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Four-leaf Clover Podcast and Scientist Interview

Trifolium repens L.

Scientist-in-training Summer Praetorius has an unusual skill—she is really, really good at spotting four-leaf clovers (*Trifolium repens L.*). A single gene causes the normally three-leafed clover to produce a fourth, supposedly lucky, leaf. As it turns out, good science depends on both close observation—a skill Praetorius uses to spot tiny shelled animals called foraminifera—and a little bit of luck. Ari Daniel Shapiro explains.

Transcript

Ari: About a month ago, I was sitting in Laurelhurst Park in Portland, Oregon with Summer Praetorius. She's a PhD student at Oregon State University. Praetorius has red curly hair that bounces just below her shoulders. And she's got a pretty remarkable track record finding four-leaf clovers. It started when she was a child. But she sort of lost interest for a while, until something happened when she turned 20.

Summer: I had this dream where I looked down on the ground and I saw a four-leaf clover. And it was very big. In the dream, when I picked it up, it turned into this bouquet of four-leaf clovers. And it felt like a really good omen. And I think it was a day or two afterwards, I was visiting my father's gravesite. He had died earlier that year. And I pulled up and I realized that I didn't bring anything with me. And so immediately my dream came into my head. And so I just went over to this little hill and there was one just sticking up, kind of like ready for me to pick. So I picked that and that's what I brought to the gravestone.

Ari: Praetorius has always been good at recognizing shapes and patterns. It really helps in grad school when she's sorting through countless tiny fossils to understand the climate on Earth thousands of years ago. But when it comes to four-leaf clovers, Praetorius has her own theory.

Summer: I think most people don't look, that's the interesting thing. Because if you see somebody who's lucky or - in some way it seems like luck is just this random thing thats streaming through that some people intercept and, you know, other people just don't. But I guess I think it's a little bit more like the people themselves are actually engaging or intercepting that luck.

Ari: For Praetorius, the four-leaf clovers of the world are like little mirrors, reflecting back to her a sense that she's on the right path, that she's making her own luck and creating opportunities. Just before we parted ways, she gave me a four-leaf clover as big as my nose.

These days she gives all her clovers away as gifts - to friends, to strangers, inside library books.

Summer: Maybe if these people don't even ever go out and look, it'll still give them the feeling like one fell into their lap, and that's a little bit of luck for them.

Ari: Our series, One Species at a Time, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Meet the Scientist

Meet Summer Praetorius, the scientist featured in the Four-leaf Clover podcast:

Where do you work?
I am a graduate student in Oceanography at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, USA.

What do you study?
I reconstruct past climate changes by examining various physical and chemical properties recorded in marine sediments.

What are three titles you would give yourself?
Paleoclimatologist, Dancer, Dreamer.

What do you like to do when you are not working?
When am I not working? Just kidding, there are moments. I love tubing, swimming, dancing, traveling, and jigsaw puzzling.

What do you like most about science?
I love that it explores the full spectrum of questions, from the smallest little details to the biggest, most fundamental questions. It seems that the more we unravel the more bizarre and mysterious everything becomes, so that it just keeps pulling us deeper into the wondrous qualities of life.

The One Species at a Time podcast series is supported by the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology.