

Natural History at the Edge of the Sierra



Butterflies on Sulphur Buckwheat

Nora Livingston

September 12–14, 2025 • Nora Livingston

\$280 per person / \$265 for Mono Lake Committee members
enrollment limited to 14 participants

The Natural History Institute defines natural history as the “...practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy.” Rather than focusing on one specific aspect of a singular creature of interest, natural history pays attention to all the goings-on in front of the observer. It is paying attention to the direction of the wind coming down off the mountain slopes or across a sagebrush plateau, and the tiny toad hopping through a meadow and the plants under which it stops to rest, and the accipiter circling overhead at the edge of the forest. Natural history is stopping to ask yourself what might be happening and using your eyes and ears to figure it out. On this weekend seminar, we will make our way up the east slope, stopping at several locations to connect with all that we may find. Throughout the weekend, we will have moments of quiet reflection to allow ourselves to ponder the grandeur and the minutia that envelops us in this amazing place: the edge of the Sierra.

Nora Livingston spent eight years as the Mono Lake Committee’s Lead Naturalist Guide. She is now an independent biologist and naturalist, still based in the Lee Vining area. She has spent more than 15 years exploring the many unique nooks and crannies of the Mono Basin and the Eastern Sierra.

Before moving to Lee Vining permanently, she bounced around California for eight years as a field biologist, studying birds on the Channel Islands, the Farallon Islands, and in the Eastern Sierra.

ITINERARY

Friday, September 12 at 6:00pm: Meet in the gallery at the Mono Lake Committee Information Center & Bookstore. After introductions, we will view a slideshow presentation and discuss what “natural history” is as well as review logistics of the weekend.

Saturday, September 13 at 8:00am: Meet in front of the Mono Lake Committee Information Center & Bookstore. We will carpool to several locations and spend the day exploring the habitats on the edge of the Sierra from low elevation (sagebrush steppe) to mid elevation (montane forest) to look for birds, mammals, butterflies, and wildflowers. The day will end around 4:00pm.

Sunday, September 14, 8:00am: We will meet at the Mono Lake Committee and carpool back up the pass, starting where we left off the day before and moving to high elevation (Tioga Pass region), continuing our elevational transect. We will finish the day by about noon to allow folks time to travel home.

ACTIVITY LEVEL: MODERATE

This seminar’s activity level: *moderate*. We will be walking up to two miles each day at a leisurely pace, much of which will be over uneven terrain, off trail, and will include stepping up and over obstacles. This type of walking requires good balance, some agility, and stamina. We will be gaining altitude steadily throughout the day.

WEATHER & ALTITUDE

Temperatures in summer will be hot during the day and drop to chilly at night, with possible windy conditions and afternoon thunderstorms. Average temperatures in September in Lee Vining are 76°F (max) and 46°F (min).

This seminar will take place at elevations ranging from about 6,000 to 10,000 feet above sea level. It is a good idea to acclimate at the elevation of Lee Vining for at least 24 hours prior to the start of the seminar. Those with a history of heart, ear, or respiratory problems should consult their doctors before attending. Anyone restricted to lower elevations should not enroll.

Remember to bring (and drink!) lots of water because your body loses more water at the higher altitudes of the Mono Basin. Begin drinking extra water as you drive to higher elevation in order to prevent dehydration and headaches. Also, the sun is intense at high elevations, capable of burning even on cool and cloudy days, so be sure to protect yourself thoroughly using sunscreen, sunglasses, and hat.

TO BRING

- notebook and pen/pencil
- binoculars/hand lens
- camera (optional)
- appropriate field clothing: hat, sunglasses, warm layers, rain gear
- day pack including plenty of water, sunscreen, insect repellent, etc.

___ packed lunch and snacks

RECOMMENDED READING

- Laws, John Muir. *The Laws Field Guide to the Sierra Nevada*. Heyday Books, Berkeley, 2007.
- Fleischner, Thomas L. *The Way of Natural History*. Trinity University Press, 2011.
- Smith, Genny et al., *Sierra East: Edge of the great basin*, University of California Press, 2003.



Mono Lake Committee Field Seminars

P.O. Box 29 • Lee Vining, CA 93541 • (760) 647-6595 • monolake.org/seminars