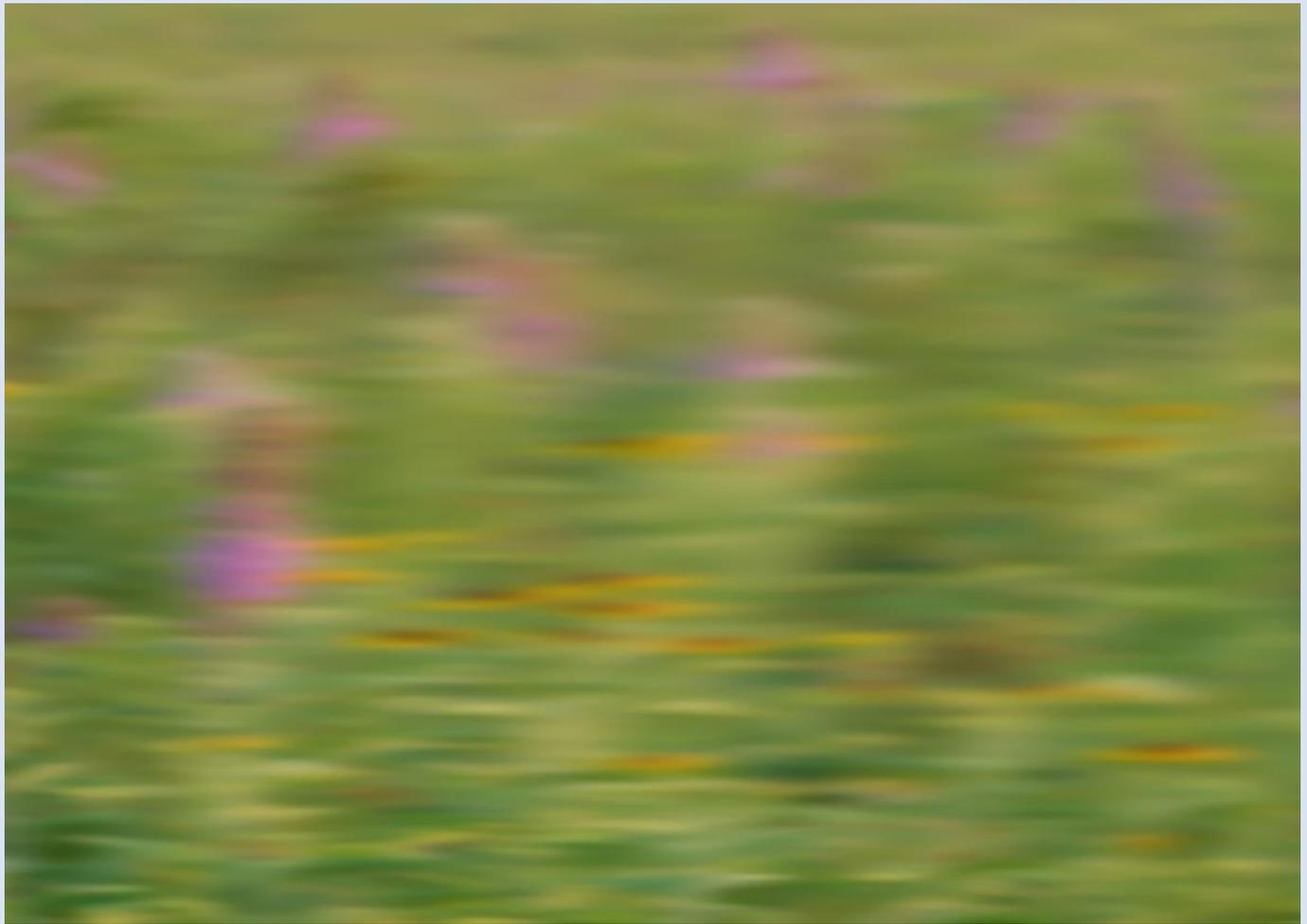


**A Field Guide to
Roadside Wildflowers
*At Full Speed***



Chris Helzer

The Prairie Ecologist
Prairieecologist.com

A Field Guide to Roadside Wildflowers *At Full Speed*

Introduction

We all know the best opportunities to see wildflowers come while on the road. Whether along an interstate highway or a remote country road, flowers of all colors and shapes are there to add beauty to our trip. Unfortunately, most wildflower field guides are nearly useless for roadside flower viewing, written for the eccentric botanical enthusiast who wanders slowly through prairies, stooping low to determine whether the sepals of a flower are hispid or hirsute.

This book is written for the silent majority of people who have important places to go, but want to enjoy and learn about nature as they travel. What good is a field guide that relies upon the characteristics of tiny hairs or even minute differences in leaf or petal shape when a flower is seen from a car traveling 70 miles per hour? The world desperately needs a guide that illustrates and identifies characteristics of wildflowers as most people actually experience them. This is that guide.

Users will find this guide works especially well in the central Great Plains of North America, in states such as Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota. However, it is also useful further east (Illinois, Indiana, etc.), where most of the same flowers can be found. It works pretty well further north and south too, though some of the flowering dates might be somewhat different.

No field guide, including this one, can contain all potential species someone might encounter. However, it does include many of the more common species that are large enough to be seen from a moving vehicle. Smaller plants are perfectly nice too, but not particularly relevant to this audience.

Finally, roadside wildflower enthusiasts have received the field guide they have long deserved. You're welcome.



