

## **ELY? REALLY!!**

Ginny Maffitt, APS Vice-president

Nearly 100 members attended the 2008 Ely, Nevada Annual American Penstemon Society meeting—an unprecedented number searching for nearly invisible penstemons. The tiny mining town lays in White Pine County, home of 20 species growing in conditions ranging from severe to dire. Each day's tour ranged at least 50 miles one way to reach all possible species found among sage brush, shadscale and pinyon pines growing in calcareous soil (think white sandstone) to sand dunes. The weather was sunny, varying from 85 degrees by day to comfortable evenings. The Prospector Hotel staff strived mightily to please our various needs, from replacing the missing microphone to copying various reports and keeping the convention room free of (yes, it's a casino) smoke. Rooms with open windows to bring in the cool night air, also brought in skunk fragrance one night!

Bob Pennington, Meeting Chairman, (proprietor of Agua Fria Nursery in Santa Fe) was bowled over by the onslaught of trip applications and new memberships as word of this trip circulated through the plant community. Academia was represented by BYU, Harvard, Cornell, U of NM, and UTEP (El Paso, TX), U of ID (Moscow) to name a few. New York Botanic Garden retirees, Pat and Noel Holmgren, came. Federal agencies from BLM, Fish and Wildlife and the Forest Service sent representatives. Professional horticulturists such as Rex Harrison from The Springs Preserve in Las Vegas and Merrill Johnson of Great Basin Nursery, Holden, UT joined the fray. Many were botanists, self-trained botanists and avid gardeners, but most were the regular enthusiastic members, about half of whom attended last year's Stanley, ID meeting. Again, the longest traveling were Jane and Barry Porteous of Richmond Hill, Ottawa, Canada.

Our best guess for the large number of attendees was the rarity of the plants in the county. Many were so tiny, a guide truly was needed to find them. Some of their pictures could not even be found on any website—but we fixed that with some wonderful pictures taken. Photographers were invited to send trip pictures to Dwayne Dickerson, who posted them to his website and then emailed it to members.

So, which of the expected species were actually seen? I'll discuss them in the order I photographed them, plus relay some of what others saw. Beginning on Friday, I went scouting with Bob and Jeni Pennington, Nathan Miller, Dwayne Dickerson and Ollie Webb south down Highway 6, turning southeast onto Hwy 318, the White River road. It looked totally unprepossessing for penstemons with lots of *Artemisia tridentata* (big sagebrush) in which they usually don't thrive. A few miles down the gravel road, we actually drove over *P. barnebyi* (in the median, it's unscathed), and then stopped to hunt for more. The trick is to then pick up trash and leave it at road's edge pointing to the 'find' for the next tour group. Just walking over several 100 yards, we found more than a dozen with some in perfect bloom, just budding or already in seed. The flower is mostly pink, very fuzzy and notable with the hugely fuzzy staminode protruding for every passing bee. Each plant is about as big as a fist with leaves the size of a tiny fingernail and flowers slightly larger (I'm not being very scientific about this, but for the full

taxonomic description go the [www.apsdev.org](http://www.apsdev.org), then 'Taxonomy' to read my full treatise on each species; fresh photos of each species will be found there as well). We also found non-blooming *P. palmeri*, checking to see if the cauline (blooming stems) had perfoliate (joined leaves). There is supposed to be a rare variety *macranthus* with mostly non-perfoliate leaves in this county. Dr. Stephen Love (the Bulletin editor) likely found it on Sunday elsewhere. Other neat flowers here were *Phlox condensata*, in a tightly-packed bun plastered over rock faces, a tiny *Cryptomeria* and the rosy bracts of shadscale (*Grayia* or *Atriplex spinosa*). We found more of *P. barnebyi* back along Hwy. 6 on a gravelly bank along with *Abronia fragrans* and a fuzzy *Astragalus* (locoweed). We stopped briefly in the Ward Mt. BLM rec. site and saw *P. deustus* with dirty-cream flowers, much unlike the usual sparkling white. *P. pachyphyllus* was here, about 12" tall with rich purple-blue flowers and lovely silvery, succulent leaves.

Saturday, I signed up for the Great Basin loop trip led by Bob and Phoebe McFarlane. Every car was loaded with carpoolers saving gas; so only about a dozen vehicles went. Crossing Sacramento Pass on Hwy 6/50 at 7,154' elevation, we had a bonanza stop discovering *P. pachyphyllus* and *confusus*. The 6-8" tall *P. confusus* was a violet form, although medium pink ones were found at Connor Pass. We headed on to the headquarters/book store of Great Basin National Park that featured brilliant red *P. eatonii* at the front doors and some good books on local vegetation, minerals and animals. Rebecca Lance's group, with dogs to run, headed up to Mt Wheeler (13,063) and reported finding *P. humilis* and *speciosus*, a tiny one formerly known as *v. kennedyi*. Since a lot of snow had impeded blooming, the larger tours didn't go up. The very rare *P. moriahensis* was also still snow-bound over on Mt. Moriah.

Instead our tour traveled over Lexington Arch road stopping at a falling-down log cabin. This was a 4-pent stop as the group rambled over the hills. I walked around the cabin to find *P. palmeri* and one nice clump of *P. watsonii*, the only one found on the weekend. It makes a wide basal mat, with smallish purple flowers in turtlehead type clusters typical of Section *Proceri* species. Wild-growing *P. eatonii* was found along this road, but the cutest was *P. concinnus*. It is fuzzy, navy blue with pink stripes in the throat and a golden protruding staminode. Its leaves are linear and silver—an excellent desert adaptation. Each plant at maximum was 5" tall and wide, growing well in roadcuts—the penstemon's best friend! We returned over Oceola Pass, through the ghost town of Oceola that had the best sweet-pea scented *P. palmeri* I encountered. *P. rostriflorus* (red, near-relative to *P. barbatus* with shark's head corolla) was seen on the descent by another group.

