

Best wildflower hikes in the Columbia Gorge

By **ZACH URNESS**
Statesman Journal

MOSIER — They are nature’s fireworks display, but instead of exploding in the air, they come up through the ground.

Blooms of wildflowers that arrive with spring provide a great reason to get outdoors, and few places in the Pacific Northwest offer a better showcase than the eastern side of the Columbia River Gorge.

Entire hillsides transform into fields of gold during peak blooms, turning already great hikes into memorable, once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

For this Top 5 feature, we’re focusing on the best easy wildflower hikes of the Gorge. These are lower elevation spots that generally peak in late March, April and May. (The bloom is a few weeks ahead this year due to the warm winter).

I visited all five and found, for the most part, all to be in beautiful shape.

My suggestion before setting out is to check the website OregonWildflowers.org. The creator, Greg Lief, has a map showing the hikes in bloom (or not in bloom), along with trip reports, pictures and helpful directions and links.

If you’re camping, a good bet is Memaloose State Park (Oregon) or Columbia Hills State Park (Washington). If you’d rather stay in a hotel, consider Hood River, Mosier, White Salmon or The Dalles. For breakfast, I recommend Egg River Cafe in Hood River. For a celebratory brew and pizza, my favorite is Double Mountain Brewery.

This list is about easy, family-friendly hikes, which is why you won’t see excellent but more challenging wildflower hikes such as Dog Mountain or Cape Horn (they won’t bloom until later, anyway).

Mosier Twin Tunnels Honorable Mention

This beautiful route on the Historic Columbia River Highway between Hood River and Mosier is closed to vehicle traffic and probably best known as a bike route.

But it also works for hiking, and the well-graded pavement makes nice conditions for those exploring with a stroller, who can turn around whenever the mood strikes.

Beginning from Mark O. Hatfield West Trailhead just outside Hood River, the route is 4.7 miles one way to Mosier and known as the Twin Tunnels segment. The trail transitions from lush west-side forest to more east-side prairie, where wildflowers begin to show up in abundance.

The views of the Columbia and the blooms of wildflowers are outstanding.

Directions: From I-5 at Hood River, take Exit 64 for Mount Hood Highway and continue into town. Turn left onto Old Columbia River Drive and continue



Zach Urness/Statesman-Journal via AP

This March 29 photo shows groves of camas and views of Mount Hood at Catherine Creek area on the Washington side of the Columbia River Gorge. Blooms of wildflowers that arrive with spring provide a great reason to get outdoors, and few places in the Pacific Northwest offer better showcase than the eastern side of the Columbia River Gorge.

to Mark Hatfield Trailhead.

Coordinates: 45.7036, -121.488

Mosier Plateau

This hike is on the steep end of “easy,” but it’s very pretty, and the fact that it starts right within the wonderful town of Mosier is a bonus.

The Mosier Plateau Trail climbs 600 feet and travels 3.5 miles round-trip, heading through a park, following a creek, passing a waterfall and ending on a plateau with beautiful Gorge views.

Peak wildflower season is normally mid to late April (but it’s early this year). The ubiquitous balsamroot is the star of the show, but the hike also features buttercups, Blue-Eyed Mary and others.

Directions: From I-84 near Hood River, take Exit 69 toward Mosier. Head south off the exit and head into the town of Mosier. Park at the totem pole in town or at a gravel pullout. The trailhead is on the south side of Historic Highway 30, just over the historic bridge. You’ll see a bench just after crossing the bridge and a trail. This is the beginning of the hike. Coordinates: 45.684774, -121.393734

Rowena Crest

Two different hikes begin at this popular viewpoint on the Historic Columbia River Highway.

The easier of the two traverses the flat Rowena Crest in the Tom McCall Nature Preserve in a landscape carved by ancient lava flows and floods.

Dogs are not allowed on this 2.5-mile out-and-back hike, and there isn’t any shade at the trailhead, so

leave Fido at home for this trek.

The views are almost non-stop from the beginning of this hike, and in April and May, balsamroot and lupine are the highlight. Excellent views down onto the Columbia can be had at viewpoints along the trail.

If you’re seeking a more challenging hike, the trail to Tom McCall Point leaves from the same trailhead and shoots uphill 1,070 feet on a hike of 5 miles round-trip (the trail is currently closed at the 0.6 mile mark for reconstruction, but may reopen soon). Balsamroot and lupine also highlight this trail, along with desert parsley. And the view of Mount Adams and Hood at the top are memorable.

Directions: From I-84 near Hood River, take Exit 69 into Mosier and continue on the Historic Columbia River Highway 30 east through the town. In 6.6 miles, you will see the Rowena Crest Viewpoint parking area on your right. Both trails start here. Coordinates: 45.68259, -121.30065.

