



Organ Pipe: Life on the Edge (Desert Places)

Ms. Carol Ann Bassett

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Deep in the heart of the Sonoran Desert lies an oasis of ebony mountains, golden poppies, stately saguaros—and the organ pipe cactus, "a prickly octopus turned on its head."

A terrain where one learns to pay attention to the details: the tracks of a sidewinder in the sand, the tiny eggs of a cactus wren, the flash of a vermilion flycatcher against the azure sky.

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument lies in southwestern Arizona on the Mexican border. It is an isolated park that for Carol Ann Bassett has long been a place of solitude—a silent refuge where she often camped out alone to capture the natural rhythms of the desert. Photographer Michael Hyatt hiked through Organ Pipe to visually document its subtle beauty in the Ajo Mountains and the valley of the Ajo, and at Quitobaquito, a rare desert oasis.

Few visitors may brave Organ Pipe during summer, when the temperature can reach 120 degrees, but for Bassett and Hyatt the searing heat is but a harbinger of rain, when normally dry arroyos surge with rust-colored water and desert tarantulas come out to mate. Bassett introduces readers to Organ Pipe's cultural heritage as well: Spanish missionaries, Anglo settlers, and the Tohono O'odham and the Hia Ced O'odham people who still travel there to gather cactus fruit during Hasan Bakmasad, "saguaro moon." She also considers the changes taking place throughout the park, including the onrush of immigrants passing through in search of better lives in the United States.

This small, lyrical book is a sensitive reflection on the heart of the Sonoran Desert. It reminds us of the beauty to be found in unexpected places—and of our intimate connection with the wild.

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