

Mosaic of Desert Landscapes: Mojave National Preserve and Castle Mountains National Monument



Rippled sand dunes sing an eerie chorus. Cactus flowers bloom after a spring rain, jewels against buff-colored earth. Salt-bush borders a dry lakebed. Countless Joshua tree limbs reach toward the sky. At night a vast darkness offers spectacular views of the stars. Mojave and Castle Mountains are all these scenes and more.

Mojave National Preserve was established by the 1994 California Desert Protection Act. The 1.6-million-acre preserve encompasses much of the Mojave Desert, as well

as transitional elements of the Great Basin and Sonoran deserts. About half of the preserve is congressionally designated wilderness. Wilderness areas, marked by signs, are open to hikers and horseback riders but off-limits to motor vehicles and bicycles.

Summer temperatures often exceed 100°F. Yearly rainfall ranges from 4 to 14 inches, varying by elevations that range from 800 feet near Baker to 7,929 feet atop Clark Mountain. A spine of mountains bisects the park north to south. Cinder

cones, lava beds, sand dunes, Soda Lake (dry), and Cima Dome attest to geological forces at work through the ages.

Many variables—elevation, moisture, soil composition, exposure to sunlight, shelter from the wind, and the effects of human habitation—create at least 30 identifiable habitats for plants and animals. Castle Mountains National Monument,

established in 2016, connects these habitats along the preserve's eastern boundary. The habitats do not have hard boundaries and often overlap; they are grouped below into general categories.

Mojave and Castle Mountains lack many of the visitor facilities you might expect in national parks. This creates inconveniences and also opportunities to observe, explore, discover, and reflect. Nearby communities offer lodging and other services. Plan ahead and be safe.



Goldenbush © JON MARK STEWART
Great Basin sagebrush © ROBIN MITCHELL
Indian paintbrush © ROBIN MITCHELL
Prickly pear NPS / DREW KAISER

Pinyon-Juniper Woodland

At higher elevations, particularly on north-facing slopes, pinyon and juniper trees cling to rocky, shallow soil. Look for this habitat in the Clark, Granite, New York, and Providence mountains. You can camp among these trees at Mid Hills Campground.

Pinyon nuts have long provided food for humans and wild

animals. Ranchers built fences from junipers; you can still see remnants at abandoned homesteads.

This habitat has sagebrush, wildflowers like Indian paintbrush, goldenbush, and grizzlybear prickly pear—one of several species of prickly pear found in the park. Also look for pinyon jays and rock squirrels.



© JEFF GNASS

Joshua Tree Woodland

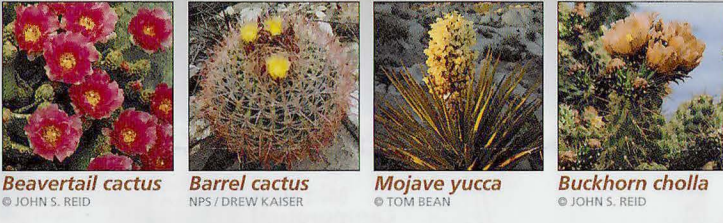
Joshua trees tell you you're truly in Mojave country. Though they can grow 40 feet tall, they are not really trees but a species of yucca. They prefer flat areas or gradual inclines. One of the largest known concentrations of Joshua trees grows on the slope of Cima Dome near Teutonia Peak, a large portion of which burned in an August 2020 fire. Compare them with banana and

Mojave yuccas that grow nearby. Banana yuccas grow up to five feet and have long, blue-green, curved leaves. Mojave yuccas can reach a height of 20 feet.

One of Mojave's many lizard species, the desert night lizard,



Desert night lizard © JOHN S. REID

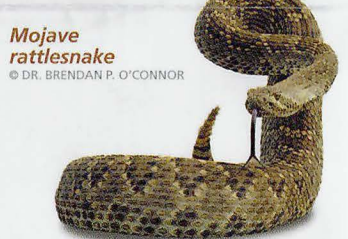


Beavertail cactus © JOHN S. REID
Barrel cactus NPS / DREW KAISER
Mojave yucca © TOM BEAN
Buckhorn cholla © JOHN S. REID

Cactus-Yucca Scrub

Cactus, or mixed-desert, scrub includes the spiny succulents that fulfill the popular notion of "desert." Barrel cacti are prominent on south-facing slopes, like southwest of Hole-in-the-Wall. They germinate only in years with favorable rainfall, so barrel cacti growing near one another are usually of the same age. If you visit in spring you may see desert plants in brilliant bloom.

The greenish-gray Mojave rattlesnake blends in easily with this habitat. It is the most aggressive



Mojave rattlesnake © DR. BRENDAN P. O'CONNOR



© DAN SUZIO

Desert Dunes

Prevailing winds carry sand from Soda Lake (dry), the Mojave River Sink, and Devil's Playground to the base of the Granite Mountains, creating dunes up to 600 feet high. At first the Kelso Dunes appear barren, but look

closely: evening primrose (cover photo, left), desert lilies, and other plants find sufficient moisture. In favorable conditions dunes may be covered by Indian ricegrass.



Mojave Desert sidewinder © MICHAEL CARDWELL



Roadrunner © FRANK BALTHUS
Hedgehog cactus © JON MARK STEWART
Creosote bush © GERALD AND BUFF CORSI
White bursage © GERALD AND BUFF CORSI

Creosote Bush Scrub

Strong-scented creosote bush and bursage dominate much of the area. These widely spaced shrubs cover low-lying expanses. Creosote bushes are among the world's oldest living things; some colonies here are 11,500 years old! Other plants in this zone are desert mallow, brittle-bush, and hedgehog cactus. Of the several types of cholla here, the diamond (pencil) cholla is most abundant.

Roadrunners nest in this type of scrub. You may see one dart between areas of cover at up to 15 miles per hour. They can fly but seem to prefer running.

This is the home of the desert tortoise, which uses powerful claws to dig nests in the sandy soil. Designated a threatened species, desert tortoises and their habitat are protected by federal law. Drive carefully and



© STEPHEN INGRAM

Desert Wash

Washes generally flow intermittently after heavy rains—a feast or famine of water that creates specific plant communities. Roadside water runoff can also create a miniature habitat of its own. Sacred datura, also called jimson weed or thorn apple, thrives in this water runoff, making the plant stand out along roads.

Unlike the sparse vegetation in most of the area, plant life in washes is lush and deep rooted. Plants range from shrubs like the catclaw acacia, cheesebush, four-wing saltbush, and mono groundsel (left) to taller trees like desert willow and cottonwood.

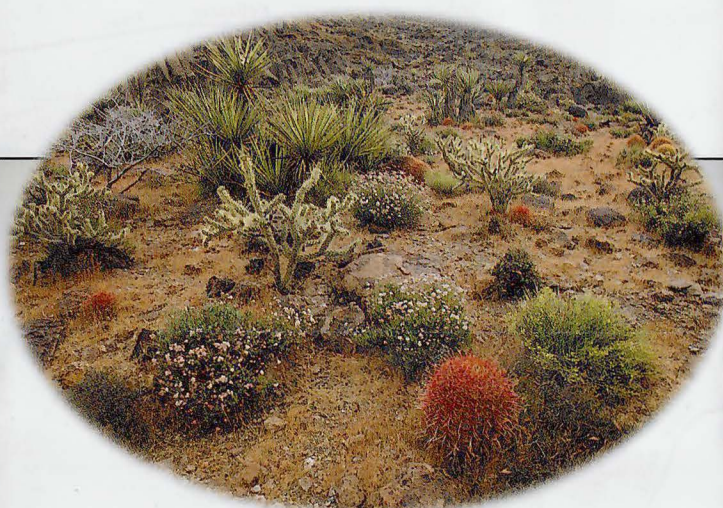
Look on the branches of the shrubby catclaw acacia for clumps of desert mistletoe,



© JEFF GNASS



Banana yucca © JEFF GNASS
Mono groundsel © JEFF GNASS
Mormon tea © R.J. ERWIN
Mojave mound cactus © JON MARK STEWART



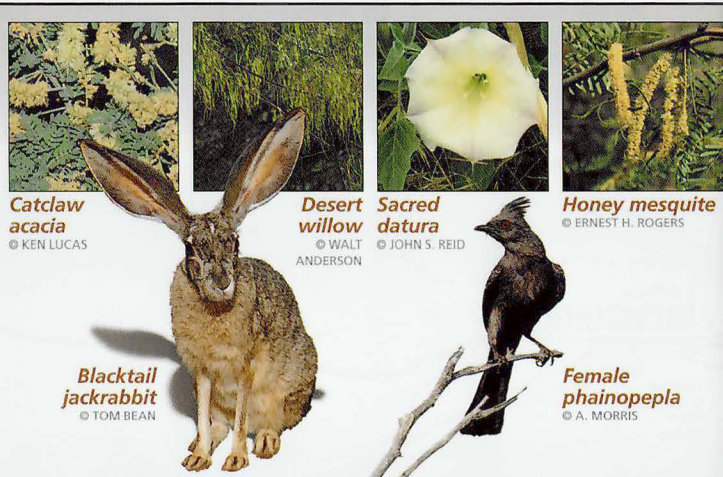
© TOM BEAN



Indian ricegrass © JIM STEINBERG
Desert lily NPS / DREW KAISER
Borrego milkvetch NPS / DREW KAISER
Sand verbena © JIM STEINBERG



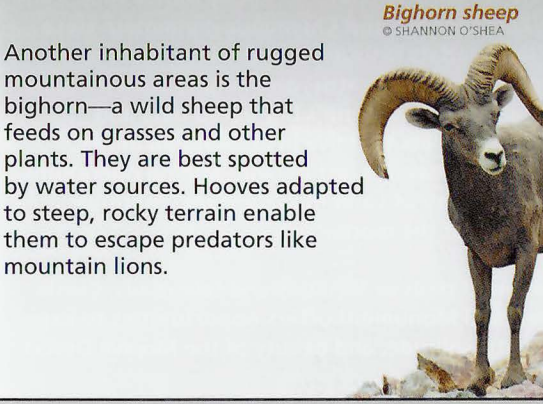
© TOM BEAN



Catclaw acacia © KEIN LUCAS
Desert willow © WALT ANDERSON
Sacred datura © JOHN S. REID
Honey mesquite © ERNEST H. ROGERS



Blacktail jackrabbit © TOM BEAN
Female phainopepla © A. TAYLOR



Bighorn sheep © SHANNON O'SHEA

Another inhabitant of rugged mountainous areas is the bighorn—a wild sheep that feeds on grasses and other plants. They are best spotted by water sources. Hooves adapted to steep, rocky terrain enable them to escape predators like mountain lions.

lives in decaying plant matter like downed Joshua trees. Despite its name this tiny lizard is active in the daytime but may hunt termites at night.

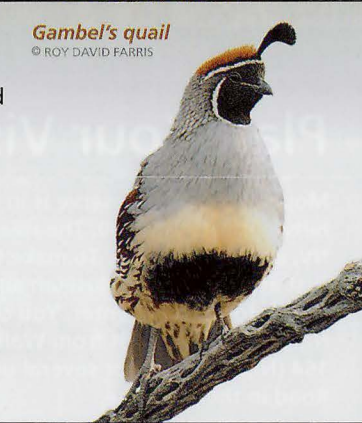
Insects, attracted by flowers of the mono groundsel and Mojave mound cactus, become food for birds. Joshua tree woodlands support species like Scott's oriole and American kestrel, a small bird of prey.



Scott's oriole © ROBERT ROYCE

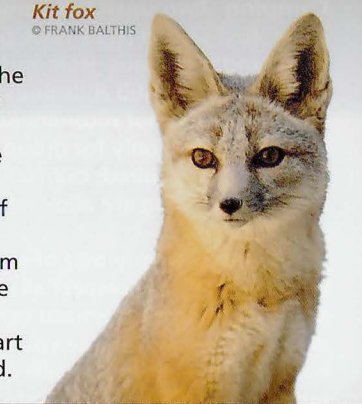
and highly venomous of the three kinds of rattlesnakes found in the park. This snake is most active at night and in early morning, so be careful where you place your hands and feet.

Early morning is a good time to spot a Gambel's quail feeding on cactus seeds and berries. These birds nest on the ground and sometimes in shrubs, cacti, or trees.



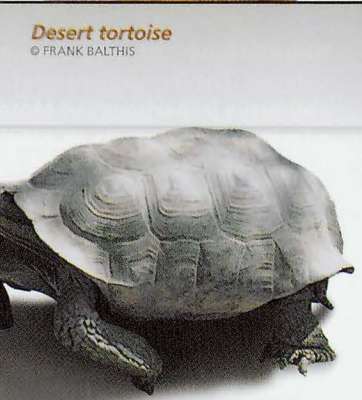
Gambel's quail © BOB DAVID FARBER

Perhaps you will see a Mojave fringe-toed lizard skitter across the dunes. Look for tracks, especially of kangaroo rats and their main predators, kit foxes. Kit foxes are most often seen at dusk in open desert. They are about the size of a housecat with the agility to match. Fur-covered toes give them traction in sand. Also look for the tracks of the sidewinder, which glides along with a rapid, two-part motion, barely touching the sand.



Kit fox © FRANK BALTHUS

check under parked vehicles for tortoises. Watch for them along park roads in the early morning and after rainstorms, especially in spring and summer. Observe them from a distance; do not touch or bother them. Tortoises are susceptible to diseases that can be transmitted through human contact.



Desert tortoise © FRANK BALTHUS

a parasitic plant. Mistletoe attracts phainopepla, a small, tufted black bird that eats—and disperses—its berries. Water attracts many birds, like migratory finches, orioles, and tanagers, and other animals like the red-spotted toad. The blacktail jackrabbit, recognized by large, black-tipped ears and a black-topped tail, is generally nocturnal. As fast as jackrabbits are, they may not be able to outrun a coyote, one of their few natural predators in this region.



Coyote © JOHN S. REID

Critical Connections

Surrounded on three sides by the preserve, Castle Mountains National Monument contains an exceptional piece of the Mojave Desert landscape. The monument connects habitat and wildlife corridors between the New York and Piute mountain ranges, protects groundwater essential to desert life, and preserves stories of the area’s human inhabitants.

Diversity abounds in the desert grassland. Rare burrograss and false buffalograss are among 28 species of native grasses. Bighorn sheep graze between pinyon-juniper woodlands on the slopes of the Castle Mountains. Golden eagles and red-tailed hawks soar over remote Hart Peak, where natural sounds prevail.

The landscape bears signs of the area’s ongoing human story. Rock markings and archeological sites attest to its use as a travel route for early inhabitants. Today Native Americans including the Fort Mohave and Chemehuevi maintain close ties with the land and its resources. In the late 1800s and early 1900s ranchers grazed cattle, and miners staked claims for gold. Animals, like Townsend’s big-eared bats and California leaf-nosed bats that live in abandoned mines, make their homes in features left behind. Mining operations, overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, continue today at the center of the monument.

With no maintained trails or facilities and few roads, Castle Mountains National Monument offers opportunities to experience the serenity, solitude, and beauty of the Mojave Desert.



Castle Mountains and bighorn sheep

BACKGROUND—© JOHN S. REID; BIGHORN—© JAMES MARVIN PHELPS

Plan Your Visit

Mojave National Preserve is in southeastern California between I-15 and I-40. The nearest large cities are Las Vegas, NV, and Barstow, CA. To make the most of your visit, stop first at Kelso Depot Museum and Visitor Center or Hole-in-the-Wall Information Center. You can get to Castle Mountains National Monument from Walking Box Ranch Road off CA 164 (Nipton Road) or several unnamed dirt roads off Lanfair Road in the preserve.

Camping Two small campgrounds open year-round, first-come, first-served (fee), have pit toilets, picnic tables, fire rings, and trash cans. Hole-in-the-Wall Campground has drinking water; Mid Hills does not. The road to Mid Hills Campground is not recommended for trailers or large RVs. Black Canyon is only for group or equestrian camping—reservations required; call 760-252-6101. Backcountry and roadside camping are allowed in previously used areas.

Wilderness Nearly half of the preserve is designated wilderness. Please respect all wilderness boundary markers. Motorized and mechanized vehicles are prohibited in these areas, but we encourage you to explore on foot and horseback. The preserve has trails of all varieties. Before you set out, read and heed “For a Safe Visit” (far right).

Regulations Off-road driving is prohibited. • Off-highway vehicles (OHV) must be street legal in accordance with California Department of Motor Vehicles requirements. • Federal law protects all natural and cultural features. • Pets must be on a leash at all times. • Licensed hunting per California Fish and Wildlife regulations is permitted in the preserve but not the monument. Target shooting and plinking are prohibited in both parks. • Using remotely piloted aircraft like drones is prohibited.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our websites.

