



'The experience of being surrounded by so many wildflowers makes you smile'

Mazama Ridge, Mount Rainier, Washington
Heavy snow gives life to one of the floweriest places on earth. Seen here are yellow lousewort, magenta paintbrushes, western anemone seedheads and Bentham's lupins

JUST WILD

Botanist Bob Gibbons has spent a lifetime searching out and photographing the most incredible flower meadows on the planet.

Are we just a tiny bit jealous?

Words **Tiffany Daneff** Photographs **Bob Gibbons**



Above: Ecrins National Park, eastern France

More than 1,800 species grow high in these granite mountains that form part of the alps. Wood cranesbill and bistort colour the Upper Narreyroux Valley

Below: the Italian Dolomites

Bob Gibbons standing waist-deep in a mix of wild clary and yellow rattle in a meadow in the mountains

Opposite: South Uist in the Outer Hebrides

Cultivated for centuries by local crofters, when left fallow the peaty soil of the machair throws up a carpet of red and white clover, ladies bedstraw and tufted vetch



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ild lupins carpet the ground, hummingbirds feast on the yellow louseworts, there are bottlebrush bistorts, bright magenta paintbrushes, and rising from this natural kaleidoscope of petals the distinctive seedheads of the western anemone. Surely the ridge on the previous page has to be one of the most wonderful sights in the world?

Until relatively recently only dedicated locals and keen botanists would have known where to find the annual explosion of colour that transforms Mazama Ridge on the slopes of Mount Rainier on the American West Coast. Now, though, we ordinary punters have only to turn the pages of a book to find many examples of similarly jaw-dropping displays of flowers growing across the world, from The Burren in Ireland to the Kwongan heaths of Western Australia.

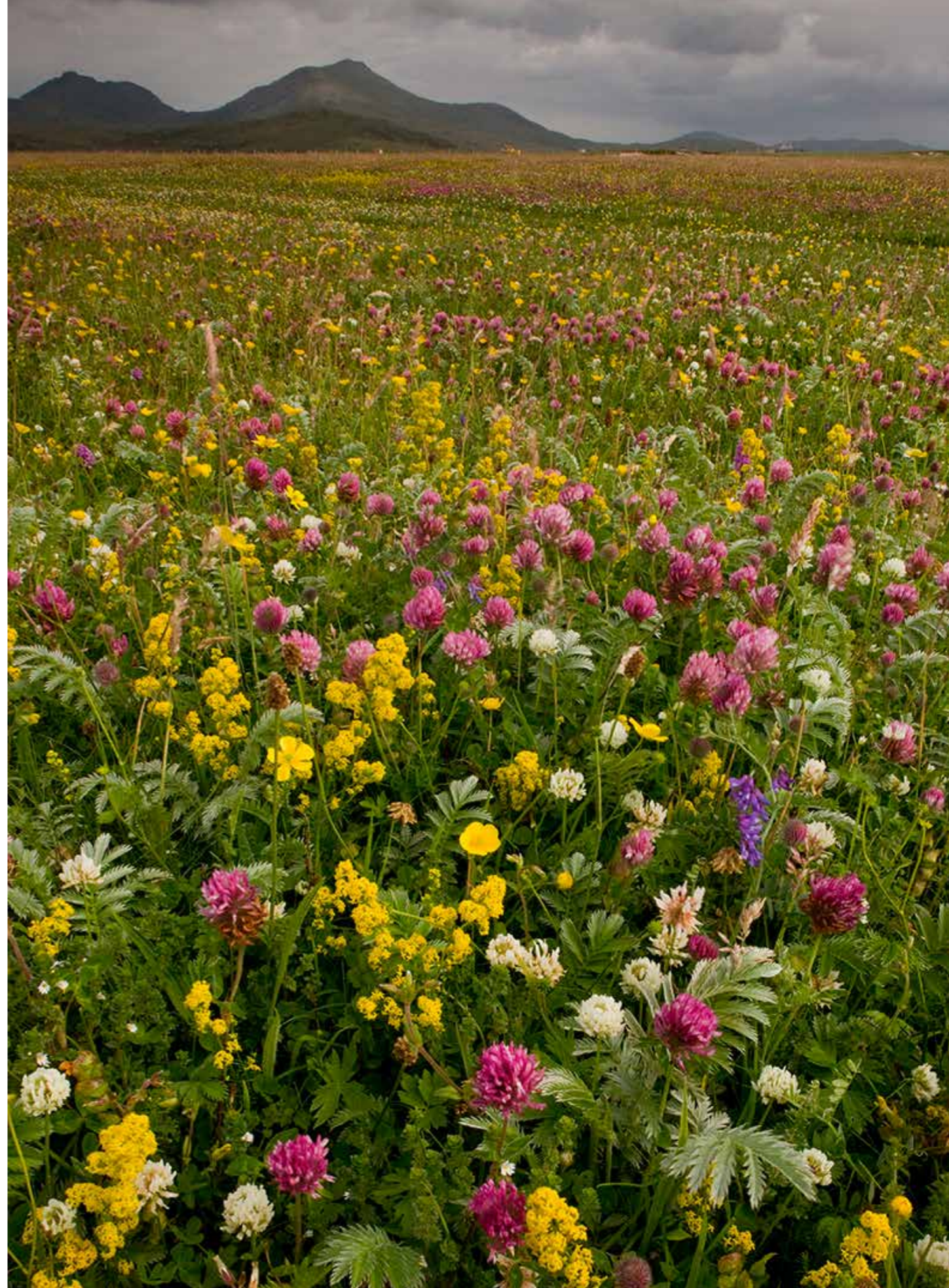
Wildflower Wonders: The 50 Best Wildflower Sites in the World, by botanist and photographer Bob Gibbons, is the result of a lifetime searching out these flowery miracles.

