

Wildflowers have become a travel destination

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Nowhere is nature's "Yay!" more apparent than a good display of wildflowers. Seeds are splitting, shoots are shooting, buds are unfolding to show the colorful petals they've concealed. It's happening everywhere from your back yard and your neighborhood to national parks and foreign forests, plains, hillsides and tropical jungles.

Some destinations and stretches of land bloom with such awesome endlessness and ferocity of color that they've created a tourist industry of their own; there are festivals, walking tours, driving routes and guidebooks about them. Others are less well known, or more remote, or small but still precious repositories of native flowering species.

Over the years, as habitat has dwindled and pollinating species have declined in numbers, wildflowers have been squeezed out and endangered. At the same time — maybe after a bit of a lag — groups across the country and the world have formed to protect and propagate species. Garden clubs and other organizations have invested major efforts to beautify roadways by planting wildflowers along their shoulders — nowadays some roads, such as Skyline Drive in Virginia and U.S. 65 in the Florida Panhandle, have become official or unofficial wildflower-viewing routes.

You can find wildflowers anywhere, really: pushing through a crack in a parking lot or clinging to a wind-whipped mountaintop. Still, there are places where wildflowers bloom more showily in habitats around the world.

We've gathered some of the top wildflower destinations from a variety of sources — including a Top 10 list in USA Today from Larry Bleiberg, who tapped expert Bob Gibbons for his picks. Gibbons is the author of *Wildflower Wonders: The 50 Best Wildflower Sites in the World* (Princeton University Press, \$27.95).

You'll find our picks both around the country and around the world. Each entry includes the range of time in which the wildflowers are in bloom — always dependent on weather conditions, of course. Some areas may be at — or even past — their peak as you read this, but wildflowers are full of surprises, and there are always more to come. Or just save the information for next year.

The U.S. Forest Service provides lots of information on wildflowers, including a convenient list of viewing areas. Check out fs.fed.us/wildflowers/viewing/index.php.

- **GEORGE WASHINGTON MEMORIAL PARKWAY, MARYLAND AND VIRGINIA**

Why: The GWMP, designed by the Bureau of Public Roads, was completed in 1932 and was the first road project to have a full-time landscape architect. The parkway, part of the national park system, runs from the Great Falls of the Potomac through D.C. to Mount Vernon, linking

memorials, historic landmarks and native habitats, the latter featuring 591 species of wildflowers.

When: Throughout the spring.

In particular: Turkey Run Park, just north of the capital, is awash in bluebells beginning in late April. Dyke Marsh, on the shores of the Potomac River near the southern end of the Parkway, is one of the park service's largest tidal marsh areas, and features cattails, arrow arum, sweet flag, yellow bullhead lily jewelweed, river bullrush and wild rice (Uncle Ben's?).

Info: nps.gov/gwmp

- **WHITE MOUNTAINS, NEW HAMPSHIRE:**

Why: Easily accessible with breathtaking displays of hundreds of species of wildflowers, from orchids to purple lupine, progress throughout the spring and summer season. Adding to the color are the butterflies attracted to the flora. Even into early summer, the fields of flowers may be framed by a backdrop of mountains still frosted in snow.

When: Beginning in late May with orchids, June for displays of blue and purple lupines.

In particular: The 19th annual Fields of Lupine Festival, June 1 to 17 this year, includes events, tours and photo ops in Franconia, Easton, Sugar Hill, Bethlehem, Littleton and Lisbon.

Info: franconianotch.org

- **SKYLINE DRIVE, VIRGINIA**

Why: This 105-mile route goes through Shenandoah National Park, which contains more than 860 species of wildflowers. You can see a lot of 'em right from the road.

When: The violets started coming out in late March; by May, pink azaleas appear throughout the forest, followed in early June by the white flowers of mountain laurel. Summer is when columbine, milkweed, nodding onion and ox eye daisy bloom, along with touch-me-nots along streams and near springs. In fall, the blooming concludes with no-less-spectacular shows of goldenrods, asters and wild sunflowers.

