

ALASKA by Gold Wing, 2019
John B. Egger

SOUTHBOUND, June 28 – July 13, 2019

Day 1: Friday, June 28, 2019: [Anchorage AK to Tok AK: 318 miles]

The Gold Wing, parked on the Andersons' short front sidewalk, was ready to begin its trip home at 8:00 AM, with 15,577 miles on the odometer. Jeff photographed the three of us (Andrea, me, and the Wing) and I moved out into the front yard using Walk Mode, then carefully pressed the cracked and loose plastic panel (damaged on the northbound ferry) to switch from Neutral to Drive. Success! With a satisfying clunk a "1" appeared on the display, and a final wave to Jeff and Andrea began our long ride southeast. After the usual fill-up at a Holiday gas station on Tudor Road, we turned left onto Boniface Parkway and right onto the Glenn Highway. No southeast yet: First, it's three hundred miles north, to the Alaska Highway at Tok.

Beyond Palmer, the mountains to the east became impressive and I stopped at 9:40 AM just south of Long Lake, at 80 miles, for a photograph. At 10:30 we came to the famous Eureka Roadhouse (122 miles), and I decided it was late enough to enjoy lunch with my 25¢ coffee.

After lunch we met frost heaves, and I quickly found that the curves around Caribou Creek were too tight for comfort (mine, anyway) at the cruise-control (speed limit) speed; a touch of the brake kicked it off. We rolled through Glenallen and headed northwest on the Richardson Highway, then picked up the "Tok Cutoff" north.

On the Cutoff I passed several "oversize load" trucks carrying long I-beams probably destined for bridge work. Once I got caught by oncoming traffic and may have hit 100 mph before sneaking back into my lane. "May have" because my attention was not on the speedometer!

A bit north of Christochina we met construction with a pilot car. Perhaps 20 vehicles waited in line, but I rode to the front and was welcomed by the flagger, a middle-aged lady with whom I had a pleasant chat until the pilot car arrived. She'd warned me that it couldn't get far ahead of its followers, and some big RVs might do only 5 mph. We started out well, but when the pilot car virtually stopped at the bottom of a short steep downhill I nearly had to put a foot down. Soon we came to the worst section, fresh soft dirt a few inches deep covered with gravel, on which a vehicle had left a weaving tire rut. That was not pleasant, and I actually spun the rear tire a couple of times trying to maintain our slow momentum when crossing over those ruts. The eventual hard-packed dirt was very welcome, and then the pavement.

We rolled into Tok and, after refueling, checked into Young's Motel at 3:00 PM with 318 miles on the trip odometer. I wandered across the highway to the Three Bears convenience store while wearing my Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) T-shirt. Forest-fire smoke was in the air, and the man ringing me up thanked me for my service and said he'd been a volunteer firefighter for many years. Eager to get back with my snacks, I skipped an explanation of what



John, Andrea, and the Wing... two of us are ready to leave!

“my” FIRE did and just said “You’re welcome,” thanked him for his service, and hoofed it back across the road. Many of the motorcycles parked near my Gold Wing (primarily BMWs) were part of a MotoQuest tour group, mostly comprised (it seemed) of Oriental and European riders. Young’s is not air-conditioned, and Room 38 was hot and stuffy until I noticed a 3-speed rotating fan that helped a lot.

It had been a pretty standard first day, and I slept well until about 4:30 AM.

Day 2: Saturday, June 29, 2019: [Tok AK to Haines Junction YT: 293 miles]

Fast Eddy’s restaurant opened promptly at 6:00 AM, and I enjoyed my standard “Short stack and coffee” (only two pancakes, but each is about the size of the plate) before heading out at 7:15 AM with 15,895 miles on the clock. Heading east on the Alaska Highway we found virtually no traffic, but the scent of forest fires was strong. Around 9AM Alaska Daylight Time we crossed the border into Canada (Yukon Territory, switching to 10AM Pacific Daylight Time) and stopped at Beaver Creek for our usual snack and fuel stop with 108 miles behind us this morning.

Ah, the beautiful but long and desolate stretch from Beaver Creek to Destruction Bay... In 2017, it was an anxious ride north on the NC-700X when I skipped refueling and the low-fuel warning blinked incessantly. In 2018, rain and overcast skies cut visibility on the new Gold Wing so much that I actually holed up in a Territorial Campground privy, grateful for shelter from the rain and cold wind for a while. This morning’s ride was just as long but much less anxious. Around noon I stopped at the Kluane Lake Rest Area for lunch of some Fast Eddy’s pizza and Three Bears potato chips. I snapped two selfies.

A couple of hours later I was treating myself to a double-dip ice-cream cone at Haines Junction’s Frosty’s. (Andrea chastised me, two years ago, for bypassing this shop; I hope she’s proud this year!) Heading for the Pine Lake Territorial Campground, I bought some fuel and groceries at 2:30 PM and rolled in, anticipating my usual Site 9. No deal! The campground was packed! Weekend... and Canada Day holiday on Monday to boot! I cruised around and finally found a couple of vacant sites, choosing #35 where I depacked at 2:45 PM.

I walked around the campground a couple of times, still coping with a stiff right leg, prepared and ate one of my Knorr’s “Sidekick” dinners, and turned in fairly early. With so many families



Young’s Motel in Tok was dominated by motorcycles. Find the Gold Wing...



The Day 2 lunch stop along Kluane Lake featured leftover Fast Eddy’s pizza

and children around (if Helen were available to tease, I'd mutter something about outlawing them), running and shouting and enjoying themselves, I did have some concern about noise, but quiet hours were well respected and it was as if a switch were clicked off at 10 PM. Thank you!

But where to go next? Big Creek is my next standard stop, but what's after that? I had no map or even pages from *The Milepost*. I knew *what*, but not *where* (distances). Ludicrous, Johnny B! Tomorrow I'll get through Whitehorse and Teslin, and spend the night at Big Creek Campground. (I hope that small one isn't packed like this.) Maybe I can buy a map at Teslin.

