



California Chaparral Institute, P.O. Box 545, Escondido, CA 92029
www.californiachaparral.org email: naturalist@californiachaparral.com phone: 760-822-0029

Searching for Nature in Saline Valley

The most desolate place in California

By Richard W. Halsey

What's nature good for? I can see how a lot of people might wonder about that.

Being in the thick of nature's soul as I am right now with mosquitoes buzzing around my head, my legs throbbing from the day's High Sierran journey above 10,000 feet, and storm clouds threatening, I can certainly understand why someone else might want to be within the cushy confines of civilization. Dried blood coating

Saline cont' on pg. 6



SEEDS OF TOMORROW

Shared by Stately Stalk
and Mini-Moth

By Bill Howell

For over 100 million years, insects have been visiting flowers. The behavior of butterflies promenading from plant to plant probing for nectar at each flower is an ancient ritual. A butterfly will visit any place that offers a sweet drink -- a sunflower inflorescence, buckwheat florets, chamise petals, and then back to another sunflower -- a random affair. A blossom to blossom trip is obviously good for the butterflies because they suck up a sugary liquid at each feeding station, but let's be reminded that it is good for the flowers too, in fact, essential.

Moth cont' on pg. 3

Marshal South

Finding Nature His Own Way

By Jim Hart

On January 22, 2005, fifty-seven years after his death, Marshal South finally received a marker on his grave in the Julian Pioneer Cemetery. But his ghost still roams the slopes of Ghost Mountain in the Anza-Borrego Desert. I know. I saw him.

But beware. If you stray too close, the story of South's dreams and the sudden destruction of all he held dear will challenge you to evaluate your own life and perceptions in uncomfortable ways. The man certainly got me to thinking.

With his wife Tanya, Marshal South left civilization in 1930 to build a simple home away

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A Photographic Essay - Discovering Nature



Bear Paw Cave, Los Padres National Forest, May 2006. By Ben Munger



This set of photos begins a new, regular feature of The Chaparralian - a page dedicated to sharing member's photos that display the importance of nature in a way words can't. Please consider submitting yours.

Desert discovery.
By Kathleen Jones

Moth cont' from pg. 1

Plants can't move around to find mates so they have to entice insects to do some reproductive chores for them. Pollen transfer from one flower to another of the same species allows seeds to become viable and, of course, perpetuate the species. Pollination by insects cannot be expected to work perfectly if, for example, pollen from a ceanothus flower is transported to the flower of mountain mahogany, so aimless flitting from bouquet to bouquet incorporates a lot of wasted effort into the process. An interesting exception to this haphazard energy drain is illustrated by a little insect whose pollination behavior is exceptionally focused.

Spear-like leaves of chaparral yucca (*Hesperoyucca whipplei*) jut up from parched soil in the chaparral covered hillsides of California. Spanish bayonet and our lord's candle are other common names for this plant. In the spring it produces an awesome shoot more than eight feet tall that explodes into hundreds of pale, golf ball sized lily-like flowers. Seen dancing about the magenta tinged petals on moonlit evenings are curious little butterfly cousins called *Tegeticula yuccasella*. This tiny insect, the yucca moth, has a special assignment that she alone can complete. Each miniscule moth (3/4" wing span) possesses a tiny proboscis sculptured into a pair of curled tentacles. They are so peculiar that she cannot feed -- she has a higher calling in her short life. Because of her unique anatomy and purposeful behavior, only she is able to prepare each yucca

Without the yucca moth's unique mouth parts and elegant behavior sequences, the plant is doomed.



Yucca moth on top of the stigma of a yucca flower.

flower for the fertilization of its 200 seeds.

