Alaska – 2011

Day 1 – August 20 (cloudy and cool – some sun)

Left on Delta #1896 to Minneapolis at 6:30 AM – arrived in MSP and walked across the airport to connect to Delta #1085 to Anchorage at 9:05 AM. Flight to Anchorage was completely full so we were able to check our two carry-on bags to Anchorage at no cost.

Arrived in Anchorage – collected baggage – found a cab and went to meet Mike at Cheap Wheels (Spenard Rd) to pick up our rental. Mike had an Alaskan Mission for Christ (AMC) car in his lot. We discussed the AMC and volunteered to drive the car to Copper Center for him when we headed that way.

Drove to the Crown Plaza and checked in

Drove to the Sourdough Mining Company to have a meal – walked across the street to the Wild Berry Candy Kitchen and Gift Shop to see the Chocolate Waterfall – saw a man carving with a chain saw and went into the park to see Reindeer.

Found a grocery store and bought lunch fixin’s for the rest of the trip – Pepsi, cheese, salami, crackers, fruit, chips, and paper goods.

Drove downtown and walked the streets – saw lots of flowers – especially at the Visitor’s Center – a log sod-roofed building. Ate a Reindeer Sausage with onions from a street vendor!

Back to hotel for an early night.

Day 2 – August 21 (sunny and warm)

Woke early – had breakfast at the hotel and headed out to Kenai.

Stopped on Turnagain Arm (south of Anchorage) saw Beluga Whales swimming in the Arm (counted four of them)

Continued south and stopped at a turnout to see a stream, SixMile Creek, and waterfall – very nice

Drove past the Summit Restaurant and headed east on the Sterling Highway) to Kenai

Stopped at a turnout at Cooper Landing and took pictures of Kenai Lake

Arrived in the town of Kenai – stopped at the Visitor’s Center and got directions to a park along the bluffs overlooking the beach – ate lunch at the park and walked a trail to the bluffs – Big Bird!

Drove to the old town and saw the Orthodox Church and old Fort Kenai building

Called Rev. Corby Cross and made arrangements to meet for dinner at the church – went to Star of the North Church – LCMS – then on to dinner at Louie’s – we shared Carol’s favorite, prime rib and still couldn’t finish the meal.

Checked in at Alicia Eagle Rock motel/sport cabin ☺

Day 3 – August 22 (cool and cloudy in AM – sunny and warm in PM)

Drove to Palmer – retraced route back towards Anchorage

Stopped at Portage Lake to take the Portage Glacier boat tour on the *mv Ptarmigan*– awesome views of lake, glacier, waterfalls and ice in lake – went to the Visitor’s Center and saw an ice worm!

Stopped to watch spawning salmon in a stream just outside of the park – awesome!

Stopped at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center to see animals that were rescued from the wild. Received call from Becky that we have a new grandson – Kaden.

Continued on to Anchorage – stopped at Coast Pizza in Girdwood for lunch

Drove though Anchorage – stopped at a mall for a phone call.

Stopped at Eklutna Historical Park to see St Nicholas Orthodox Church and the native cemetery – featuring “Spirit House” as grave markers

Arrived in Palmer – drove past the State Fair site – fair will start Thursday

Toured Palmer – stopped at Visitor’s Center – saw some huge cabbage and other plants – stopped at St. John Lutheran Church in Palmer to see if Pastor Rocky was there – he was on his way to take a child to college ☹

Stopped at a local sandwich shop to buy supper (sandwich – we had chips and Pepsi – I did buy a root beer☺)

Drove out to the River Crest Manor Bed and Breakfast for the evening – Mike drove out the AMC vehicle for us to convoy to Copper Center - ate dinner on the front porch – beautiful evening

Day 4 – August 23 (warm and sunny)

Breakfast at the B & B

Carol followed in the rental car while I drove the AMC SUV

Headed to Copper Center – stopped to view the Matanuska River valley – a braided river fed by the Matanuska Glacier

Toured the Matanuska Glacier – drove down to the Glacier Park Resort and walked on the glacier! Awesome feeling as one walks on sheets of ice and looked over the glacier – lots of snap, crinkle and pops.

