TrailGroove®

Issue 14

Contents

Issue 14

A special thank you to our contributors for this issue: Ted Ehrlich, David Cobb, Susan Dragoo, Sharon Giazomazzi, Peter McClure, Paul Magnanti, Sean Sparbanie, and Cinny Green.

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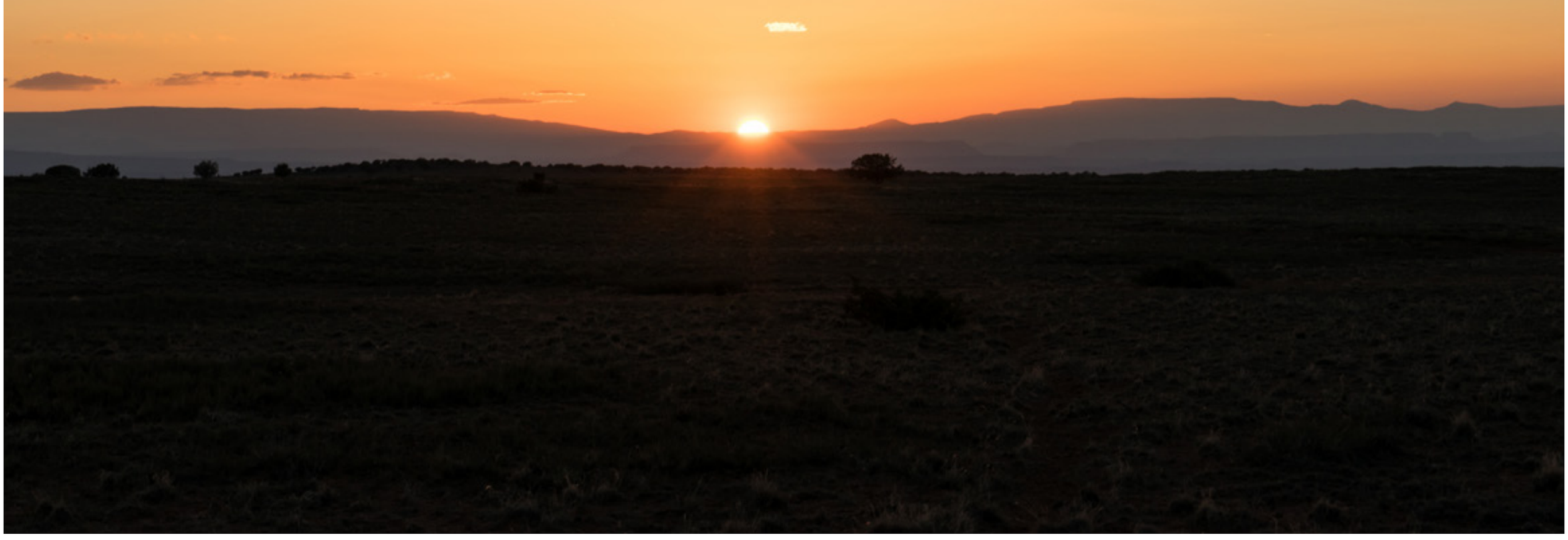
Editor's Note

The days on the calendar have been highlighted. Permits obtained. The gear patched up and sometimes a hint of green can now even be seen on the trail. Finally, spring has arrived. And while we had some fun in the snow this winter, it now feels like the backpacking season has truly begun. Hopefully everyone out there has already completed a few recent trips to remember, with more on the way. Our feet and our maps have definitely been getting the workout they deserve here in Wyoming and the warmer areas surrounding us as of late.

In Issue14 we'll check out Arkansas' Eagle Rock Loop, a scenic hike in the Sierra, and the surreal scenes of Death Valley National Park. We'll also feature a thesis on shoulder season in the outdoors, thoughts on easy hikes and what you may have been missing, and review a backcountry carbonation system that promises sodas and even beer in the backcountry. Trail News, Backcountry Cuisine, Photo Tips from the Trail…The list goes on. Enjoy Issue 14 and thanks for reading!



Interested in contributing to the magazine? Please email us at **info@TrailGroove.com** with your idea. We're always on the lookout for quality content, and compensation is offered for quality submissions. Our list of requirements isn't too long, but please keep the subject focused towards backpacking or hiking. However, submissions related to other outdoor activities will be considered. (Backcountry fishing or wilderness photography, for example). Page through our magazine for the general idea of what we're all about, but even if you have something you haven't yet seen in an issue our ears are open. Please send us a note with a broad overview and sample of your idea, as well as an approximate word and picture count. Original and factual material is a requirement. Once received, we'll evaluate your submission and contact you for further discussion. Questions before you start? Just let us know.

A few examples of what we're looking for:

Destinations	Art / Illustration
Gear Reviews (Objective)	Short Stories
Photography	Interviews
Video	Backcountry Cuisine
Skill & Technique	Your New Idea

TrailGroove Magazine
Review Policy

The products we review are obtained via normal consumer retail channels. We do not ask for or accept review samples from manufacturers, and we do not obtain the products we review under the TrailGroove Magazine name. As such, we're reviewing the same products that you would obtain - Not hand-picked review samples. Even though we like free gear as much as the next person, but we won't bend on this rule! As a result of this philosophy, we are also able to experience and comment on the same level of customer service that the typical consumer would receive.

Note that this policy does not apply to any pre-release products that we're able to obtain prior to market release for review. In such cases, we will clearly state that the product was obtained from the manufacturer for a sneakpeak, pre-release evaluation in the review.

We use a 5-star rating scale for our reviews:

★★★★★	Excellent
★★★★☆	Very Good
★★★☆☆	Good
★★☆☆☆	Average
★☆☆☆☆	Poor

Jargon: Cairn

A man-made pile of stones marking a trail or cross country route. Word origin: Scottish Gaelic. May be found stacked feet high or simply a cluster of just a few stones. Frequently utilized above treeline and in desert areas where trails remain faint or non-existent and a lack of trees make paint blazing impossible. More effective than paint blazed rock or trees after snowfall, and longer lasting. Cairns are frequently added to and shaped by hikers as they pass, blown over by winds, and often seem to be in a continual state of rearrangement. On some hikes you might find yourself hiking cairn to cairn, constantly scanning for the next which may be difficult to spot on lesser travelled routes. It's a good idea to take each cairn with a grain of salt and continually cross check against your topographic map however, as cairns do have a tendency to occasionally lead one astray on a non-intended route. However, they can be especially helpful and save time on some off-trail treks where previous travelers have already located and marked the easiest line of travel through challenging terrain.

Trail News

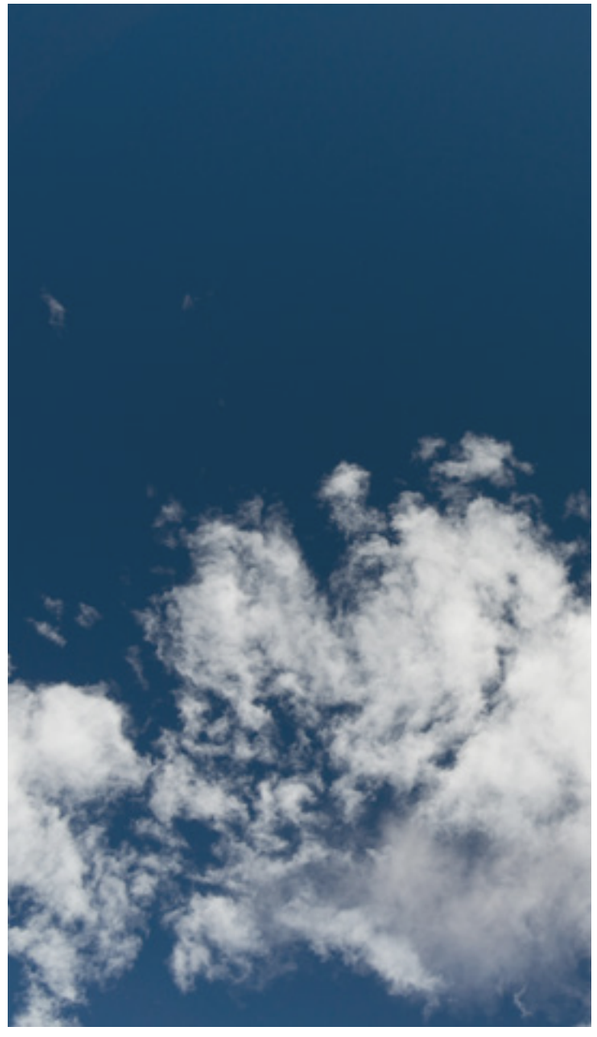
with Paul Magnanti

The Global Positioning System (GPS) had its first satellite launch on Feb 14th, 1989. Twenty-five years later, the impact of this technology on the backcountry is rather profound. GPS technology has changed how the backcountry is accessed, used and experienced in ways both obvious and more subtle: Our smart phones with their many apps are now used extensively by hikers even on-trail, automotive-based or hand held GPS devices help us navigate both to the trailheads and in the backcountry itself, and even traditional paper maps are now more accurate because of GPS technology.

On the theme of technology changing the trail experience, a Continental Divide Trail (CDT) app will be released for iOS and Android based platforms in April 2014 with data available for New Mexico. Other states will be released in subsequent months. Guthook's Trail Guide Apps are well known and used for the Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trails. The CDT app will contain town information, elevation profiles and maps that make use of Bear Creek Survey's CDT map books. The importance of this app is not so much an indication of the maturation of the CDT itself (better markings, more maintenance and more resources for CDT users) but rather an indication of perhaps the future of guidebooks and navigating the trails. Electronic resources are becoming the primary means of information for the long and more established trails such as the Appalachian, Pacific Crest and Continental Divide Trails. Printed material is becoming supplementary.

Perhaps a less profound, but many a thru-hiker would argue a more important milestone is the 50th anniversary of Pop-Tarts. In February 1964, the first Pop-Tarts were introduced by the Kellogg Company in strawberry, blueberry, brown sugar cinnamon, and apple currant flavors. Fifty years later, the sugar craving hiker can now purchase smores, French toast and chocolate chip flavored Pop-Tarts to fuel them up the trail. Over the years, countless hikers have climbed Katahdin on a sugar buzz to finish the final miles of the Appalachian Trail, hiked over Forester Pass fueled by apple-cinnamon goodness, and navigated through New Mexico trying to get to town on the last calories provided by a frosted pastry buried in the dark recesses of a food bag. The humble Pop-Tart is obviously an important "food" for most long distance hikers.

Finally, a death was mourned in the trail community. Bill Irwin, the first blind thru-hiker of the Appalachian Trail, passed away after a two-year battle with cancer. Blind Courage is an account of Bill Irwin's journey on the Appalachian Trail. His journey inspired many and made him a well-loved figure in the trail community. More information about Bill and his journey may be found at www.billirwin.org.



TRAIL TIP 14: Desert Hiking Tips

by Ted Ehrlich

To me, the spring season means backpacking in the deserts of the southwest. No matter which part of this region you plan on exploring, there are a few rules of thumb that will make your trip much more enjoyable.

Wear your sun protection

While liberal application of sunscreen will do the trick, you will eventually miss a spot and burn badly. My preference is to wear a very lightweight hooded long sleeve shirt, long pants, and a visor, wrapping a bandana around my face if the sun gets particularly intense in addition to sunscreen. Sunglasses are a must too. The long pants also help protect you from shrubs and other desert flora that can be sharp and/or poisonous (spines, needles, etc.). Some people find reflective sun umbrellas like the Golite Chrome Dome to be helpful too.

Keep hydrated

In the desert, water requires more planning and different water purification methods. 4-6 liters per day is a good estimate for moderate exercise like hiking, more depending on how your body handles the heat and how hot it actually is. There may not be any water in many areas, so having the capacity to carry more water than normal is always encouraged. A simple 2L Platypus soft bottle can weigh 1 ounce empty and fold down to nothing, so carrying 2-3 of these in addition to your regular bottles or bladder in case they are needed doesn't have much of a weight penalty. Water sources should be mapped out before the trip, and if there is a question if the water source will be good and/or available, extra water should be carried to prevent dehydration in case the water source isn't found. If the only water available is stagnant or fouled water, a good filter along with chemical or UV sanitation should be used to make sure the water is clear of any disease. In some areas, water can be cached away before the trip, and may be your only source of water for miles.

Watch the temperature swings

Temperature swings of 40 degrees or more are common in the desert, with freezing temperatures at night, and sweltering heat during the day. Make sure to check the forecast along with the average temperatures for the time of year you'll be hiking. Snowstorms can occur in the shoulder seasons, and hypothermia, frostbite, and other cold injuries can easily happen in the desert during cold spells if you aren't prepared. Heat exhaustion and heat stroke can also easily occur during the same period if you aren't careful about managing your internal temperatures during the hotter periods of the day. During the hottest months, exercise only during the cooler parts of the day to avoid heat illness.