Day 3: Sunday, June 30, 2019: [Haines Junction to Big Creek Campground YT: 323 miles; Big Creek is 36 miles west of Watson Lake, near the northern terminus of the Cassiar Highway]

We pulled out of Pine Lake at 6:40 AM with 16,188 miles on the clock. It was still a bit dark, and chilly enough on the long straight highway sections approaching Whitehorse to warrant the rain jacket. We coped with a few "loose gravel" construction areas, but rolled into a Goody's shop on the west side of town at 8:15 for snacks and a photo. I didn't need gas.

The Highway bypasses Whitehorse, and we encountered some construction on the way to Teslin, including the usual several miles of dirt just before reaching its Yukon Motel. On a 10:30 AM stop there for fuel and lunch (a nice 3-egg veggie omelet), I could find no maps. It was nice to make text contact with Andrea, but she didn't seem to understand that I was looking for camping opportunities about 250 miles from Big Creek.

The ride from Teslin to Big Creek involved a lot of construction, even a detour from the main Highway. Many miles were "loose gravel," really mostly hard-packed dirt. On the final long section, some of the dirt was wet and I soon found myself the first vehicle behind a water truck, working to reduce the "Extreme Dusty Conditions." Man, he was turning that dusty dirt into mud maybe 100' in front of me! But I coped all right -- it was mostly just on the surface and I think my tires went right through it -- and when the driver ended his stretch and got out, he waved to me. Perhaps he was a rider himself and understood what his job required him to do to my riding conditions, and was congratulating me for making it through without incident. I waved back, and turned attention to the wonderful clear asphalt.

That night a fellow camper at Big Creek asked how I liked the 50 miles of construction today. I doubt if it was that, but I'd buy 15. (Maybe he said "fifteen.") Several other Big Creek campers complimented the Wing.

We rolled into a nearly empty campground about 1:45 PM and settled into Site 9. By now I've learned to have \$12C for the registration box, and to cope with Big Creek's awkward hand pump to obtain non-potable water -- I pumped it into the blue water sack and carried it back to my site, where I ran a couple of liters through the Sawyer filter into Platypus bags.

Late afternoon brought thunder, so I began to prepare dinner (a Knorr's "Sidekick" Penne Pasta) early, about 4:30 PM. That went on hold when rain began, but it stopped about 5:00 PM



After the chilly and desolate ride from Haines Junction, a snack at Whitehorse's Goody's was welcome

and I was able to cook and eat the meal. Light rain continued off and on, but at 6:00 PM the sun was bright and it was hot in the tent, where I was holed up — not just from rain, but also mosquitoes, which are always bad here. By 7:30 the bright sun was turning the tent into an oven, but I stayed inside to evade the mosquitoes.

A nice middle-aged couple pulled into Site 8, in a large commercial-looking Mercedes. It was an interesting vehicle, not long but very high as if intended for off-road use. It sounded as if it has air brakes. As they walked back from registering, the man complimented the Wing as the best touring motorcycle; the BMW 6, he said, was a good alternative, but he preferred the Wing's low center of gravity. The couple offered me some bug spray. I should buy some, I suppose... my decades-old "100% DEET" has probably been superseded.

On the chair in the tent, I wondered what tomorrow's stop should be... and realized that today is Andrea's birthday! I forgot to mention it in our Yukon Motel texts.

By 8:00 PM I was ready to turn in (that Thermarest Neo air mattress is very comfortable) but all I have to read is one Zane Grey novel, which I've already read... I need another one!

Day 4: Monday, July 1, 2019: [Big Creek YT to Strawberry Flats BC: 208 miles]

Stretching, breakfast, and packing took about two hours, but we were able to pull out at 6:40 AM with 16,511 miles on the odometer. I was barely across the bridge and up the hill when the low-pressure tire warning began flashing: 36 psi on the rear (spec is 41). I rode back to the campsite but couldn't raise the bike onto its center stand — gravel was the problem, I think. But a thin strip of bark under the sidestand took enough weight off the rear wheel to allow rotation for access to the valve. The Slime inflator took it to 42 psi, and we left again at 7:04 AM.

I wasn't sure where I'd be stopping tonight and hadn't been over the Alaska Highway east of the Cassiar intersection for a couple of years, but I knew Watson Lake wasn't far (actually, it was 36 miles) and I stopped there for gas. The station's convenience store had a free map and booklet.

The morning was pretty chilly, and I donned the rain jacket for wind protection. South of Watson Lake I saw several bison and bear, one of whom paused at roadside and lumbered across only when she realized I was stopping. She reminded me of a child who had been taught by a parent how to cross the street. Very cute!

My short-term goal was the nice restaurant across from the entrance to Liard Hot Springs, and we arrived there at 10:15 AM, with 165 miles behind us this morning. After a great 3-egg veggie omelet we hit the road again, now firmly in British Columbia: Bye bye Yukon... and, of course, Alaska. In only 38 miles, at 12:45, we rolled into the Northern Rockies Lodge on Muncho Lake, just for fuel. The uneven dirt area adjacent to the pumps was both rutted and slanted, and I had to swing around in the parking lot for a different (north-facing) orientation to find purchase for the sidestand. A sympathetic fellow fueler suggested carrying a small piece of 2x4! That, and the high price of \$1.899 per liter, lead me not to favor this pricey place. (Last year, though, they did allow me to wait out some rain in their lounge, and didn't charge me for coffee drawn from the employees' urn.)

