

## Get Wild: Wild Orchids of Summit County by Stan Wagon

We are fortunate in Summit County that, because of the huge range in elevation, we get to see an amazingly diverse collection of wildflowers. Species that grow in open alpine meadows get a lot of attention, but our forests contain a very nice collection of orchids. The climate here is somewhat dry in spring and summer, but there is adequate moisture in many spots to support nine species of orchids. They are generally small, making them hard to spot, but some species are large. One should never pick or disturb these flowers. And when you do discover some, be careful as you take a closer look or move in for a photo as they generally grow in groups.

An orchid is any member of the *Orchidaceae* family, which has about 27,000 species. The distinguishing feature of this family is its reproductive mechanism, as the male and female parts (stamen and pistil, respectively) are housed close to each other in the column (the central part of the flower).

The orchids in Summit County generally bloom during the height of flower season, late June to the end of July. An exception is the calypso orchid, which comes out in early June and is usually gone by the beginning of July.

The most famous, and arguably the most attractive, is the aforementioned Calypso, also known as fairy slippers (*Calypso bulbosa*). Their color is a very striking magenta, with bright yellow hairs and yellow spurs. If one finds a large group, one can often find a pure white one among the magenta ones. (Similar occurrences of white variants of colored flowers occur in many other families; there are white elephant heads, white monkshood, white bluebells, white harebells, white wallflowers, white larkspur, white cutleaf anemone, and white sky pilot). Calypso grow in quite dry areas of forested terrain.

The clustered lady slippers (*Cypripedium fasciculatum*) have a similar name, but are quite different. They are rare up here and, like Calypso, can appear in dry sections of forest between 9500 and 11000 feet elevation. The flowers are brown, larger than the Calypso's flowers, with the traditional orchid look.

Hooded ladies' tresses (*Spiranthes romanzoffiana*) are somewhat common. The flowers are quite large, all white, with many blooms on a single stalk. As with all these orchids, a close examination of the blooms reveals the classic orchid shape.

In wet areas that have fields of pink elephant heads one often finds many bog orchids (*Platanthera dilatata*). These are white, and can be mistaken for white elephant heads, which do exist here, but are rare. Bog orchids are the most common of the orchids in Summit County.

Green bog orchids (*Platanthera aquilonis*) are similar to bog orchids, but they are green and smaller. And they can be mistaken for early coralroot, which is much rarer.

The next two—early coralroot (*Trifida corallorhiza*) and heart-leaved twayblade (*Listera cordata*) are not rare, but they are very difficult to spot. The first two are found in wet areas, typically not far from flowing streams. When you are crossing one of the many wooden bridges or stone walkways placed on our water features, look closely off to the side and chances are good you will spot one of these orchids. Once one develops the habit of checking out stream banks, one regularly finds these, as well as other interesting flowers that are not orchids. That said, the *trifida* seems fairly rare.

Spotted coralroot (*Corallorhiza maculata*) grows in seemingly random spots in dry forest terrain. It is an orchid, but very different from the others as it is a parasitic mushroom-like plant. It has no green parts whatsoever and gets its nutrients from fungi. The flowers are white and very small, but well worth a close look as the flower has a lip with colorful purple dots. The flowers grow on a single stalk that can rise to a height of a foot.

The last of this group of nine that I have seen is rattlesnake plantain (*Goodyera oblongifolia*). The leaves are quite distinctive (they have veining that resembles snakeskin) and I had seen those several times. But my first sighting of one with a flower was seen only last August.

