



June 2023

Notes of a Naturalist

A newsletter bringing you the species, landscape, history, and happenings of the Taft-Nicholson Center



Wildflower season is here!

After a long and exceptionally wet winter, things are finally starting to warm up and wildflowers are blooming! Here are some of the flowers we've been excited to see popping up this season.

Long-plumed Avens (*Geum triflorum*)



The fern-like leaves of this plant are some of the first green to be found when the snow melts. The flowers never fully open, so the food source within is only available to smaller or more determined bees. These early blooms provide pollen for foraging queen bumblebees in the spring. The nodding flowers turn upright after they are pollinated. This plant's other common names, Prairie Smoke and Old Man's Beard, refer to the long feathery plumes that emerge from the seedhead.

Blue Camas (*Camassia quamash*)

Indigenous peoples of this region, including people of the Salish, Nez Perce, and Blackfoot tribes, have harvested and traded blue camas bulbs for millennia. They were the second most widely traded food source in the region. These edible bulbs are traditionally prepared in a variety of ways. However, when the plants are not in bloom, their leaves and bulbs are nearly indistinguishable from the toxic Meadow Death Camas.



Yellow Columbine (*Aquilegia flavescens*)



The genus name *Aquilegia* is derived from "aquila", the Latin word for Eagle. This is a nod to the flower's distinct shape, which is often described as resembling a raptor's talons. These "talons" or spurs are specialized petals that contain nectar. Variation of spur length between columbine species seems to be correlated with pollinators' tongue lengths.

Lupine (*Lupinus spp*)

The name "lupine" comes from the Latin word *lupus*, meaning wolf. This is due to a false accusation that lupines hoard nutrients and leave the soil ravaged, a myth that puts both lupines and wolves in a bad light. But in reality, lupines provide essential Nitrogen to the soil and nearby plants. Like other members of the legume family, lupines have nodules on their roots that house Nitrogen-fixing bacteria. They do, however, contain high levels of alkaloids and are highly toxic. So despite their fruits' resemblance to pea pods, they are not edible.



Lakeview Happenings

Our season started off with a Wilderness First Aid course led by Wilderness Medicine Training Center International. It was a great refresher for our staff, local community members, and employees of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, the Centennial Valley Association, and the Nature Conservancy.



We also kicked off this season's Science Wednesdays with a presentation on Mountain Lions! Thanks so much to the Centennial Valley Association for sponsoring a fascinating discussion on mountain lions by Jim Williams, author of "Path of the Puma." Jim took us on a journey from Montana to Patagonia with a look back at his 30 years of mountain lion ecology and management experience. Big thanks to the over 70 community members who traveled across the valley to join us for this special event!

University of Utah Honors College students joined us for 10 days to immerse themselves in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. During their stay, they've spent early mornings practicing birding skills, went canoeing in the Red Rock River wetlands, and studied the behavioral habits of the local ground squirrel population. They'll be taking their new naturalist skills to Patagonia later in the summer.



Meet the Artist: Kristen Vardanega

Kristen Vardanega is an artist, illustrator, and human person living in Salt Lake City, Utah. Born and raised in Northern California, Kristen spent her twenties in Southwest Montana and considers the characters and landscapes of the Intermountain West her home and biggest inspiration.

Obsessed with illustrated books and naturalist field guides, Kristen has kept a sketchbook of observational drawings since childhood. Her paintings speak to the and magic and mythology of the natural world. An avid bird watcher and outdoors-person, she draws from a well of personal experience, inspired by symbolism, scientific illustration, children's books, tarot, textiles, and ornate cowboy boots.

