

The Great Tide Pool

TALES OF PACIFIC GROVE, CALIFORNIA

by local award-winning author, [Brad Herzog](#)



THE BLOOMIN' DUNES

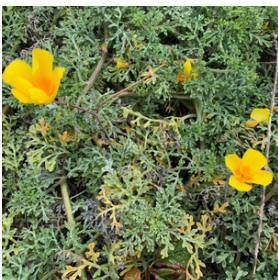
The boardwalk at Asilomar Hotel & Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove is a sweet stroll through 25 acres of the Asilomar Dunes Natural Preserve, the remaining native dunes habitat from what was once significantly larger. I've walked along the boardwalk often, and usually I find myself marveling at the view of the breakers rumbling toward Asilomar State Beach. Or the sun as it winks a final farewell and disappears beyond the horizon. But it turns out that the quarter-mile amble along the boardwalk offers some treats if you look not out at the water... but down at the wildflowers.



The dunes are not a naturally hospitable place for wildflowers. High winds. High salt content. Low water. Low nutrients. The plants have to battle through that, which is why they've been given a heap of help. For years, the dunes suffered from unrestricted activity, but a few decades ago a restoration project began that has brought it back to life. Literally. Not too many people are aware that Asilomar has its own plant nursery, right alongside the swimming pool. There, seeds are collected from native plants, grown out in tiny cylindrical containers and then returned to native areas in the preserve, their "out-planting" timed to coincide with seasonal rains. Thus the dunes become that much more worthy of preservation.



Given the bloomin' challenge, you have to look carefully as you roam the boardwalk. So I asked an expert, my pal Fred, a restoration ecologist, to give me a brief tour on the last day of spring. We strolled the boardwalk in a counter-clockwise direction, beginning not far from the nursery.



First stop: a *purple verbena*, peeking out from among dark green leaves with toothed edges. Second, *beach burr*, otherwise more mellifluously known as *Ambrosia chamissonis*. This sprawling perennial herb is a species of ragweed that ranges from Alaska to Baja. Batting third: the *California poppy*, the state flower that blooms bright orange-yellow along country roads and highways throughout the region. It's the only flower designated with its own celebratory day (April 6) in California.





We started down the path now, toward the ocean, and came upon a *Menzies' wallflower*, an endangered species found only in four dune systems along the Pacific Ocean (the others being in Marina, Mendocino, and Humboldt). It flowers only once during its lifetime and then dies, so catch it while you can. Next, a *Monterey paintbrush*, a deep-orange flowering canvas with a range that extends from Point Reyes to Big Sur.



As we walked back up toward the conference center, Fred then pointed out *dune sedge*, a foundational grass-like plant all over the dunes, followed by the *California aster*. The latter's hairy-ish leaves prevent predation from herbivores and retain moisture, acting as little fog catchers, a fine example of the adaptations necessary to thrive in a harsh environment.



Lastly, Fred showed me a *seacliff buckwheat*, a little evergreen shrub that supports the federal endangered Smith's blue butterfly, a tiny flutterer whose every stage of life (one to two weeks as an adult butterfly) is dependent on the plant.

It's a fitting reminder of nature's interconnectedness – plants, animals, and humans, too. So a reminder: When exploring the Asilomar Dunes, stay on the boardwalk. Preserve and protect.



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