

Wildflowers a bonus treat on hike to Dardanelles Lake

By Kathryn Reed

Pretty face, cow parsnips, California valerian, forget-me-nots, lupine, columbine, Indian paintbrush, larkspur, groundsel – these are just some of the flowers flourishing in a kaleidoscope of color along the trail to Dardanelles Lake.

It's helpful to have someone on the trail telling you what you're looking at instead of just saying – ooh, look at that pretty red or yellow or purple flower. They actually have names besides colors.

This splash of color was an added bonus to the hike Sue and I took my mom on two weeks ago. I don't often think of this trail as a wildflower destination, but instead I like it for the magical alpine lake at the end of the 3.5 miles.



Sue Wood and
Cleo Reed
cross a stream
on a hike to
Dardanelles
Lake.

Photos/Kathryn
Reed

With the abundance of moisture this season, not only are the

flowers prolific, so are the mosquitoes. Even with bug juice, we had plenty of souvenirs to itch.

Another consequence of the snowfall and water is the bridge leading into Big Meadow has collapsed. While the water was still tumbling over it on the last Saturday of July, it was crossable without getting wet.

But that's not the only water crossing. Fairly stable rocks have been strategically placed in other sections to make stream crossings do-able.

It was magical on this particular Saturday to see the array of wildflowers. Some are so tiny, some are like groundcover, while others go above my knees. I just want to pick them to have for a bouquet – but instead I take their pictures.

We pause to marvel at their beauty. But soon we are hitting ourselves to swat at the skeeters.

Big Meadow is so aptly named. The tall grasses make me channel Julie Andrews – but I don't sing out loud. The hills really do seem alive, though.

We carry on. After all, the meadow is just the beginning.

Plenty of shade covers the trail – which is welcome. Mostly it's dirt at a moderate climb. We start at 7,200 feet, with the maximum elevation being 7,760 feet.

The worst part of the hike is leaving the lake. It's a good descent at the end to Dardanelles Lake, so climbing out is no fun. We certainly didn't appreciate the downhill enough since we were whining going out.

Oh, but that lake. It shimmers in a way that it looks like it is dancing. Granite walls line one side. People are swimming to rocks; others wade closer to the shore.

I think cold water is for drinking, not dipping into. After

all, snow dots the far shore as well as the peaks.

Flat granite provides an ideal spot for lunch. While there are several people doing the same, we still have our own spot in the Sierra.

Color on this trail is not limited to the wildflowers. In the fall, the aspens come alive in their array of yellows and oranges.

Getting there:

From South Lake Tahoe, go west on Highway 50.

Pass the bug station, then turn left onto Highway 89. Before reaching the summit of Luther Pass, Big Meadow trailhead parking is on the left. Park.

Follow the trail from the lot that crosses the highway. You passed the trailhead marker on Highway 89 on your right.

Follow the signs to Dardanelles Lake. Signage is good for the most part. But about a quarter mile from the sign that has you go right, you need to make a sharp left. The trail is obvious, but it also goes straight – so it's not obvious turning left leads to Dardanelles.

Part of this is the Tahoe Rim Trail.

The route is 7 miles roundtrip. The U.S. Forest Service rates it as moderate. My 76-year-old mom says it's a wee bit more than moderate.

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