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Conserving the Nature of America

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Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Virginia Spiraea search

Good morning and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature. This week, we'll look at an effort to track an imperiled plant known from the banks of the Little Tennessee River.

In late May, a team of biologists canoeing the Little Tennessee River discovered two new patches of the federally-protected Virginia spiraea plant growing on the river's banks.

Virginia spiraea was listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 1990, and today it's found in seven states across Appalachia from West Virginia to Georgia, including seven counties in North Carolina. The plant is typically found along stream banks where it's able to take advantage of the stream-bank scouring that comes with periodic flooding and makes these areas inhospitable to many other plants.

The plant's decline can be linked to the widespread building of dams across its range, which temper the rise and fall of river floodwaters, allowing other plants species to become established; and the increasing preponderance of invasive exotic plant species, like Japanese knotweed, Japanese honeysuckle, and kudzu, that take over sites where Virginia spiraea is found.

The May search was part of an effort to catalog where the rare plant is found along the river, and it also confirmed the plant's continued presence at four spots where it was previously known to occur.

Knowing where these plants are means scientists know where to focus time and energy in conserving the species. Of course, the ultimate goal is to recover the plant so it no longer need protection, and this was a tiny step toward that goal."

The search brought together a host of organizations interested in both the conservation of the Little Tennessee River and Virginia spiraea, as biologists from the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, Little Tennessee Watershed Association, Wilderness Society, Western North Carolina Alliance, Friends of the Greenway, USDA Forest Service, N.C. Natural Heritage Program, and two private citizens paddled canoes down the river, eyeing the banks for the flower's tell-tale white flowers. The effort also garnered the support of a local business, as Jerry Anselmo of Great Smoky Mountain Fish Camp & Safari provided boats and shuttle services for the paddle.

The search was coordinated by the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, a Franklin-based non-profit focusing on the conservation of the Little

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Tennessee River basin, and timed to take advantage of the plant's showy, early-summer white blooms. The float trip concentrated on the stretch of river downstream from the town of Franklin, a relatively undeveloped area, and home to the highest quality stretch of the Little Tennessee River.

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

Questions, comments or concerns about the website, contact gary_peeples@fws.gov or 828/258-3939, ext. 234

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