‘It makes you smile,’ he says, of the experience of being surrounded by so many wildflowers, which no doubt explains why he has devoted so much time and energy to seeking them. And wildflower meadows can be found the world over, from the Tien Shan Mountains of Kazakhstan (look out for elegant purplish spikes of *Primula secundiflora*) to the Zhongdian Plateau in China (glorious foxtail lilies and 25 different species of tulip). You don’t even have to travel halfway around the world; France and Greece are both top of Gibbons’ list of favourite flower haunts.

Bob, now 65, grew up in Somerset and used to go birdwatching on the edge of Exmoor, but it wasn’t until a schoolfriend began studying ecology that he realised that this was the route for him. ‘It seemed much more fun than sitting in French lessons, so I switched to biology and did botany and zoology at A Level.’

His first expedition took him to the Middle East. After studying Plant Sciences at Wye College in Kent at the end of the Seventies, Gibbons led an expedition to Afghanistan, which was financed by collecting specimens for Kew and the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University.

‘We set off in a Land Rover packed with food, which we gradually replaced with ▶





Above: Temblor Mountains, southwest California

Hillside daisies turn whole mountainsides to gold from late March to early May before the slopes dry out

Below: Tehachapi Range, southwest California

Swathes of blue Bentham's lupins, in an area close to the San Andreas Fault

Opposite: the Mani Peninsula, southern Greece

Red peacock anemones, wild purple stock, magenta Calabrian soapwort and other spring flowers thrive on the rocky slopes



◁ specimens and drove across Turkey and Iran and all around Afghanistan. It was fabulous. We saw vast areas of wild tulips and Juno irises.'

Returning to Britain, Bob completed his doctorate in ecology before working in nature conservancy for many years. He married, had a family and, when time allowed, would head out into the wilds, often leading expeditions for friends to places such as Nepal and other Himalayan kingdoms. People would ask for pictures, which got him into photography; his typical expedition rucksack now weighs in at around 40lb of tripod, two or three cameras and four to five lenses.

Today, Bob lives in Dorset but spends much of the year travelling. On the menu for 2015 are Crete, Lesbos, the Sierra de Grazalema in Andalucia, Monti Sibillini in the Appenines, and the Vercors Massif in the French Prealps.

Even when he has flown halfway across the world there is likely to be a good drive from the nearest accommodation followed by a walk, sometimes for the better part of a day, to get to the best site. Not that Bob minds; that is what he is there for. Even with his experience, however, nothing is guaranteed. 'No places are the same two years in a row,' he warns.

Despite a lifetime of botanising, it was just ten years ago that he first set eyes on the flowers of Mount Rainier in Washington state. That first visit was planned for the end of July when the flowers were due. But he arrived to learn that the mountain had endured the snowiest winter for some years. After a long journey through the lower slopes of the Cascade Mountains, of which Rainier is the jewel rising to 4,392m (14,409ft), he finally reached the higher slopes only to discover that even the lodge was buried under 12ft of snow. He had to turn back. Later he learned that there had been no flowers that year. ◆

Find out more in Bob's book Wildflower Wonders: The 50 Best Wildflower Sites in the World (Bloomsbury, £19.99). The Bloomsbury Pocket Guide to Trees & Shrubs by Bob Gibbons, £9.99, has also just been published



Fancy a wildflower walk?

Find our pick of the best in the UK plus details of an exclusive Saga offer at saga.co.uk/aprilmag

