“Hardly too much attention can be bestowed on flowers.”

The April Newsletter generated a much larger response than usual. In part, the response is due to the fact that many of us are cooped up and have way too much time on our hands. But I also got the impression that people on our mailing list – those who live inside, as well as outside our chapter area – really and truly love the flowers of the Sierra foothills. Our chapter may have a shortage of people who are willing to serve in an official capacity, but we have no shortage of people who love wildflowers. (FYI, the title sentence is from an entry in Thoreau’s private Journal, dated June 15, 1852.)

This month’s Newsletter continues last month’s theme. Jeri Zemon takes us on a virtual field trip near her hometown of Sonora, down Wards Ferry Road and on to Red Hills. Karen Orso shares an impressive array of flowers from her hometown of Wilseyville in northern Calaveras County. Her list includes three species that I have yet to meet. (I hope that we can persuade Karen to lead a field trip around Wilseyville next year!) As an anti-climactic finale, your editor takes a closer look at Blow-wives – a member of the Sunflower family that he always recognized in fruit, missing the flowers altogether.

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Here is a proposal for the June Newsletter. Stephanie Garcia and her crew of volunteers have been hosting the Fall Plant Sale for many years. If, among the plants that you have purchased and installed in your yard, there is one (or several) that are real success stories, send a brief description (and an optional photo) to the editor, Doug Krajnovich, djkran@comcast.net. (No need to share plants that didn’t make it. We all know what those look like.)

Please include your home town, and indicate whether I can publish your full name or only first name and last initial.

John Muir’s views on man vs. transmicroscopic creatures

[from A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf]

“Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit - the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge. From the dust of the earth, from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made Homo sapiens. From the same material he has made every other creature, however noxious and insignificant to us. They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals.... This star, our own good earth, made many a successful journey around the heavens ere man was made, and whole kingdoms of creatures enjoyed existence and returned to dust ere man appeared to claim them. After human beings have also played their part in Creation's plan, they too may disappear without any general burning or extraordinary commotion whatever.”
Jeri Zemon (Sonora, Tuolumne County)

“In mid-April I drove along Algerine Road from Jamestown to Wards Ferry Road. The pastures were green and there were large displays of *Plagiobothys* (popcorn flowers) that looked liked white foam along the way. I stopped at a patch of pink Owls Clover, *Castilleja sp.* mixed with Lupines and Popcorn Flowers. I continued down Wards Ferry Road and stopped at a spot overlooking the North Fork of the Tuolumne River. The steep hills were colored with bright orange poppies cascading down to the river bank. Looking closer I found a mix of Lupines and Foothill Poppies (no disc below the petals). It was a classic Sierra Foothill delight!” Jeri also sent pictures of Five Spot (lower left) and Fremont’s Death Camas (next page) that she found blooming near Red Hills. Photos © Jeri Zemon
Editor’s note:
Jeri’s report of Fremont’s Death Camas at Red Hills surprised me. I visit Red Hills often (in non-pandemic years) and have never encountered it there. I think of it as a coastal species. I searched up the Calflora and Jepson eFlora maps, and sure enough, there is one blue dot on the Calflora map at Red Hills, and Jepson includes the c SNF floristic province in the range map, with the cryptic comment “just w of Chinese Camp.” Jeri let me in on the secret.
Karen Orso (Wilseyville, Calaveras County)

“TOP ROW: False Rue Anemone (*Enemion occidentale*) was found in abundance on the north-facing slope of the Middle Fork Mokelumne River Canyon. The leaves of the Pink Mountain Currant (*Ribes nevadense*) are very aromatic and the bees go crazy for the flowers. I assume the Trillium species is *angustipetalum* but I see on Calflora that *chloropetalum* is also a remote possibility for Calaveras County. 

MIDDLE ROW: Pansy Monkeyflower (*Diplacus pulchellus*) is quite rare (CNPS rare plant ranking of 1B.2) but can often be found on lava caps in the West Point-Wilseyville area of Calaveras County. CA Indian Pink (*Silene laciniata*) is a perennial. It comes up very reliably in the same places on my property every year. The last one in the middle row, Kellogg’s Monkeyflower (*Diplacus kelloggii*), was blooming near Railroad Flat.

