

Wildflower etiquette: Stay on the trails, and don't stop traffic

No matter how tempting it is to venture into the fields for a selfie, officials plead for people to stay on marked paths to avoid causing damage



Some of the visitors to Walker Canyon Trail near Lake Elsinore, including people who came off a tour bus, don't obey the signs to stay on the path and off the wildflowers on Wednesday, Feb. 27, 2019. (Courtesy of Laurie Timperely-Hitt)

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Take pictures of the wildflowers. Just don't take pictures *in* the wildflowers! That's one of the main messages that wildlife and park officials across Southern California are trying to get out this spring as they anticipate a great season for wildflowers following abundant winter rain — and large crowds turning out for the colorful display.

Sitting or lying down to take a selfie or even walking off an established trail can damage both existing flowers and the next generation that would have grown if the soil hadn't been disturbed. Depending on the park, venturing off the trails could earn visitors a citation and fine. Picking flowers is also a no-no.

"Behold the beauty," said George Land, spokesman at Joshua Tree National Park, "but tread lightly."

During a good bloom that carpeted a field with flowers a couple of years ago, "I would see people running out in the middle of the field like it's 'The Wizard of Oz,'" Land said. "Multiply that by 100 and all you have is some downtrodden blooms."



Staff at the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve stress that people should not venture into the poppy fields to take photos or for any other reason, because it can harm current flowers and future generations. (Courtesy of California State Parks, 2017)

Jean Rhyne, a state park interpreter at the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve, said people were once caught filming a samurai movie in the flower field. Staff have also come across people who brought out "a full-on picnic table" and others who were barbecuing — an especially bad idea in the desert climate where fires can take off.

But it's the all-too-common problem of people venturing off paths and into the flowers to take selfies that Rhyne and others say is one of their biggest challenges.

Public lands are, of course, there for the public to enjoy.

“They’re fantastic places to see the wonders of nature, appreciate it, get that experience that’s shrinking especially in Southern California” as urban and suburban development gets closer and closer to wildlands, said Kelly Elliott, superintendent of the state parks’ Inland Empire District.

That encroachment makes it all the more important to care for and respect nature, she said.

“Everyone needs to be protective of it,” Elliott said; “not just the park (employees), but visitors also.”

Rhyne said she appreciates when visitors help remind other guests to stay on trails — but cautioned that it shouldn’t go so far that they get into fights, which she said has happened.

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People sharing amazing photos of wildflowers on social media has played a role in encouraging more visitors, especially at places such as Anza-Borrego Desert State Park during the 2017 “super bloom.”

“Definitely social media has impacted things — both in a good and sometimes not-so-great way,” said Jorge Moreno, a spokesman for the California Department of Parks and Recreation. “People were coming out unprepared, and some of them didn’t [follow park rules](#).”

It’s important to know the policies of wherever you’re going before you head out, officials said. Check on things like whether your dog is allowed and whether commercial photography or drones are permitted. Also be aware of things like weather conditions, how likely you are to lose cell service and whether you can buy food or water once you’re there so you can be prepared. And know your own limitations as well as your vehicle’s so you don’t end up somewhere you can’t get out of.

Elliott echoed concerns about people not respecting the park rules, especially guests who aren’t frequent park-goers. At Chino Hills State Park, she said, people will stop in the middle of the road to take pictures if they can’t find a parking space.

It's not just inside parks where traffic is an issue. Olivia Walker, a spokeswoman for the Cleveland National Forest, said the flowers alongside Ortega Highway in the mountains between Riverside and Orange counties can get so amazing that they'll stop traffic.

"Cars were so backed up with people stopping and pulling over that congestion up and down the mountain, it was two hours backed up," Walker said.

Another spot that has become notorious for both flowers and traffic is [Walker Canyon Trail](#), off the 15 Freeway north of Lake Elsinore.

[Two years ago](#), the views from the freeway were so beautiful that people would slow down to look, or pull over illegally on the shoulder. This year, the Riverside County Sheriff's Department is stationing a community service officer at the trailhead on weekends to help direct traffic.

Tracy Albrecht, an interpretive specialist with the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument, agrees that it's important to remind visitors to "leave no trace" and stay on designated paths. But her view overall is optimistic.

"Because wildflowers are such a refreshing surprise and so tender and temporary, there's a natural understanding that they need to be treated with care," Albrecht said. "In general, I find most people are very careful where they step and thoughtful about where they go."