FROM THE EDITOR:

I have been doing this for ten years now. I remember Labor Day weekend 2012 well. It was the first Labor Day I spent it in front of a computer completing an issue of this magazine. “That was a lot of work,” I said back then, “but doable.” And so it has turned out, that for the last nine Labor Days I have devoted my holiday to this magazine. I suppose one could say this is a testament to my diligence and commitment to the project, then again I think it just as much shows what a dull life I lead. Just kidding. My life is exciting when on a Desert Survivors trip.

Of course, I have not done any of this on my own. Many Desert Survivors members have contributed their time and good efforts toward this magazine. It is not easy writing an article. One has to sit in front of a blank computer screen and distill thoughts into something that can be understood by others. Most often it is a real chore. I cannot thank all of the contributors enough, and please know full well that doable has only done with your terrific volunteer efforts.

Likewise we have many truly talented photographers in our membership. A big difference in The Survivor magazine in my tenure as editor, compared to those before, is the abundance of photos on its pages. The magazine is much more fun and informative because of the pictures. Thank you photographers for contributing your images, and please keep sending in those pics.

Back in 2012 I only reason I took on this project was because I knew of an existing cache of desert-themed articles I could draw from. They were written by Bob Davis and featured on his website Risking Too Far. All on his own, Bob Davis had been putting into words his love of the desert, his backpacking adventures in the Mojave and information pieces on related topics such as rattlesnake bites, inexpensive backpacking food, and mountain sickness. In the Fall 2012 edition of The Survivor Bob Davis wrote three of the articles! If I had blank pages to fill Bob was always gracious in letting me plug in one of his articles. He would also regularly pen new reports on the many backpacking trips he led. If anyone, besides me, could take credit for the success of this magazine it has to be Bob Davis. Yay!

Over the ten years of publishing this magazine the task has become significantly easier to do. I can attribute much to my mastering the layout software and simplifying the look of the magazine. In my earliest editions I would use different fonts, with letters varying size, for the text. About seven years ago I came to the realization that using 10-point Minion Pro font for all articles gave the magazine a much more polished look. It has saved me tons of time I was wasting fiddling with other fonts. I also heard complaints from readers that the text in my early editions was too small and difficult to read. We are an organization of greying members with waning eyesight, so I increased the font size to fit the readership.

Another big change in the past ten years has been the proliferation of internet photo sharing sites—especially Wikimedia Commons and Flickr Creative Commons. Back then when I found a photo I wanted to use on the internet, I had to write the photographer requesting permission. This took much time and effort. These days there are millions of photos that are available to use for a nonprofit group. I am constantly gleaning images from Flickr for use in this magazine. It is now so easy.

Finally, one area of vast improvement of The Survivor, has been the elimination of most typos, misspellings, bad grammar and other mistakes that besmirched the early editions. Karen Rusinak stepped up early on, and volunteered to proofread. Merci beaucoup Karen! The magazine was immediately much better after your scrutiny.

When I moved to Southern California, my cousin John Green was enlisted for proofreading duty. John is not a member of Desert Survivors and he read the magazine as someone who knows little of what we do. He has been a stickler about acronyms that we all know by heart. “What does BLM stand for?”, or “What is g.p.s.” were common notes from John. I also want to shout out to Kaitlyn van der Zweep who proofread while I was living in Portland, OR.

So this issue is the first of my second ten years as editor. Back in 2012, when I began this project, I could not have imagined doing it this long. Now that I have, I suppose another ten years is doable. —Nicholas Blake

Cover: Bob Ellis taking a break from driving over the Black Rock Playa, Nevada during a 2002 Desert Survivors trip that he led. Read a remembrance of Mr. Ellis by Lynne Buckner on page 9.

Photo: Eric Rorer.
Desert Survivors Annual General Meeting & Retreat
Mission San Antonio de Padua
October 6 - 9, 2022  (Thurs - Sun)
Monterey, County, CA

This year for our Annual General Meeting and Retreat we will return to one of our favorite places at Mission San Antonio de Padua. The site is located in a peaceful San Antonio Valley and was once part of William Randolph Hearst’s Ranch. Unlike most missions, this one has no towns built up around it. It is relatively remote and tranquil. Camping here is NOT offered to the general public, hence a rare opportunity for Desert Survivors to be surrounded by a part of California history.

Activities will include hikes in the Santa Lucia Mountains and walks in the mission’s gardens. Head over to nearby Army Fort Hunter Liggett and its Julia Morgan designed Hurst Hacienda Lodge for a cocktail. In the evenings, we will be hosting seminars on “Desert Survival Skills”—lessons on staying safe if your desert adventure goes wrong.

Sunday morning will feature our Annual General Meeting—where issues and directions for the organization will be discussed and our board of directors will be elected.

All Desert Survivors members are encouraged to attend.

Desert Survivors is covering the venue costs, so you can camp and take part in all of the activities for FREE!

Contact Marisa Seaman to let us know you’re coming.
seaman.marisa@gmail or call 510-872-5341

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Illustration: Henry Chapman Ford (1883) - National Gallery of Art

The beautifully preserved Bottle House at the Calico Ghost Town, CA, visited by Desert Survivors on the “Three Canyons Car Camp,” April 2022.

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After meeting Kelly, we were off in our adventure with our first stop at Thacker Pass itself—the site of the controversial proposed open-pit mine of the Lithium Nevada Corporation and various protest camps. In the Fall 2021 edition of The Survivor, I told of my visit to the “Protect Thacker Pass” protest camp and discussed the issues. On this visit we discovered the “Protect Thacker Pass” camp was no longer there.

The non-native environmental activists who founded the protest camp dismantled it after a conflict with People of Red Mountain—an Indigenous group of mostly Northern Paiute people who are directly related to the Native Americans who fled or were killed by U.S. soldiers in the Thacker pass area in the 19th century. The exact reasons for the conflict are disputed; however, the “Protect Thacker Pass” leaders were long-time spokespersons for the environmental group Deep Green Resistance (DGR). DGR is notorious for denying the existence of transgender people, and this hostility towards transgender people conflicted with People of Red Mountain’s support for indigenous “two-spirit people.” Since one of the “Protect Thacker Pass” activists, Will Falk, was also an attorney for People of Red Mountain in the litigation challenging the Bureau of Land Management decision to approve the mine, the split meant People of Red Mountain lost its legal representation and could no longer continue in the lawsuit.

It was 22ºF at 6:30AM, April 6th, 2022 when I awoke in my car at a rest area, a mile from Orovada*, Nevada. There were no motels or a Airbnb in this 155 person town. The rest area had a covered picnic area, a pit toilet and no bright lights—perfect for “car camping” with a warm sleeping bag.

