

RIDING HIGH AT MONO LAKE

by Krist Jake

IF TAKING A SWIM IN AN UNUSUAL and dramatic place amid thousands of birds, millions of shrimp and millions of, well, flies, captures your imagination, then take a trip to Mono Lake, just beyond the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada near Yosemite. Mono Lake won't rank high on your list of favorite swimming holes if you want the conventional tree-ringed lake and clear water. If, however, you keep an open mind about Mono Lake's biosystem, and your scorecard for swimming holes gives a nod to factors such as history, ecological significance, and uniqueness, you'll find the idea of a dip in Mono Lake compelling.

After Mark Twain called the large (65-70 square miles) lake the "the dead sea of California," Mono Lake's public relations department needed a big boost. It got one, finally, in 1992, when the Mono Basin Visitors Center was completed, becoming the focal point for public education programs conducted by rangers of the US Forest Service. This spacious, well-sited architectural gem is only 15 miles downhill from Yosemite's Tioga Pass entry station and should be on your itinerary if you're anywhere in the neighborhood.

Over the years, I'd made several visits to the lake, but I'd never given a thought to actually swimming in its unusual waters. On a visit last August, though, two rangers, including the veteran naturalist who leads lakeshore walks, independently pitched the idea of a swim. I had to try it.

The Lake

MONO LAKE'S SETTING IS SPECTACULAR. It rests on the western edge of the Great Basin, with miles of plateau to the east, the

Mono Craters (North America's youngest mountain range) to the south, and the Sierra Nevada ridgeline just a few miles to the west. Mono Lake is one of the Great Basin's five terminal

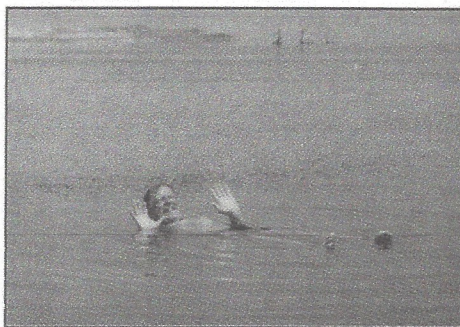
lakes, which means that water leaves them only by evaporation. Like the other four, including the Great Salt Lake, Mono Lake is *salty*. The level of its saltiness, which varies depending on the lake's water level, is currently about three times greater than the Pacific Ocean's.

This high level of salinity, as well as other distinctive characteristics of the lake's waters, provide a one-of-a-kind habitat for Mono Lake Brine Shrimp, which are about a half-inch long and almost completely translucent. As there are trillions of them, scooping up a cup of lake water offers you a chance for a close look.

Besides the shrimp, the lake's other unusual and prolific native animal species is the alkali fly, which in number are said to be right up there with the shrimp. Certainly there were more flies concentrated in one place than I've ever seen, and I've seen enormous swarms in Alaska many times. The larvae of these alkali flies were such a food staple of the local Native Americans that in their language Mono means "fly people."

Together, the brine shrimp and alkali flies support another unique inhabitant of Mono Lake: birds. Since the lake's high

salinity rules out any predatory fish life, birds have the shrimp and flies pretty much to themselves. In addition to serving as home base for many birds, and as the breeding ground for 90% of the Bay Area's California Gulls, Mono Lake is situated strategically for scores of migrating species. Among them is the Wilson's Phalarope, a water bird that arrives in July from its summer habitat in southern Canada. For several weeks, these elegant birds gorge on shrimp, doubling their normal weight



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Mono Lake Tufa formations.

from two to four ounces. And they need every bit of that fat, for at the end of their Mono stopover, they take off on a journey to the alkali lakes of their winter home in the Andes of Bolivia and Argentina, 3000 miles away. And they do it by flying nonstop for several days!

A bird perhaps more in tune with Dolphins is the Eared Grebe, a ducklike diving bird that stops at Mono Lake on its way to Mexico. Feeding, sleeping, and courting on the water, and building nests on floating mats of grass at the water's edge, these birds are water birds through and through. In October, when their population reaches its peak, up to a million and a half to two million Eared Grebes gather on Mono Lake's shrimp-rich waters.

In the 1970's, the lake level had dropped to about 35 feet due to reduced inflows caused by feeder-stream diversions of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP). Scientists noticed that the lake's increased salinity was having a deleterious effect on the brine shrimp and alkali flies, and, consequently, on the various bird populations. Much litigation ensued, including novel, pathbreaking arguments by advocates for Mono Lake and the trout in the streams that flowed into it. In a 1994 settlement, the LADWP agreed to limit feeder-stream diversions to allow the lake's level to rise and, thereafter, to manage diversions so the lake level would remain high enough, and salinity levels consequently low enough, to ensure the health of the lake's wildlife.

Centuries ago, when the lake's water level was higher, ground water percolating up into Mono Lake precipitated out columns

of bicarbonate soda. As the lake level has dropped, these formations, called tufa, have been exposed and now stand as natural sculptures, making the Mono Basin an art gallery of sorts. To protect these fragile, mostly limestone formations, which resemble stalagmites, the California legislature established the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve in 1981.

The Swim

A GOOD PLACE TO SWIM IS THE SOUTH SHORE'S Navy Beach, where the water temperature in August is around 70 degrees. It was windless the morning I swam, so the lake, framed by the surrounding jagged mountains and punctuated by tufa columns, had a reflective, silky appearance. Luckily, the alkali flies apparently dislike people, scattering out of your way when you're within a foot or so. Using the breast stroke, and riding high because of the lake's salinity, you can swim easily, taking in a sight that can only be described as other-worldly with thousands of flies rising off the water as you approach.

For those who aren't intrigued by such a swim, kayaks are available to rent, and on weekends the Mono Lake Committee offers guided canoe trips for a modest fee. If you like to swim, though, I highly recommend taking a dip in Mono Lake: there's nothing else like it and you'll remember it always.

Underscoring the lake's ecological value, the US Congress, in 1984, created the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area to protect the region's significant geologic, ecologic, and cultural resources. You can find more information at the website of the Mono Lake Committee, <http://www.monolake.org>.