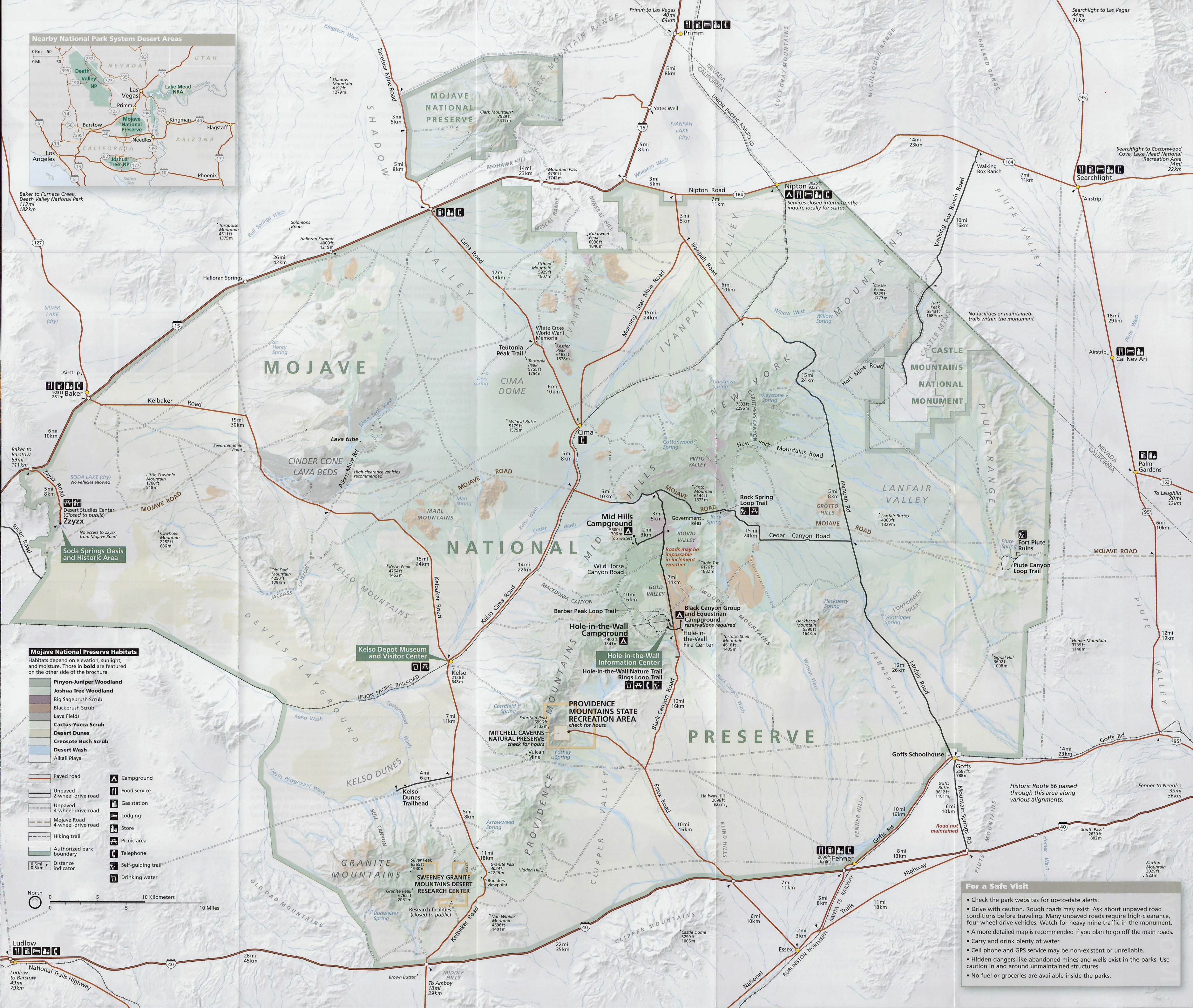
Mojave National Preserve and Castle Mountains National Monument are two of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn more about national parks at www.nps.gov.

MORE INFORMATION

Mojave National Preserve
2701 Barstow Rd.
Barstow, CA 92311
760-252-6100
www.nps.gov/moja

Castle Mountains National Monument
2701 Barstow Rd.
Barstow, CA 92311
760-252-6100
www.nps.gov/camo

National Park Foundation.
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org



For a Safe Visit

- Check the park websites for up-to-date alerts.
- Drive with caution. Rough roads may exist. Ask about unpaved road conditions before traveling. Many unpaved roads require high-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicles. Watch for heavy mine traffic in the monument.
- A more detailed map is recommended if you plan to go off the main roads.
- Carry and drink plenty of water.
- Cell phone and GPS service may be non-existent or unreliable.
- Hidden dangers like abandoned mines and wells exist in the parks. Use caution in and around unmaintained structures.
- No fuel or groceries are available inside the parks.