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Short Trips: Lonesome Yakima River Canyon cliffs bloom with this tough flower

By [GORDY HOLT](#)
P-I REPORTER

YAKIMA RIVER CANYON -- Most of those who stalk things here come to chase elk, deer, bighorn sheep and big-time fish.

We were after *Erigeron basalticus*.

That's the Latin name of a threatened life-form that has neither fins nor fur, doesn't require that you bring hooks or wear a funny hat, but will yield to binoculars if you have a pair.

Described on the Nature Conservancy's Web site as the "lavender basalt daisy," and by others simply as the "basalt daisy," *Erigeron basalticus* is itty-bitty and nearly as rare as rare can get, by any name.

While it is listed by the state as threatened, and is in the National Collection of Endangered Plants as kept by the St. Louis-based Center for Plant Conservation, it is not threatened enough to find its way onto any federal list.



[zoom](#) Gilbert W. Arias / P-I

A basalt daisy grows from a crack in the cliff basalt wall in the Selah Cliffs Natural Area Preserve. The cliffs above Selah Creek and the Yakima River are the only places where *E. basalticus* has been found.

Yet, it has come to enjoy the protection of a special preserve near the mouth of the Selah Creek Canyon just outside Yakima, and it has been tracked into Yakima River Canyon itself for about 10 miles.

Indeed, the cliffs above Selah Creek and the Yakima River are the only places where *E. basalticus* has been found -- and nowhere else in the world.

But don't expect to trip over one if you go looking. These things sink their roots only into the high, lonesome cracks of volcanic rock that



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help to frame this matchless river gorge and its Selah tributary.

The P-I went looking anyway ... twice.

Should you choose to try, do so soon because its little flower shows up only through June.

Bring a pair of stout boots, a carload of keen eyes, water, a lunch bucket and some common sense about safety.

The photos in this section by P-I photographer Gilbert Arias should be helpful -- and so would a Hubble-size spotting scope.

Our search began wrongly in a ravine cut by Umtanum Creek, a Yakima River tributary near a Nature Conservancy preserve about halfway into the canyon

We started there mostly because the Nature Conservancy's Yakima River Canyon Web site is where we first saw a photo of the little plant.

We also began there because that's where a long suspension footbridge leads fishers and hikers to Umtanum Creek's mouth across the river.

But we were not alone.

Three Freightliner minibuses and a large Chevy van had just delivered 44 budding botanists from The Evergreen State College in Olympia. With them were their instructors, Frederica Bowcutt and Matt Smith, who sent their troop across the bridge to poke about and take notes, to consult with one another, and to eat lunch.

We followed to eavesdrop.

"This is balsamroot."

"That's phlox."

"Here's lupine."

"That's a Douglas maple ... maybe ... I think."

"This is native cherry."

"Yes. Bitter cherry."

There also were the tooth marks and woodchips left by a working beaver, several breached beaver dams and one that wasn't breached and had fish in the pond behind it.

"Look! Fish!"



 zoom

Gilbert W. Arias / P-I

Katie and Joel Davis review their notes over lunch along the Umtanum Creek Trail. The husband and wife are students at The Evergreen State College and were on a field trip.

Farther still came an explosion of white identified as apple trees gone wild, in what clearly was an old homestead gone wild.

While Arias kept one eye in his viewfinder, his other scanned the outcroppings of rough lava above where, on an earlier family hike, he had spotted the shaggy flanks of bighorn sheep.

There were none this time, and no *E. basalticus*, either. So back down the trail and across the river we went, returning to the Yakima River Canyon Scenic Byway, its 45 mph speed limit and its latest safety wrinkle -- a yellow-striped zipper cut into the asphalt. Cross it and your tires let you know -- ZZZZZZZT!

Again we pointed south, aiming for the canyon's far end at Selah Creek, where the state Department of Natural Resources has established its daisy haven.

The little-known Selah Cliffs Natural Area Preserve is unmarked as yet, but about to go public, thanks to \$115 million in state grants for property acquisition and development. There is no sign, so we used dead reckoning and some very common sense.



 zoom

Gilbert W. Arias / P-I

Andrew Puls, a graduate biology student from Central Washington University, spots bighorn sheep and deer through his telescope.

Isn't this Selah Creek?

Aren't those cliffs?

Pull over.

We were at a point where the canyon river road drops out of its highest track, and saw an unmarked parking area opposite a drug rehab center known as Sundown M Ranch.

Beyond was a freshly graveled driveway -- along fencing that appeared to be newly built -- that led to another small parking area where a narrow gate offered entry onto more fresh rock on a trail that led to the cliffs, then turned east to skirt their flank.

