From the editor
At last, the often-promised, long-not-delivered new issue to The Survivor is at hand. It has been over a year-and-a-half since the last edition was published and this has been the biggest aspect of Desert Survivors that fell to the wayside with our reorganization in 2010, and Andrea Young leaving as editor after years of terrific work.

Our plan is to publish The Survivor twice a year. As the reader may already know, most members of Desert Survivors do not participate in our trips or other activities. Most are members because they support our mission. For these people The Survivor is probably the most important way we keep in touch with them. It is a real and tangible, you-can-hold-it-your-hands reward for supporting our efforts. (It should be noted that have a website too; but try holding that in your hands.) We hope you will enjoy and learn from this issue. Thank you for continuing to support us. We also hope that the return of The Survivor might inspire some of you to become active in our endeavors. We have car camping, backpacking and water trips to beautiful and intriguing places in the desert wilderness. We are a social lot and are always looking for more people to join in.

This issue of The Survivor has also been mailed to Desert Survivors who have lapsed with their membership. We realize that for many of you, the magazine was part of a promise we made for your membership that we totally reneged on. Good point. We hope to partially make this up with this better-late-than-never delivery of journalistic goods. Please know, that if you forgive us, we really want you back. Please go to-- desert-survivors.org – and follow the links to renew your membership, and thank you. There is a lot of desert of there that needs experiencing and protecting and we would love to have you again onboard.

As for me, this issue of The Survivor is first publication I have worked on since I was editor of my high school newspaper. It has been a tremendous learning experience. Please forgive the mistakes that I am sure you will find in this first edition by me. The job was only made possible because of a great Adobe InDesign template I inherited from the previous editor Andrea Young. Thank you. Over the past few weeks I have been learning the ins-and-outs of this software and if all goes well, the print shop will make sense of my files. I suppose if you are reading this, things went at least okay.

The next issue is due out in March 2013. We need articles and photographs to fill its pages. Please contact me at: blake@desert-survivors.org for submissions or your ideas for articles. The Survivor only exists because of the good writing and photography of the Desert Survivor members. We welcome your help.

Best regards,

Nicholas Blake

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Desert Survivors Volunteer Opportunity

The Desert Newsflash, our e-newsletter, reaches over 600 members a month with news about Desert Survivors, desert protection issues, trip opportunities, and more.

Our Newsflash editor, Martha Schraer, will be leaving at the end of next month, so we’re looking for another volunteer to take on this rewarding role. Martha is standing by to train her successor, and anyone with Internet access is qualified for the job. No special software is required – we use an online provider, Constant Contact, to lay out and distribute the Newsflash.

The role is creative -- you can stick with Martha’s design, schedule, and format, or create your own, and it’s educational -- as editor, you’ll learn a lot about the desert and environmental issues. It’s also great resume fodder for those interested in the hot new field of social media marketing. Finally, it’s a great way to give back to your organization.

If you’d like to know more, contact Martha at:

mschraer@desert-survivors.org.

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Guidelines for Submissions

The Survivor is written by members of Desert Survivors. We seek out and encourage all members to submit articles and photographs for publication. The deadline for the Spring 2013 issue is February 25, 2013. Please email your submissions to: blake@desert-survivors.org

Submissions (with maximum word length) may include letters-to-the-editor (200), feature articles (3000), trip reports (1500). Desert conservation issues or articles on any subject that relates to the mission of Desert Survivors will be considered for publication. All text must be submitted electronically. Please include your full name, city and state of residence and phone number with the submission. For photographs, please identify the people and locations shown. Digital photos need to be approximately 1600 pix resolution in one direction. Please do not submit digital photos with only 640x480 pixels resolution, as they are impossible to print with adequate size.
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It is not too late to...

take the plunge

at the

Desert Survivors
Annual General Meeting
Mercey Hot Springs
September 28-30, 2012

This is Desert Survivors' most important meeting of the year, when we discuss the club's direction, elect Board members and hang out.

We want you to be there.

Imagine how renewed you’ll feel after soaking in hot mineral water, sleeping under the stars and escaping the daily grind with your fellow Desert Survivors. This tranquil retreat is just a 2-hour drive from the Bay Area. A hot springs resort since the turn of the 20th century; Mercey Hot Springs retains its old-world charm with outdoor soaking tubs, swimming pool and sauna. Our cost is just $35/night for camping including use of tubs, sauna and swimming pool. That’s $70/person for camping on Friday and Saturday night. Checkout is on Sunday afternoon at 2:00 PM.

Sunday morning's meeting will focus on club business and discussion about furthering our mission to explore, protect and educate about desert issues. The meeting will begin at 9:00 am. As always, camping is optional. Anyone can attend the meeting at no cost—but it's much more fun to spend the weekend!

Please go to the website—desert-survivors.org— to reserve your camping space, before it is too late.
Desert Survivor Federica Beatrice in the Whipple Saguaro Grove—believed to be the western-most extent of this plant in the U.S. (Photo by Bob Davis)
The Search for a Distant Cactus

Article by Bob Davis

“What’s that over that distant ridge ahead of us?”
“Don’t know yet, looks big.”
“Might be a saguaro.”
“It is! It is! A giant saguaro!” We danced and hugged in celebration. We had found the elusive and remote Whipple Saguaro Grove.

The saguaro is a large tree size cactus with upright side arms that has become the primary icon representing the entire Southwest. They only grow in part of the Sonora Desert. Almost all that grow in the US are in Arizona. The blossom of the saguaro is the state wildflower of Arizona.

The range of the Saguaro is determined by its intolerance to freezing weather and its requirement for rain every year. The North American Monsoon, moist air drawn in from the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf of California, bring summer showers to the Sonora Desert. Saguaro are very slow growing and long lived. An adult saguaro is generally considered to be about 125 years of age. This cactus may weigh 6 tons or more and be as tall as 50 feet. They can grow to seventy feet with a diameter of ten feet and have numerous complex branches. They have an extensive, shallow, radial root system. When it rains, large volumes of water are absorbed into a pleated trunk that expands to store water that for long dry periods.

My interest in finding these cacti began when leading a Desert Survivor monitoring trip for the BLM in the Turtle Mountain Wilderness that is thirty miles south of Needles, CA and twenty miles west of Arizona and the Colorado River. We were asked to look for young saguaros on our trips. None were found.