Be careful with the environment

Desert plants and animals tend to be more fragile than other species. Cryptobiotic soil, a living organism that is plentiful in arid and semi-arid environments, is very susceptible to being damaged by hiking, and can lead to increased erosion. By traveling on durable surfaces like established trails, hard stone, and along sandy washes off of the cryptobiotic soil will keep the ground cover alive to help retain soil and slow the erosion of the landscape. Practice Leave No Trace land ethics while traveling in these areas. For more information on Leave No Trace, visit lnt.org.

DESERT GOLD

Photographing and Hiking in Death Valley National Park

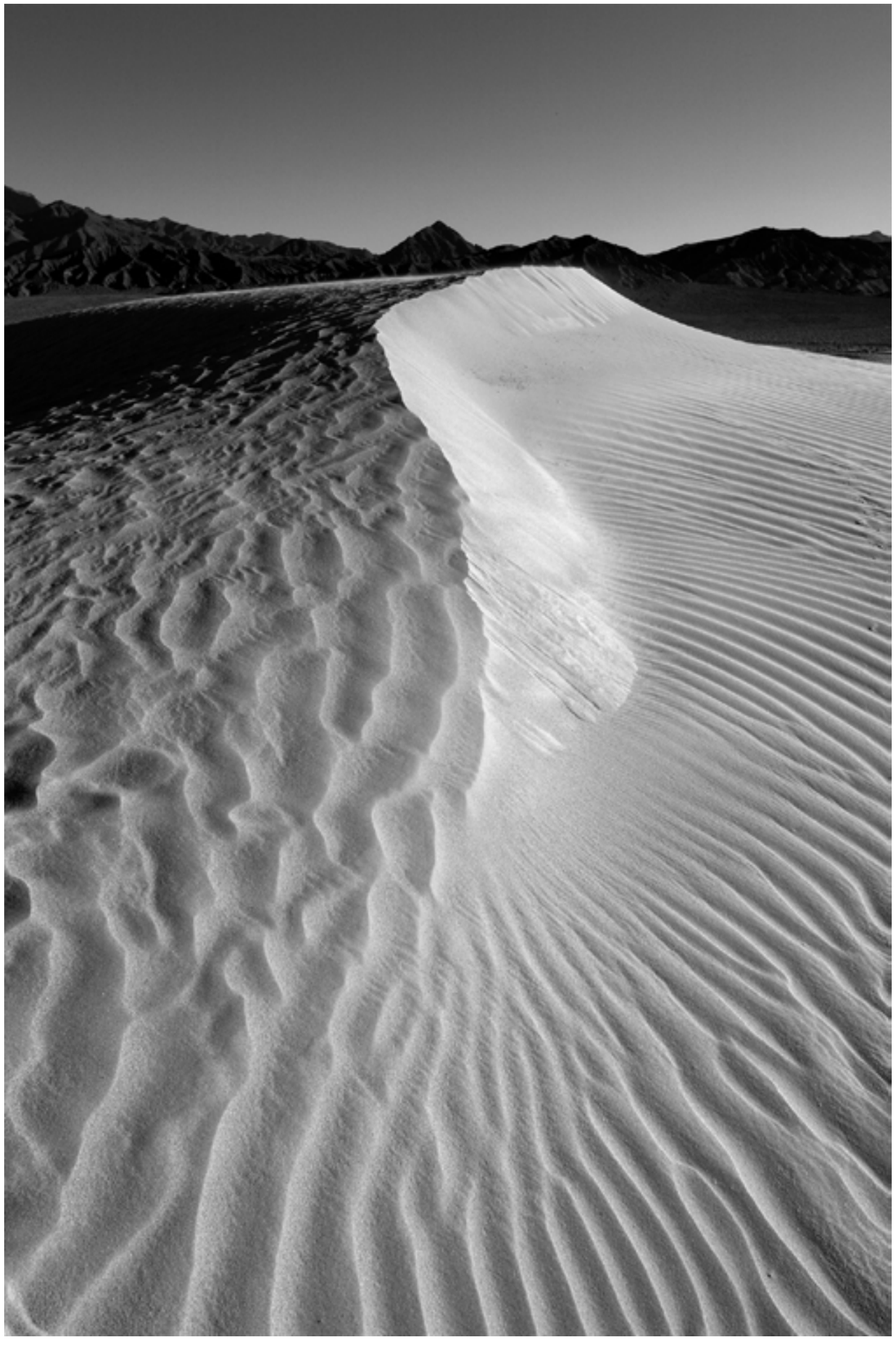
By Sean Sparbanie

I didn't know what to expect, the first time I drove into Death Valley. Such a foreboding name. Are they trying to warn you? It certainly put intrigue in my heart while driving through the flat, nearly featureless Nevada desert back in 2005. The black roads seem to stretch on forever as you wonder if the mountains on the horizon will ever get bigger. With Vegas long since vanished in the rear view mirror, the sporadic towns surrounding the park bear no resemblance to the decadent city. They look as you would imagine a small desert outpost would: Sun-baked singlewide trailers, small diners with faceless shapes hunched over video poker machines. Beige. Brown. Cigarette smoke. Gasoline. I stopped in Beatty, Nevada for breakfast before heading into Death Valley for my 2-night trip. I'd planned to hit the popular spots and head on to the rest of my 2 week California expedition. This was my first trip purely dedicated to photography, and I wanted a sample of what the Golden State had to offer.

I gassed up after breakfast and headed west on Highway 374 to Daylight Pass, splitting the Grapevine and Funeral Mountain ranges to the north and south respectively. What I saw as I crested the gap, I will never forget. It was the most stunning display of pure, raw earth I'd ever laid eyes on. I knew in my novice years as a photographer that I would never be able to capture that moment on film. I made no attempt. Instead, I soaked as much of it up into memory as I possibly could. Massive brown and red mountains streaking violently over impossibly vast networks of alluvial fans, dried washes, cracked plains, badlands, dunes, and salt flats. It's still to this day my most eye-popping moment in all my travels. I've seen many, many beautiful photographs of the park, and not a single one does it justice. It simply needs to be experienced.
In an instant, I wished I hadn't made travel reservations anywhere else in California. I wanted to stay right here. Later in my trip, I bumped into a very talented photographer named Phil Kimber, who described Death Valley as 'America's best kept secret'. I couldn't agree more.

If I were forced to choose one word to describe this park, I'd be tempted to use 'beautiful', or 'majestic', but I'd ultimately choose 'mysterious', and that's why I'm drawn to it. Every direction you look contains something worth exploring, discovering. There are ruins of mines and boom towns scattered all over the park. There are many roads that aren't on your map. Where do they go? Can my truck handle it? What if I get stuck? There are canyons tucked away in the dark

Below: Mesquite Flat Dunes. **Previous Page:** Panamint Tracks.



mountainsides. What treasures will they reveal to the curious adventurer? Impossible beauty tinged with ever present danger. It's just too much fun to explore.

Even if you stick to the most popular tourist locations as I did on my first visit, it's still an amazing experience. The Mesquite Flat dunes near Stovepipe Wells offer the quintessential desert experience, A vast sea of undulating dunes unfold as you crest the first mounds. Thousands of years of attrition all end up here. Essentially, you're wading through the smallest remnants of mountains. Water and wind break down the walls of canyons, which ultimately end up washed over the remains of this ancient lake bed. Dunes are ever-growing and shifting, slowly consuming all in their path, including the mesquite trees of their namesake.

Zabriskie Point very well may be the most popular overlook the park offers, and with good reason. Watching the sunrise here is like witnessing the dawn of time itself. Once the sun breaches the eastern ridges of the Armagosa Range, its brilliant beams slowly outline golden brown badlands in the foreground, leaving the salt-streaked valley below in momentary darkness. The otherworldly vastness is revealed as the light reaches the valley floor a few moments later.

Left: Mesquite Flat Sunrise.
Below: Photographers at Zabriskie Point.
Next Page: Sunrise on Zabriskie Badlands.

Aguereberry Point is another breathtaking vantage point, being much higher on the eastern flank of Death Valley. On my last visit, I was fortunate to witness a rare storm moving in from the northwest. With the sun still unobstructed high overhead, the light versus dark scenes painted a dramatic exposition of the widely varied terrain. Train your eyes on the sagebrush-dotted hills as they gracefully outline the high desert to the west. Leading your glance slowly eastward, perceive its transition to the jagged, precipitous ridges that violently plummet downward to the primordial cracked earth thousands of feet below in the valley. The contrast is positively staggering to comprehend from a single viewpoint.

Another immensely popular spot is the acrid Badwater Basin. Originally named by a traveling salesman, the water here is, well…bad. The aforementioned gentlemen could not convince his mule to drink from the pool at the base of the Armagosa Range, and erected a sign that read “Bad Water”. It stuck, and I must agree with the mule, it doesn’t smell very pleasant. This area is home to several records, including lowest elevation in North America at 282 below sea level, and the highest reliably reported air temperature in the world at 134 degrees Fahrenheit. Venturing out onto the salt flats here can be both very rewarding and extremely unpleasant. Timing is everything. The most ideal time for photography is after water has evaporated from a recent storm, leaving brilliant white crystals that form polygonal shapes as far as the valley stretches. This makes a stunning view with the towering mountains surrounding the valley, but you need to watch your step. The salt layer is very thin, and will easily give way to a thick, repugnant layer of mud, should you misstep. This mud is not only deep and messy, but smells horribly. Lingering too long after sunrise in the summer months, the staggering heat of the day wraps its merciless grip on all dwelling in the valley. Combined with the miasma of salty air so thick you can taste it in the back of your throat, one must take great care to respect the beast while appreciating the beauty.

When it was time for me to head to my next destination, I reluctantly packed up and headed down highway 190 west, towards Owens Valley. After cresting Towne Pass in the Panamint range, yet another stupefying view unfolded in front of me: Panamint Valley. A vast expanse of desert betwixt intensely colorful, rugged mountains. When I reached the bottom of the valley, I noticed the highway cut through a cracked earth. It was a dried lake bed. I as quickly scanned the landscape for compositions; the target that would haunt for me for the next five years fell on my eyes: The Panamint Dunes. They appeared to me devilishly tempting, almost like a mirage in an old adventure movie.

Below: Aguereberry Point - Valley View. **Pages 25-26:** Aguereberry Point - Hills. **Pages 27-28:** BadWater Basin.

Resting at the northernmost end of the valley, they rise above several hundred feet over the valley floor, as though proudly displayed as a trophy by the mountains themselves. Dunes are irresistible to me. They are my most favorite subject to photograph. They possess a simple elegance that is unparalleled in nature, and they're ever-changing. Each new day, yesterday's tracks and imperfections are erased, and the landscape renews with the breeze. Sometimes they're smooth and graceful with crests like razors, others are rippled, windblown, and chaotic. I was very curious what these dunes offered.

Stepping out of my truck at the roadside, I began shooting the cracked earth landscape of the dried lake bed in the late afternoon sun. I kept returning my eyes to the distant dunes, and I began to plot.

For a guy that grew up in the Midwest, my natural sense of space and distance doesn't compute especially well in such a foreign landscape. They looked close enough to me! I got back in the truck and started searching out a road, which I found within a few minutes. This dirt road wandered vaguely in the direction of the dunes, so I assumed it would bring me there. As the sun was quickly approaching the horizon, and my right foot began to get a bit too heavy on the gas. I was getting anxious. I knew this was my last day in the valley, so I wanted to soak up as much as I possibly could. In an instant. my exited anticipation turned to panic. A terrifying noise blasted from the dashboard of my rented 2WD Ford Explorer. This ear-shattering screech was informing me I was losing air in one or more tires. Well, as an inexperienced adventurer in a strange place, I panicked. Hurrying out of the truck, The sound of air strongly hissing from the tire only amplified my panic. Instead of calmly swapping out the tire, the swiftly fading light prompted me to grab the can of fix-a-flat I bought in Vegas, and dump it in the tire. Once the can was exhausted, I hurriedly started rolling the vehicle backwards to seal the tire. Satisfied it had done the job, I turned the truck around and headed back for the highway like a scolded dog with his tail between his legs.

Below: Panamint Valley.

In reality, even if something much worse happened, I could have survived for a week with all the supplies I had in the truck. It was just inexperience that forced me to leave. It bothered me for a long time. I live more than 2,000 miles from this location, so I felt like I truly missed an opportunity. I returned to the park two years later, but again didn't have a decent vehicle, nor the time to head all the way back to Panamint. It wasn't until November of 2010 that I'd return.

