

Caliente Mountain Range - text by James Wapotich May 9, 2017



Caliente Mountains above Carrizo Plain

While Carrizo Plain is perhaps better known this year for its wildflowers covering parts of the valley floor and nearby mountains, the area has other features of interest as well, including the Caliente Range and Painted Rock.

The Caliente Range overlooks Cuyama Valley to the south and Carrizo Plain to north, and a hike along the top of the range offers exceptional views of the surrounding area.

I had spent the previous day viewing wildflowers around Soda Lake and in the foothills of the Tumbler Mountains and had set aside my second day to hike to Caliente Mountain.



Wildflowers in the Caliente Range

The hike to the top of the mountain is about 16.5 miles round trip and requires the better part of a day. Plan on 6-8 hours. However, because of the moderate terrain and engaging scenery, the hike doesn't feel as long as it sounds. Another option is to backpack there and camp overnight, breaking up the miles over two days.

The best time to go is during the spring or fall when the weather is cooler, with spring having the added bonus of getting to see wildflowers along the hike. There is no water or shade along the route.

To get to the trailhead from Santa Barbara, take Highway 101 north towards San Luis Obispo and continue to State Route 58. Take State Route 58 east through the little town of Santa Margarita, which is the last stop for gas or amenities of any kind. From State Road 58, turn right onto Soda Lake Road.



Soda Lake with Temblor Range



Painted Rock – aerial view

Soda Lake Road leads into Carrizo Plain National Monument. The paved road continues past Soda Lake, before arriving at Painted Rock Road, where the visitor center is located. Painted Rock Road is unpaved but passable for most vehicles.

The first people to arrive at Carrizo Plain were Chumash, Salinas, and Yokut Indians. 3,000 to 4,000 years ago, they began painting in the large rock alcove at Painted Rock. The site is now managed by BLM in cooperation with the Chumash and public access is granted on a limited basis. No photos of the site may be used commercially or posted to social media websites. Reservations for ranger-led hikes used to be made through <http://www.recreation.gov>. The hike to Painted Rock is about 1.5 miles round trip. According to the ranger leading the hike, the site is considered sacred to the Chumash and has served as a pilgrimage site dating back at least 3,000 years. Descendants of the Chumash still visit the site today.

Soda Lake Road can also be reached from State Routes 166 and 33, although much of the route is unpaved and impassable during wet weather. The drive from Santa Barbara along either route is around 3.5 hours.



The Goodwin Education Center was open Thursday through Sunday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and features interpretative displays describing the natural history of Carrizo Plain, as well as rangers on duty who can answer questions about the area, current conditions, and what to see.

Carrizo Plain was designated as a national monument in 2001 by President Bill Clinton and encompasses close to a quarter-million acres of protected land. Carrizo Plain is the single largest remaining native grassland in California and is home to a number of endangered, rare, or threatened animal species such as San Joaquin kit fox, blunt-nosed leopard lizard, and giant kangaroo rat. The area is managed by Bureau of Land Management, or BLM. Visitor information and natural history resources can be found on their website.



Continuing past the turnoff for the visitor center, Soda Lake Road arrives at Selby Campground Road. The unpaved road leads to Selby Campground and the beginning of Caliente Mountain Road. Selby Campground has 13 campsites on a first come, first served basis. Dispersed camping is allowed in the surrounding foothills, but not along the valley floor. Just before Selby Campground, the road branches, with Caliente Mountain Road continuing to the right. The unpaved road is narrow, and at times steep, and is not recommended for low-clearance vehicles. Caliente Mountain Road leads to the top of the mountains. Pullouts along the road provide views out across Carrizo Plain and a number of them are also suitable for dispersed camping.