Stopped along the way at a turnout to have a picnic in the back of the car – beautiful view of the glacier flowing down through the mountain

Awesome views of Mt. Drum as we drove into Glennallen to turn south to Copper Center – stopped at local grocery store for some lunch items and Pepsi!

Arrived at Mt. Drum Lutheran Church and met Todd Roeske who serves Mt. Drum and received the vehicle. Interesting note – Todd grew up in Michigan and went to Hartland Lutheran Church – knows Carol’s dad and brothers

Drove to the Copper Center Princess Lodge and checked in – great views of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, especially mountains – Mt. Sanford, Mt. Drum, Mt. Wrangell, Mt. Blackburn, and Mt. Zanetti

Late supper in the lodge – split a plate of Alaska Cod “fish and chips”

Day 5 – August 24 (sunny in AM – turned cloudy and some rain in afternoon – sunny and cool in PM)

Woke up and headed south to Valdez – stopped to see the pipeline – walked under it – it was suspended over us on platforms that allow the pipeline to move sideways in case of earthquake

Stopped to see Worthington Glacier

Stopped to see Bridal Veil Falls in the Keystone canyon – awesome falls that drops about 400 feet – great views! Bridal Veil is one of many waterfalls in Keystone Canyon and is seasonal for it freezes in the winter – great for ice climbing

Then stopped at Horsetail Falls – climbed up into the falls – This picturesque fall is fed by snow and ice melt and empties into the Lowe River – is 330 feet high

Drove down into Valdez – toured the town – stopped at the local grocery store – bought some snacks

Went to the harbor and boarded the *Glacier Spirit* operated by Stan Stephens Cruises for an 8 hour tour of Prince William Sound and the Columbia Glacier – cruised into the sound and saw animals – ate a lunch of soup and bread onboard – hot soup tasted good as the temperature fell as we cruised closer to glacier (Carol used some glacier ice to cool her Pepsi!) The owner, Helen, and her daughter served the meal. You could tell Helen loved to teach any listener she could find about the animals and glacier movement.

We were able to cruise to within a mile of the glacier – awesome site – lots of ice burgs, but none too large that stopped us from going into Columbia Bay to see the glacier. Other boats 3 weeks earlier could only get within 5 miles.

Lots of animals on the way back!

Drove back to Copper Center and the Princess Lodge – stopped at Willow Lake and saw awesome pictures of copper colored mountains in the distance – colored by setting sun! Saw the mountains of the Wrangler – St. Elias range again – awesome!

Spent night at Copper Center Princess Lodge

Day 6 – August 25 (overcast in AM – sunny at noon and into PM)

Drove to Glennallen for a gas stop and some breakfast food

Headed out to Tok – lots of mountain views, frost heaves on the road

Stopped to see some swans on a lake

Stopped at Tok Visitor’s Center – then at All Alaska Gifts store – interesting place

Had lunch at a picnic table in park

Drove on to Tanacross – saw St. Timothy’s Church – and some of the village

Drove to Delta Junction – great views of the mountains

Arrived at the Delta Junction Visitor’s Center – saw the milepost marker for mile 1422 – the end of the Al-Can highway (miles 0 is in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, Canada)

Had a pizza at Birch Brothers Pizza – very good☺

Found our place for the evening – Garden Bed and Breakfast – awesome flowers and water feature with pond, waterfalls – greenhouse had tomato plants over 8 feet tall! Spent an enjoyable evening exploring the garden and sitting next to the pond

Day 7 – August 26 (sunny and clear – warm)

Had breakfast with blueberry waffles – Carol spotted two moose walking across the hay field next to the property – great way to start the day

Headed north to Fairbanks – stopped at the Knotty Shop in Salcha – bought some gifts – awesome display of old rifles, mounted animals and sculptures made from pine trees that have been infected and the wood forms into huge “knots” as the tree tries to grow vessels around the infection = knotty pine

Headed further north and stopped at the Santa Claus House in North Pole, AK – Carol got to talk to Santa and we were able to get some Santa gifts

Arrived in Fairbanks and checked into the Holiday Inn Express

Drove north to Fox to tour the El Dorado Gold Mine – ate a picnic lunch at the train station

Boarded the mine train and had to wait for some tour buses to arrive – while we waited we were entertained by Earl Hughes – named “Alaska’s Ambassador of Country Music” by Governor Sarah Palin – he played his fiddle and sang songs for us – very entertaining. Likes to imitate Johnny Cash.

