

**Eyes**  
by Kent Duryée

It's spring again in the desert. No other time or place is quite as sweet, with new life virtually ripping the seams of the place. Some people have favorite cities, favorite bistros, maybe even favorite islands or mountains. For me there is only the desert, and for the time being, four days were mine to savor the springtime explosion of life. I took off to find a particular canyon I'd had my eyes on for a long time.

Tucked away in the far southeastern corner of California, the good corner, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park is named for divergent parts of its history. The first half of the park's name recalls the Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza, who traveled through in 1775 on his way from Tubac, Arizona to found the sleepy seaside village of Yerba Buena on the California coast. Today we call that village San Francisco, and it's no longer very sleepy. The second name, borrego, is Spanish for bighorn sheep, which still cling tenuously to the mountainous regions inside the park.

This naming scheme is highly appropriate. Anza, along with his troops, clerics and settlers, collided head-on with the desert southwest and its inhabitants, both human and animal, on their way to extend the empire of Spain. This collision is still taking place all over the desert; each subdivision, golf course, mine, road, or strip mall that appears on the face of the desert

carries Anza's expedition just one step further. Desert wildlife species, like the bighorn, have paid dearly over the centuries, and their dwindling numbers reflect in graphic terms the diminishing size of their native habitat. The latest population figures for Anza-Borrego's bighorns show that only about 250 individuals remain within the park boundaries, and only about 350 are left in the entire state. Only 20 years ago, those numbers were more than double.

It's only fitting that the collision between human development and the fragile desert be remembered here in Southern California. All you have to do to note this is to compare the dwindling population of bighorns to the human population of the region. The combined total population of San Diego and Los Angeles Counties, for example, is 13,000,000. This doesn't include the other metropolitan region to the south, Tijuana, which adds another 2 million heads to the total. Lacking as well from this number are the population figures from the other counties making up Southern California, like Imperial, Riverside and San Bernardino. Algebraically, phenomenal growth on one side of the equation translates to plummeting figures on the other.

Enough drear statistics, however. It's spring, and the desert is calling. Anza-Borrego is geographically a sub-set of the Sonoran Desert, properly referred to as the Colorado Desert. Typical plants of the area include the twisted ocotillo, cholla cactus, mesquite and jojoba, along with the creosote bush, smoke tree, et al. Aside from these more common plants, there are several lush and peaceful oases tucked in several canyons in the park that are shaded by an unexpected sight, *Washingtonia filifera*, the desert fan palm.

Wherever they are found, these oases are amazing sights. Water percolating out along fault lines, often laden with salts and arsenides, nourishes the growth of the palms. Wild grapevines, ferns, willows, cottonwoods and other water-loving plants thrive on the rare desert water, creating luxuriant islands of green shade in the hot canyons. Taking advantage of the ecological niche offered by these islands, small animals thrive under the green canopy, and predators are drawn by the ancient, inescapable drives of hunger and thirst. Among these

predator-prey relations are the kangaroo rat and the rattlesnake, the jackrabbit and the coyote, and at the top of the food chain, the mountain lion and the desert bighorn.

This spring season was preceded by quite a few small storms, which had brought enough rain over the mountains to produce a nice show of flowers, but not on the titanic scale that sometimes occurs here. The peak bloom had had flowered the week before my trek, but there were still brilliant carpets of flowers in shaded alcoves and in the higher reaches of the park. The first real heat of the year was starting to make itself felt as I parked off of a remote road near the western edge of the park. I climbed out, and with little ceremony shouldered my pack and started off through the desert for four days.

As I meandered up the long, gentle rise, desert birds – cactus wrens, gnat catchers and phainopeplas – were flushed from resinous creosote bushes and from the yellow spheres of the flowering brittle-brush. The sounds of wings beating suddenly and furiously and the constant, mad whirring of grasshopper-like cicadas surrounded me as I walked along. After a long climb up the bajada, I arrived at the mouth of a canyon at the foot of the San Ysidro Mountains. Passing between the buttresses that guard the canyon's mouth, I turned to look back over the slope I had crossed, and saw dancing heat waves rising from the surrounding desert. I wiped the first beads of sweat from my forehead and passed between the ramparts into the canyon.