Near the top, the road arrives at the parking area for the trailhead. Past the parking area the road continues a short way before branching. The road to the left ends at a locked gate and leads along the top of the mountains towards Caliente Mountain. A trail from the parking area ties into this road. The road to the right descends down the front side of the mountains towards Cuyama Valley before ending at another locked gate. From the trailhead, I follow the old road cut along the north side of the ridge. The trail leads through a mix of juniper and Tucker's oak, which is a type of scrub oak. Growing in the shade beneath them is a surprising amount of miner's lettuce and white fiesta flower. The old road cut joins the unpaved access road along the ridge. The road is well-maintained and follows the ridgeline along the top of the mountains. At about the 2.5-mile mark, it arrives at a repeater-station tower, which serves as the first landmark along the trail. Past the tower, the road is less maintained. The road then crests a small rise and descends down to a meadow. At the far end is a corral, weathered picnic table, and collapsed trailer. Essentially an old cow camp, the site was used to collect stock when the area was used to graze cattle.

Past the camp, the road narrows to a single track. Rounding a corner, I am reminded why spring is perhaps the best time for the hike. Lining the trail are hillside daisies. On the northern side of the ridge, under juniper and scrub oak is more miner's lettuce and white fiesta flower. Here, white fiesta flower appears to almost be flowing out from underneath the juniper and oak and spilling down the hillsides.

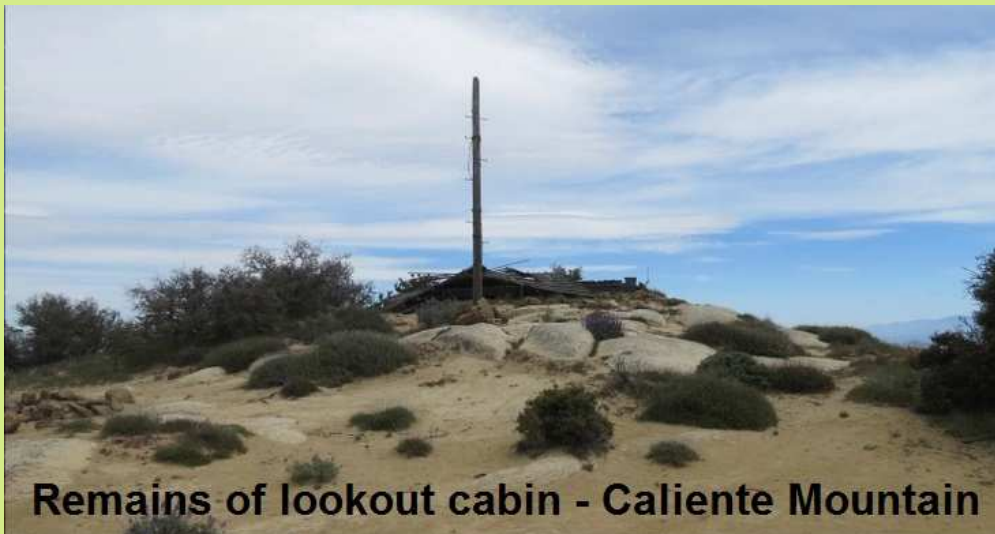


**White Fiesta
flowering beneath
a juniper tree**

Further along the trail, I arrive at a point overlooking one of the canyons that leads down to Cuyama Valley. Here, the sides of the canyon, and many of the nearby ridges, are covered in wildflowers.

At about the 6-mile mark, the trail descends down another short hill and arrives at what's called a guzzler. Essentially a large, flat surface made of corrugated metal, the structure gathers rain water and directs it into a shaded cistern to create a water source for wildlife. Continuing along the ridge, Caliente Mountain comes into view. From here, the trail descends down one last hill before making the final ascent towards the summit.

Caliente Mountain, with an elevation of 5,106 feet, is the highest point in the Caliente Range, as well as the highest point in San Luis Obispo County. At the summit is the remains of the World War II lookout cabin that was used to watch for enemy aircraft and threats to the strategic oil fields further inland.



Remains of lookout cabin - Caliente Mountain

The summit provides nearly panoramic views. To the northeast is the Carrizo Plain and Temblor Mountains. To the southeast is Mount Pinos. To the southwest is the Cuyama Valley and Sierra Madre Mountains.