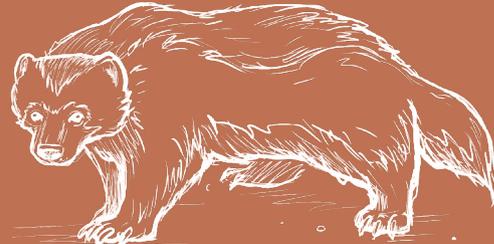
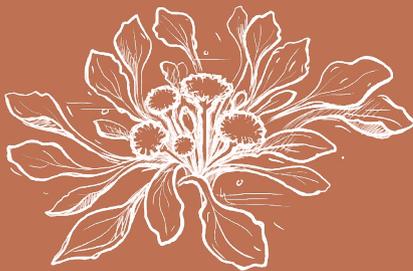


HOARY MARMOT



WOLVERINE



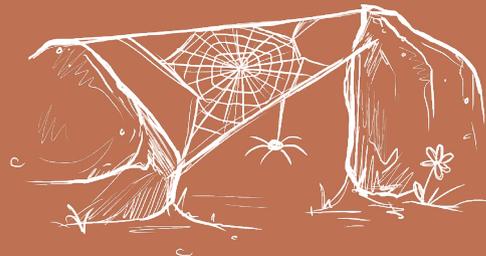
HAWKSBEARD



THAMNOLIA LICHEN



SNOW FLEA



BOULDERFIELD SPIDER

Curious about other flora and fauna sharing your summit?
Consult Ben Gadd's *Handbook of the Canadian Rockies* for more information.

High-Altitude Inhabitants

By Juliette Recompsat

The mountain summits we strive for are, at first glance, barren. Yet high-altitude species of the Rockies call these steep slopes “home.” We tapped into the knowledge of naturalist Ben Gadd to spotlight six alpine dwellers that thrive where it seems nothing could survive.

HOARY MARMOT

Chances are you’ve come across one of these peak dwellers camouflaged against a sunny boulder. Marmots are permanent residents of the alpine, hibernating deep in the rocks and then digging their way out of the spring snowpack to nibble on vegetation all summer. Their dark tails fade into a lighter upper body, giving them a dip-dyed appearance that’s helpful for spotting them. The signature marmot whistle echoes around the talus slopes where they find refuge.

WOLVERINE

The “queen of the high country,” as Gadd describes the stealthy wolverine, roams the alpine zone extensively. Marmots are among the prey of these legendary mountain hunters, though they will also make quick work of any food scraps they can scrounge along routes recently travelled by people. Wolverines have been known to eat their way through alpine camps and mark their territory with a pungent odour, earning them the nickname “skunk bear.”

DWARF ALPINE HAWKSBEARD

This alpine flower holds the charming Latin translation of “crackling dwarf.” Though not quite as adorably eye-catching as it sounds, it’s still a very cheery plant for such an intimidating environment. Alpine hawksbeard takes root in the stony soil of scree slopes and moraines and is said to be the alpine cousin of the sunflower. High above treeline, watch for a wreath of open leaves that surrounds a cluster of dandelion-like yellow flowers.

THAMNOLIA LICHEN

You wouldn’t be blamed for thinking this high-altitude plant comes from an alien world. The high alpine zone is a far cry from the verdant breeding grounds of the tropics where the largest number of the world’s species live. Thamnolia is aptly referred to as “rock worm” and is one of the highest-growing fungi in the Rockies. It grows like a mountain medusa, spreading its pure white tentacles across barren rock and cold tundra.

SNOW FLEA

If the name sounds diminutive, the biological adaptations of this resilient insect certainly aren’t. Gadd gives them the deserving title of “denizens of incredibly hostile places.” Running through the veins of the snow flea is a kind of natural antifreeze that functions like the liquid in your vehicle. Without this, snow fleas couldn’t live at such frosty, high elevations. Look for them on the Kananaskis peak that shares the species’ Latin name – Mt. Collembola.

BOULDERFIELD SPIDER

Ever found yourself scrambling a high peak in fading daylight? Then you’ve likely had the shiver-inducing experience of blundering into the robust web of a boulderfield spider. These industrious creatures stretch their wind-resistant nets high up on talus slopes, where they play out their natural role in managing the insect populations of alpine ecosystems. These spiders drop out of sight immediately at the approach of larger summit dwellers. ▲