

July in Colorado...

That can mean only one thing.... Wildflowers! Few subjects are more popular with photographers, and with good reason. These high alpine jewels resonate with us on several levels.



The trick is figuring out just when they will peak. Usually the middle of July is pretty safe, but it could be a bit earlier or later depending ultimately on temperatures and snowmelt conditions.

Everyone has their favorite destination. I usually head for the San Juans with tripod, 4 wheel drive and lots of memory cards! Of course, I love Yankee Boy Basin (but so does everyone else!). A less crowded spot that I always check out is Mineral Basin. Start up the Black Bear road, which is off US 550, just south of Red Mountain Pass. In about a mile, you'll start seeing some gorgeous fields of flowers including paintbrush and columbines. Don't worry about this road: the first couple of miles are easy; just don't keep going!

While you are in this area, check out the top of Forest Road 825, a lesser known drive, which is also great for panoramas. To reach this location from Silverton, drive north on U.S. Hwy 550 about 5 miles, turn right on Forest Road 825. Follow approximately 2.75 miles to its highest point; a short distance above timberline. Park your vehicle and look for the best vantage point to view the south and southwest. Continue the descent north down to join back up with 550. This side of FR825 features some great wildflower meadows, with stunning backdrops.

If you are in the Telluride area, be sure to visit Gold King Basin, a very rewarding location. It has a variety of flowers with columbine and paintbrush usually the most plentiful. From Telluride, drive south on State Hwy 145 toward Ophir Loop. About 3 miles west of Telluride, there will be an intersection where 145 splits to the north and south. There's a gas station and a

few other businesses at this intersection. Turn left, heading south, and follow about 5 miles until you see the Sunshine National Forest campground on the right and the road to Alta Lakes on the left. Turn left on Alta Lakes Road (Forest Road 623), marked by a road sign. Follow this road to the ghost town of Alta. You'll pass through its remains, cross the stream and continue uphill. At the next fork, turn right (unmarked) and follow this road to the small, unnamed lake that sits in Gold King Basin. Wildflowers can be bountiful around this lake and further up the road, higher in the basin. It may be worthwhile to visit Alta Lakes while you're in the area. They're less than a mile from Gold King Basin and easy to locate; just eliminate the last right turn toward Gold King Basin. Instead, continue straight and you'll reach them in about 1/2 mile. Of the three lakes, the furthest (most westerly) one has the most wildflower potential.

No visit to the San Juans is complete without a visit to one of my all time favorites, American Basin. Drive east out of Silverton on State Hwy 110 (also known as Forest Road 586) about 11 miles toward Animas Forks. As you approach Animas, watch your signs and veer right toward Engineer Pass which will be marked by a sign. In about 1/2 mile, turn right toward Cinnamon Pass. Here the road becomes a rougher and has precipitous sections; a four-wheel drive is mandatory. Proceed up Cinnamon Pass and descend the other side. In less than 1/2 mile after descending to tree line, turn right on Forest Road 12 (expect to begin seeing flowers here) and follow to its end at a trailhead parking lot. Total distance to American Basin from Silverton is about 18 miles. An easier access is from the Lake City side. Last summer I got some really nice purple monkshood shots here. This is also a good place for marmots and pikas; just look for the columbine covered rock piles!



The Crested Butte area is the other wildflower Mecca. Although I am less familiar with this area, you should especially try the Lake Irwin area.

Photographing wildflowers can be a challenge due to their size, closeness to the ground and nearly constant movement due to wind. You'll want a good tripod that gets low down. A cable release is useful too.

Equipment to "get closer" runs the gamut of inexpensive screw-in close-up lenses to a true macro lens. The simplest and least expensive are the close-up lenses which come in a set of 3. You can use one or two in various combinations. If using two, screw the "stronger" one onto the lens first. Don't use all 3 at once. Specialized, high quality screw in lenses are made by Canon and Nikon. Canon makes the 250D and the 500D, while Nikon has the 5T and 6T variants although the Nikon ones may now be hard to find (try eBay). Both brands are two element designs and made to work on telephoto zoom lenses. You may need an adapter ring to match the lens to your filter size. I have the Canon 500D and it is sharp and versatile.

Extension tubes get you closer but they do cause a loss of light and are relatively expensive. A tele-converter magnifies the image size but with loss of light and possibly reduced image quality.

The ultimate tool is a true macro lens. These feature very high resolution, flat fields and high magnification. I use a Canon 100mm macro lens on my 40D. The 1.6x factor gives an equivalent 160mm macro, with excellent working distance. If price is an issue, Sigma makes a very nice 70mm macro lens for both Nikon and Canon.

When photographing flowers, you have to juggle several decisions. You can "stop down" your lens to a small aperture like f11 or f16 for more depth of field. But as you do this; your shutter speed slows down so wind becomes an issue. Or you can try a large aperture such as f4 for f5.6 for a very narrow depth of field. Just select a small portion of the flower to focus on while the rest of the blossom becomes a soft blur.

Don't overlook the use of a Lens Baby for a whole other set of possibilities. The soft, dreamy look is perfect with flowers. Another cool trick is to stretch a piece of panty hose over a lens for a soft-focus effect!

Using auxiliary lighting is very helpful as it lets you use the smaller f-stops and still maintain a decent shutter speed. A handy device is a reflector to throw some light into your



subject. These lightweight folding disks come in silver, gold and white. They work very well and you can preview the effect. Some also come with a diffuser which can cast a soft, low contrast light. An external electronic flash is another possibility. You may need to use a flash TTL cord to get the flash off the camera so you can aim it at the flower. Experiment with some diffusing materials over the flash. You can use a rubber band to put facial tissue, wax paper, rip stop nylon, etc over the flash head. A piece of plastic cut from a milk jug works well too. The ultimate flash is a ring flash. These provide extremely soft, shadow free light but can be expensive.

It is very important to watch your backgrounds too. Don't let distracting hot spots or strong lines creep in. Use your depth of field preview button to gauge how the background will look.

When we used film, wildflower photography was always a bit difficult. But with digital, you can see what is happening and make corrections.

Finally, if you have a small point 'n shoot type digital camera, these work great in the Macro mode. They often get within an inch or even less of the subject and offer good depth of field.

Do research online and by talking to your friends to figure out what makes sense for you. And then get out there and make some magic!

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