

# Visiting California Grasslands: *The Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve*

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The Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve offers a great opportunity to see an amazing diversity of plants and animals throughout the year. This 9,000-acre reserve protects sensitive ecosystems, such as Engelmann oak woodlands, riparian wetlands, coastal sage scrub, chaparral, bunchgrass prairie, vernal pools, and more than 200 species of native birds and numerous endangered, threatened, or rare animal and plant species.

Although late spring provides the best opportunity to view the greatest diversity and number of wildflowers in the grasslands, winter and early spring provide chances to view other amazing features at the plateau. The vernal pool boardwalk offers visitors a unique opportunity to view a vernal pool from an elevated walkway



only inches above water teeming with life during the winter and early spring. Fairy shrimp, tadpoles, and a large variety of small invertebrates are common at various times when the pool holds water (generally December through May, but this varies each year). Lucky visitors will see adult Baja California tree frogs or California toads as they look for food and mates. Later in the spring when tadpoles are nearing their transformation to adult frogs and toads, the two-striped garter snake is commonly seen hunting for its favorite food. A diverse array of birds can also be observed at the vernal pool, including the American widgeon, northern pintail, cinnamon teal, northern shoveler, and green-winged teal. An amazing array of plants start growing while submerged in the pool and are seen beneath the swarms of tiny swimming animals. California water starwort, goldfields, prostrate navarretia, and hairy waterclover are among these unique amphibious plants that finish growing once the pool has dried.

Winter and spring are the best times to see the many raptors that inhabit the plateau during some or all of the year. On your walk to the vernal pool or one of the many other destinations on the plateau, you can see white-tailed kite, northern harrier, and American kestrel foraging over the grasslands or perched atop an Engelmann oak or an old ranch gate post. Less common species

*From top:* A spring hike in the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve, 2010. Junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) at the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve. *Photos:* Zachary Principe

present on the plateau only during the winter and spring include the Swainson's hawk, ferruginous hawk, and prairie falcon.

Although late winter and early spring are far from peak wildflower season, there are many species that reliably bloom in January and February. Shooting star, western buttercup, ground pink, coast jepsonia, and chocolate lily are among the first wildflowers to initiate the show as the grasslands begin to change from faded brown to brilliant green. They are joined

by a variety of shrubs, including Eastwood manzanita, bush lupine, and mission manzanita. The clumps of purple needlegrass still dominate the grasslands at this time, as the non-native grasses wait for warmer days for their return to dominance. Stands of giant wild rye and creeping wild rye are also easily visible at this time in the openings of the oak woodlands.

You can enjoy a vast trail system that meanders through the grasslands, oak woodlands, and chaparral at the Santa Rosa Plateau. The vernal pool boardwalk is approximately 0.75 miles from the parking lot; the boardwalk trail connects to the rest of the trail system and allows for both short, easy hikes on the flat mesa and longer, more strenuous hikes through the diverse reserve.

The Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve is at the southern end of the Santa Ana Mountains near Murrieta. From I-15, take the Clinton Keith Road exit and go west (left from I-15 North; right from I-15 South) about 4 miles. The Visitor Center is on the left about 0.1 miles past La Cresta Road and is open Tuesday-Sunday 9:00 am - 5:00 pm. The reserve is open to hiking daily from sunrise to sunset. More information is available at: [www.rivcoparks.org/education/santa-rosa-plateau/santa-rosa-plateau/](http://www.rivcoparks.org/education/santa-rosa-plateau/santa-rosa-plateau/)

