

The California Poppy

A Springtime Burst of Color

By: Deborah Liv Johnson



The California poppy on display at the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve.

The contrast is inescapable, like a single note floating above the orchestra, a solo voice that expands and leads the way to a burst of sound from the entire violin section. The California poppy, delicate and subtle in small numbers, is a sight to behold when it covers entire hillsides, or carpets the desert floor against a contrast of pebbly sand and creosote. Found throughout the golden state, the California poppy showcases each spring along roads and freeways, hillsides, sunny slopes and vast expanses of the southwestern desert.

Over 100 years ago, the California poppy won the title of Official California State Flower in a landslide vote by the California State Floral Society on December 12, 1890, beating out the Mariposa lily and the Matilija poppy. The winning cup-shaped flower was first discovered in California in 1815 by a Russian expedition team. In fact, the flower was named for a member of the expedition, Dr. Johann Friedrich Eschscholtz: California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*).



One of the best places to view the California poppy is the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve. Located in the Antelope Buttes just 15 miles west of Lancaster, California, this 1,745-acre state reserve is located along an elevation ranging from 2,600 to 3,000 feet. Before the emergence of the railroad in the 1880s, pronghorn antelope grazed the land, creating the necessary disturbance for the cultivation of the wild poppies.

Seven miles of trails in the reserve include a paved section for wheelchair access. In addition to the bright, orange poppy, other wildflowers found in the reserve include owl's clover, lupine, goldfield, cream cups and coreopsis. If the rains have been plentiful, the creosote may put on a sideshow with tiny, bright yellow clusters of leaves and little white fuzzy balls sprouting throughout the plant's gangly branches.

The California Poppy Reserve is a natural area and does not allow dogs, horses or mountain bikes on trails. Hiking and picnicking are allowed for day use, but there is no overnight camping. Rattlesnake sightings are not uncommon in the spring, so it is recommended that visitors stick to the trails. The park is open every day from sunrise to sunset, and during flower season the Visitor Center is open. The total drive time is approximately two and one-half hours. It is a good idea to call ahead for conditions prior to departure.

HOW TO GET THERE Take I-10 West, and merge onto I-215 North toward San Bernardino/Barstow. I-215 becomes I-15 North. Take the CA-138 exit toward Palmdale/Silverwood Lake. Turn left onto CA-138 and drive 40 miles. Turn right on 165th Street East (The sign will say Saddleback Butte State Park.). 165th Street East becomes 170th Street East. Turn left on Avenue J. Turn right on 90th Street East. Turn left (West) on Avenue I. Drive approximately 15 miles, and watch for signs directing you to the Reserve.

VISITOR CENTER INFORMATION Wildflower blooms: March through May. Peak viewing is mid-April. Weekdays: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Weekends: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Ranger or docent-led walks: Saturday and Sunday at 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. For a recorded update of flower conditions, call: 661-724-1180 or online at www.parks.ca.gov