

Valhalla Wilderness Society

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PRESS RELEASE

STUNNING DISCOVERY OF 13 NEW SPECIES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA'S INLAND RAINFOREST

British Columbia (BC), Canada — For many years scientists have been ringing alarm bells that the clearing of tropical rainforest is destroying species of plants and animals that have not yet been discovered. But this tragedy is not confined to the tropics. It is also happening in the temperate rainforests of British Columbia.

Researchers have recently discovered 13 tree-dwelling lichen species previously unknown to science in British Columbia's inland rainforest. Lichens are leafy, shrub-like or encrusting organisms that grow on trees and rocks. Throughout the world, healthy lichen vegetation has come to stand for a healthy environment. Many endangered species, including the spotted owl and mountain caribou, rely on lichens totally or in part. And some lichens are natural fertilizers, aiding the growth of trees by capturing nitrogen.

Working closely with international experts, Toby Spribille, currently based in Germany, and Trevor Goward and Curtis Bjork, both from British Columbia, have been intensively studying inland rainforests from the U.S. border to near Prince George, BC. In several recent studies, they have found that these forests support one of the richest tree-dwelling lichen floras in the world. Indeed, lichen richness may well be the hallmark of British Columbia's inland old-growth rainforests: the number of tree-dwelling lichen species equals or exceeds that of all other plants combined.

One of these studies focused on the Incomappleux Valley, an area near Revelstoke that once harbored a large ancient forest. Here, Spribille found nearly 300 lichen species, including most of the species new to science. "Such rates of discovery of new species are basically unparalleled in northern conifer forests," he explains. "We are definitely looking at a major centre of lichen diversity at a global level that we haven't even begun to fathom or explain." He expects that further research will turn up many more species new to science. Together, the researchers are currently looking at over 40 candidate new species, pending further studies.

Tragically, most of the Incomappleux Valley has been clearcut. What remains is a small tract of ancient cedar-hemlock forest with trees 500-1,800 years old where Spribille conducted his research. But logging company Pope & Talbot has been planning to continue clearcutting these trees. Similarly, ancient forests throughout British Columbia continue daily to fall to the chainsaw, and with them unknown numbers of species that may go extinct before even getting a name. “Every valley has a unique set of species which reflects its special environment and history,” says Spribille. “Each time we go into a new area, there’s no telling what we’ll find.”

“British Columbia has the only Inland Temperate Rainforest in the world,” says Craig Pettitt, of the Valhalla Wilderness Society. “The mountain caribou is in danger of going extinct because of excessive logging. But these new studies prove that many smaller species are also being wiped out with it. It is urgent to stop logging any old-growth over 140 years old.”

For years environmentalists have proposed protecting the Incomappleux and all the remaining intact forest between Glacier National Park and Goat Range Provincial Park. The Valhalla Wilderness Society has now identified the key old-growth forest and mountain caribou habitat of the area in its new Selkirk Mountain Caribou Park Proposal.

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Website for more information including photos and maps: www.vws.org;
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