This time, I was armed with 5 years of wilderness experience, a proper vehicle with off-road capability, and much more skill with a camera. After taking in the sunrise at Zabriskie, I packed up and set my sights on Panamint Valley. Once reaching the road that bested me five years prior, I set off with utmost confidence and a genuine sense of satisfaction. My truck made short work of the road, and before too long, I arrived at the rusted, weather-worn husks of two long-abandoned vehicles. I wonder what effect that sight would have had on me five years prior? As for now, I thoroughly enjoyed exploring and photographing them, even in the harsh mid-day sun.

Back in the truck, I passed a large, dark hill towering over the playa, and eventually discovered that the road ended at a makeshift parking area, outlined by hand-placed stones. There was a large off-road van parked here, which I must admit I was not pleased to see. After lamenting the fact that there very well may be footprints all over the dunes I'd been vying to shoot for several years, I decided to suck it up and make the trek regardless. There was no discernible trailhead, so this was simply a wilderness hike through the desert. As I was gearing up, I saw the two gentlemen belonging to the van approach in the distance. They had tripods. "Photographers. Well, at least they'd try not to track up the dunes for their own sake", I thought. I waited for their return and had a brief conversation with them about the dunes and the hike. They advised me to try sticking to washes when possible, as the ground is a little more firm there. Strangely enough, I ran into these lads in another remote valley later in my trip. Nick and Gary, both talented photographers whom I'm glad to say I call friends today.

The ground at this section of the valley was loose rock, clay, sand, and washes, which made for quite a slog. Shortly after departing, a pulsating noise reached my ears from a distance, getting louder and louder by the second. Within a moment, I saw the source of the noise: A military attack helicopter. Flying low through the valley, it zoomed past me, made a pass over the dunes, then darted off in the direction it came from. It was a strange sight in several ways. The desert had steadily reminded me of my insignificance, but this modern marvel swept in, hovered over the target I coveted for five years, and disappeared inside of five minutes. While I could have allowed this to be deflating, it only encouraged me. Even if I didn't get any of the photographs I desired, just reaching these dunes would satisfy me enough. Throughout the 3 and a half mile hike to the dunes, I heard the distant roar of military jets. Several times, I could actually see F/15 fighter streaking below the ridge lines of the Panamints. While I suppose some would find the noise distracting, I must confess I liked it. It almost felt like it added to the intrigue of being here. It's probably not an unusual sight in this area, since China Lake and Edwards AFB are nearby. As I reached the outer fringes of the dune field, the sounds of the jets relented, and the lonely silence of desert wilderness persisted.

My footsteps became more and more labored as the substrate transitioned to the beautiful, golden sand of the dunes. As I reached the pinnacle of the first major dune, my sense of satisfaction and pride was overwhelming. While this may be no big deal to soldiers in a helicopter or an experienced local, it was pure magic for me. The dry November breeze, the warm sun, and the perfect silence was all I could have ever hoped for. Once I'd absorbed as much of the moment as I could, I turned to face my long-sought mark. It was a truly magnificent sight. Huge, untouched mounds of sculpted sand rose over me towards the late afternoon sun, unveiling their striking bounty in every direction.

I spent as much time as possible roaming the dunes. The low angle of the winter sun provided brilliant contrast on the gracefully curved sand, and I took full advantage, snapping photo and photo. I'd become bewitched by beauty, and time was slipping away unnoticed. When I finally observed how quickly the sun was approaching the horizon, and got anxious to head back to the truck before nightfall. I wasn't sure how hard it would be to find my truck in the dark, and I really wasn't interested in learning. Once I packed up and started heading south, I noticed the fighter jets had begun their sorties again, and admired their grace as they moved over the mountains like deadly little darts in the distance. Evidently, they didn't have any trouble spotting the lone hiker in the valley. Just after the sun passed over the horizon, I heard an unusually loud jet engine approaching quickly. Before I could turn

Below: Panamint Car.

around to find it, the pilot blasted directly over me at a distance of perhaps 500 feet, give or take. It was beautifully loud. I couldn't help shouting, and I gave a wave as thanks for my own private air show. It was a great finish to an outstanding day in my life.

Though I spend most of my time roaming the Great Smoky Mountains near my home, there's always a piece of me that longs for that marvelous slice of Mojave desert. Regardless of all the modern technology we have at our disposal, I'm very pleased to say there are still many, many adventures that can only be experienced by putting one foot in front of the other.

Information: Hiking is an altogether different beast when compared to many other parks. There are some official trails, but the vast majority of the park is wilderness. If you lay your eyes on something interesting, you simply start walking towards it. This, as you might assume, is weather-dependent. Hiking in the valley during summer is a tortuous proposition. The heat is positively stifling. Backpacking is also quite challenging, as you're not likely to encounter a reliable water source. This means not only must you consume a tremendous amount of water to stay hydrated, but you will likely need to carry all of it. Allow me to give you an idea of how dry it is here; Furnace Creek, in the heart of Death Valley proper, has received 1.43 inches of rain in the last seven months. In contrast, my home in Tennessee has received more than four times that amount in December alone. The Mojave's beauty is staggering, and the risk is equally so. Quality hiking equipment is a must for any significant trek. A topo map and compass will prove essential, and I recommend taking a weather-resistant GPS unit with 'breadcrumb' features.

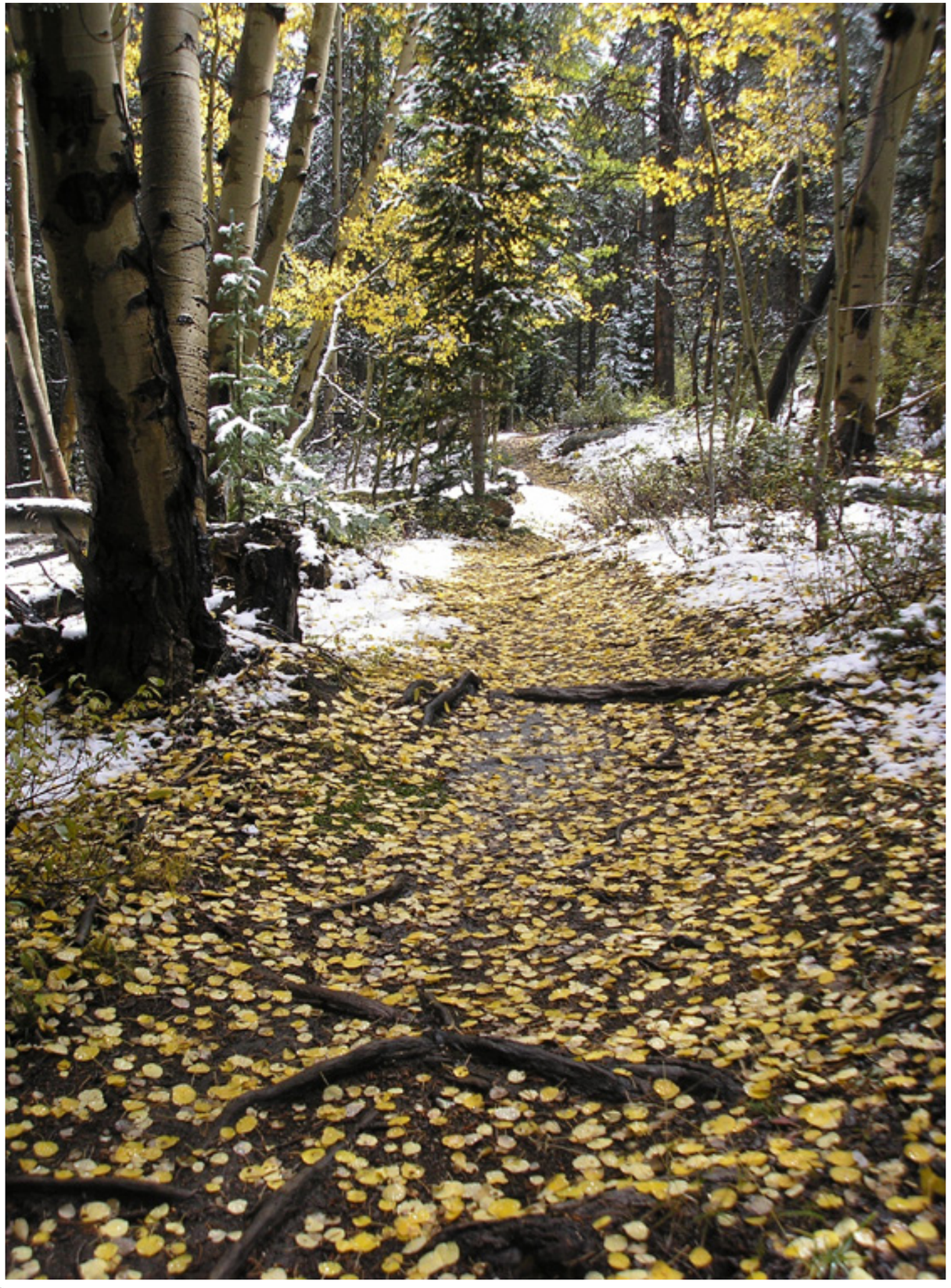
Best Time to Go: November through March for comfortable temperatures in the valleys.

Getting There: From Las Vegas, take I-15 South to Highway 160 west. Drive 60 miles to Pahrump, NV. Turn left on Bell Vista Road. Drive 30 miles to Death Valley Junction, and turn right on Highway 127. After a few hundred feet, turn left on Highway 190. Drive 30 miles to Furnace Creek Visitors Center.

Maps: Death Valley National Park, CA - Trails Illustrated Map #221

Books: Hiking Death Valley: A Guide to Its Natural Wonders and Mining Past

Pages 35-36: Panamint Dune. **Pages 37-38:** Panamint Self Portrait.



Shoulder Season
The Time in Between

by Paul Magnanti

There is a time when the snow is starting to melt away but is not quite gone yet. When the spring wildflowers are just starting to poke through the underbrush and life is again beginning. Or a time when the cool fall nights give way to cold and crisp air. When the last brilliant leaves of autumn are carpeting the ground and the mountain peaks have their first dusting of snow.

It is the time in between the seasons. A wonderful time to backpack. It is the shoulder season.

What is "Shoulder Season" backpacking?

"Shoulder Season" is a term borrowed from the travel industry. The time just before or just after the peak periods. A term that works equally well for the outdoors. In terms of backpacking, the time period implied is late spring/early summer and late fall.

The days can be anywhere from cold to warm, and the nights can be cool to cold. There may be a chance of snow, the weather can sometimes be a little rawer, and the nights can be shorter. But you will often have the mountains, deserts, canyons or forest to yourself. Nature reveals itself in ways that many people do not see. With some preparation, some extra gear and the right mind set, "shoulder season" can be a very rewarding time to be outdoors.

When is Shoulder Season?

The exact time period for this shoulder season differs based on location, elevation and general climate.

In the Colorado high country, and the parts of Wyoming and New Mexico close by, shoulder season is usually just before Memorial Day Weekend to around mid-June depending upon the area. The shoulder season for the fall is typically

Left: On the Continental Divide Trail outside of Leadville.

mid-late September until early-mid October. Note that this rough time line also seems to apply, with some adjustments, to other similar areas in the continental US. The High Sierra, the Cascades, the White Mountains of New Hampshire and so on seem to have the same rough time frame as well. Naturally if you go lower in elevation and or to a different latitude, the shoulder season is also adjusted accordingly. The term is a guideline rather than an absolute. Just think of shoulder season as the time where it is colder, but not winter. Warmer, but not having quite the warmth of late spring.

Why spend time outdoors in "Shoulder Season"?

Shoulder season is a wonderful time to be outside. The crowds are less. In the late fall the insects are gone and the days are cool with crisp nights. In the spring, the first wildflowers are seen and the Earth is waking from its winter slumber. Rather than being inside in the city, you are out in the wilds and spending more nights in the backcountry. What's not to like?

Gear and Clothing to bring for Shoulder Season backpacking

Because the hiking is done late or early season, the gear is a bit different from typical three season gear. Think of the gear brought as three-season plus. Not quite winter level gear and clothing, but a bit warmer than gear I would take in summer and early fall.

Above: In the cold, still snowy, but very beautiful Pecos Wilderness of New Mexico.
Top Right: Pasque flowers in Rocky Mountain National Park. Among the first wildflowers seen in foothills.
Bottom Right: Red columbine in the Pecos Wilderness of New Mexico.

During the day, the days can be cool or even cold with rain instead of snow. Some of the most difficult weather to hike in.