Ramona Daniels, the BLM Volunteer Coordinator, next asked if I would like to look for a remote saguaro grove in the Whipple Mountains that is between the Turtle Mountains and the Colorado River. They are thought to be the western limit of these cacti in the US. My answer was, “Of course I would”.

A survey of saguaros in the Whipple Mountains had been made by the BLM 25 years ago by helicopter before the wilderness designation. Saguaro were found near the Colorado River and, further west, a grove of about 20 cacti was found in the center of the wilderness.

Previously, I had tried to find this grove from the west— the shortest route. I came within a quarter mile but did not have enough time or water to search further. From the south the distance is longer but the routes are easier because there are washes that lead into the central mountains.

The Colorado River Aqueduct runs from Lake Havasu to San Diego and marks the southern boarder of the wilderness. Many gravel roads associated with the aqueduct provide access to the wilderness from the south. Desert Survivors Frederica and Pov joined me on this trip. We decided to take one of these roads to a wash that would pass through an ore-processing site and where we might find a wildlife guzzler.

At that site there was an oval dry pond with a fine-grained surface, probably a catchment pond. There were several cement structures. One building was divided into five long narrow spaces. The outer two spaces were filled with rusted scrap iron. Later I found that scrap iron was used to plate out copper at ore processing sites. We did not find a guzzler.

From there we had a choice of two routes, either the most direct ravine that by map appeared more rugged or the longer route that continued in the wash for much of the way. We chose the first. Along the way we saw several small water pools in the rocks, one with mosquito larva. We saw quail and a few fast lizards.

As sunset approached we were on increasingly steep rocky terrain looking for a campsite. We would be unlikely to reach the crest, with better campsite prospects, before dark. Then in the distance, in our direction of travel and still in sunlight, we saw what we were searching for, a huge saguaro cactus, and the most western in the US. We whooped and hugged in celebration.

By the time we arrived at the cactus the sun was setting. Near the top of the next steep ravine we found a barrel cactus that appeared to have had the top eaten with the spine clusters nipped off. We guessed that a very hungry burro might have done this. From there we could see several saguaros and confirm that we had found the saguaro grove. As we lost daylight we were fortunate to find a ridge with several flat smooth areas where we settled in for the night.

The next morning, we found twenty-two saguaros on a treacherous slope and four nearby outliers. More were found than were seen 25 years ago; including small ones, indicating the grove was thriving.

We needed to start back. Because of the steepness of slope we had just come up we decided to take our chances that the alternate, somewhat longer route back would be less intimidating.

In a wide bend in a wash we were watching a large covey of quail scurry back and forth seeking a place to hide when we saw a bighorn ram rapidly leaving the wash fifty feet ahead of us. When the ram reached a high ledge it stopped and monitored us as we continued on our way.

In the washes we sighted several small dark lizards that moved too fast for identification. There were burro tracks and droppings. We also saw coyote tracks and bobcat tracks, jackrabbits and desert cottontails. The route we took back proved to be the easier than route in. We arrived back at the trailhead before dark satisfied that we had found our elusive prize.

The Survivor  |  Fall 2012
There are long trails in the United States with familiar names: the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide Trail. “Wouldn’t it be fun,” I thought one day, looking at a map of the western United States, “to hike a new route? Through the desert. Mexico to Canada.” With atlases and maps spread before me I began tracing lines across public lands of the West.

Dispatches From The Desert Trail

A first-hand account of a solo, through-hike of the Desert Trail  

By Buck Nelson

While researching online I ran across a mention of the Desert Trail. I’d never heard of it. I soon learned it was a planned route that stretched from Jacumba, CA on the Mexican Border to near Burns, OR. There were even guidebooks and maps for that whole route, with vague plans to continue the route clear up to Canada. There was nothing published online that showed the exact route as far as I could tell, so I sent emails to the Desert Trail Association and the Desert Survivors. David Green sent me useful contact information and some published maps for part of the trail. Members of the Survivors were especially helpful, with Bob Lyon sending me extensive planning information he had gathered for the Trail. Dave Oline and Gerry Goss sent me some digital route information. After months of researching I had all the basics, including all the guidebooks and maps for the planned route.

Logistics. This was the big issue for the trail. Water and resupply issues hadn’t been worked out for a thru-hike. Water sources tended to be nonexistent or undependable for long distances with few resupply points on or near the trail. The only sensible solution seemed to be caches.

I left my cabin in Alaska on a wintery February 2012 day and began the long drive south. By the 23rd I began burying food and water caches from Lovelock, Nevada southwards. Most of my food was in steel ammo cans. Water was in plastic jugs or bottles. In a few places like Stovepipe Wells, Tecopa Hot Springs and Kelso Depot I left caches with stores or with rangers. Instead of fewer, larger caches I placed more and smaller caches. This helped hedge my bets should a cache be destroyed or missing, and it would lower my pack weight. The location of each cache was marked in some way that wouldn’t attract attention but that would still be obvious to me. Each cache was GPSed and mapped.

The owners of Jacumba Hot Springs let me park my pickup there. In the late afternoon of March 1 I stood at the fence marking the Mexican border and after taking a few photos turned and began walking north towards Canada.

The Desert Trail is a route, not a marked trail like the Appalachian Trail. There is very little constructed tread, and markers of any kind are virtually nonexistent. Attention to navigation is important. As I was leaving Jacumba someone asked me where I was headed and I was surprised he had heard of the Desert Trail. He directed me down the old railroad track. It was a nice walk down Carrizo Canyon along the old railroad. The grade was gentle and the old tunnels with their latticework of beams were beautiful, especially going from the bright sun to the dark and back again.

The author at the border fence and the begining of his journey. (All photos by Buck Nelson)
I’d walked for miles before I pulled out the guidebook and found the planned route was far below along the creek. It was a happy mistake. After crossing a very high trestle I descended to the gorge far below, passing pottery shards from ancient peoples and some discarded debris from modern people sneaking across the border. It was fun to roll out my sleeping pad and bag along the dry creek that evening. I was hiking the Desert Trail!