Chris Helzer

Copyright 2019 by Prairieecologist.com

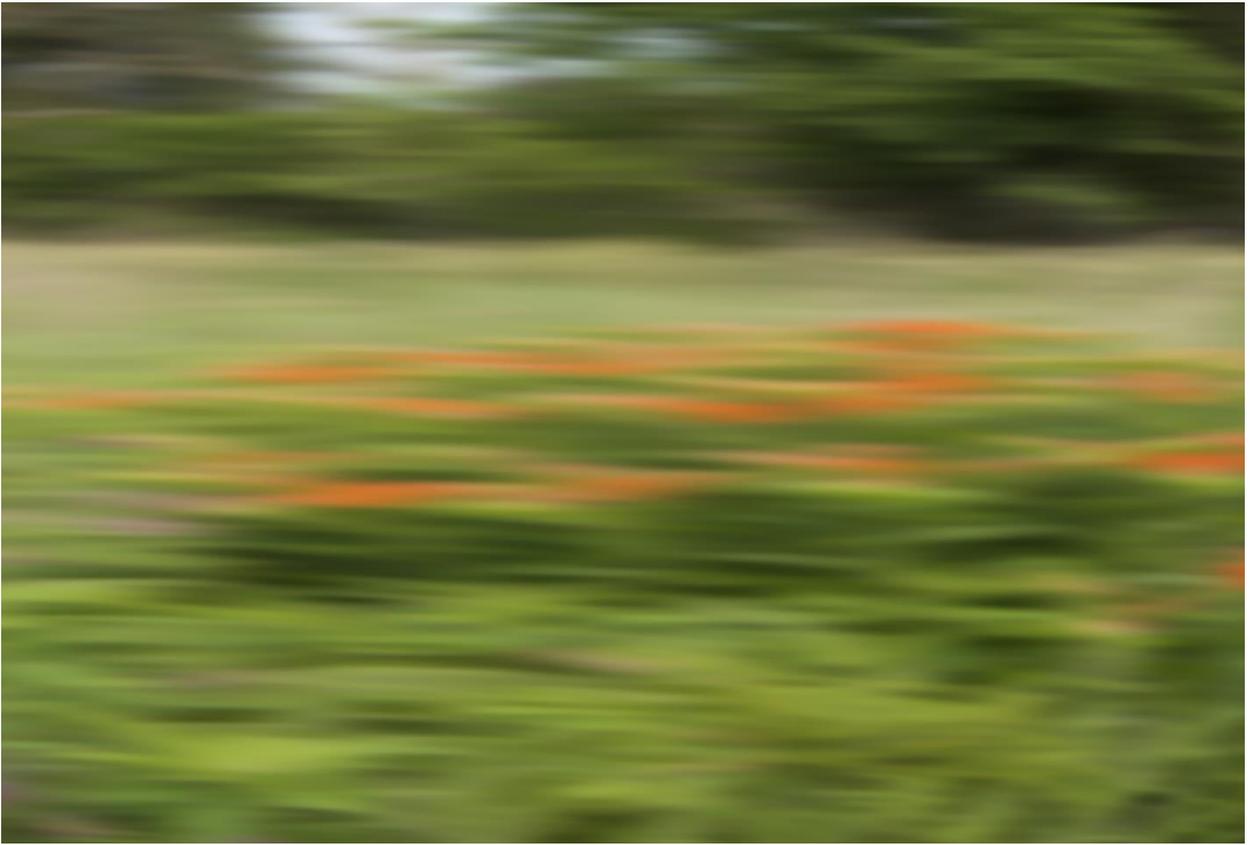
Table of Contents

Page/Species

- 3 Butterfly milkweed
- 4 Western wallflower
- 5 Prairie ragwort
- 6 Common St. John's-wort
- 7 Upright yellow coneflower
- 8 Black-eyed Susan
- 9 Fourpoint evening primrose
- 10 Entire-leaved rosinweed
- 11 Maximilian sunflower
- 12 Annual sunflower
- 13 Curly cup gumweed
- 14 Canada goldenrod
- 15 Stiff goldenrod
- 16 Dame's rocket
- 17 Shell-leaf penstemon
- 18 Lead plant
- 19 Wild bergamot
- 20 Purple loosestrife
- 21 Gayfeather/blazing star
- 22 Ironweed
- 23 Pitcher sage
- 24 Fleabane
- 25 Yarrow
- 26 Mentzelia
- 27 Rattlesnake master

Name Butterfly milkweed

Asclepias tuberosa



Flowering season

June and July

Habitat

Roadsides. Tallgrass and mixed-grass prairies.

Description

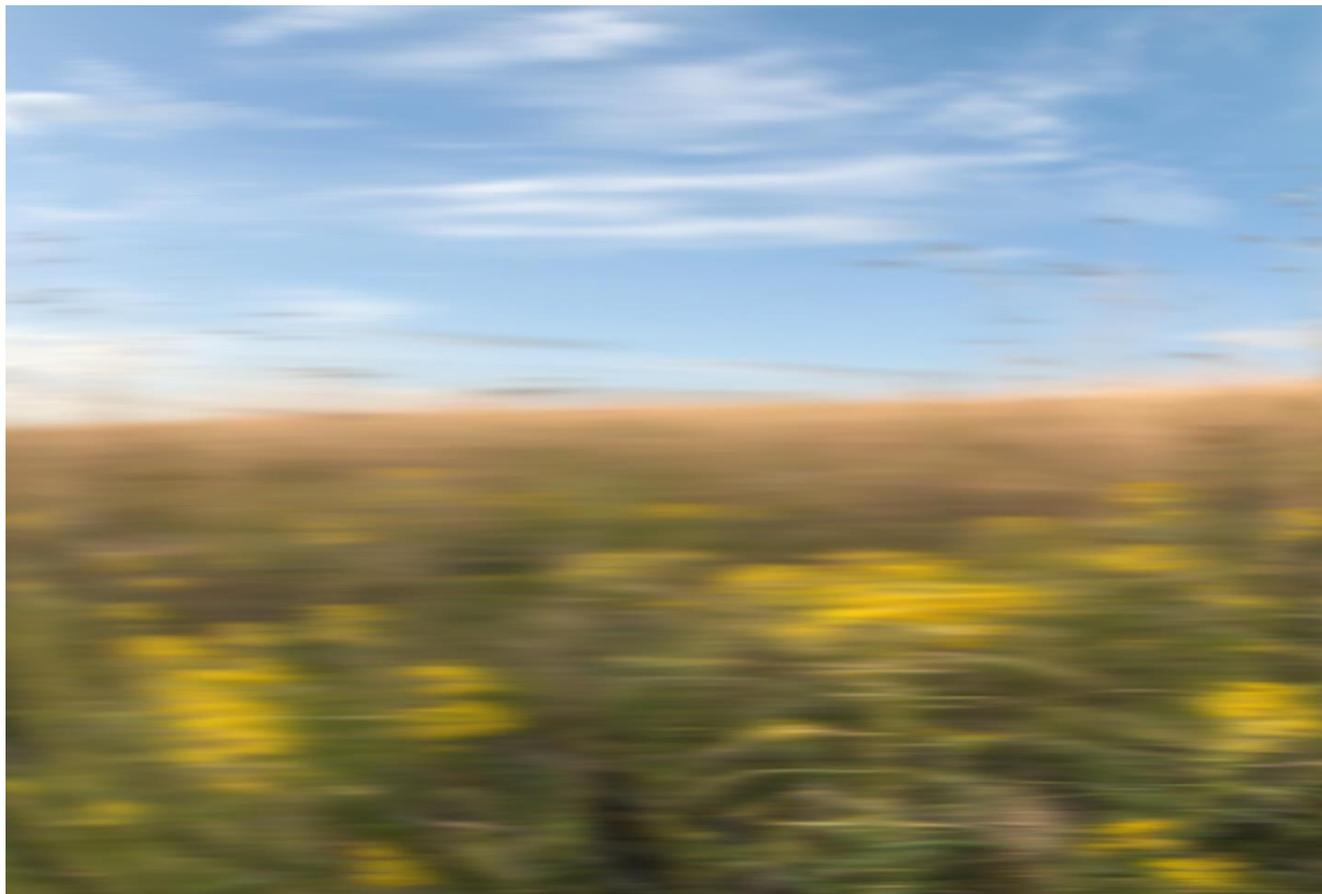
Few wildflowers have orange blossoms, so butterfly milkweed stands out among its peers along the roadside. Just look for the striking orange streaks of color as you pass by. In addition, the contrast between its dark rich green leaves and bright orange above makes identification easy.

Similar species

There are a few species of tall orange lilies that can somewhat resemble butterfly milkweed, but they are much less common and the contrast between orange and green is not as distinct.

Name Western wallflower

Erysimum capitatum



Flowering season

Spring and early summer.

Habitat

Roadsides. Western prairies.

Description

Western wallflower is biennial in the mustard family that can grow in abundance in western dry roadsides, especially where road construction has occurred within the last few years. Its color and height (1-2 ft) make it fairly unique among early season flowers, apart from the numerous other yellow mustards that look much like it.

Similar species

This species can also resemble prairie ragwort (see next page), but is distinguished by the lack of orange-ish streaks in its appearance. It also looks like just about any other yellow flower growing in the spring or early summer.

Name Prairie ragwort

Packera plattensis



Flowering season

Early summer

Habitat

Roadsides. Often abundant along the edges of gravel roads.

Description

Prairie ragwort can sometimes be found in large colonies, especially along gravel roads and other roadsides where vegetation was mowed the previous summer. The careful observer will note subtle streaks of orange within the yellow of this species, especially along gravel roads where your speed may be less than on the highway. As the flowering season progresses, smears of white can be seen within the yellow as seed production begins.

Similar species

Western wallflower (previous page), which lacks the orange color. Or just about any other yellow flower growing during the early summer.

