Looking down

From late March through midsummer each year, my wife and I compete to see who can spot the first emerging wildflowers on Mount Helena. *Douglasia* (dwarf primrose) usually show first, their mats of dark pink flowers appearing next to melting snowdrifts. Next are the white and lavender Montana phlox (which for years Lisa and I thought were *Douglasia* of a different color until finally we examined the petals of both species). Then come pasque-flowers, yellowbells, Easter daisies, shooting stars, nine-leaved desert parsleys. By late April, flowers are popping up so fast we can hardly keep track. At summer's end, we've usually counted 50 to 55 different species on the mountain, which rises about 1,300 feet above the city of Helena.

Scientists classify wildflowers as forbs—flowering plants that are not grasses or shrubs. Sometimes, in *Montana Outdoors* and other publications, you'll see forbs described as "flowering plants." That's accurate, but it irks some botanists because almost all plants, including grasses and shrubs, produce flowers of some sort.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

Wildflower identification can be daunting. Where we live in central Montana there are five species of phlox, cinquefoils, and violets, as well as three *Townsendias*. Some species are easy to identify—arrowleaf balsamroot, Missouri iris—but many have us baffled. We don't even try to figure out the shrubs and grasses, saving those for distant retirement when there's more time.

Field guides are a big help. We use *Wildflowers of Montana* (Mountain Press Publish-

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ing), *Plants of the Rocky Mountains* (Lone Pine Publishing), and *Central Rocky Mountain Wildflowers* (FalconGuides, Globe Pequot Press). But even those don't always agree on a wildflower's name—or even its existence. For instance, Nuttall's rockcress (*Arabis*

nuttallii), a tiny four-petaled white flower common around here, isn't even mentioned in *Central Rocky Mountain Wildflowers*. Or it is but we just haven't found it.

For a long time I had no idea all this diversity and beauty existed underfoot. During early season hikes I'd look at the ground only when stepping over rocks. Mainly I daydreamed or chatted with friends, often arriving at my destination with no memory of what I'd passed on the trail.

It's not that I didn't know how attending closely to my surroundings could enrich a hike. For years I've walked along streams and rivers in summer looking for trout riseforms or hatching insects. In fall and early winter, I'm always searching for buck scrapes and rubs in the woods, pheasant tracks in snow-filled cattails, or distant ducks in the sky. Setting your senses on "search" heightens any outdoor experience.

But for too long, I didn't pay much attention to my springtime surroundings. It was too early to fish and too cold for camping. That changed when I met Lisa. From her I learned to notice and identify emerging flowers and oddly shaped leaves. I discovered that Helena's seemingly drab mountain is for several months awash in micro-colors, from the shooting star's rich purple to the soft orange of a scarlet globemallow to the stunning bright pink of a bitterroot patch under the midday sun.

Now I see some of what's been around me all along. And wonder what else I've been missing up there on the mountain—and maybe down here in the valley with other aspects of my life.

I hiked the mountain yesterday and it was still barren. But soon wildflowers will appear, reassuringly, as they have for thousands of years: kittentail, cous biscuitroot, forget-me-not, rabbit-foot crazyweed, yellow violet, prairie smoke, Butte marigold, and on and on, ending with prairie coneflower, owl's clover, and, that bittersweet sign that summer is fading, goldenrod.

Over the 18 years of our contest, I've never won. Lisa is far better at spotting and identifying emerging forbs. No matter. Each year I learn more about wildflowers, about the environment where we live, and sometimes even a bit about myself. 🐻