

Plants, wildlife crowd cool washes

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a desert place

Natural beauty
through preservation

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This is my first article for the *Foothills Sentinel* since the Conservation Committee, in recognition of my move to Tempe, promoted me to the rank of "foreign correspondent." I can't think of a better way to celebrate my new status than to write about one of my favorite subjects, desert washes.

At least, that's what they're called in Arizona. In Southern California, the word for the wash is arroyo; while in North Africa its wadi. They all mean the same thing: the dry bed of a stream.

Water, originating in rain storms, may flow in a wash once or twice a year or not for a decade. The water winds up percolating through the desert floor.

Cynicism aside, a wash can be one of the most interesting aspects of the desert scene and a thing of beauty and complexity. After a runoff the surface of a wash may look more "deserty" than the desert itself since the runoff will strip away all vegetation. What's left is pristine sand and gravel that we associate with desert. However the sand and gravel is transformed. When the sun is low or the moon

is full, the newly purged surface of the wash can gleam like a highway paved with diamonds.

The borders of a wash can be lovely too. The runoff water they receive enables them to support a heavier, more extensive growth than is found in the areas around them.

Among the plants which hold in place the borders of the wash, brittlebush figures prominently. When they burst into bloom with a prodigal display of yellow flowers, the effect is breathtaking. Mesquite and palo verde also play an important role in reinforcing the banks of the wash, and add greatly to its beauty.

However, no true desert lover will complain if, upon leaving the glories of the wash, he finds himself within a forest of flowering creosote bushes, or in a field of cactuses in bloom.

The plants which grow in the borders of the wash are not without their enemies. One of the worst is the parasite mistletoe, bane of much desert plant life.

A desert wash is hospitable not only to the plant life which crowds its borders but to an abundant

variety of birds, making it a mecca for bird lovers. If you walk far enough in a wash early some morning, or toward sundown, you are bound to encounter coveys of Gambel's quail. In the spring, they are guarding their tiny chicks; in the summer, the chicks may starve or be eaten by hawks or coyotes.

Animals too are partial to washes. Desert tortoises, in the overpowering heat of midsummer, retire to dens dug deep into the banks.

People frequent washes too. In very hot weather, some even sleep in them, since the temperature in a wash is several degrees cooler than outside. Famed Carefree developer K.T. Palmer used to sleep in a wash for the sake of coolness, until he discovered that rattlesnakes used the wash for the same purpose.

What makes a wash cease to be a wash, and become instead a

turbulent stream? It usually begins with a severe thunderstorm, too full of rain for its runoff to be confined to established channels. The precipitation spreads out as a sheet and finds an exit within the bands of a previously dry wash. Filling that channel to capacity the powerful current hurls rocks, pebbles and debris of all kinds against the shoulders of the wash, uprooting much of the bankside vegetation and carrying it down the wash.

The storm waters ordinarily disappear by simple percolation into the ground. But if the ground is not very permeable as is true of much of the Arizona desert the waters may persist as a flash flood. The down pour endangers man and beast far from the point where the storm first emptied its contents into the wash. The moral is—don't walk in a wash in wet weather.