

Cooperative Cleanup in Desert Wilderness

By Tom Buckley and Sid Slone

Imagine boundless desert, mountains casting shadows over barren valleys once swept by lava, and saguaros cacti looming in stark profile above baked earth. Imagine a designated wilderness area almost the size of Rhode Island with no people and only one wagon track of a road. Imagine a place where plant and animal life persists, even thrives, despite searing summer temperatures and precious little rain.

Next, imagine three dozen abandoned vehicles littering that pristine landscape.

That, until recently, was Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Arizona.

Now, thanks to cooperation between the U.S. Border Patrol and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, most of the cars are gone and the life remains.

The vehicles were there in the first place because Cabeza Prieta Refuge, which shares a 56-mile border with Mexico, was once a hotbed of smuggling. For years, vehicles crossed the Sonoran Desert carrying illegal drugs. Then, to curb drug smuggling and illegal immigration, the Border Patrol's parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security, stepped in and built a border barrier.

With the barrier's completion in 2009, illegal vehicle traffic was virtually eliminated. But previously abandoned cars and trucks lingered and continued to blight the refuge's fragile desert ecosystem, in which tracks made by vehicles or people can remain for hundreds of years.

The vehicles were identified for removal in Cabeza Prieta Refuge's 2007 comprehensive conservation plan because they were an eyesore, because they degraded the wilderness character and because potential liquid-pollutant leakage was a concern.

In consultation with the Service's Southwest Region office in Albuquerque,



Until the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Border Patrol took joint action last year, three dozen abandoned cars and trucks blighted the fragile desert landscape at Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Arizona. (USFWS)

NM, the refuge determined that the best method to remove the vehicles would be with a forklift or backhoe. However, refuge equipment and staff were limited. And the amount of time the equipment would disrupt the solitude of the designated wilderness was a major concern.

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Then Steve Martin, the Border Patrol's Yuma Sector chief, generously offered some of his agency's staff and heavy equipment to help remove the vehicles—an offer Southwest Region Director Benjamin Tuggle gratefully accepted.

Using a Border Patrol four-wheel-drive forklift with large balloon tires to minimize soil disturbance and a refuge backhoe, last spring Service and Border

Patrol staff members quickly loaded 31 abandoned vehicles onto flatbed trucks and removed them.

Just three abandoned vehicles remain—in the western portion of the refuge, far from those that were removed. Two vehicles are scheduled to be removed via backhoe and flatbed truck this winter. The third vehicle poses a significant problem. It is wedged tight in a wash and would require a heavy-lift helicopter to pluck it out. The effort to remove the last one could be very costly, so plans are up in the air—so to speak.

Once all of the vehicles are removed, tracks created by the operation where there were none before will be raked out and the remaining trails created by the illegal traffic will be incorporated into a restoration program funded by the Department of Homeland Security. 🦋

Tom Buckley is a Southwest Region public affairs specialist. Sid Slone is Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge manager.