Sunday, I joined Steve Caicco's tour that eventually ranged into Utah. Steve is a rare-plant specialty botanist with Fish and Wildlife (Reno, NV) who really knows and loves the desert plants. It was such guilty fun to keep bugging him for more plant ID's, even though I'd bought the Great Basin plant book! Just before Connor Pass (7,162') the previous day's tours had found a gravel road loaded with neat flowers. Here we again found *P. pachyphyllus* and *confusus* and another group thought they saw *P. thompsoniae*, a blue-flowered mat-former—bummer, I missed it! It seemed as if this area had gathered all the snow last winter, it was so floriferous. Seen were *Eriogonum ovalifolium* in pink and white, *Erigeron uncialis*, with tiny white daisies, and *Stenotis acaulis* with yellow

flowers and sharp leaves. Scrambling up a rounded rock bluff, we encountered mats of *Castilleja chromosa*, a brilliant orange paintbrush, *Petrophytum ceasptosum*, an unusual matting plant and *Polygala spinosata*, with violet and gold pea-like blooms protected by spines growing over solid rock.

The tour then went south down Hwy 93, turning quickly onto Shoshone Road to low sand dunes, home of *P. immanifestus*. Since its newest name means “unrevealed”, Dr. Noel Holmgren ‘revealed’ his botanic joke on Dr. Jim Reveal, (also on the trip), years ago. It seems that Jim had left this little penstemon as a variety of *P. pachyphyllus*. Some years later, Noel found enough differing characteristics to elevate it to species status, thus “unrevealing” it. This species sprawls under the shade of larger evergreen shrubs such as silvery-needled *Tetradema* (horseweed) with the largest reaching about 6” tall by 12” wide. The flowers were pale to medium pink with one violet form, deep pink guidelines, folded back corolla lips, and golden, fuzzy staminodes—sure to attract those pollinators.

Wheeling back north to Hwy 5/60, we turned east 23 miles into Utah to find the *P. nanus*, seen the day before by the guides. With the GPS numbers, it was found, but only in seed. We backtracked about ½ mile west following another GPS site. There, near the north side of a large pine, was a little colony of the tiniest of penstemons. This is another fist-sized plant with individual flowers and tiny pointed, silver leaves. The corolla is an indescribable color; think of rich pink, with cobalt blue overlaid on the lips, and deeper pink guidelines. The staminode is golden-bearded, but included. Nearby were a white *Townsendia* (daisy) and *Eriogonum ovalifolium* var. *purpurea* (unusual maroon flowers and leaves) and unusual-appearing *Eriogonum villifolius*, as confirmed by Jim Reveal, who specializes in this genus.

Monday, with the meetings concluded, my husband and I drove south on Hwy 93 finding one last penstemon in White Pine County. On Bob McFarlane’s instructions, we bypassed Pioche onto Road 320 to the top of a low pass. We had to drive back before spotting the really tiny *P. dolius*. Its ¾” corolla is a clear blue with white throat and red-violet guidelines, and glandular-pubescent (sticky, fuzzy). The stems creep up to 6” long, and 2” high with silvery, narrow leaves to 1 ½” long. There were several dozen plants scattered on the rocky, road cut, but we would never have spotted them without specific directions. Score of species seen: 14! This was a truly amazing collection for one trip.

There were meetings on all three evenings. Lorraine Yeatts, who volunteers in the Herbarium at the Denver Botanic Garden, gave a wonderfully simplified talk on using a dichotomous key specifically to identify our possible twenty penstemons. Dwayne Dickerson, APS membership chairman, explained COCORAHS.org, a 30 state method of precipitation data collection available for anyone to participate in on the Web. Julie McIntosh of Harvard’s Arnold Herbarium and APS board member presented her photos of penstemon seeds, an ongoing study to possible use in identification of species.

On Saturday, Dr. Noel Holmgren gave the keynote address reviewing his 44 years of field botany, mostly in the Great Basin, earning his informal title of Dr. Penstemon. As someone noted, he’s famous for strolling through a meadow and finding a new species;

witness the 7 new ones found since 1987 publication of Vol. IV of Intermountain Flora. He and wife, Dr. Pat Holmgren are currently finishing Vol. VIII which will finish the series begun by his father and fellow botanists from NYBG. APS president Bob McFarlane conducted the annual meeting (see accompanying article). Dr. Bob Menter presented "Use of GPS with Photography".

On Sunday evening, 2009 Tour Chairman, Dr. Dale Lindgren, previewed the 2009 APS trip to Mexico and offered a pre-signup sheet that quickly filled. Buses will be rented to start from El Paso, TX, each carrying 40 passengers; enough will be rented to accommodate members. Steve Caicco, earlier mentioned as a Fish and Wildlife botanist, explained why White Pine County has so many endemic (occurring only locally) plants, after plaintively saying he felt like he was back defending his Master's degree in front of so many PhD holders in the room!

Bill Gray and Bob Menter topped off the final Sunday evening meeting with wonderful pictures from several contributors. Many of these are available on Dwayne's photo website at [www.picasaweb.google.com/dwaynedickerson](http://www.picasaweb.google.com/dwaynedickerson) for you to enjoy.

Meeting adjourned until 2009 in Mexico!