I find that a simple 100 wt. fleece pullover is invaluable for the shoulder season. Fairly light, versatile and not overly expensive. It is a key layering piece for extending my backpacking season. A light fleece is not overly warm and is still breathable when moving in cold conditions. The fleece fibers do not collapse from moisture be it from

perspiration or rain. Most of all, a fleece garment is still effective in these wet conditions unlike a synthetic or down filled jacket.

A fleece works best by itself in cold and dry conditions with no wind. In cold, wet and/or windy conditions, however, a shell of some sort needs to be used.

If it is windy, cold and drizzly, a wind shirt is another versatile item to use. The fleece will still be damp, as opposed to wet, but you will still be warm. A wind shirt is more breathable than rain gear so you will not overheat.

In consistent and cold rain or even slushy snow, as opposed to drizzle or fluffy snow, a hard shell will be needed. I use Frogg Toggs type shells for three-season use when it is just occasional rain or a windy day. However, I prefer a Marmot Precip type shell for continuous cold rain that is often found during the shoulder seasons in some areas. When going off-trail, I find the sturdier jacket is even more desirable.

The beauty of this system is that you can mix and match as needed. Extremely light drizzle but not particularly cold? Wear the wind shirt and base layer only. A cooler and dry day with no wind? Wear the

Below: A cold November morning in Canyonlands National Park.
Top Right: Using some shoulder season gear in Canyonlands National Park.
Bottom Right: September on Buchanan Pass in the Indian Peaks Wilderness.

fleece. Consistent and cold drizzle? Wear the fleece and wind shirt. And so on.

I also prefer to have a liner glove and a shell mitten combo for similar reasons. Rather than one glove or mitten, a simple wool or fleece liner glove with a nylon shell works much like the wind shirt and fleece combo above. In other words, a simple and versatile system that works in all four seasons.

Over the years, my kit has evolved to the point where my three season gear for camping is pretty minimal. A blue foam pad, no stove and a light balaclava make up part of my kit. For shoulder season

backpacking? The cooler nights and shorter days means I camp more and hike less. My gear and clothing choices reflect that time of the year. I will typically take a fleece beanie to work with my balaclava and a Z-lite instead of my blue foam pad for a higher R-value. To make my three season quilt a bit warmer, and to be more comfortable in camp, I'll wear some "puffy pants" to go with my puffy jacket.

Though I often go stoveless on solo trips, I'll sometimes take a stove during the colder times of the year. A hot drink is often comforting at night. Especially when shared with friends around a small and equally comforting campfire. And hot coffee when I first wake up helps take the chill out of the morning air.

> "For those who wish to enjoy the challenges of the shoulder seasons, the rewards surpass the challenges."

And for footwear? I will still take trail runners rather than boots. But I will wear lighter merino wool hiker socks in lieu of my lighter running socks.

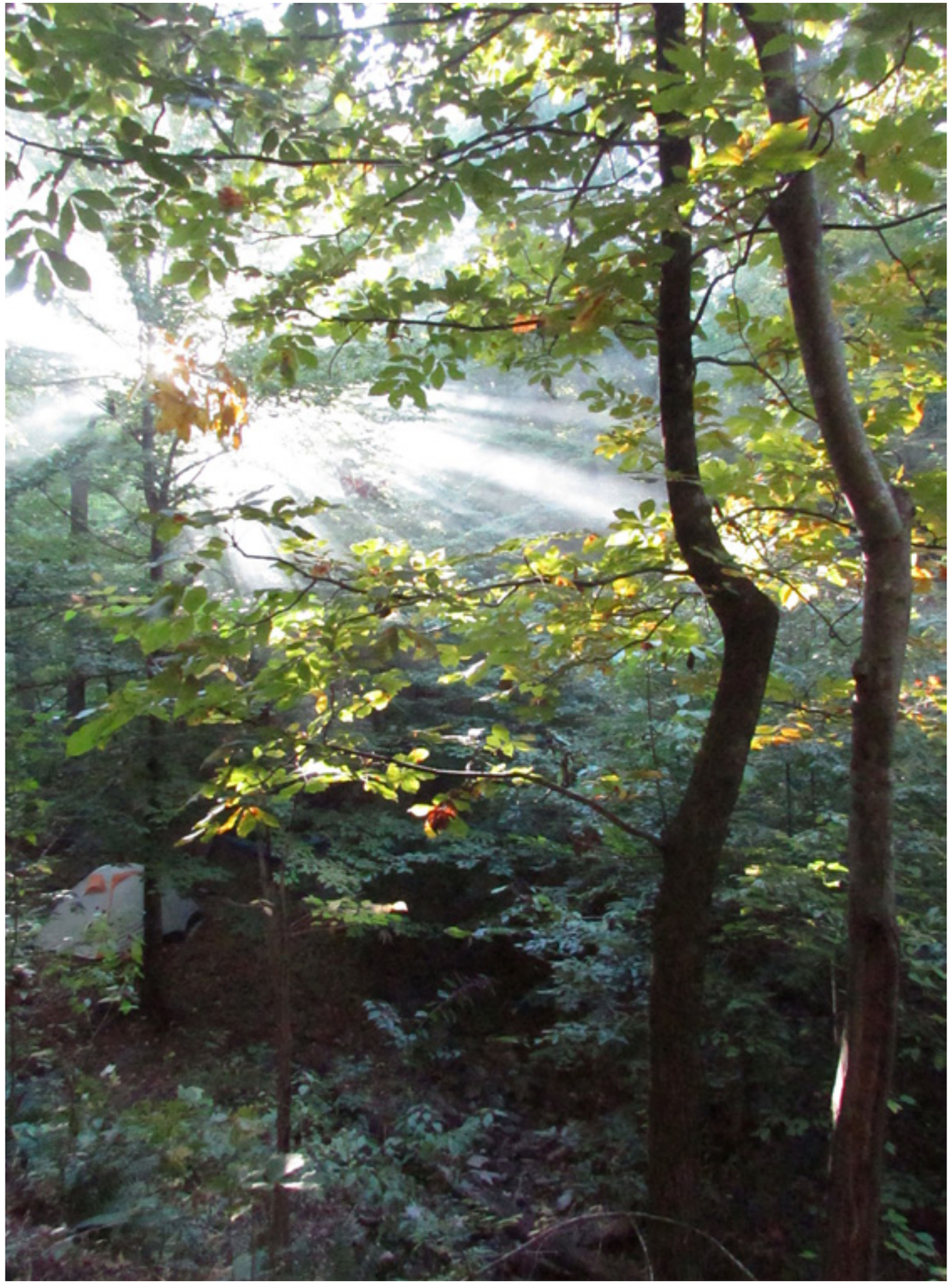
Left: Hope Pass in Colorado.
Below: A warm fire on a cold night.

Above: Eldorado Canyon, Colorado.
Above Right: Pawnee Buttes in November.

The overall idea is to take gear that is a little more than three season gear but not quite winter gear. A thicker pad vs a down-filled pad, your regular puffy and puffy pants to extend the sleeping bag or quilt rating a bit vs a 0 degree bag and so on. A little extra clothing and gear will not only fit in your three-season backpack and be lighter than full winter gear, but this additional clothing and gear will also extend your time in the outdoors immensely.

"The Time In Between" has its challenges. The weather can be colder and the clothing is a little bit heavier and bulkier. More thought needs to be put into what to pack and how to pack it.

For those who wish to enjoy the challenges of the shoulder seasons, the rewards surpass the challenges. A more solitary and perhaps deeper wilderness experience can be enjoyed. The crowds of summer are gone or have not yet arrived and the natural environment is yours to savor. Go out, hike, and experience the wilderness not only off the beaten path, but also during the off season.



The Elusive Eagle Rock Loop

Location: Ouachita National Forest, Arkansas

by Susan Dragoo

I wince with every step as I cross the river. Bare feet had seemed like a good idea. But now, after too many crossings to count, my soles feel the pain. I grip my trekking poles for stability against the current and tread cautiously on the slick stones, picking my way to the other side.

The river glitters in the late afternoon sun. Jessica and Shay are already on the opposite bank, searching for yellow blazes. They waded across in their water shoes while the rest of us were removing boots and rolling up pants legs.

Before attempting this crossing, we had bushwhacked away from the last vestiges of trail. Scrambling through brush to the stream bank, we sought some visual indicator of direction, but found only the sight of another wet crossing.

Our scouts report no sign of the trail as I dry my feet and don footwear. Standing up, I look around and finally give in to the reality I dread:

"Okay, I think we're lost."

We were supposed to be hiking along Viles Branch Creek but something is wrong. Following yellow blazes which have now disappeared, we've criss-crossed this swift stream for hours and it is getting late. Where are we?

Finally, it occurs to me. "Mary, does your GPS have maps on it?"

"I'm not sure," says Mary. "You want to take a look?"

Yes, indeed. Upon examination, it appears we are still on the Little Missouri River – somewhere in the middle of the Ouachita National Forest, but not on Viles Branch Creek. I zoom out and see Road 106 to our north, if the GPS is correct. Mary says the device may not be calibrated correctly. Even so, we have to make a decision.

"We'd better bushwhack to the north and find that road. Then we can head west and

Left: Early sun illuminates a campfire's smoke on the Athens-Big Fork section of Eagle Rock Loop.

it should take us to the Athens-Big Fork Trail," I say with a confidence I don't feel, given we are not really sure which way is north.

The seven of us begin our scramble through the undergrowth. I feel the weight of the group's welfare. What have we gotten ourselves into?

Before we have gone 100 yards we hear voices on the ridge. I hasten ahead and shout, "Hello! Is someone there?" Soon I climb a little rise and there before me is a trail. Hallelujah, a trail!

When we began this hike yesterday, getting lost never occurred to me. My years of hiking have instilled confidence in my wayfinding ability, now seeming a dangerous complacence. This trail is different, as we are learning.

Eagle Rock Loop is the longest and one of the toughest loop hikes in Arkansas, a state with a high concentration of long and tough trails. It is a combination of three trails, the Little Missouri, the Athens-Big Fork, and part of the Viles Branch Horse Trail, with a total length of 26.8 miles. Hiking the Little Missouri section is inadvisable when the river level at the Langley, Arkansas gauge is more than 3.5 feet, and flash flooding is a danger in the rainy season. It was here in 2010 that 20 campers were killed by flash floods in the Albert Pike Recreation Area. The river is something to take seriously.

We planned to do this hike last year but had to divert to a section of the Ouachita Trail because of high water. Now in mid-October 2013, we have found a sweet spot. The river is passable, there is no rain in the forecast, the foliage is gorgeous, and the sun is shining. What else could we need?

Well, a good map might help. Mary and I are the "experienced" hikers and trail guides on this trip. In our pre-trip planning, she agreed to bring the pertinent pages from Tim Ernst's Arkansas Hiking Trails book. Ernst provides detailed, virtually step-by-step, directions in his many guidebooks. I agreed to bring a detailed U.S. Forest Service map which I had painstakingly printed out and taped together. Mary always brings her GPS, so we believed we were adequately prepared. I had opted not to bring my own GPS or a back-up map for the sake of weight. My pack is just under 20 pounds without water, my lightest pack weight ever. This will be both a blessing and a curse.

Our all-female group, including three first-time backpackers, leave Oklahoma City on a Thursday evening for Mena, Arkansas, our jumping-off point for the hike. The drive is familiar. This town of 5,600 is our home base for semi-annual section hikes on the Ouachita Trail. Midway through the five-hour drive we stop in the berg of Krebs for Italian food served family style at Roseanna's. Arriving in Mena about 10:30 p.m., we waste no time hitting the sack, craving a good night's rest for the trail tomorrow.

Day 1 - Friday

The trailhead is 23 miles southeast of Mena on a remote forest road. We leave the Sun Country Inn at 7 a.m. to breakfast at the Skyline Café with a roomful of motorcyclists preparing to enjoy the area's twisty roads. After stuffing ourselves with pancakes, bacon and coffee, we wind our way to the trailhead along canopied byways, leaves of yellow afire in the morning sun.

Right: The Skyline Café has been feeding hungry travelers in downtown Mena, AR since 1922. Their pancakes make for a hearty pre-hike breakfast.
Below: A sturdy crew about to embark on Eagle Rock Loop at the Little Missouri trailhead. From left, Pam Frank, Janet Hamlin, Shaylin Halliburton, Jessica Fisher, Micah Watson and Mary McDaniel.

We arrive at the Little Missouri parking area about 9:30 a.m., intending to begin the loop in a counter-clockwise direction from its northernmost trailhead.

This would get the mountainous section out of the way while we are fresh. These mountains are not high in an objective sense but they are mountains nonetheless.

