

*Eastside Nature Notes fall 05*

## Time for change

By Paul McFarland

It is that time of year when it seems as though you can wake up one morning and just feel the changing seasons. After a summer of life at top speed – baby birds learning to fly, meadows exploding with wildflowers, creeks madly rushing down to the valley floor, butterflies flitting from flower to flower, marmots sunning without a care – it is coming time to hole up again.

Fall in the Eastern Sierra is a time of reckoning – a time when everything and everyone must come to grips with the harsh realities of the coming winter. Lately the talk among my friends and family has been that they can “feel fall in the air” or “can you smell it? The weather is changing.”



What is it that we can sense? Is it the pollen of the yellow-flowered rabbitbrush that keeps some of us up all night sneezing? The cool nip in the air that greets us at dawn? The subdued sounds of eastside creeks running low on the dregs of last winter’s snow? The reddening light cast as the sun sinks low from its high path in the summer sky? A

rather drastic drop in the crowds on the trails? Or is it that we can pick up on the general busy-ness of local wildlife preparing for the cold, lean times ahead?

Whatever it is, these times of seasonal change are my favorite time of the year. It is time when we can get snapped out of our summer frenzy. It is hard to ignore the red tint in the light, the browning grasses of high alpine meadows, or the frenetic hording of the food-crazed Least Chipmunk running through the sagebrush with its tail held straight up. And we haven't even mentioned the aspens, cottonwoods and willows...

These times of change combine the best of both seasons – the warm sun still beats down, but the air is noticeably cooler, as though it has lost its summer intensity.

These are good days to take some time and notice some of the smaller things that share this land with us. The cold mornings make it possible to get up close and personal with all kinds of insects who would just fly away in warmer weather. If your allergies can take it, head on over to your favorite local rabbitbrush (a rounded shrub with pale green stems that look as though they are dusted with white powder, very thin 1-2" leaves and full heads of bright yellow flowers) for a peak at the local insect world. Everything from wasps to butterflies partake of the rabbitbrush's late season nectar, and in the cool of the morning, a visit to a rabbitbrush is like visiting an insect diorama in a museum. The yellow flowers are often covered with sluggish wasps, flies, bees and butterflies waiting for the sun to warm them up enough to move. The other morning, I was safely able to pet a huge bumblebee clinging to the underside of a rabbitbrush. It was too cold for the bee to move.

I can't think of any time that is a bad time to get outside, but these days, as summer tilts into fall, are definitely some of the best the Eastern Sierra has to offer.



*Too cold to move, this wasp waits for the warmth of the sun atop a rabbitbrush on the shore of Mono Lake.* Paul McFarland