

One night in the shifting sands - part 2

by Malcolm McElvaney

04-08-2021 – In part one I covered much of the history and why I'm doing this particular telling of my story as the remaining images going into the night are presented in this second half. My best memories of the place are from those early years as I revisited the various seeps mixed in amongst the sand dunes, often spotted as patches of green that invited me to see what I might find within. Some were just temporary and disappeared leaving no evidence they existed, while others had bull rush and grasses take root and remain in the wet sand; however, the most spectacular ones had well established trees and water as deep as waist high in some cases. I learned life is opportunistic as it would appear out nowhere when the water pooled up on the surface to build the ecosystems seemingly from scratch. The wind and the shifting sands altered many of the sites I visited over time and I was able to walk as far as four miles out to spend hours in that one small zone I document that as well.

The water was what attracted me as I searched Google Earth for black areas (indicating moisture) and would target those area to explore and document but open pools of water was not always found. The transition from wet to dry was something I witness as a gradual change but looking back I don't think I would have imagined those areas ever holding the water levels they had. I was able to see what the lack of water which I had been so persistent to pursue looked like in these same areas. The final piece of the cycle has been seeing how the water levels have come back and gone down as the drought lifted. It will take another very wet period with more rain than we need to make those conditions possible again but I was fortunate enough to explore the one I did walk through and learn from in the process.

If this journey has taught me anything it is that life is tenacious and never make assumptions about where you are since the unsuspected discoveries will turn them upside down. It can be a deep rabbit hole once you are pulled down the path of actually observing your surroundings and immersing yourself in that new reality.

(03/26/2021 – 10:04pm)



04-12-2021 – The walk that night was about escaping the noise of my world I live in and immersing myself in a more tranquil one; however, it seems as I begin writing this new entry that same conflict exist as I get lost on YouTube. Some melodic trance music seems to help me focus and it is in some way loosely relates to how I first walked the sand dunes. Before I found the silence something to look forward to I would walk to relax but listen to music that limited me to only experiencing the visual elements in that world; however, no matter how relaxing it was to me I had to be fully immersed to truly appreciate what I had found. I can not recall when I first marked the location of this smaller cottonwood tree but it was barely in the stage of leafing out. The picture is darker than I would like but I was trying match it to what I was seeing, so my night photography skills need some work.

(03/26/2021 – 11:05pm)



04-12-2021 – I started out with my first picture here at “CT01” in the daylight and as I circled back for a gradual return to the camp site stopped here to see the same cottonwood tree in moonlight. The mental comparisons of what I have seen in daylight and under the full moonlight do happen but the transformation of the landscape never ceases to amaze me. At least you can see how this one area looked like before and after.

(03/27/2021 – 12:06am)



04-12-2021 – I actual used my “overexposed” shot here as I see this scene in my head with the memories of walking it but I call this seep “SD3” and it can be found before reaching the power lines. The jewel doesn't stand out as much in the dim light but its splendor isn't lost either. A tree line divides this seep into two wet areas with the area on the left usually holding water longer but the area to the right does have a story. When I first found it the water was openly pooled amongst the bull rush in the area on the right but between visits the sand began blowing in and the open water mostly disappeared, showing me how quickly the environment changes. Somewhat unrelated but at another seep the hole was encircled by what I called more “exotic” plants but after a strong wind storm that circle was uprooted and what came back up was different type of plants.

This particular seep is dense and harder to walk through but these oasis's in the sand have moisture and better access to water while providing shelter, evidenced by the animal trails going into these areas. Even when the water levels seem to low animals can dig to find it creating animal wells.

(03/27/2021 – 12:27am)



04-12-2021 – I found water openly pooled on the surface after I left “SD3” and was heading back. That water in this seep came about because of the ground level to the water table and the animals digging to help expose it further. On the left and right you can see the animal trails I referred to earlier as well.

(03/27/2021 – 1:00am)



04-12-2021 – It is hard to define in words but I seem to divide the park up into sections as I walk and treat them as mile markers. Upon starting out there is an area that relative to my normal distances covered seems to close in as I can still see the pump jack from the distance, in reality the likely hood of being followed out this far is slim. Once I reach the first seep and head out to the power lines I know I am alone. What I seek going out is not the same as coming back and this familiar landscape lets me know my journey is almost at an end.

How close to this point of escape transitioning to the comforts of home waiting for me I can not say but I was taking this artistic shot as my alarm went off to take my next photograph.

(03/27/2021 – 2:10am)



04-12-2021 – The alarm went off and there I stood in the area between the first water hole and the pump jack I was heading for but nothing really caught my eye. How does the eye for photography work? Why do I pick what I do for the scene to capture? Being so late into my walk the shutter bug can go to sleep before I do I suppose but these questions do cross my mind sometimes. I chose to randomly shoot the night sky.

(03/27/2021 – 2:49am)



04-12-2021 – I was attracted by the shadows on the dunes but the foot prints in the sand interested me more because it seem I had come full circle. The question of were they my foot prints was answered well enough in my head but given all the ways I could approach the same target what are the odds I would retrace my path at this point. Maybe it is true if you walk long enough you meet yourself.

In conclusion

04-12-2021 – It is almost midnight as I'm writing this and hopeful all of this will make some sense as the bits and pieces were written over time. I am connected to this place in a way only writing about it like this can make me realize, yet the ideal version I walked through is no more and what I have seen over the years of walking since is a record of how a place changes.