

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Rock Gnome lichen

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

An untrained eye would be completely oblivious to its presence. It would look nearly indistinguishable from the other lichens growing on the high, exposed rock face, and you would never know you were looking at an endangered species.

The rock gnome lichen is one of only two lichens on the federal list of threatened and endangered species and is found exclusively in the Southern Appalachians. Lichens are organisms formed through the completely interdependent relationship of an algae and a fungus. Moisture is critical for the lichen, and the 54 remaining populations are found either on high, often north-facing rock faces, where they are shielded from much direct sunlight and bathed in fog, rain, and seepage; or along a handful of rivers where stream water keeps them moist. Although 54 may sound like a lot of populations, many of these cover less than a square meter.

Threatened by climate change and air pollution, the lichen is also vulnerable to illegal collecting. Although the vast majority of people have nothing more than a passing curiosity about lichens, a handful of collectors take lichens very seriously and for these people, having an endangered lichen in their collection can be a major bragging right. However, nearly all the remaining rock gnome lichen occurs on National Park or National Forest Service land, and taking it without a permit is against the law.

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