

Get Wild: Ups and downs of spring hiking

Karn Stiegelmeier



Pasqueflowers, such as these on the on the Ptarmigan Trail, are spring flowering plants in Summit County.

Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo

Wow, it is June this week! Mud season in Summit County is a complex time for us outdoor enthusiasts. I can ski or ride my bike while trying to decide if spring is really here yet? Summer starts June 21!

I'm anxious to see the early blooming flowers that are only flowering for a few weeks. The hummingbirds, mountain bluebirds and osprey are all busy nesting and finding food. But, is it really spring yet? The classic season of spring really happens at lower elevations. Up here, snow is still covering much of my summer hiking trails, skiing is still wonderful up at Arapahoe Basin, so should I really try to get out on my favorite trails?

In my backyard, I can see the beautiful pasqueflowers and a bright, shiny yellow sign of spring in the blooming sagebrush buttercups (*Ranunculus glaberrimus*). Snow buttercups (*Ranunculus adoneus*) at the highest elevations are the first to bloom as snowfields melt later in the summer. In July and August, you can find them inches from the melting edge of snow fields up high. Buttercups sound like a breakfast treat, but they are poisonous. Our Summit County mountains offer sightings of about 25 different buttercup family flowers, including the early blooming pasqueflowers and our state flower, the Colorado columbine. This family is full of dramatic eye-catching flowers.

This time of year, it is generally better to stay at lower elevation, open dry trails, or on our paved recpaths. There are fewer people on our recpaths this time of year, and they are mostly all clear. The Tenmile recpath travels through some of the most intensive avalanche areas in those beautiful steep slopes, and it is recently open.

So, where shall I hike this time of year? Remember principle two of the Leave No Trace principles: travel on durable surfaces. Choosing the most sun-exposed trails can be the best choice. Any trails with remaining snow melting into mud means hiking into an area where your hike is likely to cause damage to the trail, making it wider, more eroded and causing permanent damage to the vegetation.

Common navigation during snowy and muddy trail conditions leads hikers to create side trails around the difficult icy or muddy areas, creating more vegetation damage and erosion.

Trampling into the sides of the trails causes vegetation damage including the destruction of tiny plants trying to sprout. These tiny green leaves emerging from the long winter may be just 1/4 of an inch long and photosynthesizing to create a summer flowering plant but could be destroyed by a boot stepping on the side of the trail. Mountain bikes can be even more destructive. Beneath the surface is a complex community of biocrust including algae, cyanobacteria, lichens, and fungi all living together and supporting the plants rooting in this rich complex. Any stepping off the trails in wet conditions can damage this amazing complex.

We are all anxious to enjoy the robust spring return of life. Be sure you are not trampling and destroying it just to get out there. The hard surfaces

of our recpaths are a perfect seasonal transition to get outside, and enjoy the signs of spring. Please think about to protecting our special and very fragile Alpine environment so that it can produce the best magnificent summer explosion that we all want to see. Do your part to keep our special Alpine summer prolific bloom thriving into the future, and showing off this summer due to the recent wet spring weather.

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Karn Stiegelmeier is the immediate past Chair of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information,

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