



July 6, 2006

Eye on The Environment: Searching For Plants and Animals In Swan Valley Wetlands

By Anne Dahl for The Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

The search is on for the rare aquatic water howellia, the tiny, white lobelia that grows in Swan Valley wetlands. Botanists and volunteers are fanning out this month with aerial photos, maps, compass, waders and clipboards to search the hundreds of shallow ponds and wet meadows where this tiny plant is found.

This is an effort by the Flathead National Forest to determine the range and habitat requirements of *Howellia aquatilis*. Forest Service botanist Linh Hoang is leading a contingent of field researchers who are tallying and mapping the plants' locations in ponds on national forest land, while Plum Creek biologist Henning Stabbins and volunteers are surveying ponds on timber company lands.

Water howellia seems to thrive in the Swan Valley. It grows in over 100 ponds here but almost nowhere else. It's known to inhabit a few other ponds in western Montana and a handful of wetlands in Northern California, Idaho and Washington.

This delicate, rare plant grows and blooms in thigh-deep to ankle-deep water, but the seeds need dry ground to germinate. When the last glaciers retreated from the Swan Valley, they left thousands of dips on the valley floor. These depressions hold snowmelt that slowly drains after the spring rains subside.

As every bushwacker knows, if you try to walk a straight line in early July anywhere across the Swan Valley, you'll wish you were wearing waders. We may have a thousand of these vernal ponds (no one has counted), which hold water in spring and early summer but draw down and dry out by late summer and fall.

Water howellia's stems are long, fragile threads. The leaves are usually alternate on the stem and about the size and shape of limp larch needles. Howellia has two flowers, an underwater green star shaped flower and a showy white flower that floats at the surface. If you know the blue lobelia often planted in hanging baskets, you'll recognize this white version.

To see the one-eighth-inch star shaped flowers, you'll have to stand in the water and bend over to examine the stem. But you can sometimes spot the larger white blossoms from

shore—if there is a good crop and your eyes are sharp. The white blossoms are about half the size of your littlest fingernail.

Howellia can be found growing among a wetland sedge common to the Swan Valley (*Carex vesicaria*), hemlock water parsnip (*Sium suave*), with its creamy blossoms that tend to shoot up from the pond like white fireworks, cattails (*Typha latifolia*), that rattle as you wade through them and many other strange and lovely water loving plants that share habitat with some of our smaller and more unusual local creatures.

Howellia likes a pond with a firm bottom. But the western painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta*), common pond residents in Northwest Montana, like soft bottomed ponds, where they burrow to hibernate in winter. The turtles can be found in ponds that hold water all year. Perhaps the ponds that dry out in summer accumulate less decomposed vegetation on the bottom than ponds that stay wet year-round.

The books say male painted turtles can reach seven inches in length, while the females may reach nine inches. But I'm sure I've seen a twelve-incher out there somewhere. With their shiny shells reminiscent of flattened WWII helmets, these reptiles are easily spotted sunning on logs. Sometimes several will line up, with the littlest turtles half submerged at the log's low end and the larger ones taking the drier spots out of water.

The turtle's bottom shell is "painted" in a gorgeous red and yellow pattern. You can catch these turtles fairly easily (ask a kid for help) and lift them overhead to admire their undershells.

I'm no authority on turtle ethics, but it seems right to help turtles cross the road. It makes sense to put them down in the direction they are headed and let them continue on their slow and arduous journey, rather than "rescuing" them by hauling them back to some pond they may have just left. Turtles bury their eggs in nests they excavate on dry land, and I imagine when they leave their pond they have a destination in mind and feel a sense of urgency to get there.

Another local pond critter is worth noting for its creepiness. The giant water bug (family *Belostomatidae*), is one-to-two inches long, flat, dark brown and unfriendly looking. The giant water bug reminds me of a long fingernail recently slammed by a hammer.

The monster I found gripping my bare toe was definitely a two-incher. I was wading in waist deep water with my feet in ankle deep muck when it clamped on. I'm assuming the giant water bug that attacked my toe didn't realize it had a foot and leg attached capable of flinging it out of the water. The bug's thick front legs are designed for grasping prey: other insects and small vertebrates. Its four back legs are shorter and the wings, which are usually flattened against the body, appear hard.

I wasn't bitten, but the Peterson insect field guide says these oversized bugs can inflict a painful bite. Apparently giant water bugs sometimes leave the pond, fly about and are

attracted to lights. But I've never heard of anyone seeing these impressive creatures in the air, and I've only encountered the one in the water.

To end on a friendly note, it's fun to find long-toed salamanders (*Ambystoma macrodactylum*) in and around our wetlands. These common amphibians can be spotted under or around damp rotting logs. They are dark skinned with a yellow or green stripe down the middle of the back. The adults are two to 3.25 inches in length.

You probably won't find a salamander if you are fishing successfully, because they usually breed in fish-free ponds. But if you take a dip net and waders with you instead of a fishing rod, our thousands of wetlands are pleasant places to explore on hot July days.