15. Watching wildlife in wild places

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Watching wildlife in wild places

MOJAVE DESERT SPRINGTIME: A FESTIVAL OF LIFE
Most of the year, southwestern Utah’s Mojave Desert is an intimidating stretch of stone, sand, and silence. It’s hotter and drier than the Great Basin desert on its north, so outside of St. George, cedar and sage hillsides give way to a rocky landscape bristling with yucca, Joshua trees, and spine-tangled cacti. In summer, the three-digit Mojave heat is stunning. In winter, the desert lies freeze-dried, awaiting a meager few inches of annual rain.

But spring is different. This time of year, bouquets of delicate wildflowers erupt in rock washes and even the stubborn cacti bloom. Songbirds and butterflies scout the crystal air. Desert tortoises, like rocks that have sprouted legs, emerge from burrows and plod off on urgent turtle business with solemn yellow eyes.

Visiting hours for the Mojave begin in May. When the temperature moderates, the spare landscape reveals a web of weird and wonderful life; for example, it’s the only place in Utah you’ll find Gila monsters, roadrunners, and sidewinders. But even at the peak of its spring vitality, a trip to the Mojave Desert is not about an overwhelming abundance of life. It’s still a rock garden—more stones than living things.

Because desert life is secretive, subtle, or just rare, it’s worthwhile to tag along with desert experts who know where to find it. St. George’s Desert Wildlife Festival, held each year in May, is a locally organized program of field trips and classes designed to teach people about the hardy plants and animals that make this place home. For two days, the area’s experienced desert ramblers lead hikers to the Mojave’s hidden corners and, there and in classrooms, teach participants desert lore, from medicinal plants to venomous reptiles.
The festival has a devoted following. “Some Utah families get together each year for the deer hunt. Our family gets together for the Desert Wildlife Festival,” says Marshall Topham, father of six and principal of St. George’s Pine View High School. “Even my two kids in college try to come back for it. On a festival hike last year we saw desert tortoise hatchlings, Gila monster tracks, and a sidewinder.”

Wild desert life is out there, if you know where to find it. “When I take people out into the desert, they’re always amazed at the variety and amount of life we find,” notes wildlife biologist Ann McLuckie, who’s with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, one of the festival sponsors. But it’s a tough place for life to take hold, so plants and animals are more dispersed in the Mojave. This part of Utah gets only 6.7 inches of rain a year, McLuckie points out, less than half of Salt Lake City’s total, and most of that falls between December and February.

Mojave plants employ strange and elegant ways to cope. Cacti grow shallow roots to suck up the slightest rain quickly and store it in expandable trunks. Barrel cacti have accordion-like pleats that swell, then shrink as they
use up water reserves. Other plants, like mesquite, drill deep roots and tap into underground water. A mesquite tree’s muscular root can grow to 80 feet and may be thicker than its trunk.

In a climate that is either scorching or freezing most of the time, desert annual flowers sprint through their life cycle in spring. They send up stalks in days and then bloom quickly, taking advantage of tolerable temperatures to deposit seeds for future generations. These tough kernels may lie in the dirt for years before conditions are again right to sprout. Desert soil is a seed bank with dozens of seeds in each scoopful. But on this vast, convoluted landscape, knowing exactly when a type of wildflower should be blooming—then finding it—is tricky. For this reason, the festival’s guided wildflower walks are popular. Desert blossoms are not only short lived, but “they are often tiny and delicate as well. You need to get out on foot to see and appreciate them,” says McLuckie.

“Our goal is to acquaint people with the desert,” notes Marilyn Davis, St. George native and a public contact representative for the Bureau of Land Management, another sponsor of the festival. “A little education goes a long way, then most people can get out and discover more for themselves, which is fun.” Organizers enjoy the festival as much as the participants do. “We set up birdwatching blinds on the Virgin River during the festival so that people can get a close look at the egrets, avocets, and other birds that migrate here in spring,” says Davis, a birdwatcher. One memorable morning “we were walking down to a blind when four mule deer popped up and splashed out across the water.” People learn that the “Virgin and Santa Clara Rivers are a lifeline for the birds and animals here.”