Rode the mine train through a tunnel to learn about early gold mining in Alaska – stopped to see how the miners took out dirt from an underground mine – then stopped at the sluice to see how today’s mining is done

Yukon Yonda is one of the owners of the mine and she explained how they find gold today by digging the mountain where the gold is found, dropping the dirt into the sluice box, running water over the dirt – as the water is released (moving very fast) and the dirt is dropped into the sluice box, the gold will settle along the length of the box slowed by the metals bars it flows over - the heavier material is trapped at the top of the sluice while the lighter materials travels down the length of the box – the box has astro-turf carpet on the bottom which traps all of the material (pay dirt) – the bars are pulled up – the dirt and material are then “panned” for gold – while we were there Yukon Yonda found a gold nugget and several flakes of gold – she said she loved it “When the sluice runs yellow”

We then were given a bag of pay dirt to try our hands at panning for gold – it was so much fun we bought an extra bag to pan – all together we found about 1 gram of gold (worth about $48.00) and had the flakes put into a pendant that Carol can wear – very pretty – I agree, I like it “when the pan runs yellow!”

We headed back to Fairbanks to find dinner – went to Walmart to buy some snacks and went to Carl’s Jr. for a hamburger

Day 8 – August 27 (sunny and warm)

Up early and grabbed some cinnamon rolls from the breakfast nook (and a coffee to go) – hailed a taxi and rode to the railroad station to catch the Alaskan Rail Road train to Denali – saw some cool HO model train setups at the station – recreating the train ride to Denali

Boarded the “C” car and settled in for the trip south – took advantage of the shared observation car to catch some awesome views of the scenery – was rewarded with a clear view of Denali Mountain – the sun was shining brightly off the snow – could see the entire mountain – it is said that only 30% of the visitors to Denali ever see the top of the mountain – we saw it a number of times on the ride

Rode through the town of Nenana and saw the tripod used for the Ice Classic

Headed through the Nenana River Canyon and saw the Usibelli Coal Mine tipple in Healy, AK

Stopped at the Denali Park Station and were met by representatives from Denali Bluffs Hotel – our home for the evening – we rode to the hotel, checked in and waited for the bus to take us on a tour of the park

Boarded bus for the Tundra Wilderness Tour – a 8 hour ride into the park to view wildlife and get close to the mountain – our guide did a great job of pointing out animals – especially the “Big 4” – sheep, caribou, moose and bear – saw lots of other animals, too – along with an awesome close-up of the top of Denali

Ate a box lunch on the bus for lunch/supper

Arrived at the hotel to spend the night – awoke at 1:00 AM to see the Northern Lights – just caught a small glimpse of them.

Day 9 – August 28 (sunny and warm)

Slept later and then rode a shuttle bus into town – walked the town and visited the shops along the way – interesting artists – purchased a painting by local artist, Tok Hwang, who takes pictures and then turns them into painting – we bought a painting of the Alaska Railroad with the Mountain in the background

Had lunch at the Denali Dog House – Carol had chili and Rich had a Reindeer sausage – very good

Met the bus for the ride back to the hotel to catch the shuttle to the train depot

Boarded the afternoon train to Fairbanks – retraced our ride of the previous day and saw the mountain again – as well as some more animals

Arrived in Fairbanks and took a taxi back to the Holiday Inn – treated ourselves to a burger and fries at the Fairbanks McDonald’s