Name Common St. John's-wort

Hypericum perforatum



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

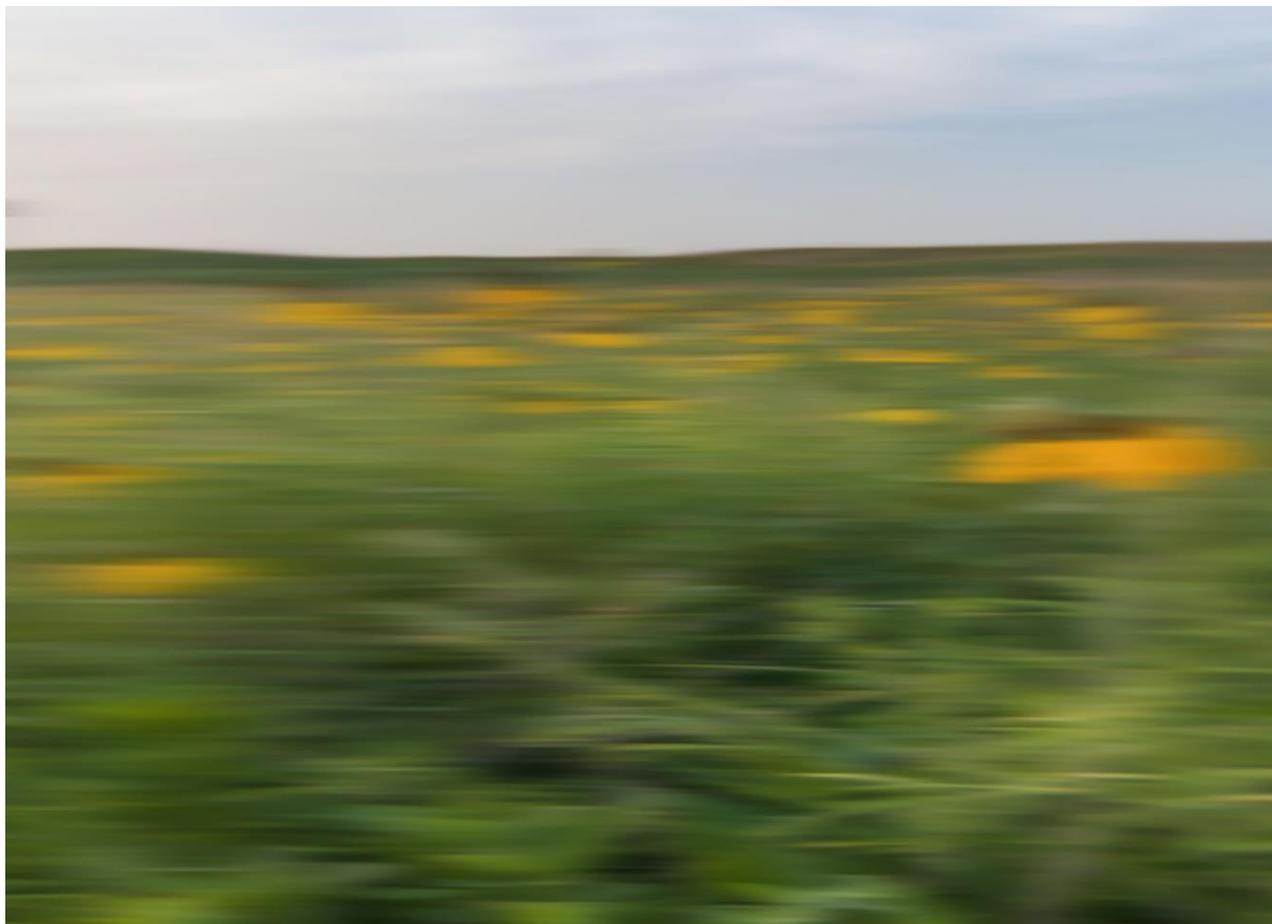
Common St. John's-wort is an invasive plant spreading westward through the Great Plains. There are other species of St. John's-wort which are native, but they tend to be rare along roadsides and appear in small numbers when they are present. Common St. John's-wort tends to have a pale cool-yellow tone to its color streaks, and the yellow and green are usually intermixed because the flowers appear at various heights along the plants.

Similar species

All other yellow wildflowers growing during the summer. In particular, bird's foot trefoil is another invasive plant with yellow flowers but grows very low to the ground, which helps distinguish it from St. John's-wort.

Name Upright yellow coneflower

Ratibida columnifera



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

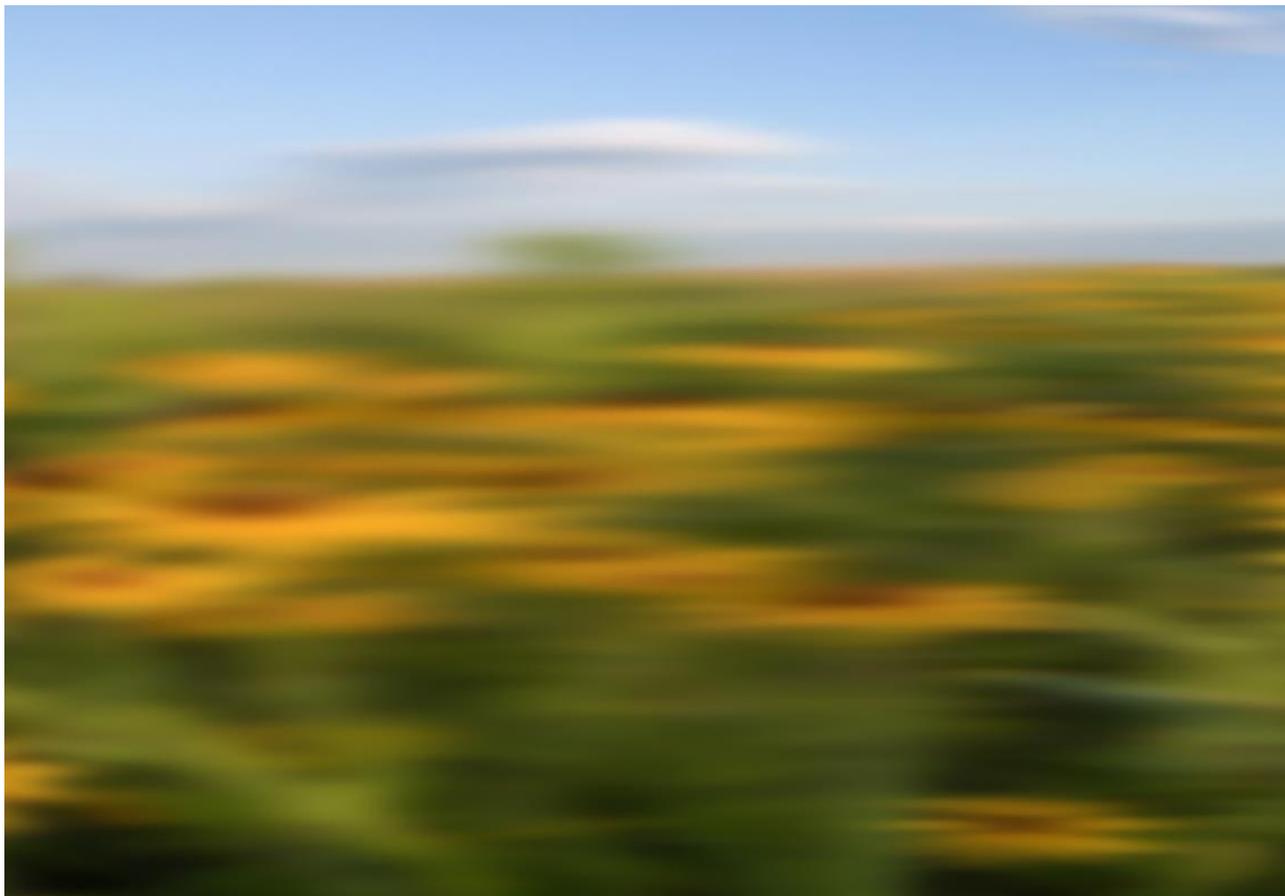
Upright coneflower, also known as yellow coneflower, is a common wildflower along roads in the central Great Plains. The dark cones above the yellow petals create distinct patterns of yellow and brown streaks in this species. It can be distinguished from black-eyed Susan because the brown streaks are usually above the yellow in the coneflowers, as opposed to intermixed in the Susans. The grayhead coneflower (3-4 ft or more) is much taller than the upright coneflower (1-2 ft), and largely replaces its shorter cousin along roads in the eastern third of the Great Plains and further eastward.

Similar species

Black-eyed susan (see above description and next page).

Name Black-eyed Susan

Rudbeckia hirta



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides. Wet sites.

