

# Tips on Wildflower Photography

## Part One

Story and photographs  
by Ed Rebhein



Wild columbine

**S**ince spring is approaching, some tips on the art of wildflower photography seem appropriate. In my view, the qualities of a good wildflower photograph are those that exalt the beauty, uniqueness, and character of a wildflower as seen and felt by the photographer in its natural setting. Furthermore, I believe a good image employs the wildflower as a means of evoking emotions, provoking thoughts, and inviting the observer to explore nature and self. In this article, I will share some wildflower images that illustrate my approach to working with light and depth of field in wildflower photography.

### Work with Natural Light

Because wildflowers grow in nature, I prefer to photograph them in natural light. Natural light can vary from full sun to full shade, so I'm always prepared to work with whatever lighting is present. Full sun offers the most challenges because it can produce harsh contrasts and dark shadows. However, some wildflowers react well with full sun backlighting them.

For example, the wild columbine in the photograph above seems to glow with full sun lighting it from behind. To obtain the proper exposure for backlit flowers, I set my camera to the spot-metering mode and then set the spot on the brightly lit blossom. My camera automatically lowers the exposure level of the whole image. In this instance, the

bright wild columbine blossom was not overexposed and the background was darkened.

### Provide Shade in Full Sun

Low-hanging or ground-hugging wildflowers are not positioned for backlighting and some wildflowers don't react well to full sun. For these reasons, I always carry an umbrella to shade wildflower blooms from full sun. Shading blooms creates different, somewhat low-contrast images, like the one of wild columbine on the next page. This photograph was taken at Camp Creek State Park on the same day as the wild columbine photograph above.

For the second photograph, I held an umbrella in one hand to shade the wild columbine, held my camera in my other hand, lined up some interesting background in the viewfinder, and snapped the photograph. The resulting image reveals the wild columbine in quite a different light.

On overcast days, with lighting choices limited, the photography becomes easier but less creative. The photograph of the Venus's looking glass blossom (next page top right), taken at the Nuttallburg Mine site in the New River Gorge last spring, is an example of a wildflower in full shade. Full shade prevents deep shadows and guards against overexposing the colored portion of the bloom.

### Concentrate on the Bokeh

*Bokeh* (pronounced bō-kay) is a Japanese term for the aes-



◀ Wild Columbine



▶ Venus's looking glass



▶ Thimbleweed

thetic quality given by the out-of-focus areas of a photographic image. Simply put, it is “the background blur.” Bokeh is a powerful tool that can add rich meaning to a wildflower image. For example, the thimbleweed is a humble, unassuming wildflower that rarely catches the eye. To add spice and flair to the thimbleweed photo at right, I concentrated on creating an intriguing and mysterious bokeh that invites the eye into the image. Likewise, the bokeh in the photograph of the deptford pink at right, with a blossom no bigger than the tip of your finger, displays subtle texture and color variations (note the blurred plant stems), which I believe make the image more interesting. I hope you’ll experiment with bokeh. It adds a powerful creative dimension to wildflower photography.

### Depth of Field

Inexperienced with bokeh control? Not to worry. Let me offer some technical data that will help you control the bokeh with your camera. Bokeh is governed by *depth of field*, or *dof*. This is defined as the range of distance in front of and behind the object in focus, in which other objects will also appear in focus. Dof increases with increasing *f stop*. F stop is a number that indicates the size of the lens *aperture* used while taking

▶ Deptford pink



a photograph. The aperture is the size of the opening of the lens that allows light to enter the camera and expose film or a digital image sensor. It may sound confusing, but a small aperture is represented by a large number, such as f22. On the other hand, a large aperture is represented by a small number, such as f5. A picture, as they say, is worth a thousand words, so let me use a couple to illustrate my point.

Compare the two shots below of a stand of Jerusalem artichoke, taken from roughly the same distance. The image with the blurry flowers in the background was taken at f3.5, while the image with the background blossoms in focus was taken with the aperture set at f20. The dof is obviously much greater at f20 compared to f3.5. Through experimentation with my camera and lenses, I have found that f7 or f8 creates enough dof to keep the main bloom in sharp focus while creating a background of soft-focused bokeh.

Another element affecting depth of field is the distance

of the subject from the lens. Dof can be adjusted by changing that distance. For example, the closer an object in focus is to the lens, the shallower the dof. Conversely, the farther away an object of focus, the deeper the dof. This means that in addition to choosing an appropriate f stop, you should try a range of distances from the subject until you find the spot where the bokeh is most pleasing.

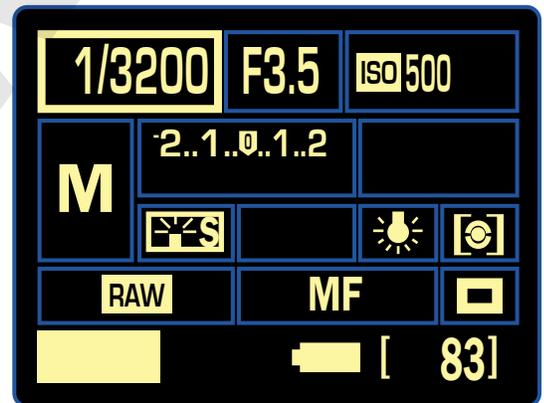
### Leave Areas Out of Focus

It seems counterintuitive to put a flower blossom only partially into focus. Yet leaving part of the blossom softly out of focus has a strong artistic effect. The portion of the flower that is in focus catches the eye and becomes the center of attention. Meanwhile, the soft-focus region gives depth to the image, creating a three-dimensional feel.

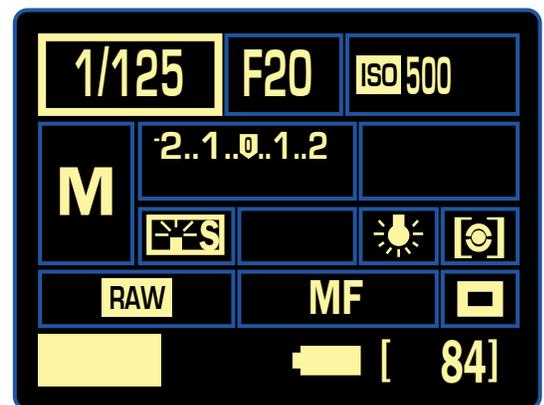
In the image of the pink lady's slippers on the next page, by limiting the dof to the single bloom in front, I've high-



▲▼ Jerusalem artichoke



Taken at f3.5, this photograph exhibits the bokeh technique.



Taken at f20, this photograph shows all of the flowers in focus.

lighted it, so the viewer's eye is immediately drawn to it. The eye then progresses deeper into the image to explore the softly focused blooms behind it. In addition, the shallow dof creates a colorful bokeh that suggests even more blooms deeper into the image, as well as a green forest floor.

It may take some persistence, as good art always does, but experimenting with bokeh will give your photographs

more artistic depth and creativity. Why not try it? The results might surprise you. 🌸

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*Look for "Tips on Wildflower Photography: Part II" in July, when Ed Rehbein will discuss how to combine lighting, depth of field, and composition to produce an artistic wildflower photograph.*

