



From: Nomads at Large:
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2002 – 2003
HOLED UP IN THE BURROW FOR
WINTER



Greetings from Brian, Narissa, and Loki!

January 2, 2003

Well, Happy Groundhog Day again!

It's almost 3 AM, a month before the big furry day, and I just got another year older and a touch of insomnia on the same night. So may as well make the most of it and jot down a few thoughts.... —B

WHAT IS A GROUNDHOG?

This year brought a marvelous epiphany: that groundhogs and marmots are the SAME beast! Now, we probably already knew this once upon a time, but one of the great things about getting older is that we get to learn the same things over and over again, and it's just as fresh and exciting every time. So in honor of the good ol' marmot, and the fact that Brian has way too much time on his hands in the middle of the night, we bring you "fun facts about mammals."



Marmots: The western species of marmot is public enemy #2 in some parks (after the lovely nuisance bears that enjoy peeling doors off of cars to get at coolers full of food) because they really like chewing on rubber, particularly the hoses on vehicle engines. So if you see one of these guys scurrying away from your car, better check for leaks. The marmot species on the Olympic peninsula of Washington might be more at home on the beaches of southern California, since they are all bleached blondes in the summer.

Grizzly bears: This beast is California's official state animal. The last California grizzly was shot to extinction in the 1920's, so your guess is as good as ours as to why they decided in the 1950's that the grizzly was suitable as the state animal. Of course, given the tectonic situation at least part of the state will eventually visit some grizzlies in Alaska, but that could take a while.

Sea otters: Here's another species that was driven extinct in California in the 1920's... or so we thought. Turns out that about 75 of the little buggers escaped the trappers and they have since grown into a decent sized population. They were a big prize for the fur trade because of their wonderfully plush coats – 100,000 hairs per square centimeter (or 650,000 hairs per square inch for those of you still confounded by the metric system). Orcas also consider them a worthwhile prize, which is pretty surprising considering that they must be little more than a hairball to a killer whale.

Orcas: These critters come in two varieties, transients that chow on marine mammals and residents that chow on fish. Smaller marine mammals can tell the difference between calls that the two types make; when transients vocalize, they run. But the transients almost never call while hunting, while the locals call regularly (turns out that fish don't hear too well). Orcas are currently decimating the Alaskan sea otter populations. Why? Apparently orcas used to feed primarily on large whales, but not too many of them were left by the time people finished with them in the 1970s. So then the orcas switched to seals... then to sea lions... and now they are quickly working through the otters, AKA "furry popcorn."

DON'T ASK:

Yes, Brian is now "ABD". For those of you not in the know, ABD means "All But Dissertation" or "Almost Bloody Drowning" as the case may be. You decide. But if you want to avoid having your head bitten off, there are a few questions to avoid for the next year:



Death Valley 'Yote

1) Aren't you done yet?

No, I'm not done. I aim to be finished sometime in the spring of 2004. Yes, that's 15 months, not three.

2) How's the writing going?

See number one. It is going slowly and painfully, like... well, like working on a dissertation. And the actual writing has not begun yet. Since finishing field work at the end of September, I have been focusing on checking over my data (of which I have voluminous quantities). The work is tedious, dull, and frustrating, which is why I don't respond well to this question. But it is coming along, and I keep aiming for that glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel (don't worry, it's not THAT tunnel).

3) What are you going to do after you graduate?

That's still up in the air. We are certainly going to be moving back to the east coast. There looks to be a possibility of a job based at Cornell University for Brian, but there are no guarantees at this point that the job will really be there or that it will go to Brian if it does exist. The National Wildlife Research Center (the folks funding Brian's research) are planning to start a field station at Cornell where the focus would be northeastern wildlife issues (probably wildlife disease to start with, but lots of possibility for growth into other areas over the years). Once I get a little closer to finishing (see number one), I'll get a bit more serious about the job hunt.

OK, I'm freezing my butt off. One great thing about living in California is that NOBODY seems to know what insulation is. So I think I'll crawl back into bed and snuggle up to the only other major heat source in the house. Till next year, —B

DON'T TELL:



NPS Ranger at Nevada's newest National Park site

May, 2003 will mark my third year at Lassen Volcanic National Park, making it my longest continuous service in any job (not counting four years as Basement Snake Removal Specialist when I was a government-brat-in-training outside Washington, DC.) I can hardly believe it's been so long. It still seems like yesterday that I came to this strange land of reeking mudpots, bull riders, conspiracy theorists, and cows abducted by aliens. Oh, hadn't you heard? We don't have regular old alien abductions out here. Lassen Volcanic is just down the highway from Westwood, famous for cattle mutilations attributed to extraterrestrials. Some say an abduction/mutilation happened a few years ago in the meadow across from Park

Headquarters. Many of us at Lassen are inclined to believe it: we strongly suspect that one or more of the hapless bovines are now living under the Witness Protection Plan in the guise of Department of the Interior employees (*see "minions" below*).

