

# Nature Notes

## At the Edge of the Snow



A treat to the eye is often the reward to a May jaunt in the Kimberley Nature Park, coming in the form of a massing of bright yellow colour. The cheery yellow glacier lily (*Erythronium grandiflorum*) can be found shortly after snow has left the ground, often at the very edge of the receding lump of frozen water. The glacier lily can be found in a variety of habitats including sub-alpine meadows and streambanks, but in the Nature Park look for the glacier lily in rich, moist, shady sites such as the Duck Pond Trail, the Upper Army Road and the Pat Morrow Trail. Some people know this plant as the yellow avalanche lily, the fawn lily or the dog-tooth violet, but by whatever name, this bright spot of sunshine is a welcome sight.



*Photo courtesy of Alan Ansell*

The nodding yellow head stands on a single 10-40cm stalk with two lance-shaped leaves emerging from the base. The six petals of the flowers bend backwards while the six stamens project down towards the ground, giving the glacier lily its characteristic look.

The bulbs of the glacier lily have long held an important place in the diet of some First Nations people who harvested the bulbs from June to August. They also were important trade items between tribes. The carbohydrates in the raw bulbs are indigestible but prolonged steaming renders the carbohydrates into an edible fructose. Care needs to be taken, though, as too many bulbs have been known to cause vomiting.

Drying also helps the process of converting the carbohydrate into fructose, a fact which is not lost on both black and grizzly bears that have been known dig up the bulbs and return to eat them after leaving them exposed to the air. Many a hiker has come across a dazzling sub-alpine meadow of glacier lilies only to realize that the torn up ground has been visited by bear looking for a meal. This beautiful plant is attractive to other wildlife, too. Rodents enjoy the roots while deer, elk and sheep indulge in the seedpods.

The glacier lily has historically enjoyed an important place in the human diet but harvesting the bulb kills the plant and some lily populations have been depleted through over-harvesting. It's best to leave the bulbs of this beauty in the ground so they can continue to delight us with their lovely spring show and continue to feed the wildlife who depend on them.

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