# Desert Spring 2005—Water and Time

*Adapted from a Salamandre Newsletter 2005*

Death Valley received threefold its normal rainfall this winter (2004-2005), lighting the fuse for the floral explosion of a generation. Contrary to the image of the desert as a salt-encrusted wasteland, every crease between pebbles launched flares of yellow, red, and purple. Flowers unseen for decades sprang toward the light. The fragrance of honey, heliotrope, and exotic fruits filled every hollow and gully, while bees hallucinated shamelessly. It is still going on….

Winter 2026 update...this is going to happen again in March and April.

*Kit Fox Hills in 2005*

Beyond the splash of ephemeral blossoms in the desert, there is something much harsher about water in a place where the earth walks naked. While volcanism and tectonic wrenching have vaulted the mountains miles above sea level, the abrasive carving of water has sculpted the raw land. One walks up broad alluvial fans, treading upon gravel a full mile deep, carried over eons from the crumbling mountains above. Probing the mouth of a narrow canyon cut into black schist, an explorer may turn a corner to find a mature piñon trunk wedged two stories above his head…12 miles from where it grew. For careful eyes, gritty slurries have opened clutches of fairy crystals in limestone walls, burnished basalt into glinting iron plates, resurrected trilobites from their million year sleep, and, perhaps, exposed lacy threads of gold. All this takes time….

Standing among fluttering poppies beneath a sheer cliff of polished marble, it is tempting to think of water's work as something that takes "forever," something long before our time. Diluvian cataclysms were all beyond merely ancient, it seems—an asteroid striking Yucatan, sending mountainous waves all over the world, or an apocalyptic deluge when Babylon was still Paradise. Maybe it really was a torrential rain instead of greed, violence, and germs that drove the indigenous people into oblivion…. A long time ago, before the Carter presidency….

One doesn't really think of mountain gouging as a contemporary act. This year, however, it happened on our watch. *(Update...2025-2026, too.)* Flash floods scoured the canyons then ripped up 30 miles of highway into Death Valley. Millions of tons of rock shifted in a single night, then grated and rumbled further downhill with every successive storm. A ghostly river flowed through the driest place on earth, and the mirages became real. Today, the scars are fresh, the mud still dark, the fissures barely separating and warping in the spring sunshine. A curious cumulus cloud drifts above.

We are, after all, part of an evolving natural history, a transient flicker in geological time, not likely some glorious evolutionary endpoint. We may actually witness some of the events that will shape the land and the life of the future. Keep your eyes open and your shoelaces tied!

*The volcanic Death Valley Buttes in a magnificent Spring*

Wells' reflections 20 years after this post:

I've made roughly 50 visits to Death Valley and the surrounding desert in the last 38 years...usually in winter and the early Spring. I travel sometimes alone, sometimes with friends...sometimes finding flowers, sometimes finding water, sometimes facing wind, sometimes bearing a backpack, sometimes driving a truck...but always sensing wonder.

I feel deep despair to note the malicious degradation of all environmental protections by the rapacious regime in power...including slashing the staffing, support, and historical honesty of the National Parks. I think the desert has endured worse, but not since the mid 1800's when white men invaded the sovereign lands of the Shoshone, blasted the mountains for gold, dug up the desert floor for borax, stripped the high timber for charcoal and mine timbers, and polluted the water.

The immigrants brought disease, depravity, and gunfire to the people who lived there. The white people named it..."Death Valley." That's understandable but wrong.

This is the Valley of Life and Light, Water and Fire, Wind and Time. It is home to earthly lifeforms inspirationally determined to survive. We must learn from them.

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