

Alaska Native Plant Society

P.O. BOX 141613

ANCHORAGE ALASKA 99514

MEETING NEWS

The May meeting of the Anchorage Chapter will be on Monday, May 5th at 7:30PM in Room 108, Wendler Junior High School, corner of Lake Otis and Northern Lights. The earlier (than usual) meeting time is to allow ample time for the speakers and a discussion period.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING---7:00PM immediately preceding the general meeting. Board members please be prompt as the board meeting will have to be short this month.

SPEAKER---ANPS member Dr. David F. Murray, Professor of Botany and Curator of the Herbarium, University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Topic—"Some scenes from Central Asia and clues to the botany of late-glacial Alaska."

MINI-BOTANY---ANPS member Scott Christy, a geologist with Alaska Dept. of Natural Resources, will discuss Mud Volcanoes.

PLANT FAMILY DISCUSSION---ANPS member Dr. Marilyn Barker will speak on the *Arctostaphylos* genus of the Heath (Ericaceae) family. The 3 members of this genus in Alaska are all dwarf shrubs having 5-petaled urn-shaped flowers with a superior ovary and fruit in the form of a berry. These are some of the earliest blooming flowers of Spring.

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MYSTERY PLANT

This plant, found only in coastal Alaska, is very prominent amongst the driftwood and on the edge of the coastal grasslands. Its thick stems are white and wooly, as is the underside of their very large toothed obovate leaves. The large yellow daisy-type flowers decorate the beaches everywhere except the North Slope.



THANKS !!!

To those who helped set up and staff our educational display at the Sears Mall-----Marilyn Barker, John Wenger, Frank Bogardus, Verna Pratt, Susan Oliver, Jean Tam, Dodie Nelson and Peggy Pletcher---Thank You!

SEEDS

We have received a request for some *Dianthus repens* seeds. If anyone has some, please let us know.

Our supply of seeds this year was rather poor because few people collected. If all of our members would collect at least one kind, we would have a bountiful harvest.

MAY FLOWERS IN ALASKA?

Wildflowers are mysterious at times. One can well appreciate the phrase "blooming idiots" when snow covers the ground and flower petals are unfolding. Many locals, including some sourdoughs, believe there are no flowers around here until June or so. Not the case--you can usually count on their appearance in May; and, if one looks closely, even in April.

Probably the earliest wildflowers in Alaska are of the many species of willow (Salix). The ever-popular pussy-willows are botanically termed catkins. Each warmly harbors a multitude of non-petaled flowers. These sky-pointing clusters of flowers are either males or females and are on separate trees or shrubs.

With heat buildup, the three Alaskan poplar species, Black Cottonwood (Populus trichocarpa), Balsam Poplar (Populus balsamifera), and Quaking Aspen (Populus tremuloides) display their drooping catkins. Poplars, being in the willow family, again have only a single-sexed group of flowers on one tree.

The birch family in Alaska is represented by two genera, birch (Betula) and alder (Alnus). Their catkins bear numerous greenish flowers. Ripe pollen from the male flowers causes puffs of golden "smoke" or blotches on passerbys, when struck. Unfortunately, it causes havoc to many people with allergies. Male and female catkins of birches and alders, quite unlike willows or poplars, are both on the same plant.

All the above are flowers that we either take for granted or else pass by each spring unknowingly. They precede the leaves of the plant; and, even though they lack showy petals, a close observer realizes that blossom-time is Alaska has arrived.

"But", you say, "those aren't the type of flowers I meant--those are trees. What about the ones on the ground?" Well, they are there also. For one species, you must search super early to discover the ever-tiny purple flowers. Crowberry (Empetrum nigrum) hides its inconspicuous flowers while snow covers near the plant. Few have witnessed the blossoms, yet most recognize the plentiful Fall fruit.

It is in the heath bogs where the real show begins, though. A preview is with Sweet Gale (Myrica Gale) sprouting yellowish flowers. Cassandra (Chamaedaphne calyculata), sometimes called leatherleaf, for obvious reasons, is next to bloom. Drooping white, urn-shaped flowers hang in rows from the lower side of its stem. Soon after, Bog Rosemary (Andromeda polifolia) dominates the scene. The urn-shaped flowers from this poisonous plant are pea-sized but grow on the stem tops and can be so numerous that they, occasionally, turn entire bogs pink colored.

In snow-free bogs, one may, with luck, spot the minute shooting-star shaped flower of Bog Cranberry (Oxycoccus macrocarpus). Remember the location! This species is the forerunner of our giant domestic cranberry, cherished on holidays, but possess about five times the flavor.

As Spring advances and the sun rises in the sky, the more upland flowering plant species develop, unusually early, on steep, south-facing slopes. I know a "hotspot" (literally) in the Mat-Su Valley that provides displays of these beauties blooming, most years, around the first part of May.

Jacob's Ladder (Polemonium pulcherrimum) with its yellow-eyed and deep-blue veined petals flourishes on the slope. Rock Jasmine (Androsace septentrionalis) and Prickly Saxifrage (Saxifraga tricuspidata) cling to rocky outcroppings. Mustards (Cruciferae) of yellow and of white petals are numerous but difficult to identify, even to genera, this early.

On the more tufted ground, several species of Currants (Ribes) and Soapberry (Sheperdia canadensis) reveal their flowers. Under cover, thousands of White Violets (Viola renifolia) can be found. Botany students that I have taken here are always amazed at the accelerated stage of development; but, I'm sure there are other similar locations in the Valley.

By Mid-May, the Fairy Slipper Orchid (Calypso bulbosa) and other orchid species can be found. Interestingly, Alaska has more native orchid species than any other state, including Hawaii. The locations are precious and one must be careful in disclosing them to others. The orchid patches are disappearing and those carried away seldom live, even if transplanted. A mychorrhiza fungi is needed for the orchid roots to absorb nutrients from the soil and it usually is killed when the plant is removed.

All these early flowers are yours to witness in April and May. Take time to enjoy the changing signs of the seasons. If you missed some of them this year, be ready the next. They are a sign that Spring is here and Summer is soon coming.

--Submitted by John Wenger--

QUIZ ANSWER

Sea Beach Senecio (Senecio pseudo-arnica).

NOTES

THIS IS THE LAST NEWSLETTER UNTIL SEPTEMBER. YOU WILL RECEIVE A FIELD TRIP SCHEDULE SOON. HAVE A NICE SUMMER!