

Living It Up in Death Valley, 2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Since moving to Arizona in 2013, I've been wanting to visit Death Valley. It's within a long-weekend's reach, about six hours' drive from the places I've been living. But Death Valley is the hottest place on earth, from time to time, and is consistently relatively hot. There was a brief scare when a place in the Sudan reported a temperature higher than Death Valley's record of 134 degrees Fahrenheit (56.7 degrees Celcius, rounding up, as is appropriate for such numbers), but that was found to be inaccurate, and there's a place in Libya that is on average hotter than Death Valley, but Death Valley still holds the record. Then there were the other complications, such as a graduate program in a department that was so bad that I had to reimagine how far the left tail of a bell curve of the departments I've been affiliated with as student, faculty, or staff could extend. While dealing with that kind of a tail, I did many things, but I didn't do Death Valley.

Zabriskie Point, my first stop



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With departure from Arizona imminent, I've been thinking about Death Valley again. I thought about it briefly in the winter, but a health difficulty came up, and then I went with Patricia to Hawai'i, and here we are, within about six weeks of departure, into the hot season, and still no visit. But I'm the sort of person who can make things happen, and I did. I checked weather (first!), motel rates, routes, and park activities, and a weekend made itself obvious. It was the coolest weekend predicted for the next few months, a major attraction had just reopened, and costs were at their pre-summer levels. I made reservations in Pahrump (Paiute Pah-rimpi: water rock—more rock than water in my experience, but the motel did have a nice pool) and jumped in the car and left.

Salt Creek, the stop after the visitor center—the creek flows down from the mountains and disappears underground shortly after the left edge of the picture cuts it off.





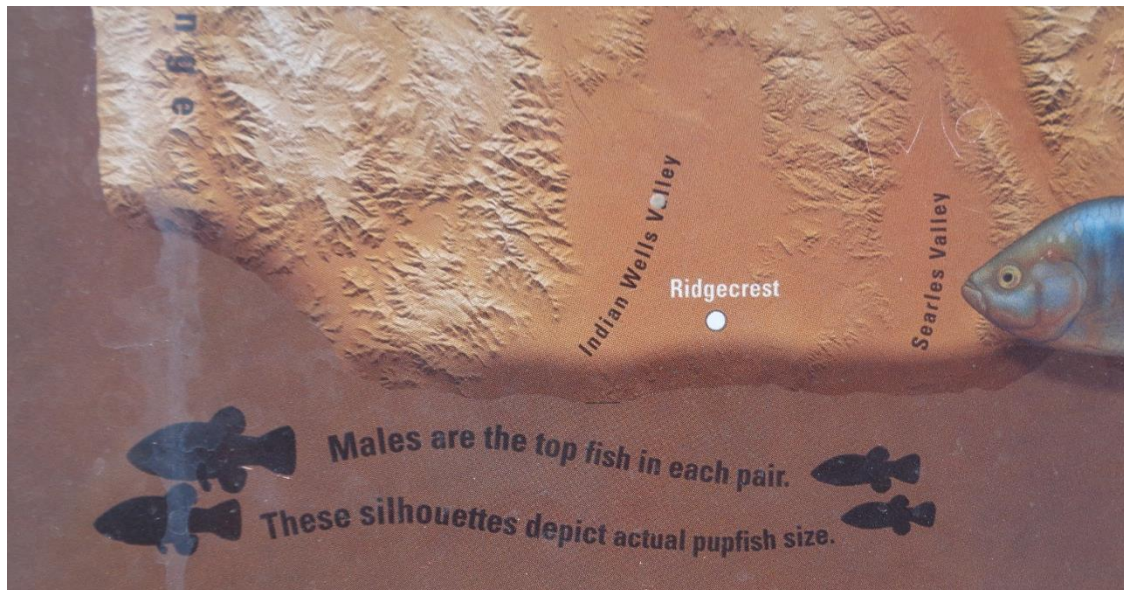
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In my ongoing efforts to seem more like a normal human being, I did invite a couple of friends along. Both refused, citing the heat. Really. I'm the one who gets sick in the heat, but I'm willing to go, and two people who enjoy basking in heat and sunshine refused. Their loss.

