

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

High Elevation Plant Conservation

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

Of the highest 41 peaks in the Eastern United States, 40 are in the Southern Appalachians. These peaks are effectively mountaintop islands, rising above lower elevations to be outposts of cold, often moist, habitat where fir, spruce, and other trees associated with more northern climates, live.

Growing on these mountaintops are a handful of endangered wildflowers found nowhere else in the world.

Chris Ulrey, a biologist with the Blue Ridge Parkway, rappels down a remote rock face, pausing every so often next to a patch of yellow flowers. The flowers are from spreading avens, one of the endangered, high-elevation plants. It grows on rock faces, which can make it a challenge to monitor, but it also makes it susceptible to trampling and dislodging from climbers, rappellers, and rock scramblers that aren't aware of the plant, its rarity, or its imperilment. Other endangered high elevation plants include Roan Mountain bluet, which produces tiny bluish flowers; Heller's blazing star with lavender flowers; and Blue Ridge goldenrod, which has yellow flowers.

One very simple way biologists try to protect these plants is steering people away from where they grow, thus removing the risk of inadvertent trampling. To help with this effort, join thousands of other park and forest visitors in heeding area or trail closed signs. By doing so, you're helping managers conserve those landscapes and you may be helping recover an endangered species.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.