Description

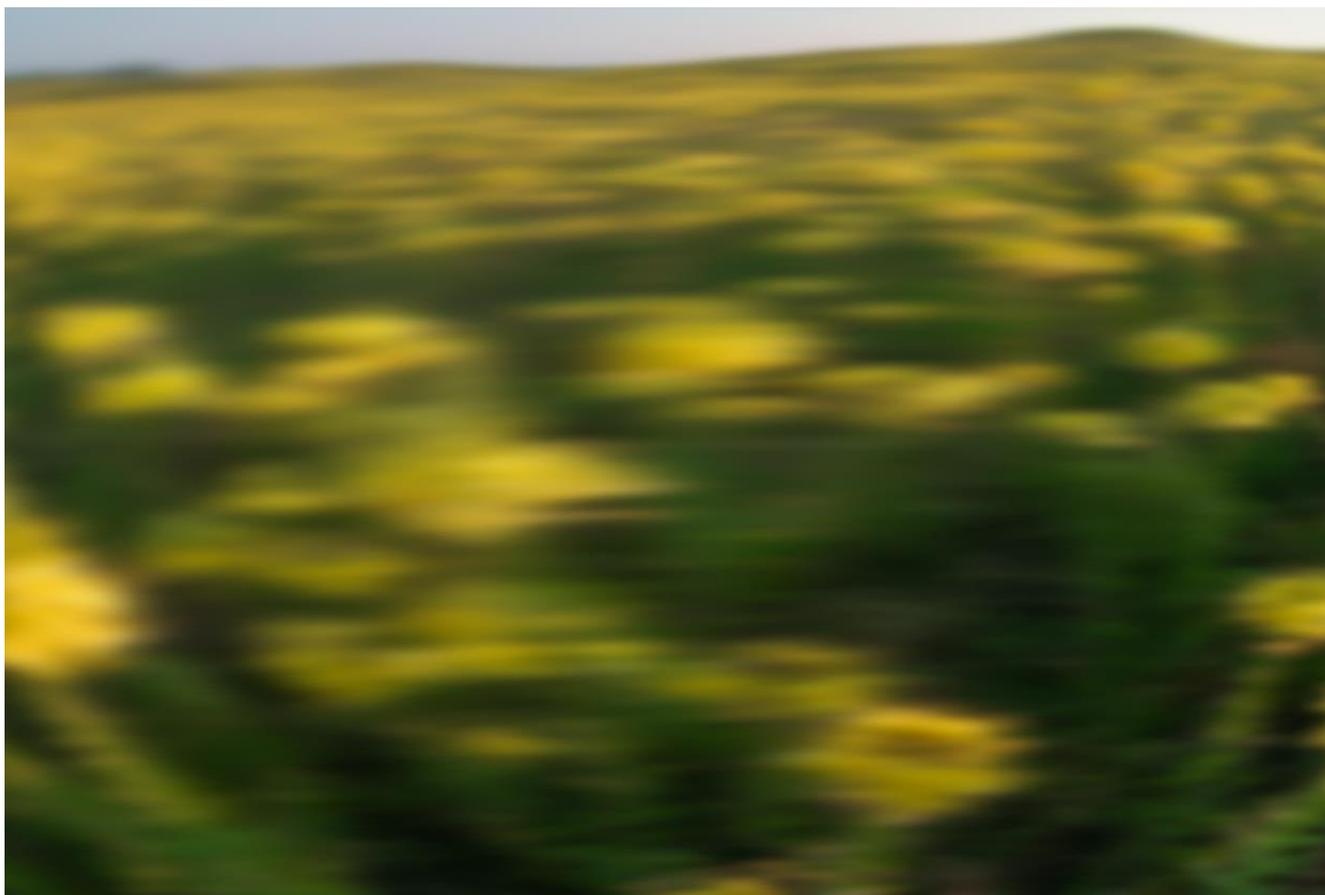
Black-eyed Susan is often found in large dense colonies, but can also appear as scattered individuals. In both cases the dark centers of the flowers create beautiful contrasting stripes of brown among the yellow smears. As opposed to the upright coneflower (previous page), those dark stripes will usually have yellow above and below them, rather than being the top layer of color. Black-eyed Susan flowers are usually 1-2 feet tall.

Similar species

Upright prairie coneflower (previous page). Sunflowers too, but they often bloom later in the season and are taller.

Name Fourpoint evening primrose

Oenothera rhombipetala



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides. Sandy sites.

Description

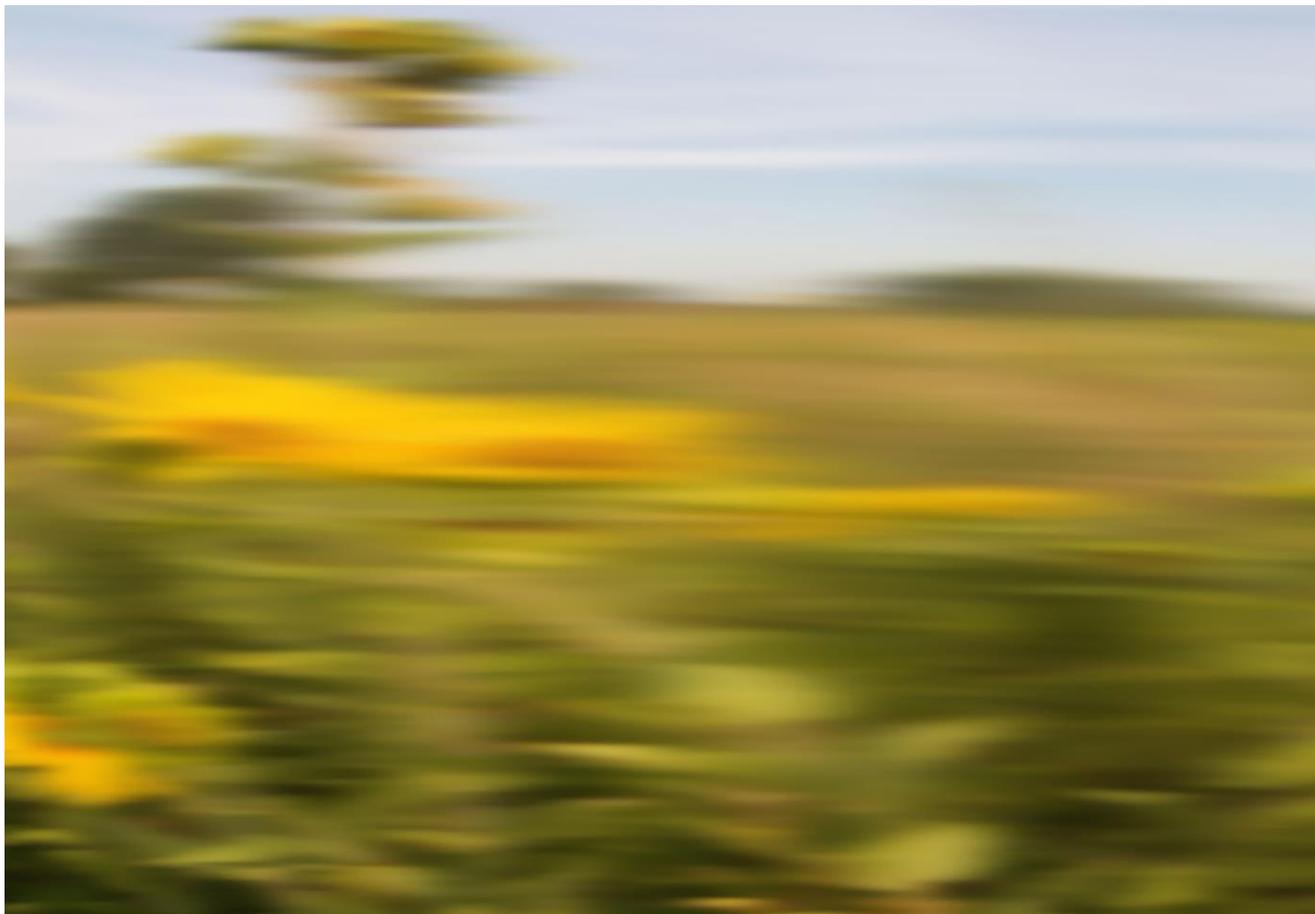
Fourpoint evening primrose usually appears in great abundance in the year or two following drought, road construction, or other disturbances to roadside vegetation. As a biennial, it produces only low-growing leaves in its first year and then provides brilliant yellow streaks of color in its second year. Flowers appear mainly at the tops of the plants, creating a nice clean contrast between smears of yellow and green as you observe this plant from your vehicle. Fourpoint primrose occurs mainly in the southern half of the Great Plains and on sandy soils.

Similar species

Almost any other yellow flower.

