

Roses are red, most of the time

Examining a rare Brier Island perennial in peak season

ENDANGERED PERSPECTIVE
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June through to September is a hallowed time in the natural world, a four-month stretch in which one of our continent's rarest flowers comes into bloom and is a relative of the common rose that you have almost certainly never heard of, let alone seen.

It's known as the eastern mountain avens, a yellow-petalled perennial found in only two places on Earth. The first is Mount Washington, New Hampshire, well within the border of our neighbours to the south. The second, fortuitously, is Brier Island, Nova Scotia.

There are approximately 6,000 of them rooted in our humble province, crowded in eight separate colonies at the very end of the Digby Neck, an appendage of Digby County reaching into the Bay of Fundy. Seven of these colonies reside on Brier Island itself, with the final one located on the mainland near East Ferry, numbering only a few hundred in all.

It teases the imagination to consider how these two populations found themselves on opposite sides of the Gulf of Maine, divided some time ago by climatic or geological events beyond my

expertise, but they're extremely vulnerable regardless and may be genetically distinct from one another, making our Canadian Avens all the more unique.

They say never to keep all your eggs in one basket. Speaking personally, two baskets hardly seem like enough.

The eastern mountain avens are strange in that they prefer habitat with high water tables and poor, mineral soil, often accompanied by a rare collection of plants that enjoy the same. They also require soil which is relatively undisturbed, making potential homesteads scarce and fragile.

We learned just how fragile in 1952 when the largest of their colonies on Brier Island, Big Meadow Bog, was besieged by pioneers hoping to convert the region into farmland.

They dug two drainage ditches before abandoning their agricultural aspiration altogether, robbing Big Meadow Bog of its moisture to this very day.

Besides making the bog less hospitable for our roses in yellow, these ditches set in motion a series of events which have made a bad situation worse.

The drier soil of this drained bog was more welcoming to species of gull, many of whom have taken up residence in the region and built nests overtop avens habitat.

The droppings of these gulls, now littering the region, have enriched the soil and allowed for the invasion of plants non-native



The eastern mountain avens is a perennial that grows 20 to 50 centimetres tall and features a reddish stem and sun-yellow petals.

to the Big Meadow Bog, thus crowding out the eastern mountain avens still further.

This process has played out to varying degrees in colonies elsewhere on Brier Island, causing an overall population decline and placing this flower firmly on the endangered species list.

There are also threats posed by off-road vehicles and the development of roadways and cottages across Brier Island, but these threats, at least, are straight forward and addressed by simple restraint.

Thankfully, there are good people working on behalf of this

dwindling rose, shielding and bolstering its habitat wherever possible.

These include the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute, Acadia University and, of course, the provincial and federal governments, all together engaging in research and putting recovery plans into action.

Besides dissuading hopeless romantics from picking these flowers for their sweethearts, it might be possible to fill in decades-old drainage ditches and undo their damage, stopping the spread of invading plants and

shooing away at least a few gulls. There's also been seed banking efforts and talk of transplanting the species elsewhere, addressing the all-eggs-one-basket issue mentioned above.

All told, I'd say the eastern mountain avens are in good hands, provided we remain diligent in protecting the places they've taken root, prioritizing their survival over our (misguided) need to expand. Most of them grow on private property, which can make conservation difficult, but I choose to have faith in everyone involved, professionals and hopeless romantics alike.