exist because of the hot climate, poor soil depth, low fertility and poor water content that makes it difficult for the woodies to move in. These could not survive in the UK as, except for a few coastal regions, we don't have similar conditions and the scrub would move in.

Even in the wooded slopes, the sumac, oak and pine are stunted, creating much less shade and allowing stonewrops, sulfur weed, sego lily, penstemon, loco weed, prickly pear cactus and even real deal desert cactus to thrive (like what you grow on the window sill, as Diana says). We have seen so many of the flowers that we now grow in our gardens, growing here in the wild. Like so many penstemons, gailardias, larkspurs and coneflowers. And every there are

small yuccas with towering spikes (3ft) of big creamy flowers (the local deer find these flowers very tasty, which rather denudes them.)

Tomorrow, we set off for the Rockies using Estes and Boulder as bases, before moving back to the west of Denver for some more flower walks. Will probably have tales of snow and scary mountain roads to tell next week.

HOME FROM THE FRONT RANGE 7th July 2003

DEER CREEK CANYON PARK, off Grizzly Drive, is one of 23 Open Space Parks that Jefferson County (centred on the town of Golden, Colorado) maintains from a 0.5% sales tax voted through by the citizens of the county. The park, in the foothills to the west of Denver, encompasses 1,881 acres of hilly, scrub oak habitat that is home to mule deer, elk, turkey, mountain lion and bear. It is accessible through 12.2 miles of well-marked trails, some open to horse-riders and bikers but a third are "Hiker Only" and allow the full value of the Park to be realised.

We chose to walk a 3.5 mile loop in this park because the Colorado's Best Wildflower Hike guide indicated we may find prairie starflower in bloom there. Unfortunately, we did not, but we saw many - by now - old friends such as juniper, mountain mahogany, sego lily, copper mallow, yucca, scarlet gilia, prickly pear cactus, sulfur weed, pussytoes, golden banner and heart leafed arnica. After two weeks of hiking in the Front Range hills, we were able to recognise and read the flower combinations of the different life zones we were encountering. Here, at Deer Creek, we were also able to complete gaps in our photographic record on finding particular wildflowers in bloom that we had only found elsewhere in bud - a magnificent clump of mauve beebalm and some early blooms of goldenrod.

In earlier centuries, this foothills area had been a campground for the nomadic tribes of the Ute and a base for the Arapahoe. Its loss to them came about in 1872 when through the drive to populate the western frontier, an English immigrant, John Williamson, took possession of the land under the Homestead Act and set about producing hay, wheat and corn crops from its flatlands. Williamson may also have profited from gold and silver mined from his hills and, along with many homesteaders, he must have been a tough, resourceful and colourful character. It is known that he gave haven to Jesse James, The Whole in the Wall Gang and Horse Thief Thompson.

We have encountered a number of homesteads with their abandoned early 20th century makeshift cabins as we have walked in the foothills-montane of the Front Range. The Act that gave birth to them encouraged settlement in the

natural meadow clearings of the foothill woodlands, allowing land to be bought cheaply, and cheaper still if evidence of rootedness was shown. Surprisingly, the Homestead Act was not repealed in America until 1972, and not until 1986 in Alaska.

The woodlands surrounding homesteads provided timber, fruit and wild protein with surplus crops from the meadows being carted downhill for sale into nearby towns. It must have been a hard but simple life with great rewards for those that could appreciate the natural world around them. Some homesteads were ruthlessly exploited for their resources, but all lost their economic viability as the agriculture of the plains to the east grew during the first half of the 20th century. Homesteads were bought up and combined into much larger holdings, which even then made little economic sense. Thus their eventual suitability for purchase and public ownership in the 60's and 70's and their regeneration to wilderness.

Conservationists please take note – the approach to regeneration and revegetation is to ban access to humans and livestock (except llamas!?) and allow nature plus wild animals to get on with it. It works because there has not been the wholesale "improvement" of farmland that has characterised Europe, nor the wholesale slaughter of wild mammals. In fact the only "management" I saw in any of the wilderness parks was the moving away of fallen trees from across trails and the periodic rogueing of introduced non-native wildflowers that threaten to swamp some habitats i.e. yellow toadflax, mullein and mountain knapweed. (I would swap their noxious weeds for ours any day i.e. giant hogweed, rosebay willowherb, himalayan balsam.)

A number of Colorado counties own and operate open space parks. Boulder to the north of Jefferson has some particularly fine ones (and a cultured city in Boulder itself). It was in the plains lifezone of Rabbit Mountain Open Space in Boulder, on the Eagle Wind trail, that we found plants of the parched prairies such as the mauve prairie verbena, locoweed, sunflower, skullcap, yellow salsify, yellow coneflower, yucca and prairie clover.

