

Windows to *Wildlife*

Waterbirds and Wildflowers

On the Idaho Birding Trail at
Camas Prairie-Centennial
Marsh WMA

Catch the Bloom

Spring wildflower destinations
around Idaho

Rocky Mountain High

Making a living as a high-
altitude pollinator

Christ's Paintbrush

One of Idaho's rarest plants



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Wilson's Phalarope feeding at Camas Prairie-Centennial Marsh WMA



Christ's Paintbrush

The Brush an artist will never use!

Species of
Greatest
Conservation
Need

One of Idaho's Rarest Plants

by Jennifer Miller*
Plant Research Ecologist
Idaho Department of Fish and Game

There are approximately 400 rare plants in Idaho and Christ's paintbrush (*Castilleja christii*) is one of the three rare paintbrushes. It is one of Idaho's rarest plants!

It was first collected on top of Mount Harrison, Cassia County, in 1950 by John "Heinie" Christ (rhymes with "mist"), who was a Regional Director of the US Soil Conservation Service and a prolific collector of Idaho plants. In 1966, Noel Holmgren collected it from the same mountain, and in 1973, he described it as a new species and named it in honor of the first collector.

Description

Christ's paintbrush is an erect, stemmed perennial herb growing singly or several to a cluster. The stem is typically unbranched, but may branch when the top of the stem has been browsed or broken off. The leaves are 2 to 5 inches long, narrowly to broadly lance-shaped with one or two pairs of lateral lobes, but sometimes not divided. Overall, the sticky inflorescence looks like a primitive brush that has been dipped in paint. However, the flowers are very small, typically only about an inch long. Nearly all the color is from the outside bracts — just like a poinsettia. The paintbrush bracts are yellow to yellow-orange, or occasionally reddish-tinged. Mature plants are 5 to 15 inches tall. Christ's paintbrush is a hemiparasitic plant, meaning it steals energy from the roots of neighboring plants, and makes its own energy through photosynthesis.

One of the Most Colorful Places in Idaho

A carpet of color, the top of Mount Harrison in the summer looks like an artist's canvas. A sea of blue, pink, purple, and red wildflowers accent the yellow Christ's paintbrush during the summer. On page 4: Christ's paintbrush are usually yellow (photo 1) but can be yellow-orange (photo 2) or even reddish (photo 3). PHOTOS: Jennifer Miller, IDFG.



Range and Habitat

Christ's paintbrush is an Idaho endemic known only from a single population near the summit of Mount Harrison — the third highest peak in the Albion Mountains located between the Snake River Plain and the Idaho/Utah border. The Christ's paintbrush population occupies approximately 200 acres on the north aspects descending from the summit of Mount Harrison, a broadly rounded peak of 9265 feet elevation. It occurs in subalpine non-forested habitats within three community types:

- snowbed - where forbs dominate and snow cover remains later in the spring
- graminoid - where meadows are dominated by grasses, but rich in forbs
- mountain big sagebrush - understory of graminoids and forbs

