

# Spinning Their Wheels?

*Death Valley's Surprise Canyon may be threatened by off-road vehicles. Again.*



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**Hikers in Surprise Canyon may soon need to look both ways before crossing the stream.**

For years, off-road vehicles ravaged Surprise Canyon, destroying aquatic life in the streams beneath their wheels, polluting the water with antifreeze and other chemicals, and scarifying away sensitive desert wildlife such as bighorn sheep. The canyon, which stretches from Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property into Death Valley National Park, was a mecca for extreme off-roaders willing to winch their rigs up waterfalls and bring a spare axle, in case one was broken. But that all ended in 2001 when the area was closed to vehicles because of a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club. Since then, their absence and severe flooding have returned the land to nature. Cottonwood and willows now fill the canyon; scrub brush

that had been pruned back for vehicles has taken over the landscape. Surprise Canyon is now becoming increasingly popular with hikers who trek to historic Panamint City, an abandoned mining town that thrived during the late 1800s.

Back then, miners constructed a road through the canyon to reach excavations in Panamint City. When the land was designated as wilderness in 1994, a special exemption allowed for continued vehicle traffic along the canyon. The road ceased to exist decades ago because of repeated flooding and the end of mining operations. But an imminent environmental impact statement has off-roaders hoping to regain access to the canyon. If the BLM decides to allow extreme off-roaders to return to its land, the impact will be felt along its entire length, including land in the park.

"Although the canyon is managed by two separate agencies, it's an artificial segregation in terms of the ecosystem," says Howard Gross, program manager for NPCA's desert field office. "Impacts in the lower canyon, managed by the BLM, will be felt in the upper canyon in Death Valley as wildlife compete for limited habitat. And hikers will be deterred from using the upper canyon in the park if the lower canyon—which they'll have to pass through—is trashed by off-road vehicles."

Surprise Canyon features some of the few spring-fed perennial streams in the Mojave desert, and that means it's one of the few places where hikers don't need to pack in gallons of water—they can just dip their canteens in the clear-

running stream. It's also home to many rare and endemic animals and plants such as bighorn sheep, the Panamint alligator lizard, and the Panamint daisy. Many migratory and nesting songbirds depend on the canyon's habitat.

"The Park Service should be able to protect rare and important resources like Surprise Canyon from damaging uses," says Gross. "And the BLM should recognize that Surprise Canyon is such a unique and valuable resource that it shouldn't be sacrificed for the enjoyment of a small number of people, when so many off-roading opportunities are widely available in the Mojave desert."

On a national level, NPCA and other conservation organizations filed suit against the Park Service and Department of Interior in November, demanding the agencies enforce regulations to prevent damage caused by off-road vehicles at the Grand Canyon, Olympic, Arches, and Canyonlands, among others. Visit [www.npca.org](http://www.npca.org) for updates on the outcome.

## News in Brief

**Death Valley, CA**—Last year, PBS sent film crews to Death Valley National Park to produce an episode of the series "Nature." The result is *Life in Death Valley*—a look at an otherworldly landscape of molten rock canyons, lunar craters, and unexpected wildflowers—airing Sunday, January 8 at 8 p.m. on most PBS channels. Get a close-up look at animals in this extreme place, including coyotes, roadrunners, the Devil's Hole pupfish, and athletes who participate in the Kiehl's Badwater Ultramarathon, a grueling 135-mile race through the desert.



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