The next day I easily found my first cache and drank my fill of water. I loaded the rest of the water and food into my pack and left my trash in the empty ammo can to be picked up when I returned back to the border to get my truck. It was hot today, a contrast to the down-jacket wearing weather I’d been experiencing for most of the previous week. I focused on keeping a reasonable pace and taking good care of my feet. It’s easy to overdo it early in a hike.

The miles were already adding up. On the third day of the hike I was walking down a granite gorge and noticed two desert bighorn rams looking down at me. On the other side there were several more. It was my first sighting of that sub-species and a real thrill.

On March 6 I got up at 3:30 am to take advantage of the bright moon and the cool of the night. I’ll never forget the cholla cactus next to my bedroll, pale in the moonlight, with its black shadow cast against a boulder. It was so bright I could easily pack by moonlight. By lunchtime I was at Five Palms Oasis, where I sat in the cool shade with a nice breeze rustling the palm fronds. The magic of that spot evaporated that evening with a windstorm. I secured everything that could possibly blow away and then crawled in my sleeping bag to escape it. Although I was in a gully at right angles to the wind, sand was still hammering me even after I crawled into my sleeping bag and covered up my head. The wind died completely just before dawn. There was sand driven into every little nook and cranny of gear in the morning.

I only made about 11 miles the next day. It required an enormous amount of navigation to follow the route. The footing was often poor and steep which made for some slow going. Nevertheless there was some beautiful scenery with views of the Salton Sea and steep, narrow canyon walls and interesting desert plants and birds. By the evening of the 8th I was doing a section of road walk and unexpectedly came to a nice RV park. There I found friendly people, a hot shower, and laundry facilities. They even invited me to pick fresh fruit! As a lifelong Minnesotan and Alaskan, being able to pick an orange off a tree was fun. At the tiny store next door the clerk couldn’t understand my English. It felt pretty exotic.

The route passed through Mecca, where I stopped for a few supplies. I enjoyed the splendid orderliness of the local fields, date palms and vineyards with vines perfectly aligned, each plant with its own drip irrigation. Looking down the rows the spreading vines were trapezoids of light and shadow, sunlight filtering through the vines. Late in the day I entered Painted Canyon. There was fascinating geology with rock walls in reds and greens and browns, even black. There were a few day hikers here. At one point in the shadows of the narrow canyon two ladders had been placed by the good old BLM to make it easier for hikers to clamber up. The coolness of the canyon was a pleasant change of pace from the hot road walk. I camped under the stars in the coarse sand of a wash, a kit fox calling from nearby, tiny bats chasing bugs with impressive dexterity.

The miles and the days rolled by. Lost Palms Oasis in Joshua Tree National Park was a real treat with an actual trickling brook and beautiful palms. There were also numerous day hikers. “Did you see the tortoise?” a hiker asked. I hadn’t. It was ¾ of a mile back they thought. I really wanted to see one but was loathe to backtrack, especially when I might not be able to find it. However I was glad to have made the effort when I saw the tortoise feeding near the trail, making a slow motion lunge for each mouthful of desert plant. Cool!
March 14 was a very hot day on which I reached the 200 mile mark and the Colorado River Aqueduct, which, to my surprise, was dry. I reached a plateau on top of the Coxcomb Mountains late in the day as the air cooled, the beautiful evening light moving across the rugged rock. As usual I “cowboy camped” on the open ground. That night I looked up to see the bright stars in a black sky.

In the morning I enjoyed the look and smell of wild-flowers as I crossed “Hidden Basin.” By mid-morning I was walking across the desert in an already baking sun. Out of curiosity I checked how far it was to my next cache, figuring it was maybe 10 miles. 30 MILES!!! Somehow I’d confused two caches and thought my next one was a few hours away. Hmm. I could backtrack miles to my last cache and get the extra water. Or walk to the nearest road and hitch or ask for some water. Instead I elected to walk late and start early. Luckily a sandy wash made for some good hiking by starlight that evening and it was early enough in the year so I wasn’t seeing snakes yet.

Two hours before sunrise I was walking by moonlight. I reached my cache just past Route 66, 38 miles and 30 hours after leaving my last cache. There I dug up 2 gallons of water and plenty of food. I resolved to double-check the whereabouts of my next cache before leaving the prior one.

In the Trilobite Wilderness the next day a desert bighorn ram skeleton lay along the trail. It was fun to inspect the massive horns and skull. Bob Davis of the Desert Survivors was meeting me that evening. Rain was threatening and I was hustling to reach the road and to set up my tent before the rain hit. Too late. A cold, drenching rain hammered down. Yikes! What a change in weather. I looked for a spot where a flash flood wouldn’t wash me away and set up my shelter as fast as I could during a lull in the rain, which soon returned with a vengeance.

After the rain had passed Bob showed up. He’d brought some supplies for me which included a cheeseburger, fries and a shake. In the morning Bob did the navigating into the Granite Mountains. The terrain had the look of an old Western at first. By evening we had made it to the ridgetop and had to take what we could find for camp spots. A strong icy wind arose during the night. Our water froze in the 25 degree temps. Brrr!

That afternoon we encountered the two big dry-falls mentioned in the guidebook and elected to climb the ridge to avoid them. Bob shared some fruit with me from his cache that evening, and he headed back to his car while I hiked towards the Kelso Dunes.

And so it went as I headed northwards. Days and weeks and miles rolled on. Memories were made daily. The morning sun on the ripples of the Kelso Dunes. The cliffs of Hole-in-the-Wall. The Amargosa River. Tecopa Hot Springs. Desert plants of all kinds: cholla cactus, joshua trees, yucca, juniper and sage. Ancient Indian Petroglyphs. Colorful sunrises and sunsets. Always something to appreciate if one took the time.

There was almost no constructed trail on the route. Much of it was cross-country, following a bearing or shooting for a specific distant peak. Other places the route followed quiet 4WD roads where vehicles were rarely seen. Often days passed without sighting another person. On a typical day I walked 20 miles or more.
Death Valley. I wanted to make sure I made it through before the summer heat. Two bighorn rams were walking walking the ridge where I started a long descent. It was hot walking across the flat of the valley floor, but not unbearably so and it was an adventure in itself. Hey, I was walking across Death Valley! It was nearly midnight and I’d covered about 30 miles for the day when I bedded down. A hot wind was blowing. It was too hot in my bag and I was getting sandblasted out of my bag which resulted in a very poor night’s sleep.