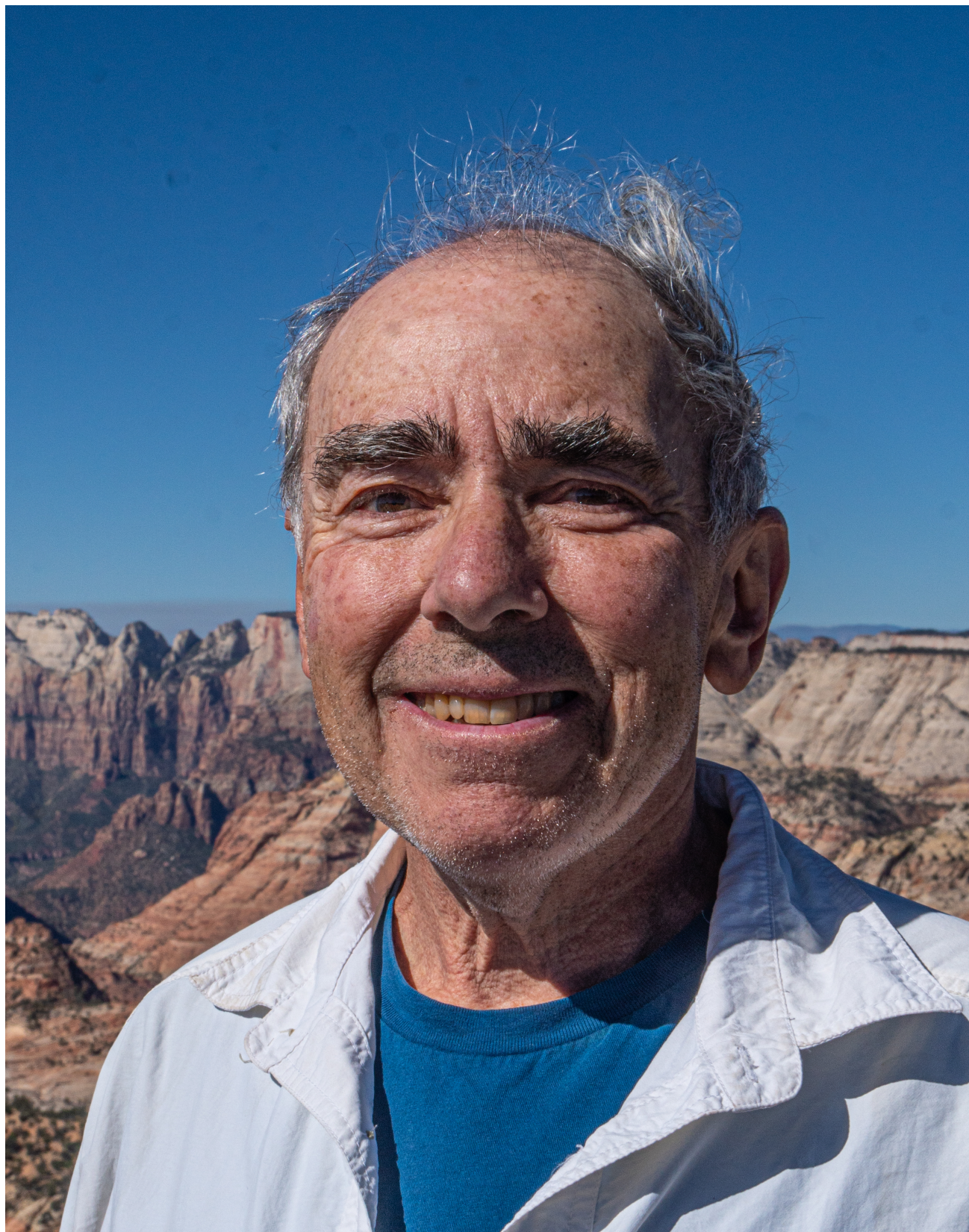
There are many orchids in Colorado that do not occur in Summit County. For more information, there is a great article by Scott F. Smith on the native orchids of Colorado. He discusses 25 varieties of Colorado orchids. The 48-page survey is in the *North American Orchid Journal* (2007; vol 13, no. 7), and can be found at <<https://tinyurl.com/4tbfnuhf>>.

Forest flowers can be beautiful, but many of us prefer to spend our hiking time in the higher alpine zones. My favorite flowers that grow above tree-line are the following, all of which are somewhat uncommon: glacier lilies, whiplash saxifrage, nodding saxifrage, kluane poppies, golden saxifrage, globe gilia, and arctic gentian. Once one learns their favorite habitat, one can find them year after year.