Alighting on the younger flowers near the top of an inflorescence, the little white insect collects pollen from the anthers of a number of blossoms with her specially modified mouth and rolls the gummy material into a ball. While balancing the sticky sphere three times the size of her head, she flutters off to enter older flowers on the stalk of another plant. Steadying this pollen packet with forelegs and curly mouth parts, she locates the base of the pallid petals and with the sharp ovipositor at the tip of her body, drills deep into the plant's ovarian tissue. With her pulsating abdomen she squeezes eggs into the seed chamber. She cannot rest yet. Still hugging the pasty pollen mass, the little moth crawls along the flower's style and smashes the glob into the yucca's stigma. Not a random act. Pollination is now complete and followed by fertilization, the seeds mature. Seeds insure a future for the plant as well as destiny for the moth. The eggs hatch into little larvae that chomp on the nutritious seeds. Fortunately for the plant, not all the seeds are eaten and eventually caterpillars munch through the wall of the yucca fruit,

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Moth cont' from pg. 3

drop to the ground and pupate. The next spring, remaining yucca seeds germinate and adult moths emerge from their tomb in the soil, court, mate and repeat the cycle.

This is a classic pattern of *mutualism* -- a special example of two different organisms totally dependent on each other for their survival. Without the yucca moth's unique mouth parts and elegant behavior sequences, the plant is doomed. The yucca plant's contribution to the relationship includes the distinct anatomical architecture that allows for the sharing of the seeds of immortality. Win-win.



Marshal South cont' from pg. 1

from it all atop a waterless mountain in the Anza-Borrego desert. Over the next 17 years, the Souths wrote poetry and philosophy, had three children and lived in a wilderness Eden of their own making. Marshal earned a meager, but sufficient income to buy needed supplies in nearby Julian by writing a monthly column in *Desert Magazine* about his family's adventures, living free from society's conventions and harried routines. They ground wheat to make bread, collected cactus fruit with yucca leaves and wore clothing only when visitors arrived. Using hand made adobe bricks, the Souths constructed a home anyone who longs to escape the madness of civilization would love to own. Unfortunately, their experiment in primitive living was not to last forever. Sometime in October, 1946, Tanya no longer wished to live Marshal's dream. She abruptly left the mountain, taking their three children to San Diego while her husband was in Julian painting a frieze in the town's library (its still there, but the building is a real estate office). The kids received their first haircuts, were enrolled in school, and tried to adjust to a world they had never known. The oldest boy, Rider, was just becoming a teenager. Marshal died two years later, his world shattered and his family's home in the wilderness abandoned, left to crumble under the desert sun.

There are photographs of the South's children, sitting naked on granite boulders outside their home or making pottery under a shaded patio. It's easy to imagine them laughing as they hopped from boulder

South cont' next page



Home at Yaquitepec:
Two of Marshal South's children, Rudyard and Rider, in front of the South's Home in Anza-Borrego, California. Photo from "Marshal South and the Ghost Mountain Chronicles" from Sunbelt Publications, 2005.

South cont' from pg 4

to boulder or all snuggled up under blankets listening to their father's stories by fire glow. Whenever I look at the photos, something touches the deepest part of my soul, an atavistic, inner gallery where dreams wander, calling like sirens from a long ago, forgotten time.

Many dismiss Marshal as an idealistic malcontent, a hermit who forced his family to live under unnecessarily harsh conditions. They don't get it, at first anyway. They'll visit the ruins of the family's home up on Ghost Mountain and joke to each other about the place being a "real fixer-upper" and take candid photos while leaning against the old, concrete cistern. But then, as the scene gnaws its way into their psyche, a few will begin to understand. Something special happened here. South was a man who lived free in order to create his own image on his own terms, close to nature and loving every minute of it. Nothing disturbed the simplicity he created, a simplicity that brings the kind of peace missing in so many modern lives.

If one lingers at the South ruins past twilight, however, and the desert is allowed to set the mind free, an ill-defined longing will begin to grow in the heart, a feeling that just won't go away. This is when Marshal appears as he did for me when a good friend and I spent the night on Ghost Mountain among the broken stone walls and empty door frames.

When Marshal's ghost appeared quietly in what was once the busy family kitchen, and the laughter of children danced in the hills around us, the cause of the longing became clear to me. It was the broken commitment to see it through to the end and the sudden interruption of innocence; a ruptured dream that disturbs the secret hope that someone, somewhere, will always be able to escape the rat race, by choice, and forever. What was Tanya thinking when she split the scene? Why did she decide to leave so suddenly and descend back into the maws of civilization? We'll never know because she died in 1997 without ever publically explaining what happened. Questions forever unanswered. Only recently has Rider, now 74, begun to share reflections and memories of his family's experience on Ghost Mountain.

