Finding Hidden Jewels

By Susan Schafer, Natural Areas Education and Volunteer Coordinator

Are rare plants hiding in Fort Collins? Dedicated volunteers and Natural Areas Department staff are working hard for conservation through the identification of rare plants. If a rare or historic plant is found it will be protected, thus leading to the protection of surrounding habitat. Summer is field season, so the team has been searching for plants daily. The results are amazing.

Led by Botanist, Crystal Strouse, NAD Rare Plant Survey volunteers head out in the morning with their hand lenses, waders, snake chaps and maps. They spend the morning battling weeds, bugs, heat and even snakes! After lunch they often spend the afternoon with their eyes focused through a dissecting microscope identifing the specimens they've collected. The work is long and hard but their efforts have paid off beyond expectation.

I love going out with Crystal on rare plant survey experiences because it is an amazing opportunity for me to be with someone who is so knowledgeable and enthusiastic about what she is doing. Her enthusiasm for finding rare plants is so contagious. –Dot Tomlinson, Volunteer.

In 2012 volunteers are looking for Bell's twinpod, a globally imperiled species found only in Colorado. Volunteers have had great success, surveying six plots in record time. These dedicated volunteers have logged 44 hours of volunteer time (although staff predicted that it would take 60 hours). The data the volunteers collected will be analyzed this winter.

If you want to learn how to ID plants using various plant parts including those only seen under a microscope, this volunteer experience is the way to go.—Pat Carey, Volunteer.

Already this year staff and volunteers have documented a plant at Running Deer Natural Area that has never been documented in the Natural Areas Department's system, in fact, the last time it was documented in Larimer County was 1970. The plant is in the Cyperaceae (Sedge) family and is called *Carex atherodes* (wheat sedge). It is mostly found in the southern part of the state or at higher elevations. In addition, Pamela Craig

and Crystal Strouse found a unique spot at Springer Natural Area that boasted 8 different species of Juncus, 3 different species of Eleocharis, 1 species of Schoenoplectus, 3 aquatic plants and 1 extremely rare plant called *Lysimachia thyrsiflora* (tufted loosestrife) in an area the size of about 1,000 ft^2. Needless to say everyone is enjoying the search!

Working with Crystal is very wonderful. She is very knowledgeable and patient and generous in sharing her knowledge. She is very well organized and focused and I always have a great time with her when we are collecting plants or identifying them. It is also a treat to go to places not yet opened to the public. I am learning a lot about the plants in our Natural Areas, especially the aquatic ones.—Pamela Craig, Volunteer.

Volunteers launched the aquatic and riparian vegetation assessment and already have visited six natural areas, collected over 85 plants, and logged almost 200 hours of volunteer time! These volunteers are knowledgeable, hard-working and dedicated. The Natural Areas Department is so grateful for all their hard work. The future of conservation depends on volunteers like these. Thank you!!

It's always a pleasure to work with Crystal on Rare Plant survey projects. She brings a ton of enthusiasm to every task. Participating in the work gives me an excuse to get out in the field and refresh my knowledge of botany. As a former biology teacher turned mostly into a paleontologist, field work reminds me that fossilized old "dead things" were once active members of vibrant living communities!

Gary Raham, Volunteer