



## WILDLIFE VIEWING & BIRDING



**ABOVE**  
Providence Mountains State Recreation Area  
PHOTO BY D. A. DEMEO

Observing the varied wildlife within the California deserts can be a never-ending quest. A remarkable assortment of birds, waterfowl, reptiles, mammals, and plants live within these boundaries, some only temporarily. Many of these animals have made amazing adaptations to survive in the desert. The endangered Devil's Hole pupfish, for instance, lives in one of the earth's hottest and smallest bodies of water, near Death Valley Junction.

Watchable Wildlife Inc. is a non-profit organization dedicated to "help communities and wildlife prosper." The group helps local communities achieve the economic benefit of nature-related recreation while conserving native plants and animals in their natural habitats. This is done through research that isolates locations with special ecosystems, and through the establishment of educational trails (marked in the field with a binocular icon on trail head signage). All the major public land management agencies in the desert work cooperatively with Watchable Wildlife. Desert itineraries may be found at the web site listed in the resources section at the end of this guide.

### PHOTOGRAPHY & VISUAL ARTS

Photography is often an inseparable part of enjoying wildlife. Fortunately, video and photography tools now include digital devices that are lighter and easier to use than the large-format camera Ansel Adams used to capture the beauty of western landscapes. Even an infrequent visitor to the desert can capture high-quality images with this equipment. Only the harsh sunlight of the summer or midday lighting interferes with capturing the subtlety of the desert. You can learn more about wildlife photography by taking workshops at the desert national park asso-

ciations or community colleges, or joining the California Nature Photographers. A few suggestions for sites to visit are also available at <http://www.californiadesert.gov>.

Many artists would prefer to reach for their portable easels, pencils, paintbrushes and paints. They may focus their eyes on a single location for hours at a time, studying their subject and losing themselves in the creative process. Art associations, such as the California Art Club schedule desert tours and exhibits for their members.

### PLANTS

For the first-time visitor, the plant life in the desert is easy to dismiss as lacking the color or diversity of coastal, mountain or sagebrush biomes. There are no dense forests, and much of the wild brush appears dry, colorless, or spiny. Many visitors gain their first appreciation during springtime, when that brush takes on the varied hues and unique forms of the annual wildflower season. In 2005, a record rainfall provided a revelation to many visitors, one that may inspire future visits. While many people enjoyed the fields of desert sunflowers at Death Valley National Park, others took in the fields of orange at the Antelope Valley California Poppy Preserve.

On subsequent trips, visitors may find out about Joshua trees (*Yucca brevifolia*), members of the lily family that live to be hundreds of years old. But the real mystery of the ages belongs to the Creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*), an aromatic shrub that grows in clonal rings. In the Soggy Dry Lake south of Barstow, the BLM protects the 12,000 year-old "King Clone," as scientists work to determine if it is indeed the oldest living thing on earth.



**LEFT**

Creosote shrub and cactus in Mojave National Preserve

PHOTO BY HOWARD GROSS

**BELOW LEFT**

Red-tailed Hawk surveying prey from Yucca branch

PHOTO BY TONY RILEY

**BELOW RIGHT**

Bird Watching in Joshua Tree National Park

PHOTO BY D. A. DEMEO

[HTTP://WWW.NPCA.ORG / DESERT\\_RECREATION / WILDLIFE.PDF](http://www.npca.org/desert_recreation/wildlife.pdf)





## WILDLIFE VIEWING & BIRDING CONTINUED



### BIRDING

The southern California deserts are a birding paradise for many reasons. The climate is attractive for most of the year and the topographic variety allows for much diversity. The region is located along the seasonal migration path for numerous species and offers the option for non-resident birds from adjacent regions to relocate seasonally. Although widely dispersed, the lakes, rivers, oases and riparian habitats offer respite to birds traveling on long journeys. The number of native birds not found elsewhere in California may surprise a newcomer to birding. Gila and ladder-backed woodpeckers, vermilion and brown-crested flycatchers, Bendire's, Crissal and Le Conte's Thrashers, summer tanager, Lucy's warbler, Abert's towhee, Gambrel's quail, white-winged doves and Inca doves, verdin, black-tailed gnatcatcher and gilded flicker all call the desert their primary home.

To make sure that their presence doesn't disturb wildlife, birders follow a code of ethics, available from the American Birding Association. "Everyone who enjoys birds and birding must always respect wildlife, its environment, and the rights of others," reads one of the basic principles. "In any conflict of interest between birds and birders, the welfare of the birds and their environment comes first."

Popular desert locations offering the most diverse selections of birds include the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, and the Cibola National Wildlife Refuge.

### REPTILES & MAMMALS

Many of the reptiles and mammals that make the desert home find it much easier to hunt for food and move about during the cooler hours of dusk and the evening. If you're looking to catch a glimpse of these animals, bring along a flashlight, exercise the typical precautions of desert exploration, and keep a respectful distance from the wildlife.

The desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), a signature species in the region, is California's State Reptile, and lives for 50 to 100 years. Observed populations of the tortoise have been declining rapidly and it is now classified as threatened. This wise and peaceful resident is quite sensitive, so it's important to take precautions in its presence. Humans must not touch, pick up, or harass tortoises. You might see a tortoise just about anywhere in the high desert valleys and washes, but you'll increase your odds if you look during the springtime and if your visit includes a stop at the BLM's Desert Tortoise Natural Area.

*Books and Online Resources for Wildlife Viewing and Birding can be found at [http://www.npca.org/desert\\_recreation/wildlife.pdf](http://www.npca.org/desert_recreation/wildlife.pdf) and on page 46 of this report.*

#### ABOVE

Desert iguana leaning against rock formation

PHOTO BY HOWARD GROSS



[HTTP://WWW.NPCA.ORG / DESERT\\_RECREATION / WILDLIFE.PDF](http://www.npca.org/desert_recreation/wildlife.pdf)



**ABOVE LEFT**

Hiker observes from a distance and does not touch tortoise to protect this threatened species

PHOTO BY BOOJUM INSTITUTE

**ABOVE RIGHT**

Bird watching on east side of Salton Sea

PHOTO BY D. A. DEMEO

**LEFT**

Rattlesnakes are a common sighting in warm weather

PHOTO BY TONY RILEY

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## BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES

### SUGGESTED BOOKS:

*A Birder's Guide to Southern California*, Brad Schram, American Birding Association, 1998

*Wildlife Viewing Guide of California*, Jeanne L. Clark, Falcon Publishing Company, 1996

*Mojave Desert Wildflowers: A Field Guide to Wildflowers, Trees, and Shrubs of the Mojave Desert, Including the Mojave National Preserve, Death Valley National Park, and Joshua Tree National Park*, Pam MacKay, Falcon Press, 2003

### WEB SITES:

American Birding Association (<http://www.americanbirding.org>)

Audubon California (<http://www.audubon-ca.org>)

Anza Borrego Foundation (<http://theabf.org>)

California Art Club (<http://www.californiaartclub.com>)

California Nature Photographers (<http://nocal.naturephotographers.net>)

California Watchable Wildlife (<http://www.cawatchablewildlife.org>)

Desert Tortoise Natural Area (<http://www.tortoise-tracks.org/dtna.html>)

Desert USA Wildlife Viewing ([http://www.desertusa.com/Thingstodo/du\\_ttd\\_wild.html](http://www.desertusa.com/Thingstodo/du_ttd_wild.html))

Sierra Club, California branch (<http://www.sierraclub.org/ca>)

