

Trails in the Dust

By Pete Clark

A great sea surrounds the place where I spent my formative years, a dry sea, made up of bunch grass between waves of sagebrush. Looking across this inland sea, it appears to be devoid of animal life, with the exception of the occasional prong horn antelope or mule deer. Don't let Mother Nature fool you. Dry, though they may be, the plains, hills and buttes of the high western desert teem with life, above ground and beneath the surface. Without spending much time in open country, few of the species living there will be seen.

Something that I like is to be on the prairie, just before daybreak gives the first hint of the rising sun, giving birth to a new day. As the morning light swells from the horizon, I look down at the myriad tiny tracks in the clear area surrounding a clump of bunch grass, melding with the surrounding clumps of sagebrush and yucca. The small area was a world of endeavor during the hours of darkness. The impressions in the dirt of the desert floor display the activities of small mammals, insects and arachnids, such as scorpions. The small mammal tracks are laid down by prairie mice, deer mice, chipmunks and what I have always called ground squirrels, but I have learned they are thirteen-striped gophers or leopard ground squirrels. Insect tracks may be left behind by dung beetles, stink bugs, crickets, ants or many other species of insects. I believe all of the arachnid tracks I have seen were made by scorpions, though I have seen many spider webs shining with the moisture of dew in the early light and holding breakfast for the owner. I have spent enough time in the boondocks that I have seen most of the small mammals and a lot of the bugs. When you are out there, if you are on a lightning trip, that won't happen.

If you are lucky when you are on the prairie, you might see a coyote, but I have seen far more coyotes here in the city than I ever saw in Wyoming, Colorado, Montana or Utah. In all of my years out in the sagebrush, I have seen one live bobcat and no lynx. One ubiquitous animal is the prairie dog. They are also here in the city. You will see prairie dogs, unless you go to one of the growing number of areas where they have been exterminated. These animals provide valuable services, such as turning the soil, keeping the ground from becoming hard like cement, and their burrows channel rain and snow melt to the water table, keeping a good portion of the water from being lost through evaporation and runoff.

It has been half of a lifetime since I have been on the prairie at dawn and I am very happy to have had the experience many times. I fervently hope the descendants of the arachnids, bugs and mammals, large and small, were out there on the prairie this morning, before dawn, doing their thing.