Stayed up late in order to head into the mountains to see the Northern Lights

Left the hotel at 12:30 AM and drove into the mountains north of town – witnessed an awesome display of the Northern Lights – they were like a river of bright green – almost white that stretched from horizon to horizon directly overhead us – they moved in waves over us and back – swirled into tight bands and then separated into three bands – they undulated and pulsated – reds and pinks would flash at the edges of the lights as they thrust out spikes of light =downwards at us – it was like watching a flowing curtain, but from underneath – we were on a side road with no visible lights other than the stars and the Northern Lights in a massive band over us – then a dog barked – it was an eerie feeling – but one we couldn’t leave – we watched the lights for an hour before we left for the hotel

As we pulled onto the main road, we saw flashing lights form an emergency vehicle on the side of the road – as we passed it we saw two other vehicles, some men standing on the side of the road and a large moose lying dead in front of the police car – looked as if someone hit a moose – it was a young moose, but very big, it looked as if it would have stood over 8 feet – we prayed that no one was hurt

Day 10 – August 29 (sunny and warm)

Went down for breakfast just as they were ready to close the doors – we were tired from the night before

Packed the car and headed to Willow – following roughly the same route the train did to Denali

Very pleasant drive through the mountains – stopped at Nenana to take a picture of the Tripod

Very clear views of Denali – third day in a row to see the top of the mountain

Stopped at Denali for a lunch break – chili and a Reindeer dog from the Denali Dog House – took it out to the park and had a picnic in the park

Drove further south and saw magnificent views of the mountains, the top of Denali and fields of bright red trees – stopped at a turnout to take pictures of the scenery and heard a train approaching – was able to get some great shots of the Alaska Railroad headed north to Denali

Drove into Willow and found the Alaska Host Bed and Breakfast – our home for the evening – very interesting house – Jim hunts and fishes – displays his mounts throughout the house – two bears in the living room – some salmon above the TV set – lots of animals throughout the house – we stayed in the “Alaska Room” – decorated with Caribou antler light fixtures, rough siding on the walls and a border of bears – the main feature was the bathroom – made to resemble an outhouse – complete with tin roof, rough board siding, antler toilet tissue holder and a “one-holer” that flushed by pulling on the flyswatter handle attached to the wall – the house was on a private lake and had great views of the lake and mountains – the sky was clear

We headed to supper at a small family owned place out in the country next to a river – the sign said “open” but when we walked in there was no one to be found – we rang the doorbell –still no answer – walked through the house and out on the back porch to see the owner sitting with friends – she welcomed us into the restaurant part and we had the “special” – Rich had Sloppy Joe and Carol had Cabbage Roll – we were surrounded by the family and made to feel as one of them – joined in the conversation about fishing, hunting and model plane engines – not a bad way to spend a night in Alaska

After supper we drove into Wasilla and found Lamb of God Lutheran Church – took pictures of it

Went back to the B and B to pack for the trip home

Day 11 – August 30 (Cloudy and cool)

Had an interesting breakfast and said our “good-byes” to the family

Took a 1 mile hike up the hill to see Thunderbird Falls – part of a steep canyon. The falls were beautiful. Too cloudy to go to the fire station at Eagle Rock.

Drove into Anchorage and visited the gift stores one final time. Stopped for lunch at Phyliss’s Café – we sat under the tents on the sidewalk. Happy Birthday Rich – we found King Crab legs for your lunch.

Drove out to Earthquake Park and read about the Earthquake, walked some trails and watched planes take off – saw a freighter head out form the port

Turned the car in to Mike’s and took a cab to the airport – waited for Delta Flight #1088 from Anchorage to Minneapolis scheduled for a 9:30 PM departure – when we arrived we noticed the time had been moved up to 9:30 PM – another good thing ☺

We had enough miles to upgrade us to First Class on the way home – had great service and bigger seats – flew through the night and landed at Minneapolis at 5:30 AM (August 31) – walked down a few gates and waited to board Delta Flight #669 to St. Louis scheduled to take off at 7:00 AM

We again had First Class seats and enjoyed a short 80 minute flight and landed at St. Louis at 8:30 AM – got our bags and walked out the door onto the parking shuttle which dropped us at our car and we headed home – a GREAT TIME!!!!