Lost & Found: Celebrating a rare and unexpected gift

By Kathy Doyle
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This time of year we are inspired by stories of rare beauty, hope and the unexpected, and those who love the Vermont landscape have such a story to celebrate. Thanks to the curiosity of a pair of kayakers, a healthy population of a native plant not seen in New England for almost 100 years was recently rediscovered clinging to a rocky headland on state-owned land overlooking Lake Champlain.

Paul Wieczoreck and Ellen Spring were kayaking on Lake Champlain in July when they noticed a pretty, white flower blooming on a limestone cliff face. Wieczoreck, horticulturist and owner of Champlain Valley Landscaping, remembers that while they could not get close to the plants, they were able to get a good look with binoculars. He could not identify the plant but recalls that it looked vaguely familiar. The grass-like leaves and characteristic flower suggested to Wieczoreck that it was probably a lily.

Several weeks later Wieczoreck returned to the area and took some photos. Later, he mentioned the plant to Art Gilman, a botanist from Marshfield. Based on the description of the plant and its habitat, Gilman suggested that the plant was Zigadenus, or white camas — a plant not seen in Vermont for almost 100 years. Bob Popp, botanist with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department's Nongame and Natural Inventory, visited the site with Wieczoreck and confirmed the identify of the plant as white camas, also known by its scientific name Zigadenus elegans (subspecies glaucus, or Anticlea glauca).

In terms of rare plant discoveries, Popp explains, "There has been nothing so dramatic as this in my career. This has to be one of the most exciting plant finds in the last 25 years or more. We thought the plant was extirpated from Vermont. Vermont is the only state in all of New England where it has been documented. And we found it doing well and reproducing ... It is amazing."

White camas was last collected in Vermont in 1912 and before that in 1879. Documentation found with collections at the University of Vermont's Pringle Herbarium describes the habitat as rocky headlands by the shore of Lake Champlain. Popp reports that the plant had been sought after during the intervening years but was believed to no longer exist in the state. Recently, when he and fellow ecologist Eric Sorenson were doing a survey of the rare cedar bluff forests for the state's Nongame and Natural Heritage Program, they were on the lookout for the plant.

Popp points out that none of the white camas plants recently found were growing on top of the bluff. "To get a good look at the plant, I literally had to get right at the edge and grab on to a cedar tree and stick my head over the bluff," says Popp.

Popp notes that new plants are still being found or rediscovered in Vermont. Tulip poplar

and cork elm are two examples that were also known only from historic collections until recently. But the remarkable feature of the white camas find is that the population looks so healthy. Wieczoreck observes that there are "quite a number of plants," and he speculates that "the bigger clumps with dozens of flowers might be 20 to 30 years old."

Finding this rare plant in such healthy condition speaks to "the important of protecting habitat," says Popp. Because the land is protected — even though no one realized the plant was there — and the site is difficult to access, Popp worries that the greatest threat to the population may be collectors or trampling by people trying to get to the plant. He also notes that climate change could be an indirect threat. Thompson and Sorenson emphasize in their book "Wetland, Woodland, Wildland a Guide to the Natural Communities of Vermont" that "cliffs should be viewed from a distance or from their bases. No plants should be collected at these sites."

While the limestone cliff overlooking Lake Champlain is the only location where white camas has ever been documented in all of New England, the plant can be found elsewhere. In the upper Midwest it occurs on "dunes and sandy or rocky shores of the Great Lakes; also inland on calcareous soils and banks, in bogs and low ground," according to "Michigan Flora" by Edward Voss.

But the nonprofit conservation organization NatureServe reports that white camas is tracked as a rare plant in peripheral or disjunct locations, such as Tennessee, North Carolina, New York and New Brunswick. The closest population to the Vermont site is reported as being on limestone rock near Lake Ontario in New York. White camas is a wonderful example of how, as described by Johnson in the "Nature of Vermont," the flora of Vermont's Champlain valley includes some species more typical of the Midwestern flora.

"It is exciting that we are still finding new things," says Popp. "It just goes to show that we don't know everything about the flora of Vermont." And as Ellen Spring remembers her day of kayaking on Lake Champlain, she notes, "It pays to be curious."

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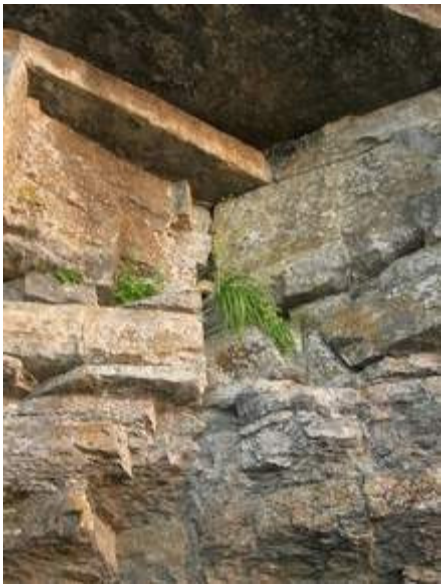

The only location of white camas known in New England was recently rediscovered after almost 100 years growing on a steep limestone bluff overlooking Lake Champlain

Bob Popp Photo

Zigadenus elegans or white camas, a plant not seen in Vermont for almost 100 years, was recently rediscovered on a steep limestone bluff overlooking lake Champlain.

Christopher Noll Photo

To learn more about Vermont's rare native plants visit:

Nongame and Natural Heritage Inventory, Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department: www.vtfishandwildlife.com/wildlife_nongame.cfm

University of Vermont Pringle Herbarium: www.uvm.edu-plantbio/pringle

NatureServe: www.natureserve.org/explorer