It was only 12:06 PM when I depacked at Strawberry Flats Provincial Park's Site 12, just a few miles down the lake from the Lodge: 205 miles for the day (some records show 208, perhaps including the low-tire false start). Like Pine Lake, it was crowded! Site 12 is way in near the end, not on the lake side, but I was happy to get it. The young ranger confirmed the pump water was potable, a pleasant treat from the Yukon campgrounds (though BC's are \$20 vs Yukon's \$12). There were also (nearly) no mosquitoes here, a delightful improvement from the Yukon. (I like a Hallmark movie called "Kiss at Pine Lake," and after coping with my Yukon campgrounds' mosquitoes I suggested to the kids an intention to produce a movie called "Bite at Pine Lake.")

They weren't familiar with the actual movie, so I had to explain... as of course I do with most of my jokes...)

I had a little trouble shifting today; I may have bumped the A/M (left) edge of that broken switch plate. (Pressing that switches between Automatic and Manual shifting.) I saw the oval hole on the top edge for the first time since a friend's friend pushed hard on the bottom (D) edge at a breakfast get-together. Well, caution is the watchword: Firm, precise 90° finger strokes... I suppose it was stupid not to have had Alaska Cycle Center replace the whole thing, probably covered by my State Farm insurance. I replaced the tire early to minimize anxiety and now I have to worry, all the way home, about this shifter. I wish I knew what's behind that square plate.

In late afternoon I walked the campground's marked hiking trail, crossing the highway to end in what seems to be a dry river bed. Again I searched, with a monocular, for a continuation of the trail, but it just seems to peter out. Still, it was a nice walk on a bright, sunny afternoon.

Unfortunately I had no food. I'd thought the little shop beside the Liard restaurant had groceries, but found only snack items. My "dinner" consisted of potato-chip crumbs, eaten in the Helinox chair in the shade of a small tree. It was too hot in the sunny tent to lie down.

I did a little planning, now that I had some data: It's 423km to Buckinghorse River Provincial Park, ~268 miles. Buckinghorse → Grand Prairie 418 km [270 mi], → Grand Cache 608 km [380 mi]. So...July 2: Buckinghorse or Pink Mountain, July 3: Grand Cache Inn, July 4: Lake Louise, July 5: Swift Current SK, July 6: ??, July 7: ??, July 8: Sault Ste. Marie MI, July 9: Ohio, July 10 Meadville PA, July 11 home.

In the evening I was feeling down: anxious about the bike, sorry I wasted half a day today, and hungry. Well, the solution is to arise at my normal time (4:42 AM), do back stretches (they were great for me, especially the right leg, this morning), have coffee, and behave normally with respect to the bike. Listen to music, eat at Toad River and/or Fort Nelson, ride to Buckinghorse or Pink Mountain, and BUY FOOD @ Ft. Nelson, including instant coffee! The day after tomorrow I'll be off the Alaska Highway and in Alberta, at a hotel in Grande Cache. (I need a map of Canada! My nth one, of course, where $n \approx 3!$ The (n-1) ones are in Towson.) I have plenty of time; that's one reason I decided to stay at Strawberry on Muncho Lake.

I had a bit of a panic: thought I'd lost my camera and tripod. They turned up in the black REI daypack where I'd stashed them for my hike, in the right saddlebag. They belong in the right motorcycle-jacket pocket! A place for everything, and...let's see... how's that go?

Well, I told myself, perk up, Johnny B! Time for coffee ("perc up", ha ha). Buckinghorse to Dawson Creek 278 km \approx 175 mi; Grand Cache 330 km \approx 200 miles...

Day 5: Tuesday, July 2, 2019: [Strawberry Flats to Pink Mountain, BC: 291 miles]

Trying to follow my own advice, I arose at 4:42, did stretches, and left at 6:34 AM. I was able to push the bike out onto the campground road before anxiously poking D; a gratifying "clunk" and "1" followed and we headed for the Highway, with the odometer showing 16,719 miles. Chilly air justified the rain jacket.

The morning's ride was beautiful, along the Toad River and over Stone Mountain. A river photograph was tempting but I'd taken an identical one last year. Great views of jagged mountains appeared on my right before crossing Stone, and in the Park I saw many sheep and some moose but only one bear. Two sheep, standing at the edge of the pavement, had coloration matching that of the rock wall behind them, and despite trying to pay attention I noticed them only when I was almost beside them.

The character of the highway and terrain changed south of Stone, and after coming down off the mountain I began to feel definitely out of the Far North. Flatter, smoother, wide grassy vistas

to right and left... there's always a clash of emotions at a point like this: Regret at leaving the Yukon and Alaska but relief at better roads, fewer mosquitoes, and more services. As many have noted, civilization is best appreciated when one has been away from it for a while! (Apologies to BC, YT, and AK; "no civilization" is an exaggeration!) The Gold Wing and I rolled past the southern end of the Liard Trail, the long unpaved two-lane road that could take one north toward Great Slave Lake on which I'd traveled south in a little Toyota pickup in 2010. I was Alaska bound, but treated myself and my truck to a brief eastward swing to Fort Nelson, where I washed the truck.

About 9:30 AM we stocked up on fuel and groceries, and I had a nice pancake breakfast at Fort Nelson's A&W. Food! And coffee! It wasn't wise to make assumptions about their availability, as I did yesterday. We pulled out at 10:30 AM, passed the Buckinghorse River campground where I'd stayed last year, and set up at the private Pink Mountain Campground, Site 22. There were a few sprinkles and mosquitoes, but I set the Helinox chair up inside the tent and started Zane Gray's *The Deer Stalker* again. Second reading, but I always pick up new things; that happened even with Lee Child's popular Jack Reacher novel, *61 Hours*.



I like Pink Mountain Campground, only 140 miles north of Dawson Creek

I like Pink Mountain, and finally figured out the shower and bathroom code: Men's is 415, with "1" the top button and "5" the bottom, then turn the lock knob to the right. (I'd kept trying left, with no success.) And I learned that water from the wall faucet outside the men's room is potable. When I walked over to fill Platypus bags, the "WATER" post faucet was occupied with a hose to one of those huge bus-like RVs. Rats. But the office gave the OK for the shower building's wall faucet and I recalled from two years ago that all water here is potable. The campground's showers look nice, and I used one last year, but I'm headed for a motel tomorrow so I'll defer that, and laundry.

