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Flowers

W In search of Wildflowers

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Groups hope to preserve remaining wildflower sites

By TRACIE WHITE
Sentinel staff writer

STEPHEN McCABE hikes miles of Santa Cruz County during the spring months in search of the ever-changing wildflower population. From coastal areas to the redwood forests, he's covered acres of ground, constantly amazed by each new wildflower discovery.

"Part of the fun for me, is the exploring," McCabe says. "Seeing what you can find."

It's a springtime passion that blossoms along with the wildflowers. McCabe, a horticulturist who works at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, is also a wildflower activist, who lobbies and testifies in Sacramento for the preservation of local wildflowers.

Hiking in an open field near the Arboretum, McCabe scans the horizon, pointing out the lupins, poppies and blue-eyed grass. The fields are dusted with blues, there's a smattering of yellows and a few drops of pink — but it's not overwhelming.

These aren't the fields of 50 years ago, he says.

McCabe bends over to inspect a bright, yellow buttercup. He comments on the singing of the meadowlark and the signs of a coyote.

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Years ago, the deer helped keep the grasses cut back with their grazing, opening up the ground for the wildflowers. The European grasses hadn't yet begun to take hold. And development hadn't destroyed much of the native habitat of the wildflower.

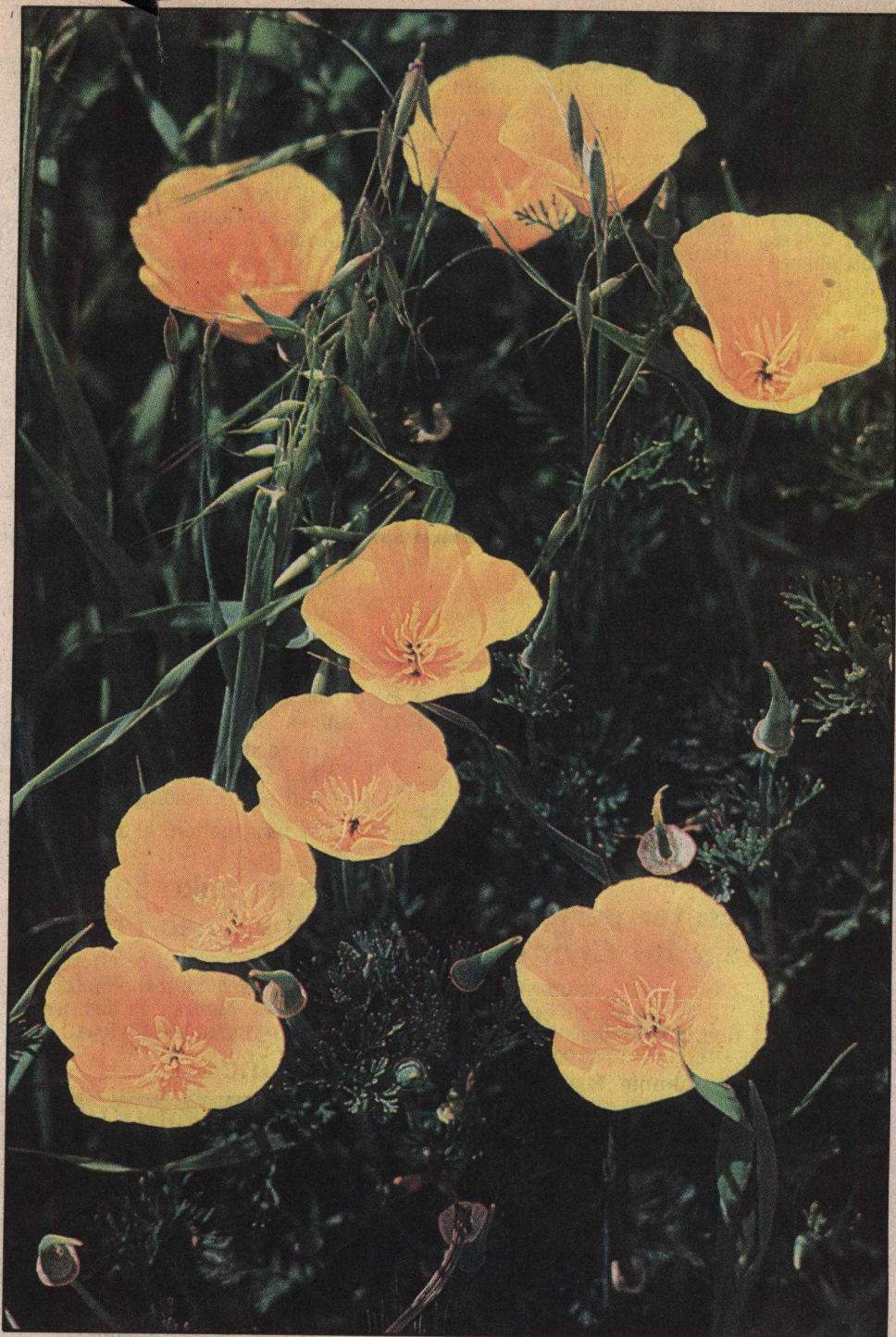
"We do still have a lot of good wildflower areas left," McCabe says. "But we've lost so many. People love to build houses on grassy fields and along the coastal terraces. Scotts Valley used to be a wonderful area. The sand hills suffered a lot through the quarrying and housing developments."