Water—how desert creatures find, conserve, recycle, and even manufacture it—is key to their survival. Kangaroo mice, for example, never drink standing water; they produce all the water they need by eating dry seeds. Desert tortoises recycle the moisture in their bladders when needed.

Such resourcefulness rules the Mojave. Clever prehistoric humans used a much wider variety of desert life for food and medicine than modern humans do and not all this folklore is forgotten. The festival holds a popular class on edible and medicinal desert plants, although most participants lead urban or suburban lives and will never need to tuck into a plate of prickly pear fruit.

But city dwellers or not, a growing number of Utahns of all ages show a desire to connect with the natural world. “As a high school principal, I see many of our students attend the Desert Wildlife Festival,” notes Topham,
who’s also on the festival board. “One of our students is skilled at identifying birds, so he’s a presenter at the festival. Another one of our students went on a festival night hike to see bats. That trip inspired her to do a science project on bat houses. It placed so high in the regional science fair competition that she was invited to show her project at the International Science and Engineering Fair,” Topham reports with pride.

As the public learns more about desert life, Topham hopes they’ll take it for granted less often. There was a time when the general public thought of desert as wasteland, as in “You can’t really hurt it—it’s only desert.” The sprawling human population in Washington County, which doubled between 1980 and 1990, reflected this attitude, causing serious wildlife declines. For example, local officials recently had to commit to a habitat conservation plan to protect the area’s endangered desert tortoise—Utah’s only native turtle species.

Topham comments, “I think we’ve realized that we have a very unique environment here and we have a responsibility to make others more aware of the sensitive species in it. We have a responsibility to educate people about this special place.”

DESERT NATIONAL WILDLIFE RANGE: 99.9 PERCENT PURE MOJAVE
Tired of tame parks with entrance fees and souvenir shops? Looking for raw wilderness without hiking trails or interpretive nature centers?

Have I got a refuge for you. Southern Nevada’s Desert National Wildlife Range is 2,200 square miles—half the size of Connecticut—preserved as habitat for desert bighorn sheep. It’s the largest wildlife refuge in the lower 48 states. And, other than a couple of really rough roads and a few picnic tables, it makes no accommodation for human visitors. It’s wild country preserved for native wildlife. You gotta love that.

The eastern half of the Desert National Wildlife Range is open to hiking, backpacking, and car camping. Here lies a thousand square miles of silent Mojave Desert with two major mountain ranges made from rippling, twisted layers of brilliant sedimentary rock.

The western one-thousand square miles of the Desert National Wildlife Range is part of the Nellis Air Force Bombing Range. I asked Marti Collins, refuge manager, if the pneumatic screech of jets and aerial bombardment
made the bighorn sheep on the military side of her refuge skittish. Collins says the Air Force tested bighorns for stress by connecting them to remote control heart sensors. Researchers watched for heart-rate increases during bombing nearby, and they detected no rise. One question, Collins says, is whether the bighorn sheep were already adapted to the commotion before the test.

Maybe they’re deaf by now. Anyhow, don’t go into the bombing range. The tourable part of the preserve is about 20 miles wide and 50 miles long. It sits deep in southern Nevada where the state’s shape is squeezed to a point from California on the west and Arizona on the east. The range has no hiking trails; the few walking visitors wander up its remote washes. If you stay overnight, you must camp out of sight of, and a quarter of a mile away from, the springs or you’ll scare away the wild customers.

The Sheep Mountains, rising to nearly 10,000 feet, run the full length of the public side of the wildlife range. The Las Vegas Mountains run parallel to the Sheep mountains, then they merge. Climate in the wildlife range depends on elevation. The valley floors, at 2,500 feet, get four inches of rain each year. These popcorn-dry lowlands are paved with sandblasted gravel
and are sparsely covered with creosote bush and white bursage. Climbing a few thousand feet, spear-pointed yucca and Mickey Mouse-eared cactus poke up. At 6,000 feet, pretzel-like Joshua trees—actually a gigantic member of the lily family—and furry-spined cholla take over.

