

Summer found at Death Valley

by Richard Marx
Staff Writer

"The Year of the Lizard" may sound like a reference to a Chinese New Year, but rather it is a statement that commemorates the 1990 trip to Death Valley as suggested by John Snively.

Fifteenth of the annual forays that occur each spring break, the trip is catalogued under the title of "Natural History of the Sonoran Desert" in the CCC schedule of courses.

"This is not a vacation nor for the vacation minded, but rather is a three credit course for serious students," said Snively.

As a CCC geology and biology instructor, Snively has more than enough material to pack into every minute spent in the valley.

"It has been an extremely dry year," said Snively. "It is the second year in a row with virtually no rain. Yet, the place abounds with geological wonders and desert life-forms."

Snively commented that lizards were the main abundant animals this year, hence the reference to "The Year of the Lizard."

Located in south central California, east of the Sierra Nevadas, Death Valley lies in the southwestern area of the Great Basin. In elevation, it runs from 282 feet below sea level at the valley floor to over 11,000 feet above sea level at the summit of Telescope Peak. In length, the valley runs north-south 110 miles and is between 30 and 40 miles in width at the widest point.

"There are many places to see at Death Valley, far more than what could be covered in a week. We had to choose what would be the best for the purposes of this trip," Snively said.

Some of the places visited were Dante's View, Wild Rose Canyon, Race Track Playa, and Scotty's Castle. A first for this trip was the Keane Wonder Mine where gold and silver were mined for two decades around the turn of the century.

When asked of his impression of this new place, Snively commented, "it was OK, but not a high priority."

Of the other previously mentioned places, Snively gives some comments of their interest. From the high point of Dante's View,

one could get a view of the valley area in its entirety. At Wild Rose Canyon are the bee-hive shaped kilns built by miners in the last century.

"That is the highest elevation we reached, about 7,400 feet," Snively said. "There were patches of snow here and the predominant vegetation is a forest of Pinon Pine and Utah Juniper."

Race Track Playa is noted for its "moving rocks." These are fair sized boulders that have been pushed by winds of great velocities. Golden Canyon has the landscape of an alien world. This should not be surprising, for "it is where part of the first Star Wars movie was shot" stated Snively. "That was where C3PO and R2D2 got lost and were captured by the Jawas."

This year was hot, not only by Willamette Valley standards, but also for this time of year at Death Valley. "The coolest day was 85 degrees Fahrenheit and the average daily high temperature was between 95 and 100 degrees," said Snively. "Also, there was no wind, making the heat all the more noticeable," he added. One of the students, Jay Patterson (a third-year Death Valley veteran), commented that "Tuesday night was really warm. The thermometer read 80 degrees in the tent at midnight."

Mentioning the heat, Snively added that the "Death Valley region is now going into its third summer of drought. This has resulted in almost no wildflowers, which usually appear after winter rains. The few flowers observed included one trumpet eriogonum, a brittle bush, and a turtleback plant."

Two years ago the draws were flowing with streams of purple and gold from the phacelia and desert gold daisies. Creosote bush, which grows over much of the valley, were burned and parched looking. Usually, at least a few have some dark green leaves and bright yellow flowers. "Even the cacti were dying in places," stated Snively.

"However, there is an advantage to the lack of herbaceous plants. One can get a better view of distinct plant communities—these being determined by the dominant shrub species at a given location and/or elevation. Also, there

is more time to concentrate on geology," commented Snively.

During the trip, Snively emphasized Latin nomenclature—the scientific names of plants and animals. "Each student kept a journal in which they recorded not only names, but also notes on geologic, historical, and other general information. There were about 100 plant species and 70 animal and bird species catalogued by the students in their journals." He also said that "the students quizzed each other on the Latin names on the return trip to Oregon. This was a first on Latin nomenclature for most of them."

The weather at Death Valley is mild enough at this time of year to allow for comfortable camping. Everyone slept in tents and the food was prepared beforehand so that most of it could be heated up and then served. "There was more food than we could eat," remarked Jay Patterson. "Everyone ate really well and plenty of food was brought back on the return trip."

"We camped at Texas Springs, back in the ashflows and mud deposits, where it was absolutely devoid of vegetation," continued Patterson. Both he and Snively remarked on the changes in the resort and campground area. "It was ecologically a bummer because Texas Springs had been bulldozed over and diverted to irrigate a date orchard," Patterson said. "They even filled in the only natural pond in the campground area. We used to come here and cool off in the evening, when we had spare time. However, we did get to use the swimming pool at the resort on the last day."

"In terms of being on track for continuous observation, this has been one of the best groups," said Snively. "The traveling library of field books was in constant use by the students. There was a consistent attitude throughout all of the students. No one on this trip had a 'vacation concept.'"

"A good time was had by everybody," according to Jay Patterson. "One of the reasons that this group was so good was because everyone pitched in to help and there was a real team effort." Finally in closing, Patterson gave the byline of the expedition: "like awesome man!"



Joshua Tree
Yucca brevifolia



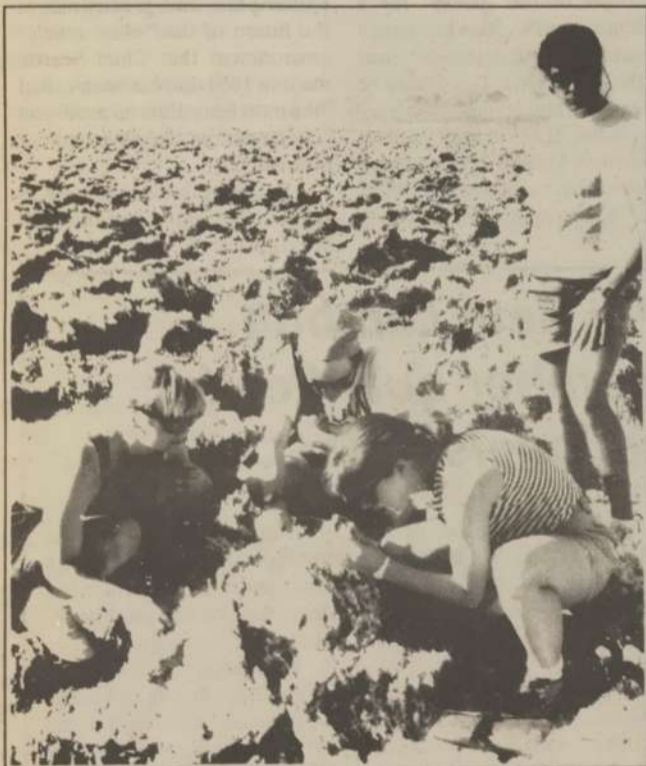
Jay Patterson leads the group past Zabriskie Point located in Golden Canyon.

Photo by John Snively



Some of the students that travelled to Death Valley resting before the hike down Golden Canyon.

Photo by John Snively



Some students are examining the salt columns that form, by capillary action, the Devil's Golf Course.

Photo by John Snively

Norm's

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inches	[Ruler scale]															
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11(A)	12	13	14	15	
L*	39.12	65.43	49.87	44.26	55.56	70.82	63.51	39.92	52.24	97.06	92.02	87.34	82.14	72.06	62.15	
a*	13.24	18.11	-4.34	-13.80	9.82	-33.43	34.26	11.81	48.55	-0.40	-0.60	-0.75	-1.06	-1.19	-1.07	
b*	15.07	18.72	-22.29	22.85	-24.49	-0.35	59.60	-46.07	18.51	1.13	0.23	0.21	0.43	0.28	0.19	
Density											0.04	0.09	0.15	0.22	0.36	0.51

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