Name Entire-leaved rosinweed

Silphium integrifolium



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

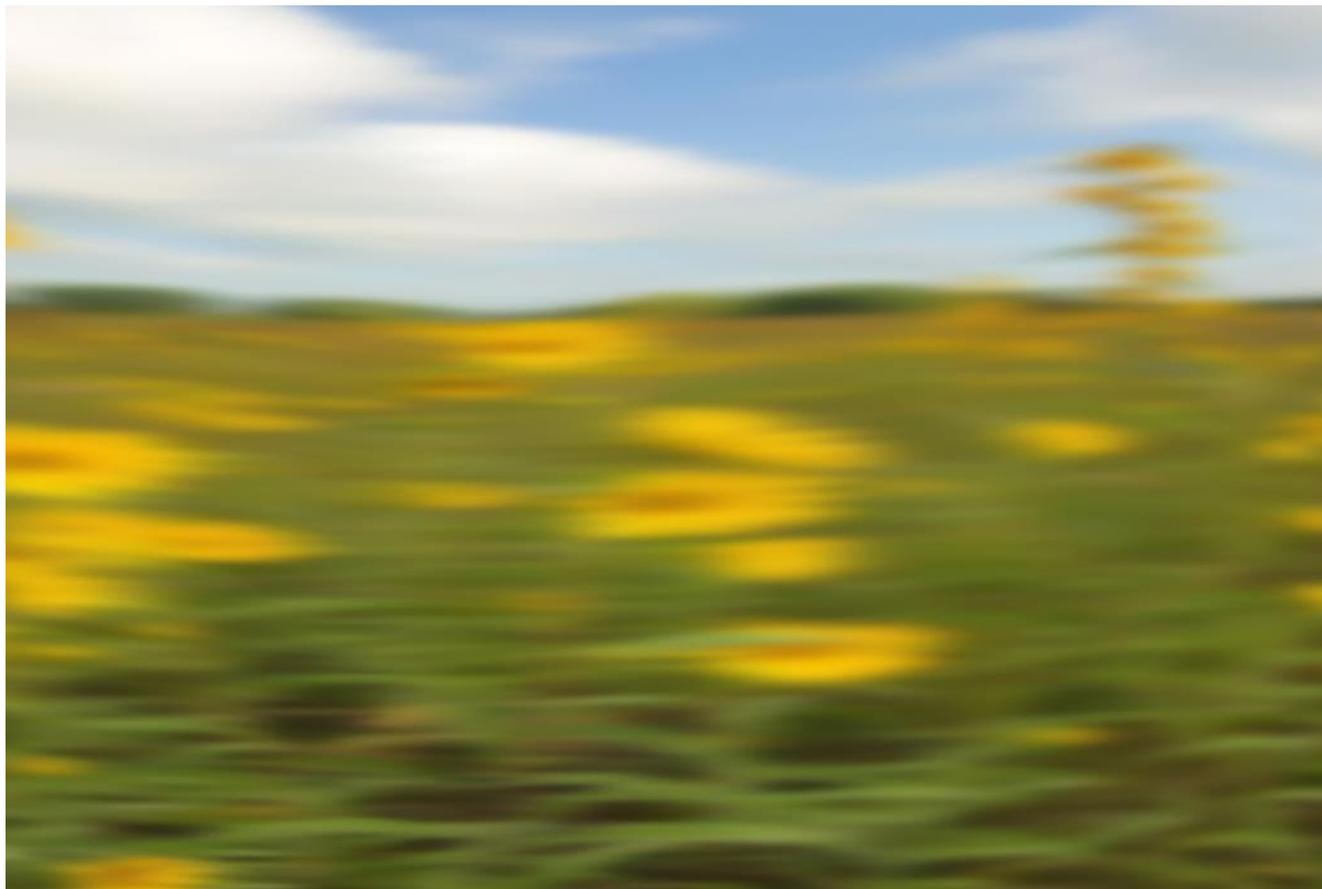
Rosinweed is one of many yellow flowers that resemble sunflowers but aren't technically sunflowers. While this is admittedly annoying to roadside observers, rosinweed can sometimes be distinguished from sunflowers by the streaks of orange among the yellow, as opposed to the darker brown seen in most sunflower (but see Maximilian sunflower on the next page). When compared with the (usually later flowering) Maximilian sunflower, rosinweed is often shorter (3-4 ft) than Maximilian (4-5 ft). In addition, the bluish green leaves of Maximilian contrast with the yellower green of rosinweed.

Similar species

Maximilian sunflower, all other sunflowers, and all yellow flowers in general.

Name Maximilian sunflower

Helianthus maximiliani



Flowering season

Late summer, early fall.

Habitat

Roadsides. Tallgrass and eastern mixed-grass prairie.

Description

As mentioned on the previous page, Maximilian sunflower has orange smears mixed in with its yellow, and tends to have a bluish green tinge to its foliage. As the season progresses, the orange can start to turn a light brown. This is a tall flower, often favored by roads departments because of its tall stature and abundant blossoms in the late summer and early fall.

Similar species

Goldenrods and all other yellow flowers in the late summer and early fall.

Name Annual sunflower
Helianthus annuus (and *H. petiolaris*)



Flowering season
Summer, especially late summer.

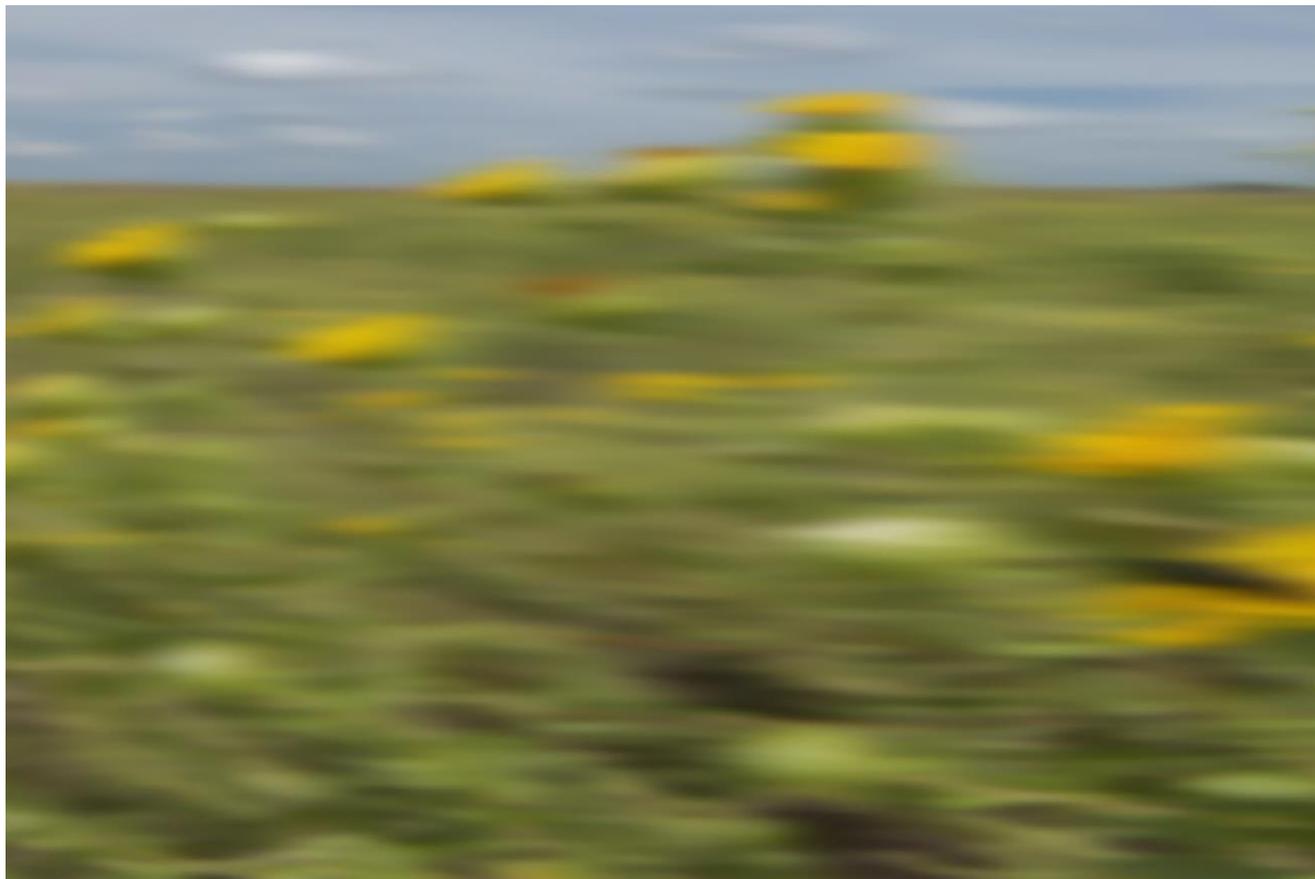
Habitat
Roadsides. Wet sites.

Description
These tall dark-centered flowers are one of the more characteristics of roadside habitats. The taller 'annual' or 'garden' sunflower (*H. annuus*) is often seen where construction has taken place recently. The shorter 'plains' sunflower (*H. petiolaris*) is more universally abundant in sandy soils and also thrives during or after drought, construction, or other disturbances. Sunflowers can be distinguished from the similar black-eyed Susan by their taller heights and (usually) later flowering season.

