Few and far between: moments in the North American Desert  

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BOOK REVIEW


By its title and theme, Few and Far Between could be intended as a scholarly book of science. After all, the study of deserts is science, and archeology and anthropology are forms of science. Photographs, too, can introduce one to science when presented accurately and factually. However, to one who has been trained academically about the deserts of North America (and who has trained others), to one who has lived in the deserts for a lifetime, the book presents a pictorial introduction to deserts for someone who is not trained in science. There is little in the book of scientific worth. Furthermore, it contains too many errors to be of much value to a scientist, but even the reader with limited knowledge of science should be presented with accurate information.

The book consists of the author’s photographs with captions and minimal discussions. In addition, one of the illustrations is a map of part of western North America showing the 4 different deserts of the continent, or presenting the “one desert” which the author repeatedly uses in his writing. The photographs, primarily studies in blacks, grays, and white, with a few in color, are the fundamental contributions to the publication. The written part of the volume is limited. From Tony Hillerman’s foreword and Campbell’s preface, it presents 3 sections—“Origins,” “The Face of the Desert,” and “Desert People”—concluding with an extensive though incomplete bibliography. The Museum of New Mexico Press is commended for the clean copy and reproduction of photographs and Campbell is complimented for his talents as a photographer, even those pictures not directly of the desert. He is criticized for the many errors found in the book and for using technical information without documentation.

The author has been described as an archeologist, anthropologist, photographer, and renaissance writer, and the book reveals all of those characteristics.

Perhaps only the author knows the meaning to the title Few and Far Between. It certainly cannot refer to the animals that are discussed in the book, because animals are common in deserts. It might refer to the scarcity of trees or other perennial plants because many of the photographs depict these organisms, but it couldn’t mean plants in general. Deserts are covered with ephemerals and other forbs when physical conditions are optimal.

The 14 color photographs are a part of the introduction to each of the 3 sections, and the 59 black-and-white photographs each occupy a full page accompanied by descriptive information on a facing page. This information is limited to 1 or 2 paragraphs, usually less than half a page. About half of these black-and-white photographs are in the section entitled “The Face of the Desert.” While the book is about the desert, not all photographs are appropriate to the desert. Photographs not related to the desert are marginally appropriate or totally inappropriate to the book’s title and main theme.

From a scientist’s perspective there are several objections to the book’s thesis. One is the repetitive reference to the “North American Desert” as a single geographic area. This is noted in the subtitle to the book and is repeated throughout the writing. The “Origins” section, page 2, contains a brief description of all Earth’s deserts. The statement is made that the “North American [desert] is fifth in size,” further suggesting there is a single desert. Science recognizes both physiographically and biologically 4 very different geographic areas and 4 unique deserts. Additionally, smaller regions such as eastern Washington and eastern Utah are desert,
One common entity is found in all these different deserts—the lack of adequate water throughout most of the year. However, this is only 1 reason for a region to be designated as desert. Other physical features include location of mountain ranges and direction of prevailing winds. Some of this is explained in Campbell’s introductory statements.

In his discussion of deserts on the different continents, Campbell almost apologetically includes the Arctic and Antarctic regions in his statement that “30 percent of the earth’s land surface is covered by desert.” The Arctic and Antarctic regions are, in fact, extremely cold deserts because water is not readily available to support life. However, the book is about the deserts of North America and, while illustrations of the Antarctica “desert” would be inappropriate, photographs of the Arctic region of North America would have made the book more complete. If one would read in some 19th-century historical writings of North America, a reference would be found to the “Great American Desert” of central North America, extending from Mexico into Canada. This extensive geographic region, now referred to as the grasslands biome of the continent, is no longer described as desert. However, it may be considered as appropriate an example of a desert as some of those written about and shown by Campbell. This Great American Desert might also have been included as a part of the “North American Desert” presented by the author.

