

Get Wild: Lilies of our mountains

Sports

FOLLOW SPORTS

| 19h ago

Karn Stiegelmeier

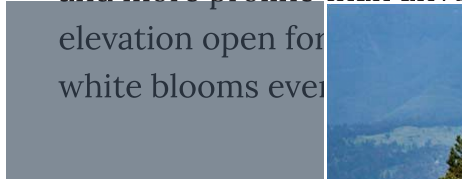
Get Wild



A mariposa lily is pictured July 2022 in Wilder Gulch near Vail Pass.

Karn Stiegelmeier/Get Wild

Peak summertime and monsoonal moisture have created a most spectacular display of wildflowers this year! Many flowers are taller and more prolific than anyone can remember. One of the most magnificent and large flowers is our mariposa lily blooming in lower elevation open for white blooms even but the mostly



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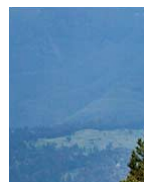
Our mariposa lily, *Calochortus gunnisonii* is in the genus, *calochortus* which includes about 40 species of tulip-like species of the lily family (*liliaceae*) native to Western North America. All the mariposas or *calochortus* are tall lilies with large bowl-shaped flowers, that can be three inches across. Consistent with all lilies, the leaves have parallel veins, and most commonly have edible bulbous roots. The lily family has been highly hybridized to create some of our most beautiful ornamentals, and also some of our most commonly used vegetables like onions and garlic.

Other beautiful lilies blooming in Summit right now have those parallel veins, and three or six petals, but otherwise have some very different appearances. The twisted-stalk lily, *Streptopus amplexifolius*, has many small six-petaled, bell-shaped flowers hanging under each leaf, on a long slender stalk that has a twisting look to it. This lily is abundant in our wetlands and streamsides. The Alp lily, *Lloydia serotina*, is found far above timberline amongst the moss campion and other tundra plants. This tiny, six-petaled white lily is only an inch or three tall, so it is easy to miss, and a fabulous treasure to find while up at high elevations! Alp lilies are found all over Western North America in the high elevations of the tundra. Seeing the beauty of this tiny lily reminds you to be careful where you step. The high Alpine environment is one where these amazing survivors may take decades to get to be a few inches wide, and one step in the wrong place can destroy all that effort to grow.

The gigantic corn lily, *Veratrum californicum*, also known as false hellebore or skunk cabbage, is commonly 6 or 7 feet tall in wet places. It has pretty six-petaled flowers and parallel veins, but is actually in the false hellebore family, not the lily family.

Many other species of mariposas or *calochortus* are blooming all around the Western U.S. Some are rare because they are adapted to growing in very specific geographic areas — including some in very dry deserts of Arizona, Nevada and Utah and California. Mariposas are known for their resilience, especially after fire. The underground bulb can usually survive and then reproduce after fire. Other notably resilient flowers famous for this ability include our fireweed and lupine. Both of those species were very prolific after the Buffalo Fire. The mariposas are also called sego lily, but there is one most famous sego lily, *Calochortus nuttalli*, common in Utah and western Colorado.

This sego lily became the Utah State flower in 1911. The Native Americans shared their knowledge of the edibility of the sego lily, giving the Mormon settlers food to survive during the 1848 invasion of crickets, which destroyed the Mormons’ crops. The bulbs of all the Mariposas and most lilies are considered edible when eaten raw or cooked, and taste something like a potato — just add some salt. However, there are always exceptions. Death camas is a common pretty flower that can look similar and will cause death as the name implies. The best mantra is to enjoy, look close and enjoy.



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Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo

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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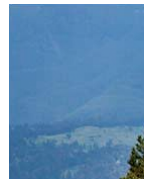
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