The Athens-Big Fork Trail, which comprises the western portion of Eagle Rock Loop, follows an old mail route between the two communities of Athens and Big Fork and climbs steeply over one mountain after another. Many recommend saving the climb for the end of the hike and a lighter pack. I am indifferent, but we have to make a choice. Mary and I stand at the narrow Little Missouri crossing looking at my map.

“Sue, do you see a trail going west?” We both search and all we can see is a white-blazed path going south.

“Let’s just head this way and see if it branches off towards the west,” I say, either direction seeming satisfactory to me.

The map goes in my pack’s outside pocket so I can reach it easily and we set a brisk pace on level ground along the river, admiring the fall colors and sparkling watercourse. If we encounter the Little Missouri Falls soon, we will know we have gone “the wrong way.” Four miles along, we do exactly that. Clockwise it is!

After crossing a high bridge over the river we explore the falls. Clear turquoise water flows over rock stair steps as wide as the river itself, framed by the reds, yellows and greens of the forest. Descending to the river level, we scramble on boulders and take photographs. The rest of the afternoon is uneventful as we continue along the Little Missouri, ending with three major crossings and no mishaps. We all have different approaches to the river crossings – some use waterproof boots and gaiters, some cross in water shoes and some, including me, cross barefoot. The water is very cold but I am not yet questioning my decision to sacrifice comfort for lighter weight. That will come soon enough.

We stop for the night at a broad, flat campsite just shy of the Albert Pike Campground, 9.73 miles into the hike. Thanks to Jan’s Vaseline-soaked cotton balls we have a roaring fire. Jessica and Shay have hot chocolate with rum and even a marshmallow. My ultralight philosophy leaves me without dessert or spirits, but the twinge of regret passes quickly.

Settled into my tent, I look for my map to review the day and prepare for tomorrow. It is gone. I look everywhere. It must have fallen out of my backpack. I will check with Mary in the morning -- we will need her maps.

Right: Nearly 16 miles of Eagle Rock Loop run along the clear waters of the Little Missouri, a designated wild and scenic river.

Rock shelves have been burnished to a smooth finish by the waters of the Little Missouri.

Little Missouri Falls is easily accessed for boulder scrambling, sunbathing or picnicking by a manmade staircase to the river level.

Turquoise waters cascade over rock steps at the Little Missouri Falls recreation area.

With each new season, the Ouachita National Forest provides an ever-changing backdrop for Little Missouri Falls.

Poles aid stability during a cold, early morning crossing.

Day 2 - Saturday

My 45-degree sleeping bag weighs almost nothing but given the night's freezing temperatures, its lightness is small comfort. At daylight, I am ready to get moving and warm up. As we break camp, I deliver the news to Mary.

"I guess my map fell out of my pack. Can we use yours?"

Mary has equally solemn news. "It looks like all I have is the summary page for Eagle Rock. The detailed pages aren't here."

We are 10 miles into a nearly 30-mile hike with a map containing only a vague suggestion of the trail. Mary and I look at each other, smile and shrug. "Okay, we'll just do our best!" It can't be that hard.

Immediately, we are stymied as we try to find the trail. Our wanderings take us through the ghostly Albert Pike Campground – buildings boarded up, abandoned and eerie. Finally, thanks to Jessica, we find the right path, just a couple of hundred yards from our camp. It is wasted time we cannot afford.

The trail skirts a rock wall with a fern-lined spring and emerges at a picnic area. While we take a break, a family drives up and asks if this is Albert Pike. I tell them no, it is Blaylock Creek, sending them down the road toward the campground we just visited. As it turns out, this was in fact Loop B of the Albert Pike Recreation Area. Sorry, folks, I only looked like I knew what I was doing.

We ascend a steep hill, losing our way again but eventually regaining the trail and moving on toward Winding Stairs. It is important to note that we don't actually know what Winding Stairs is. What we do understand is that when we get there we should look for yellow blazes signifying the Viles Branch Trail, the east-west connector between the Little Missouri and Athens-Big Fork Trails. Our map is little help in this regard.

We soon arrive at a parking area signed "Winding Stairs" and see a trail marked with yellow blazes. Before we continue, we decide to make this our lunch stop. While we eat, we observe other hikers crossing the stream and surmise that this is a lesser trail we haven't heard about. For us, it is time to get down to business on the Viles Branch.

We follow the yellow blazes. The trail quickly peters out and we are puzzled, finally deciding we have gone the wrong way. Little do we know how wrong. Trudging back to the parking area we find yellow blazes going the opposite direction. Eureka! This must be it, the Viles Branch Trail.

Off we go, trying to follow the yellow blazes, crossing the river over and over. Each time, we are slowed by the process of evaluating the water's depth and removing and replacing boots. Shay and Jessica, who are now hiking in their sandals, clearly have the right idea. Lesson learned for next time – water shoes are worth the weight.

All this leads us to that hallelujah moment, going from lost to found. Even so, we are still not sure where we are. We ask other hikers and, strangely, none of them seem to know. The term "Eagle Rock Loop" is unfamiliar. Then we come upon a place with giant boulders and multiple swimming holes. Families are wading, picnickers lounging on the lush hillsides. We ask again, "Where are we?" A young man sloshes to the stream bank and shows us his map.

Now it becomes clear – THIS is Winding Stairs Scenic Area, the point where we should have begun seeking the Viles Branch Trail. When we were back at the Winding Stair parking area and saw those people crossing the river – we should have been following them. That was just the parking area and it was Blaylock Creek they were crossing to join the Winding Stairs Trail, which is where we should have been. We have been wandering in the wilderness along the river for several hours. It is another mile to the Viles Branch and it's getting late. We get moving.

Soon we rejoice again, arriving at a sign post indicating "Eagle Rock Loop." Here we turn west and are finally trodding the Viles Branch. We come to a wide crossing—hopefully our last. Three hikers have just crossed from the other side and we ask them for bearings. They coach us on the best path for crossing and where to find campsites. We hurry along while we have sunlight, knowing we had better put some miles behind us.

Hikers disappear into the forest as a trail marker points the way.

Left: Trees drape over a narrow stretch of the Little Missouri, their roots exposed from the rise and fall of the stream's swift waters.
Above: A barefoot crossing is expedient on occasion but can be uncomfortable after repeated application.

Twilight is falling as the first campsite comes into view. It is occupied by a young woman who doesn't seem to welcome our gaggle of hikers. "There's another campsite about five minutes up the trail," she says.

We arrive there in near darkness and it too is occupied but we have run out of time. We greet the occupant and ask his permission to camp. To our relief, he is cordial, and in a thick southern drawl introduces himself as Wade from Mississippi. We hastily pitch our tents and filter water while we have light, then visit with Wade as we cook dinner. What we learn is alarming.

He is hiking the loop counterclockwise and started at Little Missouri Falls yesterday. "I've gone almost 20 miles," he says, asserting his satellite phone can prove it. If this is true, we have at least 16 miles to go tomorrow.

"And those mountains are brutal," he adds.

How is this possible? Mary's GPS shows 11 miles today and, while we know that some of it was wandering, we can't be this far behind. According to the map, such as it is, we should have only 8 or 9 more miles to go.

Mary and I confer. “Why don’t we get an early start and see how it goes?” she says.

“We should bail out when we get to Road 106,” says one of the girls, referring to the closest parking area. “It’s just too far to go to finish tomorrow.” Panic is setting in.

“I agree,” I say. “And just because there is a road up ahead doesn’t mean there will be taxis waiting to ferry us back to the trailhead.”

We set our alarms and try to sleep.

Day 3 – Sunday
We rise at six, breaking camp in the dark and rolling out at sunrise. I lead, moving as quickly as possible to get us out of here. Shay hikes at the front with me and I show her the trail signs – blazes and brightly colored tape. We quickly put the remainder of the Viles Branch Trail behind us and breathe easier when we reach the parking lot at Road 106. It is exactly where it should be. Tim Ernst was right. Wade from Mississippi was wrong. Whether he was diabolical or just mistaken, we may never know.

Now we do know we can finish today and there is no more talk of bailing out. A signpost says we are five miles from the end and we push on.

Where Wade was wrong about the distance, he was right about the mountains. The climbs are long and steep. Lack of adequate conditioning and heavy packs make it even tougher. We share the weight of our companions and soon

I drop back and let Shay lead, trying to encourage those who are struggling at the rear. This has to end at some point but the mountains keep coming. Soon we hear a shout of joy from our leaders. They have found the trail’s terminus. We’ve made it! We finish just after 2 o’clock, hiking 10.1 miles today.

As we return to the trailhead, the westerly trail is obvious. It is even marked with orange tape. How we missed it is a mystery – one of many on the Eagle Rock Loop.

Right: Hikers make a dry crossing of a shallow creek.
Below: The Athens-Big Fork Trail sign provides a welcome indicator for the clockwise ERL hiker.

Best Time to Go: Late fall, winter and early spring are best for cooler temperatures, minimal undergrowth and insects, fall colors and spring wildflowers.

Getting There: There are five trailheads/parking areas on the loop, with the nearest communities being Mena, Mt. Ida, Langley and Glenwood, Arkansas. Consult the guidebook , maps and BackpackingArkansas.com (where Eagle Rock Loop has its own section) for information to determine the best trailhead for your needs.

Maps: Hiking Trails of the Ouachitas and Ozarks, Forest Service Map.

Information: Eagle Rock Loop travels through the southwestern portion of the Ouachita National Forest, offering the longest loop hike in Arkansas. It is formed from a combination of the Little Missouri, Viles Branch, and Athens-Big Fork Trails. Camping is allowed anywhere along the trail, but not in the Albert Pike Recreation Area or any of the parking areas. No permits are needed to hike or camp. Trail difficulty ranges from “easy” to “most difficult.” It has numerous water crossings and travels over nine mountains.

Books: Arkansas Hiking Trails by Tim Ernst.

About the Author: Susan Dragoo is a writer and photographer living in Norman, Oklahoma. http://susandragoo.wordpress.com/

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Below: A morning vista on the Athens-Big Fork section of Eagle Rock Loop.

Pat's Backcountry Beverages Carbonator Kit

Review by Ted Ehrlich

There are few things I savor more than a cold soda or beer after some serious miles on the trail. I can't even count how many times I've lugged up bottles of my favorite New Belgium beer, or sprinted the last bit of the trail knowing that I had a treat waiting for me in the cooler in the trunk. The problem with packing in beer is its fairly heavy and after it's done, the trash needs to be hauled out. An empty 12 ounce bottle weighs 7 ounces, so it makes it pretty impractical for multiday trips. Cans are lighter, but many of my favorite beers aren't available in cans, so it's not always an option. The drink also tends to get warm in my pack unless I insulate it or stick it in a creek to cool it off. I figured it would just have to do if I wanted to enjoy a summit beer, or a soda with my lunch during a long hike. Imagine my surprise when I found out about Pat's Brew Concentrates. Now, I can enjoy beer or soda anytime on the trail without the weight penalty.

Specs

Cost: $40-$50 for the carbonator bottle, $6 for 12 activator packets, and $10 for 4 pack of brew concentrate. Soda concentrates are currently sold in 24 packs for $34.

Weight: Bottle with carbonator top – 9 ounces, Concentrate packet – 1.9 ounces, Activator packet - .6 ounces

Design: For this review, I was able to get a hold of the newest version of their carbonator bottle, the blue version, since they had just started making the newest design available. According to Scott Kinsey, Vice President of Sales & Marketing for Pats Backcountry Beverage, the newer version of the bottle does the exact same job of carbonating the beverage as the original orange version, but it's a bit simpler and easier to use. The bottle itself isn't that special. It's a wide mouth bottle with the same threads as a standard Nalgene, and bigger than a 16 ounce Nalgene, but smaller than a standard 32 ounce version. The cap is two parts, a blue activator cup which screws into the upper cap, and that is where the magic happens.

Pros: Ecofriendly, reusable, great taste, easy to make after some practice.

Cons: Hardsided bottle might be considered bulky, needs more variety in the brews.

Rating:

The process for carbonating the drink is fairly simple. The activator packets contain citric acid & potassium bicarbonate, two white powders in two separate chambers. After loading the cap with a little water, you empty both powders into the reaction chamber (the small blue bulb) and mix them around. Then, with the bottle full of 16 ounces of whatever flavor you're making, you quickly screw the reaction chamber into the cap, and the entire cap back into the bottle. This creates the sealed system. The water in the cap is then dumped into the reaction chamber so that the two powders can react, which create a potassium salt solution in the reaction chamber, and the CO_2 released gets absorbed into the brew or soda. After letting the reaction happen for a few minutes, the reaction chamber will stop bubbling, indicating that the reaction is complete and your drink is ready. After depressurizing the bottle, you simple take off the cap, discard the potassium salt water in the reaction chamber, and enjoy your beverage.

