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Thousands overwhelm California town to see superbloom: 'I think social media has played huge role'

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Photo: Twitter: @thot22

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The poppy display in the Gavilan Hills near Lake Elsinore, Calif., March 2019.

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If they bloom, they will come.

California poppies are exploding in the Gavilan Hills flanking the eastern boundary of Lake Elsinore, inspiring thousands to descend on the region an hour's drive east of Los Angeles.

In recent days, traffic along Interstate 15, which passes through the Riverside County town, has often come to a standstill with people wanting to photograph the eye-popping floral display (see photos above).

"We've had a huge influx of people," says Jonathan Reinig, the natural resources manager for Riverside County Parks. "There's traffic everyday from it. The county says it's their most accident-y time of year."

Reinig adds, "I think social media has played a huge role" in drawing the crowds, and indeed photos of the Lake Elsinore poppies are all over Instagram and Twitter.

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Rain is a key ingredient in the recipe for spectacular wildflower displays. Amid a winter marked by strong storms, botanists predicted wildflowers would pop up across the state, especially in Southern California because the desert landscape has fewer invasive plants and grasses that push out wildflowers.

Lake Elsinore is the first place to see a so-called "superbloom," a colloquial term describing wildflower spectacles that exceed a typical season.

The bloom started the last week of February and now the hillsides are carpeted in velvety orange.

"The color is super vibrant," says Reinig "You fee like you need to shade your eyes from it."

Photos of the display are flooding social media, and Reinig says the county has posted signage encouraging shutterbugs to tread lightly around the flowers.

"People love to get out there and get their Instagram photos," he says. "They'll plop themselves in the middle and trample the flowers. People need to stay on the path."