

Fantastic plants and how to save them

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What would your reaction be, if you were told that you lived in one of the most special areas on our planet? You'd be surprised, right? Well guess what? You do! The Klamath-Siskiyou area is considered one of eight designated centers of plant diversity and endemism in North America. In fact, the West Fork watershed of the Illinois Valley is ranked No. 1 out of 1,400 watersheds in Oregon for its numbers of rare plant species.

So, what does that mean? What exactly is endemism, and what makes a plant rare? According to the book, "Rare Plants of Southwest Oregon," "Plants may be biologically rare because they are confined to a small area (endemics) or scattered in small numbers over a large area (or both)." Endemic species, like many plants here in our valley, may be found nowhere else in the world outside of certain small areas. Our fragile serpentine soils have a lot to do with the rarity of these plants.

Serpentine plant communities have adapted specifically to live in the serpentine soils of the Klamath Siskiyou Mountain region. These soils may be

wet and boggy or dry and rocky. However, they all have one thing in common. They are extreme environments with harsh conditions. Serpentine soils have low levels of nutrients, like nitrogen and magnesium, and high levels of heavy metals. Serpentine community plants exist because they have adapted to survive these harsh growing conditions. For example, some species survive by accumulating and isolating toxins in their foliage.

Some serpentine species include, McDonald's rockress (*Arabis mcdonaldiana*), Cook's lomatium (*Lomatium cookii*), and Howell's jewel flower (*Streptanthus howellii*). The carnivorous California Pitcher Plant (*Darlingtonia californica*), while not isolated to serpentine soils, can and does grow in them. This is only a short list of these special plants. "Rare Plants of Southwest Oregon" lists over 30 rare plants growing in serpentine soils.

Unfortunately, serpentine plant communities are facing a serious threat from vehicles. Off road vehicle riding is also known as "mudding." Illegal mudding happens when motorized vehicles are driven into areas on public land

where riding is not permitted. This may be across meadows, bogs or other open areas. This activity destroys plants and also damages the soil. In wet areas, it can damage the hard pan and change the drainage. Over the years, sensitive serpentine plant communities near Eight Dollar Mountain, Star Flat, French Flat and elsewhere have been damaged by recreational off road riding.

For years, authorities unsuccessfully attempted to block areas with boulders, gates and tank traps. In 2016, the United States Forest Service, Wild Rivers District introduced a travel management plan that addresses Illegal off road riding in our area. This was in response to ongoing damage and other environmental issues. Recently, the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service signed a conservation agreement for five plant species and their serpentine wetland habitats.

The U.S. Forest Service is trying to improve their designated motor vehicle route system. As part of this, they provide motor vehicle use maps (MVUMs). These are available for every district. They list routes open to public use, specify

which vehicles can be used on certain routes and in which seasons. MVUMs are available in hard copy at all ranger district offices. They are also available in online downloadable pdf format from the Forest Service. If you have a smartphone, Avenza Maps offers a mobile map app that will allow you to travel forest roads using your GPS feature to navigate MVUMs.

According to the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, there are roughly 4,400 miles of roads and 180 miles of trail open to motorized use. There is also an additional 15 acres available at Woodruff Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) play area. While many serpentine



Lomatium (Photo by Hanna Smith)

communities are located on public lands, some also exist on private lands around the Valley. Please be aware of where you are riding at all times and consult MVUMs

for travel on public lands. Our local serpentine communities are not only a treasure to our Valley, they are a global treasure! Please protect them by riding responsibly.

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