

Fifty-somethings Hanging by their Fingertips

Snowbird climbers in Joshua Tree National Park

By Ben Gadd¹

Jay and I were sitting in the sun atop the Moose Dog Tower, nothing on our minds but how to get down, when it happened: *ground-squirrel raid!*

Far below us, we could see black dots converging on our campsite. There on the picnic table was my wooden food box, thoughtlessly left open. In the box were my corn chips, my rice and black beans, my stash of Mexican pastries ...

Oh, no! Not the Mexican pastries! Quickly we slid down the rope. Our tight climbing shoes hurt horribly as we ran over to the campsite, but those pastries were at stake.

And—oh, joy!—they were still there. Well, most of them were still there. I had been robbed of one of my favorites, a big cookie with colored sprinkles on it, yum. There was also a squirrel-sized hole in the side of the corn-chip bag, and half an apple was missing.

Ah, but the thieves had replaced the stolen goods with something else: lots of little droppings in the bottom of the box.

The horror, the horror.

Still, it could have been worse. It could have been back home in the Canadian Rockies, where the raiders might have been grizzly bears.

Why go to Joshua Tree?

There are no grizzly bears prowling the night in Joshua Tree National Park, way down in the desert of southeastern California. Instead, the place has rattlesnakes, wicked sunburn and lots of cholla (“CHOY-ya”), the fiercest cactus you’ll find anywhere.

Of course, these all serve as bait for adventurous folks. Further, in January it’s a lot warmer in J-Tree than it is north of the 49th. And the rock is wonderful. It’s granite, and it has weathered into hundreds—nay, thousands—of picturesque knobs. The bigger ones plead “climb me.”

You’re not a climber? Go anyway. J-Tree has terrific desert hikes in a landscape right out of a Dr. Seuss story.

The Joshua tree itself, which is actually a giant yucca plant, looks very much like the trees in Seuss’s drawings. The late children’s author was not believed when he insisted that he had never seen a Joshua tree until after he had perfected his tree-drawing style. Heck, some folks think Dr. Seuss *invented* the Joshua tree.

The bizarre super-boulders, slabs and mini-spires that lure climbers to J-Tree are equally attractive to photographers, while the wildlife of the Mojave desert is fascinating to naturalists like me. There you’ll find a wren the size of a robin that sits in the cactus next to your picnic table and says “gotta gotta gotta gotta.” Other kinds of wrens sing beautifully from the rocks. Cute little black-throated sparrows come peeping through your campsite. A road-runner may skulk by.

At Josh they’ve got kangaroo rats (more on those later), desert bighorn sheep, amusing lizards—don’t worry about the snakes; they’re hibernating—and real palm-tree oases.

For sort-of climbers, meaning people who like to scramble around on rocks but aren’t into doing scary stuff with ropes, J-Tree is a vast playground. On the Gunsight Pass Loop or the

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Wonderland Connection (not a drug deal), you can spend an entire day hopping over rocks, crawling under rocks, and just generally getting deeper into the essence of ROCKS than you ever thought possible. Wear long pants to maintain flesh coverage on knees and shins.

Plain tourists: you have not been forgotten. Park the RV and take the short walks at Hidden Valley or Barker Dam. Learn what “bajada” means. Eat good Mexican food at Ramona’s restaurant in the park-gateway town of Twentynine Palms. Buy souvenirs at the other park-gateway town of Joshua Tree.

Going to the Dog

I discovered the park a few years ago. Barely had time to mess up my knuckles—the rock is *very* rough—before moving on. But I planned to return, and to this end I called up my old climbing buddy Jay Rosenthal and talked him into joining me at J-Tree for three weeks after New Year’s. We are both well into our fifties, but dangd if we’re going to give up a life-long recreational addiction that, if it doesn’t kill you, is very healthy.

We set up our tents at the Indian Cove campground and did most of our climbing on the formations there, including the Moose Dog Tower. (The name is a climber’s pun on the huge Muztag Tower of the Himalayas.) All of sixty metres high, the Moose Dog Tower is one of the taller crags at J-Tree. We climbed on it a lot, using our ropes and our carabiners and our other esoteric climber’s hardware to save our necks if we fell off. Which we both did, ho hum.

The Ratting Hour

The climbing was great, but there was much more. For example, each evening we looked forward to twilight in the desert, that magical time between day and night when it was really neither. This was the Ratting Hour, when the kangaroo rats would appear.

“Appear,” indeed. Suddenly they would just be there: little blunt things with enormous eyes and long, fur-tipped tails. Then they would be gone. They used their outlandishly huge hind legs to jump so far and so fast that they seemed to vanish.

Fearless, the kangaroo rats would poke around in the sand beside our shoes, looking for crumbs we had dropped. They searched only on the ground; scraps on the picnic table would still be there the next morning, awaiting the superior climbing ability of the ground squirrels.

It was a rodent revelation, this trip.

The Bee Binge

And then there was the thing with the bees. Jay had left a pan of water on the picnic table, in which soaked the burned-on residue of his favorite and oft-repeated meal of the trip: “Chik Nuggets,” which were lumps of textured soy protein or tofu or some such poultry-like substance.

Desert honeybees crave water, and the Chik Nugget water was a big draw that afternoon. Before we knew it there were so many bees in the pan that we didn’t dare get close for fear they might be Africanized bees, a type known to occur here, which might sting us to death.

But the poor things were keeling over! Going legs-up in the bottom of the pan!

We stood by helplessly, trying to understand what was going on. Were the bees drinking too much water, passing out like drunken humans and drowning? Were Chik Nuggets toxic to insects?

At this point Jay expressed concern about his own intake of Chik Nuggets, and I could not reassure him.

We decided to leave the scene altogether, figuring that we'd come back after sundown, when the temperature would have dropped considerably. This would have sent any live bees home for the night. Then we could dispose of the partied-out individuals.

To our surprise, we found the pan bee-free when we returned. Well, nearly. There was one truly dead bee in it, perhaps trampled by its sisters—all worker bees are female—at the bar. The other revellers at the Bee Binge had revived and flown off.

Smokey ousts the Canadians

We, too, flew off on January 30th, when a certain Ranger K.A. Krisko left a note on our picnic table while we were away climbing:

MRS. GADD/ROSENTHAL:

PARK REGULATIONS ALLOW FOR ONLY 14 CAMPING DAYS WITHIN JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK DURING THIS SEASON, REGARDLESS OF WHO MAKES THE RESERVATION.

OUR RECORDS SHOW THAT YOU ARRIVED ON 07 JAN—21 DAYS AGO. OUR RECORDS SHOW THAT YOU HAVE NOT PAID FOR LAST NIGHT OR TONIGHT.

PLEASE GO TO THE ENTRANCE STATION AND PAY FOR LAST NIGHT IMMEDIATELY. YOU WILL BE PERMITTED TO STAY THROUGH TONIGHT IF RESERVATIONS ALLOW. YOU WILL NOT BE PERMITTED TO REGISTER FOR MORE NIGHTS AND MUST VACATE THE SITE BY TOMORROW.

Well, Jay had stayed as long as he could, anyway. He gobbled the last of his Chik Nuggets, struck his tent and drove away.

I, too, packed up. Had I got what I had come for? Definitely. Plenty of excitement. Good suntan. Mexican food that tastes right. I eased my scuffed-up body into the driver's seat and headed north toward winter, wife and work.

Some year Jay and I hope to do it all again. Wise to the ground squirrels and the bees, of course. Obeying all park regulations. And looking forward to the Ratting Hour.

Note: I have photos.