At 8:00 PM more sprinkles began just as I returned from walking the loop around the campsite and visiting the store. The same instant coffee I bought this morning in Ft. Nelson for \$4.99 is priced here at \$14.95! Woah. Geographic monopoly, Professor Hutt's "availability utility"?

"The Texan was a striking figure, despite the bowed shoulders that told of encroaching age." (p. 14). Yep, you've got that right, Zane! I try to walk upright but a slight lean forward feels comfortable and is always tempting.

Heather and Jett, my daughter-in-law and grandson, are on their way north from Syracuse in a rented Toyota RAV4. Hope they have a good time in Heather's home country!

A little planning: Pink to Dawson Creek is 143 miles, and DC to Grande Cache looks like 209. So I'm 352 miles from Grande Cache AB, tomorrow's destination.

Day 6: Wednesday, July 3, 2019: [Pink Mountain BC to Grande Cache AB: 336 miles]

I arose at 4:43 AM, did back stretches, packed up, and refueled the Wing before heading south (with 17,011 miles on the odometer) for our last stretch on the Alaska Highway. We're definitely

in civilization now: Bye bye, Far North. Aww... But Dawson Creek arrived at 10 AM. I have photos of both the Gold Wing and the NC-700X at its famous Zero Milepost so I followed the RV in front of me to bypass the City Center using the “Dangerous Goods Route.”

We headed east on Route 2, where I amused myself by identifying its first town with a popular Beach Boys song: “It’s my little Pouce Coupe, You don’t know what I’ve got!” (My delightfully receptive audience (me) found this hilarious, and it kept us chuckling for miles.) This highway became Route 43, where I stopped at a small Hythe truck stop for fuel and lunch. There had been some light rain and the Wing was liberally coated with light brown mud. I wiped a little of it off and headed in for lunch, finding a wide variety of meat offerings but no grilled cheese! All this vegetarian could find was a packaged egg-salad sandwich, but it was good. Free coffee to seniors --- I qualified, and had a cup of dark roast. Beside its thermos was something labeled “Cowboy Coffee.” Too late, I learned it was super-strong. Gee, I wish I’d chosen it. With coffee free to seniors, I guess I could have discarded my dark-roast, but that didn’t seem right.

Grande Prairie qualifies as a small city, I’d say, but with the GPS and street signs we had no trouble finding Alberta Route 40 south toward Grande Cache, my day’s destination. Only a few miles clear of the edge of town, however, traffic was stopped: A tank truck was lying on its side on the berm of the northbound lane. It looked as if I could get through, but as I considered the move the men directing traffic (other truckers, perhaps; not police yet) warned us all to get back because the rig was on fire and could explode. I moved back a few hundred yards, pulled over, wondering what to do. Finally I rode slowly up to a man directing traffic and asked if there was a way to get to Grande Cache. He directed me to a road headed west, where 18-wheelers and passenger cars were heading. I joined them.

In only perhaps a mile the line of vehicles turned left (south) onto a road that evidently paralleled Route 40, and I followed. I kept anticipating the return to 40, and in a few miles saw the vehicles ahead turning left, heading east back to 40. Great! But to my dismay the eastbound road was not paved. In fact, it was wet dirt, with potholes and ruts from the big trucks and the cars that had preceded me! It looked slippery and scary as hell, and I figured I had about a 25% chance of making it without a fall. Could I pick the Wing up, on that slippery dirt? How long would I block the detouring traffic? “Some damn old motorcyclist from down south, who can’t ride or even pick up his bike, has us blocked...”

Incredibly, the Wing and I navigated the potholes and ruts at a steady 25 or 30 mph and emerged unscathed onto the beautiful pavement of Route 40. A right turn resumed the ride south. Whew. That was not pleasant.

Most of the rest of the ride was, though. I remembered attempting to ride to Alaska in 1965, on my 305cc Honda Super Hawk, with only a large-scale gas-station road map for guidance. The road I planned to take from Jasper to Dawson Creek was only a faint blue line, and with some combination of fear and eagerness I visualized it running through desolate wilderness. I now know it was Route 40. What it was like then I don’t know, but it is a fine highway (still pretty desolate, though) today. About fifty miles north of Grande Cache, in mid-afternoon, a moderate rain began with dark skies. The road at that point was winding beside a river and heavy fog sharply cut visibility, so I slowed to 30 mph — even that probably exceeded my sight distance at times — and turned on flashers. There was no room to pull over, so I crossed my fingers and hoped any faster-moving vehicles approaching from behind would see me. But the traffic was very light, and by the time we made Grande Cache the fog had cleared and rain abated, and the sky had brightened a little.

A couple of years ago, as I rode north on the NC-700X, the Grande Cache Inn had just re-opened after remodeling and gave me a nice discount. I'd anticipated it this year, but no deal; like many northern motels it was almost filled with construction crews. I found a reasonably level parking spot near the northern end of the motel, ordered a pizza for delivery, and settled in. Tomorrow morning I'd clean some of that mud off, and check the tire pressures.

Day 7: Thursday, July 4, 2019: [Grande Cache AB to Canmore BC: 323 miles]

After back stretches I wiped the bike down with a microfiber cloth, checked tire pressures in a light rain (OK at 36/40) and, after showing my ticket, enjoyed a nice breakfast. With 17,347 miles on the odometer, we refueled at the Exxon station beside the motel (its convenience store had provided me with a few snacks last night) and headed out, in that light rain, about 8:00 AM.

