

Arctic Adventure 2012

A chronology of an adventurous trip to the North American Arctic and Return

By R. Claude (Frenchy) Corbeille

On 1 July, Barbara and I embarked on our “Arctic Adventure,” a motor vehicle/fifth wheel trip that would encompass more than three weeks and 8,075 miles. Our destination was Inuvik, North West Territory (NWT), Canada, reachable on land only via the Dempster Highway, an unpaved all-weather road that crosses and re-crosses the continental divide three times, as well as the Arctic Circle. It is one of two roadways in North America that cross the Arctic Circle, the other being the Dalton Highway that stretches north from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. The Dalton Highway is unpaved also, but is referred to as a highway nevertheless. The Dempster was our route to the land of the midnight sun, close enough on the heels of the summer solstice to experience that phenomenon.

My part in preparations consisted mainly of vehicle readiness. Our truck has a set of fairly new Goodyear Wrangler tires, four wheel drive, and undercarriage protection, including a steel shield for the fuel tank. I made guards for the headlights and radiator/grill using half-inch mesh hardware cloth in a metal frame and lashed them in place with nylon straps. A change to new synthetic oil completed preparations on the truck. I equipped the fifth wheel with two spare tires, in deference to the 900-plus miles I expected to travel on dirt roads.

Barbara, for her part, was in charge of the menu and all food items. She started several weeks ahead of departure, preparing first a menu for each of the days we planned to be on the road, with a few days beyond in case of an unplanned extension. Then she prepared and pre-cooked all of the meals, for each menu item, so all we had to do on the road was remember to take next day’s meals out of the freezer compartment, and then heat it, in a microwave when 110-volt power was available, on the stovetop when it was not. I call it Barbara’s “Meals on Wheels.” I know of no other person who is capable of, first, preparing a menu to cover some 24 days on the road, and secondly, to pre-cook and stow in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator, all of the resulting meals. The fact that I returned from the excursion weighing one pound more than I did when we left is testament to her skills in planning and preparation.

Our first day on the road was rather unexciting since we were crossing northern Wisconsin, circumnavigating Minneapolis, and then heading westward on I-94. We sighted two bald eagles in Central Wisconsin, near the Wisconsin River, and one in Minnesota. To its credit, the one in Minnesota was flying eastward toward Wisconsin. We stopped about 60 miles short of North Dakota which we entered early on Monday, 2 July. We stayed with I-94 to Bismarck, and then took U.S. 83 north to Minot and U.S. 52 to Portal, ND and the border crossing into Saskatchewan. Somewhere northwest of Minot we started to see fields of green and gold, some more gold than others. At first I thought we were seeing soybean fields with a liberal lacing of mustard weed, but eventually concluded that the golden plants were not mustard, but some other plant with which I was unfamiliar. During a re-fueling stop I checked with a local man and learned that we were seeing fields of canola. That was merely the beginning. We crossed into Saskatchewan and the canola continued. In fact, it grew in lateral extent, all the way across Saskatchewan and through most of Alberta. If your local grocer ever runs out of canola oil, please blame someone other than the Canadian farmers. They are certainly doing their part to maintain the supply. We stayed overnight about 50 miles into Saskatchewan.

Day 3 was spent on the northern plains, through Saskatchewan’s capitol of Regina and on to Saskatoon and link-up with the Yellowhead Trail, my favorite trans-Canada route. The

Yellowhead, or Highway 16, gets its name from the nickname of the trapper/explorer who discovered this easy passage through the Canadian Rockies. His name was Pierre Tousant and he was of French and Indian extraction. Because he had a shock of blond hair, he became known as "Tete Jaune," French for Yellow Head, and when he discovered this desirable route through a rather formidable mountain barrier separating east from west, it became known as the "Yellowhead Trail." The highest point on the route is only a little over three thousand feet.

Travelling among spring wheat and canola fields, with woodlands and potholes interspersed throughout the region proved interesting, if not exciting. Each pothole had its quota of ducks, mostly family units, wherein Mama Duck acted as flagship, guiding her flotilla of offspring to the cover of rushes. Many ducklings appeared to be aged in days, rather than weeks. Small wonder that this portion of our continent is frequently referred to as "North America's Duck Factory." A young cow moose jogging through a golden canola field provided an idyllic moment, until I realized that the moose's course and ours would coincide a few hundred yards ahead of our truck. I applied the brakes, but the driver in back of us ignored the brake lights and came whizzing around us. Fortunately for him, the moose responded to my blaring horn by turning back into the canola field, removing danger of a collision. The afternoon of Day 3 was interspersed with showers and thunderstorms, some of them quite heavy. All the while, we were being ushered along, for the third straight day, by a southeast wind. My meteorological mind simply could not ignore this unlooked for good fortune and I concluded that low pressure to the west of us was responsible for this phenomenon. I filed away that bit of data and enjoyed the showers. Then we started seeing small gulls, one or two here and there, and then scores of them. They had black heads and black wing tips, strongly resembling laughing gulls, but way out of area for laughing gulls. Barbara paged through the field guide while I drove and learned that we were seeing, for the first time in our lives, Franklin's gulls. They nest on the northern prairies and spend our winter months on the west coast – of South America!