Salt Creek has fish living in it, despite being saltier than the ocean. They are pupfish, and leftover from a time when Death Valley was the bottom of a huge lake. There are isolated populations of the fish, and the populations have differentiated enough that many taxonomists consider them different species. I'm skeptical, but either way, these are Cottonball Marsh Pupfish (*Cyprinodon salinus milleri*). They somewhat resemble guppies, with the fancy tails, but without the fancy colors. They zip around and flip and skim, disturbing the sand enough to find whatever it is they eat.



Oi. The National Park Service. I do agree that the national parks are the best idea that this country has ever produced, as a national program—some individuals have had good ideas and programs—but here's a good example of sexism, presented both in writing and in images. And I wasn't impressed with the information on the Timbisha Shoshone in the visitor center—hardly any, even though it should be interesting that there is a group of people who have made Death Valley home for at least a millennium. After much squabbling, the Timbisha managed to be allowed to continue living in Death Valley, and they have a small village of mobile homes near the visitor center; it's unusual to see a trailer park just over the way from the visitor center in a national park. The village doesn't appear on the official map, and on the newspaper map, it's said to be a private residence. It is a private residence, but they have their own visitor center, which I missed by arriving there too late. The books in the NPS gift shop are primarily about mining—almost nothing on the geology of the place, and absolutely nothing on the people of the place. On the tourism map, there is a marginal bubble that notes the existence of the Timbisha and shows where they live—none of the dots for residences appear within the boundaries of the park. The squabbling got them the same place to live that they've always been living, but no place on the map.





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The zebra-tailed lizards (*Callisaurus dracones*) were plentiful and active. This was the only one who stayed still long enough for a clear picture, and he posed several times: on the boardwalk by the creek, on the sand, and then on one of the little scrub pickleweeds (*Allenrolfea occidentalis*). They don't stay still for long (the sand gets hot in the sun), and when they run, they put their tails and heads up high and look like u-shaped animals with short legs, running very quickly.



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Having talked to a cranky employee of the National Park Service, who seemed to be put out by the fact that someone decided to visit the park and came with questions, I decided to drive as far north as I could in the park to visit a crater. His crankiness didn't prevent him from providing information that was accurate and relevant. The park was much larger than I had understood from the maps I've seen; Death Valley is the largest park in the continental United States, and the only parks that are larger are in Alaska. It took about an hour to drive from the visitor center to the crater, not including the stop at Salt Creek. I took this picture along the way.



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And this one.





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Also this one.



