

"Two for Art"

The adventures of Bernie and Martha Marks
with Sugar the Campin' Cat
and BluCon, our Lazy Daze mini-motorhome

September 2011

This year's spring and summer brought us some great moments, but in general it was a bumper time. Record heat. Drought. Fire. Smoke. Ash. And to top it off, our beloved traveling companion, 20-year-old Sugar, suffered a major stroke.



Spring started off well enough. We three—Bernie, Martha, and Sugar—took off in BluCon for Palo Duro Canyon State Park in the Texas Panhandle, not what one would normally call "scenic." But Palo Duro Canyon—the US's second largest canyon—is a fine destination. Only the Grand Canyon is larger. PDC is especially spectacular at sunset when the evening light glows on rock walls and rippling water. We were there in May at the height of bird migration. Martha was up before dawn every day, shooting many species brand new to her, including some she could only identify later.



Two interpretations of a Palo Duro Canyon sunset: Martha's panoramic photo and Bernie's oil painting, "Sweet Light."

Among the stars of PDC were the Mississippi Kites soaring overhead. Early one morning, Martha caught one of these raptors still hanging out in his nighttime roost (right).



Even more excitement came from two Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, a beautiful Texas specialty. Martha had just begun shooting a female atop a picnic shelter when she began calling loudly. It wasn't long before the male arrived. He spread his wings, gripped the lady in his claws, and proceeded to do his thing as



Martha (feeling like a voyeur but unwilling to pass up the opportunity) captured the entire sequence. A couple of minutes later, the action was over.

The female flew away, leaving her guy to fluff up and preen. As Bernie later noted, looking at the shots, the bird did everything but light up a smoke.



Here are a few representative shots from the sequence... quite a source of pride for the photographer.



Totally pumped up by this experience, Martha took off for a few days on her own at Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge in southern Colorado. There were plenty of migrants enjoying this great marsh, but



the stars were nesting Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Shown are a singing male and two ladies carrying nesting materials.



Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge on the Río Grande in southern Colorado is what birders call a migrant trap. The mountain is 14,000+ feet Blanca Peak, part of the Sangre de Cristo range.



Early in June, a gigantic wildfire on the AZ-NM border covered northern New Mexico with a choking cloud of smoke and ash, so we took an unplanned two-week trip north to central Colorado, then west over the Rockies. After two days of driving, we found blue skies and breathable air. Highlights included camping inside Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park in Colorado and in Horsethief campground on BLM land outside Canyonlands National Park (left) near Moab, Utah. We'd been to both parks before, but this was the first time we'd ever camped there. Definitely won't be the last time!

The "monsoons" that usually start late in June and deliver over half of Santa Fe's annual 13" of precipitation didn't show up until August. At home in super-dry July, we had scary close views of a fire in the Sangre de Cristo Mts. that burned to within two miles of Santa Fe. No sooner did that end than a bigger, fast-spreading fire roared up near Los Alamos National Lab in the Jemez Mts. to our west, giving daytime displays of massive plumes of smoke and nightly fire shows on the ridges that



went on for weeks. Before it ended, the entire range had burned, including historic and natural treasures like Bandelier National Monument and the Valles Caldera National Preserve. From our home's high vantage point, Martha took daytime shots and, at night, time-lapse photos with a long lens. Here are two from that collection.

Finally, because there will be many people reading this who knew Sugar, we want to end with a testimonial. In the fall of 1991, while mourning the loss of 20-year-old José Gato, we found Sugar—clearly the runt of a litter—in an animal shelter. She and her fellow adoptee, Snooty, were just what we needed. Snooty died young, but Sugar lived long and well and brightened our lives for two full decades.



She was a tough-and-sweet seven-pounder who spent the last two years of her life going wherever we went in our motorhome, never complaining as we hauled her around the Southwest, over the Rockies, and as far north as Wyoming. At home on July 27, a stroke left her unable to use her hind legs. We nursed her for a week, hoping she'd recover. That never happened, so on August 3 she went gently to sleep. We miss her and will always love her.