After a cup of coffee at the local gas station and a golden hour iPhone photo shoot at a picturesque abandoned store, I drove from town to the Quinn River gravel pit to cook a hot breakfast and wait till 10:00AM when I would meet Kelly for our second trip to Thacker Pass. We also had plans to connect with Terry Crawforth, the retired director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife, for a tour of the region and to view a sage-grouse mating site, also called a lek.

After breakfast I took a stroll to warm up and get in some steps toward my daily fitness goal. The first thing I noticed on my walk were large amounts of “lithic scatter” (rock flake remnants of stone tool fabrication) embedded in the playa-like road. These were reminders that I was in Paiute land and this was likely prime hunting ground. The second thing I noticed was the foul smell of modernity—two dead bovine carcasses left to rot after (most likely) being hit by vehicles. It was later noted that the livestock insurance payout is higher for a death by car then death at a feedlot.

* Pronounce the vada like you would Nevada. Not with an “ah,” if you want to be taken seriously in this town.
There was a new camp now, occupied by two Native Americans calling themselves “protectors” not protestors. The men were concerned that our stated goal of hiking and looking for birds and wildflowers was a ruse for grave robbing—as an archeological crew was due to arrive soon for an assessment of anthropological resources relating to mine permitting. Eventually they realized we wanted to save the land as much as they did and they led us on a walk around the area pointing out interesting botanical and cultural features. One of the protectors told us of his plan to run across the entire United States, to publicize opposition to the pending destruction of sacred land at Thacker Pass.

In the afternoon we set up camp at nearby Pole Creek. This is where we would rendezvous with Terry at 5:00AM the next morning for sage-grouse viewing.

In their proposal to Bureau of Land Management, LNC stated that they were not going to sponsor temporary housing, aka “Man Camps.” Yet here, before our eyes, was such housing. “Man Camps” have a reputation for crime, violence, and the disappearance of indigenous women and children. Native American activists fighting the mine have made it quite clear that they do not want “Man Camp” housing anywhere near Thacker Pass.

As planned, Terry Crawforth showed up before dawn the next morning to pick us up and drive us to the sage-grouse viewing area. We parked on a ridge near a shallow ravine. We could hear the male sage-grouse before we saw them. They were making whooping noises by inflating their huge white chests outward, then rapidly deflating the air. This was their mating display. From a distance, and in the near dark, we adjusted our eyes to see the male birds strutting around, showing off and challenging each other. The patch of ground of this mating ritual is called a lek. We counted 19 males taking part. There were no females apparent. We learned that this was a huge decrease from past years when 78 birds of both sexes was the average count.

There was an old corral at the site and Pole Creek flowed nearby. The place appeared to be used as a hunting camp. We were serenaded by meadowlarks, and saw ground squirrels and burrowing owls. We could also see in the distance the Lyman Youngberg ranch—a property that Lithium Nevada Corporation (LNC) allegedly had purchased for its managers to park their RVs.
This plummet of sage-grouse population is the result of stresses from human activity. The increased number of human-caused wild fires, of heightened ferocity from global warming of the last decade have been devastating for the animal. The sage-grouse need tall grasses to hide their nests from predators such as ravens. Livestock over-grazing has reduced or eliminated much of the grass that protects the nests. Noise from the proposed Thacker Pass lithium mine could spell the final blow to the lek we were viewing. Sage-grouse abandon their leks when there is too much noise, and lek abandonment leads to population losses.

Of note: I went back to the lek two days later on my own, camping out on the ridge and scoping out some viewing sites closer to the lek. While walking around the day before in search of an abandoned mine and a closer grouse-viewing area, I flushed what were probably females in an adjacent ravine. The next morning I stayed after the sun came up and the birds became more active as things warmed up. Not only did I have a better view, but when the sun reached the birds the patterns on their spectacularly displayed tail feathers became visible. It was a Saturday at the height of lekking season and I was the only one there. It was a thrill I had been anticipating and searching for years and I was grateful for the set of circumstances and people that had led to this moment.

Kelly had left the day earlier but before she went away we had one more adventure. From the Kings Valley Road on the west side of Thacker Pass we drove up a steep 4WD road to a spring where rare springsnails (Pyrgulopsis imperialis) had been reported several years earlier. Although the terrain was very steep, the natural ground had been devastated by the trampling of cows. The BLM allows livestock grazing there.

We hiked uphill to the spring looking for the snail in its pool, but found none. We all but gave up our search. However, on the way down, we came upon a place that we had somehow not noticed on the way up. Though it was close to a 4WD road, we found clear flowing water—absolutely vital for springsnail existence. And we found springsnails! They were here and alive!

Currently there is active resistance to the lithium mine at Thacker Pass. A ruling on the lawsuit brought by environmental groups, tribes, and a rancher against the Bureau of Land Management for its approval of the mine is pending. The decision is expected in the fall of 2022; although whichever side loses could decide to appeal. If that happens, it might further delay the final outcome.

Local rumor has it that Elon Musk, and even Bill Gates, now have interest in the Thacker Pass and Kings Valley. But who knows whether that rumor is true or just a reflection of local hopes and fears. Kelly and I hope to return to the area next year during the lekking season; and with any luck and successful legal outcomes for many more years.
Once upon a time, I was roped on a steep snow slope at around 10,000 feet in the Rockies, complete with ice axe. I started seeing little patches of red in the snow every so often. They couldn’t be blood, and I assumed someone had a leaky wine skin, dripping port wine. At home my wife Mary—who was a biochemist—told me it was red was algae living just under the surface, exposed by an ice ax spike. She had a friend who did research on them. The snow is known also as *watermelon snow*. Algae are one-celled primitive plants.

Closer to Desert Survivors are the striking red/pink colors in the Owens Lake, and in salt ponds in south San Francisco Bay. You can see the ponds well from a commercial jet plane. These colors are due to different creatures, including the microscopic Archaea. There are now three domains of Life: Archaea, Bacteria and Eukarya (us). The salt-loving ones are still called halobacteria, an older name, ‘cos they’re now archaea.

What causes the pretty colors? “Carotenes” which are found in carrots (no surprise) and in many attractive foods, such as tomatoes and papaya. It is probable that the carotenes protect the snow algae and the halobacteria from the intense ultraviolet light, which damages cells.

To learn much more, see Armstrong (below.)

The *DesertUSA Newsletter* reaches me every Friday; it is a consolation for living in the wet East.

I once spent a week driving along the Owens Valley, with Genny Smith’s *Deepest Valley* guide in hand. Take it with you when you go.

**Len Finegold**  
Philadelphia, PA

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*In general, most algae is considered edible. Then again, would you really want to ingest red alpine slush?*
Desert Survivors last volunteered at this California City preserve in the spring of 2018—approximately 100 years ago in calibrated Covid time. We ripped out tons of noxious tumbleweeds, but sadly, saw zero tortoises for our efforts. Another go-round was arranged for spring 2022, but we had no pie-in-the-sky tortoise expectations this time with the California desert still in the grips of severe drought.