It doesn't matter how accurate the image was that Marshal South shaped for himself. He believed it and lived it. Individualism, living according to one's ideals, and forming an intimate relationship with the natural landscape are basic American values. They are celebrated in American heroes from Teddy Roosevelt to Edward Abbey. It was self reliance and the ability to read the rhythms of the wilderness that allowed America's early explorers and pioneers to succeed. "It is to these freedom-loving souls who will not march docilely in the ordered ranks to the piping of those who would sway them, that all freedom owes its life," Marshal South wrote. "They are the bearers of the sacred fire."

Every time we spend a quiet weekend in the backcountry or stare into a campfire we are reconnecting with the crucible that shaped us as a nation. Natural open space unfettered by the hum of a nearby freeway or the sight of power lines is as precious to our country as are the principles that set us free. The South's back-to-nature story makes an impact because it reminds us of our heritage and the ideals we celebrate, but sometimes forget between the demands of making a living and the technology that was promised to make our life easier. This is why nature in the raw is so vital to our future. It helps us remember who we are and where we came from.

Wildness defines our character as a people. The challenge we face is to preserve enough of it so children 100 years from now will have the space they need to imagine their own Marshal South dream.



Saline cont' from pg. 1

various wounds, nostrils and fingernails caked with dirt, and my 12-year-old son climbing a steep cliff face unattended while his father scribbles in a journal- things that would sound alarm bells back home. And then there are all the flare-ups one could expect within a 53-year-old's body after subjecting it to miles of rocky terrain. Although I still powered up the trail with a physical image of myself that hasn't changed much since college, an uneven path and thin air reminded me that things have indeed changed. I wouldn't have it any other way.

I'm sitting on a slab of granite with a huge boulder supporting my back, overlooking two lakes about a mile below and distant mountains ten times further off, slowly fading into the twilight. The most



important concerns: when do we eat, do we have enough water, and how do we stay warm tonight - prerequisites for any successful truth seeking. Taking opportunities to live on the edge without a fence, to spend time in a village where starvation is an everyday problem, or taking a stand when it can really cost you; such things bring the essence of life to the surface. Nothing is taken for granted.

Tasting life. Tasting food. I suspect most of us fail to taste much of anything anymore. We're never hungry enough. Under the drone of civilized

living, eating frequently becomes a social (or anti-social) event. But in the wilderness food becomes both fuel and joy. Not only do you eat to hike, but you hike to eat. No meal down in the city has ever equaled the ecstasy of a well cooked, freeze-dried concoction up here after a long day hiking. Well, O.K., once I did have a religious experience of the gastronomic kind in a suburban home, but it was after firefighting for 12 hours. And it was prepared by a firefighter's wife, so it had to be good. The meal was a remarkable assemblage of ground beef, veggies, and spaghetti noodles, all cooked within one of those Pyrex casserole dishes moms use all the time. Unforgettable.

No phones up here in the wild. No one knows where I am. A simple misstep could spell my doom. I could have a heart attack and fade away for lack of immediate attention, the kind of help one would expect after dialing 911. I can see the obituary now, assuming I'd get a public one instead of one of those the deceased's family puts together. "He died where he loved to be, doing what he loved to do - an empty six-pack of nature by his side, deliriously drunk on wild. Please send donations to www.suethelloutofanyonehowantstodestroynature.org."

Funny thing, but at the very moment our trip began, we hesitated. Our comfort was being threatened. Within seconds of exiting the truck to assemble our backpacks, both my sons and I were overwhelmed by voracious, flying females, of the mosquito persuasion. After beating back the hungry beasts, we retreated into the protective confines of the cab, squishing any invaders who had foolishly followed us in. Additional forays into the open were met with equally blood thirsty attacks.

Do we really want to do this? Thoughts of buzzing insects, fretful sleep, and itching welts filled our hearts as pangs of homesickness made us want to give up. We compromised and slept in the bed of the truck to wait for the following day. Maybe conditions would improve. They

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did, but mainly due to the healthy doses of Deet applied to our skin, a toxic chemical formulated to discourage ticks, chiggers, and other bloodsucking creatures from relieving us of our vital fluids. Thus protected, we set off on our journey.