"It used to be much better."

The California Native Plant Society (McCabe is a member), the Sierra Club and the Greenbelt groups are all working to preserve the areas where wildflowers are still thriving — the Ben Lomond sand hills, part of the Scotts Valley grasslands, the areas included in recent Greenbelt proposals and Gray Whale Ranch, McCabe says.

The groups are lobbying to preserve the sand hills as a park area, McCabe says, and would like to, perhaps, see some combination of government agencies buy the land and maintain it.

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California poppies stand out against a background of lush green foliage.



Blue spikes of lupine and golden dots of poppies color the landscape along Glenwood Drive in Scotts Valley. Left, a bee buzzes through a field of lupine.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Wildflowers

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They're also supportive of the citizen's groups that are working for approval of the Santa Cruz greenbelt proposal now before the City Council and preservation of all or part of Gray Whale Ranch.

In Scotts Valley, McCabe has worked to encourage the city of Scotts Valley to require the proposed Glenwood Estates development to set aside a larger area to preserve the wildflowers permanently.

After ensuring their preservation, these groups hope to work toward gaining public access to the areas.

"There's a lot of threats to the wildflower," McCabe says. "We've lost quite a bit. The forests are areas that tend to be protected. The open grasslands tend to be developed more quickly. Much of that has been gone 50, 70 years."

McCabe is also actively trying to protect several threatened varieties of wildflower such as the Ben Lomond wallflower, a mustard-like plant on the endangered species list which is found only in the sand deposits in Bonny Doon, and the Scotts Valley spineflower. McCabe has been active in postponing the development of Glenwood Estates in Scotts Valley as a threat to the spineflower's existence.

Randy Morgan, president of the local chapter of the California Native Plant Society, is even more negative about the level of destruction that mankind has wrecked upon the Santa Cruz County wildflower population.

"We've killed off a lot by urban development and agriculture," Morgan says. "I'd say probably 90 percent of the flower fields in this county have disappeared."

"Not all grassland is currently good for wildflowers. A lot of it is artificially created by clearing trees. Flowers don't grow in those conditions. The South

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— *Randy Morgan, president
of the local Native Plant Society*

County areas are pretty much completely gone. The coastal sand dunes are OK in spots, although the coast has been badly damaged."

Still, there's a lot to be saved, says McCabe, who plans to continue his yearly ritual of searching the county for wildflowers during the springtime months. He's going to do what he can to keep them blooming.

McCabe recommends that people living adjacent to wild areas work with the plant population that already exists around them in planting their gardens. "Plant what works well with the soil conditions already there, rather than changing the setup," he says. "We try to encourage people to try and grow plants that will grow well without a lot of care. It makes the native wildflower area just a tiny bit bigger."

The Yerba Buena Nursery off of Skyline Boulevard on Highway 9 provides the best supply of native wildflowers, McCabe says.