



Prairie Wildflowers

Once they blanketed Iowa; now they can be elusive.
But the experience of finding them can be richly rewarding.

photoessay by TY SMEDES



Trillium (also called toad shade, for obvious reasons) blooms each spring in rich, moist Iowa woodlands. Its white flowers turn pink just before it withers away. Native Americans used its antiseptic qualities to treat open wounds and sores.

*W*ildflower photography is every bit as challenging as wildlife photography — for a variety of reasons. As with wildlife, you have to know where to find your subjects and when. Many wildflowers are in their glory for only a day or two, making locating them in their prime difficult. Often they have tall stems that whip around in a breeze; you have to shoot them early or late in the day when the air is still. Perfect specimens are hard to come by; many blooms are munched ragged by insects and animals. (That’s what the flowers are there for, of course — the prairie is an ecosystem as well as an art gallery!) Isolating and photographing a single bloom among a tangle of grass and stems can be a challenge indeed.

But the experience of photographing wildflowers makes it worthwhile for me — even more than the value of the images I capture, I have to admit. Not many people get paid to take a stroll through an Iowa prairie on a still morning. Dewy spiderwebs glisten, the fragrance of prairie foliage wafts through the air, and a palette of colorful spring wildflowers stretches in all directions. It’s enough to cause sensory overload. Standing in the middle of a virgin prairie, you can imagine how amazed the first European settlers must have been as they made their way along colorful and aromatic hillsides carpeted in spring wildflowers.

It’s something you can still experience in Iowa — if you know where to go. Most counties list the prairies and woodlands they manage on their websites, describe each property, and offer directions for traveling there. And the Iowa DNR website (iowadnr.gov) has a “Places to Go” link that lists forests, parks, and preserves where wildflowers abound. Perhaps we’ll run into one another out there sometime.





These flowers were sometimes called johnny whiskers by settlers, but I prefer the more lyrical (and common) name prairie smoke, which the feathery pink flowers resemble. When Iowa was blanketed with prairie, every plant had a use. Native Americans made a tea from prairie smoke roots.



A photograph of blue flag iris flowers in a wet, marshy environment. The flowers are light blue with yellow and white markings on the lower petals. The background is filled with tall, green, blade-like leaves of the iris plant. The ground is dark and appears to be waterlogged or covered in shallow water with some green algae or moss.

You can find blue flag iris in wet, marshy soils. The plant often grows near or even in shallow water. Native Americans pounded the boiled root to a pulp and applied it as a dressing to relieve pain and swelling.





The beautiful yellow lady's-slipper (also called moccasin flower) is found mostly in the northeastern part of our state. Native Americans used the powdered root as a sedative, tranquilizer, and pain reliever.

Ty Smedes is one of Iowa's premier nature photographers. He is a frequent contributor to The Iowan.