

Wild Wednesday. 5 January 2022. Copper, Nickel, & Gold by Walt Anderson

The New Year in the Granite Dells started cold and clear: bright sun, harsh shadows, cloudless sky. Not what usually inspires me as a nature photographer. But I needed some exercise, so I decided to brave the elements and make the most of what I could find. I recalled the wise advice of Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: “The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside by a generous hand. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days.” So I bundled up and headed out in nature to look for figurative pennies, hoping to maybe find a nickel’s worth. Instead, I found gold!



Photography is “writing with light,” and the primary source of light on earth is our sun. Looking directly at the sun, especially through a telephoto lens, is a path to retinal ruin, so I sought ways to use available light creatively without staring at the solar furnace. An oak along the Iron King Trail created a sunburst that left me beaming. Then I was off to find other subjects, knowing that traditional landscape scenes in this harsh light were not going to be rewarding. I needed to find some of those pennies Annie Dillard suggested.



Backlighting can provide some nice contrasts, and this old log demonstrated the differences between shady and sunlit areas on a frosty day. A nice penny, for sure.



Those manzanitas that survived the horrific July hailstorm sent out clusters of new leaves, and backlighting sets them off especially well, showing the veins of conduction within the leaves. Plants don't just receive illumination from the sun; they use it in the powerful process of photosynthesis, and I could just imagine those sugar factories at work. I also thought about the little aphids nice and cozy in their scarlet galls on those leaves, imbibing those sugars directly. What a life!



Backlighting is also the perfect way to show translucence, as in this large quartz crystal I came upon. A little photographic alchemy almost turned this into gold!



While focusing intimate landscapes, I was suddenly aware of a herd of deer observing me. I observed back. Side-lighting provided some nice definition, contrasting highlight and shadow areas.



A little rain and snow in the Dells just before the new year left a few puddles along the Iron King Trail. These froze, and then the weak sun rays warmed pebbles and leaves enough to create rings around them. Pennies galore!



For a moment, I was transported into deep space, where an asteroid trailing ice crystals spun wildly against an infinite backdrop of stars. Out of this world.



The Iron King Trail is a former railroad grade, where granite outcrops were blasted and split to create passage through the wonderland of rocks. Northern exposures receive little or no direct sunlight at this time of year, and I discovered small icefalls of great beauty. Having started on this hike with no great expectations, I was now feeling very wealthy indeed.



Liquid water is not a mineral, but when naturally frozen, it becomes one. Now this is real mineral water! It flows slowly (as does glass) and can form structures that are temporary stalactites and stalagmites.



