

Nature Happenings

When Wildflowers Bloom

by Damian Fagan

As spring rolls into the Canyonlands Region, a procession of wildflowers begins to parade across the desert. As the weather warms, the list of blooming plants, both shrubs and wildflowers, lengthens. Spectacular in their own right, these colorful flowers add another dimension to this already fascinating landscape.

The flowers represent a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes. In turn, these flowers attract a diversity of insect pollinators that includes bees, flies, beetles, butterflies, hummingbirds, and nocturnal moths.

Early in the season, the scarlet flowers of the common paintbrush are visible from a distance. Low growing, the flowers are comprised of reddish bracts that surround greenish petals. The bracts attract hummingbirds and butterflies as pollinators. Interestingly, these plants are partially parasitic; the paintbrush's root-like tissues, called haustoria, penetrate the roots of other plants and draw nutrients and moisture from the host plant.



Scrophulariaceae *Castilleja chromosa*

Another related red flower to the paintbrush is the Eaton's penstemon. The tubular shape of the flowers attracts hummingbirds and butterflies. Blue, Utah, Palmer's, and Dusty penstemons are several other species that bloom in spring. Some of these penstemons attract bees which waddle inside the flowers in search of pollen and nectar and pollinate the flowers in the process.



Palmer's Penstemon

A couple of shrubs that bloom in the spring are blackbrush and cliffrose. Both are members of the Rose family and both may have blooms



Cliffrose



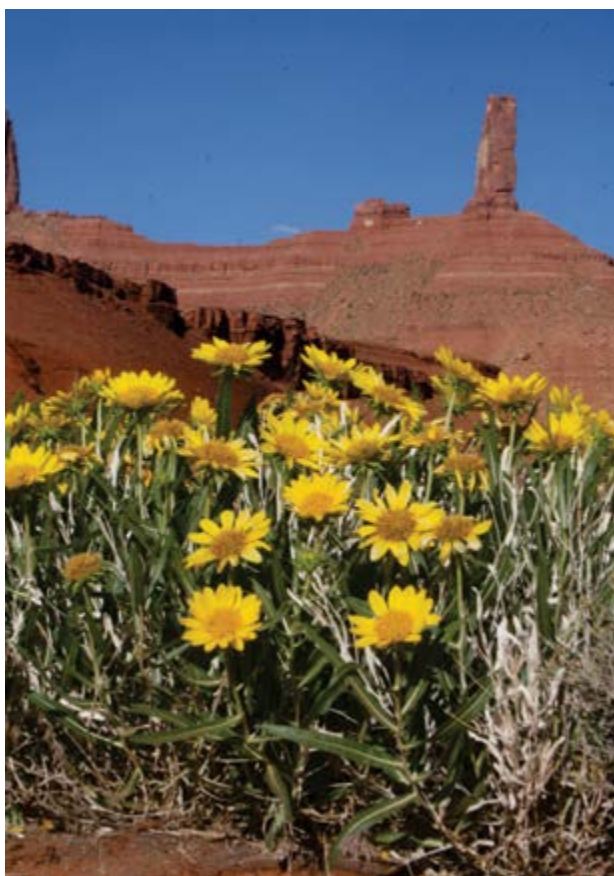
Blackbrush

that cloak the shrubs. The small, yellowish flowers of the blackbrush may be pollinated by flies, while the white-colored sweet-smelling flowers of the cliffrose attract bees as pollinators. The perfume of the cliffrose flowers can even be detected while driving past the shrubs.

As the weather warms and spring continues to roll, look for a variety of wildflowers in the Sunflower family that come into bloom. Hopi



