

## July 2020 Plant of the Month



*Hottonia inflata* Elliot, American Featherfoil; photo by Brian Johnson

July 2020's *Plant of the Month* is one of New Jersey's rarest plants that was discovered this spring by Brian Johnson, a naturalist and field manager for the Natural Lands Trust, the non-profit land preservation organization. Brian's keen sense of the forest has provided a number of very interesting rare plant finds over the years, but the discovery of American Featherfoil is one of the best. While searching for other Coastal Plain species, Brian came across this plant in a nearly inaccessible, flooded landscape braved only by those willing to wade through mud and mire. This find re-establishes the plant in the Delaware Bay region. The plant was found in newly flood sloughs adjacent to the rise waters of the Delaware Bay marshes. Many plants, estimated to be more than one hundred individuals, were observed between early May and late June. The annual plants all but disappeared by mid June.

Featherfoil is a member of the Primulaceae, the Primrose family. It is the only member of its genus on North America. Fernald (1950) described the mid-century distribution from Florida to Texas, north to New England. Mary Hough (1983) identified specimens have been collected from the north counties of Bergen, Morris, Essex, Middlesex, and Monmouth. Late 20th century collections identified populations in Salem, Cumberland and Cape May Counties. The plants described this month may be our only extant population. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program lists featherfoil as S-1, an endangered species designation.

My experience with *Hottonia* has been only as an observer. I spent time in the field exploring peri-glacial depressions and other vernal habitats near the place name Riddleton, in Alloway Township Salem County, with no success. I also remember a slide show given in the 1980s to the Philadelphia Botany Club by our former field chairperson, the late Jim McGrath. Jim had crystal clear photos of the plant growing in the shadow of today's George Washington Bridge, in Fort Lee, Bergen County. Habitat as described by Fernald (1950), Hough (1983) and Stone (1910) is quite pools, wet soils, and ditches. Its annual life strategy and its apparent capability of

disappearing for a generation makes predicting this plant's presence difficult. There are no known uses for this plant. The only way to see this plant is to search the most inaccessible wetlands we have, and hope it appears this year. Otherwise this botanical ghost will continue to haunt the wetlands of our diverse state, someday to return, if someone is there to see it. So we have to thank Brian Johnson for his fantastic botanical discovery.

JRA, 7/2020