After stopping some 40 miles short of the Alberta border, we awoke the morning of Independence Day to the sound of thunder, pelting rain, and a fierce wind. A leaden sky featured low-slung clouds skimming the tree tops, whipping along at 40 knots or more. The wind direction was West-Southwest. We had to travel generally west, and the wind load on the front of the fifth wheel was sufficiently strong as to keep the drive train out of overdrive, most of the time. Our Fourth of July featured no fireworks on the ground, but those in the celestial dome more than made up for that shortfall. We battled headwinds and rain most of the day, into early afternoon, until we turned onto a more northerly route that runs between a lot of trees. My supply of Canadian dollars was dwindling so we stopped just outside Edmonton, capitol city of Alberta, and swapped out a supply at a bank. We prefer to use the proper currency, rather than be treated at the whims of local merchants. We stopped for the night while still in Alberta, but only miles, not leagues, from British Columbia.

Day Five dawned calm and beautiful, with a virtually cloudless sky. It seemed like a perfect day to embark on the Alaska Highway, or "ALCAN," and we reached milepost zero, Dawson Creek, BC, at around 1000, just about 2,000 miles from Brillion. We were on that route only a few miles when a 4X4 mule deer, antlers heavy in velvet, crossed the highway ahead of us. A few miles later, an oncoming truck threw a pebble which struck our unprotected windshield, causing a dent, which eventually became a crack. A few miles after that, a different truck did the same thing, so now we have two dents which became cracks. During the remaining six thousand miles of travel, we never received another ding until we were almost home. We reached Fort Nelson, British Columbia (BC) that night and stayed over in an RV park. It seemed

that about half of the park occupants carried Canadian license plates, and I deduced that, overall, traffic on the ALCAN was on the light side. I have wondered off and on if that stems in part from the rising popularity of cruise ships which take a traveler to Anchorage where he can then rent a vehicle and tour Alaska, rather than make the trek up the ALCAN. Others simply fly to Anchorage or Fairbanks and rent a vehicle. For some, time constraints can make that a desirable and viable option. We like to see what there is to see along the way, so we had to drive.

Day 6 was spent entirely on the ALCAN, between Fort Nelson, BC and Teslin, Yukon Territory (YT). The number of wild animal sightings was greater that day than on any other of the entire trip. In addition to eight black bears, we saw two grizzlies, three mountain caribou, one stone sheep (nice ram), four moose, and six wood bison. These latter are an endangered species, closely akin to the plains bison, but dwellers of woodlands. They are more solitary beasts and seemingly seek no company in their surroundings, quite the opposite of the plains animals which often exist in vast herds. Stone sheep are another rare beast, but not endangered. They are one of the four species of wild sheep indigenous to North America and are found only in the mountains of Northern British Columbia, in Yukon Territory and North West Territory. Our stay in Teslin, a small community on the northeastern shore of a large, long lake of that name was in an RV park occupied by only a few travelers and zillions of mosquitoes. The mosquitoes were penetrating our defenses through the air conditioner for which cool temperatures negated a need, so we covered the ducts with heavy paper from a shopping bag. That solved the mosquito problem.

Day 7 resumed travel on the ALCAN until we got to Whitehorse, the capitol city of Yukon Territory, where we switched to the Klondike Highway, going north toward Dawson. We crossed the Yukon River, east to west, just south of Whitehorse, then re-crossed back to the east side at Carmacks, YT. Those were two of the only three bridges across the Yukon River over its entire length of more than 2,000 miles. The remaining bridge that crosses the Yukon is north of Fairbanks on the Dalton Highway. We had lunch on the river bank there in July, 1999. There was a paucity of wildlife along the ALCAN from Teslin to Whitehorse and all we saw were one red fox and some snowshoe hares. We saw no animals along the Klondike Highway. At 1520 on Day 7 we reached the start of the Dempster Highway, 3,217 miles from Brillion. The first three miles has a McAdam paved surface – then things changed – for the worse. A light rain was falling and the road was muddy.

In the first one-fourth mile, a sign advises travelers that there are no medical services ahead. Another sign advises that there is no fuel available for 385 Km, or about 240 miles. When the pavement ends and the pace must be slowed, because of the teeth jarring potholes and bumps, I had this passing thought about whether or not we should continue. It was a very passing thought. We did not travel 3,200 miles so that we could turn back! No indeed! We would press on, at whatever slow pace was dictated by the road surface, but we would press on. We stopped for the night in a gravel pit, where materials for road construction had been extracted, leaving a level and pleasant parking area right next to a gurgling stream (rushing river might be a more appropriate appellation). Our fifth wheel and truck were both well coated in mud. I had had the good sense to bring along a 5-gallon bucket and a brush with a long and extendable handle, so while Barbara got our dinner going, I hauled water from the stream and washed the mud from the fifth wheel. After supper I washed the truck, so we traveled toward Inuvik, NWT in two clean units. We were sufficiently close to the Arctic Circle that the night never grew dark, even though the sun did disappear for a short while. It just never went far enough below the horizon to bring on darkness. We slept well, with the shades drawn.