#### Author Biography:

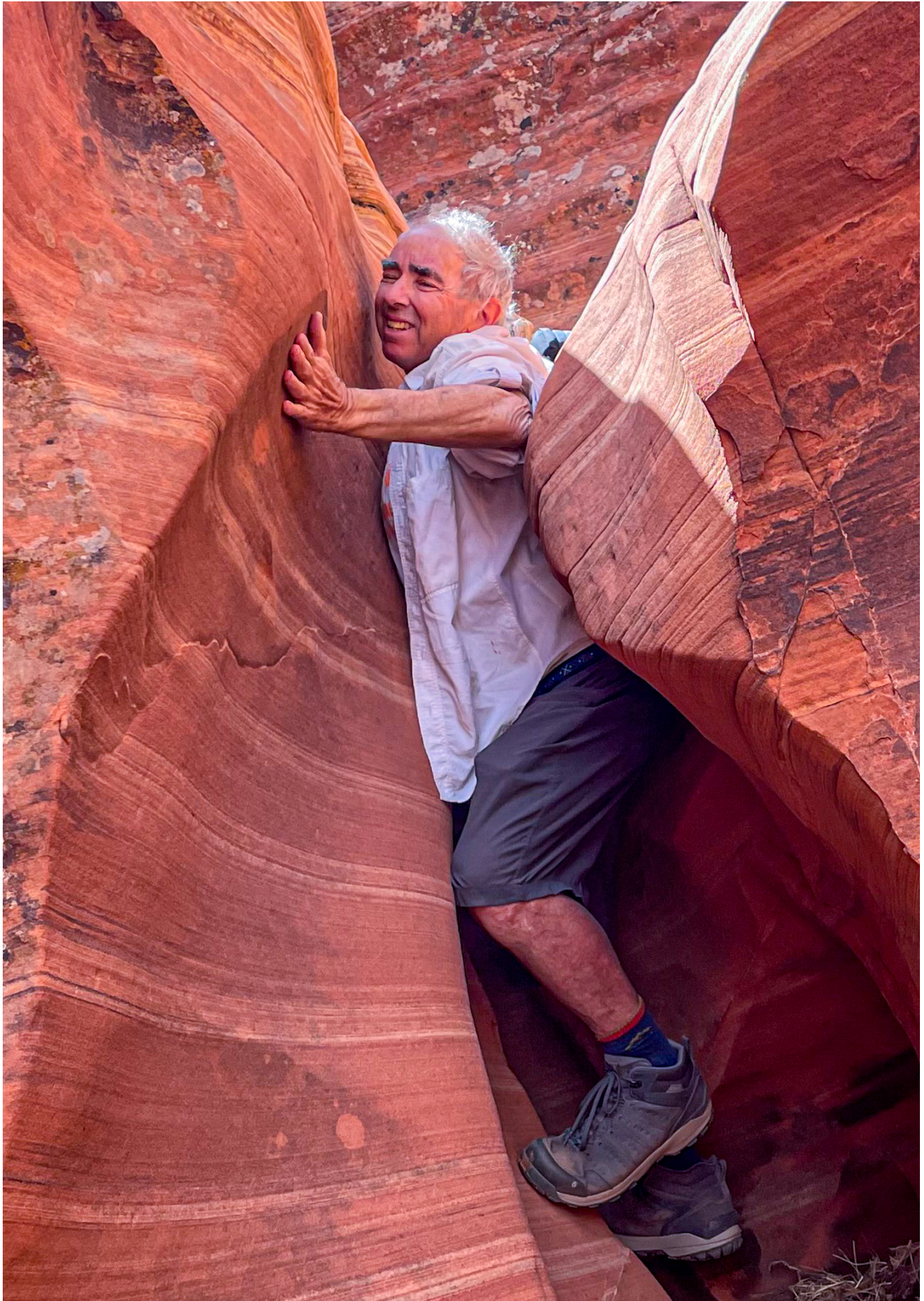
Stan Wagon <<http://stanwagon.com>> is an enthusiastic flower hunter and photographer in Summit County's forests and mountains. He is founding editor of *Ultrarunning* magazine and has been in *Ripley's Believe It or Not* for his square-wheel bicycle, an idea that recently led to the construction of a prize-winning new bridge in London. Stan lives above Silverthorne and has over a hundred flower pictures and descriptions at his web page <<http://stanwagon.com/wagon/wildflowers/wildflowers.html>>.

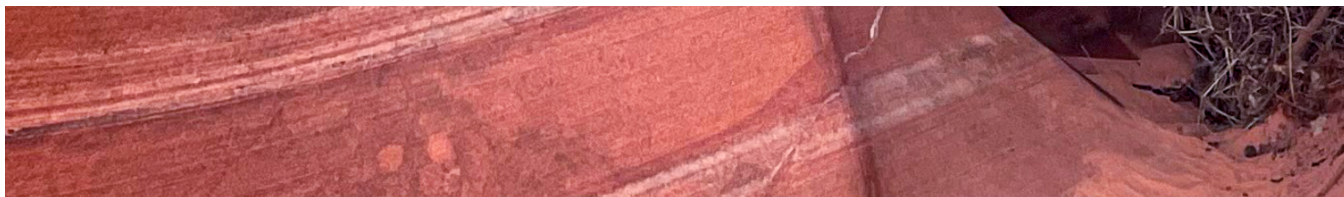
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or







**Karn: I use lower case letters for the flower names. Ok? Caps for the first letter in the species. AND italics for species. OK?**

**i have only 3 pics here. OK? Of course, I would really like to include a dozen.**



These clustered lady slippers were found just below 11000 feet in the Eagles Nest Wilderness.

ClusteredLadySlippers10900 is the file name



Fairy slippers, also known as calypso orchids are strikingly beautiful.



Early coralroot can be found near streams, but is somewhat rare.