

The Death of a Spring

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Prior to 1974 Little Black Rock Spring was a prime habitat, a center of life where unusual species flourished and the aesthetic beauty was superb. The location is at 1,170 m (3,839 ft) elevation near the center of Owens Valley, in the NW1/4 sec. 2, T.11 S., R. 34 E. (Figure 1). The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's (LADWP) Blackrock Ditch runs along the east side of the spring. Black volcanic rock crops out along the west side.

A fern-like growth of Intermountain Bird's-beak, *Cordylanthus ramosus*, occupied the black rocks about the spring prior to 1974. It was the finest population of that species I have ever seen. Although it is an annual, its stems were woody at the base and its height up to 2 ft (0.6 m) high. The sturdy plants were so unusual that the late Dr. L. H. Heckard of the Department of Botany, University of California, came to Owens Valley to study it, thinking that it might be a new species. He concluded, however, that it was only a robust strain of *Cordylanthus ramosus*. He had not seen the same form elsewhere. Impressive stalks of tall *Thelypodium integrifolium* var. *complanatum* were common in the vicinity of the ponds, reaching to a height of 8 ft (2.4 m). That, too, was an unusually fine population of a fairly rare species. It was a handsome plant.

Several plant communities overlapped at Little Black Rock. A robust Alkali Meadow community reached the southern edge of Little Black Rock. Saltbush Scrub grew to the road along the Blackrock Ditch on the east side, and several species of desert mountain plants found suitable living conditions on the wall of black rock north of the spring. Another mountain species, Scarlet Mimulus (*Mimulus cardinalis*) grew along the spring's outlet.

A walk around the area was a favorite experience. A typical walk was across the Blackrock Ditch to the north side of the ponds, across a lush Saltgrass Meadow (Figure 2), past the large willow trees, to the spring bubbling from the volcanic rocks. A Great Horned Owl used the tallest tree as a lookout. Thence one could walk across the watercourse, past the *Cordylanthus* overlooking the spring from a rocky outcrop on the south, to the floral displays beyond, skirting the Alkali Marsh. There were always interesting birds to be seen along the way.