Day 8, which would be spent entirely on the Dempster, greeted us with an azure sky, cloudless, with no appreciable wind. We were surrounded by mountains on all sides and after a hasty breakfast, made our way into the most incredible beauty to be found anywhere on our planet. The highway climbed higher, upstream along the gurgling brook, eventually topping out on a vast extensive ridge from which one can see forever. We soon crossed the continental divide, the first of three such crossings, well above tree line at something over 4,000 feet. I have an altimeter in our truck, but did not stare at it long enough to get a precise reading. I should mention that the only guard rails on the entire length of this 450-mile road are on the two longer bridges. Attention to driving is definitely warranted, especially if one wants to avoid most of the potholes and washboards. When the road descended from the ridge and into a different watershed, we were then threading our way among the mountains, with boreal forests in all of the lower elevations. Wild flowers bloomed everywhere and when we entered an area that had been devastated by fire a year or two ago, we were treated to a sea of deep pink. It seems that even in the Arctic, when vegetation is wiped out by fire, fireweed is the first blooming plant to add new life to the area.

We saw a cow moose just off the road – a really large animal – and when we stopped and reversed for a better view, she quickly headed into a thicket, leading us to believe she had a calf to attend to. Several miles further along, we had a huge bull moose cross the road ahead of us, lending credence to the glowing tales of how large are the moose of the Yukon. That was at about 0830 and we never saw another large animal the remainder of the day. We did see several snowshoe hares, one cross fox and many rock ptarmigans. With ridges and valleys all along the route, there was a lot of climbing and descending in our travels. Altitudes changed by 1,500 to 2,000 feet quite often, always easily noted by the boreal forests giving way to open treeless tundra during the climbs with the forests returning during the descents. From the ridges, the horizon appeared to be 60 or 70 miles away. We were often higher than the patches of snow and some of the lakes were still ice covered. Breathtaking scenery was commonplace, but never so common as to escape our deep admiration for God's arrangement of geographical features. We never ceased to thank Him for putting us where we were at a given time.

The half-way point on the Dempster is marked by the settlement of Eagle Plain, population 8. We did not stop there because it had nothing we needed and we reached the Arctic Circle at 1100, where we consumed our lunch, which featured Wisconsin Cheese as the main ingredient. Barbara dined on aged sharp cheddar and I had aged brick. A lady from Alaska, travelling alone, took our photo, posed in front of the Arctic Circle sign, and I took hers. It was there that I discovered that the Dempster had taken its first toll on our fifth wheel by popping an exposed water line, causing us to lose most of our fresh water. Prior to proceeding, I put in a temporary plug and then we stopped at the next stream crossing from which I hauled water in a large (6-gallon) plastic container we brought along for just such a requirement, filling our tank to most of its capacity. At 1300 we crossed the frontier from Yukon to North West Territory and advanced our clocks one hour to conform to the Mountain Time Zone. We soon reached the Peel River which is crossed by ferry, free of charge, and then on to Fort McPherson, a larger settlement of more than 250 souls, both Indigenous and Caucasian, with the former comprising the majority.

It was about ten miles beyond Fort McPherson that we experienced a bit of bad luck when the left rear spring on the fifth wheel broke, followed by the shackle links. I was made graphically aware of the problem when the fifth wheel suddenly veered toward the middle of the road and a glance in the mirror showed the axle behaving rather strangely. Almost immediately,

the left rear tire blew, with a resounding pop, followed by its mate on the right rear. I stopped as soon as practicable, which was pretty quickly considering we were not going very fast, and got out to survey the situation. It was not a pretty sight. I carry spare wheels and tires, but not spare springs and shackle links. Each passing vehicle stopped to offer help and advice; one driver said he would go into Fort McPherson and get Danny Wright, a mechanic who could fabricate new links and was capable of fixing anything. While we waited for Danny to show up, I fabricated a better plug for the broken water line. Eventually, a van driven by a Caucasian from Inuvik, advertising arctic tours and guest lodging, stopped to offer assistance. I apprised him of the fact that we were waiting for a Danny Wright and he said he knows Danny, and he will go and get him. He, too, disappeared in a cloud of dust headed for Fort McPherson, and about thirty minutes later, he returned, only to inform us that Danny had spent too much time celebrating something and would be unavailable for repairs. He said that he was on his way to Dawson and would not be back until Wednesday, but if we could get our rig to Inuvik, we would be welcome to whatever parts we might find in his several years collection. He was certain he had shackle links and was quite sure we could find a spring that would be at least a temporary fix. The immediate problem then became getting the rest of the way to Inuvik, the north terminal on the Dempster. After much surveying and assessing, we concluded that we could force the axle back into alignment and keep it there by chaining it to the front axle, using an aircraft tie-down chain that I always carry in the truck bed. We then were able, using the two jacks I also carry, to lift the frame high enough above the axle so that we could insert a large wood block, one of two I use when I drop the legs on the front of the fifth wheel. When we lowered the frame, the block was held securely in place by the weight of the fifth wheel and the axle was chained in place. It could not slip aft and had no inclination to go forward, so we should be able to proceed – slowly and carefully. The problem remaining was the absence of brakes on the fifth wheel because they are electrically operated and the wires got wiped out when the axle swung back and the tires blew. Now both my spare tires were on the ground, and I did not even want to think about a flat tire.