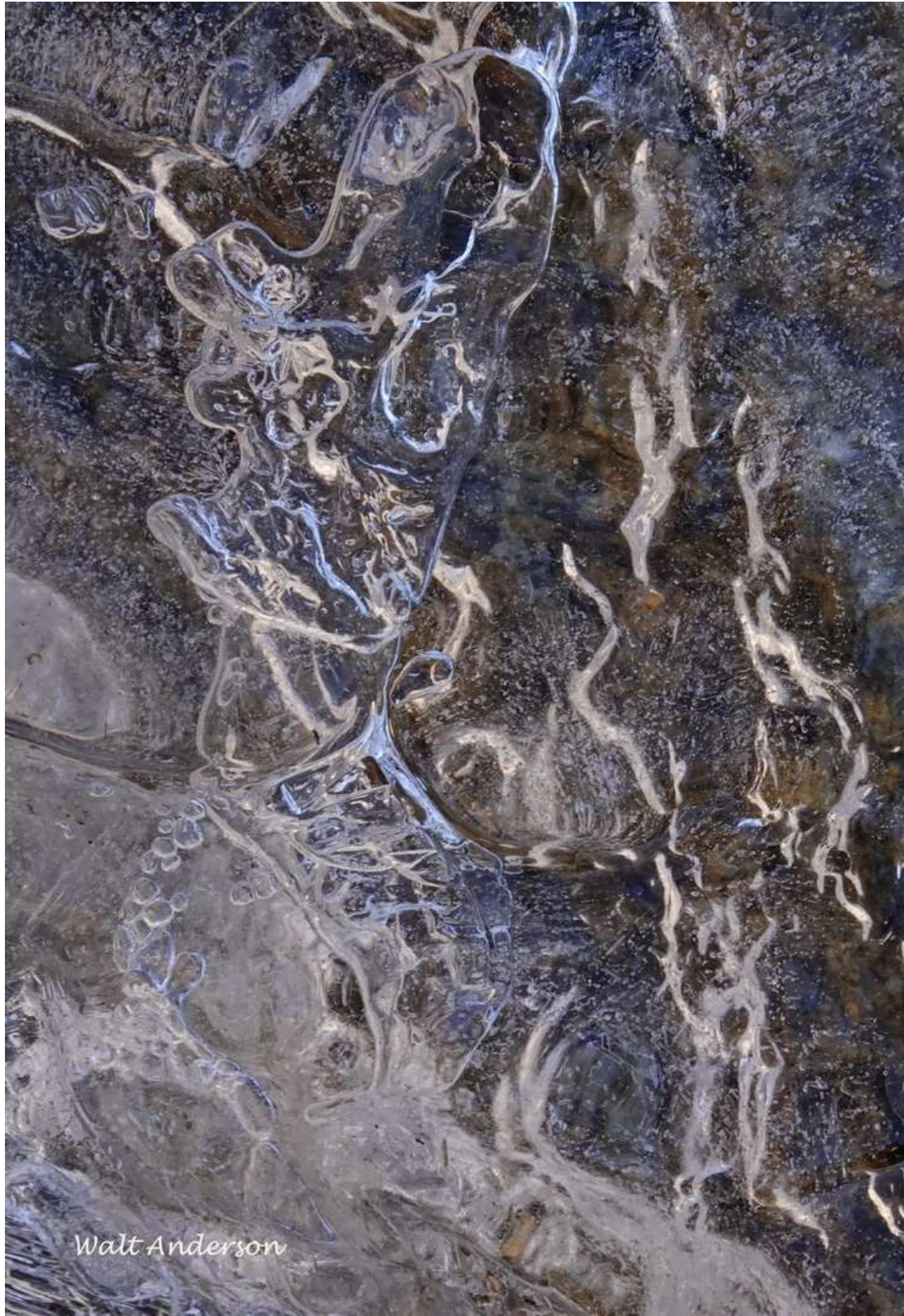
Ice is a rock, and when it is subjected to great pressure, as in a glacier, it becomes a metamorphic rock. These icicles, however, have a low melting point, especially compared to the granite behind. You can see the actual transformations from a solid to a liquid at the tips of the icicles. That liquid may gather with more of its kind to travel in creeks in the Dells, or it may simply evaporate and become water vapor (humidity) in that gaseous mix we call air.



There is such magic in water! By this time on my hike, my elemental checking account had grown to bezosian proportions. What had seemed like a poor day for even carrying a camera had turned into a day of priceless miracles. It reminded me that all I have to do is practice my calling and seek a naturalist's ways of seeing.



Icy abstractions were there for me to find them.