Stovepipe Wells was waiting after another day’s walk followed by a great sleep. I picked up my supply box they’d held for me, got a shower and shave then an awesome cheeseburger at the cafe. You can’t appreciate sleep until you’ve been exhausted, food until you’ve been hungry, or a hot shower until you’ve gone without.

That night I heard a noise and when I heard it again I knew it was an animal. When I shined my light on it I saw the huge bat ears and tiny fluffy body of a kit fox standing over a sausage he had snatched from a rock next to me. He ran when I tried to get a photo. To his disappointment and my happiness he hadn’t gotten through the wrapper yet. Marble Canyon was the next stretch of trail and one of my favorite places of the trip, with a narrow, shady, colorful canyon. There were many petroglyphs and writings from old miners, one said “1906” and then “water 5 miles” with an arrow. Saw some old mining operations and had a perfect end to the day with a long walk down a sandy wash with Joshua trees and the setting sun.

April 3 was a big day. On the east side of “The Foot” were tens of thousands of fossils. I found a black obsidian arrowhead and then looked down at “The Racetrack” where rocks mysteriously slide across the surface of the lakebed when no one is looking, leaving clear tracks behind them. Before the day was over I’d found two more arrowheads. The next evening when I reached Eureka Dunes a big moon was rising over the mountains. My moon shadow moved over the light-colored dunes and I could hear each footstep in the sand. Looking back towards the moon I could see my dark tracks in the moonlit rippled sand.

My last day in California I camped at Last Chance Mountain where it froze hard. In the morning I crossed the unmarked border into Nevada, a major landmark meaning I had about 656 miles of trail behind me.

Editor’s Note: Buck Nelson’s account of his Desert Trail hike will continue in the Spring 2013 issue of The Survivor. You can learn more about Buck and his adventures— including a 1000 mile, solo hike across Alaska— by going to his website: bucktrack.com
Proposal to Mow 17,000 Acres in Bodie Hills Continues

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), with guidance from the US Forest Service (USFS), is preparing a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) analyzing a fire management plan to mow and bulldoze almost 17,000 acres in the Bodie Hills. The Bodie Hills Upland Vegetation Restoration Project Environment Assessment should be released by BLM/USFS in fall 2012 or so. To receive a notification e-mail, please contact Ms. Heather Stone, Vegetation Management Planner at hestone@fs.fed.us (phone 760-873-2561). The comment period may be only 30 days in length so it is advisable to get a copy as soon as possible.

Background: The lead agency is the Bishop, CA Office of the Bureau of Land Management working with an interagency team that includes a fire ecologist from US Forest Service and scientists from the Nature Conservancy. Thus far, all “restoration” will occur on federal lands, but there is a possibility the project will be expanded to include Bodie State Historic Park. If so, this action would trigger a California Environmental Quality Act document.

In April 2011 Desert Survivors submitted comments on the Notice of Proposed Action (NOPA) for the Bodie Hills Upland Vegetation Restoration Project: Proposed Action dated March 1, 2011 expressing concerns about the plan. The letter, signed by Desert Survivors president Gerry Goss, stated “We are… uncomfortable endorsing artificial manipulation of 16,930 acres, given the information provided. Desert Survivors does not support an experiment of this scale, especially since some of the proposed treatments include mowing with an ASV, cutting and chipping trees, and use of a rangeland drill. During earlier Bodie Hills experiments, this has produced an unattractive landscape” (i.e. pinyon thinning conducted in the Bodie Hills adjacent to the Mono Basin).

According to the 2011 document, the vegetation-- Great Basin wild rye, big sagebrush, low sagebrush, etc-- is “currently departed from the natural range of variability.” That means that there is not enough of it in younger stages of growth. Although most of us would agree there should be multiple stages of sage, do we know enough to adequately project how to solve this question which has arisen after many years of fire suppression.

Is this what we want for our public lands? Large-scale manipulation using fossil fuels? Please request to get on the list for the EA, get educated and get involved.-- Cactus Wren 🦃
Mono Lake is a place of stark beauty and bizarre sights. Located at the edges of the Great Basin Desert and the Sierra Nevada Mountains, it is a 65-square-mile remnant of a once-vast, Ice Age inland-sea. The lake has no outlet and its water is very salty. On sunny days, the lake is a deep turquoise blue color. Ringed by white sands it stands in beautiful, vivid contrast to the dull tans and grays of the surrounding desert terrain.

As most readers know, historic Mono Lake was once much larger in size. Beginning in 1941 the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) began diverting its tributary streams to an aqueduct and sent the water to Southern California. The effect was an immediate ecological disaster. The lake receded dramatically. The salinity of its water more than doubled, putting a strain on the plants and animals that inhabit it. By the 1980’s a land bridge formed from the shore to lake islands that were nesting grounds for tens of thousands of seagulls-- opening the rookery to mammal predators. Through public education, lawsuits, and negotiations led by Save Mono Lake Committee against the DWP, the draining of the lake ended in 1994. Many of the diverted streams have now been restored and the lake is slowly refilling.

The drop in the water level had one small benefit-- an aesthetic one. It exposed many of the weird and spectacular rock formations the Mono Lake is famous for-- the Tufa Towers. These are calcium-carbonate spires and knobs, that in some places rise over 30 feet high, that were once underwater and were created by calcium-laced freshwater flowing from submarine springs interacting with the alkali lake water. The State of California maintains a tufa reserve and viewing site at the lake. Bizarre, surreal, weird are words often used by visitors to describe the scene.

Into this eerie Mono Lake landscape the Desert Survivors began a July 2012 car camp. Little did we participants know, that we would be viewing something that would give us cause to search for new adjectives and metaphors for an unusual natural sight.

Our group of 20 Desert Survivors gathered at a parking lot in Lee Vining, CA — the only town on Mono Lake. Being summer, with the schools in recess, there were five children with us. Trip leader, Bob Lyon rounded everyone up to sign waivers and make introductions. He announced the day’s first destination—a place he had not visited previously. It was a strange place, that trip participants Rich and Ruth Spelker would lead us to. A place they happened upon by chance in 2004.