We had another river to cross – the McKenzie, at its confluence with the Red River of the Arctic. I helped a motorcyclist get his repaired tire re-inflated while we waited for the ferry and then we experienced a fairly uneventful crossing, first over the Red River to an Inuvialuit Village, then the McKenzie to a no-man's land. We travelled about 20 miles more, then hove to in another gravel pit. Gravel pits do make splendid RV parks, as long as one is not concerned about the amenities. The sun did not set that day, but merely swung low in the sky. We had had a most eventful and trying day, so I was physically spent and both of us retired before 2100. Sometime in the night a most violent thunderstorm struck, complete with a driving rain and lightning flashes everywhere. I was one very surprised meteorologist, because I never expected that type weather phenomenon so far north on our continent. When we finally arrived at our destination and parked in the yard of our roadside benefactor, I was almost immediately advised that many of the Inuvialuit people had experienced thunder and lightning for the first time in their lives!

Our destination of Inuvik was reached on Day 9, 3,707 miles from Brillion. The female half of the couple who run the guest lodges and arrange arctic tours directed us to a spot in their RV Park, which consists solely of a 15-amp 110-volt receptacle – no water, nor any other amenities. I expected it to be expensive, but the \$35/day exceeded my wildest guess. The first order of business for me was to canvas downtown Inuvik for a tire vendor. I found one at the first fuel depot we checked and had new tires mounted on the empty rims. Surprisingly, the tires,

while expensive, did not cost as much more as I had expected – about a forty percent mark-up over what one would find in Brillion. I re-fueled when I picked up the tires, paying \$6.37/gallon for diesel fuel, which was eight cents per gallon less than I had paid at the junction of the Dempster and Klondike Highways. The Arctic Tours couple keeps a handyman on their staff and I was advised that I could hire him to help with my repairs. His name is Alex, he is an Inuvialuit native, and he has access to the company shop and all the equipment. That last proved valuable. We found some shackle links in good time and eventually located a used spring. The spring was not an exact replacement part, but considering my situation, I deemed it close enough, especially with a thriving metropolis like Whitehorse, YT on my return route. With a lot of luck, some really good and much of the other kind, we eventually got the underpinnings reassembled and the fifth wheel was once more resting on fair footing. I then set about making arrangements for a visit to the Arctic Ocean. I had a wolf cross the road in front of my truck while I was skirting the north side of Inuvik – a surprise and a thrilling one.

On Day 10, while awaiting air transport to Tuktoyaktuk, NWT, we ventured into town for breakfast at a local eatery. The fare was modest, but not in price, as one might expect so far off the main stream. We visited a few shops, bought a few souvenirs for friends in Brillion, and learned what we could absorb about the community. Electricity is generated by a fuel oil fired boiler. Formerly, the town had two natural gas wells that powered the boiler but one well filled with water and the other went dry. A shop owner advised me that his electric bill in his home is now \$600 per month and it will increase to \$1,200 per month in the early winter. Residents are lobbying for the drilling of a new gas well, and I now understood why I was paying \$35/day for a parking space with an electrical receptacle. We returned to our fifth wheel to check on my flight, which had been delayed because of weather at Tuktoyaktuk. I had a little time to kill so I took a walk through some muskeg. In a matter of fifty feet or so I knew that I did not want to walk very far in this type terrain. Each footfall sunk in seven to ten inches, making a walk something of a challenge. The permafrost layer is a foot or less below the surface and everything above the frost seems to be an insulating sponge. Trees grow there, but not very well. The layers of branches were only an inch or two apart, telling me that the growth rate is very slow indeed. The roots do not penetrate the permafrost, so the trees are very shallow rooted, causing them to lean over at all kinds of crazy angles. Some refer to it as a drunken forest, a fairly apt description of what I saw.

At 1400 my plane was scheduled for departure and I made my way to the airport in time to get aboard. Barbara wanted no part of that flight and stayed in the fifth wheel. I told her that if I failed to return she would have to enlist the aid of someone to drive our rig back to Brillion for her. The flight to Tuktoyaktuk was mainly over the McKenzie River Delta, supposedly the tenth largest delta in the world. It gave me pause when the pilot advised us (five passengers) that the colorful stuff visible on the tundra below was the remains of a plane that crashed some time back. We landed in Tuktoyaktuk with a 20-knot crosswind. The pilot did a superb job of setting the plane on the runway so I knew he had experienced crosswind landings before. He would do so again when we returned to Inuvik. Our tour was conducted by a late-middle-aged indigenous couple who spend eight months of the year off on their own in their trapping cabin. They proudly showed us the tanned pelts of animals they trap and hunt, including such beasts as wolverines, wolves, muskox, sable, arctic fox (white phase), cross fox and caribou. Then we had dinner at their table, eating samples of their various foods. Whitefish chowder was innocent enough and the muskox stew was tasty, albeit requiring a lot of mastication, but the beluga whale meat, dried and smoked, was not especially palatable. Dried smoked whitefish was also good. After dinner we toured a freezer storage facility, dug down into the permafrost some sixty years

ago. A vertical ladder takes one down about thirty feet to a series of dug-out rooms where the temperature is about fifteen degrees. Our tour guide lady stores whitefish there for dog food, as do other users. No one uses the natural freezer for home edibles nowadays, since households all have freezer chests. We then motored over to the shore of the Arctic Ocean where a stony beach awaited our bare feet. There was a certificate to be had for toe dunking, but I was bent on wading in the Arctic Ocean. A young man from Toronto amused himself similarly but the two blokes from Ottawa stripped down to their shorts and plunged into those icy waters. I have vivid recollection of swimming in the Bering Sea in 1954 and I wanted no part of an Arctic Ocean swim. I am older now and I like to believe that I am also wiser.

