

Water plays by different rules in the desert. It appears when we don't expect it, hides when we want it most. One day we find an old spring dry and another usually barren rock swimming with life. Rain falls from dark thunderheads, but never reaches the parched ground. Dry washes abruptly become rivers. In all this unpredictability, one thing holds true: water in the desert enables life. Surely this gift of intense life,

so rare in desert country, is worthy of the name *magic*. Surely it is worthy of our attention and gratitude.

Here's the simple fact: there is no greater alchemy on earth than the simple addition of water to dry country. Medieval technicians in turreted castles, cauldrons of quicksilver bubbling and steaming, strove to fashion gold from simpler metals. But none could hope for as fundamental a magic nor as priceless a product as the collaboration of clear water and parched earth. Together they spin the fabric of life out of invisible threads. Add water to the desert and you create life itself. Next to this, what is gold?

Whether in a rain puddle suddenly infused with prehistoric-looking tadpole shrimp, a seep of fossil water squeezed to

the surface by tilted rock layers and framed by ferns, or a desert stream bursting with birdsong in spring—there is no greater alchemy, no finer fabrication. Wealth has long been associated with scarcity—rare items are always valued more highly than common ones. Water in the desert epitomizes wealth: rich green life comprises the scarcest, most enabling treasure among stony hills.

The story of water in the desert, though, is not only about miracles and natural splendor. For water does indeed represent wealth in desert lands, and like all forms of wealth, it has often inspired rash and greedy human actions. Landscapes once rich with life have been



degraded beyond recognition. Green worlds have turned brown. Exploration of desert wetlands—whether on foot, with photographs, or in words— involves vacillating between tremendous, uplifting beauty and great,

heartbreaking degradation. We offer the images and words in your hands that you might grasp the beauty more readily and join the chorus of voices calling for an end to despoiling of these treasure-lands.

White pelican (*Pelecanus erythorhynchos*) on Pond Loop in the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico.