

Get Wild: Identifying Summit's spring wildflower treasures

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Karn Stiegelmeier
Get Wild

May mud season brings out mixed emotions in Summit County. I can still ski, I can ride my bike, and I get excited for the early spring wildflowers!

These amazingly well-adapted plants prove it really is springtime. By the summer solstice June 20, we will have meadows of wildflowers in bloom. In May, we get a teaser of summer glories to come.



Sagebrush buttercups are pictured April 29 along Ptarmigan Trail.
Photo by Karn Stiegelmeier / Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance

Sagebrush buttercups

Sagebrush buttercups (*Ranunculus glaberrimus*) are bright, shiny, five-petaled blooms found in May on south-facing, exposed hillsides along with chiming bells and pasqueflowers.

Snow buttercups (*Ranunculus adoneus*) will be the first to bloom as snowfields melt later in the summer at the highest elevations. In July and August, you can find them inches from the melting edge of snowfields on the way up to the mountaintops.



Buttercups sound like a breakfast treat, but they are poisonous. Glaberrimus means “without hairs” reflecting the hairless and very shiny petals. Ranunculous is thought to be from the Latin “rana” meaning frog because most buttercups and frogs prefer the same moist habitat.

Our Summit mountains offer sightings of about 25 buttercup family flowers, including the Colorado columbine, our state flower. This family is full of dramatic, eye-catching flowers.



Pasqueflowers are pictured April 29 along Ptarmigan Trail.
Photo by Karn Stieaelmeier / Eadle Summit Wilderness Alliance



Pasqueflowers

Pasqueflowers (*Pulsatilla patens*) are also buttercup family flowers that are spectacularly beautiful lavender colored early bloomers. The plant glows in the sun with the innumerable soft hairs on the stems, leaves and sepals. You can see them in full bloom now on sunny, south-facing ridges, but they will fade from your view as they turn into feathery plumes of seeds by June.

All parts of the pasqueflower are poisonous and touching it can cause skin irritation. So get close for pictures but don't touch!



Chiming bells are pictured April 29 along Ptarmigan Trail.

Photo by Karn Stiegelmeier / Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance



Chiming bells

Chiming bells (*Mertensia alpina*) are the first of the *Mertensia* genus to bloom this time of year. Better known *Mertensias* include other bells such as tall chiming bells, which grow along stream sides throughout the summer. *Mertensias* are in the forget-me-not or borage family.

We have over a dozen beautiful summer wildflowers in the borage family, and one nonnative lovely but nasty stickseed forget-me-not. It is a weed, but not on the Colorado noxious weed list, which must be removed by law. The stickseed has a terrible seed that sticks to all pants, socks, clothes and dog fur. You want to pull this plant out and try not to allow it to reproduce.

The Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance has a robust noxious weed eradication program for nonnative species that take over native habitat. If you are interested in volunteering or learning more about how you can help with these efforts, visit us at EagleSummitWilderness.org.



Fairy slipper orchids are pictured in May 2017 along lower Cataract Trail.
Photo by Karn Stiegelmeier / Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance

Fairy slipper orchid



The most magnificent early bloomer is the fairy slipper orchid (*Calypso bulbosa*). It is very rare and hard to find. Look near the base of conifers in moist shady soils. They are only a few inches tall. If you see one orchid, there are likely others right nearby.



Karn Stiegelmeier

Various expert authors of wildflower guides give differing common and Latin names for our flowers, creating some confusion. Some of this is based on new DNA research, and some is just differing research opinions from new Ph.D. botanists.

So enjoy our flowers with any name you choose, but please never pick wildflowers in our wilderness areas or national forests. Leave them to reproduce for next year and the next generation.

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Karn Stiegelmeier is a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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