Route 40 south to the Yellowhead, down that faint blue line I'd imagined over half a century ago, was nice: few trucks and little other traffic. It was a pleasant, relaxing ride until we hit Route 16 headed west toward Jasper, when both traffic and construction picked up. I followed the GPS advice into Jasper, but wound up on a street I'd never seen before --- the main drag, Connaught, I think --- and couldn't find my familiar restaurant with an adjacent gas station. After circling around a bit I spotted a little Petro on a corner and filled up. With Banff set as my "destination," Navigation took us directly to the north end of 93A. I turned onto it but immediately found myself at the end of a line of vehicles waiting for a long freight train to pass. I shifted to N and turned the bike off.

Perhaps ten minutes later the caboose passed and we were on our way, soon paying the park entry fee of \$8.60. I was familiar with the Icefields Parkway scenery and the misty, overcast day wasn't conducive to sightseeing anyway, so we moved along at the speed limit in the continuing light rain. We passed Lake Louise about 2:00 PM and took the exit to Banff, but a long line of traffic was heading into town so I returned to Route 1 heading toward Calgary. I'd looked on the cell phone for lodging and found prices, in this tourist haven, that seemed very high, so I was pleased to see billboards for economy motels Super-8 and Days Inn. I found them in Canmore about 3:00 PM. Tired and cold and hungry, having skipped lunch, I tried Days Inn but didn't gain much by rejecting its \$300C because I wound up choosing the Super-8 right across the street, \$296C with AAA discount.

Checking in, I met a couple beside whose red 2003 Gold Wing, outfitted with a trailer, I had parked. They were pleasant and somewhere in my age range. After settling in and showering, I made an easy Croc walk across the parking lot and enjoyed a good dinner and IPA at Patrino's next door. The kind middle-aged waitress confirmed that the way to get around Calgary was to take "The Stoney Trail."

Day 8: Friday, July 5, 2019: [Canmore BC to Swift Current SK: 395 miles]

After back stretches and a check of tire pressures (still 36/40) in that persistent light rain, I was allowed to have my modest breakfast before the official 7:00 AM start (this place is set up for tourists, not travelers) and we hit the road, with 17,670 miles on the odometer, at 7:10 AM. Fueling up at a downtown Esso station, we picked up Route 1 East, the Trans-Canada Highway.

That light rain --- all day yesterday, and continuing today --- was it ever going to stop? As expected, Navigation directed me straight through Calgary's city center; I ignored her and swung around the north side on "The Stoney Trail." East of Calgary, the rain became spotty and after a 10:30 stop at which I enjoyed a vegetarian-omelet lunch at a Denny's affiliated with the Flying-J

Truck Stop at Brooks AB, patches of blue sky appeared and clouds that were white rather than gray. In the afternoon the road was actually dry.

I looked for the Swift Current Motel 6 where I'd stayed heading west on the NC in 2017 (cheap, with a great breakfast bar), but reached what seemed to be the east edge of town without finding it. Backtracking, I immediately spotted a Comfort Inn and snagged it, \$159C despite my "Choice Preferred" status; what does that get me, anyway? But I was able to park right outside my room, with just a sliding glass door between me and my steed.

Day 9: Saturday, July 6, 2019: [Swift Current SK to Brandon MB: 372 miles]

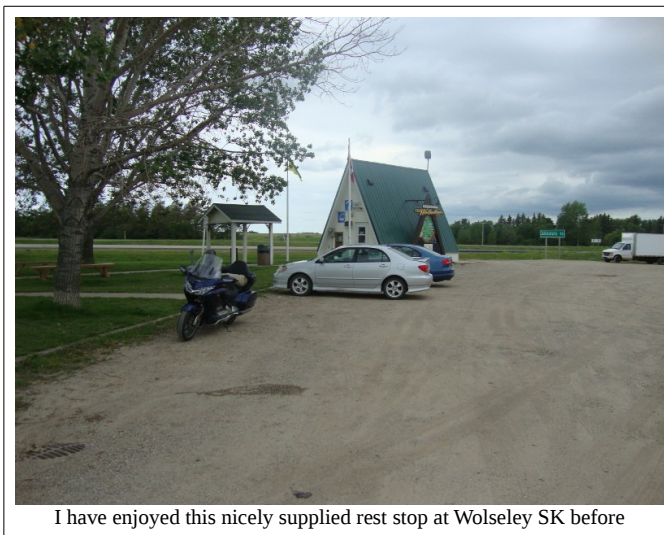
After the usual 4:42 rise and back stretches, I found the tires at 36/39 and Slimed the rear to 42. As we pulled out, with the odometer at 18,065 miles, a couple of guys yelled something to me. I didn't catch what they were saying, but a quick glance around didn't show any problems so I headed out. Later, at Wolseley, I discovered the black plastic strip covering the key hole between the taillights is gone; the boys must have been warning me of its loss. Well, it never snapped in very securely anyway.

The weather was nice but otherwise it was an anxious early morning. I'd assumed there was gas on the east side of town, but got the fuel gauge down to one bar (50 miles left) and found no stations east of the motel. Over every hill, just a ribbon of asphalt stretching to the horizon with grass at roadside. The fuel gauge began blinking, indicating we were down to ~35 miles left. I was (we were; apologies, Wing) grateful finally to reach Herbert SK and its Co-op station. We'd traveled 230 miles since the last fuel and were delighted to fill up, especially at civilization prices (~\$1.17/L, not Northern Rockies' \$1.899!)

This long prairie highway got us down to one bar again before Wolseley and its Esso appeared. I've stopped here before and photographed its pleasant gazebo with picnic tables. As I walked to a table with coffee and pastries a pair of young women at another table greeted me and we had a pleasant conversation about my trip and wildlife I'd seen. As I prepared to pull out, a woman in helmet and gear walked up, admiring the Wing --- her husband was refueling their white ~2003 Gold Wing with trailer. He came over, and we all talked about the new and old Wings. I left just before them, and was sorry almost

immediately to run over a prairie dog. The poor thing froze in the center of my lane and I could not avoid him. It was a solid square hit, so it's not likely that he suffered much, I hope. I set the cruise control at the speed limit, 110 kph, but the white-Winged couple soon passed me.