Similar species
Black-eyed susan, other sunflowers, and all other late-season yellow flowers.

Name Curly cup gumweed

Grindelia squarrosa



Flowering season

Late summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

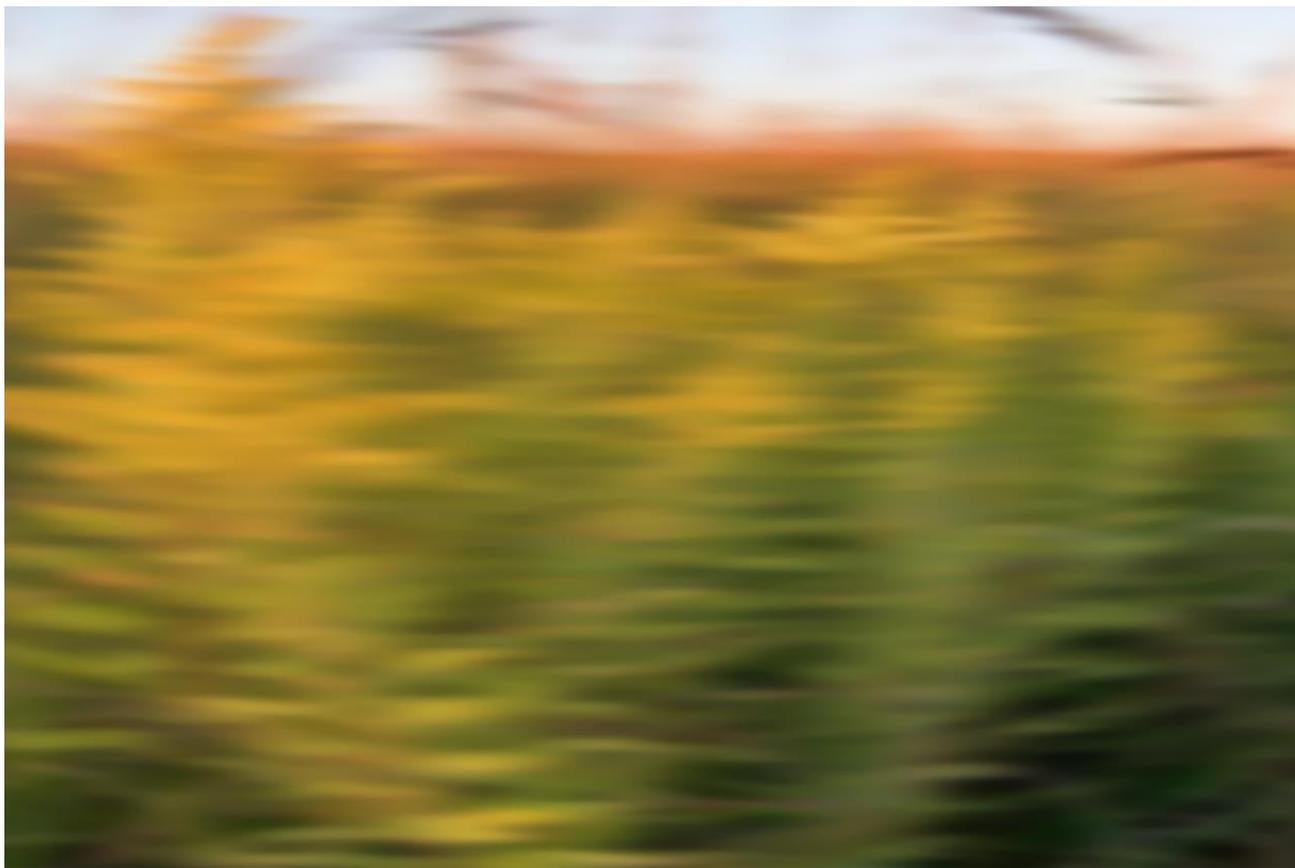
This annual flower is often found where construction or other disturbances have taken place – especially on the inside edges of cattle fences, where concentrated livestock have created the bare ground it likes to grow in. Yellow bands intermix with those of green because flowers appear at various heights on the plants. In addition, the relatively small flowers (size of a quarter) make for more numerous streaks of yellow than are seen in some other species.

Similar species

Anything yellow.

Name Canada goldenrod

Oligoneuron canadensis



Flowering season

Late summer, early fall.

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

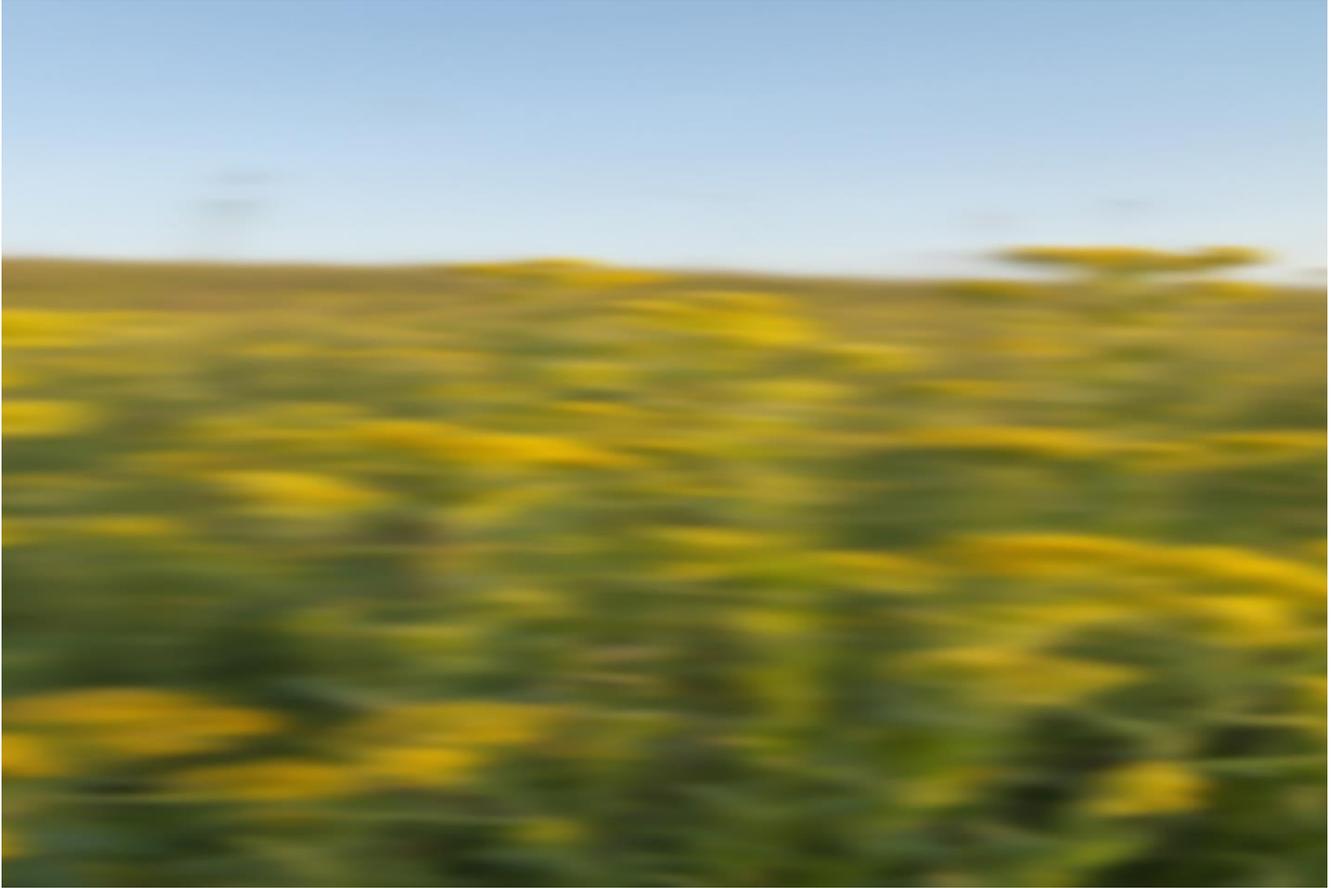
Canada goldenrod is one of many goldenrod species with a similar pyramidal yellow top. That distinctive flower shape creates a noticeable striping of yellow and green/dark above the green leaves below. The yellow bands are fairly broad compared to stiff goldenrod (next page), which has a different flower shape. Canada goldenrod can be 3-4 ft tall.