Incredibly, for a place so little known, the trail quickly revealed a trio of unweathered concrete benches and two concrete picnic tables anchored in more concrete and a continuation of the freshly packed trail.


Was the P-I making first tracks?

"You probably were," said Jeanne Williams, an official at the Department of Natural Resource's southeast regional office in Ellensburg.

"That gravel just went in."

Williams was on a field trip of her own to the Columbia River when she spoke by cell phone several days after our first trip. "The site isn't open yet, at least officially," she said. "But we hope to get our interpretive signs up by the end of June, and then we'll have some kind of grand opening."



 Gilbert W. Arias / P-I
Lomatiums in the Yakima River Canyon.

Situated about a dozen miles north of Yakima, this 107-acre site was identified in the 1980s as something special, and with grants from the Legislature totaling \$115 million so far, was gradually acquired, piece by piece.

Selah Creek is less a creek than a dry desert wash. Sundown M Ranch lays over part of its prehistoric delta, which also is crossed by the highway as it darts up through a break in the cliffs to reach orchard lands above.


Crossing high over the old creek's bed to the east, and within sight of the cliffs, is the Interstate 82 freeway and its engineering marvel, the Fred G. Redmon Memorial Bridge. When completed in 1971, its twin concrete arches were the longest in North America, and they are something to see from below.

But we didn't come to assess the art of civil engineering. And there it was, visible through Gilbert's big lens -- little clumps of our target, holding fast to cracks in the cliff.

Erigeron basalticus.

We found them blooming on only our second trip, but blooming they were late last week and should continue well into June.



 Gilbert W. Arias / P-I
Serrate balsamroot also is called toothed balsamroot.

To describe them as cute is not to imply that they also are dainty, for they have to be hardy to cling to what they cling to -- cracks exposed to the canyon's weather, and crevices way back under big overhangs.

Just why they took root here and nowhere else, scientists can't say. What they do say is that the cracks they grow from are rock that arrived in that series of hot-lava floods that inundated this region 15 million to 20 million years ago.

That *E. basalticus* likes it is clear. When you finally learn to spot them, they are here, they are there, they are almost everywhere.

But will they survive public attention?

Williams said visitors will be asked to bring that Hubble telescope and to stay on the trail. For those who don't, there will be rattlesnakes to enforce the rule.

If you go

Getting there: From Seattle, take Interstate 90 east about 100 miles to Ellensburg, Exit 109 at the "south interchange." At the stop sign below, turn left onto scenic state Route 821, the Yakima River Canyon Scenic Byway. goto.seattlepi.com/r743



Seattle P-I

On the Web:

- Center for Plant Conservation -- goto.seattlepi.com/r702
- Department of Natural Resources -- goto.seattlepi.com/r731
- The Nature Conservancy's Yakima River Canyon Preserve -- goto.seattlepi.com/r736
- The University of Washington's Burke Museum -- goto.seattlepi.com/r741
- Selah Cliffs -- goto.seattlepi.com/r738

Take the scenic route

About 150 miles of roadway lie between Seattle and the Selah Cliffs of Yakima County. Most of it fits into Interstate 90 or breaks onto Interstate 82 southbound from Ellensburg. But there are two other, more scenic and leisurely ways to go.

The Yakima River Canyon Scenic Byway -- The southbound alternative to I-82, and once the shortest all-weather way between Yakima and Ellensburg, seems to get all the ink these days. Floaters and fishers adore it. Tourists like it, too.

But just as picturesque, in its own, underappreciated way, is "old U.S. 10," which follows the upper Yakima River between Cle Elum and Ellensburg and now carries the "state route" label "SR 10."

Like I-82's canyon alternative, Route 10 is slower and less hectic. Everyone isn't bumper-to-bumper in the fast lane.

Once through the upper canyon and on your way -- westbound into Cle Elum -- Mount Stuart and the Stuart Range, snowy through much of the summer, hang just above the east horizon's near side, and you never know what wildlife will show.

On this trip, as his passenger gazed at Stuart, P-I photographer Gilbert Arias yelled, "look, wild turkeys" and hit the brakes.

Turns out he was only half right.









They were turkey vultures, about 50 yards off in an open field, black and brown of feather, and bald and red of neck and face, as if suffering an awful, infected case of acne.

They were two, then three, then two again, picking on something brown and furry, yanking, dragging and picking again. You could see thin, meatless ribs and, finally, a tan bushy tail.

A coyote had bit the dust -- or been dusted by a car -- and got no further.

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