I considered driving through Brandon to Portage la Prairie again, but was tired and had done 370 miles. Navigation found a Comfort Inn that was easy to get to charged only \$104 plus tax. (Why was Swift Current's \$159?)



I have enjoyed this nicely supplied rest stop at Wolseley SK before

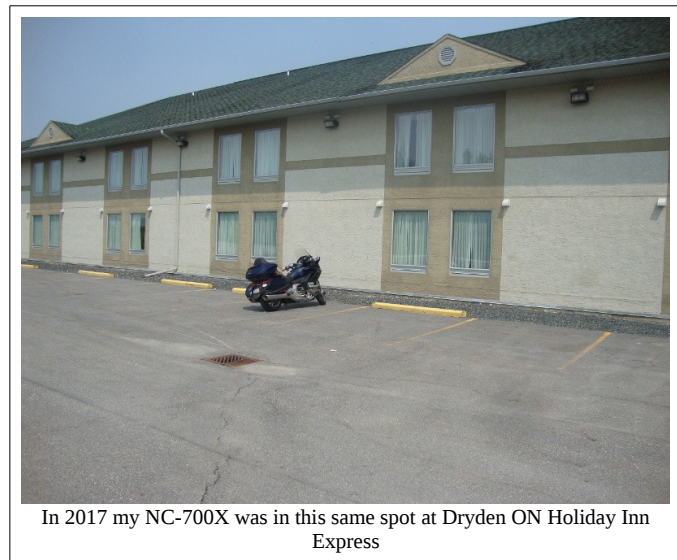
Day 10: Sunday, July 7, 2019: [Brandon MB to Dryden ON: 353 miles]

After back stretches and breakfast, we headed out with 18,791 miles on the clock. Showing some sense this time, I refueled at once (half a mile into today's ride). The sky looming over the Trans-Canada East had large dark clouds but some light sky on the horizon, and there were a few sprinkles within the first half hour but no precipitation after that. As the road turned, I'd be heading toward clear blue skies (Yay!) and then toward a heavy blanket of black (Boo!). After a couple of hours we left the dark skies behind.

As we circled around Winnipeg on Route 101 I let the fuel get down to one bar again (89 miles left, as I recall), but soon after we returned to Route 1 Richter showed up about 9:45. A small attractive restaurant was beside the gas station, so I had a cheese omelet and coffee before pulling out at maybe 10:20. I should have shucked the heated vest; even turned off it was becoming too hot.

Like last year, I welcomed the emergence of trees moving closer to the road --- bye bye open prairie --- and stunning rock outcroppings. We skipped Kenora city (aka Rat Portage!) and easily passed the point at which I'd become a little dizzy last year. The heavy traffic was mostly headed west, with RVs and trailered boats suggesting Winnipeg people who'd enjoyed weekend lake recreation. I held to the speed limit (90 kph, 58 mph) and found vehicles passing me. Forget it, boys -- no speeding citations for me. The big trucks were traveling at my speed too, probably for the same reason. There was construction in the westbound highway: Single lane, dust clouds, even a water truck (Boo...) for several miles. I was glad to be eastbound!

I passed a big north side Esso station, and Quacker's Diner, both of which I'd stopped at before. Pulling into a Dryden gas station, I set Hotels as "destination" and found a Comfort Inn, but it had only 2nd floor rooms at \$179, despite my alleged "Choice Preferred" status, so I bopped over to Holiday Inn Express, pretty much just across the road. A little better -- \$140 or so. I parked the Wing in almost the same spot the NC-700X had occupied in 2017, when we'd put in a long day to make up for a weather delay. On my camera I found a photo of the NC parked there.



In 2017 my NC-700X was in this same spot at Dryden ON Holiday Inn Express

There was an A&W across the road, and I walked over in Crocs. They had nothing for me, so I walked to a grocery store east of the hotel and bought a pint of Haagen Dazs Rocky Road and a Marie Callender's bean/rice/cheese bowl and potato salad for dinner. I found Fox News Channel on the TV, and a channel with "Heartland" and "When Calls the Heart."

At some point today Routes 1 and 16 merged, with the latter coming in from the north and left. I was glad again to be on the Yellowhead; farther to the west, I'd spent a lot of time and distance on it!

Day 11: Monday, July 8, 2019: [Dryden to Nipigon ON: 274 miles]

I arose at 4:44 and started back stretches. My right leg was tight and painful until about the 13th cross-knee push, when something seemed to snap into place. There were no emails or texts

from the kids, but there was an email from petsitter Leah! Of course the SPOTs tell the family I'm progressing OK so maybe that's enough, and Heather and Jett's family trip to NY may be of more interest. At 6:00 AM the tires were 36/43, and I left them alone.

Some trip planning at the Swift Current Comfort Inn had suggested Nipigon on July 8 (The rest of it was Sault Ste. Marie MI on the 9th, Ohio on the 10th, Meadville on the 11th, and home on July 12.) so I used the cell phone to look for motels. There were no chains, and when I stopped at the top-rated Beaver was told it was full with highway construction people, but its proprietor recommended the little Birchville Motel I'd just passed. My room had a roofed outside patio where I could park the bike, and was perfectly adequate. I checked in about 1:30 PM, then rode a mile or so east to a Husky Truck Stop for lunch (grilled cheese), also enjoying a pleasant chat with a trucker (an ex-biker) who'd come down from Grande Prairie.

At 5:30 PM I got up from a brief nap and found my right leg stiff and painful again, but rode to Husky's for \$19 worth of dinner things and settled in for a relaxing evening. TV selections were limited, and I found the new "Magnum PI" awful; Higgins is now a cute blonde woman! It's just another NCIS/Hawaii-5-0 buddy thing. I wonder what Tom Selleck thinks of it.

