

Spring Wildflower Walks in California State Parks

By John McKinney

Spring is a time of singing birds, sweet-smelling air, emerald green grass, trees shimmering with new leaves, and above all, flowers. Spring reminds us of youth, of optimism, of new beginnings, particularly when we're sauntering along a flower-strewn path.

From the purple sand verbena and yellow bouquets of brittle bush that grace **Anza-Borrego Desert State Park** in early spring to the columbine, lupine and leopard lily coloring **Emerald Bay State Park** in late spring, California's state parks offer a diversity of spring blooms. Atop **Montana de Oro State Park** bluffs grow fields of mustard and poppies which give the park its "Mountain of Gold" name. The park system even features a trio of reserves named, respectively, for their profusion of poppies, rhododendrons and azaleas.

Even some of the state's big "reservoir parks" have been known to put on a flower show. Take a hike around **San Luis Reservoir State Recreation Area** in the spring when the usually brown hills turn green and are brightened by California poppies, tidytips, larkspur, bush lupine, goldfields and Chinese houses. Springtime colors the hills around **Lake Perris State Recreation Area** with a host of wildflowers including goldfields, California poppy, fiddleneck, baby blue eyes and blue dicks.

Often El Nino showers bring a profusion of flowers; sometimes, however, a La Nina weather pattern has kept moisture away from California. Your guess is probably as good as any meteorologist when it comes to predicting a "good" wildflower year.

Beware of the vicissitudes of Mother Nature. In past years I've heard so-called experts on LA radio stations predict a wimpy crop of wildflowers and warn visitors away from the **Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve**. Then along comes a sudden rainstorm and voila!—the celebrated home of the state flower comes to life. (These same experts have also predicted fields of flowers on years when the bloom was a bust.)

California's state parks are just too darn diverse for anyone to be making statewide flower forecasts. Best bet for wildflower-seekers is call ahead and ask park staff what's blooming where. Below are some of my perennial favorite parks for springtime wildflower walks.

Southern California

The California poppy blooms on many a grassy slope in California, but only in the Antelope Valley does the showy flower blanket whole hillsides in such brilliant orange sheets. Surely the finest concentration of California's state flower (during a good wildflower year) is preserved at the **Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve** in the Mojave Desert west of Lancaster.

The poppy is the star of the flower show, which includes a supporting cast of fiddlenecks, tidy tips and gold fields. March through May is the time to saunter through this wondrous display of desert wildflowers.

Just seven miles down the road from the reserve is the all but unknown **Ripley Desert Woodland State Preserve**, bedecked in spring with fiddleneck, scarlet bugler, coreopsis, goldfields, chia, blue dicks and filaree. In spring, the beavertail cactus

produces attention-getting magenta-hued flowers while golden bush puts forth yellow daisy-like blooms. Greeting hikers is the fragrant blue sage, which raises long spikey arms covered with blue flowers. Star of the spring show, though, is the Joshua tree with creamy white blossoms festooning its uplifted arms.

My favorite wildflower walk in the Santa Monica Mountains is the 7-mile round trip jaunt through Leo Carrillo State Park to Nicholas Flat. Spring wildflowers are abundant because it's a meeting place for four different plant communities: chaparral, grassland, coastal scrub and oak woodland.

En route to Nicholas Flat, look for shooting star, hedge nettle, sugar bush, hollyleaf redberry, purple sage, chamise, blue dick, deer weed, burr clover, bush lupine, golden yarrow, fuchsia-flowered gooseberry, and many more flowering plants. At the Flat, which hosts small Nicholas Pond, keep an eye out for wishbone bush, encelia, chia, Parry's phacelia, ground-pink, California poppy, scarlet bugler and goldfields.

Northern California

Henry W. Coe State Park, California's second largest, state park, features conifer forests, oak woodlands and some magnificent manzanita growing more than 15 feet high. In spring, Mariposa lilies, poppies, fiddlenecks, buttercups, shooting stars and more pop out all over along the park's extensive trail system.

In **Mount Tamalpais State Park**, Matt Davis Trail takes you 3.5 miles downhill to the town of Stinson Beach. En route look for calypso orchid beneath stands of Douglas fir and for mission bells, fairy bells, crimson columbine and pink-flowering Western trillium in company with the bay trees. Mountain meadows are festooned with poppies and lupine.

In the Wine Country, head for **Sugarloaf Ridge State Park**. The park's grassy meadows are bedecked in spring with a multitude of colorful wildflowers from Indian pinks to blue dicks. Also look for lupine, California poppy, cream cups, buttercups and Mariposa lily

One of the annual rites, and fine sights, of spring is a walk amongst the pale pink blossoms of **Kruse Rhododendron State Reserve**, located 90 miles north of San Francisco. California rhododendrons brighten the forest floor from about mid-April to mid-June.

The wondrous western azalea lights up **Azalea State Reserve** located on the north bank of the Mad River near Arcata. During May and June, pink and white blossoms burst forth to perfume the air and delight the eye. Joining the thickets of azaleas is an intriguing collection of north coast flora including ferns (licorice and sword), salmonberry, elderberry, myrtle and Sitka spruce.

For more information about hiking in California visit John McKinney's web site at www.thetrailmaster.com