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Colorado State Flower Enthusiasts Rising To “The Challenge”

GRAND JUNCTION (JULY 6, 2026) – Throughout the last month hundreds of Coloradans have been hiking into the Colorado high country and returning with photographs of the Colorado State Flower- the blue columbine.

These Coloradans are participating in The Colorado Columbine Challenge as a celebration of both the Colorado Sesquicentennial (150th anniversary of statehood) and the breathtaking beauty of the blue columbine whose scientific name is *Aquilegia coerulea*.

The Colorado Columbine Challenge calls for Coloradans, native plant enthusiasts, and citizen scientists, to document all observations of the blue columbine in the wild (not in gardens) using the popular iNaturalist app during 2026 so that the Colorado State Flower becomes the most observed plant species in Colorado on iNaturalist.

The initial motivation for The Colorado Columbine Challenge was a webcomic published in July 2025, by Randall Munroe [xkcd.com/3118] noting that the plant species most uploaded to iNaturalist in Colorado is the common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*). This plant is a 6-ft tall column of yellow flowers emerging from a bowl of 20-inch-long woolly leaves. However, the mullein was introduced from Europe, is found primarily in disturbed sites, is a prolific seed-producer, and is designated by the Colorado Department of Agriculture a “List C Noxious Weed.”

According to Richard Alward, the creator of the Challenge, the indignity of having Colorado represented by a weed in the xkcd comic needed to be addressed immediately.

“2026 is the year to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the 150th anniversary of Colorado statehood. I wanted to celebrate these momentous events by getting outdoors and enjoying the Colorado high country. So, I created an event that I could share with as many friends and family and columbines as possible.”

Numerous columbine outings are being promoted by the Colorado Native Plant Society (CONPS) since 2026 is also the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Society.

“The Colorado Columbine Challenge is what we call a mission moment. Everything about this project is exciting and motivating. It speaks to the collaboration of community science and to the inspiration that nature provides. Promoting a native plant through our iNaturalist adventures builds knowledge, friendships, and a shared responsibility for stewardship. Do your part to appreciate our great state and the amazing flora within. Find a columbine today and make a new observation for every individual plant you find!,” observed CONPS Executive Director Maggie Gaddis.

At the beginning of June, the blue columbine was still just the 7th most observed plant species in Colorado on iNaturalist, nearly 2,000 observations behind the #1 mullein. However, as the columbine blossoms emerged in mid-June, so too did the columbine enthusiasts.

Now, hundreds of pictures are being uploaded to iNaturalist every week; sometimes well over one hundred in a single day. These images document the beauty, diversity, and distribution of our state flower.

Color patterns of the flowers include the familiar blue and white patterns, with the blue varying from just a slight tint to a deep purple. Other variants include flowers that are all blue and others that are all white or cream. Observations have been submitted for plants within just a few miles of the north, west, and south state borders. Some plants still have only buds and no open flowers, others exhibit a profusion of colorful blooms, and others have begun producing seeds.

The Colorado blue columbine has the 3rd most observations on iNaturalist as of the end of June 2026. Approximately 50 observations are needed for the columbine to rise into 2nd place and at least 600 observations are needed to ensure our State Flower is on the top of the podium.

With the Challenge goal so nearly within reach, we encourage everyone with an interest in native plants, and everyone who enjoys sharing the Colorado high country with family and friends, to find a trail to hike or ride, or a roadside to stop beside, and take pictures of columbines (ensure your camera has permission to access your location data). Get close. Zoom in. Make sure to get the flowers in focus. Load the iNaturalist app on your phone and upload the photos. Someone with the Challenge will review your photos and confirm the identification within a day or two.

July is the most reliable month for finding columbines in bloom. With enough participation among Coloradans who want to join a statewide citizen science event, we can boost the columbine into 1st place in time for Colorado Day on August 1st.

Images from the Colorado Columbine Challenge

A beautiful Colorado blue columbine (*Aquilegia coerulea*), showing the distinctive spurs on the petals, captured by Dr. Jennifer Ackerfield, Director of the Charles Maurer Herbarium at Colorado State University, and author of the *Flora of Colorado*.



The banner for The Colorado Columbine Challenge on iNaturalist.
[<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/the-colorado-columbine-challenge>]



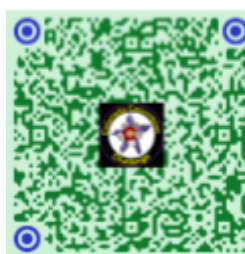
The Colorado Columbine Challenge badge and QR codes with a) link to join the Challenge on iNaturalist, b) link to a mapping tool, and c) link to download the iNaturalist app.



