

Mono Basin Journal

A Roundup of Quiet Happenings at Mono Lake

by Geoffrey McQuilkin



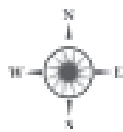
GEORGE MCQUILKIN

As the days grow long, winter retreats from the Mono Basin. But that retreat is hardly as large as you would expect for sunny California. All spring, enthusiastic travelers arrive, ready to cross Tioga Pass to Yosemite. The weather at the lake may be intermittently mild, the sun strong, the hardy may even be wearing shorts and T-shirts, but 3,000 feet higher at the top of the pass the road lies closed under tens of feet of snow.

Weeks later comes the opening of Tioga Pass, and you'd think that would guarantee summer weather at Mono Lake. But we're in the Sierra Nevada, 7,000 feet above sea level, and the temperature records show that a 70° day and 30° night are regular partners. So confirms an early morning walk. As

Yosemite visitors roll out for the now-clear pass, the sun sparkles through ice that encases grass, fences, and flowers—the overnight art of sprinklers and dripping faucets and freezing temperatures.

Not that these extremes hold nature back; all things adapt. Walk the trail to Parker Lake and the phlox are already blooming, little five-petaled carpets of white and pink showing bright through hot and cold alike. The desert peach blooms pink, then the bitterbrush turns yellow, blanketing the Mono Basin. California Gulls nest, brine shrimp hatch, alkali flies roam the lakeshore, and songbirds return from points south; so comes summer, hot and cold, to Mono Lake's corner of California. ❖



Benchmarks



DAVID GAINES

Lower Lee Vining Creek and delta, winter 1979. Note how visible the stream channel is due to lack of vegetation. Because it is winter some defoliated vegetation is difficult to see.



ARVA DEGENHARDT

Lower Lee Vining Creek and delta, summer 2004. Note the increase in vegetation along the creek and more channels carrying water!