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UW-Stout instructor David Tank is the author of the book "Wisconsin Wildflowers in 3D," which has more than 90 three-dimensional images of state wildflowers and a short history of 3-D photography.

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Book features wildflower photos in 3-D

By Joe Knight

Leader-Telegram staff

At first glance, the wildflower photos in David Tank's book appear to be colorful but seriously out of focus.

But if you gaze at them through a pair of three-dimensional glasses — the left lens red, right lens blue or cyan — they come into focus and appear to sprout off the page.

"Wisconsin Wildflowers in 3D" offers a new way to see wildflowers photographed in their natural settings.

Tank is an instructor in journalism and mass communications at UW-Stout and faculty adviser to the student newspaper, the Stoutonia.

He has been interested in 3-D photography since receiving a View-Master as a child. He has been taking his own stereographic photos for 18 years and is a collector of vintage 3-D cameras.

However, it was a new two-lens digital camera developed by Fuji that allowed him to photograph all the flowers in one growing season.

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"The new camera made it possible for me to get out and shoot the flowers, even on windy days. We had a lot of those," he said.

The camera is actually two cameras in one body. The lenses are offset by about 2½ inches - the distance between a person's eyes. Having two eyes, offset slightly, allows us to have depth perception. Three-dimensional photography duplicates this by having two images slightly offset. When viewed through the three-D glasses the images appear to have depth, as well as full color.

He ordered the camera from Japan; it is not currently available in the U.S. Despite being essentially two cameras in one, it was light enough to fit in his pocket, which made it easy to carry while riding a bicycle.

"One of the best places that I found for shooting wildflowers is along the bike trails. The bike trails are just nice paths through wild areas that don't have pesticides and don't have people's yards," he said.

He biked and photographed along the local trails - the Red Cedar, Chippewa and Old Abe trails - but his travels, using car and bike, took him to all corners of the state.

"I was able to get a pretty good cross-section of things that bloom throughout the state that way," he said.

Starting in the spring, Tank took more than 14,000 images of more than 200 wild flower species but chose 93 favorite images for the book.

"I just had to keep narrowing it down," he said. "I wanted to get a nice mix from both across the state and in different seasons, and they also needed to be ones that worked well with the 3-D," Tank said.

"I started when the first flowers came out in spring and shot through the summer to the beginning of fall when the last asters were blooming," said Tank, an instructor in the English and philosophy department at Stout. "I kept working on the book all the way through, so by the time I got to the last flowers blooming, I had 95 percent of the book essentially done."

The book is not intended to be a field guide for Wisconsin wildflowers.

"There are a lot of really good field guides out there now. My goal was not to compete with that," Tank said.

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One of the reasons Tank self-published the book was because of the difficulty of printing a 3-D book. He knew several 3-D photographers who had been disappointed by the quality of their books that had been published by large publishers.

Tank said he is a better 3-D photographer than botanist, but he asked UW-Stout botany professor Kitrina Carlson to proofread a copy. She said he had identified the flowers correctly but had a few suggestions for the text. Each image is accompanied by a small amount of text describing when it blooms, where it blooms, and a little bit of its natural history. Sometimes he describes folklore or medicinal uses of the flowers.

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David Tank is scheduled to talk about "Wisconsin Wildflowers in 3D" at 1:30 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 14, at the Rassbach Heritage Museum in Menomonie as part of the Heritage Speaker Series. He also will have an exhibit of framed 3-D photos next spring at the Mabel Tainter Center for the Arts in Menomonie.

"Wisconsin Wildflowers in 3D" sells for \$24.95. It's available online at www.3dwildflowers.com or at www.amazon.com.