

NATURE'S

passport

"How cunningly nature hides every wrinkle of her inconceivable antiquity under roses and violets and morning dew!"
-Ralph Waldo Emerson



A lone River Beauty grows along the sandy shores of a remote river delta in Newfoundland's interior. Opposite: Lady's Slipper, the province's largest and showiest orchid, found growing on fens underlain with limestone bedrock.



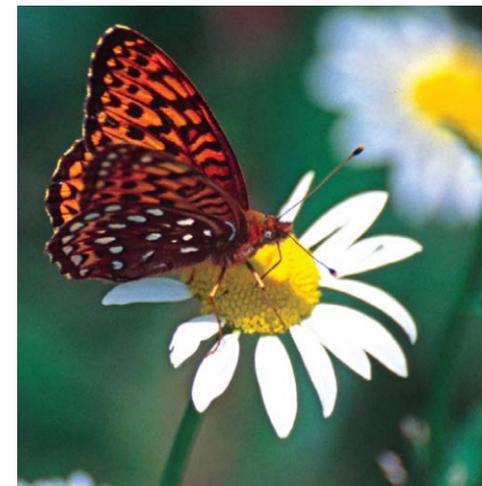
Photography and text by David Tilley

The wildflower is one of nature's greatest wonders: a creation of exquisite form, colour and sometimes scent. From spring till fall, nooks, crannies, barrens and fields across rural Newfoundland are dappled with festive colour; fragrant scents carry on the breeze. Walks through sweeping landscapes grand in scale and design lead to intimate encounters with these most delicate species, whose genius is their ability to persist, returning every season, attuned to elements that both favour and challenge them. Masters of their domain, they seem to celebrate the victory of survival with a beauty that calls out for recognition.

Their beauty is an evolutionary adaptation, ensuring reproductive success by luring pollinators. Flying insects are usually the unwitting couriers of genetic material from plant to plant, but birds, bats and even small mammals are known to share the task. This symbiotic partnership is a model for sustainable development, wherein the short-term gain of both parties perpetuates the relationship. Failing this, many wildflowers have the means to self-pollinate, a do-it-yourself alternative especially important in regions and seasons where insects are few.

Freshwater marshes, although rare on the island of Newfoundland, offer an alternative habitat for a diverse collection of plants and animals. The muted green and blue maze of floating lily pads and tall grass stalks are lit by an occasional flash of the decorative Fragrant Water Lily or brightly coloured Yellow Pond Lily, whose globular flower rivals the gleaming domes of medieval Russian architecture. Edging the stream banks and wetland sloughs are wide bands of Joe Pye Weed, loved by butterflies. Small melt-water ponds become meadows in summer, offering fertile ground; their stalks, growing to miniature forests, are broken by the passage of wandering moose, creating corridors.

Growing profusely in open meadows, the common dandelion, a veritable medicine cabinet, is prominent in history and geography. All of the nutrient-rich herb is edible; the bitter leaves are a spring tonic and in times past, the plant was used as a cure for scurvy. By mid summer early blooms have gone to seed—transformed to cottony balls with slender needles blown and scattered by the wind. Fallow farm fields are often blanketed with dandelions, or “Piss-a-beds,” as they are sometimes called, a term that may refer to their diuretic properties. In the abandoned meadows of resettled outposts they flourish against a backdrop



Clockwise, from top left: The Pitcher Plant, found in nutrient-poor bogs, traps insects as an alternative food source—it's a proud provincial emblem, an apt symbol of adaptability and ingenuity; showy blooms of Marsh Marigolds, resembling giant Buttercups; the cheerful pink blossoms of Sheep Laurel belie the plant's deadly toxin, which can poison sheep when ingested in sufficient quantities and inhibits the growth of black spruce trees; Ox-eye Daisies, known locally as Bachelor Buttons and common in meadows and pastures, are a favourite of butterflies like the *Atlantis Fritillary*. Opposite page: The Blue Flag Iris grows in wet peatland trenches that wind through the Avalon Barrens.

of leaning fences and crumbling homesteads—a memorial to past lives uprooted and resettled now fading into history, nature's expropriation for unfinished labours.

On open bogs, their tiny umbrella heads bobbing in the wind, Pitcher Plants have earned the status of provincial emblem. A rare plant carnivore, they circumvent the food chain to acquire nitrogen from insects, trapping them in pitchers (tubular shaped leaves) where rainwater collects. A waxy surface and downward pointing bristles spell the end of the line for unwitting bugs indulging in a last meal of nectar before a ritual drowning, and decomposition aided by bacteria.

Kalmia barrens, once boreal forests razed repeatedly by wildfire, are dominated by dwarf shrubs known colloquially and collectively as “goowiddy.” Labrador Tea, Rhodora and Sheep Laurel contribute to a blend of white, pink and purple blossoms in June. The latter, a toxic invader, spreads quietly through parkland forest edges, accenting the spruce and bog.



Yellow Pond Lilies grow in the deep mud of fresh water marshes. Their leaves and showy, fragrant flowers provide a habitat for fish, amphibians and aquatic insects. Opposite page: Portrait of a Blue Flag Iris, also known as Fleur-de-Lis.



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The island is noted for its rare Arctic alpine plants that prefer the climate extremes found in coastal barrens. Ecological reserves provide an opportunity for education and research in areas of relative accessibility. Three of these are located on the limestone barrens of the Northern Peninsula bordering the Strait of Belle Isle. High winds, low temperatures and dryness provide an ecological niche for plants at the southern extent of their range.

The endangered Barrens Willow and threatened Fernald’s Braya are endemic to the region. The ocean also plays a hand in recreating subarctic conditions in the Hawk Hill reserve on the Avalon Peninsula, an elevated barren cooled in summer by fog.

Wildflowers in bloom are an invitation to explore the complexities of creation, to set your clock to the cycles of the seasons. In the timeless words of Rachel Carson, “Those who dwell among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life.” 🐾

David Tilley studied environmental technology at Westviking College (now College of the North Atlantic) in Corner Brook, NL. He has travelled Newfoundland extensively in search of images for nature and travel magazines; he recently contributed photos to the book *Caribou and the North*, caribou conservation being near and dear to him. Find him on the web at wildnewfoundland.com.