# Snow Melt on Hull Mountain Part 2; Released from refrigeration, spring flowers return.

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Note: Suggest reading Part 1 first.

I often comment on how quickly spring wildflowers come and go here in the North Bay counties of California, but the low elevation progress of springtime is an eternity compared with the mountains. Up there, plants may stay dormant under deep snowdrifts for many months and then suddenly one day they are out in full sun on an 80 degree (F) day! This requires a quick response if the plants are going to complete their cycle of growth, flower and seed, especially if they are plants that require moisture and cool temperatures, as these mountains are hot and dry once the snow is gone.

Toothwort, *Cardamine* species, sending up a flowering scape within a week after its deep snow cover has disappeared, even before the foliage appears. Even though I thought I had focused a lot of attention in trying to figure out the names on our local toothwort species this one also leaves me uncertain.

Probably a type of *Cardamine pachystigma* which is known from N of here at Plaskett Meadows. However these plant have pure white flowers while *C .pachystigma* usually has pink or purple flowers.

The attractive toothwort (or milkmaids) foliage is thick, almost succulent, and is almost silvery on the upper surface while deep purple beneath. Here it has emerged through a still flattened clump of *Eriogonum compositum*, a large-leafed perennial "buckwheat" with huge creamy white flower heads (later of course). Against the rock is *Cheilanthes gracillima*, a lovely evergreen fern that will curl up when dry in the summer.

On the rocks!  Here the *Cardamine* forms a loose colony amongst the fractured rock pieces. These plants have relatively small flowers that open white and fade white.  Underneath this loose rock are stems, usually about 5 - 6" that connect to tubular strings of tubers.  Over time due to shifting rock, slides, fragmenting root pieces and so forth, sizable clonal colonies develop.

A gem of these high ridges is Purdy's fritllary, *Fritllaria purdyi*.  Similar in overall size to the talus fritillary in Part 1, these have greener leaves (but a dull grayish green), and the leaves are arranged in a cluster at the base and diminish quickly up the stems.

*Fritillaria purdyi* is well-known to native plant enthusiasts of the North Bay, and is often a "destination plant" for early spring field trips.  Especially for those who scour the serpentine barrens of Napa, Lake and Colusa Cos., this plant is always a joy to come across in flower. While the majority of its sites at low elevation are on serpentine, especially in vernally wet swales and barrens, it also has an alternative habitat on the volcanics of The Palisades - in sight of my window as I type this (The Palisades, not the fritillary).  What it seems to want is relatively sterile soils that are wet in winter/spring, but go bone dry later.

A sweet plant however one looks at it, but fascinating in close up detail. The tepals (petals and sepals that look alike, 3 each) are sort of thick and succulent, something like the base of a lettuce leaf. Overall they are translucent, but with variable bronze marking zones, streak and spots. Hints of green and gold also show through.

At low elevation, Purdy's fritillary flowers in March or early April, although as you move up in elevation it can sometimes be found in May. On the high ridges of Hull Mt., especially Windy Gap, it is likewise early, but needs to wait until the snow melts. But it doesn't wait long once the snow is gone.

Initially on opening they face down or outward, turning upward with age.

In distribution this bulb is usually relatively rare - maybe a dozen or two here and there, at most a hundred in one area.  Even on Windy Gap just N of Hull Mt., it needs to be looked for, although I saw at least several hundred plants - most not yet in flower.  Further to the N however there are gravelly ridges with many hundreds, probably thousands of bulbs in relatively small areas (acre or so).  Thus while the number of people who see them in the mountains is limited, the plants themselves are likely to be far more numerous up high than all the lower elevation sites combined.

Typically a plant of few flowers, most often 1-3, but rarely plants with as many as 8 may be found.

Looking down on the glossy backsides, here with a sizable bronze zone.

Clustering foliage at the bottom and flowers at the top.

Although nearly anyone who sees this plant would love to add it to their gardens, it is yet another native that just seems to be impossible to cultivate for any period of time.  While at UC Botanical Garden at Berkeley, we tried to grow populations from many elevations and locales, all without any success beyond a year or two.

And just one more picture before moving on...

As much of an uncertainty now as when I first saw it thirty years ago is another lovely *Claytonia* found on Hull Mt. In Part 1 I discussed the lovely annual *Claytonia saxosa,* however this is a perennial species which forms a small round tuber about 3-4" deep. This *Claytonia* is probably *C. lanceolata*, the Western spring beauty, although there is not much lanceolate (lance-shaped) about it to my eyes. Nor does it look anything like the illustration in the Jepson Manual (p.901). However the description does say that it is variable, and I guess we have to go with that explanation. On Hull and Windy Gap it is widespread in some areas just after snow melt, but disappears quickly as the heat sets in.