I found the learning curve to be pretty quick. The first beer I tried to make was flat and tasted terrible, but I realized afterward that I didn't give the reaction time to carbonate the bottle, and I think some of the potassium salt got into the beverage on accident. The second beer I made I took some more time for the reaction to occur, however it still wasn't what I was expecting, and I probably

depressurized it too soon. The third beer I was patient with, letting the reaction happen around 5 minutes, and it revealed a perfect beer. Currently there are only two flavors of brew concentrates, Pail Rail, a pale ale style beer at 5.3% alcohol after mixing, and Black Hops, a black IPA at 6.1% alcohol. Of the two flavors, I found that I preferred the Black Hops, as it's a smoother IPA and quite aromatic. The Pale Rail was also quite good and I liked it even though I'm normally not a fan of pale ales. Unfortunately, those are the only two brews currently available, but Scott told me that they are currently in the process of bringing a third flavor to market, a lager style brew, with the possibility of more styles to follow.

For kids and adults that aren't interested in beer, Pat's also has 5 flavors of natural sodas available. The carbonator kit comes with one of each flavor. Of the five flavors available, I personally found the root beer to be the best, with their PomaGranite being the most interesting flavor. I found all five flavors to be pretty tasty and enjoyable when I wasn't in the mood for a beer. As a bonus perk, all 5 flavors are all natural with no preservatives and have some vitamins added to them, making it better for you than regular soda while still tasting as good as regular soda.

One of the important ideals that Pat's carbonator system wants to employ is an ecofriendly way to enjoy drinks in the backcountry. One 4 pack of brew concentrate makes 64 ounces of beer, at only a fraction of the weight and almost zero trash. The brew packets are about the size of an energy gel package, and the retail packaging is minimal and recyclable. The carbonator bottle is reusable, and because it's essentially the same as a standard hard sided Nalgene bottle, can be brought with me to be used as a regular water bottle on a trip. Because the bottle is a standard wide mouth, most filters that fit onto a Nalgene will fit on the carbonator bottle, making it easy to filter water from whatever source you want to use. Due to the beer being concentrated, the process to produce and ship the beer is also much more ecofriendly than conventional beer, using significantly less water and having a smaller CO2 footprint.

While I was using it, I found a few hidden benefits. The reaction chamber doubles as a shot glass with a 1.5 ounce marking on it, useful for making mixed drinks or measuring shots of your favorite liquor that you may bring with you. Also, you can carbonate almost anything, so if you have beer that has gone flat while traveling or at home, you can re-carbonate it anytime. For people that travel, all of the components of the system are TSA complaint, meaning you don't have to have checked luggage to bring them with you.

Conclusion

Overall, I would give the Pat's carbonator a very good rating with 4 stars. The only reason I wouldn't give it 5 stars is because they are still limited to two flavors of the brew concentrate, and not everyone will like IPAs and pale ales. I think if they can get around 5 different brew concentrates, especially lighter lager or pilsner types, they will have at least one style of every type a beer drinker will enjoy. I personally would like to see an Abby style ale, but that's because I like Belgium style beers. The carbonation process is pretty straight forward after getting the hang of how it works. I look forward to making and enjoying a well-deserved beer on my trips this summer.

Overall: ⭐⭐⭐⭐½ – Very Good

You can find the Pat's Backcountry Beverage Starter Kit Here at Amazon.com for about $45 and more information at http://www.patsbcb.com/.

In Praise of the Easy Amble

by Peter McClure

It sounds contradictory for a hiker, especially for those of us who focus on scaling that looming summit or doggedly slogging along to finally reach that distant lake. We are a goal-oriented lot, often driven to bypass a short, easy walk for something we see as more of a challenge, and sometimes it takes a real shock to break the pattern.

For me, it was a clot in my leg. Nothing fatal, but a disability that slowed me down quite a bit. Any pace faster than a gentle stroll caused leg cramps, and I went overnight from being one of the faster hikers on the trail to one of the slowest. Instead of planning week-long backpacking trips or peak-bagging expeditions, I suddenly found myself limited to the tourist lookouts, pond-loops and scenic nature walks.

But believe it or not, the change was good for me. On one drive down the Icefields Parkway in Jasper National Park, scene of some of my more challenging adventures, I suddenly realized that there were many destinations I'd bypassed in previous years in my rush to get started on some exciting trek. Instead of joining the tourists to enjoy a short walk down to a hidden canyon or up to the great views at a lookout, I'd been so determined to get started that I'd driven right by many of the best locations!

I'd forgotten that there is a reason so many visitors go to those places. A scenic lookout exists because enough people heard about it and wanted to go see the view. That hidden canyon has a trail to it because a whole bunch of people thought it was interesting and unique. The view of the glacial lake from the mountain top is spectacular, and the trail to the top was built because of the gorgeous scenery. The roadside pullout is there because you'll get nice photos when you stop.

That one drive made the point for me. I stopped and looked, and started to find out what I'd missed. The people I was with had to adjust to the slower pace, but the new scenery we saw made it all worthwhile.

One common thread when you have a bunch of people hiking together is that there's always someone who thinks they're holding everybody else up. I've always hated to hear that, but now I found myself feeling the same way. Fortunately, I found friends who were willing to accept my change of pace.

While most of my hiking companions kept going as they had been, a few told me their motives had always been different than mine. They would have preferred to slow down and pay more attention to what was around them, but they'd been keeping up the faster pace just for the pleasure of my company on the trail. Once I'd convinced myself they were telling the truth, I was happy to accept them as my buddies on the easier paths.

The photographers were good for that. Already conditioned to stop and compose a particularly interesting image, they had no problem waiting for a moment or two for me to catch up. Instead of fussing, they'd find a unique flower by the trail or look for a different angle on the mountain looming above. And who among us hasn't, when the slope got a bit too steep or the speed a bit too fast, stopped while gasping for breath saying 'Just gotta get that shot!'. What a convenient excuse, even if sometimes you have to look a bit harder for a nice photo than for others!

But it turns out it's true after all. Now, when I stop, it usually turns out there is something quite interesting to see and something interesting to learn about. I've stopped to see the ducks on their migrations, and learned to distinguish a Coot from a Widgeon, and a Gadwall from a Scooter. I've sampled berries, ripe at the end of the summer, while others on the trail didn't even realize they were there. I used to walk past all the different kinds of evergreens, but in the past weeks, I've learned how to tell spruce from pine, and tamarack from fir. I've compared animal tracks in the mud, where I once would have walked through without noticing, and I've gained a sense of the lives taking place all round me as I hike through the forest. And there is always a great picture to be taken if I have a camera handy!

> “Don’t stare at the heels of the guy in front as you grind up the mountain. Stop and look around and find something new and exciting to learn about.”

I’ve also learned more about my companions on the trail. With the pressure to ‘get there’ gone, we’ve had a chance to relax a bit and to talk about subjects other than the hike we’re on. That slower timing allows for the development of more personal relationships, and removes some of the competitiveness that often exists between strong hikers.

It’s that leisurely amble that makes it possible. Don’t stare at the heels of the guy in front as you grind up the mountain. Stop and look around and find something new and exciting to learn about. Try to catch the scent of the high bush cranberries in the fall, or perhaps the musty odor of an animal back in the bush. Feel the texture of the bark on the trees, the softness of the moss or the coarseness of the rocks. Listen for the rustle of a rabbit in the underbrush, the sound of a deer sneaking away, or the chirp of a hidden songbird.

We’ve all heard the old adages: “Stop and smell the roses,” and “it’s about the journey, not the destination.” but all too often we forget to do just that. And while our urban lives are often high-pressured and fast-paced, there really should be more to hiking than just a push to get it over with!

BIG PINE CANYON:
A Bully Hike to Brainerd Lake

Location: Sierra Nevada Mountains, California

by Sharon Giacomazzi

Photography courtesy Brian Schmalz / Calitrails.com

Sixteen miles south of Bishop, CA, Highway 395 cruisers must slow down to pass through Big Pine, population 1350. It's a tiny high desert burg and not likely to lure you out of the car. Definitely small and unimpressive, but you should see its "backyard." Big Pine hunkers at the base of the Palisades, a spectacular 6-mile-long Sierra sub-range along the crest.

One of the loftiest and most sharp-spined crests in the lower 48, the Palisades region contains the largest glaciers in the Sierra and the southernmost glaciers in North America. The dramatic congregation of alpine summits is renowned as the "best and highest concentration of technical climbing in the Sierra." The scenery in this zip code showcases some of Ma Nature's sublime handiwork.

The Palisade Group was named by the Brewer Party of the Whitney Survey in 1864. The spectacular sub-range straddles the crest and is bounded by John Muir Wilderness in Inyo National Forest to the east and Kings Canyon National Park on the west. The landscape has all the High Sierra ingredients to toss you into visual overload.

Along with a gang of 12 and 13,000-foot+ summits, seven of California's 15 peaks over 14,000 feet impale the M&M- blue sky. There are no official, established trans-Sierra trails. Only a few strenuous, precipitous cross-country routes squeeze through high east-west notches. They are not for the faint-hearted or mountaineering novices.

The full panoply of Big Pine Canyon's (BPC) peaks and Palisades Crest is mostly hidden because Highway 395 runs close to the mountain front. Steep high altitude trails usher you into a world of quintessential, breath-robbing Eastern Sierra scenery. For the very best and intimate views you must hike up either the North or South Fork of Big Pine Creek. Though it is by no means a lug-soled freeway, the North Fork trail receives more knapsackers and backpackers than its neighbor because of all the lakes. Hikers love lakes!

The Palisades are Xanadu for skilled technical rock, ice and snow climbers. Expert ski mountaineers also find the Palisades ground zero for 7000-foot descents from alpine heights to desert sage. In this rarified air that angels breathe, hikers and climbers have

long been seduced by the vertical and sensational granite realm.

Few hikers tread the South Fork trail to the rugged, rock-rimmed world of Brainerd Lake, el. 10650 feet. Many day trippers prefer not to walk too far or too hard for their scenery, hoping to find unpopulated pristine lakes and killer views not far from the trailhead. Consequently, the 5.5-mile junket to Brainerd culls out a lot of people.

The view-packed Brainerd Lake corridor transports hikers through a colorful tapestry rich in contrasts. Thousands of feet above, the formidable cluster of massive, cloud-ripping peaks of the Palisades rivets the eye. Starting at 7800 feet, the South Fork Canyon trail penetrates a wide glacier-cut trough.

In late summer elderberries dangle like purple earrings, inviting you to pop a few in your mouth. Unlike the sweetness of red gooseberries, elderberries are tart. Sage, manzanita, mountain mahogany and Jeffrey pines thrive here. The trail begins in a stretch of high desert terrain filled with a surprising profusion of heat-loving wildflowers and ends at a granite-bound lake beneath Middle Palisade and its glacier.

You'll need to invest some sweat equity to complete the 11-mile roundtrip trek. Hikers must be prepared to negotiate two miles of hot, open trail, not mind a little talus dancing and be game for rough and rocky trail sections. Finally, the last stretch to the icy waters of Brainerd is on an indistinct, but straight forward, use trail marked by ducks, small piles of stacked rocks.

Begin walking from the dayhikers' parking area at the end of BPC Road, a short distance from Glacier Lodge. Its present incarnation does not offer any hint of its former backcountry splendor. Back in the day, before avalanches and fires, Glacier Lodge was a very popular full-service accommodation for vacationers. Walk around the locked gate on a closed road past several private summer cabins. Shortly cross a bridge spanning North Fork Big Pine Creek cascades, known as First Falls.

Walk for 0.3 mile to a junction, and bear left onto the signed South Fork trail. The path climbs steadily on a mellow grade, crosses an abandoned dirt road at 0.6 mile that once ended at Second Falls Campground, no longer open, and continues up South Fork Canyon.

The knife-edged Palisade Crest and Norman Clyde Peak fill the horizon above the headwall. Big canyon views lend themselves to dramatic photos. For the next two miles, beneath this stunning vista, the trail meanders through the wide glacial valley. Aspens line dashing South Fork Creek and June/July wildflowers help mitigate this toasty piece of real estate.

Bristling with ominous spines, the showy and luscious blooms of prickly pear cactus at your feet will briefly draw attention away from the alpine wonderland above. Their yellow or peach-colored flowers, sometimes red, turn pink and orange with age. Along the way a clutch of elderly curl-leafed mountain mahogany offers an unusual Kodak moment. Typically more like a shrub, these gnarled, contorted old-timers have survived the harsh elements long enough to become small trees. In early season, they're a mass of fuzzy, silky plumes.

