

Death Valley National Park Sampler

Trip Report | March 20-25, 2022 | by Greg Smith



With guide, Greg Smith, and participants Bill, Brenda, Chris, Jim, Lani, Susan, and Terry.



Sun., Mar. 20

Arrivals | Las Vegas

After gathering everyone at the airport, we were off to Death Valley! Red Rocks stood out from Las Vegas like a shining beacon surrounded by the beige-gray-browns of the water-scarce Mojave Desert. Death Valley holds many secrets, and this week we were going to explore many of them.

Mon., Mar. 21

Birding Badwater | Mesquite Dunes | Mosaic Canyon

A little breezy this morning as we walked the edge of the golf course and through the ranch. Lots of Eurasian-collared Dove, with a smattering of White-winged and Mourning Dove, all cooing their lives away. Not too much in the way of migrants, although Yellow-rumped Warbler and White-crowned Sparrow were the most abundant. Lincoln Sparrow and American Pipit seemed to favor anything short and green. But the highlight of the morning was while we driving to the back of the resort to look for a reported Harris' Sparrow. It had apparently changed locations, as it was sitting on an overhead wire in front of our rooms. Great looks at this Midwest migrant.



We finished our morning with a walk out onto one of the former valley playas to the lowest elevation in North America – Badwater. The crazed salt crystals that abut the trail have been there for ages having eased their way to the surface where the torturous battle between moisture and the sun goes on. The temperature here climbs rapidly during the day given the elevation and the unsullied whiteness, so a morning visit is almost mandatory. We had walked just about a mile out onto the playa, when that surface heat said it was time to head back.

Temperatures were in the high seventies at the Oasis, which meant the Mesquite Dunes would be plenty warm in the sun-drenched arena where we would be looking for the signature tracks of those that find sand the best to live. Darkling beetle, Kangaroo rat, Pocket mouse, Desert Cottontail, different lizards, and some unidentifiable tracks challenged us as we sleuthed through the sands. We did get to see the Mojave Fringe-toed lizard skimming across the surface of the sand, and that was the only vertebrate to appear. But we would be back here tomorrow for more... Mosaic Canyon is a wonderful exposure to the ebb and flow of the desert. The formation of bajadas, the tearing down of the higher peaks that then filled the valley floor, the cementing of debris flows. But most special was the unmasking of sub-surface rocks like dolomite showing the polishing effect from exposure to the brunt of eons of erosive assault by water and rocks. Our final stop for the day was Artist Drive, where the late afternoon sun spiked the colored canyons with an intensity that can't be found during the previous ten hours of light. Parts of the drive are chocolate-covered lava flows, while rhyolite and other minerals made up the pastel-shaded hills. And it was so still as we moved from formation to formation, one of those classic Death Valley feelings.

Tues., Mar. 22 Salt Creek | Augereberry Point | Wild Rose Kilns | Mesquite Dunes

Today we were heading to points west of the valley. Up into the Panamint Range where pinyon pine and juniper abound in the higher elevation. And there was still some snow visible on the north side of Telescope Peak. Our early morning was a drive up to the Salt Creek boardwalk, where there are always Desert Pupfish up close for observing. We were about halfway to the creek on our drive when we saw white bumps on the alluvial plain.



Not being sure what we had just passed, we turned around and put our bins on a flock of sixteen roosting Snow Geese. An odd place to see these birds, but when you look around and all you see is alluvial soils, maybe it wasn't so strange. And as a water source, plenty of wildlife, especially birds, visit to rehydrate before taking the day on. Wonder why those Snow Geese in the middle of the dry valley didn't find or use these pools of water at the golf course or Salt Creek? The lower elevations at the beginning of the canyon on Emigrant Gap Road is where we look for desert bighorn sheep. There are springs along this part of the road and that water is a precious commodity to the sheep and other wildlife in the area. And our early start got us an appointment in the morning hours, which is one of the preferred times for when the sheep come down to drink.

Our slow drive-up Emigrant Gap presented us with a male Vermilion Flycatcher pacing our van, a bird that decided it was much safer to fly rather than land anywhere in the wide open. And just after that we were in the canyon proper, where we found four young sub-adult rams alongside of the road. They didn't seem to be the least bit wary, probably because of the lack of hunting pressure in the park. And this was the same greeting we got later in the afternoon from a young ram and ewe, and another ewe with a lamb. Both sightings were superb! Augereberry Point is where we were headed after a visit to what used to be called Harrisburg the adjacent Eureka Mine. A hard life working those mines, but Augereberry made a decent living with his mining claim, especially during WWII when precious metals were in short supply. He constructed the road up to the point that was named after him, and that is where we had lunch.

