

Life and Death in the Foggy Desert

By Paul McFarland

Fog isn't something that comes to mind when you mention the desert. Well, I've got news for you –come visit the Great Basin Desert and get straightened out!

“The desert?” people say, “oh yeah. Cactus, coyotes and sun.” I, personally, can never get enough cactus or coyotes, but lately I've been hearing plenty from folks who could go for more sun.

For the past four days the desert I live in – the sagebrush sea of the Mono Basin – has been shrouded in freezing fog. Four days of icy firewood. Four days of below freezing temperatures. Four days of icy stillness. **FOUR DAYS OF NO SUN.**

The Piute called this icy desert fog “poconip.” Lee Vining locals have their own modern names for it, but I don't think they're appropriate for a family publication such as this.

The fog is actually fairly beautiful. Geometric ice crystals sprout from the needles of pine trees or from your beard if you stand still long enough. The constant noise of Highway 395 seems a bit dulled, and the howl of winter winds is no where to be heard.



The sun breaks through four days of poconip over Mono Lake. Photo: Paul McFarland.

Poconip is somewhat of a miracle if you stop and think about it. With poconip the invisible – air and it's constituent water vapor – suddenly becomes visible, visible as microscopic frozen ice crystals suspended in the frigid winter air. The air that so many of

us take for granted – and we definitely cannot afford to take our air for granted! – is made tangible right in front of our face.

For those who have not experienced poconip, it's truly a wonderland of gray cold and soft stillness. Life, however, is not maintained by soft stillness but by movement and action. Winter is a hard time for life. Look at Europe. "European cold snap kills hundreds," read a recent news release. With temperatures as low as 22 degrees below zero, people are simply dying.

The effects of cold are often on my mind as I ski through the white of the Mono Basin. I worry about the chickadees and nuthatches. How do these minute balls of feathers possibly keep warm when the sun hasn't been out for days, and there are almost no insects to eat? How do the jackrabbits and kangaroo rats, whose tracks I see in the snow leading from bush to bush, keep their little feet warm? And where the heck are the sagebrush lizards?

Textbooks can give us some cursory answers – they are "hibernating" or "aestivating" or even "evacuating," a technique more commonly known as "migrating." But that doesn't cut it for me. I want to call that pygmy nuthatch and his friends over to the nearest Jeffrey pine bough and have a heart-to-heart about what it takes to survive an Eastern Sierra winter.

The Mono Basin and other Eastern Sierra communities have lost some valued residents this winter. We have read about them in the newspaper and attended their memorial services. Prayers for their souls and the hearts of their families and friends.

I happened to come across another soul who passed this winter. On a late afternoon ski along the shore of Mono Lake I noticed that many of the tracks I had been following were beginning to converge into a single path.

Soon, I found what everyone was leading toward – the frozen and mostly eaten carcass of a large mammal. When I got close enough, I saw two huge orange incisors curling down to meet two more large orange incisors and a strange, desiccated appendage hanging from the back of its dried pelt. This was a beaver!

What the heck was a beaver doing on the shore of Mono Lake? Looking for salt to flavor his aspen? The closest known beaver occur in Lundy Canyon, about 9 miles away. Ecologically, this is a world away – a mountain canyon of fresh water and aspen groves – compared to the relatively harsh and desolate shore of a saline desert lake.

The closest place this beaver could have wanted to live was Lee Vining Creek, about a mile to the east. In talking with a friend, it hit us, "Could this beaver have been trying to move back to Lee Vining Creek?" As many know, Lee Vining Creek is coming back to life thanks to hard-fought renewed flows of water from the LADWP aqueduct. Was this beaver, now dead in the snow, another sign of the creek's resurrecting life? Was it becoming a new home for a species not typically associated with the dry Mono Basin?

There are no definite answers, but in our world of tragedy, loss and sometimes darkness, we need to find hope and light in whatever form it is given to us. Sometimes, it is hidden in the fog.

Eastside Nature Notes is a bi-monthly column exploring some of the wild happenings here in the Eastern Sierra written by the friends and staff of Friends of the Inyo, a local non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation, stewardship and enjoyment of our eastside public lands and wildlife. Learn more at www.friendsoftheinyo.org.