As their story is told: Back in 2004 Rich and Ruth launched kayaks from Navy Beach on the south shore of Mono Lake for an afternoon of quiet paddling. Once out on the water a strong wind picked up. They both paddled as hard as they could to get back to the launch site; however, the wind turned into a small gale and blew them many miles away, to the east shore of the lake. The only feasible way back to their car was to secure the kayaks onshore and to hike over eight miles back to Navy Beach.

At first Rich and Ruth walked along the lakeshore, which required them to trapse around several marshes and tufa formations. At a certain point they decided it would be easier going if they walked to the dirt road that ran along the pre-1941 shore. As they headed across the dry lakebed toward the road they came upon a scene that was… unusual? Weird? It was hard to describe in simple words.
For the 2012 Desert Survivors the first course of business was for everyone to make their way on paved roads to Navy Beach. The road beyond Navy Beach was unpaved and quite sandy, so those participants in 2-wheel drive cars had to leave their vehicles in the parking area and catch rides with those who had 4WD. Rich and Ruth led the caravan of Desert Survivors vehicles along a bumpy route that used to be mere yards from the shore of Mono Lake. Now the lake was over ½ mile distant. After about a half-hour journey the caravan came to a halt. Everyone grabbed his or her daypack and we were off on foot.

We clambered down a steep bank from the old shore and onto a flat, sandy plain of the exposed lakebed. This land is actually a source of local air pollution. Dust particles kicked up by winds often make alkali clouds that put the Mono Basin in violation of the Clean Air Act. The winds are also responsible for removing several feet of sediment.

Gazing across the bright white sand we began to notice odd, convoluted shapes and shadows in the distance. Or were they close by? It was hard to tell because no one was sure just what he or she was looking at. We walked closer. Finally, within a few feet the true aspect of these objects became apparent… and they were really weird. We stood before the Sand Tufas of Mono Lake.

These strange geologic features stand anywhere from two to six feet tall. They rise from the ground in narrow, delicate sand columns. In most instances the columns widen the higher they go, and cantilever out in sediment bands and often top off with white calcium carbonate knobs. The cantilevered sediments seem to indicate the changing levels of ancient lakebed. The overall look is a rock formation that is delicate and intricate and yet absurdly top heavy.

The sand tufas were formed differently than the tufa towers. They were created beneath the lakebed by the chemical reaction of calcium-rich water seeping up through brine-saturated layers of sand—causing the sand around the seeps to harden. The lake receded, leaving the lakebed high and dry and subsequent wind erosion revealed the sand tufas.

Of course, we Desert Survivors found the sand tufas to be utterly fascinating. Every camera on hand was pulled out and we went into a frenzy of picture taking. The formations reminded me of structures from sci-fi and fantasy movies, such as The Lord of the Rings trilogy or the Star Wars films, or in the history something akin to the Maijishan Grottos in China or Kandovan in Iran; only these rock houses had been inhabited by an ancient civilization of tiny people. Wait a minute. Now I was getting weird.

Many broken pieces of sand tufas were scattered about giving evidence of their fragile state. The formations will most likely remain intact for only mere years. Considering the weathering forces of this high desert, it is hard to imagine these structures
existing decades from now. The location of the sand tufas is more or less kept secret to protect them from the impact of too many visitors and possible vandalism. We felt privileged to witness them.

The remainder of the trip was wonderful. After viewing the sand tufas, the Desert Survivors hiked on to the lakeshore for lunch. Several of the children donned swimsuits and waded into the briny water, walking out to tufa formation offshore. We camped in a pine forest that night near the site of Mono (saw) Mills. The next day we visited a beautiful, fresh water marsh on the east shore of the lake and hiked the cinder cone and volcanic plug of Panum Crater. Mono Lake is full of wonderful sights and we visited our fair share of them.

For me, the highlight of the trip was the sand tufas. When I went to work the following Monday, my workmates were eager to hear about the trip. I searched long for words to describe the sand tufas. I finally blurted out, “They were like fairy castles.” A couple of my workmates smirked over what I said. They were all bewildered. Ultimately they understood what I was getting at when I showed photos. They agreed that the sand tufas were hard to describe in a few words.

Then again, I said, “fairy castles.” Those words shouldn’t be coming from a grown man.
Ramona Daniels is the Outdoor Recreation Planner for the Needles Bureau of Land Management. Under her direction I monitor wilderness areas that the Needles office manages. The purpose of this trip was to locate and evaluate two caves near Whipple Wash.

Nate Stewart from Minnesota is one of four new interns at the Needles BLM. As backcountry monitor he was eager to get into the remote wilderness. Pov and I were looking for a reason to get back to Whipple Wash to continue the search for a cave near Whipple Palm Tree. Nate, Pov and I were available for the same five days. Plans for a Whipple Wilderness exploration developed.

The temperature in the Needles area had been dry and hot for several weeks before our trip with highs in the 80’s and 90’s. Pov and I left the Bay Area just as a cold front passed over going southeast. We drove in rain all the way to Bakersfield with a few heavy downpours. The cold front reached the Mojave about the same time we did, cooling the air and providing a few light sprinkles and a windy evening.

We planned a three-day backpack trip that would let us locate and explore Palm Tree Cave on the first day, and hike through Whipple Wash and North Bowmans Wash to reach cave that I knew about from a previous trip on the second day. The middle third of the course I had not explored and even though it appeared to be reasonable on the USGS topo map, we were prepared for a third night should it be needed. In order to lighten our packs Nate cached water using a trailhead that was two miles from our halfway point.

We had seen what we thought was Palm Tree cave from the access road looking though a notch made by the first narrows in Whipple Wash. We knew from a previous trip that the cave was not in Whipple Wash. So it had to be in the far wall of the first big drainage coming into Whipple Wash.

We hiked past Whipple Palm, a 50-foot California fan palm. The seep that supports this tree had more water that last month. After turning into the wide side canyon and going past an island plateau we were excited to see the cave about halfway up the canyon wall and 1000 feet above us.
We found a route from the wash to the cave up a moderately steep slope. Palm Tree cave is in an intermittent watercourse so that when there is enough rainfall the cave would be behind a waterfall. There is a small gravel and rock wash that starts from below the base of the cave where there were many small charcoal pellets. Charcoal tells us there were fires here somewhere in the water path above this site. This could be evidence of previous human activity. Inside the cave we found an empty corroded 22-shell casing with rim intact. We found no other archaeologically interesting artifacts at this site.