Join the Challenge!



Maps & Columbines

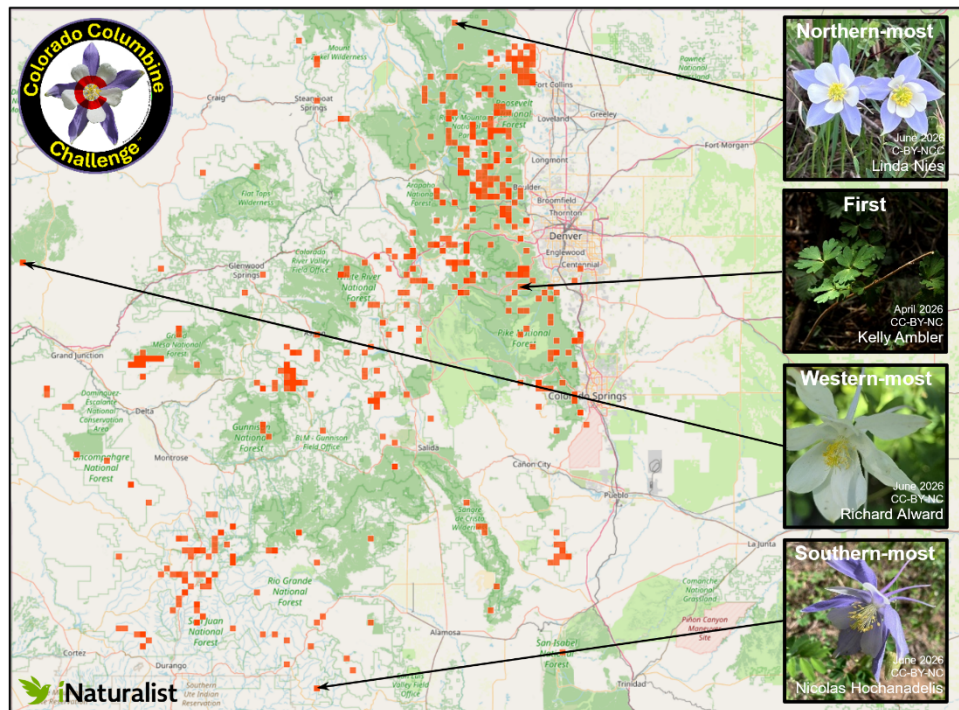


Download the iNaturalist app

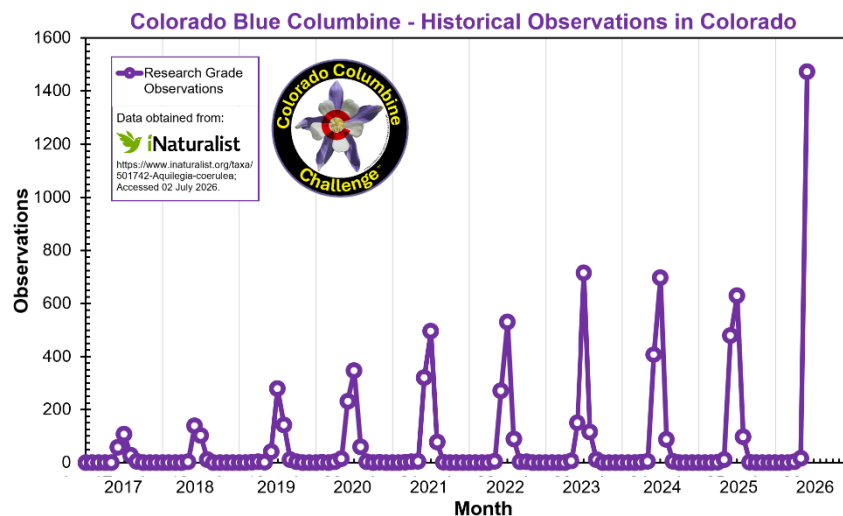


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Map of Colorado depicting the locations where columbine observations have been made in the first half of 2026 (red squares) with images of the columbines observed furthest north, west, and south, and the first columbine observed in 2026. Data for this map were obtained from iNaturalist on June 30, 2026.



Historical blue columbine observations on to iNaturalist. In nearly every year, July is the month with the most observations (June 2018 is the exception). Prior to 2026 there had never been a month in which more than 750 observations were recorded. Coloradoans recorded an extraordinary 1,295 observations in June 2026.



Links:

- The Colorado Columbine Challenge: <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/the-colorado-columbine-challenge>
- iNaturalist: <https://www.inaturalist.org/>