There is a DEW line early warning radar unit at Tuktoyaktuk, installed by the United States in the early 50s. It was a manned installation for most of its life, but now it is on automatic operation, with a monitor somewhere in Maryland. The man told me that if one walks into the compound, in short order a voice asks him to state his business and reason for being there. Tuktoyaktuk is situated at 69 Degrees, 27 Minutes North latitude and I would guess that duty manning that far-flung station was not highly sought after.

Bird sightings in the far north were something of a disappointment. We observed, for the most part, birds which we have already seen way down south. The only difference is that we were seeing them on their breeding and nesting grounds. Golden Plovers, for example, are winter residents of the warm Pacific Islands, but here we were seeing them where they spend their summers. Lapland Longspurs are winter visitors to the Brillion area, but they are more colorful by far when they are in their breeding grounds. Robins were quite common, as were Flickers, White Crowned Sparrows and Harris's Sparrows. I had not seen Northern Phalaropes since leaving Pacific Missile Range in Southern California, where they spent several months each winter. Now I know where they went when they left Point Mugu.

Our Tuktoyaktuk tour eventually came to an end and we boarded our six-seater for the return flight to Inuvik. It was our last night to be there and it was with good memories along with strong trepidation that we planned for our early morning departure.

Day 11 was a rain day, making the Dempster a muddy experience. We arrived at the McKenzie River ferry forty minutes before the first boat would leave, so we were first in line. It was a long wait with a lot to think about. We knew our left rear spring was questionable so we decided on a top speed of 40mph, and that only when conditions were really great. That did not happen often. The road to Fort McPherson was muddy but reasonably good travelling and we arrived at the Peel River ferry as it was loading. We drove aboard and were headed across the river immediately. A truck driver advised us that we would see lots of caribou near the Yukon Territory frontier because there was a migration of the Porcupine Herd ongoing, but his prophecy was ill founded. The leaden sky and constant rain limited visibility markedly and the mountain tops were shrouded in clouds. The portions of the road that were lower in elevation were a sea of mud and I had to use four wheel drive to keep from slewing around. It is quite disconcerting to glance out the side window and see ones towed vehicle out there beside him, so four wheel drive was a really great option. As expected, the going was slow, but we were OK with that, having accepted the fact that we would spend at least two days on our return to pavement. Early in the afternoon I saw a van coming toward us that I knew to be the one driven by our benefactor, owner/operator of the Arctic Tours and Lodging. We both stopped for a chat and I apprised him of all that had transpired in the repair process. He advised us that, due to the heavy rains, the road was closed beyond Eagle Plain and that we would be forced to spend a day or two there awaiting road repair. We arrived at Eagle Plain at around 1430, parked in the large parking area

among other vehicles similarly delayed, and settled in for a long wait. When the rain stopped, we took a walk out among the trees, looking for whatever birds we might find. Since we were only a few miles south of the Arctic Circle, night came without an accompanying darkness, and once again we slept with shades drawn.

The morning of Day 12 was a spirit-lifting event, featuring a clear sky. We had breakfast in the Eagle Plain restaurant, and while enjoying the fare, a construction worker entered and announced that the road was now open. He went on to say that it would be best if the trucks go first to sort of pack down the mud and that the smaller rigs towing trailers wait a couple hours. That was about 0830 and we waited until 1000. We again proceeded at little more than a snail's pace. Both truck and fifth wheel were coated in mud from stem to stern and it was our intent that we would remain overnight in the same gravel pit we had used on our way north, only 200 miles away, in order to scrub off all the mud. It was a great day to be travelling on the Dempster and all of the scenery we were now viewing in reverse was brand new to us. Breathtaking and majestic are two adjectives that work well, but "indescribably beautiful" really sums it all up. I would have enjoyed all of it more were it not for two facts. One, I knew the left rear spring on the fifth wheel was really questionable, and Two, I had no brakes on the fifth wheel. When the axle swung aft, the brake wires broke (electric brakes) and the tire chewed up the wiring in the wheel well, so that part of the repairs was left for later. I did not relish the thought of another roadside repair stop so we were content to proceed slowly. After all, slow is always better than stopped! At around 1630 we reached the gravel pit and parked near the gurgling stream. The first thing I noted upon exiting the truck was that the left rear tire on the fifth wheel was destroyed, along with its wheel. I had been checking everything about every ten miles but when we got within about twenty miles of our destination, I grew complacent and performed no more checks. Somewhere in that twenty miles the tire blew, unbeknownst to me, and eventually disintegrated.