This is a big cave with a hemi-circle entrance about sixty feet in diameter and one hundred feet deep. The floor of the cave is very steep in the front half of the cave. In the back half there are two moderately steep terraces. In the front and center of each of these there are four foot diameter rock formations that appear to have been made by dripping mineral laden water, similar to stalagmites in limestone caves.

The first of these consisted of a low dome of cream-colored rock covered with wavelet shapes. The second was a high dome of tiny multi-branched fingers of light grey stone. In the back of the cave there were linear columns and much of the upper terrace floor is encased in a layer of similar rock. Nothing that we saw here suggested to us a history of human occupation.

Our attempt to return down the cave ravine failed when we encountered a high pour off with no apparent way around. We returned to the route we came up and retraced our steps to Whipple Wash.

Since finding the cave and getting into it were easier than expected this exploration was accomplished in much less time than was scheduled. We pushed on toward or second cave objective.

We passed by the Whipple Pools, the lone Whipple Saguaro and through the many rock labyrinths that are the signature geology of this part of the wash. There were stands of tamarisk and several different yuccas. After leaving Whipple Wash we followed North Bowman Wash in the one of the unknown sections of this trip. We found walking in this wash fairly easy, encountering only a single, rock fall labyrinth we had tread carefully through.

We arrived at the cave near North Bowman Wash sooner than expected. This cave had a level floor of grey sand and was littered with dry yucca leaves and fiber. There were old dry tree branches and abundant burro tracks and droppings.

As evening came a strong wind blew down the canyon. We found a shelter area out of most of the wind for camp, had dinner, a few stories and then to a long winter’s night sleep. Early the next morning we resupplied our water from the cache that was easily found. We and had a quick breakfast then decamped and started on our return trip.

Since we were well ahead of schedule we decided to take an alternate route back to Whipple Wash that went on the other site of the ridge that we passed on our way through North Bowman Wash. This route goes up a gentle ravine to a low pass, along a ridge, and down a ravine to Whipple Wash west of where we had been the day before.

On our way out we looked at a rock layer where a rock drill bit is locked in the rock. There appeared to be a previously exposed rock face that had a seam of dark brown rock that blend into rusty red then to yellow. This seam is enclosed in rock that is light green with a few thin layers of dark green. This could be mineral bearing rock, possibly copper, but not in sufficient quantity to be valuable. It appeared that a prospector had blasted a layer of rock from this ledge then when drilling to plant another dynamite charge the drill bit stuck in the rock and was left there.

Near the trailhead we found mesquite trees where sections of the tree trunks had been removed recently. The remaining cut surfaces were very smooth. These cut surfaces were quite beautiful. It appeared that this was done because these mesquite logs might be considered to be valuable.

Because each segment of this trip was done in less time than allocated we arrived at the trailhead a day early with some daylight remaining and decided to do a day hike to Mopah Spring the next day.
Desert Survivors’ Dave McMullen reports on a NPS public meeting and offers his comments for the plan.

Desert Survivors Paul Menkes and yours truly journeyed to Bishop, CA to attend the first of three open house-style public meetings regarding the development of this plan. Many National Park Service (NPS) folks were in attendance including Death Valley National Park (DVNP) Superintendent Sarah Craighead. Multiple easels with story boards were set up around the room, each directing one’s attention to some facet of the program’s development, i.e. potential scope, some identified areas of concern, maps, and legalese, and more. I was able to engage all but one of the NPS personnel in discussions of various aspects of the plan’s development. The crowd of citizens present included a prominent member of the Saline Preservation Association, a long-time desert activist, and someone from the E Clampus Vitus (a group dedicated to preserving the western heritage.) We spent approximately two hours looking over the displays and speaking with park personnel and other people present.

My initial impressions are: 1. DVNP takes this task seriously, and 2. They are very closed-lipped about their intentions. Let me mitigate #2 by saying that I found Superintendent Craighead to be open about the direction this management plan will take. One particular concern I heard voiced from several directions is the libertarian nature of the community involved there, which the Park “inherited” with passage of California Desert Protection Act (CDPA) in 1994. It must be obvious to any one informed of the area, that the community and its incumbent behaviors are anathema to NPS norms. When the CDPA passed, this very conflict was correctly identified by cognoscenti along with the inevitable struggle to maintain that status.

Here are my comments to date (June 25, 2012). They have not yet been submitted as I expect to amend them before submission via the internet. They are offered for you perusal, kibitzing, comments, derogation, etc.

Sincerely,
Dave McMullen
Below, in **bold type** is the list of “Questions to Consider” taken from the DVNP mailer on this issue. The bulleted comments are Mr. McMullen’s responses to the questionnaire. Note: The comments are the opinion of Dave McMullen and do not necessarily reflect an official position of Desert Survivors

### What types of recreational use of Saline Valley Warm Springs are important to you?
- Camping.
- Bathing/soaking in existing tubs at Lower Warm Springs and Palm Springs only.
- Campfires w/user provided wood at communal site at Lower Warm Springs only. No private campfires at individual camping sites.
- Star gazing.
- Wildlife viewing.
- Kite flying.
- Dancing at Lower Warm Springs only.
- Singing at Lower Warm Springs only.
- Playing musical instruments.
- Sunbathing.

### What visitor activities do you feel are appropriate in the Saline Valley Warm Springs area?
- See above.
- Clothing optional attire in the bathing/soaking areas only.
- Group BBQ’ing at Lower Warm Springs only.

### What are your thoughts on management of feral burros in Saline Valley?
- Eradicate the burros.
- Establish an on-going burro monitoring and eradication program.

### How do you feel about the camping situation at the springs?
- I have mixed feelings about this. I am glad camping is allowed. I am also glad for the unique libertarian community that has evolved there. However, I disagree with some of the activities that have occurred over the years, such as the scraping of peace symbols on hillsides, construction of a baseball field, discharging firearms, use of fireworks, and drunkenness/slovenliness just to name those I find most egregious.
- I would have the sociological openness associated with the Warm Springs left unfettered, except for the undesirable sloth attracted to this special site.
- Limit the use of electrical generators to daylight hours between 9 AM and 4 PM.
- Limit noise making activities generated at camp sites to 9 AM to 8 PM.
- I believe the NPS can cooperate with individuals and/or organizations of site users to manage the area. It need not be forced into conformity w/NPS standard management models. Should the Timbisha require access for private traditional uses, the NPS can establish a closure period or periods for the general public and allow the Timbisha their cultural practices.
- The use of a campground host is beneficial to site users and the NPS.

