Superbloom!
Death Valley Phenomenon
by Nancy Nies

At the end of February we and other Kern CNPS members headed independently for Death Valley to witness this year’s “superbloom” — a once-in-a-decade occurrence. Some of us had never before seen such a profusion of wildflowers in and around the valley. Exploring in different areas of the national park, different members made different discoveries, though we naturally saw many of the same plants in bloom. When I told *Mimulus Memo* editor Dinah Campbell that I planned to write about our shared experience, she confessed that she herself had thought, “Somebody has to write about Death Valley in the next issue — it was just too remarkable not to.”

On our way to Death Valley on February 28, Paul (Gipe) and I had a taste of the bounty of blooms to come. When we stopped at the rest area in Trona, we found a good crop of *Chylismia claviformis* (brown-eyed primrose) blooming around the rest area’s boulders and underneath a scraggly tree. What later grabbed our attention, as we climbed the pass between Panamint Valley and Death Valley, were roadside swathes of yellow *Chylismia brevipes* (yellow cups) and *Eschscholzia sp.*, as well as purple *Phacelia crenulata* (notch-leaved phacelia).
Once inside the park, we saw the rocky flats tinged with the yellow of *Geraea canescens* (desert sunflower), the most abundant and eye-catching flowers of the superbloom. At the time, we didn’t realize that the desert sunflowers on those flats would seem sparse in comparison to those we would see the next day. On February 29, with Kern CNPS friends *David* and *Dinah Campbell*, we set off for the southern end of the park. There, wide bands of sunflowers lined the roadside in many places and the flats became an increasingly intense shade of yellow. Paul points out that the sunflowers were so plentiful that after walking among them, “you had to scrape the pollen off your shoes.” The flats around milepost 27, thick with bright-yellow blooms, contrasted with the red cliffs and blue sky behind them — creating an irresistible opportunity for photographers.

That day we drove as far south as Ashford Mill, stopping en route to get a close look at the lavender-pink clusters of *Abronia villosa* (desert sand-verbena), which became more and more numerous on the landscape. In this area we also began to see the delicate *Eremalche rotundifolia* (desert five-spot), with its five pink petals, each bearing a red splotch on the inside.

On the advice of *Gordon* and *Eva Nipp*, who had scouted out the area the day before, we left the main highway and took West Side Road to Warm Springs Road, which afforded a wonderful variety of wildflowers. In addition to many more desert five-spots, phacelias and sunflowers, we saw *Malacothrix glabrata* (desert dandelion), *Atrichoseris platyphylla* (gravel ghost), *Chaenactis* sp. (pincushion), and *Larrea tridentata* (creosote bush). While we were exploring in the south that day, Eva and Gordon were hiking farther to the north, in Echo Canyon. There, they sighted the rare *Mimulus rupicola* (Death Valley monkeyflower) blooming in a crevice high on a cliff, its showy pink-and-yellow flowers bright against the black limestone.

On March 1, our foursome enjoyed another day of botanizing, this time exploring two canyons on the east side of the valley. Walking up the scenic Natural Arch Canyon, we spotted *Mohavea brevifolia* (lesser mohavea), *Phacelia califolia* (cal tha-leaved phacelia), notch-leaved phacelia, five-spots, and others.

Sidewinder Canyon, however, held even more in store for us. The parking area offered the silvery-leaved *Atriplex hymenelytra* (desert holly). The trail to the mouth of the wash led us through a garden of desert sunflowers and brown-eyed primroses. In the wash itself, we saw more of the prolific purple-hued phacelias with their lush, green leaves, as well as the occasional rose-pink of a five-spot, standing out against the gray gravel from which it had sprouted. Blending in with its whitish-gray surroundings was the aptly named gravel ghost. We also saw healthy clumps of *Perityle emoryi* (Emory rock-daisy) and *Monoptilon belliioides* (desert star) with their white ray-flowers, and, here and there, *Aliciella latifolia* (broad-leaved gilia), with its large leaves and tiny, bright-pink blooms. In places, a mix of flowering plants transformed the dry, crumbly canyon walls into hanging gardens.

A few days earlier, *Clyde Golden* and *Lucy Clark* had visited Hell’s Gate, the northeast entrance to the park, and Badwater, to the south, where they saw most of the above-mentioned blooms and identified many more—*Amsinckia tesselata* (bristly fiddleneck), *Cryptantha utahensis* (scented cryptantha), *Nama demissum* (purple mat), *Pectocarya recurvata* (arch-nutted comb bur), *Phacelia fremontii* (Fremont’s phacelia), *Caulanthus lasiophylus* (California mustard), *Descurainia pinnata* ssp. *glabra* (western tansy mustard), *Acmispon strigosus* (strigose lotus), *Astragalus didymocarpus* var. *didymocarpus* (dwarf white milk gilia)
Lucy has a special memory of the 2016 superbloom. At Hell’s Gate, she was excited to come upon a narrow path “with desert five-spot every two steps.” Lucy picturesquely describes these, her favorite Death Valley wildflowers, as being “like small pink bowls, with up-curved and overlapping petals, splashed with a fuchsia spot,” and says she’d love to have a porcelain teacup painted as a desert five-spot, with a dusty-green saucer.

Clyde compiled an extensive list of their sightings, and remarked on the wide variety of plants he and Lucy found in neighboring Panamint Valley, mostly at the southern end. Among those they had not seen in Death Valley were three Cryptantha species, one of them the rare C. scoparia (pinyon desert cryptantha); two Eriogonum species, E. inflatum (desert trumpet) and E. pusillum (yellow turban); Emmenanthe penduliflora (whispering bells); Lupinus concinnus (bajada lupine); Encelia farinosa (brittlebush); Eschscholzia minutiflora (pygmy poppy); and, last but not least, Gilia brecciarum ssp. neglecta (Nevada gilia), with its lovely, lavender flowers.

This year’s superbloom was indeed exceptional. Seeing Death Valley and environs brought to colorful life by such a variety of wildflowers was a never-to-be-forgotten experience.

Field Trip Report
Tejon Ranch - Antelope Valley Area
by Patty Gradek

On an excellent field trip to Tejon Ranch on April 17th, Laura Pavliscak, Stewardship Manager for the Tejon Ranch Conservancy, took us to the southeastern area of the Ranch, known as the Antelope Valley portion.

We saw vast fields of poppies, desert marigold, lupines, pensetemon, chia, blooming cacti and many other species.

We also saw riparian areas with groves of willows and oaks, as well as the highest elevations of the Ranch. The Tejon Ranch Conservancy is managing a large portion of the Ranch as conserved areas. Laura exhibited a wide breadth of knowledge on the wildlife, geology, and history of the area, as well as the special ecosystems and plants.

Both right and above:
Calochortus kennedyi
(Kennedy’s mariposa lily)