Desert Hills of the San Joaquin Valley

Bureau of Land Management public lands in the Panoche, Griswold and Tumey hills of southern San Benito and western Fresno counties provide a wealth of outdoor recreational opportunities, including hunting, camping, hiking, and wildlife viewing. The rugged hills west of Interstate 5 provide habitat for many rare and endangered species common to the San Joaquin Valley, such as the San Joaquin kit fox, giant kangaroo rat, and blunt-nosed leopard lizard. Other species of plants and animals in the area are similar to those more commonly seen in the southern deserts, such as the yellow-backed spiny lizard, desert night lizard, and glossy snake. Vegetation consists of annual grassland with occasional saltbrush, Mormon tea shrubs, and yucca. Typical plants found growing on the gypsum barrens include fiddleneck and protruding buckwheat.

Traces of the Past

The Panoche, Griswold and Tumey Hills are underlain by marine sediments that are primarily of Cretaceous age (65 million years ago). During the Cretaceous, most of California that we see today was underwater. Small islands, representing the very highest points of the present-day Coast Range, had just begun to emerge from the ocean. The present day Central Valley was a shallow sea. Large sea-dwelling reptiles, such as Mosasaurs and Plesiosaurs, swam the shallow seas along with sea turtles and other marine animals near the islands.

Both the Tumey Hills and Panoche Hills have produced important fossil finds, including mosasaurs and hadrosaurs. A permit is required to collect vertebrate fossils.

Panoche Hills

Bound by Panoche Valley and Little Panoche Valley, the Panoche Hills provide a badi lakes experience just an hour’s drive from the Bay Area. Panoche Access Road winds east from Little Panoche Road up the side of the valley and crests on a windswept plateau dotted with desert tea and juniper. Further south and east the hills become a jumble of razor-backed ridges and plunging canyons. The low ambient light in the region creates ideal conditions for stargazing, and both amateur and professional astronomers travel every year to the hills to view the Perseid meteor shower.

Griswold Hills

Turning south from Panoche Road towards the old mining town of New Idria brings the traveler to the Griswold Hills. A foot trail from the public parking lot zigzags up the hillside to the ridgetop above. The Griswold Hills are a destination for hunters seeking upland game birds, wild pig and deer. Rock outcrops provide homes for the yellow-black spiny lizard, which sports a bright black and yellow collar and can attain a total length of over one foot.

Tumey Hills

Stretching along Interstate 5 south of Panoche Road, the Tumey Hills are a jumble of bare rolling hills and valleys dotted with saltbush. Two entrances along Panoche Road give access to the area. Due to the characteristics of the highly erodable soils, massive sink holes can develop in roadways, locally referred to as “Tumey tunnels”. Drivers are cautioned to beware of these hazards when traveling on designated routes!

Pastes, Present, & Future

The earliest permanent European settlers in the foothills of the South Coast Ranges were Mexican citizens. Mexican Governor Manuel Micheltorena granted a tract of land in this region in 1844 to Julian Ursua and Pedro Romero called “Panoche de San Juan y los Carrisañolos.” The 22,000 acre rancho passed through a number of hands until the late 1870s, when Daniel Hernandez acquired the land and ran a sheep ranch.

Greater numbers of European-American settlers moved to the west-central San Joaquin Valley in the 1860s and 1870s, like Pleasant Valley. Large ranching enterprises - which spread from the Coast Range east to Fresno City - covered tens of thousands of acres. Cattle baron Henry Miller used land throughout this region as part of his cattle-ranching empire.

How Can I Help?

Each summer, museums and universities conduct field expeditions to BLM public lands under permit. Fossil enthusiasts can get involved and contribute to paleontology by volunteering at museums and educational institutions to study and work alongside trained paleontologists - discovery, fieldwork, preparation, and curation are all components of paleontology work. Casual visitors can help protect unique resources by reporting the location of any vertebrate fossils found on public lands to the Hollister Field Office.

Panoche, Tumey, and Griswold Hills are limited to 14 days within any 30-day period at a particular site. While there are no limitations on campsite locations, vehicles are restricted to designated routes. Hiking opportunities are also available at each of these areas on old roads and trails. Please practice Leave No Trace® principles when visiting all public lands.

Camping & Hiking

Primitive, dispersed camping opportunities on BLM public lands in the Panoche, Tumey, and Griswold Hills are limited to 14 days within any 30-day period at a particular site. While there are no limitations on campsite locations, vehicles are restricted to designated routes. Hiking opportunities are also available at each of these areas on old roads and trails. Please practice Leave No Trace® principles when visiting all public lands.

Hunting

Hunting opportunities on BLM public lands within the San Joaquin Valley consist primarily of game birds (chukar and quail), wild pig and deer. BLM and California Department of Fish and Game manage game animals for hunting by providing watering sites (guzzlers) and planting cover shrubs. All areas are known for the bird and pig opportunities, with deer being found primarily in the Griswolds.

Special Designations

Two Wilderness Study Areas (WSA): Panoche Hills North & Panoche Hills South, are managed as “de facto” wilderness until Congress determines their suitability for official wilderness designation. No motorized access is allowed within the WSA to prevent impacts to the wilderness values.

The region has long been known to bird enthusiasts for the uncommon species that can be seen, such as phainopepla and mountain ptarmigan. Other animal species, like the San Joaquin antelope squirrel with its distinctive stripes, can also be seen by the alert wildlife watcher. The rare Cervo agišlan scarab beetle and the San Joaquin dune beetle are found only in the Monvero Dunes.

Other Local Resources

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Montero Dunes

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BLM

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Panoche Hills, Griswold Hills and Tumey Hills
THE TEN ESSENTIALS
Packing these items whenever you venture into the backcountry, even on day hikes or drives, is a good habit to acquire. On a routine trip you may only use a few of them. Yet you’ll probably never fully appreciate the value of the Ten Essentials until you really need one of them.
1. Map
2. Compass
3. Sunglasses and Sunscreen
4. Extra Clothing
5. Headlamp/Flashlight
6. First Aid Supplies
7. Fire-starting Material
8. Matches
9. Knife
10. Extra Food & Water

LEAVE NO TRACE (www.lnt.org)
As more people use parks and recreation facilities, LEAVE NO TRACE® guidelines become even more important for outdoor visitors. Leave No Trace is a plan that helps people to be more concerned about their environment and to help them protect it for future generations. Leave No Trace applies in the frontcountry as much as it does in the wilderness (backcountry).
1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
3. Dispose of Waste Properly
4. Leave What You Find
5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
6. Respect Wildlife
7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors

TREAD LIGHTLY (www.treadlightly.org)
1. Travel responsibly on designated roads and trails or in permitted areas.
2. Respect the rights of others including private property owners and all recreational trail users, campers and others to allow them to enjoy their recreational activities undisturbed.
3. Educate yourself by obtaining travel maps and regulations from public agencies, planning for your trip, taking recreation skills classes, and knowing how to use and operate your equipment safely.
4. Avoid sensitive areas such as meadows, lakeshores, wetlands and streams, unless on designated routes. This protects wildlife habitat and sensitive soils from damage.
5. Do your part by leaving the area better than you found it, properly disposing of waste, minimizing the use of fire, avoiding the spread of invasive species, restoring degraded areas, and joining a local enthusiast organization.

SPECIAL REGULATIONS: FOSSILS
Animal fossils:— It is illegal to collect vertebrate fossils (remains of reptiles, mammals, fish, amphibians or birds) without a permit. Fossil shells or other invertebrate remains may be legally collected.
Plant fossils:— It is illegal to collect plant fossils of scientific interest (including fossilized leaves or needles, cones, flowers, seeds, and fossilized logs less than 6 inches in diameter) without a permit. Fossil wood, logs and log fragments less than 6 inches in diameter may be legally collected.
Fossils may only be collected for personal use.

SPECIAL REGULATIONS: FIRE USE
A permit is required from the Hollister Field Office if you are planning to have a campfire. Permits are generally not issued during the dry season (summer).

Restriction on Lead Ammunition
In order to prevent the accidental poisoning of California condors, lead ammunition had been banned for most kinds of hunting.

U.S. Bureau Of Land Management
Hollister Field Office
20 Hamilton Court
Hollister, CA  95023
(831) 630-5000
www.blm.gov/ca/hollister

BLM/CA/GI-2009-026+8350