### Do you have any concerns about the Upper Warm Springs?
- Continue to allow diversion of water from Lower and Palm Springs for use in bathing and soaking tubs, and for dish/clothes washing.
- No diversion of water from Upper Warm Spring.
- Establish a drawdown limit/removal rate that will protect the ecosystem within the springs and places said protection as the highest and best use of the water with rate adjustable pending changes in spring output; lower output = reduced drawdown, and vice versa.
- Spring overflow (when available) to be directed toward down slope irrigation of native Mesquite trees.
- Tub/bathing discharges to be directed toward down slope irrigation of native Mesquite trees.
- Continue to allow diversion of water from Lower and Palm Springs for use in bathing and soaking tubs, and for dish/clothes washing.

### Do you have any concerns about the Diversion of Water from Saline Valley?
- Require registration at time of arrival for camping.
- Erect a donations receptacle to aid funding management/maintenance of the area.
- Do you have any concerns about the use of the Chicken Strip airstrip?
- Close the Chicken Strip.
- Prohibit aircraft from landing except for emergency purposes only.
- Prohibit all low flying aircraft within 20 miles of the Warm Springs area (including military aircraft) except for emergency purposes only.

### Do you have any concerns about the Non-native Plants?
- Remove all non-native plant species.
- Prohibit future introduction of non-native plants. Enforce prohibition with stiff financial penalties.
- Provide for a regularly scheduled inventory of plants and establish removal parties as needed. Parties can constitute volunteers from user groups and/or other interested groups, paid staff, grant funded environmental restoration projects, etc. But get them out and keep them out.

### Do you have any concerns about the Facilities Maintenance?
- Current facilities/structures built by volunteers to be maintained/rebuilt by volunteers with full knowledge and prior approval of NPS.
- Current facilities/structures built by the NPS to be maintained/rebuilt by the NPS.
- Limit additional facilities/structures to donation receptacle, registration kiosk, and camp site/day use area markers only.
The Green River feels ancient and vast. Flowing from the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming it cuts through the Colorado Plateau in Utah, and some of the most spectacular canyons in the world. In June 2012, I was one in a party of 12 Desert Survivors who rafted down the Green River, led by guides from ARTA River Trips.

Looking up from the river at the remote, crumbling canyon walls, one can’t help but feel dwarfed by the scale of these surroundings. It doesn’t take much imagination to see mountains of debris falling away from solid rock and imagine hidden castle walls and ancient defenses. For several days we paddled along the base of these prehistoric bulwarks-- monumental rock walls supported at strikingly regular intervals by sandstone buttresses. The layers of rock here are less striking than the gigantic scale of the formations. The canyons have a soaring Monument Valley aspect-- parched and treeless down to the river’s edge where the river meanders along in lazy loops, punctuated now and then by Class 1 and 2 rapids. Cottonwood and mulberry trees grow along the riverbanks, providing us with welcome shade when we went ashore. Being the month of June, the weather was hot.

One particularly warm morning, our guides led us on a side trip-- a hike a couple miles inland to some Fremont Indian petroglyphs. The path paralleled a noisy creek of crystal-clear water. About 1½ miles in we encountered a delightful waterfall tumbling into a pool beside the trail. Several of us immediately plunged into the water. Its icy cold left us breathless, but also refreshed us before we resumed our trek upstream. Further on we met some fishermen busy with their rigs. They told us this creek is among the best fly-fishing spots in the US. Who knew?

Shortly after that we arrived at a series of pictographs along the base of a sandstone cliff. Bright, rust colored images of people and symbols stood out sharply from the ochre rock. They were close enough to touch, yet the isolation has protected them from desecration. This was an extraordinary place. We took enough photos for a National Geographic special edition before heading out the way we came. On the walk back, our guides led us on a detour up a side canyon; to a legendary place they called “Butt-Dam Falls.”

Our path ended at a shallow gravel depression at the base of a jumble of large boulders. A trickle of water (about the same flow as a garden hose) cascaded down from a mossy rock lip about 15 feet overhead. Our guides had a few of us remain below, and then led the rest of the group on a climb up the surrounding boulders. Once on top they found the water’s source-- a stream flowing along a series of rock-sculpted
basins. The river guides organized those at the top into teams, strategically seating knots of people at intervals along the water’s path, completely blocking its flow with their butts. People sat shivering, up to their navels in cold water, using their rear ends to divert the stream into series of natural tubs. Within minutes, enough water was dammed up to fill a small swimming pool.

The guides then yelled for us at the bottom to lean against the wall below the trickling water. With racing hearts, three of us pressed our backs against the cold rock and we held our breaths. We had a good idea as to what would come next. Above us, beginning with the back row, the guides began ordering teams to stand up—releasing the water backed up by their bodies. The water quickly gathered speed; ultimately releasing a surge of water so powerful it nearly knocked the last group over the precipice.

Down below what had been a trickle of water became a torrent. Suddenly we felt the weight and force of an endless crashing wave. The downpour of frigid water pounded down on us for a solid minute. We survived this onslaught only by screaming at the top of our lungs and laughing hysterically. At the end of a battering that seemed to last forever, we found ourselves gasping for air, fire-hose-clean, ecstatic and ready to ride the hydraulic roller coaster all over again.
WHY THE TURTLES? by Bob Davis

After my fourth backpacking trip to the Turtle Mountain Wilderness in the Mojave Desert I was asked, “Why do you keep going back to the Turtles?” The obvious disadvantage is distance. The time to drive to the eastern Mojave from the Bay Area is about the same as driving to Portland, Oregon or Salt Lake City. But also, why go that far to a vast, hot, dry, sandy wasteland that has spiny cacti, scorpions, tarantulas and rattlesnakes? I thought about these questions while going on my fifth trip there a few weeks later.