Just before reaching the first shade offered by the steep canyon walls, I heard a clatter of rocks, and the hollow thud of bounding hooves echoing above me. My heart started to race. I stopped and scanned the hillside, but for a moment couldn't spot the animals; Bighorn sheep blend perfectly with their environment. It wasn't until they began to move again that I saw them. There were two lambs and a ewe hopping from one rock to another. About that time, another group of sheep made an appearance, announced by yet another clatter of dislodged rocks. There were three more sheep near the ridge line looking down at me. In the midst of what was a truly

exhilarating moment, I became acutely aware of the fact that I was only a guest here, and that I was probably keeping them from reaching the water within the canyon.

Excited and elated, and also a little repentant for being a pest, I continued my hike up the canyon, not knowing exactly what might lie in store around the next turn of the canyon walls. Dozens of small rock hollows, or tinajas, were filled to their rims with water all the way up the canyon. A small trickle of water flowed down the canyon, producing several waterfalls in the steepest parts of the gorge. In the wider shaded reaches, the wildflowers had yet to fade. Purple scorpionweed, golden flowered brittle-brush, and delicate Emory's rock daisy draped around boulders. The temperature continued to climb as I hiked, and I was glad when I finally reached the shade of the palm oasis near the head of the canyon. According to the small key-chain thermometer on my pack, the temperature within the narrow gorge had climbed to 102 degrees, and had hovered there for the past two hours. Within the oasis under the shade of the palms near the tiny pool of water, the temperature leveled off at about 85 degrees. I ate my lunch and after a long nap in the cool green shade, I was ready but reluctant to return to the heat of the climb.

My goal was the crest of the range at the top of the canyon. I walked along as quietly as I could, wondering if there were more sheep up ahead. Of course, no matter how quiet I tried to be, the sheep heard me before I spotted them. This time, instead of the 2 or 3 sheep I had hoped for, there were more...many more. First one and then another of the magnificent animals broke from cover on the hillside above me. The canyon was alive with the sound of snorting and dislodged rocks clattering down the slope. I could smell their musky, wild scent on the afternoon breeze blowing down the canyon. I watched the beautiful animals leaping from rock to rock and began to count. One by one, single file, I counted 5 then 6 then 9, and still they kept appearing. I continued the count. Seventeen hopped up and over the rock. Then from behind me I heard another clatter of dislodged rocks. I turned to see 4 more sheep on the opposite wall of the canyon.

The local band of sheep, a significant part of the total population of the park, was converging on this canyon with its still-reliable perennial springs. Up to this point, I had been walking on the canyon-side above the tiny stream, but these sheep were clattering along the rocks on the wall directly above me. When I began to move again, the sheep continued their retreat up the wall, dislodging rocks that bounced and hurtled down past my ears like artillery shells, exploding into the gorge all around me. I crossed over to the other side of the canyon to avoid the danger. The sheep stayed high on the opposite wall, and watched my progress up the canyon.

When I reached the next bend of the canyon, I turned back for a last look. A large ram stood on a nearby outcrop watching me, marking my leaving. I stopped and stared back at him, reluctant to leave. Stupidly I waved, not knowing what else to do. He stood and stared at me with an unnamed eloquence in his eyes.

Later, at the crest of the mountain range, I lay in my sleeping bag looking into the vast night. The rocks seemed to ring as the day's heat escaped into the darkness. From within the canyon far below, I heard the now unmistakable sound of rocks cascading down the walls. As these echoes died away, a coyote howled somewhere, and a nighthawk coursed silently overhead. Somewhere not too far off in the west, 15,000,000 people carried on their lives as I closed my eyes. In my dream, quiet brown, eloquent eyes stared out at me above desert flowers, as an eternal column of people wound their way across the endless desert.