

[MyHomeIdeas](#) & [MyRecipes](#) networks

Sunset

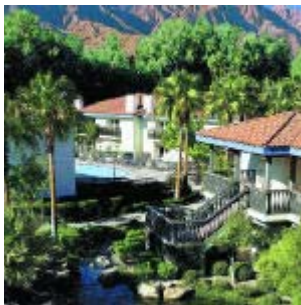
« [Return to Southern California's desert glory](#)

Southern California's desert glory

Don't miss Anza-Borrego's March wildflowers



Magic carpet: Purple blooms of desert sand verbena sweep across Anza-Borrego's valley.
Photo: Larry Ulrich



[Seeing Anza-Borrego more](#)

If you want to catch the spring wildflower displays at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park at their peak, a lot of things have to go right. The timing and intensity of rains.

The timing of your own arrival. It's all part of the allure. The beauty of Anza-Borrego's wildflower bloom — often the best in California, and one of the best in all the West — is not just the physical display but its ephemeral nature. This is glory on the go.

Beauty at lizard level

Like an enormous fleece-jacketed chuckwalla, I'm on my belly, shimmying along the floor of Anza-Borrego, about 90 miles east of San Diego. The chuckwalla is born to such close-to-the-ground activity; I, much less so. I'm pushing with my feet and pulling as best I can with my elbows. The motivation for such undignified locomotion is to get as low as possible to photograph a once-in-a-century wildflower display.

Seen from lizard level, the blossoms — sand verbena, dune primrose, and desert sunflower — spread across the dunes, seeming to fill the desert with purple and cream and yellow until reaching the bare mountains beyond. Black-and-orange painted lady butterflies flutter above the verbena. Some alight, then ride the clusters of blossoms as they sway with the quickening wind. It is a garden gone wild.

Even before I reach the low desert of eastern San Diego County, it's clear that something special is happening. Coming down County Highway S22, the normally scrubby slopes glow yellow with blooming brittlebush. Views of the valley floor reveal a desert cloaked in green.

Arriving in Borrego Springs is also a shock. The normally languid town is filled with day-trippers from San Diego and more serious desert rats, all drawn by reports of a record bloom. With Borrego Springs' 1950s-era stylings, the atmosphere is reminiscent of a vintage sci-fi movie where mobs throng some remote outpost to see an alien spacecraft that has crash-landed. But luckily it's a Sunday, and by evening the town has pretty much cleared out.

I'm relieved when things quiet down. I love the solitude that 600,000-acre Anza-Borrego provides, as well as the serendipitous encounters my friend Tom and I have had with people who are equally passionate about the desert. Up in Alcoholic Pass, there's a U.S. Coast Guard environmental analyst from Alaska, hopped up on a blend of caffeine and desert air, who makes annual pilgrimages to get back into the sun and see the bare bones of Earth free of the thick forests of his home. Down in Blair Valley, we meet up with a young San Diego dude getting his final blast of the desert before heading to Prague for a year. And then there are all the guys you encounter at backcountry stream crossings: manly men in manly trucks who like to talk about torque and winches, but who also harbor a soft spot for the pretty flowers of spring.

Anza-Borrego at its peak

The nighttime serenade of coyotes fades to silence as dawn comes to the desert. We head up Coyote Canyon, a dependable area for wildflowers with access to the trailhead for Alcoholic Pass, where we had witnessed a major bloom the year before.

The display is not of the delicate desert ephemerals but of larger shrubs and cactus. When we were last here, Alcoholic Pass was filled with indigo bush and its fragrant deep blue blooms. Ocotillo, the iconic Anza-Borrego plant, dominated the slopes. Like the desert itself, the twisting, thorny stems of ocotillo can appear bare and lifeless, but given moisture they leaf out and produce gorgeous scarlet flowers.

Considering the vision of the day before, we're expecting a prime display. But the bloom is surprisingly modest, particularly the ocotillo, which almost appear to be sitting out this spring. Still, the morning has hardly been a disappointment—all along the road leading to the trailhead, Arizona lupine and desert dandelion paint the sand purple and gold.

The wind picks up, and we decide to make another visit to the dunes. Despite strong gusts, the blossoms seem to be holding up. But wandering around, I notice some less densely flowered areas before a flash of gold catches my eye. It is the almost metallic stripe on the back of a sphinx moth caterpillar, and I realize that the verbena all around me is being devoured by hordes of these binging creatures. Back down on my belly, a closer look reveals mandibles in perpetual motion as stalks, leaves, and blossoms disappear with frightening speed.

So it goes with desert wildflowers. I feel darn fortunate to have caught this rapidly vanishing display — and so, I suspect, do the caterpillars. Just about every other time I've visited Anza-Borrego, there's been some guy who'll say, "Oh, you should have been here a few days ago" or a few years ago or whatever. Listening to such boasts, I vowed that if I ever got lucky enough to catch Anza-Borrego at its peak, I'd never taunt anyone with such what-coulda-beens. But you know what? You definitely should have been here.

Matthew Jaffe

Printed from:

<http://www.sunset.com/travel/california/southern-californias-desert-glory-00400000016510/>

Copyright © 2009 Sunset Publishing Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#) .