

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



May 18, 2016

*Then the violets peeking through,
As if to say "how do you do."*

From the poem Iowa's Prairie Flowers by Matie L. Turner Baily

Have you heard the violets ask, "How do you do?" Whether in the woods, in the park, or on our farmstead, recently the shy violets have been nodding their heads at me as they bloom their hearts out. Perhaps it's time for a closer look at this often over-looked and trodden-upon wildflower.

Violets belong to the violet family *Violaceae* whose largest genus *Viola* includes over 600 species nodding and blooming around the world. Violets may be perennials, annuals, or even small shrubs. Found throughout Iowa, violets thrive in a wide variety of habitats ranging from wet to dry, woodland to prairie. Did you know the common blue violet is the state flower of four states – Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Illinois, and New Jersey?

Violets have a longish bloom period, April through June, and may bloom all summer if conditions are right. And while you might identify violets by their heart-shaped, scalloped leaves, it is their showy flowers that many of us recognize. Ranging from shades of violet, blue, yellow, white, and cream, each flower has five petals, an upper pair, two side petals, and a lower petal. It is this longer and larger lower petal that serves as a landing pad for pollinating insects. Often this petal features prominently colored veining that helps guide pollinators to the violet's nectar & pollen, much like airport runway lights help guide pilots to a safe landing. Pollination initiates the formation of fruit capsules which upon drying may eject seeds distances of several meters.

Violets are important food plants for the larvae of several butterflies and moths, including the Regal Fritillary, which has been proposed as Iowa's State Butterfly. Unlike many insects, fritillaries have only a single generation of offspring per year. Each fall the female lays 1,000 – 2,000 eggs in the tall grass prairie. Even though many violet plants have died back, their chemical trace remains. The small larvae overwinter in the grass litter before emerging in the spring and crawling upon violets where they eat their way through six instar stages before molting, pupating, and emerging as adults in early summer. After mating, females go into summer dormancy until fall, and the Regal Fritillary life cycle begins anew.

In ancient times, Roman naturalist Pliny advised wearing a garland of violets as a cure for hangover headaches. American Indians considered violets to be "blood purifiers" and used the dried plants to treat skin diseases and dysentery. Violet leaves are still used as greens and pot herbs, and scientists are researching the various antioxidants found in violet plant tissue. Some violets contain the chemical compound ionone, which temporarily desensitizes the nasal receptors of humans, so their fragrance comes and goes.

Violets – just one of the many small miracles in nature that come and go each spring.

