



## Carrizo Plain National Monument, California

PHOTO BY DAN SMUTS/THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY



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# Too Wild to Drill

## Carrizo Plain National Monument, California

### What's at Stake?

Visitors often describe California's Carrizo Plain as a place frozen in time. Known for its spectacular spring wildflower displays, this arid and treeless grassland valley is the largest remaining example of the type of habitat that once spread across the San Joaquin Valley centuries ago, land that has been largely eliminated by agricultural, urban, and industrial development.

With only limited evidence of human alteration, the 250,000-acre Carrizo Plain National Monument is the biological cornerstone for the San Joaquin Valley. Located in eastern San Luis Obispo County and dramatically bisected by the San Andreas Fault zone, it is the largest undeveloped remnant of this ecosystem, providing habitats that are essential to the long-term survival of the many endemic and endangered plant and animal species that inhabit the area.

The Carrizo Plain is home to the largest concentration of endangered species in all of California. Thirteen plant and animal species have been state or federally listed as threatened or endangered, including the San Joaquin kit fox, the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, the California condor, and the California jewel flower. Other large mammals within the monument include pronghorn antelope and tule elk. These two magnificent animals, which were almost totally eliminated in the region by uncontrolled hunting

"We will definitely look back at the Carrizo Plain National Monument someday and see how forward-thinking it was to set these places aside. In time, we will be remembered for what we save, not what we exploit."

— IRV MCMILLAN, A RANCHER NEAR THE CARRIZO PLAIN.

during the last century, have begun to reestablish themselves in the monument following reintroduction programs.

The monument contains Soda Lake, one of the largest undisturbed wetlands in California, which provides an important habitat for migratory birds, including a quarter of the state's wintering sandhill crane population. Also included in the monument are the Temblor and Caliente mountain ranges, which include lands of wilderness quality. ■

### Why is the Carrizo Plain National Monument at Risk?

Since the area's recognition as an important natural area, designation as a National Monument in 2001 and subsequent management as part of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System, the Carrizo Plain has benefited from management decisions including the reduction of oil and gas drilling and the implementation of critical conservation measures such as reduced grazing on the Carrizo and Elkhorn Plains.

The last of the existing "grandfathered" federal oil and gas leasing permits – which predated the monument's designation – lapsed in February 2006. Because the Presidential Proclamation that created the monument prohibits any new oil leases on BLM lands where the agency holds the mineral rights, its pristine

and previously developed areas should be positioned to enjoy permanent protection from oil industry pressures.

Unfortunately, 30,000 acres within the monument's boundaries are privately-owned properties known as "inholdings." In addition, the mineral rights to BLM lands, including surface access rights, are privately held on approximately 150,000 acres (or 60 percent) within the 250,000 acre monument. Even more disconcerting is that an oil company, Occidental Petroleum, owns 20,000 acres of these privately held mineral rights.

If oil and gas exploration and development were to occur on even a fraction of those 150,000 acres of privately held mineral rights, it could prove devastat-

## Why is the Carrizo Plain National Monument at Risk? continued

ing to Carrizo Plain National Monument. The associated industrial activity, including roads, drilling pads, pipelines, and other infrastructure, would destroy suitable habitat for the San Joaquin kit fox, the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, and other endangered animals.

Fortunately, the current assessment of the oil and gas potential on the Carrizo Plain is low, meaning that there is either a low probability that oil and gas would be found there or that, if oil and gas were to be found, it would be unprofitable to remove. ■

PHOTO COURTESY U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



The Carrizo Plain is home to California's largest concentration of endangered vertebrates, including the San Joaquin kit fox. This nocturnal fox forages in California prairie and Sonoran grasslands in the vicinity of freshwater marshes and alkali sinks, where there is a dense ground cover of tall grasses and San Joaquin saltbush.

## Where is the Carrizo Plain National Monument?



## Solution

**T**he likelihood of discovering oil and gas on the Carrizo Plain is currently low, but it is not infeasible. The area could become more vulnerable over time due to changing economic conditions and the development of new oil and gas discovery and extraction technologies. Even speculative exploration without positive results could cause substantial impacts to the monument's unique species and ecosystems.

Although these acres may currently hold a low potential of profitable oil and gas discoveries, they are critical to the survival and recovery of endangered species and ecosystems of the Carrizo Plain National

Monument. The BLM has recently directed discretionary funding to acquire a portion of the surface and mineral inholdings within the monument where industry currently has no interest. To protect the monument from oil and gas drilling and other development threats, the BLM needs to continue to prioritize the funding of the acquisition of privately held mineral rights and inholdings. The BLM must continue to work with the Department of Interior, Congress and its private partners to accomplish this task to insure the future health of this tremendously important area. ■

### **TWS Research on Oil and Gas Issues:**

A wealth of research focused on oil and gas development in the West and Alaska is available on The Wilderness Society's website at <http://Wilderness.org/Library/OilAndGas.cfm>

## For More Information

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