Hopi blanketflower

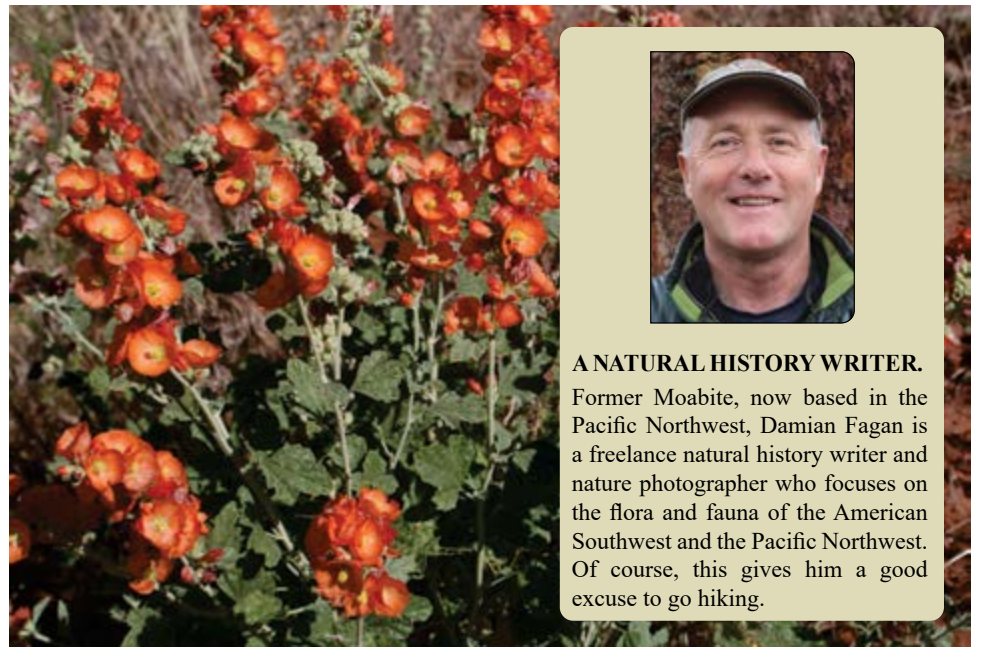


Rough mule's ears

blanketflower, with its brown centers surrounded by yellow rays, may bloom in profusion. The flowers attract butterflies, bees, beetles, and moths.

Though other yellow sunflower family members bloom in spring, nothing stops traffic like the rough mule's ears. These semi-shrubby plants have mule ear-shaped leaves which are rough to the touch; hence, the common name. The large yellow blooms attract butterflies and bumblebees; some bees have been observed sleeping within the closed flowers.

The classic bee-in-a-flower relationship is the *Diadasia* or globe mallow bee which curls up around the center of a globe mallow flower before it closes for the evening. These ground-nesting bees build a small turret around the entrance hole to protect itself from rain and dust, and may even help the female bee to know which nest is hers.



Scarlet globe mallow



A NATURAL HISTORY WRITER.
Former Moabite, now based in the Pacific Northwest, Damian Fagan is a freelance natural history writer and nature photographer who focuses on the flora and fauna of the American Southwest and the Pacific Northwest. Of course, this gives him a good excuse to go hiking.

Another insect-flower relationship is between the white-lined sphinx moth and the dwarf evening primrose. The large white petals of the evening primrose unfurl during the night and release aromatic scents which lure the moths to the flowers. The moth's long proboscis can probe deep within the flower for nectar, while transferring pollen from other flowers in the process.



Evening primrose

But of all the pollinator-plant relationships that exist in the desert, the connection between the yucca moth and the yucca plant is one of the most interesting. Female moths gather pollen from one plant, then fly to another plant and transfer the pollen in the process of pollination. At the same time, the female




Sphynxmoth

deposits eggs within the flower's ovary and as the larvae grow they feed on the developing seeds. Eventually, the larvae emerge from the seed pods and go underground to pupate.

So, as the spring rolls along, enjoy the procession of wildflowers that adds another layer of interest to this spectacular landscape.

Article Archive

To find previous Moab Happenings articles go to moabhappenings.com and click on the Article Archive. It will take you to previous copies of complete Moab Happenings as well as previous articles by topic.



www.moablibrary.org Grand County PUBLIC LIBRARY 435-259-1111

WILD FLOWERS OF THE TWELVE MOONS WITH JOEL TUHY

Cycling through all twelve months, local botanist Joel Tuhy shares pictures of each canyon-country full moon, and the flowers blooming during each moon, or month.

Wednesday, April 2nd @ 7 PM

Moab Library 257 E Center St.

The Challenge: can Joel present a photo of at least one wildflower blooming during each month of the year? You'll have to show up to find out!

Free!