I proceeded with mud removal from our units while Barbara got dinner on the table. I soon lost track of how many five-gallon buckets of water I hauled from the stream, but it was lots of them. I stopped to eat long before finishing the wash job. Once the mud, or at least most of it, was removed, I set about replacement of the ruined wheel. One of the six lug bolts was damaged and another broke off, fortunately not adjacent to each other, so I now had another problem with which to contend. I was beginning to feel a little bit like Job, and we still had some 45 miles of the Dempster ahead of us. I disliked the looks of the salvaged spring because one leaf was turning sideways, so I jacked the frame up and re-inserted my wood block again. This put the trailer weight directly on the axle and constituted a more secure mode for the rest of what lay ahead. We were down to one spare tire now, but believed we would be fine with such a short distance to "civilization."

Day 13 was another pleasantly dry and sunny one and we were in good spirits as we made our way on the Dempster toward its junction with the Klondike Highway and pavement! I experienced some nostalgic thoughts as I considered the fact that this truly great experience, with all of its splendor, would soon be a part of the past – something to be put in the memory bank but not something to ever be experienced again by us. We continued to check our rear-view mirrors to verify the roundness of our tires and during one such check I noted that the left rear trailer tire was not as round as it should be. I stopped, decided I might really be Job, and went about installing our only remaining spare tire. We reached the junction without further mishap and drove into the service station yard. Signs proclaimed tire service, which we were very much in need of. We were to spend most of the day there, first getting the tire repaired. Lug bolt repairs

required parts that were not available, so I unhitched the fifth wheel and drove the 25 miles to Dawson to the Napa store. They did not have the proper size lug bolts either, but I did note the availability of springs. I asked about spring replacement on our fifth wheel but such service would not be available until "sometime next week." I drove back to the tire repair place and asked if they could replace the spring and, most happily, they could. So Barbara and I drove once again to Dawson where we purchased not one, but two springs – one for each side. That was Barbara's good idea – replace both springs, and then both sides would have a new and stronger foundation. We bought lunch at a local eatery, enjoyed the little of Dawson we had time to see, and headed back once again to the tire place. While repairs were being made, I noticed that the left front tire on the fifth wheel had lost some of its roundness. My pressure gauge barely registered any pressure at all, so that tire too was removed for repair. The Dempster had got in its final lick by sending a shard of wire from the shredded left rear tire into the tire right ahead of it. The puncture wound was too close to the bead to permit repair so we had to purchase our third new tire. It seems hard to believe now, but that was our final bit of misfortune. With new and stronger springs in place and good rubber on the ground, we made our way down the Klondike Highway, planning to get the brakes repaired in Whitehorse, the capitol city of the Yukon Territory with a population of over 30,000 souls. After about an hour of driving we found a turn-off to a small stream, used by fishermen to access the waters. We parked there for the night and went to sleep to the sound of water flowing over a bed of rocks.

Day 14 was highlighted by travel down the Klondike Highway toward Whitehorse. We saw a porcupine with one youngster (not sure what the youngsters are called – perhaps "young porcupines") and one cross fox. A mid-sized black bear fed along the roadside and we saw magpies again for the first time since leaving the Arctic. We ate lunch and refueled in Whitehorse and then set about finding an RV service center. 14 July was a Saturday and just about everything shut down at noon. One place stated they might be able to get to it sometime next week. Having come over the Dempster with no brakes on the trailer, and down the Klondike another 400 miles, I figured I could make it over the Cassiar Highway and on to the more populated part of British Columbia. We continued eastward, now back on the ALCAN, toward its junction with the Cassiar. We stopped for the night in an RV park about 40 miles short of the Cassiar and experienced a few hours of darkness for the first time in over a week.

With an early departure, we reached the Cassiar Highway on Day 15 and headed south through the central part of British Columbia on another of one of the world's most scenic routes. If you do not like winding roads with no centerline painted on, nor steep hills and sharp curves with guard rails no more than wishful thinking, then maybe the Cassiar is not for you. If, however, you relish unmatched beauty from calm lakes reflecting the surrounding mountains, being surrounded by glaciated peaks on all sides, having to slow to allow a bear to cross ahead, you may find the absence of centerlines and guardrails no more than a minor distraction. The real up side is that the Cassiar is paved – over its entire 400 miles. The grades can be challenging, but less so than some that we found on the ALCAN. Compared to the Dempster, it was a breeze, and the scenery was singularly beautiful. It was different from that of the high arctic region, but a highway threading its way between the peaks of the Cassiar Range cannot help but offer panoramic views at every turn. At the southern terminus of the Cassiar, at its junction with the Yellowhead Highway, we turned right – WEST! We were less than 200 miles from Prince Rupert and the Pacific Ocean, and we wanted to visit both. We stopped for the night just east of Terrace, BC where we booked two nights in a small and very pleasant RV park.

