

Late Spring Mystery Flower

It was 1975, when I moved to El Portal from the Bay Area to work in Yosemite and I was becoming familiar with the plants of the lower Merced Canyon, species by species. Most of my plant identification had been learned in the field from professors and fellow students. One day in June I came across what I thought was a five petaled flower. As I peered into it's center of it I was unable to find stamens or pistils (the male and female reproductive parts). I noticed each "petal" had little thread like structures and suddenly it dawned on me that I was looking at a plant in the sunflower family.

In the massive plant family there are two types of flowers, ones that are flattened and strap like called ray flowers and those that are tubular with five pointed petal lobes known as disk flowers. Think of a large sunflower blossom with rays around the edges and in the center disk many little disk flowers, many of which are still in bud. Sunflowers, daisies, asters, and yarrow have both ray and disk flowers in a flowerhead. In the thistle group there are only disk flowers in a flower head. In the dandelion group there are only ray flowers in each flower head. In a dandelion there are dozens of ray flowers, though it is easy to mistake the head as a single flower.

The flower I had been puzzled by was unusual since it only had 5 ray flowers. This blossom is in the genus, *Stephanomeria* (meaning bare crown) and commonly called wire lettuce due to its narrow leaves. The species I first encountered is called Nuttall's wire lettuce (*Stephanomeria elata*). There are 3 other species that can be found in the region, one other growing in the foothills and the other two above 4,000 feet. Plant identification requires keen eyes and careful observation to reveal surprise features.

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