



Ribbon of WILDFLOWERS

The Highland Scenic Highway

Story and photographs by Ed Rehbein

While cruising the Highland Scenic Highway two years ago, my wife, Phyllis, and I spotted a young couple crouched by the side of the road photographing something in a ditch.

Being a photographer, this piqued my curiosity, so of course we stopped. We discovered that the young lady was a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Biology at Duke University. The two had found a somewhat rare fen orchid, just a few inches tall. Phyllis and I are wildflower enthusiasts, so we shared in the excitement of their find. But we weren't entirely caught off guard by the discovery.

Earlier that day, we had found and photographed some large purple-fringed orchids along State Route 39/55. Moreover, we were en route to a patch of wild columbine along the Highland Scenic Highway mentioned to us by nature photographer Ernie Page. We knew the wildflower delights this highway had to offer. Indeed, wildflowers are as much a part of the Highland Scenic Highway experience as

the views from which it draws its name. This article will give you a taste of the wildflower gems that decorate the highway and tell you where you can find them.

Highway in the Sky

The Highland Scenic Highway, aptly dubbed the "Highway in the Sky," ranges in elevation from 2,325 feet at Richwood to more than 4,500 feet along Black Mountain. It's the highest-elevation major highway in West Virginia. Beginning in Richwood as State Route 39/55, the road runs 21 miles east, following the valley of the North Fork of the Cherry River to Kennison Mountain (elevation 3,988 feet) and on to the Cranberry Mountain Nature Center. Along this stretch of highway lie Summit Lake, the Falls of Hills Creek, and the Cranberry Glades Botanical Area—all worth exploring.

But the part I want to highlight is the 23-mile portion called State Route 150. It begins at the Cranberry Mountain Nature Center and crosses the spine of the Allegheny Highlands before terminating at U.S. Route 219, about seven miles north of Marlinton. This is the Parkway portion of the Highland Scenic Highway, where the speed limit is reduced

to 45 mph and commercial truck traffic is prohibited. This segment of the road is not maintained for winter travel and is generally closed from early December to March.

The Parkway is renowned for sweeping highland vistas. After running the length of Black Mountain at elevations greater than 4,500 feet, it descends to the Williams River and then ascends again to run atop Tea Creek and Red Lick Mountains at elevations of around 4,300 feet. At these heights, spectacular vistas abound. Four scenic overlooks with picnic shelters provide gorgeous views of the surrounding ridges and valleys of the Allegheny Highlands. Forming the eastern boundary of the Cranberry Wilderness Area, the Parkway also provides access to four wilderness trailheads.

The 23-Mile-Long Wildflower Garden

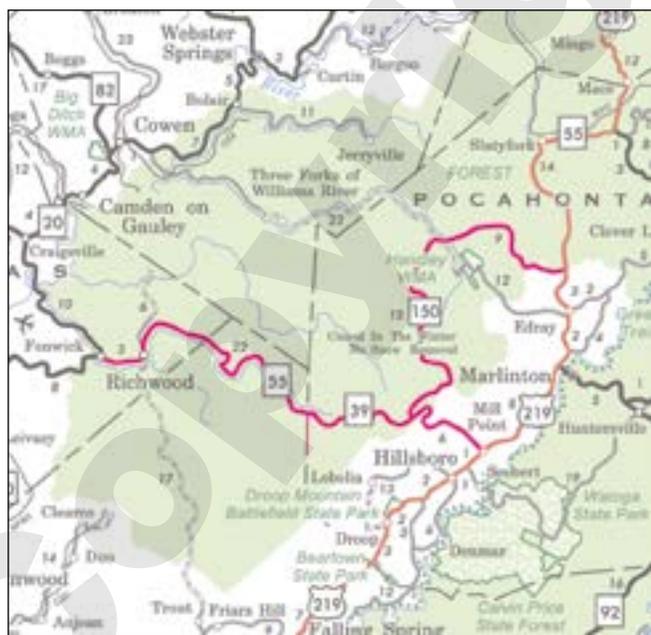
Most people drive the Highland Scenic Highway for the scenery—and rightly so. There’s no other highway in West Virginia that offers such continuous vistas. But as the Parkway crosses the higher elevations, it accesses some unique environs for plant communities. Wildflowers and meadows thrive in the abundant rainfall of the high country. Particularly in the summer months, I find as much to see and enjoy by the side of the road as at the vistas. Indeed, it seems as if the entire Parkway is lined with summer wildflowers, both common and rare. It’s like a narrow garden winding across the summits of the Allegheny Highlands.



▲ **The large purple-fringed orchid** can be found along the Williams River Road in early summer.

(Previous page) **In late June, mountain laurel** blooms are abundant along West Virginia’s “Highway in the Sky.”

▼ **The Highland Scenic Highway** (in fuchsia) is the highest-elevation major highway in West Virginia.