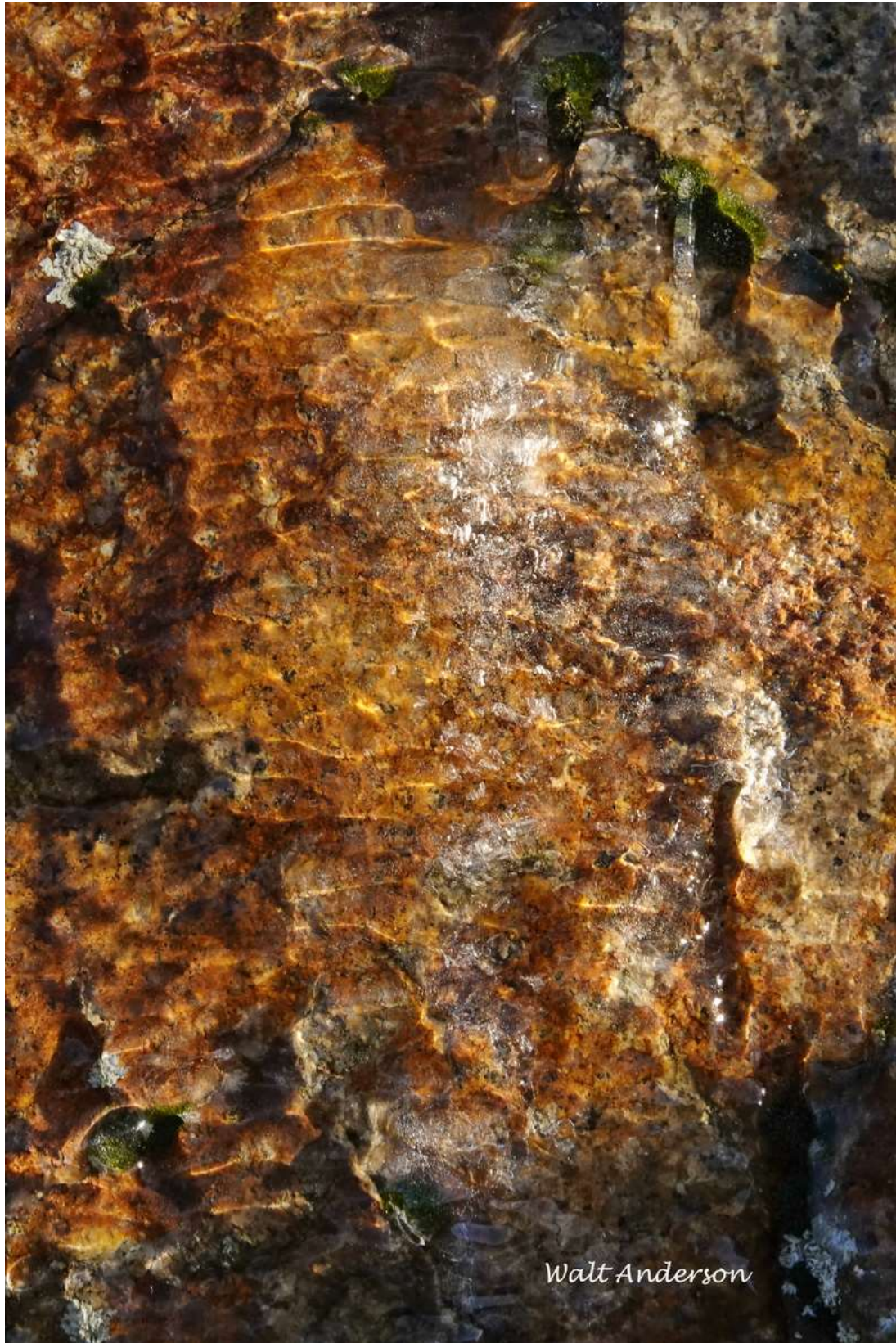
Letting my imagine fly, I found a mermaid etched in glass. What do YOU see?



Here is a pot-bellied rabbit or bear scaling a cliff. Your ideas?



Here I am reminded of the ominous but fascinating mammatus clouds that hang around near tornadoes.