Early on Day 16 we drove to Terrace and had breakfast at the local Tim Horton's. I have no idea who Tim Horton is or was, but restaurants bearing that name have sprung up all over Canada in more recent years. Their main offering is a continental breakfast with a large selection of donuts and pastries and coffees, teas and hot chocolate. Most of them have a drive-up window and it seems that every Canadian on his/her way to work stops at a Tim Horton's on the way. We sometimes frequent them for a breakfast snack wherein I have coffee, Barbara has hot chocolate, and we each have a croissant and a Danish pastry. Barbara can spot a Tim Horton's before we even get into a town and she knows the location of just about all of them between Prince Rupert and Halifax. For the record, Tim Horton's coffee is really good, and I know what good coffee is supposed to taste like. But I digress – we ate, then continued on to Prince Rupert.

The drive from Terrace to Prince Rupert is another very scenic byway, often overlooked because one sees it only if he has cause to visit Prince Rupert. The Skeena River, which the highway and railway parallel, cuts a path through the towering coastal range. Glaciers cap all of the high peaks and extend down the valleys, where run-off forms fast flowing streams with towering waterfalls. All of the cascades were beautiful and some were truly spectacular. So just when we thought we had seen almost everything, God threw a bunch of waterfalls into the mix.

Our aim was to have a seafood dinner centered around fresh halibut, with a sprinkling of other offerings from the area, such as scallops. Upon learning that our seafood platter included no Dungeness crab, we bought two to take back to our fifth wheel for our supper. After all, there is no point in going all the way to the Pacific Ocean and then coming away with less than what it has to offer.

Prince Rupert is quite unique in its own right, and exists first as the western terminal of the Canadian Northern Railway. In the early 1900s, a need existed to move grain from the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to a shipping point on the west end of Canada. Some entrepreneurial soul whose name escapes me got the railroad built and had grain elevators installed near the ocean – actually, a well-protected extension of the ocean that resembles a fiord. A few buildings sprang into being and it was deemed necessary to name the place. There is no real person named “Prince Rupert” who was a part of the British Empire, but the town's name came about from some kind of a naming contest in which Prince Rupert emerged the winner.

During WWII, a garrison of Canadian and American troops was stationed there, complete with shore batteries, to protect against possible attack by the Japanese. Equal in importance to the garrison was the gathering of sphagnum moss from the coniferous trees of the surrounding rain forest. The moss was widely used in the field treatment of wounds because it is clean and highly absorbent. I do not know if people were paid money to collect the moss or if it was done out of patriotism, but the Canadian Northern Railway served as a good transportation mode to get the moss in the hands of those who needed it.

Concurrent with the transportation of grain westward, a fish cannery went into operation in a bay adjacent to Prince Rupert, in a location called Port Edward. The same locomotives that pulled cars laden with grain to the shipping point, pulled cars loaded with canned salmon to the markets in the east. Mother ships and flash freezing have relegated the cannery to museum status nowadays, but the grain terminal still functions as originally planned. A side note here: The cannery workers at one point started clamoring for fresh milk and none was to be had. Some enterprising soul bought a herd of dairy cows in Seattle and had them delivered to Prince Rupert by ship. There is no nice beach landing in Prince Rupert, so when the ship anchored in the

harbor, the cows were pushed overboard, leaving them to swim ashore. It seems most of them made it, but not all, and the bay is now called Cow Bay. One could easily assume that the cows were black and white Holsteins because there are numerous signs and store fronts near the waterfront that use the black and white motif of a Holstein cow.

The drive back to Terrace disclosed numerous huge truckloads of both logs and of finished dimensional lumber, all destined for shipment from Prince Rupert. We also met several trains on the rail line adjacent to the highway that consisted of scores of railcars carrying coal. Canadian friends with whom we met later advised us that the wood and wood products are destined for oriental ports and the coal, mined in British Columbia, would be going to China.

I had now been to Prince Rupert twice in my life and had not seen one of the legendary white bears. The white bears are actually *Ursus Americanus*, or black bears, but they are colored white, just like some black bears are cinnamon colored. I had hoped to see one, but admittedly, such sightings are rare. It is just that the area around Prince Rupert is kind of home to this white strain, and hope springs eternal in the heart of this sailor. We dined on our Dungeness crab that evening. There is a sizeable RV dealer and service center in Terrace and I once again attempted to arrange repairs of our fifth wheel brakes. Only if we could wait around a few days could we get repairs, so I opted for a stop in Houston, BC, our next stop en route home.

Day 17 was a short driving day since the Terrace to Houston route is only about 175 miles. We booked into a nice RV Park and I dialed up my friend Raymond, a fellow hunter, fisherman and sometimes guide. Our paths last crossed in 2003 so we had a lot of ground to cover. One of Raymond's two daughters who now lives in Surry, near Vancouver, BC, was in town for a visit. She was a twelve-year-old school girl the last time I had seen her and now she is transformed into a lovely young woman, confidently making her way in the world. Sufficed to say, it was a positive experience. Our attempt at achieving brake repairs once again met with negative results and I resigned myself to make the remainder of our return relying solely on my truck brakes, which are uncommonly good. It was not what I wanted to do, but it was the only practical avenue open to us. We needed to exercise more than the usual amount of care in staying well behind other vehicles and I made more than the normal amount of use of the truck's engine and drive train to keep downhill speeds under control.

