

PETER STEKEL

Wildflower Heaven

—“IF IT’S FLOWERS YOU WANT, I’M YER MAN AND SPIKE’S YER DOG”—

With a great amount of anxiety, I watched the four-wheel drive truck slowly grind its way up the rocky road from Lake City, Colorado.

The driver’s face was hidden by a large cowboy hat but I could plainly see two rifles and a shotgun suspended from the rack behind him.

A vicious-looking dog of mixed parentage stood in back, with forelegs perched atop the cab, barking and howling like the Hound of the Baskervilles. A large herd of sheep, oblivious to the din, made way for the truck, then stared, dimly, as it passed.

I hurriedly gathered up my plant press, flora, and collecting equipment and shoved whatever I could into my daypack. Mentally measuring the distance between me, my truck, and what I took for an approaching sheepman, I wondered if I could escape before the dog attacked.

Knowing I was on public land being leased to sheep growers didn’t obviate the feeling of trespassing. I pictured the coming confrontation with impending doom. The guy might not appreciate people disturbing his sheep.

The truck stopped about 20 feet from me and the driver got out, leaving his weapons behind. He sternly pointed a finger at the mutt and it ceased its racket, shrinking back in the bed. Silence, except for the sound of my shallow breathing, descended across the tundra. Looking like the Marlboro Man, but slightly worse for wear, the fellow strode quickly to me.

He pulled his white wool collar up around his neck to guard against the chilly morning and asked, abruptly, “Seen any bistort?”

“Huh?” I replied. I was aware of sweat running down the inside of my shirt from my armpits.

“Seen any bistort?” he repeated. “It’s my favorite even if it does remind me of sheep.” He leaned forward and rested one hand on his thigh and the other

on his hip. He posed, like a runner getting ready to sprint. Instead, he spit out a long stream of tobacco juice.

I considered the question and his observation. Bistort is an alpine wildflower that stands about six inches above the ground, waving its white inflorescence about, looking like—well, now that I thought about it, it looked like a sheep that had been run up a flagpole.

“These here woollies,” he continued, “do a good job of munchin’ ever’thing to ground level.” He straightened up, slapped his thigh and gave out a loud laugh. “They’ll prob’ly be eatin’ before, during, and after hell freezes over!”

“This isn’t your flock?” I struggled to say.

“I sell trucks in Montrose. Fella that owns the sheep lives in Denver and I wish the things lived with him.”

“I haven’t seen much of anything,” I said, relaxing and warming up to the fellow. “There’s good vegetative growth but all the flowers have been eaten.” I indicated the sheep with a sweep of my hand and shrugged my shoulders.

“Hop in the truck, then. Me an’ Spike,” he hooked his thumb back, indicating the dog, “come up here ever’ week from town to watch the flowers and take pitchers. If it’s flowers you want to see, then I’m yer man and Spike’s yer dog.”



Bistort.

Within the triangle of Ouray, Silverton, and Lake City and along a road known as the Alpine Loop lies some of the finest wildflower viewing in the United States. For years, I’d heard stories about this place in Colorado’s San Juan Mountains: Wildflower Heaven.

If you get there before the sheep you’ll be rewarded with primordial views to fourteen thousand foot peaks and colorful carpets of flowers: huge blue columbine, magenta and ocher paintbrush, blue sky pilot, bluebells, gentian, fleabane, and aster, and fields of willows with clusters of yellow flowers dangling in the wind.

Peeking out of the rocks are saxifrage, various mustards, sandwort, and

catchfly. Underlying them all is a green spread of grasses and sedges.

Alec helped me load my gear in the back of his truck and we were off. We spent the remainder of the day driving and hiking all over the place from 12,800-foot Engineer Pass, down to Ouray, up the San Juan Skyway to Silverton, and then back onto a primitive road to the ghost town of Animas Forks, up 12,600-foot Cinnamon Pass and back to my truck. Most of the route is suitable for vehicles with high clearance with only the region surrounding the two passes being recommended for four-wheel drive. While Spike sat in the truck, growling at any passing truck with Texas plates, we wandered about looking at flowers.



Columbine.

Peter Stekel

Alpine Loop amenities are rustic to non-existent. Along the 65-mile drive are three campgrounds, a picnic area, and lots of open space. This National Back Country Byway of public land is administered by the BLM and Forest Service. Developed facilities are located in surrounding communities for those who require motels, RV sites, stores, and restaurants.

History buffs will enjoy various townsites plus the Alfred Packer Historic Site, where the purported cannibal slaughtered his five companions. Fisherpeople have a choice of rivers as well as Lake San Cristobal near Lake City. Hikers can choose a host of trails or scurry up Handies, Sunshine, and Uncompahgre Peaks.

Originally called LaPlata City, Animas Forks was founded in 1877 and abandoned during the 1930s. It is the best representative remaining of the 11 area mining towns that extracted over \$750 million of base and precious metals from the region.

We stopped there to admire a lush stand of the densely hairy yellow Indian paintbrush. Alec took out his camera and I began to pull up clumps of the plant.

"Why for you doin' that?" Alec asked. "For the plant press," I replied. I showed him the press, a 12 x 12 inch

affair of plywood, cardboard, newsprint, and blotter paper.

"What's that for?"

"I use it to collect plants for drying."

"Why?"

"I donate them to university herbaria for study."

Alec shook his head slowly and a grin worked itself across his face. "Yer kinda like one of them sheep." He spat another long stream of tobacco juice.

"Why don't ya study the plants where they grow, take home pitchers of 'em, and leave 'em here for others to enjoy? Don't be like them tourists that's always diggin' stuff up."

I could see his point so I collected what samples I'd already removed, and returned the press to the truck. Since we were friends now, Spike licked my hand and I admonished him to, "Guard the press from tourists and other plant predators."

I joined Alec with my camera, a hand lens to study the smaller features of flowers, and H.D. Harrington's, *Manual of Plants of Colorado*, for identifying what we saw.

At day's end, with the summer sun dipping behind the ridge, Alec and I said our goodbyes while Spike snored softly. It had been a busy day. I watched the headlights from Alec's truck wind

westward down the switchbacks of Engineer Pass until the only light remaining came from the rising moon. I got into my truck and headed east. Sheep bleated softly in the night.

For more information, contact the Bureau of Land Management, San Juan Resource Area, 970-247-4082.

△

Peter Stekel, of Seattle, likes to hike. Sierra Nevada. Rocky Mountains. Cascades. Olympics. It doesn't matter as long as there is lots of rock, lots of wildflowers, and not many trees. He has a web site at <http://members.home.net/peterstekel>