Similar species

Other goldenrods, sunflowers, and anything else yellow in the late summer and early fall.

Name Stiff goldenrod

Oligoneuron rigida



Flowering season

Late summer/early fall

Habitat

Roadsides.

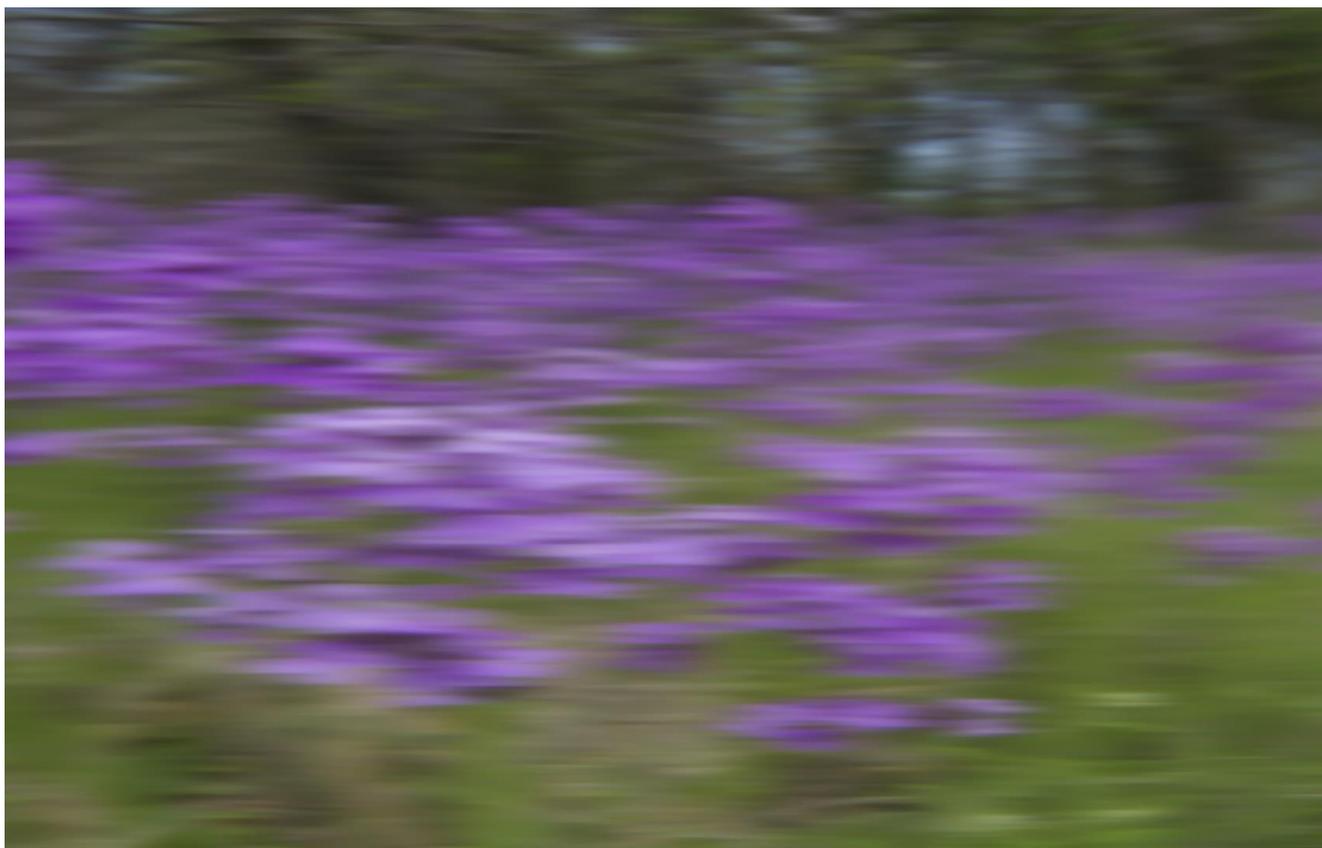
Description

The flat-topped flowers of stiff goldenrod create narrower bands of yellow than most other goldenrods, helping to distinguish this species from that crowd. The lack of dark streaks also help separate it from sunflowers. Otherwise, it's similar in appearance to many other yellow flowers.

Similar species

Anything yellow.

Name Dame's rocket
Hesperis matronalis



Flowering season

Spring

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

This non-native flower is invasive in wooded areas, but can also persist for a few years after being seeded in open habitats. Its big vibrantly-colored flowers in the spring made it a popular choice for roads departments until its invasive nature was better understood. While it is rarely planted these days by those departments, private landowners sometimes get fooled by less ethical seed companies who still sell this species. As a result, it can still be occasionally found along roads, even outside of the wooded areas it persists best within. No other spring flower has the height and vibrant pink/purple color of dame's rocket.

Similar species

None.

Name Shell-leaf penstemon

Penstemon grandiflorus



Flowering season

Early summer

Habitat

Roadsides. Dry sites.

Description

Shell-leaf penstemon is a gorgeous pink to bluish/pink wildflower that is most often seen in dry soils in the western prairie regions. It can appear in large colonies, and the tall flowering stalks create broad streaks of pink above pale bluish smears of color from the leaves.

Similar species

Not much resembles this species when it is in full bloom.

Name Lead plant
Amorpha canescens



Flowering season
Early summer

Habitat
Roadsides.

Description

Lead plant is a woody plant that can grow in large clumps along roads. The contrast between dark purple flowers and grayish green leaves can be fairly unique during its early summer blooming period.

Similar species

Other plants with dark purple flowers.

Name Wild bergamot

Monarda fistulosa



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

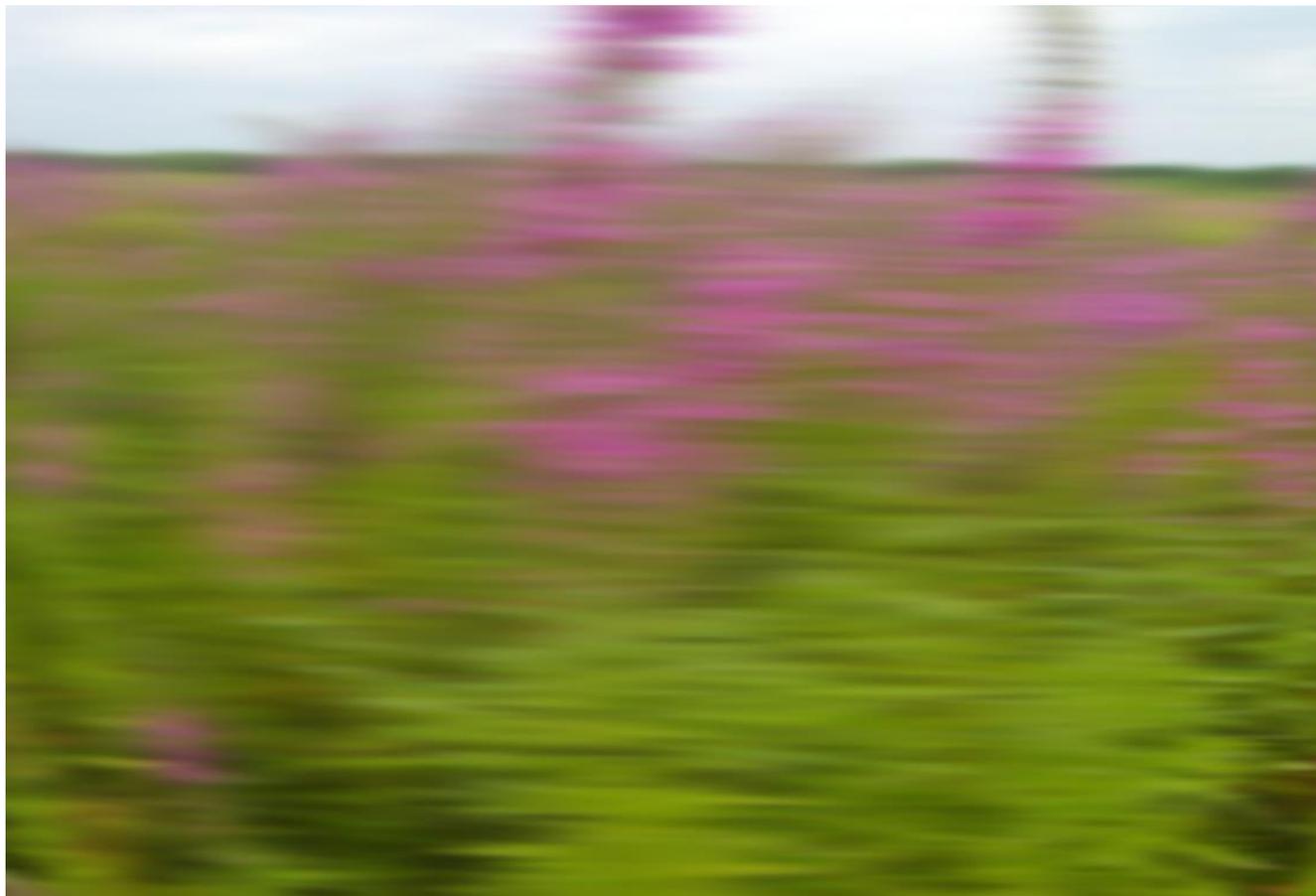
Bergamot is also widely known as bee balm, and attracts pollinators, including large butterflies, which can sometimes add accent colors to the pink bands created by the blossoms. Those streaks of pink above pale yellowish-green vegetation make this tall wildflower relatively easy to pick out among other species.