Above 6,000 feet, the desert shrubs give way to woodlands of juniper and sagebrush. Bighorn sheep and mule deer live near the springs here. Pinyon jay and broad-tailed hummingbirds are common as well. The 7,000 to 9,000 foot elevations may catch 15 inches of rain and snow annually. Green pockets of ponderosa pine and white fir thrive. Fewer mule deer or bighorn hang here, but there are some cougars. Plenty of sagebrush lizards, Clark’s nutcrackers, and canyon wrens dart through. Approaching 10,000 feet, you’ll find the wizards of the tree world—bristlecone pines.

The wildlife range is Mojave Desert preserved for bighorn sheep habitat, but in saving this island of natural landscape from human renovation, it also protects all the usual suspects: badgers, bobcats, foxes, coyotes, mountain lions, and over 260 species of birds, including roadrunners and golden eagles.

Most visitors enter the range through its Corn Creek Field Station, 23 miles northwest of Las Vegas on U.S. Highway 95. Corn Creek is a marshy spring-fed oasis that was once a stagecoach stop on the route from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles. Now it provides R and R for hundreds of birds species during their spring and fall migrations. The flint chips scattered around Corn Creek show it was a campground for Southern Paiutes. Later it was a freight wagon stop; it still has a blacksmith shop and a storehouse built of railroad ties from that era. The range is home to another stagecoach stop, called Mormon Well, at a 6,000-foot pass between the Sheep and Las Vegas Mountains. In a clearing of cedars, the stage stop’s original corral—an enclosure of skinny, charcoal-black sticks rammed into the ground—stands next to a forgotten wagon track.

The range has two through roads. The Mormon Well Road runs northeast from the Corn Creek Field Station to Highway 93. The Alamo Road runs north from Corn Creek to Highway 93 at Pahranagat National Wildlife Refuge. Both roads are rutted and have long sections of loose rock. A high-clearance vehicle is essential; four-wheel drive is recommended.

You should reserve a whole day, even for just a drive-through. But definitely get out and walk some. Just a short stroll from your car, the range’s vast spaces and interplanetary quiet conspire to lower your blood pressure. The crystal air telescopes scenery, bringing grand sweeps of tan desert floor and
magenta mountain walls up close. A short walk off the Mormon Well Road are two prehistoric crock pots. Like traditional Hawaiians, Southern Paiutes and Virgin Branch Anasazi roasted meat and vegetables underground in pits lined with limestone cobbles and covered with earth. Succeeding generations left piles of white rocks in coffee-table size mounds, called agave roasting pits. You can still see chunks of charcoal among the stones.

When I was there, we took a brief hike away from the Alamo Road to an old Indian cave. It’s a low den in lava rock with a sandy midden, or ancient trash heap, out front. Someone had been digging into the midden carelessly. Gray potsherds, flint chips, and bird-size bones lay all mixed up worse than Fido’s breakfast. Looking out from the cave, the Mojave was a spiky sea of glowing Joshua trees and swordlike yucca in the low afternoon sun. A spray of mountain bluebirds shot by with two needle-beaked flickers in hot pursuit.

The range’s 850 desert bighorn sheep are more difficult to spot. Their numbers are down, range manager Collins says. Biologists believe it may be drought, disease, or predation by mountain lions that’s causing the decline, which is serious because scattered bands of 50 or fewer desert bighorns rarely last 50 years. Compared to mountain bighorn sheep, desert bighorns are smaller and lighter colored and have a wider flare in their horn curls. Genetically, though, the mountain and desert bighorn are closely related. Desert bighorn travel only about a mile or two on an average day and live their entire lives within a 10 to 20 mile area. They have preferred travel paths to water and feed and to cliffs; ewes pass this knowledge on to succeeding generations. Rams and ewes roam separately, each with a group leader, who also acts as the sentinel. Standing watch, the leader signals danger with a snort. When breeding time approaches, the groups join and rams sort out leadership. Most duels are one-butt skirmishes, but occasionally they can last 24 hours. Bighorns stay lean on their diet of grass and desert shrubs; they also scour the desert for cactus fruits, jojoba nuts, and the fruiting heads of brittlebush.