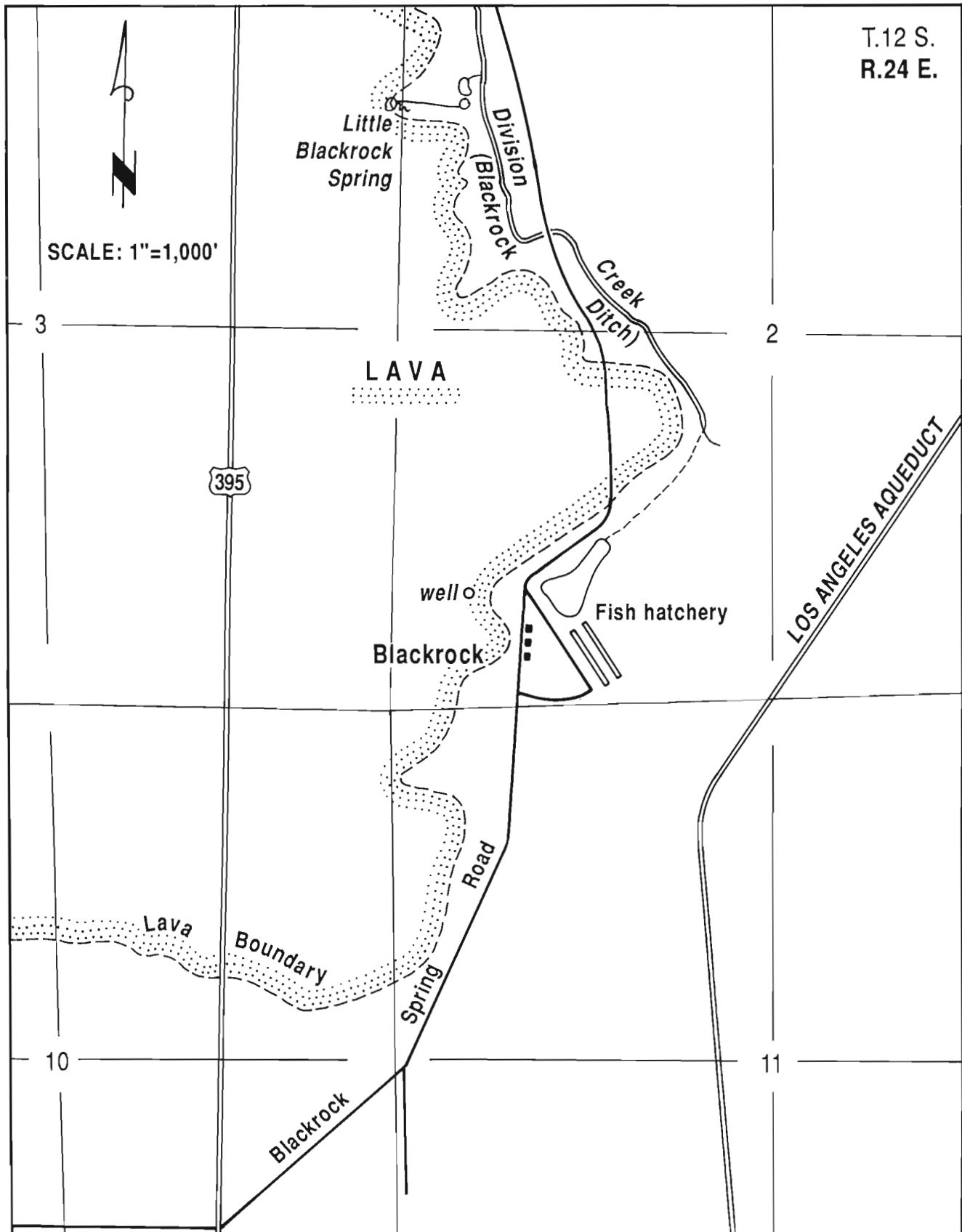


Figure 1. The Black Rock area. After a map by Jack Fair.

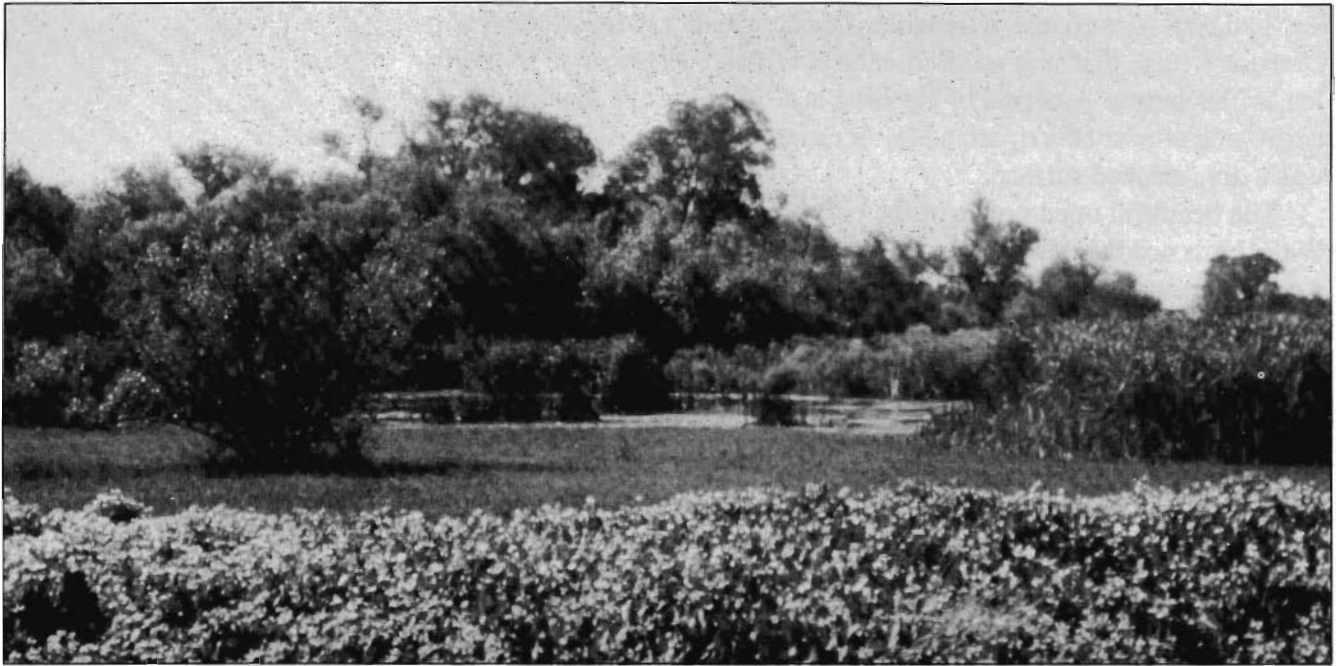
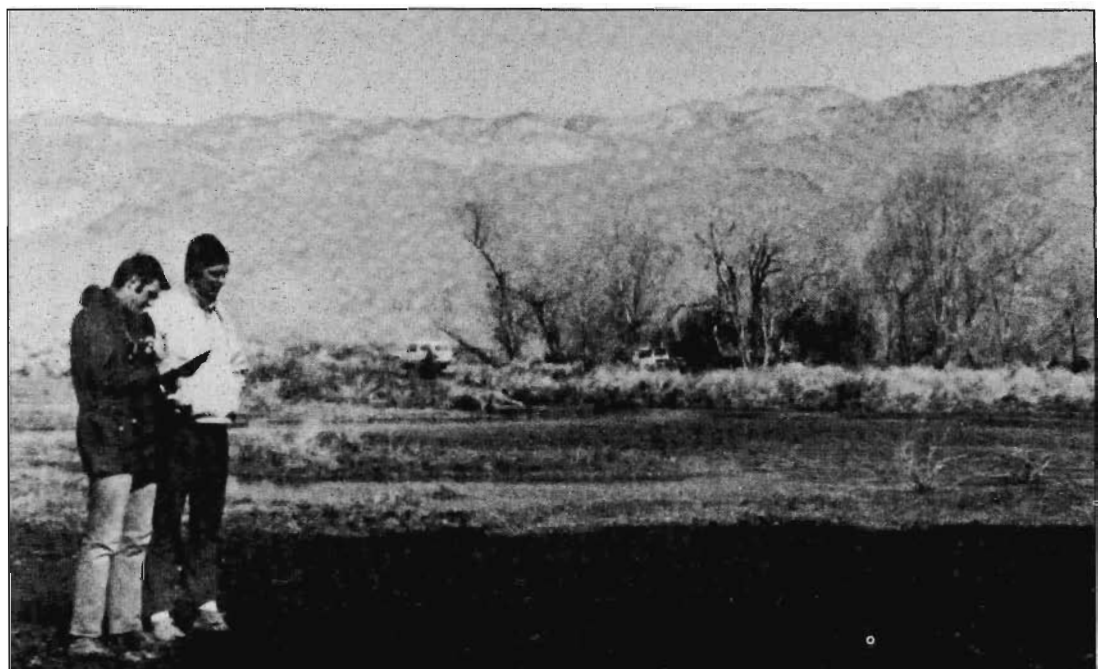