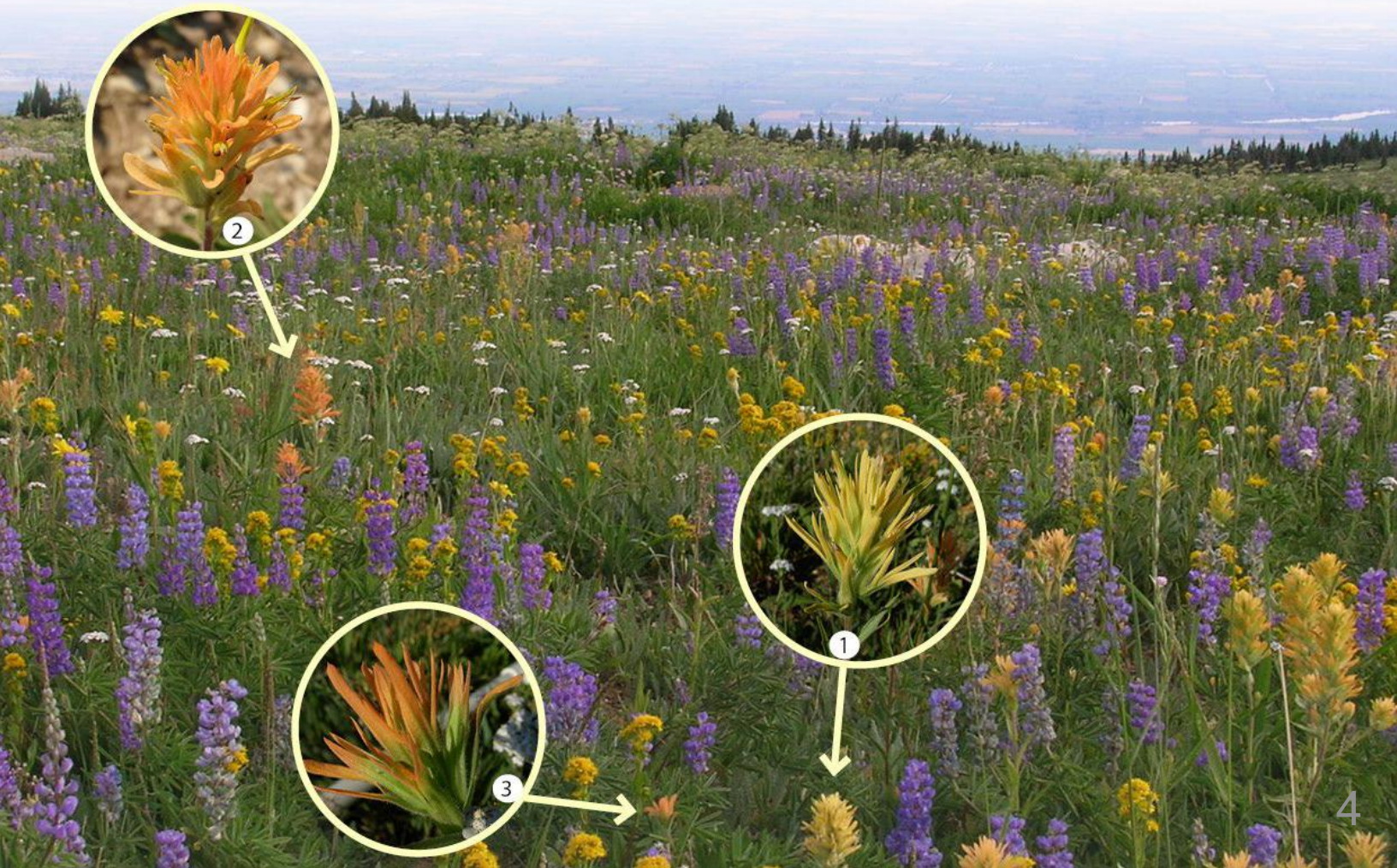
Conservation and Importance

There is only one population of Christ's paintbrush in the world, and it's an outdoor art gallery that Idaho proudly claims. In the 2022 Idaho State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) revision, Christ's paintbrush was identified as a species of greatest conservation need. This is the first time plants have been included in the SWAP.

Christ's paintbrush was proposed for listing as endangered in 1976 and designated as a candidate for threatened and endangered listing in 1980. Threats to the population include climate change, competition from non-native plants (mostly smooth brome), and disturbance from road building and off-road vehicles. Over the years, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game has worked closely with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Forest Service to implement conservation actions, and in 2012, Christ's paintbrush was deemed secure enough to remove from candidate status.

Viewing Christ's paintbrush

It's easy to see Christ's paintbrush! From Albion, take Highway 77 to Howell Canyon Road (the turn-off for Pomerelle Ski Resort) and follow the paved road all the way to the top. There you will find that the meadows are an artist's canvas dotted with orange paintbrush, purple lupine, white yarrow, yellow goldenrod, blue penstemon, and all colors of other mountain wildflowers! Peak flowering typically occurs from mid-July to mid-August.



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Species of Greatest Conservation Need, like this American Pika, are on the decline. We're working hard to give them a fighting chance so they'll last for generations to come.



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Idaho Birding Trail

Camas Prairie-

Centennial Marsh WMA

Camas Prairie-Centennial Marsh Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is located in south-central Idaho 14 miles west of Fairfield. It covers 6,240 acres, providing aquatic and upland habitats for breeding, nesting, and feeding waterfowl and shorebirds.

The WMA is a seasonally flooded wetland. It is inundated by water from mid-April to mid-July and 70% of Centennial Marsh is covered by one foot or less of water. This creates the dense vegetation that attracts large numbers of waterfowl and other waterbirds.

WATERBIRDS AND WILDFLOWERS

An incredible purple camas lily bloom begins in late May and generally peaks about mid-June. Historically, the Camas Prairie was the principal camas root gathering area and summer hunting grounds for the Bannock, Shoshoni, and Northern Paiute tribes. Today, the camas lily bloom is one of the most visited and photographed time of year on the WMA.





