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Mono Lake: Classic, haunting beauty intrigues kayakers

By MAREK WARSZAWSKI
The Fresno Bee

LEE VINING -- The first rays of sunlight illuminate the summit of nearby Mount Dana as I push my kayak onto placid water.

It's 6:15 a.m., and Navy Beach, a popular launching spot on Mono Lake's southern shore, is deserted. The quiet, interrupted only by a gentle breeze, is as soothing as it is eerie.

Set at the foot of the Sierra Nevada off Highway 395 and ringed by towering peaks, scrubby desert and volcanic remnants, Mono Lake is one of those places that mere words can't adequately describe.

It must be experienced. And there's no better way to experience this hauntingly beautiful place than by kayak or canoe.

But still, we writers can't help but try. Looking around at the barren landscape, I'm reminded of Mark Twain, who found Mono Lake to be a "solemn, silent, sailless sea" set in a "lifeless, treeless, hideous desert" after visiting the region in the 1860s. He went on to call it "the loneliest place on Earth." Great imagery, but Twain sold the place short. Today, we know Mono Lake teems with life. Even more than that, the lake plays a vital role in sustaining it.

The first clue in this ecological puzzle comes the instant my hands touch water. It feels slippery -- almost greasy -- thanks to the lake's high level of salinity.

How does a saltwater lake form in the middle of the desert? It occurs because Mono Lake has no outlets. So when water evaporates from the lake, all the salt remains. A million years after it was formed, the lake is now almost three times saltier than the ocean.

Fish can't survive in such a harsh environment, but a tiny species of brine shrimp thrives in it. Biologists estimate between 4 trillion and 6 trillion -- yes, trillion -- of these brine shrimp inhabit the lake during the summer. As I paddle along, columns upon columns of them bob beneath the surface.

And then there are the black alkali flies, which cluster along the shoreline in an inch-thick, 3-foot-wide belt. These flies are everywhere, but they don't bite and aren't much of a nuisance.

The brine shrimp and alkali flies serve as food sources for millions of shorebirds, including American avocets, killdeer and sandpipers, which use the lake as a rest stop during their long migrations. Resident birds flock here as well. It's estimated that some 85 percent of all California seagulls are hatched here.

Flocks of seagulls soar overhead as I paddle toward a cluster of Mono Lake's most intriguing (and best-known) natural phenomena, tufa towers.

Pronounced "too-fah," these towers are formed when underground springs rich in calcium come into contact with carbonate from the lake. When the calcium and carbonate combine, the result is a white-colored limestone that builds up around the lake-bottom springs.

Through time, these towers grow to the point where they extend above the water's surface. (Declining lake levels help, too.) Some are up to 30 feet tall.

Paddling near these otherworldly looking tufa towers is a spooky experience, to say the least. I also keep my eyes peeled for those just beneath the surface, so as not to put a dent (or a hole) in my boat.

From Navy Beach, it's a 15-minute paddle to the South Tufa Grove, a state natural reserve. But the lake is so large--more than 45,000 surface acres -- that I spend several more hours exploring and only see part of it.

In the 1970s, after lake levels dropped significantly following decades of inlet diversions by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Mono Lake became a cause celebre for environmentalists. Thanks to groups like the Mono Lake Committee, the diversions ceased (after a lengthy legal battle) and the lake level has risen steadily.



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Yosemite landmarks Mono Pass and Mount Dana and assorted tufa towers for a scenic morning of kayaking on Mono Lake, located in the Eastern Sierra near the town of Lee Vining. One of the oldest lakes in the Western Hemisphere, Mono Lake plays host to millions of migrating birds that come to feed on its teeming populations of alkali flies and tiny brine shrimp. A few of these flies can be seen on the kayak's bow. MAREK WARSZAWSKI-THE FRESNO BEE



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Morning is the best time for a kayak trip on Mono Lake because afternoon winds can be sudden and fierce. By the time this happens, I'm nearly back to Navy Beach.

Next stop: The Whoa Nellie Deli at the nearby Tioga Gas Mart for mango fish tacos. A perfect ending to a splendid day.