Desert bighorn are tough to see in the wild. You’ll be wishing they wore fluorescent orange vests, like deer hunters. The color of a bighorn’s coat—drab brownish-gray that fades into a small white rump patch—blends perfectly with desert mountainsides. The sheep are wary, and just after hunting season—when we were there—they make themselves scarce. A ranger at Lake Mead comments, “I took a class to learn how to spot bighorn sheep in the wild, and still I have a hard time seeing them.” Collins recommends that
if you just want to see desert bighorn sheep, go to Boulder City’s Hemenway Valley Park, near Lake Mead National Recreation Area. A herd of bighorn is often seen nearby. To see bighorn sheep on the Desert National Wildlife Range, it’s best to drive the Gass Peak Road in August.

If you’re lucky enough to see a bighorn sheep in Desert National Wildlife Range, that’s wonderful. But just to walk in this Mojave wilderness is magnificent.

If You Go

Entry: There are three entries to the public side of the refuge, one of them is unsigned. The southern entry is the Corn Creek Field Station, which is 23 miles northwest of Las Vegas off Highway 95. The northern entry is at Pahranagat National Wildlife Refuge, which is about 60 miles directly north of Highway 93’s junction with I-15. An unsigned entry is at Elbow Canyon, two miles south of state road 168’s junction with Highway 93. Look for the intersection of the east-west and north-south power lines and for a small substation. The entry is the rough gravel road on the west side of Highway 93.

Getting Around: The public side of the range has two through roads. Both are rough; a high clearance vehicle with four-wheel drive is recommended.

Hiking: The entire east half of the refuge is open to hiking. There are no designated hiking trails. The most popular canyon hikes are Hidden Forest and Cow Camp Spring off the Alamo Road, and Sawmill Wash and Pine Nut Road, both off the Mormon Well Road.

Camping: Roadside camping is allowed along routes signed as open to vehicles. Camps must be at least one-quarter mile from, and out of sight of, water sources.

Backpacking: Hidden Forest Canyon and Sawmill Canyon are five-mile hikes that go to springs amid conifer trees. Again, camp one-quarter mile away and out of sight of water sources.

Map: U.S.G.S 30 x 60 “Indian Springs.”

Hotels: Hotel rooms are relatively expensive and occasionally booked up in nearby Las Vegas. However, in Mesquite, 80 miles northeast of Las Vegas, rooms are cheap and plentiful. Call ahead and ask for specials in effect when you’re visiting.

Weather: Winter weather is mild. Temperatures range from freezing at night to 75 degrees during the day. In the summer, daytime highs usually exceed 100 degrees.
CABEZA PRIETA: A SONORAN SAFARI

It was a smuggler’s nightmare. At the shoulder of a rocky ridge, we heard the hollow thump-thump of an approaching U.S. Border Patrol helicopter long before we could see it. Only a few dozen feet off the ground, it came straight to us, like a giant dragonfly tracking lunch. The whirlybird’s bronze-tinted bubble windshield reflected the ragged Agua Dulce Mountains as it turned and landed. We were amazed. In a sea of rock and cactus about the size of Delaware, a lone Border Patrol crew located us two walkers as easily as if we’d phoned in G.P.S. coordinates.

I was glad our paperwork was in order.

“The Border Patrol has a tough, no-win job out here,” Virgial Harper, Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge’s recreation planner, told me earlier that morning as I applied for an entry permit. The Border Patrol tracks the footprints of illegal immigrants through the refuge, which shares 56 miles of border with Mexico. Too often where the tracks stop, ill-shod campesinos are found exhausted or dead from thirst and exposure.