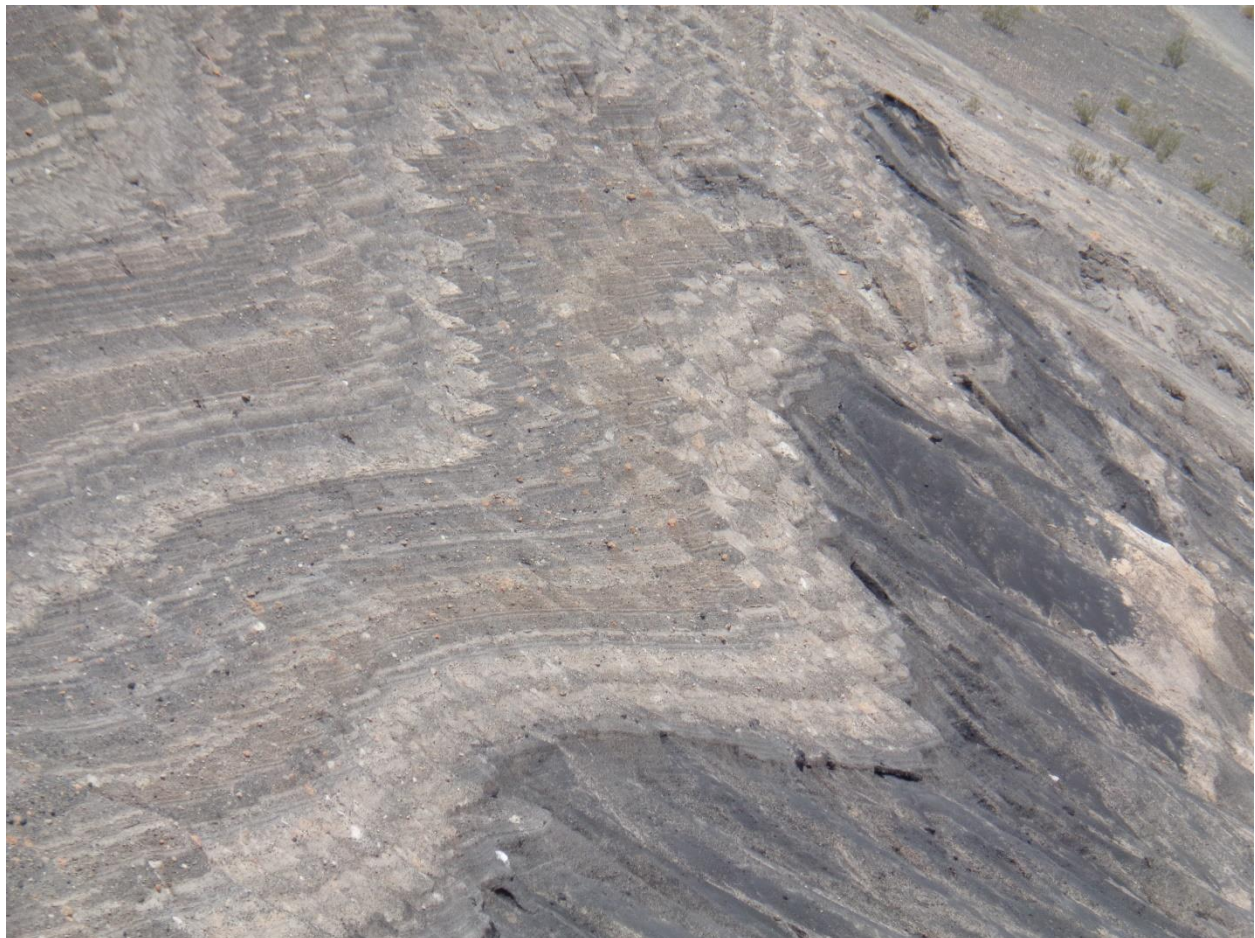


The Ubehebe crater is a major feature in the park. It was also an opportunity to walk around the crater and down to the bottom. It was formed when magma flowed close to the underside of the lake and made the water explode into steam; this kind of eruption is a phreatic eruption, and the crater formed by a phreatic eruption is a maar. The process was not unique in the area; there are several other maars. The sediments are different colors—yellowish on the left and orangish in the middle and on the right along a fault line. The grayish talus is volcanic cinders; the cinders made the hike back out of the crater a challenge. A couple of other visitors from California watched me churn my way up a steep gravel slope, and they told me, upon my return to the rim, that they thought I needed help. Just a drink.



Drinking was my main hobby of the day and made the rest of the day possible. It wasn't overly hot most of the day, in most of the places I went. The temperature was in the mid-80s (Fahrenheit—we weren't breaking any records the day I was there), but it was incredibly dry. There's a sharp feeling in the lungs, caused by inhaling dry air on a very cold day; it was so dry in Death Valley, that I had that sharp feeling with hot air, which was a new experience. I was losing fluids breathing in and out. I brought several gallons of water with me, and two quarts of a generic V-8, and about a hundred Thermotabs. Over the course of the day, I drank nearly four gallons of fluids. I was taking it in faster than I could process it, and I looked pregnant by the end of the day.

