

Chasing Fairies - Lia Chalifour

In late March this year, on a steep cliff on the side of Galiano's Mount Sutil, Ken Millard and I went looking for fairies—fairy poppies, to be precise. Against all odds, we found one.

The White fairpoppy, *Meconella oregana*, is a delicate annual that flowers during a brief window of time in very early spring. This little flower clings to the side of steep slopes and, at only a few centimeters tall, can be muscled out by larger herbs and grasses. Its complex habitat requirements, combined with threats from development, recreation and invasive species have led to the White fairpoppy being considered imperilled throughout its natural global range in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and California. It is at the northernmost limit of its range up here in BC, and the handful of populations that remain are scattered across Vancouver Island and the Southern Gulf Islands. So how did we come to find one on Mount Sutil?

We had a clue about where to look. Defying all odds, the Galiano Conservancy embarked on a journey to re-introduce the rare flower to the steep mossy slopes of Mount Sutil a year ago. As no previous attempts to restore *Meconella oregana* in the wild have succeeded, we had to use a combination of education from leading expert Dr Hans Roemer and our own intuition, as we chose the location and methods to plant the seeds. Spreading over 300 seeds the size of ground pepper into three separate 1m x 1m squares on a breezy but sunny day, we put our best foot forward and hoped for the best. A year later we were scrambling back up to the site and scoured the slopes in hopes of finding the tiny plant.

A few potential tiny white flowers poking up; we dared to allow a sliver of hope into our hearts. One in particular seemed to have just the right form, with the basal leaves that looked like little green spoons, forming a rosette from which a tiny stem emerged, bearing a few lance-shaped leaves and a graceful little white flower. The flower was not yet open, and it nodded as though in a deep and gentle slumber.



Our trusty Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team species-at-risk handbook showed the flowers as they were open, pointing straight up to the sky with all petals flung wide in a triumphant serenade to the sky. Even this tiny discrepancy caused us concern as many plant species can be delineated by a simple difference, such as the nodding onion versus the Hooker's onion. (The easiest way to tell those two apart is that one has a flower that nods or hangs downward, while the other's flower points up to the sky.)

We photographed the hopeful *Meconella* nearly to death, feeling guilty as we gently poked and prodded the one potential specimen in our planting area. Could it really be?

The next morning, sitting on the Galiano Conservancy's school bus at 6am, I waited for Ken so we could board the early ferry to Victoria (the bus gets a biennial check-up). Ken came toward the bus with a huge smile on his face—'You'll never believe it.' He had checked his email, and found the most delightful news waiting for him. Hans Roemer had already replied to the email we had sent after the trek, and to our shocked delight, he immediately confirmed that one of the photos we had attached of our nodding beauty was indeed *Meconella oregana*. He congratulated us on our find, and in doing so, put us both on cloud nine. We had done it!

Now that we have discovered re-introduction is possible, we hope to refine our planting methods and work to establish a population of White fairpoppies on Mount Sutil, aiding the recovery of this fragile species. In the face of mass extinctions happening all over the world, it is such an incredible feeling to take part in increasing biodiversity in a place, and helping a species to survive. Together with our seed donors and partner organizations, we hope to change the fate of this delicate flower on Galiano Island.

Here's to believing in fairies. ☘