The Cabeza Prieta refuge is more than three-quarters of a million acres of protected Sonoran desert that spills into southern Arizona from Mexico. It is the third largest wildlife refuge in the continental U.S. “It’s a complicated wildlife refuge to operate,” Harper said. Coordination of federal agencies is tricky. Not only is Cabeza Prieta patrolled for smuggling and illegal immigration, but the U.S. Air Force uses it to practice bombing runs.

Cabeza Prieta is not for everyone. Visitors must apply for a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and sign a hold-harmless agreement for the Air Force. A four-wheel drive vehicle is required to handle its solitary two-rut road, which becomes impassable after a spit of rain. And yes, Cabeza Prieta does have rattlesnakes—six species of them. Easy to see why the refuge is a chunk of nearly unspoiled Sonoran real estate still. The summer heat is extreme. Ground temperatures can hit 175 degrees. The refuge wrote just over 1,500 visitor entry permits last year, reports Don Tiller, refuge manager. Only one of them during July.
But the Sonora gets furious thunderstorms in the summer and soaking
rains in the winter, which allow it to support a vast array of plants and over
40 species of mammals, from the endangered Sonoran pronghorn to pocket
mice. Year-round moisture—though it amounts to only a few inches—
keeps the Sonoran desert more biologically diverse than the Great Basin and
Mojave deserts to the north or the Chihuahua desert to the east.

We crossed the remote northwestern corner of Organ Pipe Cactus
National Monument to enter Cabeza Prieta on a winter afternoon. The
road is a knotted, twisting groove in the desert floor, sliced by silty runoff
channels. It took two-and-a-half hours to penetrate twenty miles into the
refuge from Ajo, Arizona.

Twelve mountain ranges, not much higher than 3,000 feet but extreme-
ly rugged, corrugate the desert floor. The landscape is dominated by tele-
phone pole-sized saguaro cacti, their upcurved branches frozen in a stiff
“Howdy.” Many of these giants are over one hundred years old. A hawk
with a toast-colored head and creamy breast perched on a lofty saguaro and
examined us curiously as we bounced past.

The refuge is a cactus cornucopia. Every turn offers new varieties: Mickey
Mouse-eared prickly pear cactus, fishhook cactus, pencil cactus, as well as sev-
eral species of cholla with spines so fine and dense they appear to be blond fur.
Whiplike ocotillo, olive creosote, and ironwood scrub—along with cacti—
create a sparse forest with a wind-blasted, gravel floor. The mountains are
steep heaps of bowling ball-sized rocks dotted with thorny brush and cactus.

We camped in a low pass and lit out on a walk. It was then the Border
Patrol’s flying welcome wagon landed—not to check our entry permit—but
to kindly inform us that the road ahead was flooded. The refuge has only one
east-west avenue for visitors. A section of it, nicknamed El Camino del Diablo,
or “Devil’s Highway,” dates back to 1540 as a risky shortcut for travelers from
Mexico to California. At one time, human graves lined the road like mile-
stones; 65 tombs were dug near Tinajas Altas (High Tanks) alone. In 1855,
U.S. Army Lieutenant N. Michler wrote, “Death has strewn a continuous line
of bleached bones and withered carcasses . . . to mark the way” along the
Devil’s Highway. For Cabeza Prieta travelers today, one road forks from the
Devil’s Highway. It heads north, passing a pale granite peak with a black vol-
canic layer on top, Cabeza Prieta, or “Dark Head.” That road eventually meets
up with Interstate 8 after it leaves the refuge. Refuge rules allow vehicles to
park within 50 feet of its two roads for camping. This corridor is the only place

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vehicles are permitted. The refuge has no maintained hiking trails. The result is an enormous, untrammeled wilderness, perfect for animal watching.