In the evening I called the Comfort Inn in Sault Ste. Marie, MI and made a reservation for tomorrow night.



My room at Nipigon's Birchville Motel had a covered patio for the Gold Wing!

Day 12: Tuesday, July 9, 2019: [Nipigon ON to Sault Ste. Marie MI: 370 miles]

I arose at 5:10 AM after a night of some sleeplessness due to right-leg pain. Stretching cleared it up, about the 11th cross-knee push. All I'd saved for breakfast was a blueberry muffin from Husky's, and after handling that expeditiously we pulled out of Nipigon's Birchville Motel with 19,065 miles on the odometer. Today I'd make the States!

That alleged breakfast wasn't adequate, so I stopped at 10:30 AM at the White River A&W at which I'd dried out in 2017, and ordered a 6-pancake breakfast. That seemed to confuse the young woman clerk, who finally brought two plates, each with three!

I rode at the 90 kph (58 mph) limit nearly all day, with the low highway speed resulting in good gas mileage. The views along the Lake Superior Circle Tour were beautiful, but I had to watch other things, and I took no photos because two previous years' of them are available. There was some construction, but no "loose gravel," pilot-car, or long sections of dirt.

Last year I was so confused about how to reach the bridge to the United States, circling around the block several times, that a kind pedestrian finally stepped out in front of the Wing and pointed to the entrance. This year I approached in the wrong lane, but there was no traffic so I was able to dart into the access area. (It's enclosed by chain-link fences and resembles some factory parking lot. No wonder I was confused when first encountering it.) Traffic northbound, into Ontario, was heavy, but southbound was light and we were soon in Michigan! But there are two Sault Ste. Maries. Navigation would not acknowledge the Michigan Comfort Inn, and kept directing me to the one in Ontario. No way was I going back across that bridge! I stopped for fuel and begged for

directions; the gentleman smiled and said that happens to everybody... just head down I-75 and follow the "I-75 Business" signs. Sure enough, we were soon there, arriving at 3:45 PM.

I followed what has become normal practice of showering at the end of the riding day, then strolled over to the nearby Applebee's. Last year this single man in hiking clothes was pressured to sit at the bar (he didn't), but this year I made clear that I'd ridden hundreds of miles today and my preference to sit at a booth was readily accepted. I enjoyed a nice IPA and a very good pasta dish from which the chef omitted the normal meat.

Day 13: Wednesday, July 10, 2019: [Sault Ste. Marie to Milan MI: 340 miles]

Arising at 5:00 AM, after stretches and breakfast we left Sault Ste. Marie with 19,437 miles on the Gold Wing. The famous Mackinac Bridge, about 45 miles south, arrived at 8:10 AM and I paid the \$4 toll. I'd pulled off to the right to stash my wallet and put gloves back on, when two or three riders just coming down off the bridge waved to me. They knew what was ahead of me, and had just successfully handled it themselves! The long metal-decked bridge has a somewhat fearsome reputation, but even wet we had no trouble this morning: Hold 45 mph and just let it wiggle. Like last year, the right lane was closed at one point, where we left-lane travelers had to brake to allow merging. Still... no problem.

At a charming rest area I stopped to remove rain gear; rain had stopped and I was getting hot. I-75's speed limit is 75 mph, and the traffic became heavier the farther south we traveled. The Interstate coincided with Route 23 south of Saginaw, but they split at Flint and we stayed on 23, coping with some congestion around Ann Arbor. But the GPS took us through the congested areas and, with 340 miles on the daily clock, we decided to pull up at a Sleep Inn (in the Choice chain, like Comfort) in Milan, Michigan. Checking in at 12:30 PM, we found the fare only \$71, and several good fast-food places were adjacent. One of them, a Subway, provided my lunch, and that evening at the restaurant beside it, Marco's, I obtained an excellent pizza for dinner.

An added bonus was the availability of the Fox News Channel. I caught the end of the noon-to-1 "Outnumbered" with the Subway sub, and all of "The Five" with the Marco's pizza.

Day 14: Thursday, July 11, 2019: [Milan MI: Zero miles]

Today I make my brother Bob's in Meadville PA! Navigation planned the shortest route, but it went through Cleveland and then east on two-lane roads. Nix on that! I set Grove City as a waypoint so she'd take I-80 over to I-79, with just a familiar northern hop left to my destination. After packing, breakfast, and suiting up, I was ready to pull out around 7:30 AM. There were 19,777 miles on the odometer.

Well, not so fast... the Wing wouldn't start. It fired but immediately died, and the headlights began to flash. I moved it so they weren't pointed at someone's first-floor window, and connected the StarkPower jump battery: The motor started, but it would not stay running. To misquote William Bendix in *The Life of Riley*, "What a disgusting state of affairs this is." The electronic key would not even open the luggage compartments; I had to do that manually, with the spare key I keep in my wallet.

Back in the room, I called Zack's, the local motorcycle shop, who referred me to the big Honda East of Toledo dealership... both were too busy to help. (So much for the joke about the BMW (or Gold Wing) "tool kit" consisting of a cell phone and a credit card.) I called Zack's again to see if they would check the battery if I brought it in: "Sure." But there was no Lyft, no Uber, no taxi, absolutely no commercial rentable transportation in this little town! The pleasant lady at the front desk tried Uber, as I had, but we each got something like "Grandparents' ...

something ...” and dismissed that. She found a taxi, but it was in a nearby town and wouldn’t travel out to Milan. I was very discouraged, and realized I had to rent the room for another night.

An older gentleman (I’m learning that people can be ten years younger than I am, these days, and still be considered old), residing at the hotel temporarily while his apartment was being renovated, had been a rider and admired the Wing. He suggested jumping from his car battery, and — despite contrary advice — I didn’t see any reason not to, so we used his jumper cables and gave it a try. No deal, and my gauges jumped and froze, the tach at about 7000 rpm and the speedometer at 85 mph. Yikes. Did I screw the whole electrical system? Frustrated, worried, and wondering what to do, I headed back to the room.