Twelve Desert Survivors campers gathered at Red Rock Canyon State Park base camp for the weekend under very warm skies. We spent the first day exploring a canyon in the Scodie Mountains. We investigated boulder rock formations and several thousand years of cultural occupation marked by pictographs, mortar holes, and historic inscriptions from construction of the first Los Angeles aqueduct and generations of Boy Scout campers. Near the canyon mouth, we found the front half of an historic stone mining cabin held together with salvaged aqueduct wire cable.

On Saturday morning we headed out early to California City for our service work. The Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA) is 39.5 square miles of natural habitat dedicated to the official California state reptile, the desert tortoise (Gopherus agassizii). Established as a Research Natural Area and Area of Critical Environmental Concern through Congressional designation and the California Desert Conservation Area Plan in 1980, the preserve contains flora and fauna representative of the Mojave Desert ecosystem. The fenced natural area, protected from grazing, recreational vehicles, and mining, offers researchers unique opportunities for western Mojave Desert study and conservation. The DTRNA maintains a public interpretive center with self-guided trails, bathrooms, educational kiosks, and on-site naturalists.

We spent the morning on tasks: delineating walking trails, shoveling gravel on car park areas, and scrubbing raven splash from the interpretive kiosks. After a box lunch supplied by the Preserve, we set off on some guided walks through the Natural Area. And there in a wash we saw a grazing female tortoise! Possibly alarmed by the horde of gawking observers, she set off in a slow tortoise "trot" for her burrow. No more photos after she rebuffed the paparazzi and hid her front half in her tunnel.

As we packed up the gear and prepared to leave the parking area, we were gifted with yet another tortoise sighting, a large male taking advantage of the shade under a car. I was always taught when Mojave surveying to check for tortoises under vehicles before leaving, but this was the first time in two decades I'd actually seen one using those cooler spots. I'm a believer now!

Visit the DTNRA Interpretive Visitor Center located four miles northeast of California City or give DTRNA's website a look at http://www.tortoise-tracks.org/. Spring is the best time to see tortoises. The Preserve is also a place to see the rare Mohave ground squirrel, lizards, horned toads, and desert birds. A live-in naturalist is usually on duty on weekends, but weekday visits are best for avoiding the off road vehicle activity in the neighborhood.

When in the desert, always check under your parked vehicle of wildlife.
In Memoriam: Bob Ellis  
1940 - 2021

by Lynne Buckner

Bob Ellis joined Desert Survivors in the early 1990’s and quickly became a beloved trip leader, editor and writer for The Survivor, a board of directors member, and in all, a vital part of our organization. Bob along with Marty Dickies, started a Desert Survivors issues group, and with Steve Tabor wrote many of the comments for Environmental Impact Reports and lawsuits in which Desert Survivors were involved.

Bob loved that one could still make discoveries in the desert. He relished finding new and unexpected routes, landscapes, cultural and historic sites, plants and ideas, and sharing them and his enthusiasm with others. I remember driving with Bob down I-5 and he pointing out Joaquin Rocks—sharing what he knew about their history and a local celebration. I never made it to Joaquin Rocks on one of the hikes Bob led, but the lore surrounding them inspired others in Desert Survivors to attempt the trek. I finally made it there in 2014.

The excursions Bob led were unique in many ways. Most were exploratory. He was such a good navigator that he led us safely to many places he had not scoped out ahead of time. And his trips were imaginative. He led two full-moon backpacks in the Eastern Mojave that involved sleeping during the day and hiking at night. He also led long-distance backpacks, that involved several legs, such as from Trona to Baker. He planned, led a section and provided vehicle support for a historic recreation of a 75-mile trip the miners would have taken by foot from Keeler to Bullfrog Mine in Death Valley 140 years ago.

He led excursions relating to environmental issues such as two trips to nuclear detonation sites that were not within the Nevada Test Site. One of these was Project Faultless (1968) in Hot Creek Valley near Morey Peak. Bob published a dramatic picture in the Winter 1997 edition of The Survivor which turned out to be a classified image causing the person who gave Bob the photo to be fired. The picture was an aerial view showing newly created fault lines in a drastically altered landscape. The article was a riveting condemnation of the Atomic Energy Commission for its recklessness and coverup of the radioactive mess it created. About this Bob wrote:

“We need to put up BIG SIGNS. We need to direct tourists to Hot Creek. We need people to understand where radioactive dangers are and mark them plainly. I think the Worlds Largest Thermometer needs to be moved from the Bun Boy in Baker and placed at the bomb site at Hot Creek. We can re-calibrate it to show the gradual reduction of hazardous radiation underground. It will not change fast. We can sell hamburgers while we wait.”

Desert Survivors revisited this site in the mid-2000’s and we saw government personnel doing radioactivity monitoring or some kind of activity.

Bob also pioneered trips and interest in what was referred to as the “Diablo Range”—the inner coast range administer by the Hollister Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This included Joaquin Rocks, Clear Creek and Monocline Ridge. Carrizo Plain was also a destination. In his volunteer work with the Hollister BLM on a Clear Creek committee, he discovered a Wilderness Study Area the BLM had forgotten it oversaw. This helped bring more protection to the Clear Creek getting more parts designated as a Wilderness Study Areas.

In the late 1990’s Bob joined the now defunct Desert Advisory Committee of the BLM. He, along with Ilene Anderson, were the two environmentalists on the committee. I remember Bob express much sadness and discouragement that most of the committee members were only interested in exploitation of resources and personal uses.

While in Desert Survivors, Bob and his wife Ingrid became very interested in native plants. The couple scouted rare plants as volunteers for Death Valley National Park. It was because of their discovery of “rock lady” (Maurandya petrophila)—a rare perennial desert plant—in several canyons surrounding Titus Canyon that the road through Titus did not have to be closed to motorized vehicles.

Bob and Ingrid continued scouting rare plants. They submitted samples of unknown Bristlecone pine stands to herbariums.

Bob had far-ranging interests. One of his passions was music. He played the autoharp and invented his own way to play it as a melody instrument. He even incorporated his music into his love for the desert as a member of a group called the “Cactus Huggers” who played for a Desert Survivors annual meeting and at a “Darwin Spring Fling.” Ingrid remembers Bob playing music late into the night under a full moon in the desert.

That’s how I would like to remember my dear friend Bob Ellis.
Near Lone Pine, the electronic highway billboard signs often announce “high wind” warnings to drivers of campers and high-load vehicles. Such were the hazardous conditions as I drove Highway 395 to the meeting site for this Desert Survivors trip with fingers crossed, hopeful that the 40-50 mph gusts would not topple my small-but-tall trailer and Jeep. I arrived safely and intact, to the Eastern Sierra Visitor Center where a dozen Desert Survivors gathered inside. Faced with a forecast of 36 hours of cold, fierce winds and the Owens Valley filled with dust, trip leader Nick Blake proposed, traveling directly to the campsite at Lower Centennial Spring.