▼ **You’ll find wild columbine** across from the North Fork Trailhead.





In early summer, from June to July, the most interesting flowers for me are the orchids. In addition to the fen orchid, we have marveled over several stands of large purple-fringed orchid. This eerie-looking, round-leaved orchid can be found just off the Parkway on the Williams River Road.

But wildflower enthusiasts will find plenty of other noteworthy plants. In late June, mountain laurel blooms in abundance. A particularly full line of these shrubs lies directly across from the Williams River Overlook. A patch of wild columbine grows right up through the roadside berm across the Parkway from the North Fork Trailhead (TR 272). Here, delicate blue-eyed grass is plentiful. We also found some roadside nonnative, invasive flowers: yellow patches of wild parsnip and blue spikes of viper's bugloss.

Tea Creek Meadow

Farther along the Parkway, across from the Little Laurel Overlook, lies the Tea Creek Meadow. This 40-acre manmade meadow, composed of fill dirt created by the road cuts on the Parkway, is chock full of wildflowers all summer long. Early in the summer, buttercups carpet this gorgeous field in gold. Scattered among the buttercups sprout other wildflowers such as yellow goat's beard and rough-fruited cinquefoil.

In late summer, large patches of highly invasive crown vetch dot the meadow, competing with native wildflowers such as purple coneflower, tall bellflower, black-eyed Susan, virgin's bower, and field thistle, to name a few. Lovely stands of sweet goldenrod grace the meadow in September.

In late summer, native species like purple coneflower (above) and black-eyed Susan (lower left) grace Tea Creek Meadow. You'll also find fireweed (lower right) scattered along the highway.



You can walk among the wildflowers down an easy path mown through the meadow. The path is part of the Tea Creek Interpretive Trail (TR 489), which runs the length of the meadow and then descends to the foot of the fill dirt pile into a small wetland and beaver pond area, where a new set of wildflowers grows. Interpretative signs and benches help educate the mind and rest weary feet. The trail loops back up the slope of the fill dirt and onto the flat meadow, where another mown path returns back to the trailhead. The entire trail loop, probably no more than 0.8 miles, is an easy excursion and well worth it for the wildflower display.

Jerusalem artichoke, a late summer bloomer



Late Summer Blossoms Along the Parkway

During August, the Parkway bursts with wildflower blossoms and harbingers of fall. Large stands of tall ironweed and spotted joe-pye weed paint the Parkway margins with brilliant purple highlights and subtle pink hues. Along certain stretches, the roadside glows with brilliant yellow-gold patches of Jerusalem artichoke, wingstem, tall coneflower, and black-eyed Susan.

These resplendent displays can be appreciated from the car, but surprising finds await those who walk the berm and poke around. Once, Phyllis unexpectedly spotted some white campion growing among the grasses right in the ditch line. Having seen these bulbous little beauties only in books, we were thrilled to find some first-hand. They would have escaped our notice, though, had we not been on foot.

We've also discovered some lovely wildflower mixes by walking along the Parkway. I have always wanted to find and photograph different wildflowers growing closely together, and the Parkway graciously granted my wish. Bee balm (red), tall bellflower (purple), and tall coneflower (yellow) mingled by the side of the road in a virtual kaleidoscope of color and texture.

More Wildflowers Await

Evening primrose, fireweed, and St. John's wort are scattered here and there along the Parkway, along with the small purple flowers of highly invasive spotted knapweed. Phyllis and I are eager to explore the Parkway again this year, for we know that more beautiful wildflowers are just waiting to be found. Whatever species we discover, a trip along the Parkway in summer is like driving down a wildflower garden 23 miles long. Add the scenic overlooks and you have beauty afar and beauty at your feet. What more could you ask of a lovely summer day in West Virginia?



Please note: When enjoying the wildflowers, take pictures only. Digging and picking are prohibited. For more information and a map of the highway, go to tinyurl.com/highlandscenic or contact the Gauley Ranger District, 932 North Fork Cherry Road, Richwood, WV 26261, 304.846.2695, or the Marlinton Ranger District, P. O. Box 210, Marlinton, WV 24954, 304.799.4334. 🐦

Ed Rehbein of Beckley is a frequent contributor to Wonderful West Virginia. His photography can be viewed online at wvscenicphotography.com and at "Ed Rehbein Photography". His work is for sale at Tamarack and online at our-wv.com. With Randall Sanger, he coauthored an award-winning book of photography called West Virginia Waterfalls: The New River Gorge, available through the authors and at Tamarack.



More late-summer bloomers:
tall coneflower (above) and white campion (left)

► **Wildflower mix:**
red bee balm, tall bellflower, and tall coneflower

(Next page) **Sweet goldenrod is resplendent** in Tea Creek Meadow in September.





Read more at e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia. www.wvencyclopedia.org