At a lofty elevation of 6433', we were rewarded with stunning views of the valley and a number of mountain ranges to the east. Sitting among the lichen-encrusted rocks with Turkey Vultures floating by on a sunny day was a spectacular vista as we enjoyed our lunches. One more stop on this, the west side of Death Valley before heading back to lower elevations. We drove up Wild Rose Canyon to the charcoal kilns below Telescope Peak. Built in 1875 by the Modock Mining Corporation, they supplied charcoal to the company's two smelters, about



25 miles to the west in the Argus Range. It was nicely cool up here at 6800' and made for a comfortable visit. Not too many birds out and about, but the Pinyon Jays made up for that dearth of diversity. We made our way back down to Stovepipe Wells where we had a relatively early dinner as it was time to feel the stillness and steal a peek at the shadow races on the Mesquite Dunes as the sun set. We found a dune of some significance that provided us with a clear and distant view of the Grapevine Mountains and settled in for the races. There was no wind, which made for a remarkably noiseless and simmering view, and a wonderful end to our west side day.

Wed., Mar. 23 **Zabriskie Point | Harmony Borax | Mustard Canyon | Dante's View**

Zabriskie is always an early morning visit to take in the sunrise as it first lights up the Panamint Range, then Gower Point and finally the salt pans of The Valley floor. We walked up the short, paved path on the western side of the Armagosa Range that is surrounded by the colorful sediments of the ancient Furnace Creek Lake. Then we headed back to the oasis for our breakfast. Harmony Borax Works is one of the original borax processing plants in the Valley in what was formerly called Greenland. It was only operational in this location for five years (1883 – 1888), as it was too hot in the summer for the borax to crystalize during the heat of the summer months. But it did leave us with that iconic vision of 20 mule teams hauling wagon loads of the three tons per days of processed borax down to Mojave for transport elsewhere.

Mustard Canyon is another set of small hills adjacent to the borax works that is made up of the sediments from the five million years ago Furnace Creek Lake. As the name belies, the hills are the color of a dark, culinary mustard. Coincidentally, the word mustard first came into being in 1886. Our final stop before our late lunch was a drive up to Dante's View on the east side of the Valley. The parking area and view is directly above Badwater with the primary view being to the north and the west. Even at this elevation, there was a dearth of birds at this season most likely because of the drought. But a very young, speckled rattlesnake did appear on the side trail to the south.



Thurs., Mar. 24 Rhyolite | Titus Canyon | Ubehebe Crater

Today was our day to explore points further north in Death Valley, with Titus Canyon, one of the crown gems in the park, being on our day's to-do list. And given that the entrance to the canyon is up near Beatty, NV, we decided to stop at Rhyolite, an old mining town in the Bullfrog Hills. A small, very small gold strike back in the 1900's caused the town to swell in population, only to die by 1906 with a lack of gold and the economic crash. The house made of bottles and the train depot are the only two intact structures left in what was a community of 5,000 at one time. The first part of the drive into Titus is through high desert sagebrush flats, but that gives way to the amazing Grapevine Mountains and some of the park's finest and most scenic geology. Layers of sedimentary rocks in all colors are twisted, turned and compressed into a mosaic of very unusual patterns. Limestone breccia in dolomite bedrock were just one of the facets of this Cambrian-aged wonderland we drove through.

Sagebrush, Black-throated, Savannah and White-crowned Sparrows all appeared, with resident species all on territories, and the migrants all in flocks. Chuckwalla, side-blotched and desert horned lizards were seen along the way, along with lots of desert bighorn tracks. But it is when you leave the canyon through the finely polished slot that you realize just how old these rocks are and just how special a place, we had the opportunity to experience. One last drive and stop in the park before we called it a day, and that was up to Ubehebe Crater. The crater and surrounding vents were created by a series of steam explosions about 2,700 B.C.E. Amazing how much of an explosion can be created when sub-surface water encounters the Earth's mantle. And the surrounding landscape after all these years is still in its infancy when it comes to revegetation. We finished the day with a farewell dinner in the dining room at The Inn, and after walking down the coolness of the access tunnel afterwards, we stepped out into the warmth of the desert evening with a blanket of stars overhead.



Fri., Mar. 25 Departures

Back into the real world of airports, freeways and appointments. That was what awaited us as we climbed out of the Valley and headed over the pass into the other desert, Las Vegas.

Death Valley Tanka...

Descent, the intro

A part of our world unknown

Rocks of the ages

Shaped with only grays and browns

Stoic over the missing wet

Photo Credits: Harris' Sparrow (Greg Smith - GS), Group Photo (Greg Smith), Death Valley Scenic (Unsplash), Panoramic View (Jim Esten - JE), Group Hike (Brenda Richmond - BR), Raven (JE), Palm Tree Silhouettes (JE), Lookout (Chris Bittle - CB), Aguerberry Point (BR), Bighorn Rams (GS), Snow Geese (CB), Greg (JE), Seated Portrait (JE), Scenic (JE), Contrast Rock Wall 1 (JE), Contrast Rock Wall 2 (JE), Scenic (BR), Birds in Flight (JE), Speckled Rattlesnake (JE), Group (BR), Wide-shot Scenic (BR), Ubehebe Crater (BR), Group at Lunch (JE), Scenics x2 (JE)