The original itinerary would have taken us first onto Owens Lake to view a massive dust mitigation project. We missed seeing the site where the band U2 photographed their 1987 album *Joshua Tree*, and we did not venture to the town of Darwin nor the White Swan mine and “Star Wars Canyon,” that were all potential destinations on the first day. Eyeballing those sites will have to wait for another time. Notwithstanding those missed opportunities, we enjoyed two days modest breezes, clear skies, and mild temperatures, perfect for hiking, petroglyph viewing and camaraderie camped at the mouth of Centennial Canyon.

Turning off of Hwy. 190 our caravan of vehicles drove 5.5 miles up a bumpy dirt road ending at several spectacularly situated primitive campsites that nicely accommodated our group. Upon arrival, we embarked on a side canyon hike in search of the crash site of two Navy Phantom F4J jets that collided in 1978. As we later discovered many quizzical miles and hours later, we were hiking in the wrong canyon. So, this outing will hereafter be fondly remembered as Nick’s “Phantom Phantoms” adventure.

Unperturbed by the mysterious disappearance of the vaunted crash site, we proceeded steadily uphill to Upper Centennial Flat and the boundary fence of the China Lake Naval Bombing Range, making a perfect setting for a group photo. Retracing our steps on this eight mile out-and-back hike, we arrived back at camp in time to enjoy happy-hour libations and dinner in front of a nicely maintained miner’s cabin. With steady breezes blowing, no campfire was made, thereby avoiding a legacy of “Blake’s Blaze” along with his “Phantom Phantoms” hike.

**Exploring the Cosos**

*by Craig King*

Lunch break in the only shade spot available—at the base of a cliff.

*Photo: A.H. Cominos*

Treking into the upper reaches of Centennial Canyon

*Photo: N. Blake*

Right photo: It seems like on every trip someone has car trouble. In this instance the trip leader’s car developed clanging sounds in its the front suspension.

*These two photos: Craig King*
Late in the evening, we were joined by Dave Nichols and his partner Debbie, who drove from his home in the Mojave National Preserve where he serves as the National Park Service Archaeologist and Cultural Resources Program Manager. Dave’s expertise proved invaluable on the next day’s hike as we came upon petroglyphs etched by successive generations of indigenous peoples, and American miners as well.

One miner etching we saw dubiously announced the presence of gold. In fact, successful prospectors zealously guarded their valuable secret locations to avoid the predations of claim jumpers. Perhaps the gold was actually to be found in the opposite direction.

The top of Centennial Canyon is adorned with numerous petroglyphs etched in successive styles that span 10,000 or more years of human habitation. The earliest “pre-Coso-Era” petroglyphs often include highly abstract, mysterious, spiritual images. Not featured then are now-extinct Great Basin megafauna such as ancient mastodons and camels that were hunted by people with atlatls (spear throwing sticks). Etched images depicting smaller prey arrived in later millennia. More contemporary petroglyphs feature homages to bighorn sheep—a favorite food source for Coso-era hunters who used bows and arrows.

After another enjoyable evening spent kibitzing around the non-campfire, we departed for home on day three. Alas, we experienced another mechanical breakdown (somebody had a vehicle breakdown on each of the last three Desert Survivor trips). This time, Nick was relieved to find the clanging noise came from a worn-out suspension bushing in his 1994 Jeep Cherokee, and he was able to safely continue leading us to view new sights along our way.

Some fine petroglyphs and grinding stones are easily accessible adjacent to a rock quarry overlooking Owens Lake. These include some very ancient pre-Coso-Era abstract etchings and more modern images of big horn sheep.

A special find at this location was a sharpened flaked tool made by indigenous people from the thick clear glass at the bottom of a bottle. According to Dave Nichols, such artifacts are not uncommon, considering that traditional toolmakers often used volcanic glass (obsidian) to fashion knives, arrowheads and spear points. Like the pioneers’ bottles and their booze, obsidian was also imported from elsewhere.

At the conclusion of our trip, we drove on levies across Owens Lake to observe the massive dust mitigation infrastructure built (under court order) by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Toxic dust that previously rose across 47 square miles of now-dry, exposed lakebed is now kept in place with sprinklers, gravel beds, and shallow flooded wetlands. The two billion dollar project cost is a small price to pay by 12 million Los Angelenos whose thirsty desert lawns are irrigated with stolen Owens River water. On the positive side, it was pleasing to experience successful wetland habitat restoration for thousands of migrating birds, making an uplifting end to a fun weekend of desert exploration.
For this year’s Desert Survivors Annual General Meeting Retreat (AGM), Marisa Seaman has organized a series of seminars on wilderness survival skills—especially for the desert. The desert is one of the harshest environments on earth. In general, it lacks water and the extreme heat of the summer make it potentially a most deadly place.

We know the number one rule of desert survival is to not get yourself in a situation where your survival could be in question. Then again, we are an organization that loves the desert and we get out there as often as we can; and even the best laid plans can go wrong.

Ms. Seaman has studied up on survival strategies for being laid up in the desert. She is planning lessons for the AGM that will be informative and fun with lots of hands-on training. Consider this article your pre-class reading assignment. —The Editor

“The best way to survive in the desert without water is to not get stuck out in the desert without water!”

—Krebscreek
by Marisa Seaman

If one were to get stranded on a desolate road or find oneself lost in the desert wilderness (or, for that matter, on a trail in the local hills), one might initially panic. It’s okay to feel fear, but blind fear is paralyzing, and panic will affect reasoning with potentially fatal consequences. “How well you exercise that control often decides the outcome of survival situation,” says Lawrence Gonzales, author of Deep Survival: Who Lives, Dies, and Why (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003) (“Gonzales”). What should one do if stranded or lost? What skills should one learn to have a better chance of surviving? There are many resources providing tips and skills that should be tested beforehand to find out what works and are within your abilities. Practicing and becoming proficient in these will better ensure your survival.

Many survival situations are preventable with good preparation and planning. These include: educating yourself about local conditions; making sure your vehicle is in good working order with knowledge of and tools for basic repairs, and not overestimating the vehicle’s capabilities; packing proper gear, including a survival kit anticipating possible need for water, shelter, fire and signaling; carrying appropriate clothing for the season and potential changing conditions; knowing how to navigate with and carrying a compass and a durable, waterproof map wherever you go (as GPS units and cell phones are not always reliable); and knowing basic first aid, including how to recognize and treat heat-related injuries. David Alloway, author of Desert Survival Skills (University of Texas Press, 2000) (“Alloway”), recommends you bring a minimum of 1 gallon of water per person per day for consumption (versus cooking); and two gallons in 110°F to 120°F degree temperatures. Before you leave, you should tell your contact person the details of your itinerary - the time and route, your vehicle description and license number, fellow travelers’ contact information, and expected return, and don’t deviate from it without informing someone of your change of plans.

