NATURE nearby

Volume One/Issue six

East Bay Regional Park District

The March issue of *Nature Nearby* is being sent to you with calendars for both March and April. The full April issue, along with past issues, will be available on the Park District website: *www.ebparks.org*. Look for the May issue of *Regional In Nature* with your newspaper in late April and the June issue of *Nature Nearby* in the mail.

checker bloom Nick Cavagnaro

A WILDERNESS OF WILDFLOWERS

Welcome Spring!

It's that time of year again! The time when the East Bay Regional Parks are abuzz with activity as winged insects flit, fly, and flutter, gorging themselves on nectar from wildflower blossoms that have suddenly, and sometimes dramatically, appeared, painting the grassy hills, oak-bay woodlands, rocky outcrops, marshy wetlands, deep canyons, and broad valleys with various hues and shades of color! This seasonal celebration, this amazing profusion of wildflower diversity is the result of a relationship established eons ago between insect pollinators and the flowering plants.

In the beginning...

Among the first plants to appear on earth were non-flowering plants like algae, ferns, and horsetails. These primitive plants have graced the planet for hundreds of millions of years. Yet, until about 130 million years ago the planet's favorite color was green. Then, with the advent of flowering plants, rainbows of color splashed onto the scene, eventually giving rise to the floral tapestries and textures that lure visitors to East Bay Regional Parks each spring.

Location, location, location...

There are 65 parks within the East Bay Regional Park District. These parks cover a variety of different microclimates and habitats extending from the edges of the San Francisco Bay to the eastern foothills nearly fifty miles away. Many of our wildflowers have adapted to living in very specific conditions. Some like it hot and thrive in places like Black Diamond Regional Preserve; others like it cool preferring the wet forests of Tilden Regional Park. Some like it rocky like the asters, star tulips, and rock daisies that cling to the volcanic outcroppings at Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve. Others such as brass buttons, water plantain, alkali heath, bird's foot trifolia, and pickleweed prefer the flat low-lying wetland soils of Coyote Hills Regional Park. The smooth lessingia can only grow in serpentine soils such as are found in Sunol-Ohlone Regional Wilderness.

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The reason for a flower…

What are wildflowers for, to look lovely and smell good? Well… yes! Flowering plants are master tricksters and use shape, color, and fragrance to entice unsuspecting pollinators into their employ. The animals are beguiled by the promise of sweet nectar or nutritious pollen, but the flowers depend on visitors to transport pollen that can fertilize the next floral host. Pollen sticks to insect abdomens, bat faces, and hummingbird heads and brushes against the sticky stigmas of the next flowers they visit. Bees are attracted to many wildflower colors (except red) including ultraviolet, while bright red tubular flowers like California fuchsia attract birds. Sweet-smelling red, yellow and blue flowers attract butterflies, and night-flying moths are drawn to white or other pale, fragrant flowers like soaproot. (Both plants can be seen in front of Sunol's Old Green Barn Visitor Center).

Threats to wildflowers….

The profusion of spring wildflowers in East Bay Regional Parks and other public lands is a welcome balm for winter weary park visitors, but wildflowers face the same kinds of survival challenges as other organisms. Human-induced factors that threaten wildflower populations include global warming, habitat loss, unsuccessful land management practices, and invasive species. The East Bay Regional Park District recognizes the aesthetic and ecological value of our wildflower resources in park planning and management. For example, park grazing practices are timed to maximize wildflower displays.

Where to find them….

Within the East Bay Regional Parks there are over 150 different species of wildflowers and many, many places to enjoy them. Black Diamond, Briones, Coyote Hills, Del Valle, Garin/Dry Creek, Las Trampas, Morgan Territory, Pleasanton Ridge, Pt. Pinole, Tilden Nature Area, and Sunol/Ohlone are among the popular wildflower haunts. March, April, May, and June are the prime months for wildflower watching. The variety inspires the imagination. They range in character from the dainty early blooming white petals of milkmaids to the robust black and yellow heads of late season mule-ears, and the satiny lavender and white pagodas of Chinese houses of spring, to the sticky and stinky-stemmed tarweeds of summer. The East Bay Regional Parks afford the park visitors a chance to see wildflowers in many different habitats whether on a one hour family picnic or a three day backpacking trip.

Explore several different trails to find some of these flowers – and more. Enjoy them, but please leave them for others to appreciate!

Black Diamond: Chaparral Loop Trail and Manhattan Canyon Trail: globe lily, shooting stars, Indian warrior, blow wives, gold fields, Mt. Diablo sunflower, wallflower, lupine, baby blue-eyes, fairy lantern, wind poppy, and columbine.

Coyote Hills: Castle Rock to Bayview Trail to Lizard Rock to the Boardwalk: Ithuriel's spear, shooting stars, buttercups, bush lupine, purple sanicle, mule's ears, blue-eyed grass, checkerbloom, gum plant, brass buttons, and bird's trefoil.

Las Trampas: Chamise to Las Trampas Ridge to Trapline and Mahogany Trails: black sage, sun cups, Chinese houses, woodland star, mountain mahogany, chamise, Dutchman's pipe, and red larkspur.

Sunol: Canyon View Trail to Camp Ohlone Road and Meadow Loop: Chinese houses, larkspur, wind poppy, fiesta flower, bird's eye gilia, owl's clover, Ithuriel's spear, shooting star, butter and eggs, sky lupine, and johnny jump-ups.

Ohlone Wilderness Trail: goldfields, cream cups, popcorn flower, California poppy, woodland star, purple sanicle, Indian pink, blue-eyed grass, smooth lessingia (rare), lupines, johnny jump-ups, baby blue-eyes, vetch, and sticky monkey flower.

Tilden Nature Area: California sunflower, Mt. Diablo helianthella, shooting star, gilia, tarweed, golden aster, Douglas iris, woodland star, lupines, monkey flower, coyote mint, skunkweed, yampah, popcorn flower, cream cups, and Yerba Buena.

By Sunol Naturalists Erica Oudeboon-Herron and Katie Colbert

More wildflower reading:

James Hickman, ed. Jepson Manual: *Higher Plants of California.* UC Press, 1993. (The definitive key for California plant identification.)

Phillip Munz. *California Spring Wildflowers.* UC Press, 200 . (An illustrated introduction for the lay wildflower lover.)

Robert Ornduff. *Introduction to California Plant Life.* UC Press, 2003.

Michael Proctor, et. al. *The Natural History of Pollination.* Timber Press, 1996. (A somewhat technical introduction to the fascinating world of pollination.)

Sara Stein. *The Evolution Book.* Workman Publishing, 1986. (An engaging beginner's guide to evolution, including plant evolution.)

Donald and Lillian Stokes. *A Guide to Enjoying Wildflowers.* Little, Brown and Company, 1985. (The natural history of a variety of individual wildflowers.)

East Bay Regional Park District. *Wildflower Watching* brochure.

Sunol Docent Wildflower Committee. *Fifty Common Wildflowers of the Sunol-Ohlone Regional Wilderness.* 2002. (This booklet is available for loan at the Old Green Barn visitor center.)

Sunol-Ohlone Regional Wilderness Herbarium. (This collection of pressed and mounted plants is available for review in the Old Green Barn Visitor Center.)

shooting star — *Ron Russo*

mule ears — *Don R. Wilson*

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