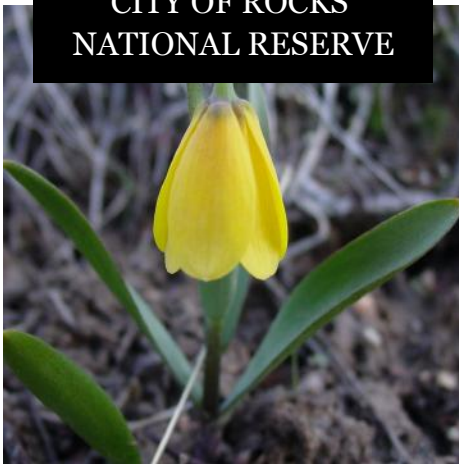
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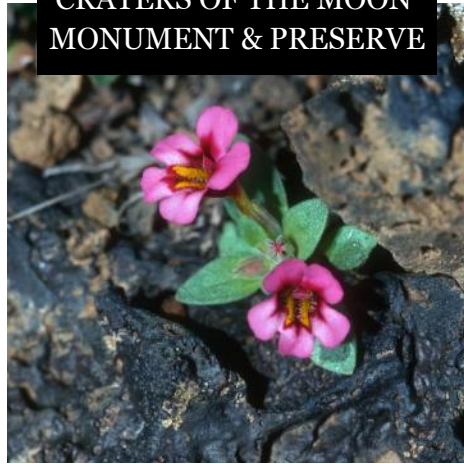
Spring destinations for **WILDFLOWERS**

CITY OF ROCKS NATIONAL RESERVE



Yellow Bells/NPS

CRATERS OF THE MOON MONUMENT & PRESERVE



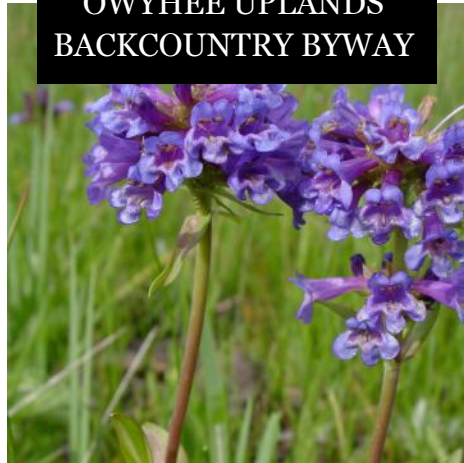
Desert Monkeyflower/NPS

MCCROSKEY STATE PARK



Sticky Geranium/NPS

OWYHEE UPLANDS BACKCOUNTRY BYWAY



Rydberg Penstemon/NPS

Species of
Greatest
Information
Need

Rocky Mountain Parnassian

Where is a good place to find butterflies? A lush urban flower garden? A sun-dappled woodland trail? A field of alfalfa in bloom? How about a rocky windswept ridge high in Idaho's mountains?

The Rocky Mountain Parnassian (*Parnassius smintheus*) is a gem of Idaho's mountains, found in a habitat where most people would not think of looking for butterflies. With a wingspan of around 2.5 inches, it is white with black and red markings. The females tend to have darker markings, and the wings can be somewhat translucent. Their bodies are hairy and their antennae have black and white segments.

The key to finding the Rocky Mountain Parnassian is finding its larval host plant - stonecrop (*Sedum lanceolatum*). This hardy little wildflower can be found in rocky and gravelly soils, often at high elevations that other plants find inhospitable. The female butterfly lays her eggs on or near the stonecrop, where they overwinter and hatch into caterpillars in the spring. The caterpillars transform into a chrysalis, and the mature butterfly emerges during summer.

The female butterflies usually are found on the ground near the host plant. The males patrol a few feet above the ground, searching for females. When they mate, the male secretes a waxy plug on the female's abdomen called a *sphragis*, which inhibits further mating. Both sexes can also be found nectaring on other food sources such as rabbitbrush.

This summer, while in Idaho's high country, keep an eye open for this lovely insect. You might be surprised to find a butterfly in such rugged terrain!

Text and photos by Jeff Thompson*, IDFG volunteer



Thank You

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Your contribution provides important funding for wildlife and habitat conservation, research, and outreach in Idaho.



Windows to Wildlife

WILDLIFE DIVERSITY PROGRAM

PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707

Deniz Aygen — Editor

deniz.aygen@idfg.idaho.gov

To submit an article, obtain a subscription, or notify us of address change, contact the Editor at the above address.

*The contents of the articles in this publication are the views and opinions of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent or reflect the policies or opinions of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game or the State of Idaho.

