



Taming Wildflowers

by Robert Berdan

Taking artistic photos of wildflowers can be challenging. Mastering specific photography techniques, having the correct equipment, and knowing when and where to find them all contribute to capturing beautiful shots.



Although the Canadian Rockies are home to more than 900 wildflower species, the average visitor sees only a few. Many emerge at specific times and only last a few days or weeks. The Prairie Crocus first appears in the Bragg Creek area as early as March, and along with certain other hardy alpine plants, survives in the snow by generating heat through an exothermic chemical reaction that melts the snow. The Glacier Lily is another common flower that emerges early and follows the retreat of the snowline. As the ground warms up, a succession of different plants flower throughout the spring and summer, especially at different altitudes. In the mountains, some plants don't even begin to flower until late July or August.

Wildflowers are good photography subjects because, unlike wildlife, once you find them, they don't run away. In fact, the biggest challenge is finding them and keeping them still in the wind. Most new digital compact cameras offer a macro mode that allows you to move in very close. The trick is to focus carefully and keep the camera still, so using the manual focus and viewing a live preview on the LCD can be very helpful. A good tripod is a necessary accessory, especially up close, where the depth-of-field is shallow and accurate focusing is harder. The best tripods have legs that go flat to the ground when getting closer to the subject. If your camera has interchangeable lenses, you may also want to invest in some additional accessories such as close-up filters, extension tubes, teleconverters or macro lenses.

Overcast cloudy days provide the ideal lighting conditions for photographing wildflowers – sunny days can over-expose highlights and create too much contrast. If you are hand-holding your camera, a flash can be helpful, but natural light is generally the best. My favourite time to shoot is right after a rainfall, when the plants are covered in water droplets and everything looks and smells fresh. If there is no apparent natural dew, you can add some with a small spray of water from a perfume bottle. A polarizing filter is a useful tool for reducing the shine and reflections off the leaves, while increasing overall colour saturation.

To capture unique wildflower shots, you will need to play and experiment with the composition. Try allowing other plants or flowers to touch the front of your lens and shoot through them to create gentle blurs and a soft vignette effect around the edges. Another technique is to get in real close and fill the frame with the flower to show off its inner parts. If your camera has a depth-of-field preview button, use it to check for background distractions like bright branches or blades of grass, and then alter your camera position or remove the offending elements.

Finding and identifying specific wildflowers requires knowledge about when they bloom and their likely habitats, so a good portable wildflower guide is priceless. I recommend "Wildflowers of the Rocky Mountains" by G.W. Scotter and H. Flygare. If you don't have such a guide, I would recommend that you target river valleys and damp areas. These areas are generally rich with a broad range of wildflowers in early June.

Finally, a few general tips: take notes on the location and time of year you encounter specific flowers for future reference; always bring a small cushion or spongy kneepads, since you will likely spend some time on the ground; and if you're lying in the grass a lot, check your hair and clothing at the end of the day for deer ticks – they usually won't bite until you go to sleep, and you don't want to wake with one embedded in your skin ... trust me!



Photograph by Donna Berdan

Robert Berdan is a professional nature photographer located in Calgary, AB and offers regular photography workshops, including a Spring Wildflower workshop in June.

He may be contacted at (403) 247-2457, by email at rberdan@scienceandart.org, or visited on his website at www.naturephotographers.com/workshops.html.

Flowers from left: Roundleaf Orchid; Prairie crocus in snow; Wood Lily; Oxeye Daisys; Common Harebell; the aptly named Elephanthead Lousewort.

At left: Robert zooms in on a cluster of prairie crocuss flowers.