

THE RIDDLE OF THE RACETRACK

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by Roger Mitchell

OFF the beaten path in the northwest corner of Death Valley National Monument lies a hidden valley—and a mystery. The valley contains a dry lake approximately one-and-a-quarter miles wide and three miles long. The Racetrack Playa at first glance appears like any other of hundreds of such dry lakes in the southwest.

It has one different and mystifying feature; rocks and other objects on its surface have been known to shift, move and skate about! No one has actually seen any of these objects move but the tracks left from such movement are obvious.

There are many theories explaining the phenomena. Some say it has to do with the earth's magnetism, while others claim it is related to the sunspots. Still others suspect the gravitational pull of the moon producing an effect similar to the ocean's tides. Under scientific examination, however, most of these theories can be dismissed.

The wind is immediately suspect of being the culprit. This alone seems unlikely for a number of reasons. First, many of these moving rocks are round in shape. It seems the wind would tend to roll such objects like a bowling ball. Such is not the case however.

Rounded objects, like the more flat objects, slide along keeping the same relative position. Many of these moving stones are rather small, about the size of a softball, others weigh 50 to 600 pounds.

Close examination of the tracks reveals one important fact. At the time of movement, the playa's surface is wet. The furrows and grooves left behind by the moving objects plainly show the once muddy nature of the playa's surface. Ridges of once soft mud are also seen pushed up in front of the once sliding object.

The theory is that the wind moves the various objects only when the playa is wet or muddy. Because several objects close together sometimes appear to have moved in echelon, the theory is further expanded that water on the playa surface freezes—trapping several objects together in an iceberg. The wind then blows this iceberg around causing only the rocks to leave tracks in a parallel

pattern. This line of reasoning seems to have some merit.

The surrounding country of some 70 square miles drains into the Racetrack Playa. This desert area receives about three inches of rainfall annually on a long term average, although rainfall in some years may be almost nil. A thin sheet of water on the playa has been observed a number of times, and being 3708 feet in elevation, such water would freeze during the cold winter nights.

Although every theory has some flaws in it, it does seem likely that the phenomena must be related to the combination of wind and a wet playa surface. Actually the Racetrack Playa is best known for the mystery, but the phenomena has been observed in other dry lake beds. Similar occurrences have been reported at Bonnie Clair and Nelson dry lakes in nearby Nevada and also near McKittrick in California's San Joaquin Valley. I have also seen similar tracks at Laguna Chapala in Baja California.



Death Valley's mysterious moving stones have puzzled scientists for years, although the most popular theory is they are moved by winds when the usually dry lake is covered with ice.

While it is easy to tear holes in other people's theories, it is difficult to suggest a solution which itself is not flawless. About the only thing observers can agree upon is that the tracks are truly a product of nature and not some pranksters' idea of a joke. It appears that the mystery will remain unsolved until some hardy soul camps at the playa's edge all winter, and waits with a movie camera for the action to begin. Any volunteers?

The Racetrack can be reached by conventional automobile by way of a 25 mile graded dirt road which goes south from Ubehebe Crater in the north end of Death Valley.

A more scenic route comes up from the south and goes over pinyon-covered Hunter Mountain. However, the dirt road portion of this route is almost 40 miles long and may be a little more rough. This road, paved at first, leaves Highway 190 at a point approximately 4 miles east of the Darwin Road. Signs indicate it as the Saline Valley Road. Go north 15.7 miles to a junction. The left fork descends into Saline Valley. Take the right fork which continues to climb up the slopes of Hunter Mountain. If you disregard the numerous side roads which show much less evidence of use, the next major road junction will be at Tea Kettle Junction, 25 miles from the last one. Turn left



No one has ever seen the stones actually move. Some of the giant boulders weigh more than 500 pounds. The area is in the northern part of scenic Death Valley.

here and the Racetrack is but 7 miles down the valley. This second route is not difficult for vehicles with high clearance, and with care can usually be negotiated by standard passenger cars if they are not too heavily laden. This route is not recommended unless you are a seasoned desert driver. Neither route should be attempted unless your tires are in good condition.

The best time to visit the Racetrack is in the spring or fall, although the weather may be pleasant on many winter days. Because of the extremely high temperatures and lack of assistance should you become stranded, the Racetrack area should be avoided during the summer months.

There are no established campgrounds at the Racetrack, but many campers have found shelter in The Grandstand—a large rock outcrop at the northern end of the Playa. Plenty of water should be carried, however, as the nearest dependable source of drinking water is at Gold-belt Spring, some 20 miles away on the Hunter Mountain Road. Whether you spend an hour or a day there, the riddle of the Racetrack is sure to prove fascinating.



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