Nearing the creek at 1.2 miles, rare copper (water) birch thrives in the riparian niche. They are small trees with shiny coppery bark and grow only along a few southeastern Sierra waterways. At 1.8 miles cross the stream on a flattened log bridge. The little shady nook at 8700 feet provides a cool respite for Brainerd-bound hikers or a good turnaround point

for those seeking a less challenging journey.

Catch sight of the South Fork splashing down the canyon wall to the right. If, like me, you can't pass up a waterfall, a use trail leads across a grassy patch to the willow-choked stream below it. Just past the wee meadow put your legs in four-wheel drive as the trail begins to aggressively ascend the headwall. Climb 1000 feet on a swarm of talus-covered switchbacks, juke around and over boulders and scramble across narrow ledges for 1.6 miles to a ridge top, known locally as The Hogback.

From the ridge crest at 9800 feet, an astonishing mountain panorama will take your breath away, assuming you have any left. This is a ne plus ultra view that not many Eastern Sierra visitors will have the pleasure of seeing. As my Brit hiking pal said, "this place will gobsmack ya!" Pull up a chunk of granite, take a breather and munch some snacks. Ansel Adams got it right when he said, "no matter how sophisticated you may be, a large granite mountain cannot be denied—it speaks in silence to the very core of your being."

If your legs have turned to rubber and you're gulping air, stop here and savor the fabulous Palisade panorama before turning around. Check the map to identify (south to north) Disappointment Peak, Middle Palisade Peak/Glacier, Palisade Crest, Clyde Glacier and Mt.

Jepson. Below, green-fringed Willow Lake is a refreshing sight, though it is slowly transitioning to a meadow.

Brainerd Lake, your goal, about two miles distant, bears the name of Lawson Brainerd, Inyo National Forest ranger in the 1920s. It's believed that Frank Dusy, in search of good graze for his flock of sheep, was the first Euro-American to see Palisade Glacier. North Palisade, 14,242 feet, was first climbed by Joseph LeConte in 1903.

Before you is a bold, imposing jagged ridge comprised of 12 pinnacles located in the heart of the Palisade region. The toothy pinnacles have been unofficially named by climbers for characters in Tolkien's classic "Lord of the Rings." Gandalf Peak is the highest of the twelve summits.

Legendry climber and mountaineer Norman Clyde spent 20 winters as caretaker of Glacier Lodge, affording him access to these Sierra rock stars all year. Clyde was drawn to the challenges and grandeur of the Palisades and pioneered most of the first ascents in the region.

After the intermission head downhill, losing 200 feet of precious elevation. At 4.0 miles, note a right-branching spur to Willow Lake. Willow is more boggy marsh than lake, and it is the birthplace, I swear, of all the mosquitoes in the entire Sierra Nevada. Though the water and vegetation are inviting, beware. You'll need a transfusion after the squeeters are through with you. Be prepared with bug juice and a mesh hat as you travel through this section or decide to visit the lake.

Beyond the junction, the trail roller coasters through the forest and crosses Brainerd Lake's outlet stream around 4.5 miles. Paralleling a deep gorge, resume climbing toward Finger Lake's outlet. The trail follows it for awhile before it turns east (left), passes a tarn and traces more switchbacks to a granite hump.

Walk past a second tarn, descend briefly through a squishy meadow, and bend around a rocky ledge on the final climb, seemingly with a vengeance, to the rockbound shoreline of frigid Brainerd Lake at 5.5 miles. Resting in a granite basin in the belly of the inner Sierra, the setting emanates a Zen-like serenity.

During my first visit to Brainerd, and every time thereafter, I stared in amazement at the stony ramparts of the Palisades. I was exhilarated to witness the majestic, wild place and humbled by the stupendous forces that created it. I am continuously struck by the fact that when nature greets us, it often does so in unforgettable, unexpected ways. Obviously, the grandeur of Brainerd's environs is stunning. But, I was unprepared and overwhelmed by the complete absence of human sound. What a rare gift.

If you've schlepped a backpack to the lake, you'll find a few campsites around the outlet or on the outcrops above.

Campfires are verboten. Remember LNT, leave no trace, of your visit, and camp 40 paces from the water. Sanitation is a top priority here. Anglers can try to lure small golden trout into their creels. Dayhikers should take a long rest before dropping 2500 feet to the trailhead. Be mindful of the rocks on the descent; mountains don't care if you do a face plant.

Still feeling frisky and adventurous? Even more extraordinary scenery awaits a half-mile above at Finger Lake. Near the outlet pick up a use trail that makes an arcing ascent of the cliffs above the northwest side of Brainerd. Strong hikers will enjoy working their way up slabs of granite for about 500 feet to another alpine beauty.

The storybook setting of Finger Lake, 10,800 feet, is a stunner. Long and lean and set in a granite cleft, it is reminiscent of a Norwegian fjord. Small colonies of grasses and flowers grace the severe landscape circling Finger's heavenly turquoise waters. There are a few camp spots around the outlet. Remember to set up camp at least 100 feet from the water. The setting is pristine; please keep in that way. Bivouac here, climbers, if scaling the Palisades is your destination.

OPTIONAL:
North Fork Big Pine Creek trail serves as the portal to nine gorgeous timberline lakes. It's a lake-blessed canyon, though you won't see one until 4.5 miles from the trailhead. A 13-mile-loop route, though on the long side, is the ideal way to experience this setting. Better yet, backpack to one of the lakes and explore leisurely. Climbers can also access the Palisades from this canyon.

A hike in either canyon underlines a passionately held belief of John Muir: "In every walk with Nature one receives far more than he seeks."

SUGGESTION:
Stop in Glacier Lodge store for current information about the status of North Fork bridge. Heavy run-off years can and have taken out this span.

Best Map for Big Pine Canyon is Tom Harrison's "The Palisades Trail Map." You'll find two campgrounds, Glacier Pack Train office, rustic cabins/supplies/food at Glacier Lodge en route to the trailhead. Ever think about riding a horse up the canyon and walking back down? I did this once when recuperating from pneumonia kept me from strenuous uphill hiking. Loved it and enjoyed a different perspective of the timberline landscape eight feet off the ground. Glacier Pack Train will be happy to rent you an equine taxi, complete with an experienced guide.

The small town of Big Pine has a couple of modest motels, convenience store/gas station, cafe and a very good eatery called "Rossi's Steak and Spaghetti." The pasta is excellent, as are the offerings for carnivores.

Best Time to Go: June thru October, winter for ice climbing and skiing.

Getting There: From Big Pine, CA, on Hwy. 395 drive west on Crocker Street/Glacier Lodge Rd. for 11 miles to the day use parking lot at the end of the road just past the spur to Glacier Lodge. Backpackers must park in the area across from the pack station; permits mandatory.

Maps: "Palisades Trail Map" by Tom Harrison Maps

Information: Inyo National Forest Office, 760-873-2500; Glacier Lodge Store/cabin rentals 760-938-2312

Books: "Exploring Eastern Sierra Canyons; Bishop to Lone Pine" by Sharon Giacomazzi.

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GEAR MASH

Aqua-Tainer

Probably won't be strapping this to your backpack anytime soon, but most backpacking and hiking trips start with a car ride and maybe some car camping along the way. Gallon jugs are one solution, but the Aqua-Tainer replaces 7 in one easy to dispense container. $17: REI.com

Jetboil CrunchIt

Don't throw away your empty fuel canisters – Recycle them with this tool from Jetboil! Safely vents fuel prior to puncturing and even includes a bottle opener. 1 ounce, $6: Campsaver.com

rescueME PLB1

At 4.1 ounces and pocket-sized, this PLB stays out of the way but still packs a punch if you need it. $350: Campsaver.com

Osprey Poco Premium

Spring is officially here. Don't leave the kid behind – Hit the trail and give them the best view around at the same time. Ample storage allows you to pack all the extras you'll need, and of course, they even made the drool pad removable for easy washing. The adjustable torso size is ideal for multiple porters. 6lbs and $300: Backcountry.com

GoLite Yunnan Hiking Pants

Quick drying synthetic pants with a DWR finish make for a great all around, 3 season hiking solution with built in stretch for comfort on steep trails. Hand pockets as well as zippered cargo pockets offer up secure storage space. 9 ounces and $60: GoLite.com

Harmony House Soup Mix

Just 12 ounces of dry mixed vegetables gets you 24 cups of soup on the trail - Perfect for a shoulder season pick me up when temps take a dive. Shelf life 1 to 2 years, $13: Amazon.com

NeoAir Pillow

An ultralight pillow solution from Therm-a-Rest, the NeoAir Pillow is available in 2 sizes, 2 colors, and true to its pad heritage packs small and remains light at just 2-3 ounces. $35-40: Backcountry.com

Klean Kanteen Insulated

Keep beverages hot for up to 6 hours and get a boost of warmth on cold days, or keep it cold to cool down this summer. Stainless steel construction won't alter flavors and is super durable. Available in 12, 16, and 20 ounce capacities with the 20 ounce just over 10 ounces and under $30: REI.com

PHOTO TIPS FROM THE TRAIL

by David Cobb

Since long-distance hiking helped form so much of my photography, I thought it might be helpful to supply a few photo tips I picked up from the trail. These tips don't require the use of tripods or fantastic cameras; they are suggestions designed to help improve your composition and use of light, and will affect the overall impact of the photos you take along the trail. (I hope you enjoy these tidbits from this ongoing TrailGroove series.)

5 Tips for Photographing the Wild Coast

Where I live in Oregon, Governor Tom McCall signed a beach bill in 1967 proclaiming all of Oregon's beaches as public land. Much of the land is state park and some of it is still a bit wild. There is also a 382-mile Oregon Coast Trail which spans from the California to Washington borders (more on that in a future article). I've spent a lot of time exploring the west coast beaches from Alaska to Mexico, and traveling the Hawaiian coastlines. Photographing these shorelines can be challenging and rewarding, so here are a few tips to improve your beach photography wherever that may be.

David Cobb is an avid backpacker and photographer. You can see more of David's images at www.dmcobbphoto.com

Check out our next issue for more "Photo Tips from the Trail" by David M. Cobb. Be sure to check out previous issues for his other great tips.

Left: Olympic National Park Seastack.

Many snapshots along the beach are of a sunset or sunrise placed dead-center in the frame, with 50% of the image land and 50% sky. Consider moving away from that uninteresting composition and incorporate a few of these following tips:

1. A foreground element is important for most landscape photography, but along the coast it helps immensely. Look for tide pools, rocks, or streams to anchor your image with a foreground or leading line into the frame.

2. Get low along the beach and pick up the sky's reflection along the water, and if there are sea stacks along the beach pick those up in the reflection too. Speaking of sea stacks, try and get some visual separation between them, if there isn't separation between these elements they tend to look like one giant blob.

3. You don't always need to point the camera out to sea. Shorelines can be rugged, striated, and majestic, so look up and down the coastline to spy where the most interesting receding coastline lies.

4. Then there is always the drama of the waves. In Oregon, people flock to the beaches to watch the storms arrive. Catching a backlit wave at its crest can be a beautiful sight, so can a wave capture as it crashes a cliff. To catch the stop-motion of a wave you'll need to shoot it at a 500th of a second or faster, for a silkier feel you'll need to capture the wave at a quarter of a second or slower, but then you will need a tripod.

5. When you're at the beach, you don't always need the sun in the picture. When you're on the west coast, you can get awesome sunrises out to sea as the sun rises inland, and the same can be said for the east coast at sunset. So let the sun go in an image, and concentrate on the clouds and light instead.

There is nothing better than exploring the wild beaches of the west. They offer solitude and scenery, and best of all, a great opportunity for photography. Hopefully these few tips will help improve your beach photography, and someday it might inspire you to walk the entire length of the Oregon Coast Trail.

Right: Grizzly Tracks at Sunrise.
Pages 117-118: Rugged Oregon Coast.
Pages 119-120: Blacklock Beach.