At camp in the morning, we watched a pair of racoon-masked cactus wrens perch on the grill of our truck and knock flattened bugs off the radiator. Then they dropped to the ground to savor the dehydrated treats. In the afternoon, a clack of rocks tipped me off that a large creature was near. I turned to see the ghostly pale butt of a desert bighorn sheep warily traversing the ridge just 50 yards away. The color of its coat blended so well with the surrounding rock, all I could see at first were two white hind legs. Looking carefully, I could make out a white dot of fur at its nose and two spiked nubbins on its head. It was more than twice as large as a domestic sheep. When the ewe caught our scent, she bounded straight up the steepest part of the facing ridge. Cabeza Prieta is home to approximately 400 of these desert bighorn sheep.

That evening, the Sonoran sky turned peach as the sun dropped behind interlocked purple and gray mountain ranges. When the night went crystal black, a lone coyote whined into the eternity of stars. All night long, owls hooted.

A morning walk flushed three sturdy mule deer out of a nearby wash. One had an enormous Bullwinkle-size rack. The dry washes in the Sonoran desert create a microclimate that support much of its wildlife. Like coral reefs in the ocean, Sonoran washes provide food, shelter, and denning sites for animal life. Between mountain ranges, Cabeza Prieta is a web of washes. Walking near one overgrown ravine, a palo verde bush rustled, and out stalked a javelina, or peccary, a stocky, piglike animal with tusks and long charcoal-black fur. Awakened early from siesta, the peccary turned to confront me, planting stumpy forepaws in the turf like an NFL lineman.

My U-turn deflected that challenge. Soon after, a creosote bush erupted in front of me as I flushed a gang of Gambel’s quail. Clucking like chickens chased by a cat, the plump birds rushed crazily back and forth, each with a plumbed topknot jiggling before its two beady eyes. In a few minutes, my heart stopped hammering.

Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge will surprise you. Some days, you’ll encounter sternum-rattling ker-BLOOMS as low-flying warplanes scream by. The Air Force uses electronic targets these days, so the only explosions you’ll encounter will be flushed birds or beasts. Although it takes planning to get the necessary entry permit, Cabeza Prieta is as untamed and exciting as any natural landscape left on Earth.
Thoreau nailed it about places like Cabeza Prieta: “It is a world more wonderful than convenient, more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used.”

If You Go

Permits: An entry permit from the refuge headquarters in Ajo, Arizona, is required. You must also sign a military hold-harmless agreement. Necessary paperwork can be done in advance by fax and mail; refuge headquarters is not open on weekends or holidays.

Entry: From Ajo via Bates Well Road; from Tacna, exit 42, off Interstate 8; from Wellton, exit 30, off Interstate 8. The Charlie Bell Trail goes a short distance into the refuge; take Rasmussen Road out of Ajo. Get permits before entering the refuge.

Getting Around: A four-wheel-drive vehicle is required. Traveling in parties of at least two vehicles is safest. The refuge requests that “to protect historic trails, and for your protection, avoid using the roads during wet conditions and especially at times when rutting or potential for erosion is high.” There are no regular patrols for the assistance of visitors; if you break down at certain times of year, such as summer, it may be a month before someone finds you. Bring plenty of gas, water, a hat, and sun protection. Mountain bikes are permitted on designated four-wheel-drive roads only. Allow at least two days to drive the 124-mile Camino Del Diablo from Wellton to Ajo.

Camping: Car camping is permitted within 50 feet of the road. The refuge requests that you camp at already-impacted areas. No camping within a quarter mile of waterholes. No wood fires.

Hiking: No trails, but you can hike washes and ridges.

Map: Available in downtown Ajo at a store named “Si Como No.”

Hotels: There are at least two in Ajo, Arizona.

Weather: October to April the days are sunny in the 60s and 70s with occasional light rains. May through September the temperatures often exceed 105 with brief violent thunderstorms. Nights are cooler than days year-round.

Warnings: Don’t collect cultural artifacts or military hardware or fall into mine shafts. Carry one gallon of drinking water per person per day plus a reserve.