Despite proper preparation, unforeseen incidents or miscalculations can happen that will put you in a survival situation. When disoriented, a tendency is to push on thinking you can find your way back, increasing your risk of dehydration and becoming more lost. Instead, Gonzales recommends relying on the acronym, STOP, which stands for Stop, Think, Observe, and Prepare.

STOP. Sit down and stay calm. Moving around wastes precious time and energy, may make you harder to find.

THINK. Take inventory of what you have with you and what you see around you, considering your safety and physical needs for heat (Gonzales actually sees this after Observe.)

OBSERVE. Look for landmarks that you can identify and what the weather is doing.

PREPARE. Prepare for an overnight stay, seeking (or creating) a shelter for protection from the sun, wind, cold, or rain. Gonzales says “Wet suits” provides warmth as well as a visual signal from the air for rescuers. The classic scene of venturing into the desert ill-prepared.

The best way to survive in the desert without water is to not get stuck out in the desert without water. —Krebscreek

by Marisa Seaman

In August 2021 this California family embarked on a day hike into the Sierra foothills during 100°F+ temperatures with insufficient water. All three people and the dog were later found dead along the trail.

Illustration: E. Boyd Smith

In July 1996 a Plymouth van rented by German couple with two children broke down in the backcountry of Death Valley. All four people were without sufficient water for a desert emergency.

Illustration: ABC News

\[ \text{STOP, THINK, OBSERVE, PREPARE.} \]
If you told someone your plans before leaving, plan to stay put until you are rescued. “It is easier to locate a stationary person than one who is moving” (Alloway, p. 13). If no one knows of your whereabouts, you’ll need to develop a strategy plan for staying alive until help gets to you, and stick with it unless new conditions warrant.

It is crucial to set priorities to maximize your chances of survival. Water is always the first priority, followed by shelter, fire, signaling and food.

WATER. It is essential to safeguard from dehydration: “Reduced hydration levels make you more susceptible to heat-related illness and in addition it can impair both physical and mental acumen making you more likely to make a mistake that could compound your situation.” (Woodland Ways Bushcraft Blog, https://www.woodland-ways.co.uk/blog/overseas-expeditions/desert-survival-guide-rationing-water-loss/) (“Bushcraft”) For this reason, you should never ration available water. When necessary, you may need to find, catch, even “make” water. By carefully surveying the terrain from a good vantage point or using a topographical map, you might be able to identify riverbeds, gullies, or green areas that could indicate water sources. Keep in mind, however, if it would cost too much sweat energy to get to or obtain water. Observe—and listen to—your environment. Take notice of lush areas which may be indicative of water seeping from the ground. Also take note of game animals and animal tracks, especially in the early mornings and evenings, that would lead to or from water. Charles A. Lehman, author of Desert Survival Handbook – How to Prevent and Handle Emergency Situations, (Primer Publishers, 1998) adds, “Depressions in desert rock formations trap and hold rain water…[therefore] you may be alerted to these puddles by regular activity of birds or animals, or by swarms of insects hovering above them.” Any water found should be purified by boiling for 10 minutes or using water purification tablets. Water can also be obtained by collecting condensation through the use of dew traps, and from water vapor released from vegetation in (clear) transpiration bags.

SHELTER. Shelter is needed not only for protection from the elements, but also is critical in safeguarding against loss of body water. Whether artificial or natural, shelter should be constructed in a safe place visible to searchers, although one must balance protection against visibility. Dressing properly is another form of shelter that will enhance survival. Alloway says durable cotton is the fabric to wear in hot desert climates as some synthetics and blends may absorb solar radiation and make you feel hotter. (Wool is preferable in the cold). Loose-fitting, long-sleeved pants and shirts will help reduce evaporation in warm weather, protecting body water. A wide brimmed hat is a necessity to protect your brain.

FIRE. Fire offers several benefits: warmth; heat for cooking and purifying water; may serve as a signal to rescuers; and provides psychological support. Where fire is used for signaling rescuers, it should be built to produce a great deal of smoke, ensuring the smoke will rise upwards in a column and not be dispersed. However, Tony Nester, author of Desert Skills Tips, Tricks, and Skills (Diamond Creek Press, 2003) (“Nestor”), advises using caution when building a signal fire, and recommends you have experience with this method. Nestor actually recommends against signals fires unless the situation demands it.
**SIGNALING.** Once the above needs are addressed, you need to set up signals to aid search and rescue (SAR) teams. Signals take multiple forms: electronic, visual, and audible.

- Electronic signals include a personal locator beacon or a handheld satellite messenger device to send a distress message with your exact GPS coordinates (such as InReach). Cell phones, even if the signal is too weak to make a call or send a text, may still “ping” towers in the area. Satellite phones are also an option but acquiring the satellite can be difficult. Electronic devices should not be depended upon as the only means of signaling as they are not always dependable.

- Visual signals should be big and visible, since signals from the air may look quite small.
  - Ground markers (using whatever materials are at hand) make good signals in an opening or on a hilltop. SAR pilots recognize a giant X, aligned 40 feet by 40 feet, as indicating “Unable to proceed.”
  - Visual signals should also stand out in color. Consider carrying orange ponchos, orange smoke bombs, or other supplies that will draw attention.
  - A signaling mirror, an essential tool that should be in your survival kit, can signal surface-to-surface and surface-to-air for many miles, depending on your location and weather conditions. Any reflective surface, even a CD, can be used in a pinch.
  - You also can increase your visibility by opening all the doors, hood and tailgate of your vehicle, taking care not to drain the battery (unhook the negative battery cable). If you must relocate or leave your vehicle, leave signs indicating which direction you’re heading.

- Audible signals, such as a whistle or horn, should be done in a pattern of three, the universal code for distress, and continually repeated.

**FOOD.** Food is a lesser priority in desert survival situations. While food helps keep up metabolism and maintain body temperature, Alloway says you should not eat anything if water is in short supply as water is needed for digestion. (Alloway, p.14)

People can survive far longer without food than without water.

Water is the top priority for survival in the desert for the simple reason that one’s water needs “go upward at alarming rates” as temperature rises, or in case of physical activity. (Alloway, p.48) In *Surviving the Extremes – What Happens to the Body and Mind at the Limits of Human Endurance*, in the chapter, Desert, (Penguin Books, 2004) Kenneth Kamler, M.D (“Kamler”) describes the physiological relationship between core body temperature and body water in the human body. He details how the effect of exposure to the hot sun and physical activities in the heat will increase core body temperature, which in turn increases dehydration, leading to internal havoc, and ultimately threatening our survival. “If body temperature varies by more than 4°F from 98.6°F,” Kamler explains, “systems begin to malfunction and the body’s formidable defenses start to crumble.” (Kamler, p.127)

When the body temperature exceeds 108.6°F – only 10°F above our normal body temperature - this will cause the body to fatally overheat. For this reason, survival depends not only upon maximizing heat loss but also upon minimizing heat production.