Similar species

Rocky mountain bee plant. Other pink flowers.

Name Purple loosestrife

Lythrum salicaria



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides. Wet sites.

Description

Purple loosestrife is an invasive wildflower in wetlands and along rivers/lakes. Its broad dark pink smears of color are often seen in low wet roadsides, especially near bridges across creeks and other bodies of water. The tall stature (3-5 ft) and strong tie to wet areas helps distinguish this flower from others, though it can be sometimes confused with tall gayfeathers (see next page). Compared to gayfeathers, purple loosestrife usually has a darker, more magenta tone to its flower color.

Similar species

Tall pink or magenta flowers.

Name Gayfeather/Blazing star

Liatrix lancifolia (also *L. pycnostachya* and *L. spicata*)



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

There are multiple species of tall gayfeathers, distinguished from each other only by minute characteristics irrelevant to the vehicle-borne viewer. The broad pink bands of color provided by these tall wildflowers are fairly unique (but see previous page), especially because the narrow stalks below the blossoms can be seen even at fairly high speeds. Individual plants usually produce numerous flowering stalks and the species usually occurs in colonies.

Similar species

Purple loosestrife and other tall pink-flowered plants.

Name Ironweed

Vernonia sp.



Flowering season

Late summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

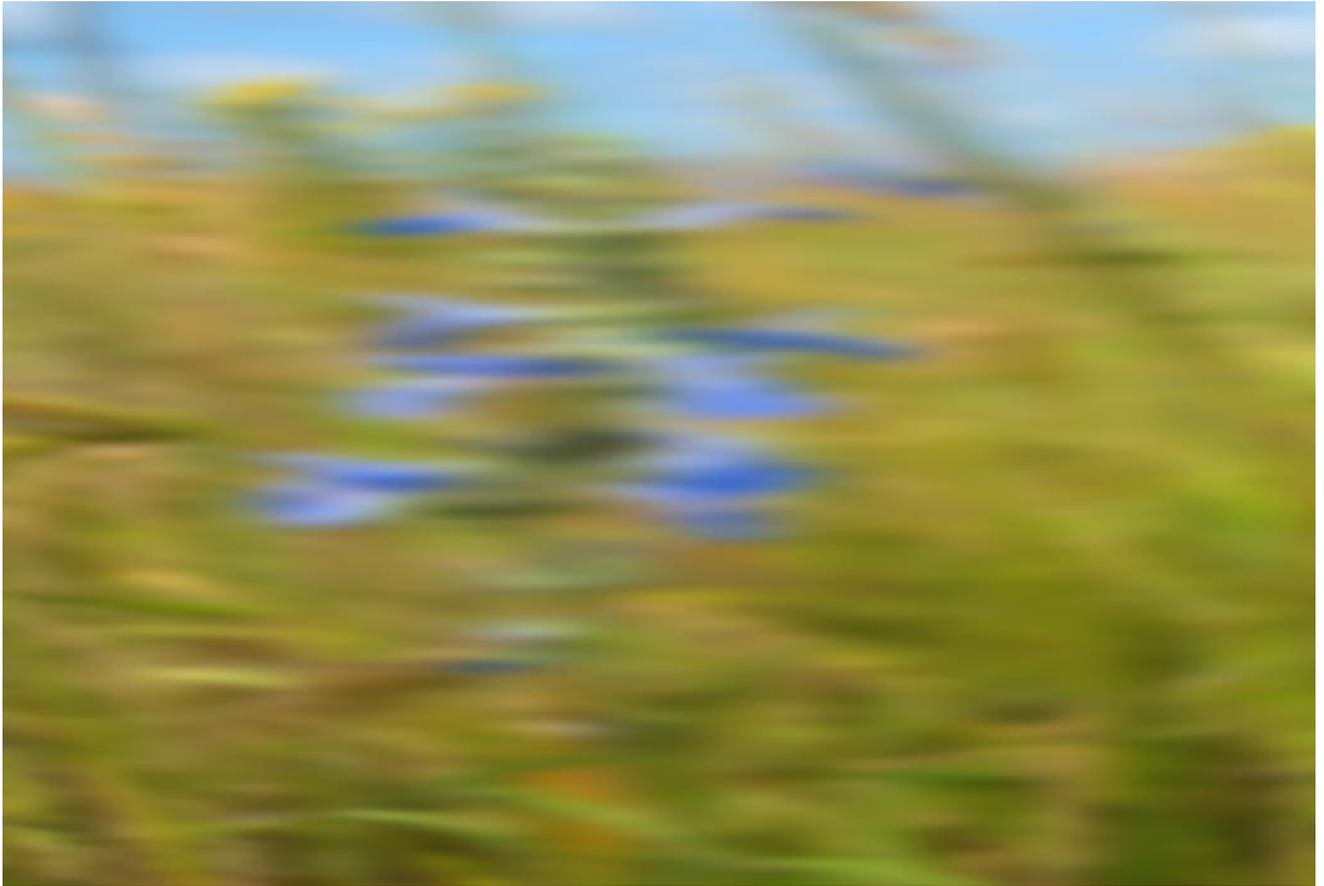
The dark purple of this species appears in fairly compressed streaks of color above dark green below. The height (3-5 feet) and late summer blooming also help distinguish it from many other species. New England Aster is the most similar, but often blooms even later than ironweed and is much less common along roads in more western portions of the Great Plains.

Similar species

New England Aster.

Name Pitcher sage

Salvia azurea



Flowering season

Late summer, early fall.

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

Pitcher sage, or blue sage, has a unique color among tall late-season flowers. It is a favorite among many roads departments, so is often seen along public highways, especially within the first five years after construction projects. It often grows 4-6 feet tall in those sites.

Similar species

Chicory is also blue, but is shorter and often done blooming by the time pitcher sage appears.

Name Fleabane

Erigeron sp.



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

Tiny streaks of white, sometimes tinged with pale pink, intermixed with yellow, though the yellow can often be difficult to see at high speeds. Fleabane's abundance of small flowers creates numerous white smears among a background of green when this plant is abundant. There are several closely-related fleabane species, though few people care which is which.

Similar species

Anything with white flowers.

Name Yarrow

Achillea millefolium



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides.

Description

Yarrow's flat-topped white flowers appear as narrow streaks above a pale green below. This plant often grows 1-2 ft in height and is separated from asters and daisies by the lack of yellowish centers to the its smears of white.

Similar species

Daisies, asters, and other white flowers.

Name Mentzelia

Mentzelia sp.



Flowering season

Summer

Habitat

Roadsides. Western prairies.

Description

Mentzelia species occur mostly in the far western portions of Nebraska, Kansas, and other Great Plains states. The 'sunburst' shape of the individual blossoms often gives a slightly spiky appearance to its white bands of color, even when seen at high speeds.

Similar species

Other white-flowered plants in the west.

Name Rattlesnake master

Eryngium yuccifolium



Flowering season

July and August

Habitat

Roadsides. Eastern prairie regions.

Description

This tall white-flowered plant occurs along the the eastern edges of the Great Plains and extends into Illinois, Indiana, etc. The roughly spherical shape of flowers (appearing at the very top of the plants) are distinctive enough to be recognized even at high speeds. Otherwise, its streaks of white are higher off the ground than those of many other white-flowered plants.

Similar species

Anything tall and white.