Backcountry Cuisine: Greens in Death Valley

by Cinny Green

I spent last week with six people in the red, yellow, and white desert canyons of Death Valley National Park. The nights were cool, skies lit with the beacons of other galaxies. Daytime, however, got hotter and hotter every hour until by 4 PM it was at least 90 degrees. There was nothing to do but find a patch of shade under a cliff and daydream. There was no bag of ice in the world, no camping cooler that could withstand that onslaught of heat and keep food fresh. That's where my dehydrated Ultra Food recipes morphed from backpacker delights to desert dweller's salvation. I had my spicy Squash Soup the first night; I sipped my tasty Strawberry Cran-Apple drink and munched on Electrolyte Trail Mix to stay hydrated. Other nights, I had curry, pasta, and Japanese miso with rice noodles. Not a fresh vegetable in sight, you might ask? Not true. Again, using the "bark" formula of those savory soups and juice, I made a dehydrated green drink that tasted fresh out of a summer garden. I confess it's not my original idea but one adapted from my book by a fine hiker named Patti Lentz from Albuquerque NM.
Here's how I did it:

INGREDIENTS:
2 peeled Apples
3 stalks Celery
1 Cucumber
1 2"piece of Ginger Root
Juice of 1 Lime plus grated lime zest
1 bunch Parsley
2 cups baby Spinach
salt to taste

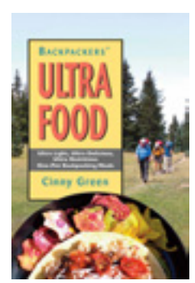
INSTRUCTIONS:
Run all ingredients through a juicer (or blend and sieve as necessary)

Spread juice 1/8" thick on solid dehydrator trays and dry at 135 degrees until crisp.

Bag in a zip baggie and label.

When you are ready for your green veggies, re-hydrate, sit back on a rock, and enjoy the landscape of one of the most stunning, barren deserts in the world!

Cinny Green's book, Backpackers' Ultra Food, offers more tips, techniques, and recipes to elevate eating on the trail. You can find the book Here at Amazon.com.



The Drive Home:
Stepping into the Maze

by Aaron Zagrodnick

My feet sunk in the sand as I wove through juniper trees and tried not to walk off the cliff. "There's no reason this should be more dangerous in the dark, right?" I said, both asking Ted's opinion and trying to convince myself out loud at the same time. "Technically no," Ted replies. We'd left the smooth paved surface of the highway some 2 hours before as the sun set over the San Rafael Swell to the west. At first we'd made good time on the smooth dirt road, but the farther we'd travelled the rougher the road became. Now, we found ourselves standing on the edge of a precipice, staring east towards the Maze District of Canyonlands National Park. It was pitch black. We knew the single lane switchbacks of the Flint Trail lay somewhere below, but they couldn't be seen. Neither could we see just how steep the descent would be in the dark – A good thing for my nerves, perhaps. No headlights in sight coming up the switchbacks. A good thing – The road was too tight for two vehicles to comfortably pass. We jumped back in the truck, escaping the chill that had just begun to creep in. I selected 4-LOW and we began the 800' descent down the sheer drop known as the Orange Cliffs.

For the next half hour, over a distance of just 1.5 miles, my foot never left the brake. We slowly rolled over rocks, cringing for the expected spine-tingling sound of steel against rock at frequent intervals. Fortunately, that sound was only occasionally heard. 3 back to back hairpin turns approached; each greatly exceeding the turning radius of the vehicle. "Backup! Turn your wheels to the left, swing it wide then pull straight forward. Watch the drop." Ted's voice cut through the dark as he spotted us through the turns. Slowly we made progress, my hands clenched to the wheel and my right foot firmly riding the brake. 1st gear and 4-LOW were no match for the steepness of this road. Eventually, the black void leading off to the side lessened in its emptiness – An emptiness that was slowly replaced by shrubs and sand on each side of the

headlights. We'd made it to the bottom. Ted rolled down the window and I killed the engine. Headlights off, we stepped outside and focused our eyes on something other than the narrow tunnel of the headlights that had been monopolizing our focus. The stars enveloped us overhead, and more and more began to appear as we looked upwards and our pupils fought to make use of the available light. There was no sound. In the Maze, frequently touted as one of the most remote spots in the lower 48, I'd learn that's usually the case. Another half hour of bouncing onward along the road and we found ourselves at Golden Stairs, where we'd camp for the night. We'd both had long days – I'd driven in from Wyoming and Ted had driven up from a few days of backpacking in the Grand Canyon. With 3 days of backpacking in the Maze ahead, we ate a dinner of what food we could most quickly assemble and then each found a spot to sleep for the night.

Typical for a nighttime arrival, sunrise always brings surprise. I opened an eye and stared out from beneath the fly of my tent, now able to see farther than only what had been illuminated by my headlights or the stars above the night prior. I stumbled out – Not yet physically tired enough from hiking for a good night's sleep in a tent away from home.

We didn't move quickly. Ted remained half asleep in the passenger seat of the

truck, I wandered away from camp both to watch the sunrise and in an attempt to gain some sense of my surroundings. After sunrise photos and a survey of the surrounding landscape, I found Ted awake and we focused efforts on making sense of the jumble of backpacking gear, food, water, maps, camera equipment, empty soda cans and other assorted items that now occupied the rear of the passenger compartment; our original intentions to maintain some sense of organization had quickly been abandoned. Water was the main concern, and I realized I'd forgotten the bite valve for my hydration setup. A slight inconvenience, but I mostly needed the capacity of the reservoir and without a bite valve or extra cap it was rendered useless. Luckily in the mess I was able to locate a couple empty water bottles to make up for the oversight. We'd brought 11 gallons of water with us; we ended up each drinking all that we could and carrying the rest plus a water filter into the near waterless environs of the Maze that morning. Luckily, our legs were still fresh as we left the Golden Stairs Trailhead carrying 40lb packs, and complete with a gallon jug in my hands, we crossed over China Neck, then descended the cairned switchbacks to the deserted flat hundreds of feet below.

Though only mid-March, as the sun crept higher in the sky we were both happy to have the benefit of shade as we hiked – A wide brimmed hat in my case, long sleeves and a hood in Ted's case. With the amount of water we were carrying we both felt like pack mules for the time being. It would only get lighter. We both frequently remarked at this fact out loud, though for the moment it was hard to believe. I nearly finished the gallon jug I had in hand by the time we reached The Wall, a particularly flat and angular sandstone feature rising above us in a line of similar, but more ambiguously shaped features of standing rock.

We saw no one, but commercial airliners could be heard thundering overhead at frequent intervals. We looked up, perhaps a passenger looked back from a window downwards in our direction. But neither party could see the other. Nor could we ever spot any of the planes among the puffy white clouds that were starkly set against the blue sky and red rock, themselves streaming over the desert landscape. Like us though, the clouds travelled at a more leisurely pace. We stashed our heavy gear and most of the water and day hiked across the top of the Maze. A labyrinth of canyons could be seen below us on either side, but for now we stayed high where navigation was easy. The land was strangely empty, animal tracks could be seen in the sand but no rabbits stirred in the brush, not a junco flitted amongst the stands of Utah Juniper, no hawks were seen in the sky. As the sun set however, the land was briefly set on fire and became alive; the distant La Sal Mountains providing an impressive backdrop, their snow-capped peaks

lead your eyes to the horizon from the arid land from where we watched the scene unfold. There is no hiking to be had in those moments, moments that would stop even the most distracted among us in their tracks. We stared in wonder as shadows gradually overtook the land. Sun down, we found our cache and Ted setup his bivy in a sandy wash, I pitched my tent a stone's throw away – using rocks for stakes where needed. We were both asleep prior to moonrise.

This pattern mostly repeated itself for the next 2 days. We explored the canyons, the other ridges, discovered hollows and caves – With each sunset seemingly more spectacular than the next. Pack weights quickly dropped. One night – Friday night – We sat on a rock eating dinner overlooking the Colorado River and Ted proclaimed, "This is the best place I've ever camped." The cliffs leading into the river lit up with slowly changing shades of red, pink, yellow, and orange. Stars had just begun to appear overhead. I looked at Ted and simply nodded my head, there was little room for debate. Under the presumed cover of the approaching night, a mouse stuck its head up from beneath the ledge we sat on, ready to pounce if any crumbs were dropped. I was low on water. Ted low on food. A trade was arranged. Camera batteries had been exhausted, feet ached.

Tomorrow we'd amble westward, some 15 miles, and return to the truck, past the rock formation known as Mother and Child, and ascend the Golden Stairs. 4 hours of 4 wheel drive and a few more scrapes later, we'd make it to the desolate Highway 24 at 9 PM on Saturday night, a single light from what must have been Goblin Valley the only sign of habitation until we intersected the interstate. 200 miles of driving and then a quick handshake. "See you in a few weeks" I said. Ted headed East, I turned North.

Nat Geo Map 312, trail beaten and battered as any good map should be, stuck out the side pocket of my backpack in the backseat as I wound through the mountains towards Wyoming. Snow only lingered on the highest peaks; the morning sun revealed a hint of green barely perceptible in the valleys below.

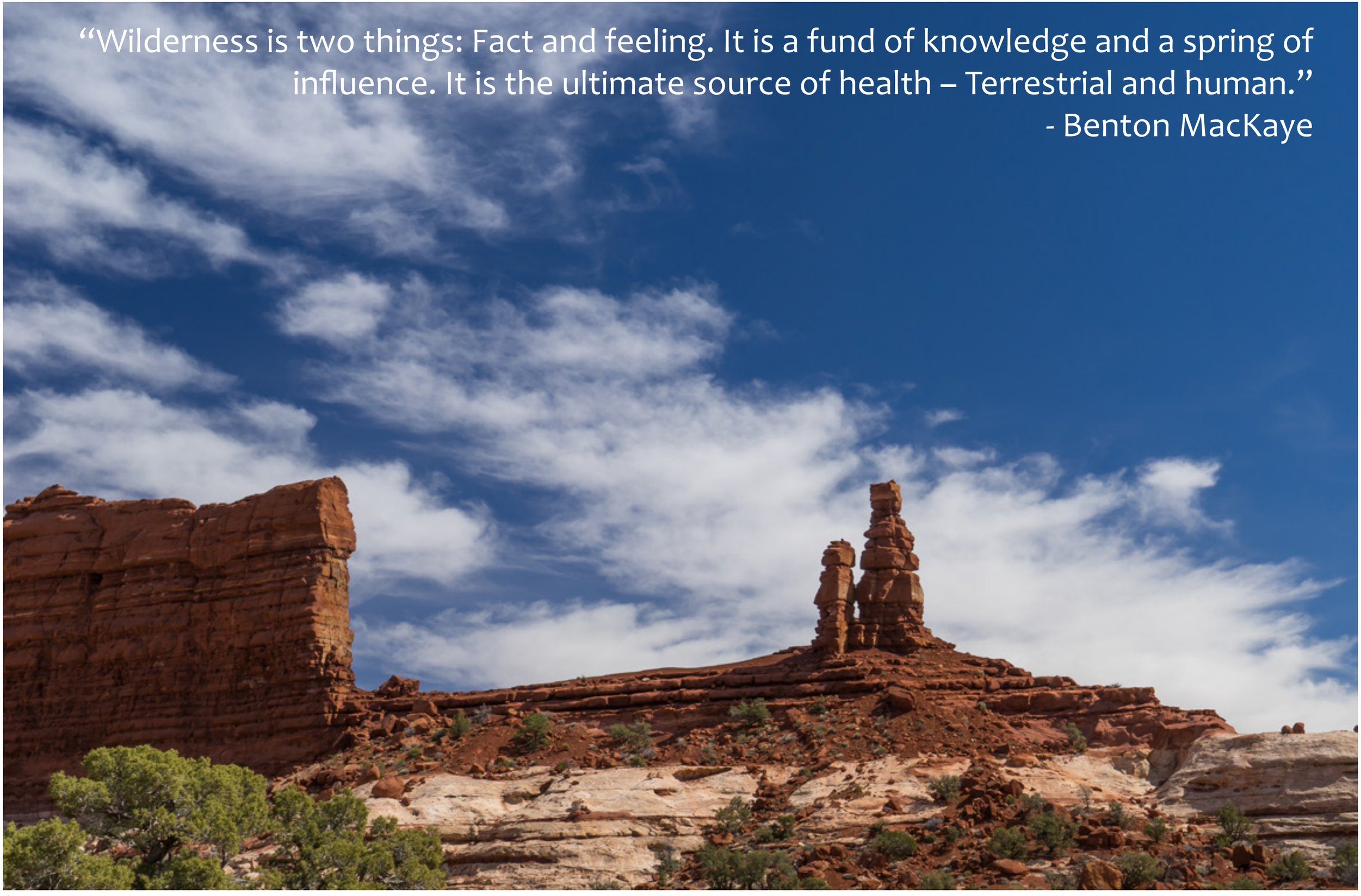
Spring. Up next: The same stars, a new map, and another 80,000 steps into something new.


NOTICE
LEAVE THE
CATTIE ALONE
THEY ARE NOT
WEID AND THEY
ARE NOT YOUR'S

Photo by Ted Ehrlich

“Wilderness is two things: Fact and feeling. It is a fund of knowledge and a spring of influence. It is the ultimate source of health – Terrestrial and human.”

- Benton MacKaye



Thanks for Reading Issue 14

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