In particular: Skyline Drive and the Big Meadows are best bets for summer and fall shows of color; early in the season, the banks of South, Hughes and Rose Rivers, as well as Mill Prong — all in the lower elevations of the park — are prime areas to see the floral diversity.

Info: nps.gov/shen/

- **ANTELOPE VALLEY POPPY RESERVE, CALIFORNIA**

Why: The largest display of the California state flower, as well as showy displays of fiddlenecks, creamcups, goldfields and tidytips located on California's most consistent poppy-bearing land. Other wildflowers: owl's clover, lupine, goldfield, cream cups, and coreopsis, to name a few, share the desert grassland to produce a mosaic of color and fragrance each spring.

When: Mid-March through mid-May. The peak viewing period, already past, is usually mid-April.

In particular: Drive the seven-mile Antelope Loop Trail within the reserve and continue on to

Antelope Butte Vista Point, at the 3,000-foot apex of the reserve, you'll get gorgeous desert panoramas. Among the eight miles of trails through the park is a paved stretch from the accessible visitor center. A wheelchair is also available for check-out at the center during the wildflower season.

Info: parks.ca.gov/?page_id627

- CARRIZO PLAIN NATIONAL MONUMENT, CALIFORNIA

Why: This remote central California region offers one of the best wildflower vistas in the world; when conditions are just right (lots of rain over the winter) it can cover an area of 500 square miles. Among the wildflowers are the endangered California jewelflower and the Kern mallow, plus dozens of "special status" species, including monkeyflowers and tidytips.

When: Mid-March to mid-April. Check the Wildflower Hotline for daily conditions: theodorepayne.org/hotline.html

In particular: Tours are offered Saturdays from mid-March through May to Soda Lake and Painted Rock, focusing on wildflowers and other features on the Carrizo Plain, plus the 3,000- to 4,000-year-old Native American pictographs at Painted Rock.

Info: blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/bakersfield/Programs/carrizo.html; recreation.gov for tour reservations.

- MOUNT RAINIER, WASHINGTON

Why: At 14,410 feet above sea level, Rainier is the tallest mountain in the Cascade Range. The national park encompasses 235,625 acres on the west side of the range, and because of its elevation, offers a variety of habitats, providing an amazing variety of displays of wildflowers. In single-day hike, you can see the very best of the flowers of the forest, subalpine and alpine zones.

When: Starts mid-July, most impressive shows by the beginning of August.

In particular: The Paradise section of the park is famous for its glorious views and wildflower meadows; try the Alta Vista Trail for amazing views; Skyline Trail to Myrtle Falls also offers a wealth of wildflowers, and is wheelchair accessible with assistance. Spray Park Trail has as many flowers as Paradise, but far fewer visitors.

Info: nps.gov/mora; flowersofrainier.com

- TEXAS HILL COUNTRY

Why: Lady Bird Johnson, a native Texan, loved wildflowers, and led a campaign to spread their beauty to cities around America. The profusion of bluebonnets across the Texas Hill Country around Austin is one result of the program she initiated to have highway medians in Texas seeded with wildflowers.

When: Peak season for bluebonnets is the first two weeks in April.

In particular: The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin offers beautiful gardens as well as a wealth of information on bluebonnets (and other wildflowers) and where to see them. For a great drive through the blues, take U.S. 290 west from Austin to Johnson City's lovely Wildflower Loop, then take U.S. 281 north to Burnet, the official bluebonnet capital of Texas.

Info: wildflower.org; for updates on bloom sightings, the Texas highway department has a wildflower hotline, 800-452-9292 and posts updates at [txdot.gov/travel/flora\(underscore\)conditions.htm](http://txdot.gov/travel/flora(underscore)conditions.htm).

- GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK, NORTH CAROLINA AND TENNESSEE

Why: With more than 1,600 flowering species, it's earned the nickname Wildflower National Park. Variations in elevation, rainfall, temperature and geology contribute to that diversity of flowering plants - more than in any other North American national park. The show begins in February, with the "ephemerals" such as trillium, iris, little brown jugs and violets making brief appearances through mid-May; followed by extravagant displays of mountain laurel, rhododendron, azalea, and other heath family shrubs flowering en masse through July with aster, goldenrod and Joe-Pye weed up to 10 feet tall lasting through the fall.

When: Late winter to late fall.

Info: nps.gov/grsm, greatsmokies.com; springwildflowerpilgrimage.org

- FLORIDA PANHANDLE

Why: Natural conditions, along with some human intervention, have helped make Liberty County in the panhandle the best place in the state to view native wildflowers. Florida's garden clubs led the way in beautifying roadways with wildflowers in the '30s, and in the 1960s, the Florida Department of Transportation joined the effort — it is now planting wildflowers and maintaining natural populations along hundreds of miles of federal and state highways. State Route 65 from Telogia to Sumatra is prime viewing area.

When: Starting in late March.

In particular: A 26.5 mile stretch of SR 65 has been designated the Panhandle Wildflower Route from Sumatra to Telogia and covers land within the Apalachicola National Forest. It features 250-plus native species, Download a route map at the Florida Wildflower Foundation site, below.

Info: flawildflowers.org/

INTERNATIONAL

- WATERTON LAKES NATIONAL PARK, ALBERTA, CANADA

Why: Known as the Wildflower Capital of Canada, the park is at the convergence of ecosystems from north, south, east and west, at the narrowest point in the Rocky Mountain chain. Waterton also has an unusually high number of rare plants — more than 175 are provincially rare, including mountain lady's-slipper, pygmy poppy, mountain hollyhock; more than 20 species are found only in the Waterton area — western wake — robin, Lewis' mock-orange, white-veined wintergreen. This vast ecosystem not only features wildflower displays in the mountains, but in grasslands, too.

When: mid-May to July

In particular: The ninth annual Waterton Wildflower Festival is June 16 to 24 (Watertonwildflowers.com).

Info: pc.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/waterton/index.aspx

- THE BURREN, IRELAND

Why: This area of County Clare, on the Atlantic coast of Ireland, offers an amazing variety of wildflowers — Arctic-alpine plants coexisting with Mediterranean plants. For instance, mountain avens and spring gentians, which normally grow high in the Alps, are found even at sea level, while Mediterranean species like the dense-flowered orchid and maidenhair fern are right beside them. Lime-loving plants (calcicole) and acid-loving plants (calcifuge) also grow side by side. Botanists come from all over the world to study the area; 75 percent of the plants found in Ireland are represented in the flora of the Burren, including orchids. Plus, there are seven species of bats — including the endangered lesser horseshoe bat.

When: Spring through early fall. Midsummer is best for orchids.

In particular: The new interpretative center for the Burren National Park is in the town of Kilfenora so it's a good place to start your visit. The town of Poulsallagh is one of the best places in the Burren to see a spectacular collection of plants in a coastal setting.

Info: discoverireland.com, burrennationalpark.ie

- BRUCE PENINSULA NATIONAL PARK, ONTARIO, CANADA

Why: The northern Bruce Peninsula is home to two national parks and is at the heart of the Niagara Escarpment World Biosphere Reserve. The peninsula is known for its wide variety of wildflowers, thanks to its diversity of habitats in a relatively small area. Most notable are the wild orchids — 43 or 44 species, by last count. Other notables include globally rare species such as lakeside daisy and dwarf lake iris. Also notable: its diversity of ferns (about 36 species) and ancient cedars — some 500 years old — grow on the cliff faces and alvars (limestone barrens).

In particular: The annual Bruce Peninsula Orchid Festival, June 1 and 2, is based in the town of Tobermory (orchidfest.ca).

When: Spring, summer and early fall to see the full range of species.