The last year has brought several satisfying accomplishments: the revamping of the park's Web site, a much-lauded new graphic design for the park newspaper, and finally convincing park management to turn our year-round desk position into a permanent job with benefits. (Alas, only a GS-3 salary with no potential for advancement was approved. For those of you not familiar with Fed-speak, a GS-3 gets paid about \$9 an hour and needs only 3 months of specialized experience to qualify.) Outside of work, I have taken up crocheting and Tai Chi, which actually share an essential element: in the first, I tie yam in knots; in the second I tie myself in knots. I'm not sure Tai Chi is supposed to do that to you, but I suppose I'll get better with practice.

We are now getting into my favorite time of year, snowshoe/ski season. This is my favorite part of the winter (which lasts from October through June at Lassen) because it means I can get out of the office for programs! It's a blast to stomp about with a bunch of fourth graders and dig snow shelters, slide on our butts down the slopes, and follow flocks of mountain chickadees through the woods.

This once-a-week diversion is more necessary than ever right now since we are all tearing our hair out over the lack of Congressional appropriations. Until the park gets money, we can't do squat. As it stands, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named-By-Disgruntled-Federal-Employees and his DOI minions have cut our travel and training funds down to uselessly low levels, forbidden us to purchase any more computer equipment, and



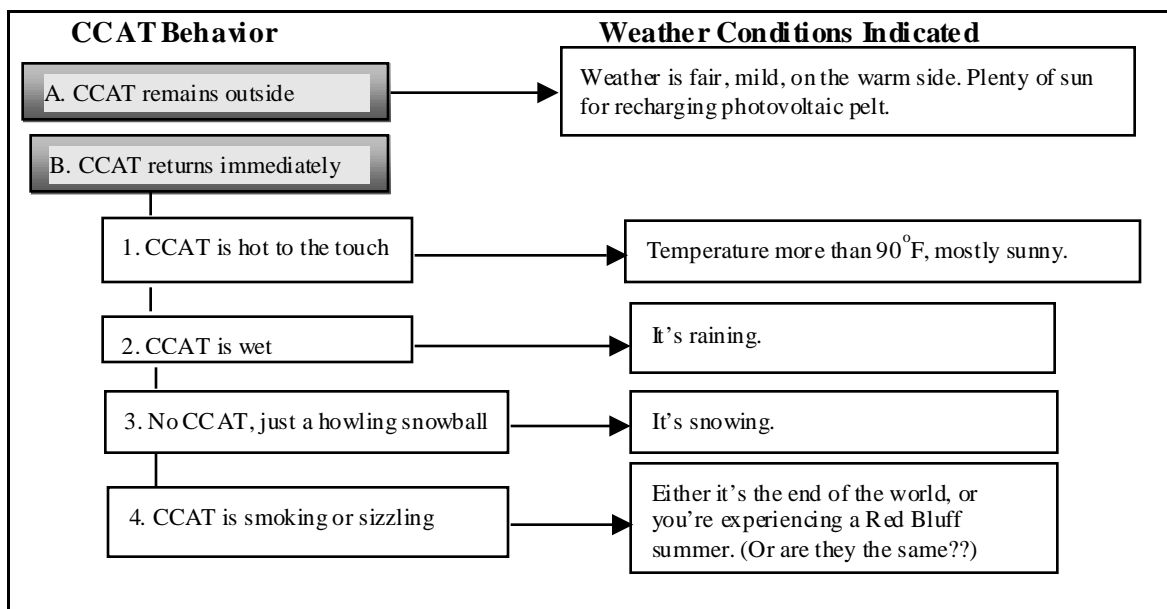
Mist over Brokeoff Mountain, Lassen Volcanic National Park

January, 2002

accused our agency of "creative accounting." (The minions commanded the NPS to cut certain IT expenditures by \$6 million, then pitched a fit when we explained we were already spending less than \$4 million...so the required cut would actually put us into negative dollars. If the minions actually came to the parks to see our decrepit infrastructure and fossilized software they'd understand that we're telling the truth!)

All this fiscal doom and gloom may make you wonder whether my job is in jeopardy. Anything is possible in this tense, war-threatened time, but don't worry on my account! Before summer comes, I hope to have a patent out for an ingenious new technology that is far cheaper and more accurate than current barometers, thermometers, and even the Weather Channel. With the assistance of Brian and Loki, I am perfecting a home meteorological device I call CCAT (Current Conditions Assessment Technology.) The prototype unit is really quite simple. Here's how it works:

1. To engage CCAT, raise approximately to shoulder height.
2. Deploy CCAT by propelling it forcefully through CCAT door, window, mail chute, or other suitable ingress/egress. (Brian is exceptionally good at football-pass style deployment, esp. when CCAT accidentally engages in the middle of the night or during meals.)
3. Find a safe position from which to observe—CCAT has been known to reverse course without warning at hair-raising and even potentially deadly speeds.
4. Wait approximately one minute before attempting to retrieve results. After 60 seconds, behavior of CCAT will give you an accurate reading of outside conditions.
5. Consult the chart below to interpret results:



If anyone is interested in obtaining a prototype unit, I have several potential distributors in Maine and Northern Virginia. Also, I'm sure Brian would be willing to mail you ours next time it pees on the couch.

