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BEAUTY SO RARE

SURVIVORS OF THE LAST
ICE AGE, OUR ALPINE FLOWERS FACE
A NEW THREAT

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENDAN WILTSE

Deer's hair sedge on
Algonquin Peak.



*VISITING THE
ALPINE ECOSYSTEM
ON THE ADIRONDACKS'
HIGH PEAKS IS LIKE
TAKING A TRIP BACK
IN TIME.*

The plants that grow in this beautiful yet harsh environment are remnants of the past. When the glaciers retreated from our region roughly 12,000 years ago, much of the Adirondacks would have been covered in these arctic-alpine plants. Slowly the climate warmed, soils accumulated and trees took hold in elevations under 4,800 feet. Over time, the arctic-alpine ecosystem shrank in size, to the point where today you can find alpine plants on just 16 summits in New York State. These plant communities, now relatively isolated on Adirondack summits, are often referred to as “islands in the sky.”

Clockwise from above:
Lapland rosebay. Black crowberry fruit. Alpine goldenrod. Alpine sweetgrass. Bog laurel.





Cotton grass and some 22 other fragile alpine plant species grow on isolated Adirondack summits, often called "islands in the sky."



EACH YEAR, TENS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE VENTURE INTO THE ADIRONACKS' ALPINE ECOSYSTEM— THAT'S MILLIONS OF FOOTSTEPS THAT COULD DO DAMAGE.

Alpine plants have adaptations that allow them to survive extremes in temperature, soil moisture, wind and a short growing season. Over the last century, as humans began to travel to these summits, the plants have faced the additional challenge of trampling. In some cases, a single footstep can destroy many years of growth. Each year, tens of thousands of people venture into the Adirondacks' alpine ecosystem—that's millions of footsteps that could do damage.

The late scientist and hiker Ed Ketchledge, or "Ketch," as he was known, was passionate about alpine plants. He started what is arguably one of the most successful conservation initiatives in our region.

Ketch noticed that hikers' trampling was impacting large areas of the Adirondacks' alpine ecosystem. In the 1960s he began researching methods to restore these areas, eventually enlisting thousands of volunteers to carry seed, fertilizer and lime to the summits to stabilize soil and help the plants to reestablish. In 1990 Ketch, with the Nature Conservancy, Adirondack Mountain Club and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, helped launch the Adirondack Summit Stewardship Program, which today funds stewards on five High Peaks summits during the busiest months. These stewards have educated more than 400,000 hikers about fragile alpine flora.

Inspired by Ketch's work and the stewards' dedication, in 2015 I started New York Alpine Plants & People, a photography project with the goal of capturing the beauty of alpine-zone plants and sharing the stories of the people who work tirelessly to protect them. All of my images are donated to the Adirondack Summit Stewardship Program. Initially, the project was supposed to happen over one summer, but it's now a long-term project that will continue for many years.

Do your part to protect our rare and important alpine plants by walking only on solid rock surfaces while above tree line and sharing this message of stewardship. Use #NYAlpine on social media to share your images of alpine plants; see www.adk.org/summit to learn more. 🌿

Photographer Brendan Wiltse is the science and stewardship director of the Ausable River Association and a former High Peaks Summit Steward. He lives in Saranac Lake.

Below, top to bottom: High mountain blueberry. Mountain sandwort. Facing page: A snowshoe hare munches deer's hair sedge. *Diapensia*.



