

Cedar Glade Preservation in Middle Tennessee

I often think about the billions of dollars that have been spent globally to protect rare and endangered animals, but how rarely I hear a peep about such efforts put forth for plants. Many of these critically endangered animals such as the black rhino, Sumatran elephant, Sunda tiger, and western lowland gorilla, have been plastered on our TV screens and across the internet for decades. They are in our collective conscious and we are keenly aware of their struggle to survive. While I am not a gambling man, I'd be willing to bet a thick stack of cash that your average person couldn't name a single rare or endangered plant, more-less be willing to fork over a penny of their hard-earned money to support their preservation.



Justin Stefanski,
Extension Agent II

Too often, plants are overlooked, undervalued and otherwise forgotten. My assumption is that we simply take them for granted. Looking out my office window, I can see a myriad of plants. Oaks trees, turfgrasses, crape myrtles and daffodils to name a few. To date, I have never once seen a black rhino or western lowland gorilla lumbering about the grounds here at Lane Agripark. Should I ever come across either, I promise to write a highly entertaining article about it. Jokes aside, the question we must ask ourselves is this: are rare and endangered plants less worthy of preserving simply because they are mere plants? They may not be the showiest, most exciting, or even remotely as cute as a baby gorilla or tiger cub, but let's not let this lack of glamour condemn to extinction.

Believe it or not, Middle Tennessee is home to several critically threatened plant species. Many of these plants are found growing within the ever-shrinking biome known as cedar glades. These glades are a completely unique ecological habitat where numerous rare plants, insects and animal species call home. Outside of the Appalachian Mountains to our east, they are the most biologically diverse ecosystem in the state. At least 15 plants are endemic to the glades, meaning they have evolved within them and occur naturally nowhere else on the planet. Unfortunately, urban and commercial development has destroyed thousands of acres of glade habitat, making the rare plants found within them increasingly scarce, and in some cases, pushed toward the brink of extinction.

Two such plants are Braun's Rockcress (*Boechera perstellata*) and Running Glade Clover (*Trifolium calcaricum*). They are both found here in Rutherford County and have been individually observed growing within two specific cedar glades. Doing a brief internet search of these plants will pull up a scarcity of information along with a few grainy photos, which speaks to their rarity. These two humble gems are not showy or sexy in plant terms, and could so easily have been lost in the sea of green, brown and gray that carpets the glade floor. As one who constantly stares at the ground looking for cool rocks or some unique horticultural specimen, it simply amazes me that either plant was found.

Braun's Rockcress was located growing on a 40-acre hilltop in Rockvale, known locally as Versailles Knob. My house sits in the shadow of this majestic little hill and has been the subject of many a painting by this avocational artist. Running Glade Clover was found within Rocky Hill Road Glades, a one-acre remnant of a once massive cedar glade habitat found on the north-end of the county. Both of these places, home to these rare treasures, were in the crosshairs of private development. To my pure delight and pleasure, recent events have transpired that will forever protect these precious sites from the ruinous actions of bulldozers, excavators and rock crushers.

Earlier this month, the Tennessee House of Representatives unanimously passed House Bill 126, sponsored by State Rep. Greg Vital, R-Harrison. The bill approves the creation of four new state natural areas, including Versailles Knob and Rocky Hill Road Glades, along with the expansion of six existing natural areas, three of which are located here in Middle Tennessee. In a political environment rife with tension and division, the passing of this bill is a tremendous statement of unity and commitment to preservation. If plants could talk, they would certainly be singing loudly with songs of thanks and gratitude.

Daily, I see big yellow bulldozers parked on roadsides near glades on my way to work, only to see on my way home that every last tree, twig, shrub, and blade of grass has been pushed into piles waiting to be ignited and erased from the face of the planet. Sites like this cause me to grieve deeply as I reflect on the turtles, frogs, salamanders, field mice, chickadees, trees, flowers, shrubs and grasses that have been destroyed in the blink of an eye. Once gone, the wonderful array of plants and animals that lived there will fade from our memories just as quickly the glade they called home was bulldozed, burnt, and quite literally blasted out of existence. What took nature millions of years to create can be eradicated by man in mere hours. The destruction of the glades is a true ecological tragedy no less significant than the deforestation of the Amazon. Yet, for the most part, it goes on almost completely unnoticed and without so much as a whisper of disapproval. The last time I checked, nature isn't creating any new cedar glades. So, when the last cedar tree is bulldozed and burnt and the remaining rock get blasted into a dusty oblivion, then it's game over.

Continue to next page

As a self-professed conservationist and a voice for the voiceless plants and animals that live in the glades, I want to personally commend our elected officials for recognizing the importance of these threatened habitats. This is a great win for nature here in Middle Tennessee and the preservation of Versailles Knob and Rocky Hill Road Glades will ensure that Braun's Rockcress and Running Glade Clover, along with countless other plants and animals, will continue to live happily ever after in their undisturbed cedar glade homes.

For questions or comments, please feel free to reach me at the UT/TSU Rutherford County Extension office. Our main office line is 615-898-7710 and my email is jski@utk.edu. Additionally, please check us out on the web at rutherford.tennessee.edu to learn more about upcoming classes and all other Extension programming activities that we offer.



(Versailles Knob, original paintings by J. Stefanski)