After taking the first few steps on our way up to Bishop Pass, I glanced back at our truck and caught a glimpse of the message my 12-year-old son Jake had scrawled into the dust on the rear window. "Take me to Death Valley." It was his reminder to me of the deal we had made earlier. If the mosquitoes maintained their rude behavior, we would cut short our Sierra adventure and descend to a place where such fragile life forms could not exist. We ended up doing so.

While the mountains provided the solitude and beauty we sought and the inspiration my older son Nicholas needed to write, the challenge of diving into the depths of hell in the middle of summer appealed to our primitive hearts. If raw nature was what we desired, then why not sip her nectar while it's hot?

In order to maintain our distance from civilization on the way, we chose the most primitive path we could find to the land of desert pupfish, sand dunes, and salt flats. We decided to travel the "No Services for 100 miles" dirt road through the most desolate place in California, Saline Valley.

Inquiring ahead, the Park Service told us the route was open but suggested we take extra gas, water, and not go alone. "Take two vehicles," they said. Why would we want to do that?



As we left the pavement outside of the Owens Valley town of Big Pine, we encountered what would be our first and last vehicle sighting for the next few days. It was a van stalled in the middle of the road with a blown-out tire. "You need any help?" we asked. The sun baked, bare-chested man who emerged from behind the stranded vehicle said no. He then walked over and moved a bowling ball-sized rock off the edge of the road so we could drive around him. "How's the road ahead?" we inquired.

"Washboard, but it's O.K. You goin' to the hot springs?"

"Probably, and a little beyond."

I avoided further discussion. If our route to Death Valley was questionable, I preferred to find out for myself. I suspect such an attitude might cause most to consider me irresponsible, taking my two young sons on a trip like this and driving into the abyss of uncertainty. Maybe, but I'm sure similar doubts were expressed to those who left cozy homes in Philadelphia in 1849 and struck out to cross the Great American Desert in search of their own dreams. I like comparing myself to pioneers. Doesn't everyone? Well, most people I enjoy hanging out with like to. Besides, guys don't ask for directions anyway.

The difference of course between the three of us and those in 1849 is that they didn't have a map, four-wheel-drive, and extra water; hardly a fair comparison. The risks we take to discover the cusp of life today are light indeed when placed next to the ones accepted more than a century ago. Yet risks they remain, relative to the lives most of us now lead.

Leaving our last link to civilization, we descended down a twisting road and began to marvel at the starkness of the terrain ahead; just a long winding, dirt road in the distance with nothing but undisturbed nature on all sides. The openness mesmerized us, but our trance was short-lived.

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The Road to Saline. Similar to the national forests in Southern California, the Inyo National Forest is obviously misnamed. Not a lot of trees here.

Our descent into Saline Valley was suddenly interrupted by another wayward traveler, but this one came from outer space. About two miles away, between our truck and a large, desert mountain, screamed a fiery meteor, marking its trail with a strange orange-red glow, or at least something we assumed to be a meteor.

The celestial visitor appeared to vaporize less than several hundred yards above the ground, ending its magnificent display as quickly as it had appeared. The juxtaposition of government signs warning of risks ahead, a stranded motorist, and finally a UFO gave all three of us cause to pause. I looked over at my two sons and said with piercing eyes and a graveled voice, "It's an omen!" Onward we drove.

The road eventually led us into a pinyon-pine juniper woodland so characteristic of highland desert elevations in the West. To most folks I suspect it looks just like another forest, an unfortunate lack of awareness that is all too familiar to those of us who love the chaparral. The combination of two types of trees with a sparse understory of sage makes for a beautiful plant community that covers more than 74 million acres of the western United States. And like the

chaparral, there appears to be significant confusion regarding the natural role of fire here. One often reads that fire suppression has caused these woodlands to "encroach" upon other ecosystems and that they "need" to burn because many of the trees are dying and creating "unnatural" fuel loads. One tool used to "correct" this problem is the Bull Hog, a giant tractor that topples junipers and ingests their bodies with a huge, multi-bladed, front-loading masticator. Resistance is futile.