More layers in the crater





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A couple of the other maars in the area



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Drinking heavily did have its advantages. I did okay, all day, and I took the hike and shorter walks that I wanted to take. I saw a lot of people who were not moving, or not moving well. I was the only person hiking on the trail around and into the crater.





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Not much was blooming while I was in Death Valley, and not much was growing in the area of the crater, but this little pom-pom of a plant was doing brilliantly in some of the cinder gravel. I have been unable to find out what it is.



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I went to the Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes. As the interpretive signs said, sand is everywhere in deserts, but dunes are not. I hadn't thought of that previously—it's hard to think about things that aren't there. Thanks to this excursion, I now have another not-thing to think about in deserts. Dunes require a combination of wind and barriers, as do snow drifts.





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It might look like Death Valley is not one of the more visited parks, and that is correct. It is a huge place, which can dilute the crowds, but there really weren't crowds to be diluted. The park is apparently most popular with Europeans. There were about three US citizens in the park, about three Chinese people, and everyone else was from Europe: Germany, Poland, France, Italy, the Netherlands. Mostly Germans. Why this park? The European tourists I've encountered elsewhere are often in search of remoteness and exoticity. New Zealand is traveled frequently by Germans because it's about as far as they can go on the planet. When I take extensive hikes anywhere, the other people out hiking are German. There are few accessible places on the planet that are more remote and exotic than Death Valley, even though it's just down the road for me at the moment.



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Maybe one of the reasons that Death Valley is not one of the more popular parks is that no good marketing has been done. There's not an iconic view, like El Capitan in Yosemite or the view from the south rim of the Grand Canyon that one gets almost as soon as one gets out of the car. If anything, Badwater Basin is The Thing. It's the lowest point in North America. That's more of a characteristic and a geographical oddity than an iconic view.





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There are also snails that live around the pools of water in this salt flat. I looked for them, but I couldn't find them. Instead, I helped myself to some salt. I visit the salt wherever I go, sort of a personal pilgrimage. The salt tasted salty. I'd think that I'd be more of a salt connoisseur by now, given the quantities and types I've consumed around the world, but salt tastes salty, and there it is.



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The mountains in the background are about 11,000 feet high. The highest is Telescope Peak, at 11,049 feet (3,368 meters). It's a view, as the NPS says, from below sea level to the equivalent of the arctic. I also got a good view of people who underestimate the effects of sun exposure; several of the people I saw on this walk were well on their way to needing medical attention for their sunburns.





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As I was going to visit a natural bridge in sandy composite stone that I visited because I've not seen natural bridges in such stone anywhere else, I also saw people who had not been drinking enough. Dehydration happens quickly and takes a while to resolve, so if people get behind on their drinking in this kind of situation (hottest temperature of the day happened at the bridge: 101 F), it can take days to get back to normal. A German family, on vacation: a father, beet red, dragging a teenage son along by the hand, while slumping mother and other teenage son shuffled along behind them. They made it to the bridge. They traveled far and found remoteness and exoticity. They looked terrible. That's why they're not in the picture.



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Artist's Palette can have more and brighter colors, but some of the color was washed out in the brightness.





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The last stop of the day was Dante's View, from which much of the valley could be seen, including the mountains on the west, the saltwater flats, and north toward the crater, but not so far as the crater. There is much still to see. I skipped most of the mining sites (there are active mines visible on the way to and from the park), missed the Timbisha, didn't stay long enough to check out the night sky (the clouds were in and out, and I had an early morning the next day), and showed up too late for the spring blooms. It was acceptable to leave when I did—I saw a kangaroo rat crossing the road in the evening, shortly after leaving the park. Not being nocturnal myself, I don't plan on meeting the nightlife, but the nightlife came out at exactly the right moment to be seen and not run over: way to go, kangaroo rat.

