

Conservation Corner

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They're back! After a long, cold absence, the redwings and robins have returned to the farm – bringing much appreciated warmer weather and hope with them. Even the calendar says spring. Are you ready for the Vernal Equinox coming up this Friday, March 20?

Like Nature waking up after a long, cold winter, I'm ready and hungry for spring – for new beginnings and new life. Fellow Naturalist Brian Gibbs of Clayton County is also ready for spring. The March/April issue of *Iowa Outdoors* features his photo essay entitled "Spring Ephemerals: Hidden Treasures of Iowa's Woodlands."

And what a treasure they are! Ephemeral means lasting only a very short time, transitory, like the ephemeral joys of childhood. Ephemeral also refers to a plant that grows, flowers, and dies in only a few days. Many spring wildflowers, especially in the woodlands, must do their thing before the trees do their thing. It always amazes me how plants wait patiently in line before quietly and quickly taking their turn, completing their life cycle in their time.

In Pocahontas County one of our earliest ephemerals is a member of the buttercup family, *Anemone patens* L., commonly known as the Pasque flower but also called April fool, Easter plant, wild crocus, or windflower. Did you know the Pasque flower is the state flower of South Dakota? As the first prairie flower to emerge and bloom each spring, Pasque flowers often appear while snow still covers the ground. Its name comes from the word Paschal that refers to the Passover and Easter which is, of course, when it appears.

Pasque flowers grow only a few inches high. The gray-green stems and flower stalks are covered with tiny, white, silky hairs that help insulate the plants. The single flowers have no true petals but rather five to eight sepals in colors of blue, purple, or white that surround yellow stamens topped with long, featherlike plumes.

Native bees are also hungry and searching for early pollen and nectar sources. Like many plants that flower when pollinators are scarce, Pasque flowers perform heliotropism. Each flower follows the sun throughout the day, trapping the solar heat which also attracts pollinators, including bumble bees, mining bees, and sweat bees.

American Indians crushed the leaves of Pasque flowers to treat rheumatism and to promote healing. Caution was used, though, as the plants contain alkaloids which may cause depression, nervousness, and upset stomach. The Dakota sang to the Pasque flower, encouraging other flowers to follow its lead and appear soon.

In closing, remember to save the date of April 11 and join us for the 9th Annual Garden Show at the Expo Center in Pocahontas. Conservation is also planning an Earth Day Outing. Save the date of April 22 and join us on a walk through Kalsow and/or Wiegert Prairie as well as Whitetail Ridge. We'll look and listen for returning songbirds, native pollinators, and early wildflowers. Won't you join us in a song to spring and the Pasque flower?



Bee and Pasque Flower—Photo by Brian Gibbs