August 2017:
Early Springtime in the Yosemite High Country
by Nancy Nies

The winter of 2016-2017 brought an unusually heavy snowfall to the Yosemite high country — 42 feet of “Sierra cement,” as one ranger called it — which crushed the roof of the historic Tioga Pass Resort and delayed the opening of the Tuolumne Meadows campground and tent cabins until August 1. It also brought, to an already gorgeous part of the world, even more beauty: the surrounding peaks were still cloaked in white, the waterfalls and cascades more spectacular than ever, and the meadows and mountainsides filled with an abundance of colorful wildflowers. Paul and I spent the first week of August in the Tuolumne area, hiking our favorite trails and seeing how familiar places had been transformed. Here are a few examples.

We always enjoy beginning our annual visit to Tuolumne Meadows (el. 8600 ft.) with the easy climb of Pothole Dome, which affords a stunning 360-degree view: meadows, river, peaks and domes. Some summers, we had seen a few Primula jeffreyi (Dodecatheon jeffreyi) (Sierra shooting star) blooming along the trail at the base of the dome, at the west end of the meadow. This time it was much more profuse, turning large swathes of the meadow a lavender-pink.

Along the Dog Lake/Lembert Dome trail (el. 8600-9000 ft.), we were treated to more uncommon sights. Every so often, the bright-blue flowers of Delphinium sp. and the creamy white “butterfly-wing” petals of Calochortus leichtlinii (Leichtlin’s mariposa lily) — many more of both than we’d ever seen there before — drew our attention.

Dana Gardens (el. 10000 ft.), an open hillside that can be reached by hiking just a half-hour up the Mt. Dana trail, is always a wonderful place to find summer wildflowers. Though
in August they can be a bit past their prime, this year they were at their peak. The deep purple of *Lupinus latifolius* (broad-leaved lupine), the vibrant red of *Castilleja* sp. (paintbrush), the bright yellow of *Solidago* sp. (goldenrod) and the pinkish lavender of *Allium validum* (swamp onion) combined to make an unforgettable wild garden.

The trail to Gardisky Lake (el. 10,500 ft.), which starts from the Saddlebag Lake road, just outside the Yosemite park boundary, begins with an extremely steep segment. The stunning views and beautiful wildflowers to be found along the way make the climb worthwhile. Our special reward this time, for making it to the top, was a whole hillside of *Iris missouriensis* (western blue flag) at peak bloom. On our previous visits there had only been a small clump of the iris, its blooms mostly already dried up. This year was different, to say the least! At the lake itself, we also saw more flowers than we remembered from other years, including lovely, deep-pink clumps of *Kalmia polifolia* (mountain laurel) lining the lakeshore.

The hike to Gaylor and Granite Lakes (el. 10,000-11,000 ft.) another of our favorites for its sweeping vistas and breathtaking scenery, also begins with a steep climb. We have always been well compensated for our efforts — not only by spectacular views, but also by a variety of blooms—and this time was no exception. As with our other hikes, however, there were differences on this visit. One stand-out, in a rocky area at Middle Gaylor Lake, was an extensive, spreading thicket of *Sambucus racemosa* var. *racemosa* (red elderberry). Thick with creamy-white flowering heads and bright-green leaves, it contrasted with its background of gray rocks. Blooming alongside it was a healthy patch of *Phyllococe breweri* (purple mountainheath). Later on, hiking off-trail near Upper Granite Lake, we happened upon the botanical highlight of the day: a large, colorful seep garden made up of long-stemmed *Arnica* sp., *Castilleja* sp. (paintbrush), and *Allium validum* (swamp onion). The vivid yellow, red and lavender hues of the flowers, as well as their lush, green foliage, stood out against the dry, rocky landscape surrounding this “secret garden.”

For the Yosemite high country, it was an unusual first week in August. Although there was some warm sunshine, there were often overcast skies and cool temperatures, as well as late-afternoon thunderstorms. Compared with a normal year, there was more snow covering the mountains and more water swelling the...
lakes and rivers. And last, but certainly not least, there were more flowers gracing this beautiful part of the world with vibrant color—flowers usually seen earlier in the summer and in smaller numbers, if at all. It was August, but in 2017, it was early spring! ✿

Thank You to:

... Dr. Anna Jacobsen, for her engaging presentation on differences and similarities in Mediterranean Shrublands found in various parts of the world.

... Melanie Baer Keeley for her informative and helpful presentation on Landscaping with Natives from the Southern Sierra foothills.

... Stephen Cooley for his fascinating practical advice on growing natives from seeds. ✿

Photo Assortment:

Horse Meadow Camp-out 2017

(Left) Castilleja praeterita
(Salmon Creek paintbrush)

(Right)
Lupinus lepidus var. confertus
(clustered tidy lupine)

(Left) Helention bigelovii
(Bigelow’s sneezeweed)