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## San Felipe Valley Wildlife Area: A Wild Oasis in Southern California

*By Kimberly McKee-Lewis*

It would seem that peaceful, wide-open spaces would be hard to find in the growing San Diego County area of Southern California. But grand vistas sweeping up from the high desert floor to the forested peaks of Volcan Mountain to the drier slopes of the San Felipe Hills can be found just 30 miles from the suburban sprawl of San Diego. Outdoors enthusiasts can find plenty of room to enjoy the wide variety of wildlife species vegetation types occurring at the San Felipe Valley Wildlife Area.

This east San Diego County gem lies 10 miles northeast of the quaint mountain town of Julian, between the grasslands of Lake Henshaw and the arid expanse of the Anza Borrego Desert State Park. As an unstaffed and passively managed wildlife area, San Felipe Valley offers a realistic Southern California hunting experience since it remains in its natural state. Adjacent federal and state wildlands are managed in similar fashion giving the public an uninterrupted glimpse of native California. It also provides excellent bird watching opportunities as it is a key migratory route for songbirds moving up from Baja California.

Two separate mid-1990s acquisitions from the much larger Rutherford Volcan Mountain Ranch form the 1,650 acre wildlife area. The primary purpose for the purchase of these lands was to protect foraging and fawning habitat for resident mule deer within the east/ central desert area and to preserve riparian, oak woodland and upland habitats used by a variety of game and non-game species. The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) continues to pursue additional acquisitions in the area to further protect wildlife resources and expand wildlife-related recreational opportunities.

The San Felipe Valley is a unique blend of diverse habitats types such as desert riparian woodland, chaparral, oak woodland, and mixed hardwood/conifer forest. Native grasslands and Riversidian alluvial fan sage scrub are examples of rare habitat types that can also be found. In addition, equally rare bird and mammal species such as golden eagles and pocket mice can be spotted by the sharp-eyed observer. Natural springs throughout the area and a portion of San Felipe Creek provide water year round. Major wildlife species found within the valley include mule deer, mountain lion, coyote, bobcat, gray fox, badger, wild turkey, California quail, mourning dove and several species of raptors. Songbirds such as western bluebirds, gray flycatchers, western tanagers, and yellow warblers provide flashes of color during the spring migration.

While the San Diego Natural History Museum is conducting baseline biological surveys on the most recent acquisition, the southernmost portion of the wildlife area remains temporarily closed. However, the remaining two-thirds is vast enough for all interests. Seasonal highlights include fall upland game and deer hunting, scenic views of snow capped peaks and dog training opportunities in the winter, and outstanding birdwatching in the spring. June through August can send even the hardest of sun lovers running for cover. For those brave souls, remember to bring plenty of water and sunscreen.

To visit San Felipe Valley, travel southeast on County Highway S-2 which bisects the length of the wildlife area and provides public access. Current boundaries and public use information is displayed in a kiosk located on the southwest side of S-2, approximately 11.4 miles east of the junction of Highways S-2 and 79. Information sheets are also available through the DFG's South Coast Regional Office (858) 467-4201.

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