Another objection to Campbell’s presentation in photograph and dialogue is the idea that the Great Basin Desert is found north and east of its actual physiographic boundaries (map on page xii). Admittedly, these extended regions are desert, but they cannot be correctly defined as Great Basin. Excluding the Arctic, the 4 primary deserts of North America are detailed in this map. Campbell’s map shows both the Great Basin Desert and the Mojave Desert incorrectly. The Great Basin Desert, for instance, does not extend northward into the state of Washington, nor eastward into central and southern Wyoming, nor into eastern Utah, nor into northwestern or southwestern Colorado. It certainly does not extend into northeastern Arizona nor into New Mexico. The Great Basin Desert conforms to the area covered by the Basin and Range Province and is more restricted in geographic area. (References: Physiography of Western United States, Nevin M. Fenneman, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1931; Natural Regions of the United States and Canada, Charles B. Hunt, W.H. Freeman and Company, 1974; Exploring the Great Basin, Gloria Griffen Cline, University of Oklahoma Press, 1963; The Trees and Shrubs of the Southwestern Deserts, Lyman Benson and Robert A. Darrow, University of Arizona Press and University of New Mexico Press, 1954; Deserts, James A. MacMahon, Alfred A. Knopf, 1985, this latter being one of The Audubon Society Nature Guides and the only reference of these 5 included in Campbell’s bibliography.)

Campbell’s map is also incorrect for the Mojave Desert. One of the important evidences of this desert is the Larrea/Ambrosia shrub association which extends into southwestern Washington County of Utah, into northwestern Mohave County of Arizona (both areas are shown on the map incorrectly as being Great Basin Desert), and along the Colorado River farther south than shown by Campbell’s map.

The book contains many errors and inconsistencies in writing. On page 4 the caption to the color photograph uses the binomial of the arrowweed as Pulchea servicea. The correct scientific name of this shrub is Pulchea servica. A statement is made on page 6 that the desert “encompasses all of Nevada,” which statement is in error. High mountains, certainly at elevations immediately below timberline on the northern slopes, are not desert, even though they are surrounded by desert. These high mountains are sometimes referred to as “islands in the sky,” but these islands are not part of the desert. A statement is made on page 50 about “the various desert mountains,” with a specific reference to “elevations of from more than nine thousand feet to more than fourteen thousand feet above sea level.” This is implied by Campbell to be desert.

On page 16 the author states that “the rain forests of the Northwest Coast, are the only true jungles of any temperate-zone region on earth.” This is not true of all such regions on Earth, but why is this even considered in a discussion on deserts? On unnumbered page 45 is the sentence, "Not a single major desert plant species of the Mexican state of Sonora, for example, grows in the desert of Washing­ton." With the great difference in latitudes (Sonora 30°N, Washington 45°N), how could
anyone knowledgeable of plants expect them to be similar in these geographically separated areas? Campbell reverts to the 19th- and early 20th-century reference to the "life zones of C. Hart Merriam" instead of using the now scientifically acceptable biomes idea.

On page 50 an incorrect statement is made that the "sage grouse is exclusive to the Great Basin." The known distribution of the Sage Grouse extends into southern Canada and central North America, far beyond the reaches of the Great Basin. Also on page 50 is a reference to "pronghorn antelope." This mammal is admittedly a pronghorn, but it is assuredly not an antelope even though the once-popular song refers to "where the deer and the antelope play."

On page 52 is the statement that "the Great Basin Desert grows relatively few plant species." The plant species may be few in number compared to a tropical rain forest, perhaps, but a great variety of Forbs and annuals are found in all North American deserts.

Reference to the creosotebush (this should be 2 words, not 1) occurs on pages 53 and 54, with the statement that "each ... parent root may produce dozens of bushes over thousands of square feet of desert floor." The creosote bush does clone to produce other plants over time and over limited areas, but over "thousands of square feet" is an exaggeration.

The full-color illustration on page 55 is of the purple prickly pear (Opuntia violacea). According to N.L. Britton and J.N. Rose (The Cactaceae, Volume I, page 144), this scientific name is questionable. These authors explain that this plant "can never be critically identified" because it was described from drawings brought back from the Southwest and not from actual specimens.

