

Nature Note



a pipet's best friend

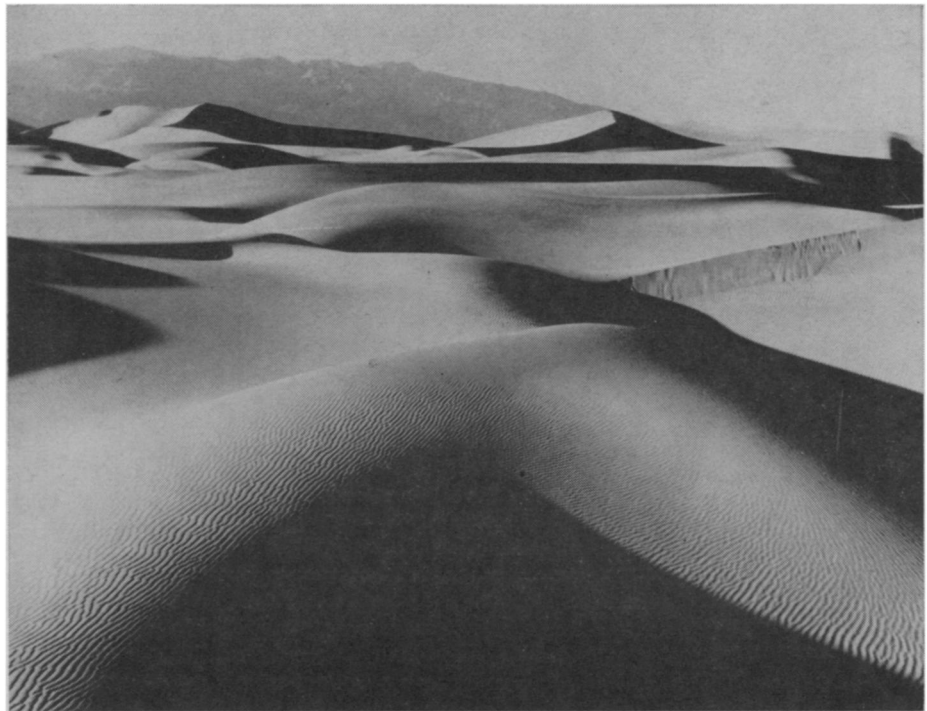
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Sand Dunes

The constant wind builds sand piles in many places—on deserts, beside oceans and lakes, along rivers traversing arid regions.

As winds scud along the earth's surface, they pick up particles of fragmented rock, drop them, pick them up again, dashing them against each other and rubbing off their rough edges. Eventually the rock particles become smoothed and rounded into tiny grains of sand that accumulate into dunes extending in size from tiny ripples to 100-mile-long "whale-backs" rising several hundred feet and weighing millions of tons.

Many sand dunes are composed primarily of quartz, a mineral that is tough and chemically resistant. Other dunes are formed of materials such as gypsum, coral or lava that has been broken and ground by the wind.

There are many types of sand dunes—the crescent shaped barchan and longitudinal sword dune, the shorter transverse dunes, pyramidal and star-shaped dunes, and the parabolic or U-shaped dune whose crescent tips point into the wind.

Active dunes constantly change shape and position. Sand is blown up the gently sloping windward side, rolls over the crest and tumbles down the steeper lee side. The whole dune can

march in the direction the wind is blowing at speeds ranging from a few feet to more than 250 feet a year. Dunes have suffocated forests and villages, even cities. Farmlands, railroads and forests in America and Europe have been covered with sand. The ancient cities of Acre, Tyre, Tottosa and Laodicea on the Mediterranean have been entombed by creeping dunes. Today, moving dunes threaten not only Egypt's Suez Canal and Lake Chad, but cities in southern Algeria and Turkistan.

Along the southern shores of Lake Michigan, westerly winds are gradually moving sand dunes inland across a forest floor in Indiana's Dune Park. Not all dunes migrate, however. They can be anchored down and held in place by intertwining root systems of grasses and shrubs.

Dunes can grow to enormous size, reaching 600 feet high at Great Sand Dunes in Colorado, 700 feet high in Saudi Arabia and southern Iran, and 1,000 feet on the Sahara. Yet they are relatively rare. Contrary to general opinion and movie romances, the great deserts are mostly barren rock. Drifting sand covers only about one-seventh of the Sahara, about one-third of the Arabian Desert and less than one-tenth of other deserts.