Colorado itself operates state parks although their functions vary more than the Open Space Parks of the counties. Some of them are for motorised outdoor sport and recreation, but the gems have a more restricted use for trails-only and sometimes backcountry camping, and we have enjoyed the rich wildflower life in those as well. Roxborough State Park mentioned in an earlier communication combined a lush basin of wildflowers flanked with the beauty of towering fins of red sandstone rock emerging from the ground. There is a line of this red sandstone that stretches NS along but separate from the Front Range. Along its length are many separate parks such as the geological phenomenon

of the Garden of the Gods with its balanced rocks, the native American cliff dwellings of the Anasazi culture at Manitou Springs, and the Red Rocks Natural Amphitheatre where concert seating for 9000 has been superbly constructed between two of the more massive red sandstone fins.

And then come the national parks of which Colorado has two, its most well known being the Rocky Mountain National Park. If the foothill walks were occasionally lungbusting at 7000-8000 ft., then trails in the national park at 10,000 to 12,000 ft. needed care and acclimation to avoid the nausea and debilitation that can come at these altitudes. The views of the snow-clad peaks (over 14,000ft) were also breathtaking. An American couple had told us earlier in our journey, while we shared a hot tub near Mt. Rainier National Park, that we would be disappointed with the American Rockies after having been in the Canadian Rockies. Far from it, as we found it a magical place, giving us access to the lifezones of montane, sub-alpine and alpine that had been denied us by arriving too early in Jasper and Banff.

Each walk brought new finds, from the exquisite calypso orchid and the pale blue and yellow columbine found on the 4 mile return trail to the Calypso Cascades (9200 ft.) in the Wild Basin Area, to the globeflower found on a wetland meadow as we tramped up through snow (again) up to Emerald Lake (10,080 ft.). The lake was in a glaciated corrie with a backdrop of snow-covered Hallett Peak (12,713 ft) and Flattop Mountain (12,324 ft). Combined with the emerald colour of the lake water, it was a unique place of fantasy.

Unfortunately, the fantasy was rudely punctured by a thunderstorm, but we had been dodging those from the moment we arrived in Colorado.

Trail Ridge Road runs EW through the park and is the highest public road that is kept open year round in America. Its highest point is 12,183 ft and it provides a panoramic view of the northern and southern peaks and of the continental divide. One of the more challenging trails leading off the road is a walk across the tree-less alpine tundra just a few feet lower at Rock Cut (12,110 ft.) The high wind is a constant threat there and combined with the altitude means that walking is done with at least five layers of clothing on and in slow motion. Nevertheless, we identified 12 different alpine flowers, all very low-growing and one, a miniature forgetmenot, having a surprisingly strong scent.

Another trail off the road, the Ute Trail (10,500 to over 11,000 ft) marks the migratory route of the nomadic native tribe as it travelled back and forth across the Rockies. This elevation marks the upper extent of the tree line, with a very few windshaped and stunted conifers struggling to maintain a presence. The climate was by comparison relatively softer, and many of the alpine flowers and grass were able to grow a little taller and form a more satisfactory meal to the

elk and yellow-bellied marmot that we had to share the trail with. As I have done on a number of occasions, I couldn't help feeling that here was an unchanged landscape that would have been familiar to the native Americans of hundreds to a thousand years ago.

A last walk in the Rockies was around Lily Lake (8880 ft) with one of the Park Rangers in a wildflower walk that is part of their free program of events. We were the only people to turn up for the 90 minute walk and so Walt, our guide, sensing we weren't exactly novices, abandoned his usual approach, and we spent a delightful time trading wildflower stories and letting Walt bring the whole thing alive for us. Walt was a sprightly retiree (wicked sense of humour) who loved the national parks such that he moved to the Rockies to work summers as a Ranger and then travel in the winter. We joined in an appreciation of the natural world, with Walt revelling in the sighting of a rare Williams sapsucker returning to nest this year, and to his delight, us being able to identify a couple of plants that even Walt hadn't got around to. Priceless.

Our very last walk in Colorado was a 3-mile loop in Meyer Ranch Park (Jefferson County Open Space) that our guidebook promised would give us an orchid called spotted coralroot. Well, we didn't find that orchid, but we did find another coral root and three other new plants in elephant heads (because the flowers look like little elephant heads), a ground clematis, and a dwarf lousewort that we had seen in bud with Walt. Our final motel move followed that walk (23 in all) and a pitcher of very decent Sierra Nevada beer accompanied our dinner, crowning what had been an extraordinary plant search afforded by the Front Range hills in Colorado. As I quipped before, who'd a thunk it?

The next day we went through extended security checks again at Denver airport (for some reason, we were always flagged up for additional security on all the internal flights) and while Diana headed off for a flight to Atlanta and then on to Pensacola, I took a flight to Chicago and then picked up an overnight flight back to Manchester, arriving last Monday morning in the pouring rain. The coolness of the climate was actually some relief as the weeks in Colorado had been a constant battle over insect bites to my limbs, complicated by an allergy that added rashes along with the welts of the bites. It seemed no amount of anti-histamine, DEET spray or covering up with bug pants would make any difference, and it was only the joy of finding wildflowers each day that kept my resilience up in the face of lack of sleep due to the itchiness and soreness, let alone the unsightliness of my limbs. I hope to emerge sometime next week with more regular sleep patterns, some spotless limbs and with some thought of what to do next, now that my odyssey is over.