

## Celebrate wildflowers at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Candace Ward



*Fireweed photo. Credit: USFWS/Kenai Refuge Staff*

The summer solstice marks the peak of wildflower season in south-central Alaska. To make the most of this special time, join us at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge to learn more about wildflowers at our Celebrate Wildflowers Fun Day. This event takes place on Friday, June 20 from 11am to 3pm at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Center, located one mile from Soldotna off Ski Hill Road. Enjoy displays, games, craft activities, and wildflower inspired snacks. Guided half-mile wildflower identification walks will take place at 1pm and 3pm. Walks are limited to 15 people each and you need to pre-register with Education Specialist, Michelle Ostrowski, at 260-2839.

You can discover lots of wildflowers as you walk and hike the Kenai Peninsula this summer. Each habitat from wetlands to alpine tundra has distinctive wildflowers. Wetland blooms to enjoy include brown chocolate lilies, purple wild iris, pink bog rosemary, white cloudberry, and yellow monkey flower. Woodland favorites include white dwarf dogwood, pale pink twinflower, white starflower, and pale pink wintergreen. Disturbed roadsides are showy with purple lupine and deep pink wild rose.

Though mid-June is the time for the most concentrated wildflower blooms in the lowlands, a second wave of the flowers can be found in alpine areas from late June to early July. When hiking from 800 to 2,000 ft., look for blue harebells, pink moss campion, yellow spotted saxifrage, and white gentian.

A few commonly encountered wildflowers require caution—white-flowered baneberry, purple monkshood and purple larkspur are all very poisonous. It is recommended that you wash your hands after even lightly touching these plants to prevent any of their oils from being transferred to your hands and eventually to your mouth. Another flowering plant to avoid is the large white-flowered cow parsnip that produces an oil that causes severe skin irritation in people and animals

Wildflower season is a great time to find the flowers of wild berries, so you can stake out good berry patches for late summer and early fall. Look for white wild raspberry flowers in disturbed areas by roadsides and trails. White low bush cranberry flowers tinged with pink are found in woodlands and wetlands. White bell-shaped blueberry flowers are found in wetlands and alpine areas.

Not only do Alaskans enjoy beautiful wildflower displays all summer, but also thanks to the hardy pink fireweed, we have one of the most colorful wildflower “exits” of any place in the world. In late July, roadsides, meadows, and mountainsides are a vivid pink with awesome displays of showy fireweed.

While Alaska is renowned for its scenery, fish, and wildlife, let’s not forget how remarkable our state is for its beautiful wildflower displays. To protect our wildflower heritage far into the future, remember to view

or photograph these showy blooms, but refrain from collecting them to insure there will be seeds for next year's blooms.

Take time to enjoy wildflowers with us during Celebrate Wildflowers Fun Day or go outdoors on your own to appreciate these colorful and beautiful Alaska residents.

*Candace Ward works at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge as a park ranger specializing in visitor service and education. Her favorite wildflower books are *A Field Guide to Wildflowers* by Verna Pratt and *The Flora of Alaska* by Eric Hulten. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*