But I noticed on the cell phone, about 10 AM, that Zack’s was only 1.3 miles away. I’m a good walker so, armed with the phone and verbal directions from the hotel lady, I put the Wing’s battery in the light REI daypack and headed out into the hot sun. I arrived at Zack’s about 11:30 AM. The man I met, possibly Zack, was pleasant and efficient. My battery, the Gold Wing original, wouldn’t hold a charge, the sign of a bad battery. Zack’s is a small shop focused on Harleys, and all they had in the showroom were accessories like jackets and windshields, so I was wondering how fast I could get Toledo’s Honda East to overnight a new battery up the road to Milan. But “Zack” had disappeared into the back room, and soon reappeared with a Yuasa battery, the same make and size as my original, for about \$90. He applied its acid pack, which he said produced about 70% charge, and I stuffed it into the daypack, returning “home” about 12:45. (As I walked past a gas station about a hundred yards short of the Sleep Inn, my helpful colleague drove in; he wished I’d looked for him for a ride! Nice fellow, but by then I was almost “home” and shucking the heavy daypack to enter the car would have been more trouble than just carrying on, so I thanked him and finished my walk.)

Rather than carry the battery to my room, I placed it in the bike right away, finishing about 1:30 PM. After a nap and lunch, I connected its cables and at 4:30 had the bike started. I was anxious but my friend had appeared and pointed out that though he understood, I had to do it. It ran roughly at first, clearing out junk from the morning’s failed efforts, but quickly smoothed out. I returned to the cool quiet room a happy man, just as “The Five” was starting. OK — but 513 miles tomorrow if I am to get home on the 12th as planned. I called Bob to tell him I wasn’t coming, and Dasher to check on the flooding in New Orleans — they’re OK.

Day 15: Friday, July 12, 2019: [Milan MI to Meadville PA: 268 miles]

After the usual morning prep, at 7:00 AM I anxiously pressed the red Start button (It’s one end of a rocker switch, opposite Kill.) and was thrilled to hear the Gold Wing fire right up. Sorry not to bid farewell to my friend, who’d said there was no way he’d be up at 7, we headed across the street for fuel. The odometer, of course, still read 19,777 miles. Street signs clearly directed us back to 23 South, and we began a pleasant ride down to Toledo OH, where 23 coincides with I-475 (an Interstate 75 bypass of the city) until it meets the Ohio Turnpike, Interstates 80 and 90.

At Elgin I-90 splits to the north, toward Lake Erie and Cleveland, while I-80 continues straight and then southeast toward Youngstown. After paying the \$12.75 toll we crossed into Pennsylvania, reset Navigation to keep her from continually telling me to make a U-turn to get to Grove City, and headed north on I-79 for Meadville. I had reconsidered the desire to get home today, cleared another visit with the petsitters, and decided to spend my final trip night at the pleasant home of Bob and Aggie. Otherwise, I would have switched from I-80 to I-76, just west of Youngstown, and headed toward Pittsburgh (at the state line, I-76 becomes the Pennsylvania Turnpike).

We rolled into my brother's driveway at 12:30 PM, with the Wing no doubt enjoying the unaccustomed luxury of a spacious garage. It had been a nice and smooth short riding day, and it was great to be in this welcoming and familiar place.

We were all amused at the incident of the birthday cake. My birthday was in a few days, and Bob had baked a nice layer cake for me. When I'd called to tell them I wasn't coming, they served some of it to other guests, so when they brought it out for me, a day later, slices were gone. We all chuckled about that: "It's the thought that counts," "half a cake is better than none," and so forth. It was great, and there was plenty more left than I could eat!

Day 16: Saturday, July 13, 2019: [Meadville PA to Towson MD: 336 miles]

We left Meadville about 8:15 AM, with 20,045 miles on the odometer. There was a little in-town construction between us and the Conneaut Lake Road, but it was easily circumvented and we were soon on I-79 headed south toward Cranberry Township, just north of Pittsburgh, where we'd pick up the Turnpike headed east.

The PA Turnpike, as I recall, was one of the earliest (perhaps "the") limited-access highways and its relatively narrow width shows its age. Traffic around Pittsburgh was fast and moderately heavy, so I just kind of hung on and tried to stay out of trouble. After one fuel and snack stop at a Travel Plaza, we exited at Breezewood, where I-70 East splits off, and pulled into the Dunkin' Donuts for more coffee and snacks.

It was here that I'd had electrical trouble with the Gold Wing last year, so I was a bit leery of this stop. I turned the ignition off and began to walk to the restaurant, but realized I hadn't set the steering lock. No click or indication on the display! Oh oh, that's not normal... I switched the ignition on. Nothing happened: the display stayed black. Pressed the Start button: Nothing. What is it with this place, a curse? But in perhaps ten seconds the ignition display came on, the steering-lock indicator appeared, and all seemed OK. I had and still have no idea what was going on, but had my coffee and sinkers and resumed the ride home.¹



Two of us ready to leave... wait, I already used that line. John and Bob Egger...

The 125 miles remaining, I-70 south to the Baltimore Beltway I-695, then north to the northbound Falls Road (Route 25) exit, went smoothly. After a final refuel at Brooklandville Exxon (Falls and Joppa Roads), we arrived at the Jeffers Road home at 2:23 PM, with 20,381 miles on the odometer.

The southbound ride of 4,804 miles from Anchorage was finished.

¹ Later, with the leisure of home, I found the positive battery connection to be loose. Its bolt was tight, but I'd apparently chosen the wrong bolt of the two that were supplied. Too long, it passed through the battery's threaded positive terminal and was bottoming against the battery case without tightening the cable against the terminal, making the contact intermittent. The fix was to replace the longer with the shorter of the two supplied bolts.