

STEPHANIE MARTIN

Flicker, 2017
Intaglio Etching, 6.8 x 9 in



Flicker

smartin

COURTESY THE ARTIST

RICHARD M. LANGE

A Little Extra Weight

Birdwatching in
the High Sierra

Every summer, in preparation for my annual backpacking trip to the Sierra Nevada, I load my pack with all the usual equipment—tent, sleeping bag, bear canister stuffed with food, portable stove, cookware, pocketknife, water filter, etc.—and then put the pack on to make sure the load is secure and the weight properly distributed. It's at this moment that I usually mumble something like, "Holy crap, that's heavy!" or simply, "Uggghh!" Despite some upgrades to lighter equipment, the forfeiture of creature comforts like novels and my iPod, and food choices that prioritize lightness over taste and nutritional value, my pack always weighs at least forty pounds. When I take longer trips, which require more food, it gets closer to fifty. Regardless of the number, before I set out on the trail I always break the cardinal rule of backpacking by adding a few pounds of wholly unnecessary weight. I bring a pair of binoculars (two pounds) and David Sibley's *Field Guide to the Birds of Western North America* (one pound four ounces).

My early backpacking trips almost always included some type of misadventure, usually due to poor planning or simple foolishness. I took my first trip, at fifteen, with my friends Ron Storm and Mark Warner. It was a ten-mile two-nighter along the Pacific Crest Trail in the Laguna Mountains, a modest range of oak and dry pine forest east of San Diego. Though my friends and I were all from San Diego proper and had no wilderness experience beyond a few car-camping trips with our respective families, we saw ourselves as rugged outdoorsmen. We decided that, instead of bringing a tent or sleeping bags, which, in our view, were for city-dwelling sissies, we'd bring a single cotton blanket that Ron's mother had recently purchased in Tijuana and sleep out under the stars. Unaware that, in March, the nighttime temperature at five thousand feet can be quite a bit colder than it is at sea level, we spent the first night violently shivering and woke to find that everything from the water in our canteens to the laces of our sneakers to the tips of our hair had frozen solid.

In the years that followed I got full-body cases of poison oak in the Ventana Wilderness multiple times, was snowed on in famously hot and dry Death Valley, took my friend Mike on a "shortcut" through Yosemite's Tiltill Valley that led straight into a crotch-deep bog, and got my then-girlfriend Molly and myself scary lost in an isolated part of Joshua Tree. But as the years went on and the trips