One can minimize heat production by understanding how our body absorbs heat. When there is direct contact between two objects, heat flows from the warmer one to the cooler one (conduction), like from the hot ground to your boots. Ambient air is also a factor, because when air circulates over a contact surface, heat again spreads from the warmer to cooler surface (convection), like how hot air heats up your skin. Radiation (both from the Sun and from rocks or other surfaces) is the greatest source of heat: “Direct solar energy accounts for about two-thirds of the heat load absorbed by the body.” (Kamler, p. 127)
If you find yourself in the dangerous predicament of having insufficient water in the desert, the following tips offered by Krebscreek Outdoors (https://krebscreek.com/how-to-survive-in-the-desert-without-water) (“Krebscreek”) can help you minimize your water loss and improve your chances of survival:

- Minimize loss of body water through perspiration (sweating). Although our body temperature is around 98.6, our skin temperature is about 92. When skin temperature exceeds this lower temperature, the body begins to produce sweat to cool it down, leading to a loss of body water.
- Seek shade and limit activity in the heat of the day. Limit movement and physical exertion to cooler times of the day such as early mornings and at night.
- Move slowly so you do not work up a sweat. Reducing unnecessary physical exertion is key to retention of body water.
- Balance the costs and the benefits in activities that involve sweating and energy. You don’t want to expend more sweat than what you can expect to obtain in your search for water.
- Don’t sit on the hot ground or rocks. Avoid sitting directly on unshaded ground or rocks that have been heated by the sun since the ground temperature in the desert can reach between 30°F to 80°F degrees hotter than the air temperature. If possible, sit on something that allows air circulation under you.
- Breathe through your nose instead of your mouth. This helps limit water vapor through respiration. Breathing through your mouth open will increase moisture loss from your body.
- Cover your nose and mouth. Wearing a scarf or other thin piece of material will help limit the vapor loss through your breath, without making it more difficult to breathe.
- Cover your head. The brain is one of the most temperature-sensitive organs in the body. Direct or indirect sunlight on your head will heat up your brain and trigger the body’s natural cooling mechanism of sweating.

In conclusion, always keep your wits about you and remember to ration sweat by limiting exercise, wear proper clothing, and utilizing shelter.

While these measures will help your survivability, the will to live is paramount in improving your chance of survival. Facing and accepting the reality of your situation instead of resigning yourself will better enable you to function. Find some reason to live, whatever reason, even a less noble reason, to want to return alive, and don’t give up. Humor in a survival situation can also help. Gonzales says laughter helps alleviate anxiety and frustration, thereby alleviating fear and anxiety.

Hopefully you will never find yourself in a survival situation, but being prepared and aware of the risks should help you find your way safely out of the desert wilderness.
Some years ago I arrived in Anza-Borrego Desert a month beyond the vernal equinox with the mercury dabbling in the low 100ºs. I stood with a guide, suddenly roused from lethargy, on the ledge of Font’s Point above the aptly named Borrego Badlands. The scene at our feet was stock still, wasted after untold years of geologic torture. Its poker-faced pattern of shrunken mud repeated across into forever, or probably just Mexico. It was hard to remain languid confronted with this stretch of earth in the wake of its lost battle with time. I had hired a guide because I was on assignment for a travel magazine. I needed to penetrate hide-bound terrain expeditiously in a 4WD. With his sun-bleached hair and ruddy-bronze skin, Ted looked as if he should have been out catching a wave. But his affection was for this dry undulation of desert. He acquired his flush, not at the coast, but in this ancient beach of southeastern California, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

The scene was in startling contrast to the previous hikes we had taken, fording a creek in Coyote Canyon, bushwhacking through thickets of invasive tamarisk, salt cedar, passing barrel and cholla cactus, blooming ocotillo, then on to Catarina Springs. Where there’s water there’s life — we slid through willow, admiring indigo bush, sage, mesquite, dyeweed, cat’s claw, and more.

I left Ted and alone from Bow Willow Creek, I attempted to hike Mountain Palm Springs but the heat stymied me. I rested long in the beauty and isolation of the Pygmy Grove, soaking my extremities like the stand of Washingtonia filifera, not knowing that in my distant future I’d meet the palms again on a five-star trip with Desert Survivors led by Paul Harris and Carol Clark.
impressed with their prior knowledge of the terrain and how much preparation they had done, including safety precautions. We split into two groups of five piling into the high-clearance 4WD vehicles required to get to the trailhead. I went with Ari, Steve, Jessica, and Dan. For the first of many times, conversation turned to jumping cactus. To the uninitiated, which I was painfully not, it sounds like an urban myth. Those fuzzy golf-sized ovals, detached from their parent, will on the slightest provocation jump a foot to attack. The one that assaulted me years ago even made a U-turn to penetrate my calf, through long pants.

We rolled on the paved S2 until a sandy wash that led to an otherworld landscape called Arroyo Tapiado Canyon. Most vegetation had skipped town. The prominent features, dark holes in the baked mud walls, were like empty eye sockets, eerie invitations to the curious and daring, which we were. This astonishing land form, new to me, harbored mud tunnels, also called caves, but tunnel felt more fitting.

Arroyo Tapiado is Spanish for walled wash. These buxom mounds are honey-combed with tunnels (ending in the “eye sockets”), feeding into caves and vice-versa in varying degrees of slant and with varying degrees of clearance. Carol had already assured us that she has some claustrophobia (me too!) so we wouldn’t be getting into any of the really tight tubes. However, we would need headlamps for some of the dark passages where only our disembodied voices united us. We bowed and shimmied sideways quite a bit through narrows, marveling at the labyrinthine network of natural forces. I found myself long-ing for greenery to break up the monotonous buff color.

We passed slits in the mud walls that only a small dog could fit through but one fearless member of our group, Brian, collapsed himself like Gumby and disappeared into the black hole. I held my breath until he poked his smiling head out again. After that nothing Brian did amazed me. (Turns out he is part mountain goat too). The caves are not well known but our guides had maps and a trusty GPS to get us to the best and most stable of them. Carol and Paul had meticulously scoped and researched the safe ones—some are dangerous (there have been accidents) and we avoided those.

Toward late afternoon, our guides had no problem getting group consensus for us to head to the Agua Caliente Springs not far from camp. Geothermally heated waters feed three mineral-rich pools where the leisure soak with Jacuzzi jets dissolved dust and released stiff joints, tired bones, and tight muscles. This collective ritual would be happily repeated every day, thank-you very much.

