

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Spreading Avens Blitz

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature. Today we'll take a look at a major effort to track a rare plant and provide insight into its future.

As I looked on, Chris Ulrey, a botanist with the National Park Service, tossed the rope over the cliff's edge, announced his descent, and began dropping down the cliff face. However, Chris was not rappelling just for fun. Around his shoulder hung a hammer drill, and with him he carried a tape measure, a handful of numbered, metal tags, and a hammer dangled from his harness.

Chris was part of a team of botanists tracking one of Southern Appalachia's rarest plants, the endangered spreading avens, which only grows at a handful of cliffs and rocky outcrops on the region's highest mountains.

The scientists are measuring each patch of spreading avens, tagging them, then using a laser range finder to map the patches in relation to one another. Additionally, they'll search for any seedlings, tagging them with a metal pin. Collecting this data annually will allow botanists to track changes in the population.

Sites with five to six years of data can be analyzed using population viability analyses to estimate the risk of extinction at various points into the future. If botanists see a population declining, we can try to determine why and address the problem.

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