The Turtle Mountains rise abruptly from the Mojave landscape, ascending several thousand feet to provide a background of sharply contrasting colors and shapes. There are strange volcanic features with cinder cones and eroded lava flows. There are saw-tooth ranges and huge flat top mesas with debris slopes reminiscent of the walls of the Grand Canyon. There are many varieties of rocks including sedimentary rock with inclusions of many different colors and consistencies. Many of the mountains appear as if composed of layers of rock that were coarsely mixed in a cosmic blender.

Evidence of dramatic erosion includes house-sized boulders (creating mazes to puzzle through) and multi-colored gravels and sand on the floors in the arroyos. The bajadas (slopes) extend from the edge of the mountains to the arroyos with rocks ranging in size from boulders at the base of the steep-sided mountains down to the sand and gravel of the arroyos. The Turtle Mountains are famous for the Chalcedony Rose, quartz rocks that look like extruded cake decorations. They are dense, translucent quartz of white, grey, or blue color with a waxy luster often covered with sparkling quartz crystals. Chalcedony Rose is formed underground from silica gels between layers of volcanic or sedimentary rock. They are exposed when the overlying rock is eroded away and can be found throughout the mountain range.

The Mojave has marvelous backpacking weather in winter, with moderate days and cool nights. While the rainfall in the Mojave averages five inches per year, when and how much it rains can be highly variable. On the trips that I have made, rain has been frequent. I have been in brief snow flurries and have seen ice in water bottles. There was a downpour one night that caused wet down and some ruffled feathers. Wet gear and spirits dried quickly in the sun and dry air the next day.

A typical Turtle Mountains backpacker’s day starts, after a long restful winter night camped in a sandy arroyo, with a hot drink and breakfast while decamping and packing up. The hiking begins on flat sand and gravel then to a steep rocky ravine with some rock scrambling, interesting route finding and navigation puzzles, heading to the rewarding experience of reaching a pass. New amazing views of the next valley and more distant mountain ridges greet the hiker. Later there are ridges, rock filled ravines, new bajadas and arroyo to cross. The landscape changes regularly through the day. Nighttime comes in a different bajada campsite where meals are cooked and stories shared; then early to bed to be ready for tomorrow’s daybreak.

There are springs in many forms in the Turtles. Coffin Spring is bathtub-sized and is hidden in a steep arroyo. Mopah...
Spring is a classic desert oasis. It lies in a shallow ravine on the side of a mountain bowl surrounded by tightly clustered Californian fan palm trees. Whipple Wash has numerous seeps and small pools. These and others are important water sources for a wide assortment of animals that live in these mountains.

The higher elevations are home to bighorn sheep, mule deer, bobcats, and mountain lions. In the arroyos and bajadas there are burros, rabbits, coyotes, foxes, ground squirrels, pack rats, desert tortoises, lizards, and snakes. Most animals are elusive, and if seen at all, will be moving away. Evidence of their passing is in the form of tracks, spore, bones and tortoise shells.

Commonly observed birds are the quail, doves, roadrunners, ravens, chukar and phainopepla. Red-tailed hawks and golden eagles can be seen soaring in the mountain updrafts. The canyon wren is seldom seen but its distinctive declining scale song is easily identified. A dome-shaped nest nestled deep in a cholla is the home of a cactus wren.

A wide variety of tiny beetles are often seen inside flowers. Grasshoppers are common. Harvester ant and their mounds are common sights. The solo red velvet ant is a flashy insect. Bees are found around flowering plants and at water sources. There are a few wasps. Mosquitoes are rare but occur near still water, even in old mine shafts with pools of water at the bottom.

Low, widely spaced shrubs dominate the bajadas. An ephemeral kaleidoscope of spring annuals will appear after a winter rainfall. Desert hollys are seen in dense clusters. Creosote bushes give off a characteristic smell after rains. The low-growing cacti have spectacular flowers, particularly the beavertail. Fishhook cacti have a ring of pink flowers below the crown that develops oblong, bright red fruit.

There are many different types of long, narrow-leafed yucca plants. Smoke trees, Palo Verde and mesquite grow in the lower arroyos. Ocotillo, with long wispy stems and clusters of bright red flowers, are seen in groups with barrels and cholla.

It is rare to dislike a plant, particularly if what is disliked is an amazing adaptation to the desert. Jumping cholla deserve the name due to the unpleasant easy that segments of these plant will cling to clothing, shoes, or skin after the lightest touch and because the spines can be quite painful to remove.

For me, a special animosity is reserved for the catclaw. It looks like any other bush-like tree. It is aptly named in that all along its small-leafed branches are reversed claw-like thorns. These thorns will rip through clothing, packs, or skin that brush by. In some ravines catclaws will block a reasonable path and force circuitous bypasses around them.

Even though some of the surprises in the Turtles are unpleasant, to me, in winter it is a place of fascinatingly and beautiful landscapes, occupied by myriad of interesting plants and animals. It is place with clear skies, where the stars can be seen at night, and glorious sunsets are not rare. The backpacker’s days consists of vigorous exercise, while at the same time resolving the puzzles of wilderness exploration. All of this takes place in company of like-minded companions. It is why I go back to the Turtles.
We met this fellow at the Berkeley Earth Day. Like the Desert Survivors he loves the desert—so much so, that he had a Bristlecone Pine tattooed on his back.

In the Goblin forest, Granite Range backpack July 2011. Photo: David Oline

Carolyn Dorsch discusses resources for identifying desert plants at the July 2012 Desert Survivors summer picnic.

Desert Survivors in Gary Wash, Turtle Mountains, January 2012

A dry wash camp. Photo: Bob Davis

This boulder was dubbed, “Femur Rock.” Photo: Nick Vasquez
Trips and Events

Enjoying a beautiful day on the Providence Mountains car camp, February 2012.

Desert Survivors at the Berkeley Earth Day, April 2012

A cactus hugger gets some tough love. Photo: Martina Konietzny

Backpackers in route to Coffin Springs, January 2012. Photo: Bob Davis

Wading in the water of Mono Lake during the July 2012 car camp.
Kelso Dunes as seen from the Quail Springs trail, Mojave National Preserve during a Desert Survivors February 2012 car camp. Photo by Nick Vasquez.