Early Saturday, following our prep talk and reminder that we needed to carry three liters of water today, we piled into the brawny vehicles. We drove about nine miles down S2 to Road 93 and bumped along washboard dirt to the Dome-lands trailhead. We were greeted by loud reverberating shots bouncing off the stony hills, target practice for gun enthusiasts. We were reminded that firearms regulations for a state park are looser than for a national park. I watched Dan quietly pick up the casings we came across. He also saw fit to collect mindlessly discarded trash even when it was on a near vertical hill. A true-blue Desert Survivor.
We tucked our pelvises and slid sidewise through the narrowest cracks (what me, claustrophobic?). Where the gash widened a bit we had to straddle footholds on either side and gingerly step over deep potholes that would not be fun to fall into. Happy to report none of us did. Also happily, Brian gave some of us a hand, pulling us safely up and over the gaping ditches. I kept looking up from this maze to make sure the sky was still in its place.

The pinnacle and reward of the day came shortly after this test of fortitude. Ahhhh, the wind caves. I can still sense their calm refuge. Atop a long climb, we encountered the gaping excavations in the rock, like grottos where one expects to find shrines. We scrambled in and out of the natural depressions. Carol and Paul, who knew this route well, leaped into one grotto big enough for two, which I dubbed the Love Seat. Six of us entered a bigger semi-dark and cool one. We fell supine and silent, perhaps all wishing this were home for the night.

Reluctantly we regrouped and made our way back to the trailhead, stopping to absorb what message there was in a broad view to the Carrizo Badlands.

Saturday night brought the infamous howling desert winds. So much for my perfect hilltop site. I joined happy hour — Margaritas anyone? — in the lower protected lands where all other Desert Survivors had wisely set up. Fellow camper Ron kindly gave me his well-anchored tent and slept in his vehicle.

Morning brought a few sporadic gusts and a gorgeous wind-scrubbed sky. Carol and Paul gathered us for the Torote Bowl Loop and the Mountain Palm Springs. Unfortunately, I had a ten-hour drive back to San Francisco so I could only do the first part of this hike. Still, it’s more than compensated for what I had missed years before. We climbed out of Bow Willow Campground to the torote or elephant trees. These are rare thick-trunked trees with tiny green leaves. About six-feet high, they look as if they should have been taller but were bonsaied by nature. They are said to bleed a fragrant gummy sap but we didn’t test that.

Our caravan descended the well-marked rocky trail to the first fan palm oasis. We had kept an eye out for the shy bighorn sheep known to drink at the lush tropical groves but all we saw were some droppings. Still it’s always a joy to come upon a moist fertile spot in the desert. The group would go on to three or four other oases but I had to head back. Carol led me back to the trailhead and we were gleefully surprised by a sun-bathing snake who did not move for us. I hated to leave the group but I consoled myself that we all belong to a fraternal order of desert aficionados. The likelihood of our meeting again was good.

I was glad for vaulting sky instead of mud ceilings as we started down the sandy wash. Before long we encountered abundant and luxurious proof of ancient sea beds. Paul and Carol directed our eyes to fossilized seashells, the remains of marine life. There were gastropods, oysters, spirals, chambered nautilus shapes, perfectly formed sand dollars, vestiges petrified and encrusted in cement-hard walls of coarse sand and silt. We were looking at the ancient artistry of the Colorado River, the once tropical inland Sea of Cortez, coupled with deep time, pressure, and the uplift of our famous San Andreas Fault.
Three Good Canyons

by Eric Rasmussen

It is Monday. No Desert Survivors are left at the Owl Canyon campground. When I drove away at 4:00PM, passing a discarded, wind-bashed tent, a new camper was standing at the entry kiosk. His pickup truck was the only other vehicle in sight.

The Desert Survivors trip to the Rainbow Basin Natural Area, was a gift I’m grateful for. It began on Friday morning at the Barstow train museum, with the trip leader Nick Blake checking his watch, and his phone, in hopes a possible participant would show up, or cancel. She never did.

Owl Canyon came into view on our Friday hike. It’s water-smoothed stone curves, sandy, boulder-strewn path and surrounding layers of contorted, colored rock are a geological masterpiece we had to our 19 selves.

The trail through is natural. There’s no cement, no wooden stairs, no metal rails. When the route turned vertical at a dry fall, there was often lively conversation amongst the trip participants regarding the best route. And each time every climber would refuse all helping hands, and use their own, and other body parts, to make the short ascents.

Aways up the canyon a few Survivors ducked into a natural tunnel in the canyon wall; a few long minutes later they reappeared high above atop the canyon and hollered down.

It was hot in the ravine. Breaks and lunch happened only when we found big shade. There was evidence of massive, if infrequent, movements of water down the course. One person spoke about his desire to drive out and witness a flood. But Friday there was only very dry evidence of these rare events. Bags and bottles kept us wet.

As I hiked happily up this course I wondered what made this difficult path so much more pleasant than city walks, and concluded it was the need to carefully select each lovely next place to set a foot. Risk awakened me to the beauty underfoot and made mindfulness easy. And enjoyable.

On Saturday the scene was different. Instead of a twisting, narrow and sometimes vertical path, our way was a flat road, and sometimes cross-country rambling through creosote, to a low wide gap between walls of chunky black rock where patient Indians long ago chipped petroglyphs, (now officially protected) yet crowded by the spray-painted initials of impatient modern yahoos.

Lunching in the shade in view of the decorations we were treated to a moving prehistoric show. A long, fat chuckawalla suddenly appeared, climbing a dark stone face to a ledge where it sunned lazily as several of us adjusted camera lenses to take the creature home. Then at our feet a long snake was spotted. Instead of rattles its tail tapered to a point. “Young red racer” was the Petersen Field Guide picture it most resembled.

Our third outing, on Sunday morning, was not a walk, but an amble. The trip ended at Calico, CA—an unusual ghost town brought back to life as a theme park by a famous impresario. The first building I came to was a souvenir store so full of shlock that I was ready to leave the town in disgust. But at the next building came an authentic preservation of a boarding house, where miners lived during the brief heyday of the silver mining about a hundred years ago. Another building with dark straight walls adorned with small stones was of rammed earth construction—a material made popular again only a couple of decades ago. The original town barber shop featured an antique bathtub that was little larger than a sink. There was a rustic cabin that used a huge natural boulder as one of its sides.

Nick led the trip to Calico, then freed us to go where we wished or wanted. Several left with ice cream. And even I found a souvenir—a half dozen polished stones that clung to each other, and to my keys. Magnetite. Three are now on my refrigerator, keeping the chuckawalla from falling down.
When trip leader Nick Blake, tried to get our band moving for the day’s hike, it was like driving cats. He knew not to push, and instead led the way to the trail. At a point, those of us in the lead group turned and yelled “Goodbye!” to the stragglers. They came quickly. In minutes we were all ascending the path. Nick wanted a ten o’clock start. He got 10:30.

