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Get Wild: The sun is out and the sunflowers are watching!

Opinion [FOLLOW OPINION](#) | Jun 23, 2023

Karn Stiegelmeier
Get Wild



Arrowleaf balsamroot is pictured just north of Silverthorne in June 2023.

Karn Stiegelmeier/Get Wild

We have been blessed by cool weather and rain, rain, rain and now sunshine! The wildflowers are thrilled with these conditions. One of our early amazing sunflowers blooming prolifically this time of year – and filling our sagebrush meadows with yellow – is the arrowleaf balsamroot (*Balsamorhiza sagittata*). Balsam is a sap that is found in numerous plants, and it is used medicinally in many ways throughout the world. Native people used all parts of the arrowleaf balsamroot for food in various ways, including the protein-rich seeds. Medicinally, the leaves and roots were used for cuts, burns and bruises.

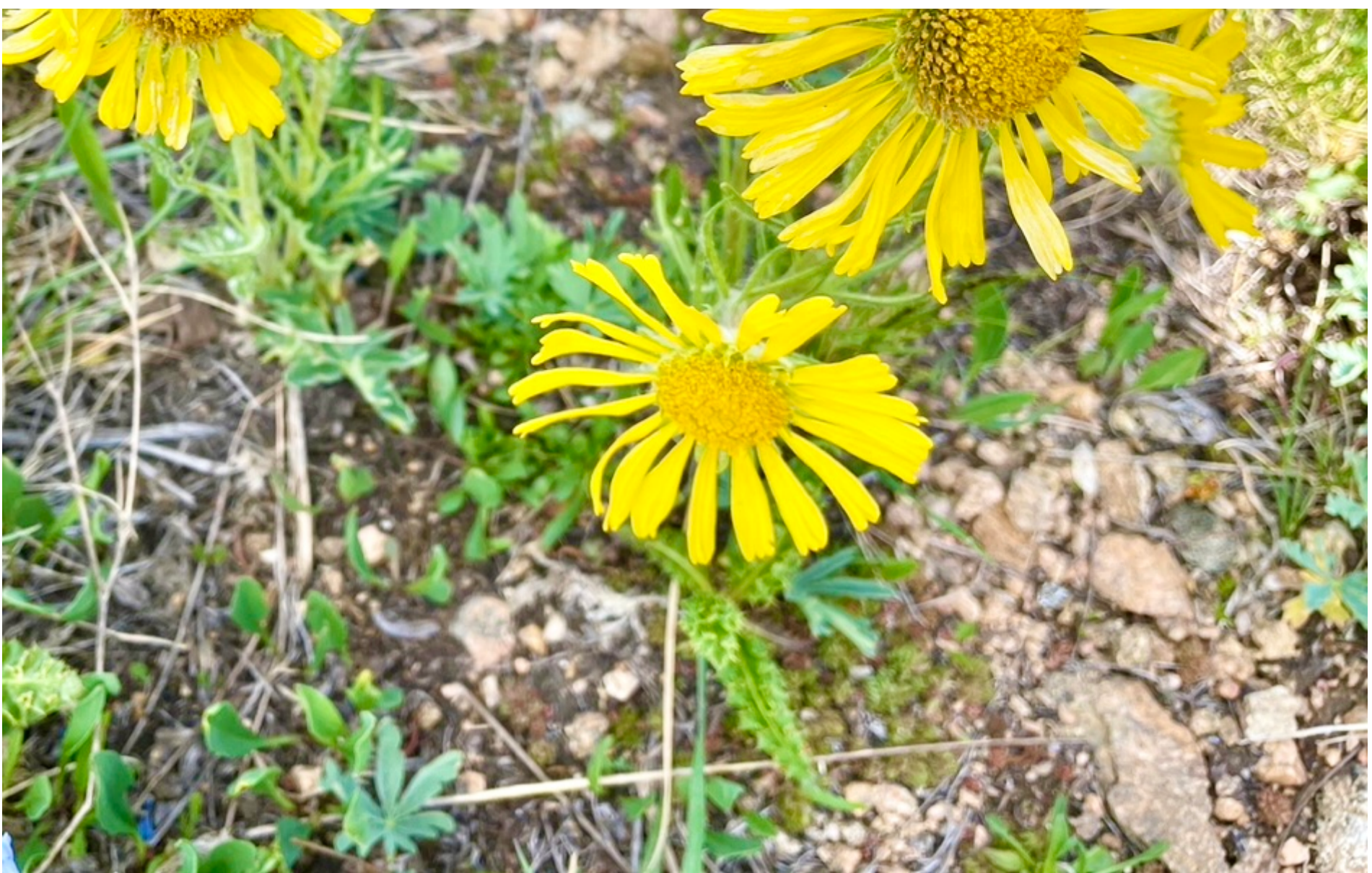
Next month, this sunflower will be taken over in the same sunny locations by the mules ear sunflower (*Wyethia amplexicaulis*). The flowers are almost identical, the leaves are the clue – arrowleaf balsamroot leaves are arrow shaped, mules ear is shaped like a mule’s ear. There are many sunflower family flowers. Some show the classic yellow-petaled flower, but others have similar shapes yet are not yellow. Some are very hard to identify because they look so much alike. [↗](#)