It is stated on page 56 that "the Sonoran [Desert] runs right down to the sea" and "it has its equally unique shore fauna, including great sea turtles." How can an animal, such as a sea turtle, that spends its entire life in the ocean, except for brief moments on land for oviposition, be referred to as a desert animal?

The photo and narrative on page 58 and unnumbered page 59 claim that "arroyos result ... from the absence of close-growing vegetation." This appears to be quite true about the one pictured in New Mexico, but there are countless examples throughout the American Southwest where arroyos do produce diverse species and large numbers of plants.

The caption to the photo on unnumbered page 61 is "storm on San Rafael Reef." This photo shows clouds, but no storm. Similarly, that on page 62 and unnumbered page 63 is "cloudburst on the Red Desert" without any evidence of water.

Ground temperatures are discussed on page 64 with the note that they "have reached a staggering 190 degrees F." In the opinion of the writer of this review, documentation of this temperature should be included. Another inconsistency is found on page 72 in reference to the photo of a playa. The statement is made that the floor of a playa may be "as flat as a tabletop and as solid as a rock." There is no objection to the statement, but the playa shown is fractured with mud cracks and is anything but flat and certainly not solid because of these cracks. On page 74 a statement is made that quagmires are "bottomless." Perhaps this is included as a form of poetic expression, but quagmires are not really bottomless.

A "north country prickly pear" is shown and discussed on page 90 and unnumbered page 91. In reference to fruit size, the expression is used that "desert prickly pears bear fruit two inches long; others, as with those of this little northernmost species, are as big as thimbles." Compared to 2 inches, a thimble should be referred to as small rather than big. Is there such a thing as a 2-inch thimble?

Swallows' nests are shown on unnumbered page 107 with the name of the Cliff Swallow given as Hirundo pyrrhonota on the facing page. The genus name for this bird is Petrochelidon, not Hirundo.

A statement is made on page 112 that the Joshua tree "nearly exclusively belongs to the Mojave [Desert]." The map on page xii shows the Mojave Desert scarcely in Arizona where Joshua trees are common and not at all in southwestern Utah where they are abundant. The word "nearly" probably justifies these inclusions.

In the narrative on page 116 the first paragraph is about the accompanying picture of a Mexican blue palm. The binomial used for the plant, however, is a synonym and not the accepted scientific name. The second paragraph about the Cochimi Indians has no recognizable reference to the picture of the palm.
The logical explanation might be that this second paragraph introduces “Desert People,” which is the last section of the book beginning on the next page.

The caption to the color photograph on page 120 is about the prickly pear cactus as a food source. The photograph, however, shows a tree cholla, not a prickly pear cactus.

The discussion on page 121 is about “rabbit drives.” The author then states that “fifteen or more species of other rodents were eaten” (emphasis added). This statement suggests that rabbits are rodents.

According to the information on page 127, “Chaco Canyon lies squarely in a Great Basin Desert environment.” As stated previously in this review, New Mexico is not in the Great Basin, although the environment may be somewhat similar, and certainly the area in and around Chaco Canyon is suggestive of desert.

The photo on unnumbered page 136, showing a salmon fisher’s roost in Wasco County, Oregon, is interesting historically, but the Columbia River and its tributaries are definitely not in any desert. Like so many other references, some of which are stated in this book review, Duchesne County, Utah (reference page 144), is not even remotely near a desert.

Despite these technical criticisms, the reader of Few and Far Between should be entertained by the writing, especially such poetic expressions as “I got to go along” (page x), “desertic Pacific coast” (page 16), the “poisoned water to boot” (page 20), the “honest river” and the “exotic rivers” (page 68). On the other hand, the reader may find it monotonous with some of the redundancies that occur.

Campbell may have been more at peace with his science readers had the draft been more carefully critiqued and edited by a competent scientist, and had the author and editors paid more attention to detail and documentation of what supposedly is fact. Few and Far Between is obviously not intended for the scientist, but it is a photographer’s contribution showing his ability to record in that medium.

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