

Land, Water and People

A Rainbow of Color on the Land

By Mike Blakeman

It's not often that the mountains surrounding the San Luis Valley receive such a steady supply of moisture in the second half of May. The mountains are starting to green up nicely and nature is cranking up for a dazzling early summer show of low elevation wildflowers.

As usual, the wild irises are thick in some of the irrigated fields, but this year, the crimson colored paintbrush and bright yellow wallflowers are already strutting their stuff. Additionally, the white locoweed, yellow golden banner and purple penstemon have joined in to create a riot of color in the foothills. Soon, the blue lupine and the blazing red sky rocket gilia will be joining the crowd.

This year is shaping up to be one of the best low elevation wildflower displays we have seen in quite some time. One of my favorite areas to visit when we have a wet spring is the Embargo Creek area, which is located north of Highway 160 between Del Norte and South Fork. This year there should be areas along the Embargo Creek road where wildflowers form dense carpets of color—kind of like those 1970s shag rugs. Okay, nicer than that.

Interestingly, the reason the lower Embargo Creek drainage has such spectacular wildflower displays is because the area was severely overgrazed in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In a report from the 1930s, the ranger stated that each spring 30,000 head of sheep were herded up the drainage to summer grazing grounds. The ranger observed that after the sheep passed through, all that was left was stubble and dust. Cattle and horses then grazed the area during the summer.

By the 1940s, the Forest Service started getting a better handle on range management and the area began to recover. Locoweed, lupine, penstemon and sky rocket gilia are not highly sought after treats by sheep and they have deep roots. These plants were able to hang on and may have even increased during the heavy grazing period. What we see now is a partially recovered rangeland, but what a sight it is!

Great photographs can be taken of the dense stands of wildflowers when the sun angle is low. Rather than having the sun at your back when taking a picture, try aiming your camera into the oncoming light. The backlit flowers will appear to glow! If you want to get down and close to take photographs of individual or small groups of flowers, it is often best to wait for the leading edge of a cloud to cover the sun before pushing down on the shutter release. The diffused light shining through the white edge of a cloud reduces contrast and brings out soft saturated colors in the flowers.

Even if you don't have a camera, this year's foothills' wildflower display is one you don't want to miss. Just remember: Please don't pick the wildflowers to take home where only a few people will see them, instead leave them on the public lands for all to enjoy.

Mike Blakeman is the public affairs officer for the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center. He spends much of his free time scrambling around the mountains with a camera in his hand.