Info: pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/on/bruce/index.aspx

- UMBRIA, ITALY

Why: Sweeping fields of dark-orange poppies are one of the main showstoppers. But the Pian Grande — the grand plateau — offers a variety of hikes through spectacular wildflower settings. Don't forget the beautiful medieval villages, friendly locals and great food.

When: Mid-April to May

In particular: The Gubbio Double Ring trail from the top of Monte Ingno winds through a forested canyon, historic sites, and wildflowers — identified on park display plaques. Another option is Monte Cucco, the highest point in Umbria, with incredible displays of wildflowers and, on a clear day, views all the way to the Adriatic Sea. The park has mineral springs, caves and is also home to wolves and golden eagles. Parco Nazionale dei Monti Sibillini in Norcia offers abundant spring and summer wildflowers - with a landscape dotted by castles and fortresses. Above the tree line you'll find rare species, such as the Apennine alpine star. Another feature of the park: If you're too tired to hike, try a mule trek.

Info: english.regioneumbria.eu; sibillini.net; inumbria.net/eng/parco-montecuccio.html

• THE COTSWOLDS, ENGLAND

Why: This region, Warwickshire and Worcestershire in the north, through Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, down to Bath and Wiltshire in the south, spans nearly 800 square miles of some of the most beautiful countryside in the U.K., and is designated one of 38 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England and Wales. With its rolling hills and valleys, the Cotswolds is the third-largest protected landscape in England and Wales after the Lake District and Snowdonia. In the 1930s, 40 percent of the Cotswolds was covered in wildflower rich limestone grassland; today it has dwindled to only 1.5 percent. The grasslands are home to more than 100 species of wildflowers and grasses and 25 species of butterflies. Numerous rare plants, including many species of orchid plus the pasque flower and Cotswold penny cress, are found here, along with several species of nationally rare butterflies.

When: Spring through early fall.

In particular: Cotswolds Wildflower Week: June 12 to 20. Among the best towns to use as a base for wildflower-watching: Cleeve Common, Glyme Valley, Stonesfield in West Oxfordshire, Bredon Hill and Selsley Common. Also stop at Westonbirt, The National Arboretum in Tetbury, known for its spring rhododendron, azalea and magnolia displays as well as its specimens of the recently rediscovered snake's head fritillary, and spreading bellflower. For a hike, try the Cleeve Hill Ring stretch of the Cotswold Way National Trail, which offers both panoramic overviews from hilltops and close-up looks of wildflowers at Cleeve Common.

Info: cotswoldsaonb.org.uk; escapetothecotswolds.org.uk

• WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Why: A whopping 12,000 wildflower species have been recorded throughout the state of Western Australia, with a five-month blooming season and a host of tourism services developed specifically to track down the biggest or most colorful display as well as the rarest or most unusual species.

When: From July in the warmer parts of the state through November in the south.

In particular: The southwestern region boasts more species of flowering plants than almost anywhere else in the world. Stirling Range National Park has 1,500 species, including more than 100 orchid species and 80 endemic species, most famously its mountain bells. Nearby Banksia Farms botanical gardens is home to the annual Celebration of Mount Barker Wildflowers (Sept. 1 to Oct. 30, wildflowerswa.com) Other wildflower hot spots: Lesueur National Park, with more than 820 species, including 123 orchid species, and many plants found nowhere else in the world; and the Margaret River region, the extreme southern corner of the state, where you'll find three-quarters of the state's 12,000 species of wildflowers, from orchids to arum lily and kangaroo paw. Near Perth, the state capital, Kings Park and Botanic Garden is home to the long-running Kings Park Wildflower Festival, which has grown from a weekend to a monthlong celebration every September. (bgpa.wa.gov.au/kings-park)

Info: westernaustralia.com; mountbarkertourismwa.com.au (for Stirling Range), margaretriver.com; and dec.wa.gov.au/index.php (the Department of Environment and Conservation of Western Australia, which has information on all the parks and natural areas).

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