Figure 2. Little Black Rock, showing the main pond in the background. The white-flowering plant in the foreground is Yerba Mansa (Anemopsis), with Saltgrass Meadow between it and the pond.

The sad ending of Little Black Rock Spring occurred when it became the victim of groundwater pumping, beginning in the early 1970s (Figure 3). When the LADWP's pumping for the second aqueduct began to lower the flow from Black Rock Springs into the fish hatchery ponds there, the California Department of Fish and Game expressed concern. The LADWP responded by granting permission to locate a well to pump water for the hatchery ponds. This well, located just north of the main hatchery pond, was 1 km (0.6 mi) south of Little Black Rock Spring. As soon as it went into operation, the flow from Little Black Rock Spring diminished, then ceased. In response to complaints by Inyo citizens,

Figure 3. A close view of the pond, taken in 1974, when it was still being fed by water from the spring.



the LADWP tapped the Blackrock Ditch, which carried water from Division Creek, to divert water into the ponds and watercourse formerly fed by the spring. A period of flooding and drying of the site followed, destroying much of the riparian life. At times the bottom of the main pond was a dry, cracked surface.

The beautiful open ponds of the past no longer reflect the blue sky. Water birds no longer land there. The ponds are now clogged with growth, a condition which did not exist when they were fed by pristine spring water.

Other management practices contributed to the problem. The Saltgrass Meadow was being grazed by the Three Corner Round burros under a project managed by Jimmie Kelley under an LADWP lease. Although the grazing permit was said to be for a limited time, the animals were not removed until after they had grazed the saltgrass down to its roots. The burros had also climbed the volcanic rocks on the north and wiped out the desert mountain species. They have not come back. The saltgrass eventually recovered but not before the bordering Yerba Mansa (*Anemopsis californica*) had taken advantage of its weakened condition and intruded into its outer borders, reducing the size of the meadow. There seems to be some confusion as to who actually owns the spring. It appears to be on the line between sections 2 and 3, T.11 S., R. 34 E. The LADWP owns the property in Section 2, east of the line. That includes the meadow. The property west of the line in Section 3 is federal land managed by the Bureau of Land Management. A survey to determine ownership has not been completed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Maintenance of the ditch carrying water from the Blackrock Ditch has added to the impact on the native flora. The ditch has been cleaned out periodically by the LADWP's mechanical equipment. The extracted waste has been dumped along the edge of the ditch and over the vegetation. The ditch is now lined by small willows, but the flowers, including the lovely Scarlet Mimulus (*Mimulus cardinalis*), are long gone. Beavers have moved in and cut down the large willow that was the lookout for the Great Horned Owl.

A fence has been erected south of the spring and ponds. There is no trace now of the once abundant *Cordylanthus*. Only a single individual of *Thelypodium* was found in 1989, a depauperate specimen with a weak stem less than 2 ft (0.6 m) high. It hardly resembled the tall plumes that were once present at the spring. It would be difficult today to visualize Little Black Rock's former charm.

Each spring in this arid Owens Valley is the center of an abundance of flora and fauna and each spring is valuable. Little Black Rock was an exceptionally beautiful place. The death of any Owens Valley spring is a serious loss.