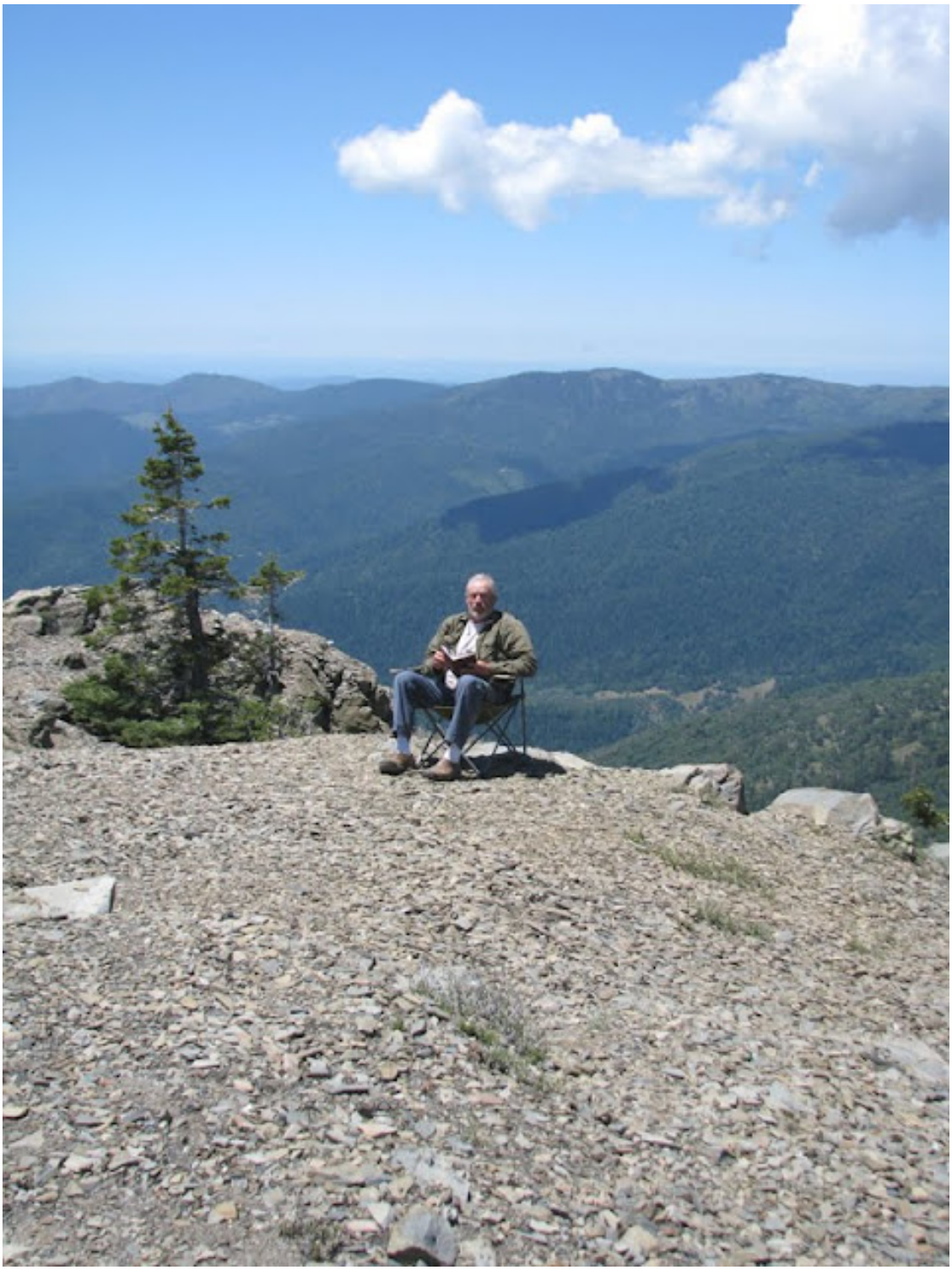
Moving from one uncertainty to the next, a real treat to come across are the dwarf mountain larkspurs in the genus *Delphinium*

This vivid purple-blue mini-larkspur takes a little longer to come up and flower, probably about 2 weeks or so after the snow disappears.  It is one of two possible species, but I didn't key it out when I was there; thus I can't say for sure.  It could be either *Delphinium decorum* ssp. *tracyi,* Tracy's larkspur, or *D. antoninum,* Anthony Peak larkspur, but it takes root characteristics to really separate the two.

The color seems especially vibrant against the gray rock talus.

The foliage is lovely too being nearly orbicular (round) but with deep divisions.  The foliage tips the scales for me in terms of which species this might be, being more reminiscent of the Anthony Peak larkspur, but it is only one character.

Close up of larkspur flower, the lower flower already passing.



Author employing old-fashioned collection notebook on scenic bluff.

A plant I must mention, even though it is not native to California, is a lovely mat forming member of the mustard family, *Aubrieta deltoides*. What is special about this plant - and as far as I can tell it is only one plant - is that I first saw this on my first trip to Hull in 1981. It is located at the base of the stairway up to the Hull Mt. lookout tower - although there are only piers left now where he fire lookout once stood. I remember puzzling over its identity 30 years ago when a ranger came out of the lookout and she laughed and told me I would never figure it out because it was not native. Apparently some early ranger - possibly trying to improve on nature - had thought it might grow there and "pretty up the place." For better or worse, that person had a good horticultural sense as this plant has persisted for most likely close to a half century enduring intense wind, wind cold and summer heat and drought, to flower beautifully every spring.

What I found particularly interesting is that the plant is exactly the same size and the same stage of flowering as when I first saw it.  Imagine running into an acquaintance you haven't seen in 30 years who hasn't aged.  It is both comforting and disconcerting.  30 years erased in a flash of remembrance, the perfect end to a long day on Hull's mountain.

Last but not least, and the only plant I'll mention not from the summit ridges, is this lovely race of bowl tube iris, *Iris macrosiphon*. Down around 5,000' elevation in the pine/fir woodlands, is this quite yellow form of this widespread and variable species - probably the yellowest it gets anywhere in its distribution. Creamy forms are not uncommon, but seldom do they possess this strong a coloration. In our area of the North Bay, blue, blue/purple or deep purple are the most common color forms.

The variation and splendor of the California flora is always amazing, even after a lifetime of experiencing it!