We reached a ridge and viewed the surroundings—a desert flat speckled with Joshua Trees, spotted with tents and RV’s, surrounded by grandly sculpted walls of colored stone. No wonder this is a state park.

We then began the descent, picking our ways between chunks and slippery chips of dark, volcanic basalt. One member of our group was most careful, and slowest. The other hikers quickly outpaced him.

By the time he reached the bottom, Nick came back and discussed options with the man. He would not be able to keep up on the hilly trails ahead. Janet and I had descended the trail with the man, and she suggested the three of us explore the nearby washes while the others continued on. This was a great idea. The sun soon made itself felt, and we saw lots of lizards, one butterfly, a dragonfly and many active ant nests. These colonies can be 15 feet deep, Janet told us. Maybe that helps them survive when rain falls and the washes fill with running water.

Jeret pointed out a large footprint in the sand. “It’s round” she said. “So it is a cat’s. Could be a cougar, but they follow deer, and I haven’t seen any sign of them.”

All around the washes were the cathedral-like walls intricately carved by wind and water into grottoes and vertical forms that reminded me of lined up chalices. A hard layer of rock capping these creations helps preserve them. Otherwise, the hills would be smooth. Here and there isolated columns stand under their own caps. “Hoo-doos” they’re called. “I love seeing the bones of the earth,” Janet sighed.

That evening when we rejoined the group back at camp, Nick apologized for separating from us. We assured him that our day was wonderful. In fact, we were sure our leisurely pace had given us more discoveries than afforded the faster hikers who had covered many miles we didn’t miss.
February 5, 2022 - Still camped in Red Rock Canyon
The first morning in camp, a neighbor told Krag the temperature was 32°F. The second morning we didn't need to ask. Our water jug held an inch of ice.

For the day's hike we first caravanned in vehicles to the Golden Valley Wilderness. A surprise on this drive was that we found two places of civilization—the town of Randsburg was on a hill we drove up, on the other side the town of Johnnesburg. Both were once vibrant gold mining camps but now barely inhabited. Google calls them “Living Ghost Towns”. We learned that in Randsburg there is a general store with a fountain that serves milkshakes. Very good ones. But the fountain was only open to 3:00PM.

As our hike began in the morning, we held out hope that we might finish in time for an afternoon milkshake. The route Nick planned was only partially explored. There was a chance we would be back in time, but who knew? We headed into the desert on a mission of discovery.

We came to a ruined historic cabin. There were rusty cans in trash piles from maybe 100 years ago, but also lengths of white plastic pipe. The place was old, but not ancient.

For the first part of the journey, we followed a road. After lunch it became a cross-country expedition that didn't seem to challenge anybody's endurance, but tested our sense of direction. We would hike up a ridge, then speculate on which rise ahead our cars were behind. After a couple of climbs, phones with g.p.s. came out and distances calculated. A complication was that between each high ridge were often several gullies, that we needed to climb in and out of to make our way. Milkshakes were out of the question. The decision was to make a path as a crow flies rather than onto a flanking road, and got us back to our cars. Whew!

February 6, 2022 - Breaking Camp
Our last day yielded much more novelty than physical exercise. We broke camp and Nick led our caravan of vehicles toward a wide, white flat playa that held the remnants of Saltdale, CA. This town had once been a booming mining operation, scraping salt that had formed a crust on the ephemeral lake that covered this lowest area of the valley. In its heyday there was a post office here, and even a school.

Looking around, seeing miles of creosote bushes surrounding the wide, flat lake bottom, hearing only our own voices it was a stretch to imagine dozens, maybe hundreds, of workers and families actively engaged in productive living in such a quiet, desolate realm. But as we began to walk, we found traces of this time.

As we ambled further, a shed-like building came into view—appearing like a buried hut being gradually exposed as earth eroded away from it. But up close this collection of 2x4’s sided with thin sheet metal is obviously not emerging, but sinking, or simply being eaten. For like the dike timbers, it is deteriorating, and has tipped to lie on one side. Was this the post office? Given its insubstantial construction, it seems likely it was used as a field office where managers could meet and do their paperwork and telephoning out of the sun and wind.

It was our last day and near noon we completed our walk and most made ready to return home. A few of us remembered the milkshakes. One wise woman had called ahead to be sure the Randsburg General Store was open for business. Yep.

The shakes were thick and tasty, the pulled pork sandwich delicious. The good food, welcome as it was, wasn't the main attraction. Inside this plain building with its false facade is a beautiful, ornate backbar. “It was shipped here from the East Coast. Came across the country on wagons.” said the cheerful manager. “And that soda machine there is the oldest one still working in the whole country. “

These attractions are surely good for business in a remote town far from any industry or Amazon warehouse, and the owners are motivated to maintain them for the tourists to enjoy. But how did they get here? Who could have covered the costs back more than a hundred years ago, I wondered.

A couple of doors up the street I found out, at the museum. Gold was discovered in 1895 and a town of 3,500 people sprang up. $60 million worth was mined before the 1930’s. Enough to cover the cost of a new soda machine in 1904. Only about 80 people in the town now. Rental vacancy rate is 50%! So no surprise that 93% of the residents own their own homes. I’ll bet some still mine. 🦓
The hikers route stopped at this gate to the Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake.

Dinner time on the Hawksy Walksy Car Camp, June 2022.

Dinner time at the Return to Crooked Creek Car Camp.

Left: David Nichols in an archaeological dig site, as seen in his online presentation called "Mojave's Hidden History."


A beautiful Anza-Borrego morning.

Preserving the Amargosa
Susan Sorrells telling of her family in Shoshone, during our online event May 2022.

Dinner time on the Three Canyons Car Camp.

The hikers route stopped at this gate to the Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake.
Photos From Our Trips & Events

Below: Our summer dance party celebration, July 2022.

Mike Prather tells of water birds in the desert in his online presentation “Owens Lake’s Returning Wildlife”, April 2022.

The Return to Crooked Creek trip featured lots of horse petting.

The wind caves in Anza-Borrego swallowed the hikers whole!

Dorothy Hudig is all smiles on this hike.

Did they really not think this sign would be begging for this?
Near Inscription Canyon, May 2022.

A day hike in the empty country of the Nevada-Oregon border, June 2022.

Michelle Bashin hosts our online presentations.
Desert Survivors Membership Form

Membership dues are just $30/year, although additional donations are welcome. You can renew your membership by filling out this form and mailing it in with a check to the address shown below.

Name (req’d) _____________________________________________________________
Street Address (req’d) ______________________________________________________
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Phone number: ___________________________________________________________
E-mail address: ___________________________________________________________

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