BOTTOM ROW: Yellow Star Tulips (*Calochortus monophyllus*) are very common and in some years when there is bloom overlap they hybridize with *Calochortus albus*. But it does not look like that will happen this year as the neighboring Globe Lilies are currently nowhere near. The last two flowers in the bottom row are rare plants with 1B.2 rankings: *Horkelia parryi* & *Allium tribracteatum.*”       Photos © Karen Orso
Earth laughs in flowers

Karen Orso’s uncropped picture of Diplacus pulchellus brought to mind this line from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poem Hamatreya. These four words adorn countless greeting cards, tee-shirts, coffee mugs – all of them misrepresenting the somber topic of Emerson’s poem. Hamatreya is not a poem about happy-go-lucky wildflowers. It is a poem about man’s arrogance, death, and the grave.

Here is the stanza in which the misappropriated sentence appears, right after Emerson has described a series of well-to-do farmers who think that they OWN their land:

Where are these men? Asleep beneath their grounds:  
And strangers, fond as they, their furrows plough.  
Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys  
Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs;  
Who steer the plough, but cannot steer their feet  
Clear of the grave.
A Closer Look at Blow-wives (by your editor)

Several people who replied to the April newsletter self-identified as “newbies.” I do not regard this as a derogatory term. When I retired in 2012, I knew nothing about wildflowers. I remember “discovering” Giraffe’s Head, Fiddleneck, & Filarees, imaging that I was Alexander von Humboldt heading up the Orinoco. I know a lot more now, but I still consider myself a newbie. This page is written for my fellow newbies.

The most intimidating family for newbies is the Sunflower or Composite family (Asteraceae). Of 1054 species described in the Brecklings’ Yosemite Wildflowers book, 174 are Composite. With so many species, and so many look-the-sames, newbie botanists often choose to ignore the sunflower family entirely while they are getting started – just as newbie birders choose to ignore LBJ’s, focusing instead on easier-to-identify birds. (In case you don’t know, LBJ’s = Little Brown Jobs.)

But even if you are a newbie, you will see a striking difference between the following three “dandelion-like” seed / fruit heads. The left one happens to be the common non-native dandelion (Taraxacum officinale). Many species have similar-looking heads. The middle one is Silver Puffs (Uropappus lindleyi). There is only one other species in our area that has a seed head similar to this. The right one is Blow-wives (Achyrachaeana mollis). No species that I know of can be mistaken for Blow-wives. For years, I have id’ed Blow-wives solely based on the fruit, paying no heed to the flowers.

On a field trip, Judy Breckling pointed to a Blow-wives plant that had not gone to seed. I said “I only pay attention to sunflowers after the flower bud has opened.” She said, “That’s as open as it gets.” In April, I took a closer look at Blow-wives plants close to my home. Sure enough, the composite flower head refuses to unfurl. The middle picture below is a cross section of one “bud,” consisting of many disk flowers, each of which will contribute one propeller-shaped fruit to the head. When I went to file my pictures, I saw that I had placed Blow-wives in the radiate sub-category of Asteraceae. (Radiate means the plants have both ray & disk flowers.) I thought I had made a mistake. Blow-wives should be discoid (disk flowers only). I checked Jepson. It said Blow-wives is radiate. I went back to the park and examined more flower heads. Sure enough, each had a small number of rays. The rays are peeled back in the right-hand picture.

For completeness, Common Dandelion and Silver Puffs are ligulate, which means ray flowers only. (Ligule is a synonym for ray flower.) A fourth sub-category of Asteraceae – known as disciform – contains oddball plants with hard-to-describe flowers and flower parts, like Q-tips. When you decide to tackle Asteraceae, it helps to keep track of the four sub-categories: Radiate, Discoid, Ligulate, Disciform.
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