

Mono Basin Journal

A Roundup of Quiet Happenings at Mono Lake

by Geoffrey McQuilkin



GEOFF MCQUILKIN

The summer was a season of fire and water. Not the regular wildfire of the mountains and forests, although our area has seen its share of smoke, flame, and harried Forest Service crews racing down the highway. No, the big fire this year was simulated, not real. But it appeared to be the ultimate in Mono Basin fire—a fresh lava flow dripping off the Mono Craters. It all started with a small spot fire (of the real, smoke and flame kind) started by a lightning strike on the west flank of the craters. Being remote and relatively small, the fire was allowed to burn, and it slowly gained elevation, moving up the loose grey pumice slope.

That upward creep created a nighttime drama. It all depended on your angle of view, of course, but northern observers looking down at the craters could see the distinct, dark outline of the craters against a starry sky, and a flowing swath of orange light descending from the top, wavering in the cool night air. It looked just like a lava flow that might glow through the night some unknown number of years hence when the next volcanic event spices up the regular routines of the Mono Basin.

The summer has water stories as well. There's the August rainy season, which has been a rather amplified version of average years. Monsoon moisture, afternoon thundershowers, nighttime lightening; sure, it's wonderful, but it's also expected. But day on day of rain that starts early, spreads wide across the Mono Basin, and falls hard with fingertip size drops that splat with authority? That is weather to remember.

And then there was the release, finally, of large flows of water into lower Rush Creek. Scientists fanned out across the bottomlands and engineers patrolled DWP facilities as everyone sought to learn from the planned 380 cubic feet per second release, the highest since 1998. The work of the water was impressive, shaping and rebuilding the creek. But perhaps more impressive still was to walk the bottomlands a few days later, with the creek back in its banks. For across the green meadows were sinuous bands of folded-down grass, enduring markers of the now-receded water, grass rivers created by the natural work of a creek that's growing in health thanks to the efforts of so many Mono Lake supporters.



GEOFF MCQUILKIN