

Patterns of Reflection

by Gary Nelson

Mono Lake is often depicted in words and photographs like a mirror, reflecting tufa and other surrounding features with a clarity that adds a stunning visual effect to an already awesome scene.

For those lucky enough to be paddling on the lake during a perfectly calm day, the size and detail of these images transcends the realm of reflection to become a separate, if usually hidden, dimension of reality.

However, perfectly calm days are the rare exception at Mono Lake. Its surface usually displays a mosaic of wave patterns resulting from the interaction of the heavy, saline water with unpredictable winds.

My observations of the wind during the canoe tour season are most often made from a short, squat rock at the end of a gravelly berm which is all that remains of the Navy Beach pier. From atop this rock I can be seen intently observing the patterns of the wind, rather like an archaeologist trying to interpret the meaning of obscure hieroglyphics. Morning often finds Mono's waters calm and light blue in color. But inevitably the wind makes its appearance known upon the lake with darker, wind ruffled patches. Sometimes local winds funnel down the steep drainages above Mono's western shore, sending long feathery dark plumes of rippled water stretching eastward, often presaging stronger winds.

One of our tour guests, who proclaimed himself a yachtsman, once told me a common name for some of Mono's most common wind patterns: "cat's paws." And I must admit that if a gigantic, invisible, lighter-than-air cat were to step

ever so gingerly upon the surface of the lake it might well leave the oval shaped rippled patches that are seen so often upon the surface of the lake.

Occasionally one of these cat's paws will appear a short distance from my canoe, causing passengers to ask why the water is ruffled only 20 feet away from us when there is no perceptible wind. Barring the timely flyby of an osprey, or other reason to change the subject, I usually have to admit the truth: I just don't know why.

I don't know why dark blue wind-ruffled linear patches alternate with calm water, reflecting Paoha's white color, to produce enormous blue and white stripes upon the lake.

I don't know why the wind changes direction 360 degrees in a minute's time when it's a clear day and not a cloud in the sky.

I don't know why acre-sized masses of lake water pass each other like adjacent rivers flowing in opposite directions.

I guess that I shouldn't feel too bad since meteorologists still can't accurately predict the local weather that occurs when intricately layered air masses interact with the radically complex topography of the Eastern Sierra. In spite of all the scientific work done on Mono Lake, many aspects of its natural processes remain like the wind upon its waters, unknown patterns created by unseen forces. ❖

Gary Nelson is the Committee's Canoe Program Supervisor. He is wondering if the school bus will fit the increasing number of Committee offspring in Mono City.



PHOTO BY ARYA DEGENHARDT