Arrowleaf balsamroot is pictured just north of Silverthorne in June 2023. The flowers can be identified by their arrow-shaped leaves.
Karn Stiegelmeier/Get Wild

Heartleaf arnica (*Arnica cordifolia*) are now blooming in shady, forested areas and will continue blooming for another couple of months. They are easy to identify by their heart-shaped leaves and classic yellow sunflower flower. The genus *Arnica* are the plants that are used for arnica creams to help bruising, pain and skin inflammation. There are at least 26 species of *Arnica* in North America. *Arnica* has been used for centuries for these purposes in North America and Europe. Native Americans used the root of the *Arnica* species to treat sore throats, aching teeth, cuts and bruises.

One of my very favorite sunflowers is the old man of the mountain (*Hymenoxys grandiflora*). This sunflower is very large, and blooms in the Alpine tundra where most plants are very small. At 2-3 inches in diameter, the Old Man flower is very large for an Alpine tundra plant. Like other sunflowers, you will see them all facing the same direction — toward the sun.



A few old man of the mountain flowers are pictured on Upper Straight Creek Trail on the Summit County side of the trail, near the top of Loveland Ski Area in summer 2022. Karn Stiegelmeier/Get Wild

Sunflowers follow the sun from morning's east light to western sunset, consistently turning toward the sun as it moves through the sky. After the sun goes down, the stems turn toward the east where the sun will be rising. Plants, like people, rely on the daily rhythms of daylight and dark night to function. This "sun-tracking", also called heliotropism, is part of the circadian rhythms, which we humans share as our behavioral changes are connected to our internal clocks following a 24-hour cycle. An east-facing flower at dawn slowly turns west as the sun crosses the sky. During the night, it turns back east, ready to begin the cycle again at dawn. Researchers have found that the plant's turning is due to different sides of the stem elongating at different times of day.

While sunflowers are following their circadian rhythms, we humans are also out earlier in the morning during summer months with longer light. Our hundreds of volunteers in Summit County are out on the trails from early sun into the sunset light doing work to protect our invaluable natural resources. Certified sawyers are clearing deadfall trees from the trails. Other volunteers are maintaining trails and campsites, repairing and installing signs, and removing nonnative noxious weeds that are taking over native plant habitat. Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance, Friends of Dillon Ranger District and more local volunteer groups are committed to protecting our precious lands. Locals and visitors alike are relishing sunflower-filled public lands.



“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](https://www.eaglesummitwilderness.org).
Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo

Karn Stiegelmeier is the chair of the 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](https://www.eaglesummitwilderness.org).

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