



Greetings from Brian, Narissa, and Max!



From: **Nomads at Large: Narissa Willever and Brian Mitchell**

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Dear Friends,

This is just a quick update to let you know where we are and what we are up to. Hopefully we will be able to send a more complete account in our usual Groundhog Day "holiday" newsletter.

As most of you know, Brian and I began planning a move last winter. Last November I had a severe reaction to medications I was on and had to take extended sick leave. Although I was able to return to my work at Lassen Volcanic National Park (very) part time, it became clear that I would not be able to continue much longer. Brian began looking for wildlife jobs while finishing his PhD work at the University of California. He was offered a postdoctoral position at the University of Vermont, collecting and analyzing data for a study investigating how species diversity is affected by land use change. He moved to Burlington at the end of March and I followed in May.

We've now bought a condominium at the base of Marble Island (actually, a peninsula) on Lake Champlain. It is very quiet, backing up to a couple dozen acres of woodland. Not waterfront, but there is a path leading down to the beach and a boat ramp a short drive down the road where we can launch the kayaks. We love being near a big body of water again! Our "new" cat, Max, whom we adopted last spring, loves the stairs in the new house and the good bird, squirrel, and outdoor cat watching opportunities that the patio door affords him. He has also become quite proficient at catching socks.



Brian taking photos at Green River Reservoir State Park

Work-wise, Brian is enjoying his situation at UVM, though he wishes he was being paid a salary more fitting for a PhD. (Universities are notoriously stingy on pay for wildlife postdocs. He says that at least he's finally making more per hour than he did as an office temp.) I am still officially unemployed but am trying to get set up as a freelance writer. My first article, on autumn kayaking, appeared this month in Vermont Woman, a local free paper. Yay! Brian and I both took photographs for the piece and did on-site "research" in the form of puttering around beautiful places in our boats. I've got to say, even though \$\$ aren't likely to come out of the assignment, the experience has won me over to the concept of freelancing! I mean, what other job allows you to make "work" out of a weekend vacation, and then deduct some of the expenses from your taxes!?



Max, in training as an Anti-Terrorist Bear attack cat. Git 'em, Max!

Other than that, we've pretty much been occupied by fixing up the condo. Brian put new floors in the upstairs bedrooms, has built racks for kayaks and other things, installed a toilet, and removed the yucky wallpaper from the downstairs bathroom. I bet you didn't know he was such a handy guy, did you? I've been taking on wall painting, shelving, and building or remodeling various pieces of furniture from "found" items from the local salvage depot. I'm especially excited about building a new desk made from an old barn door, complete with hinges.

Some of you know that I went to the Mayo Clinic last winter. I've had a couple of people recently say that they'd heard I'd gone in for surgery or had cancer—thankfully, neither is true! It was merely for diagnostic testing, since my neurologist in California went on a rare-disease diagnosing spree last summer. We had no one locally who felt confident giving a second opinion and Mayo came highly recommended for dealing with complex cases. Well, Mayo confirmed my suspicions—I am not suffering from a slew of weird illnesses! Just one auto-immune problem and a doctor who prescribed way too many chemicals. For those who want the full details of my medical saga, I have no problem sharing it with you if you ask. However, for those who are bored to tears by such things I will spare you here.

After a few really stressful years in California, we are very pleased to be back on the East Coast, somewhat closer to family. And it has been an immeasurable relief to be someplace with a little culture and life! (Although Brian says he misses the roar of the monster truck shows and drag boat races in good ol' "Dead Bluff.") Burlington is an extraordinary little city, filled with music, festivals, and eccentric people. We've been going to lectures, swing classes, and concerts, soaking up all the things we'd missed in California. The only thing we're missing is good Mexican food, but we figure that with the dozens of other tasty ethnic offerings in Burlington it's a fair trade. We are enjoying the splendor of a New England autumn and (unlike all our neighbors) looking forward to winter. We've had a few days of snow, but nothing that's stayed on the ground. The extreme changeability of the weather is still a novelty to us, after the fairly predictable patterns in California's Central Valley. We'll see how much we're enjoying it a month from now, with ice-out a distant five or six months away.

Narissa doing "research" for her kayaking article at Green River Reservoir State Park



We are very happy to be close enough to old friends and family for occasional weekends away, but hope many of you will come to visit us here. (A postdoc's salary doesn't exactly afford us unlimited travel opportunities!) Plus, if American politics have got you down, we encourage you to come up for a foray to Canada—we're about an hour and a half from Montréal. In the meantime, if you want to check out our new digs, photos from some of our favorite Vermont places will be posted on our website. And if you plan to be in the area, give us a call or send an email!

And speaking of email, if you're getting a hard copy of this letter, it means we don't have a current email address for you or the address you gave us is a work address. (We don't like to send personal mail through workplace systems, and chances are your boss doesn't like it either!) If you'd like to correspond via email please send me your personal address or let me know that your work address is okay to use. We're both far better email correspondents than we are paper correspondents, and as we're not exactly rolling in dough we appreciate being able to keep in touch without racking up stamp and phone bills. For those of you without email, we'll continue to budget for the stamps for you!

Much love,

Narissa
(and Brian)



Brian and Narissa at a Halloween party. (The dog was not part of the costume.)

