

Nature Happenings

Wildflowers of Spring

by Damian Fagan

There is hope in the blossom of a wildflower. Each season, sprouting from desert sand and soil, arises a great diversity of wildflowers, annuals and perennials, that seek to grow, flower, and set seed before the unwavering heat of summer desiccates their leaves and flowers. These fragile flowers add splashes of color to an already Crayola-infused landscape, and attract an audience of insects to their petalous performances.



Lady Bird Johnson, the former First Lady married to Lyndon B. Johnson and co-founder of the National Wildflower Research Center in Austin Texas now known as the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center wrote, "Almost every person, from childhood, has been touched by the untamed beauty of wildflowers."

Indeed, it is difficult to pass by the paintbrushes and penstemons of spring blooming along a trail, no matter how focused a hiker may be to reach their destination. The



sego lilies, lupines, and bee plants demand some respect for growing, unseeingly, in this land of rock and sand.

These wildflowers also attract an array of pollinators, from beetles to bees to butterflies, creatures that help ensure future generations of flowers by performing pollination services for the plants. Variations in floral shape and color determine which pollinators visit a flower for pollen or sugary nectar rewards. For some plants, such as the narrow-leaf yucca and Spanish bayonet, this arrangement is a specialized one with a single moth species performing such services.

The parade of wildflowers begins early in the year, sometimes in January if the conditions are right, then reaches a crescendo in spring. Several low-growing members of the Carrot family (Apiaceae), the Canyonlands biscuitroot and Parry's lomatium, are two of the earliest wildflowers to emerge. The endemic biscuitroot grows in sandy soils associated with Entrada sandstone fins and



produces a somewhat foul-odor to attract flies, which have also emerged early in the season, as pollinators.

Common paintbrush, with its fiery-red flowers, is a unique wildflower in terms of false advertising and a partially parasitic nature. What provides the floral color are bracts, modified leaves, not the petals. These bracts act like a lantern, attracting hummingbirds and butterflies to some sweet nectar rewards in exchange for their pollination services. Underground, the paintbrush has fine roots called haustoria that attach to the roots of neighboring grasses or



sagebrush and extract nutrients from those plants.

Another member of this petalous parade is the Sego lily, the State Flower of Utah, that unfurls a beautiful cup-shaped flower lined inside with nectar guides directing bees, beetles, and flies to these sugary rewards. Some years, when soil moisture conditions are just right, these plants carpet the desert, a trait shared with many annual wildflowers such as yellow beeplant, Indian blanket and scorpionweed which take advantage of these optimal conditions and create a mosaic of color across the

A NATURAL HISTORY WRITER.

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landscape.

Some of these springtime wildflowers may appear past their prime as you walk by, but they are just "resting" getting ready to unfurl their flowers at night. Wildflowers such as evening primrose or snowball verbena bloom in the evening and early morning hours attracting moths or other species in the Lepidopteran family as pollinators. Moths are

often overlooked for their pollination abilities but are a critical component of the pollination scene.

Watching the pearly-white petals of the dwarf evening primrose uncoil takes about 30-45 minutes but is a Grammy-winning performance well worth watching. And in the words of author C.V. Sutherland, "Chase your wildflower dreams, because even the smallest buds can become something beautiful."

Let the wildflower parade begin!



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