Memaloose Hills

Truth be told, the top three wildflower hikes starting here really stood out above the others. They were all spectacular in their own way, and ranking them was a challenge. All three are must-hikes.

It wouldn’t be quite right to call Memaloose Hills a secret — it appears in a book and a handful of websites — but it’s still unmarked and less traveled than most wildflower hotspots in the Gorge.

The trail begins at Memaloose Viewpoint, just across the highway. It’s unmarked throughout but easy to follow a total of 2.2 miles and 629 feet to the top of Marsh

Hill. Balsamroot blankets the entire hillside at the top with a touch of lupine, and views extend to Mount Hood.

The trail winds through oak savanna where other wildflowers stand out, including blue-eyed mary, gold star, larkspur and many others. Apparently there are longer options, but I didn’t hike them.

Directions: From I-84 near Hood River, take Exit 69 and continue on the Historic Columbia River Highway 30 east through the town of Mosier. In a little more than 3 miles, stop at the Memaloose Viewpoint. The trail begins just across the road. Coordinates: 45.693433, -121.350767.

Catherine Creek

Of all the hikes on the list, this one is my personal favorite.

The Catherine Creek area on the Washington side of the Gorge is spectacular in so many ways. The towering basalt formations and canyons, old homesteads, views of Mount Hood and the smell of ponderosa make me want to stay for days rather than hours.

The Arch Rock Loop is the best easy hike here and requires a bit of navigation. The loop is 2.1 miles with 481 feet of climb.

From the trailhead, the route follows a combination of trails and closed roads past a rock arch, a bubbling creek, an old homestead, epic views of the canyon and Mount Hood, along with more types

of wildflower than you can count.

The best time to hike is March to May. Right now, the bloom is excellent, with camas lilies, balsamroot, lupine, prairie stars and many others.

Directions: From I-84 in Hood River, take Exit 64, and drive north across the Hood River Bridge (\$1 toll for passenger cars). Turn right onto Washington Highway 14, and drive east for 5.8 miles. Turn left at Rowland Lake onto County Road 1230 (Old Highway No. 8), which follows the north end of the lake. In 1.3 miles, a large and well-marked trailhead arrives on both sides of the road. The hike starts on the left trailhead (a paved trail down to the Columbia is on the right). Coordinates: 45.710483, -121.362067.

Columbia Hills State Park

Entire hillsides are



Zach Urness/Statesman-Journal via AP

This March 29 photo shows trails at Columbia Hills State Park on the Washington side of the Columbia River Gorge.

BLOOMIN’ BLUES Rare specimen makes an appearance

By **BRUCE BARNES**

Name: Arctic Sweet Colt’s Foot
Scientific name: *Petasites frigidus*

Colt’s Foot is a rather unique plant. It is found across Canada and south to California to Massachusetts, but is not very common around here.

Seeing it in full bloom the first week in April was a complete surprise, especially since I hadn’t seen it for several years.

The name “Colt’s Foot” has probably existed for centuries for a closely related plant in Europe, and knowledge of how the name originated seems to be lost. The scientific name *Petasites* is from a Greek term for a hat, and refers to the broad flat leaves of the plant.

Each spring the 6- to 12-inch flowering stalk sprouts from the roots. The stalk has small triangular bracts but no leaves, and supports a dense cluster of flowering heads radiating out at the top. Each

head has tiny white flowers tightly packed in a cup-shaped base.

The plant’s leaves sprout from the roots separately, often several inches away from the flowering stalk. The leaf stem is usually shorter than the flowering stalk, and bears a single leaf that faces upward.

The leaf blades are round in outline, with veins and several long lobes radiating out from the point where the stem attaches to the leaf. When the photo here was taken, the leaves had barely started to emerge from the ground, although sometimes the flower and leaves will appear at the same time.

The plants extract salt from the soil. Some inland Indian tribes, particularly in California, burned the leaves and extracted salt from the ash, because they had no access to the ocean.

Ailments treated with the plant included early stages of tuberculosis, influenza, colds, and for sores and boils. Alaskan tribes ate young



Bruce Barnes

Petasites frigidus

leaves and flowering stems in salads or as a potherb, and some placed the leaves on top of huckleberries and rhubarb while stored, to prevent mold from growing.

Were to find it: Colt’s Foot usually grows in marshes, on stream banks or along wet shady ditches, and occasionally in wet spring meadows. It can be seen along the roadside ditch at Umatilla Forks just before the drive into Kiwanis Cabin.

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Emily Ann Smith

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