

Responsible persons may explore the restricted La Prieta Game Range if they know how and where to obtain permission. In this article Norman Simmons reveals a new back country experience for desert travelers.

EXPLORING LA CABEZA PRIETA

By Norman Simmons

AS PRISTINE TODAY as it was before white man ever set foot on it, the 860,000-acre Cabeza Prieta Game Range is surrounded by millions of acres of wilderness that extend from Highway 80 between Yuma and Gila Bend, Arizona, to the Gulf of California.

Administered by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, the Game Range was named after Cabeza Prieta Peak, a lava-capped granite mountain on the western edge of the refuge. Cabeza Prieta means "Black Head" in Spanish.

Because the area is a military reserve, travel on the Game Range is restricted. However, well-equipped and responsible travelers are welcome to visit many parts of it if they first obtain permission from the Refuge Manager in Yuma (356 First St.) or his assistant in Ajo (1611 No. 2nd Ave.).

Making his way across the vast area on rough trails, today's explorer is reminded of the hardy men who preceded him. Glazed green potsherds seen near a waterhole in the Sierra Pinta bring forth images of Padre Francisco Eusebio Kino, the Jesuit missionary-explorer who passed this way over 250 years ago. He first visited the deep pool of water in the rugged Sierra Pinta in 1699 while on a trip from Mission Dolores in Sonora, Mexico, to the Gila River in Arizona. He and his Indian guides traveled west along the Sonoita River, skirting the west side of the Sierra Pinta. One midnight they halted at the mouth of a deep gorge. Here his

guides showed Kino a watering place high in the rocks and barrancas, where, after a difficult climb they drank of the sweet water. Impressed by moonlight reflected on the white granite, Kino named the spot Aguaje de la Luna—"Watering Place of the Moon." Today we call it Heart Tank because of its heart-shaped appearance.

Evidence of human occupation dates back to about 2,000 B.C., when a people called San Dieguitos by modern anthropologists lived in this magnificent land. Their stone tools and "sleeping circles" are found in and near several of the mountain ranges on the Game Range. From about 1000 B.C. to nearly 1000 A.D., the Armagosa people, successors to the San Dieguitos, occupied the Sonoran Desert. They left stone tools from New Mexico to the California deserts. It was not until after 1700 A.D. that the first pottery-making Indians arrived. Then the Yumans came from the west, traveling east to the Growler Mountains. On the other side of the Growlers, Hohokam people left their characteristic red-on-brown pottery.

The Sand Papago Indian groups appeared on the Game Range area around 1450 A.D., roaming west of the Growler Mountains between the Gulf of California and the Gila River. The Papago Indians occupied the more habitable land they live in today east of the Growler Valley. Both Sand Papago and Papago Indians were encountered by early Spanish explorers.

Recorded history of this part of the Sonoran Desert begins with the arrival

of the Spaniard Melchior Diaz, third in command to Francisco Vasquez de Coronado. In late 1540, Coronado appointed Diaz commander of his forces in Corazones, Sonora. He was given orders to go west to the Colorado River to contact Spanish supply ships making their way up the Gulf of California with provisions for Coronado's expedition to Cibola. Failing to make contact, Diaz returned to Mexico, stopping at waterholes in the Cabeza Prieta Mountains on his way.

In 1698, Padre Kino began a series of exploratory journeys that would take him through Cabeza Prieta several times. He was first to traverse and map the whole of Pimeria Alta, a name then applied to southern Arizona and northern Sonora. He traveled several times in the area of the infamous Camino del Diablo (Devil's Highway) which passes through the southern part of the Game Range.

For 20 years after Padre Kino's death in 1711, no Spaniard entered that portion of the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. Then interest was revived in the area and once again missionaries visited the Indian villages, continuing their work in Arizona until the belligerent Apache Indians forced them to leave, around 1820.

Following that tragedy, the area remained unoccupied by other than nomadic Sand Papago Indians until the U.S.-Mexican war of 1846. After the war, a gold rush to the placers in California began and the Gila River and waterless Camino del Diablo became important immigration routes.



THE WEST SLOPE OF THE GROWLER MOUNTAINS, NAMED AFTER AN EARLY MINER, JOHN GROWLER. THIS IS A MESA-TYPE RANGE COMPOSED OF QUATERNARY AND TERTIARY SANDSTONE, TUFF, AND CONGLOMERATE OVERLYING MESOZOIC GNEISS AND GRANITE. IT CONTAINS ANCIENT WATERHOLES, INDIAN TRAILS, CAMPSITES AND PETROGLYPHS. BIGHORN SHEEP, ANTELOPE, MULE DEER, PECCARY, AND OTHER GAME ANIMALS FREQUENT THIS AREA.

Over 400 gold-seekers are said to have perished on the Camino del Diablo.

In 1863, the Game Range area became part of the United States as a result of the Gadsden Purchase. Plans were then undertaken to exploit the rich copper deposits near the mining camp called Ajo, not far from the eastern border of the present Game Range. Prospectors and other immigrants flowed into the area. By 1915, a copper ore reduction plant was constructed in Ajo and the camp became a roaring town of 5000 people. Mining is still the principal occupation in Ajo and a few prospectors hunt minerals in the surrounding desert. However, much of the activity was stopped during World War II when the area was made an aerial gunnery range.

This relatively undisturbed territory is an ideal desert wildlife refuge. The once seriously endangered desert bighorn sheep thrive in the rugged mountains. A remnant population of Sonoran pronghorn antelope roams the broad valleys where its keen vision is often unobstructed for miles. Peccary dig for roots and mule deer occupy the more verdant eastern end of the refuge. Gambel's quail, white-winged doves, and a variety of other birds are also provided a refuge.

Though the Game Range is in the arid part of Arizona, it supports desert plants such as creosote bush, palo verde, ironwood, and the giant sahuaro cactus. The organpipe cactus is common in the southeastern part and a few specimens of the unusual *sinita* (old man) cactus also grow.

Among the unusual plants are the elephant tree (relative of the Old World tree that produces frankincense), the red-sapped limber bush, the poisonous Mexican jumping bean and the rare Kearney sumac.

Historic old roads and trails are patrolled by trained wildlife managers in radio-equipped, four-wheel-drive vehicles and on horseback. They sometimes cover the vast area by helicopter and light fixed-wing airplanes. The rugged mountain habitat of the desert bighorn is patrolled on foot. Thus the wildlife manager keeps informed of the condition of the wild animals he manages and the vegetation and water that sustains them.

The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife has augmented the sparse water supply by enlarging natural waterholes and building new ones. Artificial holes to catch rain water are blasted from the solid rock of the mountains and earthen reservoirs are excavated in the valleys. Careful records are kept of wildlife observations and a special study is being made of the activities of the elusive desert bighorn sheep.

The Cabeza Prieta Game Range is a treasurehouse of information for researchers wanting to learn more of the nomadic desert Indian, the trek of the Spaniards, the routes of gold-seeking '49ers, and native desert animals and plant life. It also provides a true wilderness for back-country explorers who obtain permission to enter it and agree to "take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but footprints."