Not being familiar with this ecosystem, I'm uncomfortable making any judgments about the validity of the Bull Hog approach. However, I fear the "encroaching" junipers may be suffering the same botanical bigotry as the chaparral. Since these lands are used (abused?) for livestock grazing, I wonder how much influence economics has on shaping such perceptions. The fire return interval for some of the West's pinyon-pine juniper woodlands has been estimated to be more than 400 years (in Mesa Verde, Colorado). In areas where junipers are supposedly encroaching, the natural fire return interval has been suggested to be between 30 to 70 years. Scientists are trying to sort this all out, but the pressure to manage, or to "do

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Pinyon-pine juniper woodland: pine in the foreground, conical junipers in the back, and a colorful understory of sagebrush.

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something” can be intoxicating.

After leaving the pinyon-pines via Whippoorwill Canyon we finally saw our first view of Saline Valley, stretched out before us like a thinly rolled layer of white flour. Smoke from the Clover fire in the eastern Sierra made it difficult to see details, but it was clear the landscape ahead was desolate, native, alone. Lack of water and easy access have protected this area of 400,000 acres plus (the valley and surrounding mountains), so other than a few roads and 100-year-old mining remains, the place hasn't changed for thousands of years. No power lines, no pavement, no services. However, there is one place in the valley where a semi-civilized, clothing-optional development has occurred. The green oasis of Lower Warm Springs: an idyllic island of tamed lizards, rock-tiled bathing pools, and friendly fish - a perfect sanctuary from 112 degree heat.

The oasis is seven miles off the main dirt road and was home to an eclectic mix of alternative thinkers in the late 1960's and early '70's until the Bureau of Land Management, and later the US Park Service (Saline Valley was incorporated into Death Valley National Park in



Warm Springs Oasis: home to friendly lizards, green lawns, and creative people.

1994) chased the homesteaders away. Now the place is cared for by a resident volunteer or an occasional substitute. During our Saline Valley visit, the oasis was being cared for by Dezrtdave, an intrepid soul who finds other environs much too cool for his liking. After spending days crossing windswept landscapes, it was wonderful to meet another human being. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, especially if the reunion is with someone of like mind, driven to discover the mysteries of the universe within a hidden, desert valley.

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The Saline Valley Road. Looking north, back from where we came.

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DezrtDave came out to greet us after we had entered the shady confines of Warm Springs, surrounded by palms, rich green grass, and an assortment of fine arts and crafts created by past visitors. We were the first humans he had seen for some time. “People generally don’t come out here in the middle of summer.”

While listening to DezrtDave’s tales of busier times and characters who have passed this way before, my natural-born naturalist son Jake located all the wildlife that was willing to talk. Waving a dry blade of grass back and forth in front of the

shaggy trunk of a palm tree, Jake caught the attention of Spiro, the resident desert spiny lizard (*Sceloporus magister*) of the baby bath tub and shower area. Spiro peeked out from behind his hiding place and darted forward, looking as if he wanted to procure a portion of Jake’s hand. DezrtDave informed us that Spiro used to live around the caretaker’s house, but was exiled by two larger lizards. “He’s waiting for his afternoon snack. He likes grasshoppers.”

Jake quickly ran off and returned with the requested meal. It was a relatively easy task since the entire valley was suffering from a plague of locusts. They had been finding their way into our truck and down our shirts ever since leaving Whipoorwill Canyon. Their favored food was the shiny green leaves of the



Author at work. Nicholas relaxes by the main Warm Springs tub while writing a story of lands far away.



Lizard boy and friend.

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creosote bush, causing nearly every stem to look as if someone had run their hand down its entire length, stripping it bare. The desert was filled with spindly, naked sticks waving in the hot wind. Suppliers of the herbal remedy “chaparral” which is made from creosote leaves will unlikely suffer any inconvenience from the locust party. Un-munched sources of this inaccurately named substance are plentiful elsewhere, except of course *in the chaparral* where the creosote does not grow.



Stripped bare. Locusts swarmed Saline Valley and consumed creosote leaves by the tons.

With Spiro well fed, we took advantage of the spring’s tiled pools, cool showers, and nibbling fish. Jake found his way into the fish pond of course, enjoying the removal of his peeling, sunburned skin by the pond’s aquatic inhabitants. All the while Nicholas continued to express artistic energies in his journal at main pool, driven into an alternative state of reality that only desert heat and desolation can create. Having to drink 100 degree water in order to stay hydrated likely played a role as well. “It’s really hot out here,” he reminded no one in particular after taking a swallow.

