

# Desert Bloom

Umtanum Ridge is at its loveliest from mid-April to mid-May

JIM KURESMAN



*Umtanum Ridge is a rewarding spring desert hike. Flowers (such as bitterroot, above) start near the trailhead and never let up. The key is timing the peak of the blooming season. Checking current trip reports online makes it easier to arrive for the blooms.*

BY JIM KURESMAN

April and half of May 2005 had slipped on by without a flower hike in Eastern Washington. So, with showers and rain forecast for the mountains, and mid 70s temperatures for Ellensburg, it was time to head east. Suzanne was free and accompanied me. We left Seattle at 7:00 a.m. and by 9:00 we were at the trailhead for Umtanum Ridge, off Canyon Road along the Yakima River. On the drive over, it rained from North Bend almost to Easton. But at the trailhead it was partly sunny and already comfortably warm. There was one other group about

to get hiking, and a big empty parking lot. We crossed the suspension bridge into Umtanum Canyon and immediately turned left up the first side canyon. This trip was three weeks later than my hike here in 2004 and I feared we might be too late for the flowers. Those fears were quickly put to rest.

There was a little balsamroot down low but a plethora of other flowers. Some I recognized from previous trips here but some I didn't remember seeing before. Trips at different points in the spring seem to bring out very different flowers. I was pleasantly surprised at the variety

of flowers and colors. We saw yellow, white, blue, purple and red among others. Higher up, pink bitterroot appeared. In fact, this was the single best hike I have done for seeing bitterroot. They were just about at their peak, with more blooms still to come. We hiked up the canyon on the old road, then turned off on the side trail heading higher. The higher we went the more types of flowers we saw. We also came upon a well-camouflaged lizard. We were to see many more of them all around the ridge.

As we climbed it got hotter and muggier. The humidity had sweat pouring



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*Top: Shrub-steppe hills typical of Umtanum Ridge. Left: Balsamroot sends out its yellow blooms. Above: Bridge leading to Umtanum Ridge. This eastern Washington gem is best experienced in spring when wildflowers bloom and temperatures are mild.*

off my brow. One thing I have noticed while climbing up the middle section of the side ridge is the constant bird songs. I never saw the birds, but heard their songs close by. High up the side ridge more balsamroot were blooming. Not as many as I usually see but they were still nice. Just before we reached the ridgetop a military cargo jet roared

overhead. It was huge, like a C-17, and only a few thousand feet above us. The noise and closeness was a real shock. It looked like they were practicing low-level flight.

Finally we crested the top of Umtanum Ridge. Clouds hid the mountains but the view to the north, south, and east was excellent. A visit to the ridge

in 2004 offered views of Mount Adams and Mount Rainier. Many people do not realize how far south I-90 goes as it moves east. Umtanum Ridge is just south of Ellensburg, but it is also directly east of the summit of Mount Rainier. That puts it east of a point between Olympia and Centralia. The location gives great views of Adams and Rainier when skies

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*Top: Look for bright pink cactus in bloom mid-April to mid-May.*

*Left: Blue-flowered Brodiaea douglasii is one of many other wildflowers brightening Umtanum Ridge.*

are clear.

After climbing in the hot sun a cooling cloud now put us in the shade on top. Suzanne immediately spotted a flowering cactus, giving us hope that we would see many more in bloom. Alas, it was not to be. We saw only a few more flowering. It seems most of them are finished for the year. We turned left on the ridge and headed east. I wanted to go to the area where I saw so many blooming cacti last year. The bright yellow balsamroot show of last year was replaced with a wide variety of flowers. Bitterroot was the star but there were dozens of other varieties.

The ridge is never flat, and we fol-

lowed the undulations up and down. We decided to turn around at the steep drop where I saw so many cacti last year. I was disappointed to see that they were already finished but the other flowers made up for it. This was a good spot for lunch, with great views in all directions. As we were getting ready to head back we met the first person since the trailhead. A lone runner stopped to talk for a minute. He was on his way to Selah and had started at Central Washington University in Ellensburg. It was just another 35 mile run with 4,000 feet or more of elevation gain. Nothing like an extreme comparison to make you feel like a slacker.

Heading back along the ridge we met the brothers we had seen at the trailhead. The hike down from the ridge was much

faster and easier. We dropped from the ridgetop to the parking lot in just under an hour. We were back by 1:45 and the lot was nearly full. Based on the five groups we passed all day, most people were down in the canyon. The car thermometer read 82 degrees, which was about 8 degrees warmer than forecast. It was plenty warm for me.

We missed the peak of the balsamroot and cactus but saw some of each. The variety of other flowers peaking was outstanding. After lots of snow hikes the past month, a day of flowers without trees was refreshing. I'll be back this spring for another round of desert hiking. ♦

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