

Superbloom

Super for Business

Southern California zip tour Skull Canyon Ziplines, which opened in 2009, is enjoying its best business year ever thanks to the wildflower “superbloom” blanketing the area. “The flowers started blooming in mid-January [in their incipient stage], and we’ve been out of control busy since then,” owner Pete Liston told *API* in May.

A superbloom is a rare botanical phenomenon in California and Arizona in which wildflower seeds that have lain dormant in desert soil bloom simultaneously

following an unusually wet winter season.

The events aren't as predictable as, say, the changing of the fall foliage, but Liston was confident a superbloom and the spike in demand it precipitates was likely this year. "We knew this winter because of all the rain that we would have a superbloom, so we started hiring more staff," he said.

Skull Canyon offers four zip line courses of varying lengths and extremes as well as the Sky Gym, a 58-element challenge course. Liston said the crowds keen to zip above the wildflowers—mostly poppies—are booking whatever is open.

Liston has experienced two previous superbloom events at the zip tour—one in 2011 and one in 2019. The differences in experience demonstrate just how much the outdoor recreation landscape has changed in the last decade.

"When it happened in 2011, social media wasn't what it is now," he explained. "There was no such thing as a 'superbloom.' It was beautiful out here, but nobody cared. Social media changed things."

In 2019, visitors who saw wildflower snaps on social media and were eager to capture content of their own,

turned out in droves. "The superbloom back in 2019 stopped the freeway," said Liston.

Skull Canyon is between Corona and Lake Elsinore, "the epicenter of the a-poppyplypse," as Liston dubbed it, and in 2019, the zip tour was one of the only places where the wildflowers weren't trampled—the outfit does not allow hikers, and its zip liners have a much smaller footprint on the foliage.

This year, in February, the City of Lake Elsinore shut down access to neighboring Walker Canyon for the duration of the superbloom, which led to an even bigger spike in demand at Skull Canyon Ziplines. "We saw a huge number of people," said Liston. The outfit has also been featured on most every news channel in California and even on the national news.

While all the earned media has been good for business, "With all the poppies, we saw a lot of people who just wanted to come hike," said Liston. "We don't allow hiking on the property, so that was challenging. Some people ignore you, or there can be language barriers." Drones—also not allowed to operate on the property—have been another challenge, particularly those flown by flower tourists parked down on the freeway. The bloom also leaves behind a significant amount of brush, which can become a fire hazard.

Photo credit: Kristha Cortes



Zippering over the California superbloom.

Even with the challenges, though, Liston was pleased with the business impacts of the bloom, which look likely to extend beyond peak flower season. "The poppies are pretty much done now, but the demand seems to be holding," said Liston. "We are getting a few cancellations from people who thought there would still be flowers in June, but we got enough media exposure that we expect demand will hold." ■