Although we considered camping at Warm Springs we decided it would be best to move along. We bid farewell to DezrtDave and continued our journey across the valley towards higher elevations. On the way we stopped to play in the valley’s sand dunes (fortunately the keys to the truck were in the zippered



The fish pond



Nicholas, Jake, and DezrtDave.

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pocket of my shorts when we rolled down the sandy slopes), viewed the last remaining towers of the salt tramway (a thirteen mile long bucket brigade that once transported salt up and over the 8,900 feet crest of the Inyo Mountains), and played tag with a jackrabbit as we travelled up Grapevine Canyon to cooler climes (another beautiful pinyon-pine juniper woodland on a high desert peak called Hunter Mountain).



Jackrabbit: trying to look invisible in Grapevine Canyon.

The remainder of our trip was spent exploring the depths of Death Valley, following the twisted tracks of the mysterious moving rocks on Racetrack Playa, adding our own teapot to the collection at Teakettle Junction, braving the fierce desert winds at Ubehebe Crater, and taking a midnight stroll on the dunes near Stovepipe Wells.

On the way home, we took one final adventure up the steep, narrow road to the old lead and silver mining town of Cerro Gordo, nearly 6,000 feet straight up from Owens Lake. We were fortunate enough to meet Bob there, a master craftsman who has worked with the owner of the town to help preserve and restore a priceless piece of history. Back down the mountain our gas gauge reminded us of the risks we chose to take days before. Fortunately we decided to turn right toward Big Pine once we reached the main road. We later discovered that the gas station on the planned route (the left turn) turned out to be closed.

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Racetrack Playa: Although no one has ever witnessed the rocks moving, it appears they are pushed along by strong winds when the playa becomes wet and slick during those rare rainy periods. The tracks zig-zag across the smooth surface like those made by drunken...rocks?

Saline from pg. 12



The winds of Ubehebe Crater in Death Valley: Blown out of the ground by super-heated steam, this hole in the ground is a testimony to the power of the earth to change topography instantly.

I know this kind of trip isn't for everyone. And I don't pretend to believe that in order to become inspired and reconnected to one's inner spirit, an individual has to challenge the natural environment and wander through desolate stretches of desert or some other unspoiled expanse of nature. But it sure helps. If allowed to do so, such an adventure can improve the lives of most of us because down deep we're still scanning the savanna for danger. We still need to do that from time to time. Taking the opportunity to embrace the natural world in its purest form, away from the confines of civilization, allows us to really live again by reconnecting with our history. Come up with as many arguments as you can about technological advances and the benefits of cold beer, one fundamental fact remains, we evolved fighting for survival in nature, not behind a desk. Sure, natural selection has played its hand in molding us since we first settled down in villages: sweeping plagues, wars of conquest, and the demand for conformity. We are here today because our ancestors were able to make it through it all. Yet the softness and protection many of us have finally achieved has separated us from what we really are. We obviously can't go back, but we can certainly honor and value our heritage, where we came from. But it's not just about going back home from time to time and talking to the animals we find there, but about talking to each other.

Although we shot our television set when our first son Nicholas was born and neither he or his brother Jake have been consumed by electronic surrogates for friendship (I-pods, I-phones, I-only), our family still has to deal with the hectic world we all live in. Sure, we take time out to talk during dinner and try the best we can to enjoy the present moment, but civilization is always there creeping around the corner, ready to amalgamate our spirits into a swirling mass of disconnected chaos.

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Nature can give us a reprieve from all that civilized confusion. When you have to drink 100 degree water, must plan where to bed down, and get to the point where bugs in the soup no longer matter, the tensions, presumptions, and obligations of civilization slip away. You're back on the savanna looking out for yourself and those you love.



The last leg of the journey: Above, looking north on our way to Teakettle Junction, Death Valley. Right, the junction.

Soon Nicholas will be going to college and Jake will be thirteen. The memories we formed and conversations we had as we travelled through Saline Valley will always transcend the march of time because nothing else mattered but each other. Yeah, the water supply was important, but it was important to all of us, not just one of us.



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