



Figure 1. Alternating fields of purple and gold in the Temblor Range. Photo: Jennifer Buck-Diaz



Figure 2. *Poa secunda* emerges from a solid layer of goldfields. Photo: Diana Hickson

VISITING CALIFORNIA'S GRASSLANDS: **The Shifting Mosaic of Carrizo Plain**

by Jennifer Buck-Diaz¹, Vegetation Ecologist, California Native Plant Society, jbuck@cnps.org

Spring has sprung, and for those who love sweeping vistas of native California wildflowers, excitement is in the air. At the top of my list of places to see showy grasslands in the state is the Carrizo Plain. Each year brings a unique display to this amazing semi-desert landscape. The plain is located in northeastern San Luis Obispo County, and a large portion of it is managed by the Bureau of Land Management as a national monument.

At 50 miles long and 15 miles across, you will have plenty of room to spread out and explore the myriad of grassland types that assemble in this region. Start in the low alkali playa of Soda Lake with its rare goldfields (*Lasthenia ferrisiae*) and peppergrass (*Lepidium jaredii*). Meander through bands of iodine bush (*Allenrolfea occidentalis*) and saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*) to reach the dotted saltbrush scrub (*Atriplex spinifera*) that gives cover to pronghorn antelope. Your eyes will light up with the brilliant sun-tracking heads of coreopsis (*Leptosyne calliopsidea*) and fields of tidy tips (*Layia munzii*).

Head up into the hills of the Temblor Range and step over the San Andres Fault as you explore the gaudy flower-covered

slopes that come alive in the early spring. In certain years, you can investigate alternating, almost pure stands of purple *Phacelia* and gold *Monolopia* (Fig. 1), each thriving on a particular combination of slope, aspect, and soil profile. Keep your eyes open for blazing patches of desert candle (*Caulanthus inflatus*) and flat terraces of the fragrant thistle sage (*Salvia carduacea*) above ephemeral streams. Swing over to the other side of the Plain to climb the low hills of the Caliente Range, where you can step lightly through dense carpets of blue grass (*Poa secunda*) (Fig. 2) and waving patches of needlegrass (*Stipa cernua*).

Each year brings different timing and amounts of precipitation to this region, and repeat surveys have shown stability as well as variance across the different grassland communities (Buck-Diaz et al. 2013). Some years are breathtakingly showy like the spring of 2010; others are dry and dusty with exposed bare soil churned from rodent activity. In 2015, reports are good for an early bloom, and whether you catch the display this year or sometime in the future, be sure not to miss an opportunity to witness the amazing diversity of grasslands within the Carrizo Plain.



References

Buck-Diaz, J., J. Ratchford, and J.M. Evens. 2013. "California Rangeland Monitoring and Mapping: Focusing upon Great Valley and Carrizo Plain Grassland Habitats." Final Report to the Natural Resources Conservation District. California Native Plant Society, Sacramento, CA. http://cnps.org/cnps/vegetation/pdf/grassland_nrcs_report-2013c.pdf

¹Jennifer Buck-Diaz is a vegetation ecologist and botanist with the CNPS Vegetation Program where she surveys, classifies, and maps vegetation across California. She has recently focused her work on the classification and description of grassland vegetation, including the study of spatial and temporal dynamics in these systems. She earned both a B.S. and a M.S. degree in Plant Biology from UC Davis, where she participated in a state-wide classification project that looked at fine-scale vegetation in vernal pools.