

Organization performs first vegetation survey in county

By Mike Gates

The Carolina Vegetation Survey performed its first in-depth study of Chatham County last week, focusing on the White Pines Nature Preserve.

The organization is dedicated to learning as much as it can about plant life in North and South Carolina.

"We're a conglomeration of scientists," said Forbes Boyle, who led one of the two teams that worked in the nature preserve.

The eight-day study, which is called a pulse, is one of two planned this year for the Carolina region and the first one to ever closely study plant life in Chatham County.

The team staked their plot near the top of a 300-foot tall bluff overlooking the Rocky River.

"We were told it was 'unplottable,'" Boyle said.

The terrain is filled with steep slopes, slippery, leafy forest floors, fallen trees and more obstacles preventing easy access.

"But we hiked our way up to a ridge nearby, walked across, and here we are," Boyle said.

Pulses are slow and methodical, Boyle said, and they're dedicated to documenting all plant life in an area, except for fungi, moss and lichens.

The survey team goes over 1,000 total square meters during a given pulse.

"Now, we could cover that in six or eight hours by just walking around," Boyle said.

But he added that a lot of information would be lost with that kind of method, undermining the reason they were there.

Instead, the teams cordon off plots of land and begin looking at species one at a time.

Any they can't identify on the spot are taken back to their camp to examine more closely.

The pulses have two goals, Boyle said.

They document more common plants to find out which ones are present throughout the Carolinas.

"But our other goal is to find the more unique species in an area," Boyle said. We were here particularly to study mountain laurel, but we were really pleased to find white pines this far east."

White pines are usually only found in cool climates, according to the Triangle Land Conservancy, which owns the White Pines Nature Preserve as well as a number of other natural areas.

The trees were common in the area during and shortly after the last ice age, but as the climate warmed, they receded north.

In North Carolina, they're usually only found in the mountains, which Boyle said is why he was surprised to find them there.

The survey teams also took soil samples for analysis and testing.

The conservancy volunteered to help the pulse team with their work in the nature preserve.

Leigh Ann Hammerbacher, who works with the Triangle Land Conservancy, said that the organization appreciates the survey team's work.

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Mike Gates photo

Documenting local nature . . .

UNC-Chapel Hill graduate student Bianca Lopez works a soil auger in order to obtain samples of the ground for analysis. Lopez and a number of scientists and volunteers spent eight days documenting local plant life to better understand the Carolinas' resources and natural habitats.

Survey

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"From TLC's standpoint, it's really helpful because they're basically inventorying all of the higher-class plant communities," Hammerbacher said.

Boyle said the data the survey collects can be used by other groups as well.

State and local governments can use what the organization finds to determine how to handle land, and independent groups, such as the Triangle and Conservancy, can know what's on their property.

The plotted pieces of land also stay in place forever, Boyle said.

"That way, if a hurricane blows through, we can see what it's like afterward," said Bianca Lopez, a graduate student from UNC-Chapel Hill who worked on the pulse. "And if that happens, now we have something to compare it to."

Boyle added that having the plots marked forever will also allow future generations to