We continued our eastward trek along the Yellowhead on Day 18, through Prince George and up the Frazer River drainage. There was little with which we were unfamiliar between Houston and Prince George, but everything east of there was new, exciting and beautiful. The Frazer River originates in the Canadian Rockies and once again we found ourselves surrounded by majestic snow-capped peaks. The scenery and the day were both gorgeous with an abundance of altocumulus lenticularis present over the peaks. Those are the lens shaped clouds that form over the peaks when a moisture laden wind blows perpendicular to a sizeable mountain range. They are not a rare phenomenon but it is uncommon to see so many of them at a given time.

The Yellowhead is an easy climb up and through the Canadian Rockies and sometime in late afternoon we crossed into Alberta. We immediately found ourselves in Jasper National Park, resplendent in its mountainous beauty and replete with wildlife. We would love to have parked for the night, but such was not permitted, so we continued on to Hinton, AB where we once again lodged in an RV Park.

We left Hinton, AB on Day 19, but only after a stop at the Tim Horton's. Barbara said it would probably be our last one, but I did not believe that. Then we proceeded across the plains, through the fields of golden canola, now more golden than they had been a couple weeks before, and a liberal mix of spring wheat, taller and very green. For a Green Bay Packer fan, it was a

nice blend of green and gold. A whitetail doe, resplendent in her tawny summer coat, made a pretty sight while feeding in a field of golden canola. As the day progressed, the wind increased, providing two appreciated features. One was the 30-knot tailwind which ushered us on our way. The other was the art work woven by this stiff prairie wind in the fields of spring wheat. The wind created lovely patterns of light and dark green as it bent the headed grain stalks and the patterns appeared as giant ribbons flowing through the fields. At times, they seemed serpentine and alive, as well they were. We reached Saskatchewan by the end of our driving day and hove to in an RV Park just outside Fort Battleford.

We left the RV Park early on Day 20, prepared to make our way across Saskatchewan. Barbara spotted a Tim Horton's so progress was temporarily halted, and then just after we left the town, we saw a timber wolf near the Canadian Pacific Railway, just off the highway. He may have been waiting for a train. From Battleford onward, the Yellowhead takes a southeasterly course and it proved interesting to note the changes in, not only terrain, but in the type crops being grown. The canola gradually became less abundant and the green of the spring wheat was replaced by amber stalks of winter wheat, just before reaching the Manitoba frontier. Sylvinite, an ore from which Potash is refined, is mined in Eastern Saskatchewan. The mines are relatively deep at 3,500 feet below the surface and the extracted ore constitutes an important source of potash, used mainly as a fertilizer. A stop at an information center near Yorkton, SK afforded a chance to see what canola seeds look like. They are small, round, and very dark brown, perhaps 3/32 of an inch in diameter. I did not learn where the oil is squeezed out of them, but I did learn that the harvest is accomplished by combine, similarly to the harvest of wheat and soybeans. We were once again accustomed to having nighttime include darkness and we spent that night in Newaukum, Manitoba, about 175 miles north and west of where we planned to re-enter the U.S.

We continued south and east again on Day 21, again noting the changes in crops with the southward progression. Canola became rare and soybeans became common, along with potatoes, sugar beets, sunflowers, flax, and combines working in the fields of winter wheat. The numerous ponds and potholes which constitute North America's duck factory grew fewer in number and the flotillas of ducklings had fewer members than they had three weeks ago. Baby ducks have a lot of enemies and precious few friends.

We were back in our native land in late morning, crossing the frontier at Pembina, ND. Pembina is only a couple miles from the northwest corner of Minnesota and we were soon headed south in that state, toward U.S. Highway 2. The number of sugar beet fields decreased as the soybean fields increased in number. We crossed the headwaters of the Mississippi River near Bemiji, MN and soon found ourselves in a more wooded setting. A large pine tree, perhaps 30 inches in diameter, snapped off and lying near the road captured my interest, and I soon noted that there were countless hundreds of trees along the roadway that had been either broken off or uprooted, obviously by a very strong wind. The path of destruction was too long to have been caused by a tornado and I idly wondered if the strong wind that impeded our progress on 4 July, north and west of where we now were, may have been a more intense phenomenon when it reached these parts. One north-south forest service road was barricaded and marked "Closed". A glance up the road as we passed showed scores of trees strewn crosswise over the road and I thought the barricade was surely not necessary, since God had already done a pretty good job of blocking passage. Our travels took us to a Corps of Engineers Park on the bank of the Mississippi River, just outside Grand Rapids, MN. I believed that with no more Tim Horton's to impede progress, we would arrive home in the late afternoon of Day 22.

Sunday, 22 July, at 0800 I was refueling in Superior, WI. From there, it was a generally uneventful trek south and east to Brillion. I substituted a Norwegian restaurant in Rice Lake, WI for the Tim Horton's and we had a substantial late-morning meal to carry us home. The fifth wheel is in the service center as I write, having its brakes brought back to life and the broken water line will have a permanent repair made. For the first few days at home, we dined on food left over from Barbara's well-stocked pantry in the fifth wheel and life now goes back to what passes for normal in this household.