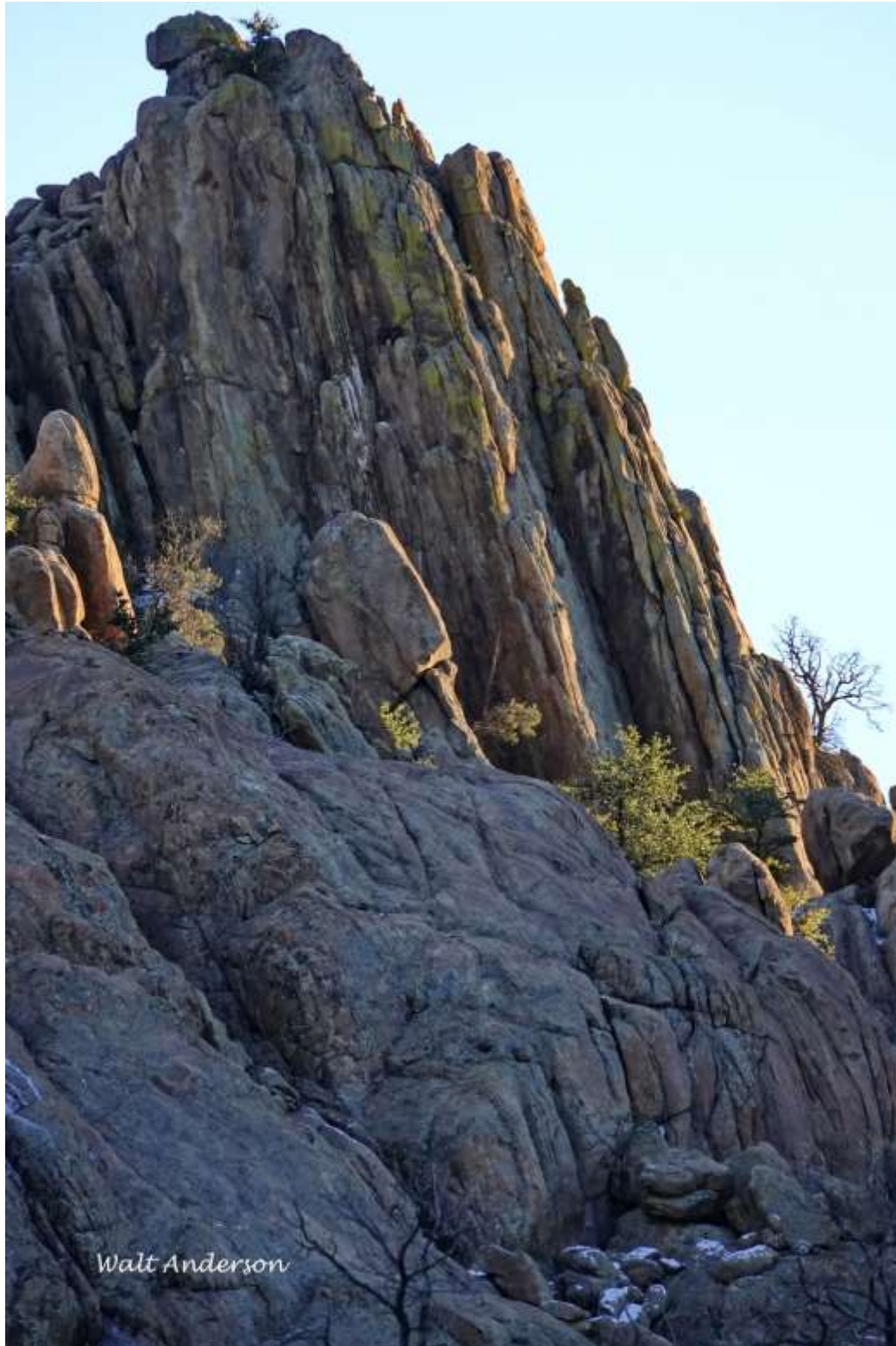
Out of context, this looks like ripples radiating outward in a pond. This “pond” is a vertical cliff!



Transparent ice “flows” over lichens. Now this is cool!



On a drier north face, a bit of residual snow graces lush lichens that contrast coolly with the warm quartz crystals of granite. How amazing that life can grow directly on rock! It's complex life too; lichens are now known to be composite organisms composed of a cyanobacterium or green alga (the photosynthetic partner), an ascomycete fungus, and a basidiomycete yeast! It's an incredible ménage à trois (French for "household of three"). There are over 20,000 named "species" of lichens, which really ought to be thought of as mutualistic communities. There could be hundreds of such symbiotic organisms in the Granite Dells, and yet how often we just take them for granted. Let's give lichens their due by observing and protecting them! Our victories in preserving hundreds of acres of open space in the Dells will assure that these rocks will not be blasted to smithereens (whatever those are!), destroying these remarkable symbionts. Head out to the Dells (or your favorite rocks) and admire these successional pioneers, which often are the first life forms to colonize rock. Some may be among the oldest known organisms on the planet!



Wonderful lichen habitat! The winter sun is now very low, catching just the southwest faces of the peaks. I am pleased, for this brief time creates the light that artists crave. Study the rocks to see just how many shades and tints are represented here.



A raven takes flight and heads toward a gilded peak that catches the sun's last warmth before nightfall returns the chill of winter.



That light is reflected in a frozen pond, more of the gold that rewards me for heading out to seek pennies this afternoon. It reminds me not to prejudge any day. There are always riches just waiting or a receptive mind and heart to find them.



Elegant branches dancing on the golden surface of the ice.



Cadmium-orange granite and ultramarine sky transformed as icy abstraction. I'm in awe (and yes, sometimes I'm an awed fellow).



The Dells is settling into night, and my last photo features the skeleton of a hail-stripped pinyon, with the shape of Granite Mountain behind. My first photo foray of 2022 has exceeded all my expectations, and I hope that begins a trend that will apply to the entire year. Happy New Year, my friends!