

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #58 answer: **QUAKER LADIES, BLUETS** (*Houstonia caerulea*)

Patches of this diminutive pale blue flower dot the forest floor and spread on less-used paths. It is named for an 18<sup>th</sup> century botanist and ship's surgeon, William Houston. *Caerulea* means "sky blue," though the four fused petals are just as often purple or white. "Quaker ladies" comes from a supposed resemblance to old-fashioned Quaker bonnets. The shape of the yellow center does suggest gathers around a face.

Bluets have two quite distinct flower types, which Charles Darwin first described. Some plants ("pins") have flowers with long stigmas, short anthers, and small pollen grains. Others ("thrums") have short stigmas, long anthers, and larger pollen grains. Both types have nectar at the bottom of the flower tube, attracting bees, bee flies, and small butterflies.

This makes for a curious partnership in pollination. A bee getting nectar from a thrum collects pollen on its abdomen and spreads it to the stigma of a pin. A bee getting nectar from a pin collects pollen near its head and passes it on to a thrum. Pollen germinates only when the two types cross.

Just in case, there is a second layer of control. Pins are not genetically compatible with pins, nor thrums with thrums; so seeds are viable only when there is a cross.

No one knows how this whole arrangement began, or where it might lead. Next time you see bluets, look down their throats. Compare some thrums and pins.

### WILDFLOWER #59

**Clues:** Dense heads of starry flowers rise from leaves like broadswords.



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