Botanizing on Mt. Pinos: A Photo Essay
by Nancy Nies

Whether or not you’ve ever been up the Chula Vista trail to the top of Mt. Pinos, there are several compelling reasons to do the hike, which can be enjoyed over and over. When Bakersfield’s summer temperatures reach the triple digits, the trail remains an inviting, comfortable thirty degrees cooler. The trailhead (el. 8,300) is a 1 1/2-hour drive from Bakersfield; the trail climbs another 547 feet to the summit of Mt. Pinos, and the hike is a moderate four-mile round trip. If you’re lucky enough to be able to go on a weekday, you’ll find few, if any, other people there. The trail provides hikers with both shady, forested areas and sunny, open meadows, and a reward for reaching the summit — spectacular views to the west and north. Last but not least, and despite years of drought, the trail offers varying wildflower displays from spring to fall.

No two summers — in fact, no two visits — are alike on Mt. Pinos.

During the summer of 2020, we did the Mt. Pinos hike four times at three-week intervals, enjoying different wildflowers each time. We made our first trip that summer on June 18, when it was still early spring at that elevation. Lupine in varying shades of purple lined much of the road to the trailhead. In the meadow just below the parking area, the Iris missouriensis (western blue flag) were still in the bud and the Ribes cereum var. cereum (wax currant) bushes along the trail were sporting their pink flowers. In the trail’s dry, open areas, we noted large
was now blooming in abundance, often together with paintbrush. The vibrant reds of Sarcodes sanguinea (Sierra snow plant) and several species of Castilleja (paintbrush), along with the bright yellows of Erysimum capitatum (western wallflower) and Eriocameria nauseosa (rubber rabbitbrush), were particularly eye-catching.

When we next visited, on July 31, the irises had faded but we found Erythranthe guttata (seep monkeyflower) and Veratrum californicum (corn lily) in bloom in the marshy portion of the iris meadow. At the southern edge of the meadow, there were other discoveries for us to make — vigorous-looking colonies of yellow cinquefoil and lavender lupine. Farther up the trail, in addition to the paintbrush, rabbitbrush and mariposa lilies we’d seen the last expanses of Castilleja spp. (paintbrush) and Phlox astromontana (diffuse spreading phlox). In the shade of the conifer forest, the early bloomers included colonies of the tiny Collinsia callosa (desert mountains blue-eyed Mary) and the yellow-petaled Viola pinetorum (mountain violet). On the open summit, we found Lewisia rediviva (bitterroot), Astragalus purshii (hairy-pod milk vetch), and Lupinus breweri (Brewer’s lupine).

By the time we returned on July 10, the Iris missouriensis were blooming in the trailhead meadow. As we made our way up the mountain, we were excited to find, now gracing the trailside, the various lavenders and blues of Calochortus invenustus (plain mariposa lily) and Penstemon speciosus (showy blue penstemon). Achillea millefolium (common yarrow) was now blooming in abundance, often together with paintbrush. The vibrant reds of Sarcodes sanguinea (Sierra snow plant) and several species of Castilleja (paintbrush), along with the bright yellows of Erysimum capitatum (western wallflower) and Eriocameria nauseosa (rubber rabbitbrush), were particularly eye-catching.

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time, new flowers had appeared since our previous visit — a large area of bright-red *Penstemon labrosus* and patches of *Eriogonum kennedyi var. alpigenum* (Kennedy’s buckwheat), its mounds of rose-colored flowers visible from afar.

On August 19, the date of our fourth and final visit of 2020, the red paintbrush and penstemon were still in bloom, but we also witnessed some changes. The currant bushes now bore ripe, red berries, and the rabbitbrush now blanketed the open areas in vivid yellow. The blues and purples of July had given way to the reds and yellows of August. Over a two-month period, we had witnessed the comings and goings of many vibrant blooms. Even more new discoveries awaited us on a subsequent August visit in 2022. We found a large, healthy stand of *Sphenosciadium capitellatum* (ranger’s buttons) at the shaded, wet north end of the iris meadow, and thriving colonies of *Epilobium canum* (California fuchsia) in and around rock outcroppings, both at the trailhead and near the summit.

If you’ve never been up the trail to the summit of Mt. Pinos, it’s definitely worth doing. If you’ve already been up it many times, it’s worth doing it again—and again! (And be sure to take along a copy of Pam De Vries’s *Field Guide to the Plants of the San Emigdio Mountains Region of California.* It’s a great way to spend the day, beat the summer heat, enjoy scenic vistas, and enjoy a multitude of colorful wildflowers. No two summers — in fact, no two visits — are alike on Mt. Pinos. You never know what surprises await! ✯

**Left to right:** *Lupinus* sp. (lupine), edge of iris meadow, Chula Vista trailhead, Mt. Pinos – 31 July 2020; *Penstemon labrosus* (southern scarlet penstemon), Chula Vista trail, Mt. Pinos – 31 July 2020; *Eriogonum kennedyi var. alpigenum* (Kennedy’s buckwheat), near summit of Mt. Pinos – 31 July 2020.

**Left to right:** *Ribes cereum* var. *cereum* (wax currant), Chula Vista trail, Mt. Pinos – 19 August 2020; *Ericameria nauseosa* (rubber rabbitbrush), Chula Vista trail, Mt. Pinos – 11 August 2021; *Sphenosciadium capitellatum* (ranger’s buttons), low end of iris meadow, Chula Vista trailhead, Mt. Pinos – 4 August 2022; *Epilobium canum* (California fuchsia) and *Ericameria nauseosa* (rubber rabbitbrush), rock outcropping near Chula Vista trailhead – 4 August 2022.