

CARRIZO PLAIN

California's Serengeti

By Chuck Graham

At the foot of the Caliente Mountains a herd of Tule elk browsed across the sweeping grasslands of the Carrizo Plain National Monument. Through my dusty binoculars I could see about 40 cows and calves munching on an array of lush, dewy wildflowers just north of Painted Rock.



I was roughly two miles east of the herd and had never seen elk on the plain before. With the sun at their backs I managed to close the gap to about 200 yards, maneuvering with a 300mm lens, while staying low to the ground in a seasonal arroyo draped in tidy tips and gnarled tumbleweeds. Able to fire off a few frames, I backed away from the elk letting them enjoy the spring's bounty.

Along with Tule elk, pronghorn antelope also share the open plain. North America's fastest land mammal can gallop up to 50 mph — crossing the grasslands between the Temblor and Caliente Mountains in blinding speeds. Because of these herds, the Carrizo Plain has come to be known as “California's Serengeti.”

This relatively pristine landscape is a safe haven for the highest concentration of threatened and endangered wildlife in the state. The national monument turned 11 years old in April, the last of California's once-vast grasslands clinging to the protection set forth by former President Bill Clinton.

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PHOTO: **Chuck** Graham



Natural Wonders Abound

Every time I enter the Carrizo Plain my anticipation mounts. What will I see and experience that I didn't the time before? The abundant silence of this remote wilderness engulfs me until a blunt-nosed leopard lizard scampers across the road, or a badger mows through the tallest grasses.

"It's a unique, beautiful area," said Jonah Hurl, resource manager of the Carrizo Plain for the Bureau of Land Management the past 18 years. "It's a place where you can go without seeing or hearing anyone."

Two winters ago, my wife Lori and I saw two barn owls roosting inside an alcove of a sandstone cathedral. They flew over to the sunny side of the gritty outcropping to ward off the morning chill. They landed on a slab of sandstone covered in a montage of

crimson and auburn lichen the same shades as the owl's wings.

On another occasion after heavy winter rains, we were driving on Simmler Road on the eastern fringe of Soda Lake. We were moving slowly, careful not to get stuck in the mud, when Lori spotted a baby black-tailed jackrabbit. It was alone, separated from its mother and cold, huddling in a muddy rut. Its mottled fur was soaked from the previous night's rain and it was shivering. I pulled it out of the mud and held it close to my chest facing the warm morning sun until it was dry. It was weeks from growing into its submarine-like feet and it needed a lot of luck to survive marauding coyotes, San Joaquin kit foxes and raptors. Reluctantly we left it behind, but it was nature's way.

On several trips to the Carrizo Plain I've gone without seeing another soul, so it came as a surprise that the national monument





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brings in anywhere from 40,000 to 60,00 visitors per year at a place where the next gas station or market is 50 miles away in any one direction.

“It’s totally dependent on wildflowers,” continued Hurl, “April is the busiest month. The spring of 2010 was a banner year for wildflowers.”

It’s true. Soda Lake Road runs for 50 miles through the Carrizo Plain, and in 2010 the Temblor Mountains to the east and most of the grasslands were splashed in swaths of purple, yellow, pink and gold.

Golden Hour

It was a lung-busting ascent at dawn, rising above the floor of the Carrizo Plain, achy knees churning my mountain bike to its highest

summit at 5,106 feet. I left the sweeping grasslands and lost myself in the oak woodlands and pine forests while pedaling up Caliente Ridge for a different perspective of the vast grasslands.

Aside from old cattle ranching roads and remnants of ranches dating back to the 1940s, the Carrizo Plain suffers from very little human impact. In fact, ravens and raptors have taken over those weather-beaten manmade structures and made them into their own. Old windmills, water tanks and teetering barns are fair game for annual nest sites.

My eyes were tearing up in the frigid 20-degree temperatures and my lungs burned with each deep breath. It was silent except for my huffing and puffing. Gratefully I pulled up to a natural overlook to catch my breath as shadows retreated across the sweeping plain.

As I neared the summit at the top of the ridge, I spooked a



It swooped over me and continued east out over the grasslands, vanishing against the stark landscape of the Elkhorn Plain in the southeast corner of the monument.

PHOTO: **Chuck** Graham

CARRIZO PLAIN Facts

GETTING THERE:

From Highway 33 head north to Highway 166 and turn right. Ten minutes east turn left on Soda Lake Road to enter the National Monument.

CAMPING:

There are two free campgrounds, the KCL Campground and the Selby Campground. Potable water is available. Bring all food and gear. Next available facilities are 50 miles in every direction, www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/bakersfield/Programs/carrizo.html

VISITOR CENTER:

The Guy L. Goodwin Education Center is open seasonally from the beginning of December to the end of May. Normal days and hours of operation during the winter and spring season are Thursday through Sunday, 9:00AM to 4:00PM. www.blm.gov/ca/bakersfield/goodwin.html.

majestic golden eagle roosting in a gnarled oak tree. It swooped over me and continued east out over the grasslands, vanishing against the stark landscape of the Elkhorn Plain in the southeast corner of the monument. What would take me half-a-day's ride, hell, the raptor was already there.

Soda Lake

The flock of American avocets skimmed the surface of Soda Lake maybe a millimeter separating their wing tips from the shimmering shallows. They gathered inside a tiny cove sharing it with a bevy of sandpipers and long-billed curlews.

Soda Lake is the largest natural alkali lake in California and during wet winters attracts migrating sandhill cranes. During the dry season Soda Lake becomes a blinding white, 3,000-acre saltpan,

the midday glare seen from miles away. But at sunrise and sunset the edge of the lake is one of the more tranquil places across the Carrizo Plain. It's a place to wander and reflect. It's also a good time to see some of the 180 bird species that frequent the National Monument.

The best place to do this is along the boardwalk that meanders along the west shore of the alkali lake, well situated for setting up a spotting scope or scanning with binoculars. Shorebirds and geese fly in by the hundreds, Soda Lake being part of the Pacific Flyway, the lonely, wide open expanse a safe haven for flora and fauna alike.

Back on Highway 166 unfortunately signaled the end of another Carrizo Plain experience, leaving behind the grasslands, soothing silence and too many natural wonders to count. That is

until once again I feel the tug inside to pack up my truck and climb Highway 33 to return once more to "California's Serengeti."

