

Summer EcoQuest: Colorado Blue Columbine

Colorado blue columbine (*Aquilegia coerulea*) is one of the state's most beloved wildflowers. Blooming from late spring into summer, this perennial grows in moist meadows, open forests, streambanks and rocky slopes from the foothills to the subalpine zone. Their striking flowers attract a variety of pollinators, from hummingbirds to bumblebees and hawkmoths.

In 1891, schoolchildren across Colorado voted the columbine their favorite flower, and in 1899, the General Assembly officially adopted the white-and-lavender form as the state flower. This year, Colorado is entering 150 years of statehood. To celebrate, Colorado naturalists are encouraging observers to document this iconic species on iNaturalist with the goal of making Colorado blue columbine the most-observed species in the state. Currently, the most observed species is common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*), an introduced Eurasian plant. To make blue columbine the most observed species, about 1,200 Research-Grade observations are needed.

Colorado blue columbine is easy to recognize by its elegant, nodding flowers with five long backward-pointing spurs. The flowers typically have white inner petals surrounded by blue to lavender sepals, with bright yellow stamens in the center. Although flower color can vary, the long spurs are distinctive. The colors are thought to reflect meaningful colors in the state: blue reflecting the clear Colorado sky, white the mountains' snowcapped peaks and gold representing the mining history.

Several other columbines occur in Colorado, but they can be distinguished by their habitat, flower size and color. The western red columbine (*Aquilegia elegantula*) has smaller flowers with red sepals and yellow petals, while golden columbine (*A. chrysantha*) has entirely yellow flowers. Rocky Mountain blue columbine (*A. saximonta*) is typically found at higher elevations in rocky crevices and alpine scree slopes.

If you encounter a wild columbine this summer, share your photos on [iNaturalist](#). With enough observations, we can make Colorado's state flower the top observation to celebrate our state's 150-year anniversary.



Blue Columbine (*Aquilegia coerulea*), [codylimber](#), some rights reserved, CC BY-NC.

What is an EcoQuest?

EcoQuests, part of the Denver EcoFlora project, challenge citizens to become citizen scientists and observe, study and conserve the native plants of the City via iNaturalist, an easy-to-use mobile app.

How Do I Get Started?

1. Download the iNaturalist app or register online at [iNaturalist.org](#).
2. Take photos of the plants in bloom that you find on your daily neighborhood walk. It is ok if they are weeds! But avoid taking photos of cultivated plants in gardens or in your home.
3. If you are concerned about revealing the location of sensitive organisms or observations at your own house, you can hide the exact location from the public by changing the "geoprivacy" of the observation to "obscured."

4. Post your findings on iNaturalist via the app.
5. Your observations will automatically be added to the [Denver EcoFlora Project](#).
6. You can add an identification to your photo when you post your findings on iNaturalist, or leave it blank for others to identify.

What is the Goal?

The EcoFlora project is designed to meaningfully connect citizens with biodiversity, and to assemble novel observations and data on the metro area's flora to better inform policy decisions and conservation strategies.



Photo by Scott Dressel-Martin