Throughout this year and every year, I wish you much laughter and love, and abundant beauty and grace. —N

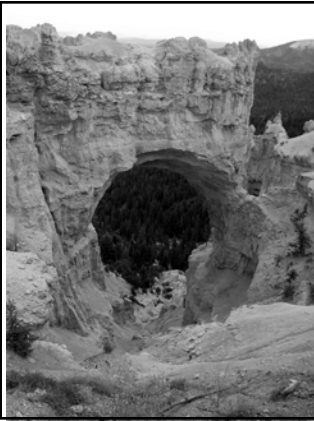
EVENTS OF NOTE:

Brian struck out solo to Georgia for Passover last year, and he had a great time visiting with family for a few days at "Camp Mitchell". Of course, work was not far away, as evidenced by the emergency phone call from his British volunteer who had gone to Canada for the weekend and was not being allowed through US Customs to go back to work... but that's another story.

100-foot sand dunes at Mesquite Flats, Death Valley NP



We made it up to Ashland, Oregon near the end of the summer for a combination river rafting and Shakespeare festival trip. The rafting trip was terrific – neither of us had rafted Class IV rapids before and it was a lot of fun. At the Shakespeare festival we saw an excellent production of “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf”, plus something or other (very fluffy) by Shakespeare. Let’s just say it wasn’t one of his better plays.



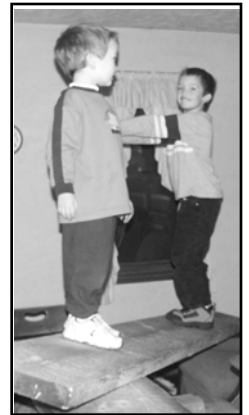
Arch, Bryce Canyon NP

By the time fall rolled around, Narissa had several weeks of leave built up that she had to “use or lose,” and we decided it would be pretty crazy to lose it. So we loaded up the pickup truck and drove around the desert southwest for nine days. We saw Devil’s Postpile, trekked through ancient bristlecone pine forests, and got serenaded by coyotes in Death Valley (now there was a first for Brian). Also at Death Valley were some great hikes, including a trip into Mosaic Canyon and a full moon hike among the sand dunes. Then we pushed on to Zion where we hiked up the canyon and out to an impressive overlook. Next we headed to Bryce Canyon, and we both took WAY too many pictures of hoodoos (rock spires), plus got our first snow of the year. We finished the trip up with a stop at Great Basin, where we toured their cave and picked gobs of pine nuts (many of which are still waiting to be shelled, but at least they’ve already been toasted).

After a week at home we headed to San Francisco where Narissa attended National Park Service Webmaster training and Brian decided to put in an appearance at his campus office for a week. What a treat to actually have lots of terrific restaurants to choose from for meals! The highlight of the week was a behind-the-scenes tour of Alcatraz during a torrential storm. We even got to don hardhats for a trip around the “dungeon” beneath the prison; the dungeon is the remains of the fort that preceded the penitentiary.

After another week at home we went to Monterey for a carnivore conference. Brian got to catch up with lots of researcher buddies and other contacts, and we both enjoyed many of the talks and especially the opening night party at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Then it was back home for another week before we left for almost three weeks of travel around New England. We enjoyed catching up with some friends in Rhode Island, then had Turkey Day with Narissa’s family before we both got food poisoning or the flu the day after Thanksgiving. After being incapacitated for several days, we finally made it up to Maine for more visits with friends and a couple of hikes in Acadia. Then it was off to see Brian’s family in Northampton, MA, where we were treated to Cirque Eloize and a viewing of the best movie we’ve seen in a long time: “Bowling for Columbine.” We wound up with a jaunt out to Ithaca so Brian could meet with researchers there about ways to analyze his coyote vocalizations, plus we wanted to see what the area was like just in case things pan out for jobs in that area.



*A new family tradition??
Cousins “walking the plank”
off the Thanksgiving table*

We returned home for a quiet New Year (if you consider Red Bluff’s annual Bull Ride and Dance “quiet”). This year we saw only one fistfight erupt in front of us, when someone pounded some poor guy that his girlfriend was looking at. Just one more example of why we’re not considering making Red Bluff the permanent homestead!

We’re planning to stick fairly close to home for the next few months, as we get caught up on various projects. Luckily there is lots of snow this year, and we’re planning to make the most of it with several cross-country ski days in the coming months.

We hope that this letter finds you all healthy and happy.

Love,
Brian & Narissa

PS – Please note that we no longer have a web site, due to changes in our local internet provider. We are also phasing out our AOL account, so please use the new e-mail address for Narissa: nkwillever@sbglobal.net. Brian’s address is still bmitchel@nature.berkeley.edu.