



WILDFLOWER WATCH

# Saving a Wildflower Meadow

OREGON'S LIBERTY HILL CAMAS BLUFF

Story by JANENE WALKKY Series Coordinator GILLIAN RICE



Janene Walkky graduated with distinction in 2013 from the Society of Botanical Art diploma program. Since then, her work has been in regional, national, and international shows. She was a founding member and served as president of the ASBA Artists' Circle, Oregon

Botanical Artists. Janene's artwork often focuses on rare and endangered native plants of the Pacific Northwest. She uses watercolor to achieve the clear, bright tones of nature. One of her favorite painting surfaces is calfskin vellum, which has been used by artists since before the Renaissance.

I have a story to tell, the true story of a very special place called Liberty Hill Camas Bluff. I hope to give you a glimpse of a tale that goes back perhaps for millennia.

In the early nineteenth century, surveys of the Willamette Valley reported over a million acres of oak savannah wildflower meadows—a million acres! They were so vast that from a distance, Meriwether Lewis of the Lewis and Clark Expedition thought the valley consisted of “lakes of clear water” until the explorers got closer and realized they were viewing fields of blooming blue-flowered *Camassia*. The species of the flowering bulb they saw is *Camassia quamash*, locally known as camas or camas lily.

A later explorer, Rev George Gary, who also experienced the oak savannah in spring, wrote in 1845: “It is like a flower garden, a flower garden, indeed, in a large scale, to an extent unmeasured, and it hardly seems right that our horses should step.” Because of the Indigenous tribes' practice of controlled burns that minimized shrubby undergrowth, the meadows and surrounding woodlands had a park-like quality.

Lewis and Clark noted this practice of controlled burns in their journals, but many early explorers and pioneers thought they were traveling through untouched wilderness. These meadows, however, resulted from long-established management by local tribes. They regularly burned the meadows to clear out shrubs and the encroachment of Douglas fir trees. The nuts, grains, and bulbs of the meadows were food sources for Indigenous peoples, and many medicinal plants grew there. The lack of undergrowth also made hunting easier.

Now these meadows are gone, except for a few small patches on land unsuitable for farming or development. Liberty Hill Camas Bluff, near the town of St. Helens, Oregon, is one of the few intact meadows left and its future is uncertain. A conservation group called Friends of Liberty Hill Camas Bluff formed to advocate for preserving this special place, which was in the permitting process to be blasted to create a gravel mine.



THIS PAGE *Camassia leichtlinii*, great camas; *Ranunculus occidentalis*, western buttercup; and *Iris tenax*, toughleaf iris appear in May in the succession of wildflowers. INSET, LEFT I use a photography gray card to separate my subject from its background and improve color accuracy. This is a Nuttall's larkspur. RIGHT The camas lilies grow so densely that they shimmer in the breeze like the surface of a lake. OPPOSITE PAGE The predominant wildflower in the meadow is *Camassia quamash*, the camas lily, which blooms in mid-April. The bulbs were a staple food of Indigenous peoples.

In 2020, I completed a series of 12 studies to document some of the botanical treasures and to publicize the plight of the property. The 44 plants I documented are a small representation of the many native plants that botanists and naturalists have identified at this location.

At first, I didn't have a clear idea of how I would use my sketches, besides posting them on social media and in my blog. I simply had a passionate desire to explore the meadow and do what I could to preserve it. I spent hours, sometimes entire days, exploring and sketching, often not seeing another person. Sometimes I drew in pencil on my 12x16-inch watercolor paper in the field, or if I wasn't sure of my composition as I added more plants from that season onto the page, I used tracing paper as a sketchpad. After drawing the plants lightly in pencil in the field, I went over my most pleasing lines with black or gray ink in my studio. I added touches of color in watercolors. I kept color to a minimum so I could finish each page quickly and move on to the next to catch the fleeting succession of wildflowers in bloom. I began to develop a composition style

for my pages. I wanted them to work as a whole collection that could be put on display, rather than traditional field sketches bound in a book.

My first opportunity to share the collection of sketches was during an Oregon Botanical Artists' exhibition, *Wild Treasures: Oregon's Native Plants in Contemporary Botanical Art*. I gave a presentation about my project, so I developed a slide show that featured photos of the plants alongside my sketches. I wanted my audience to experience the wonder of discovery exploring the meadow, as I had done. I spoke in present tense as if the audience members were with me in nature.

*“Walking through the meadow is like stepping on a sponge, soft and very wet after the recent rains. Even the rocks are soft, covered with a plush carpet of chartreuse moss.”*

*“In early April, the camas lilies emerge. They give the meadow a shimmering haze of blue that stretches into the distance as the buds wave in the breeze.”*

Since that first presentation, I repeated my talk at the Oregon Historical Society and the Lake Oswego Festival of the Arts in conjunction with botanical art shows. I am a firm believer in the power of images and stories to engage both the mind and the heart. Botanical artists can convey the significance and stunning beauty of the natural world in a way that speaks deeply to our audience.

Although a mining company applied for a permit to mine basalt rock for gravel under the meadow, the emails and letters sent by the Friends of Liberty Hill Camas Bluff to the permitting agency delayed the process long enough that the permit application expired. I hope my advocacy added a few more letters to the flood of mail the agency received. The preservation effort is not over but we hope the mining company will choose one of the area's many less sensitive sites for their gravel mining. This rare meadow ecosystem is worth preserving for future generations to enjoy. ■