VNPS Piedmont Chapter
WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #84 answer: COMMON CATTAIL (*Typha latifolia*)

Cattails thrive in shallow water, both brackish and fresh. Underwater rhizomes allow them to spread quickly and densely, especially after disturbance, and broken roots drift and regenerate. The apparent stem is made of tightly curled leaves, like a roll of maps. Air spaces in leaves and rhizomes let oxygen circulate to all parts of the plant.

Cattails define the habitat. They are crucial cover, support, nest sites and nest material for most small wetland mammals and birds, such as red-winged blackbirds, coots, rails, bitterns, and marsh wrens. Salamanders, frogs, and fish lay eggs in their shelter. Caterpillars of many moths feed on the leaves, flowers, and seeds. Where cattails crowd out other wetland plants, muskrats, who depend on the starchy rootstocks, can keep them in check.

For at least 30,000 years, cattails have supported humans too. The pollen makes flour, the rhizomes are a vegetable, and even the flowers can be eaten. Meanwhile, the "fluff" of released fruits has a myriad uses, from insulating houses to padding diapers to kindling fire. In World War II, life vests stuffed with cattail fluff in place of kapok could stay afloat for 100 hours. Today cattails are valued for cleansing water tainted with arsenic, lead, and pesticides.

Cattail leaves stand tall, wrapped around the base of the stout stalk. At the top of the stalk, yellow male and brown female flowers, both without petals, form separate cylinders: males on top, females below to catch pollen. This species has little or no gap between the sexes, whereas in narrow-leaved cattail (*T. angustifolia*), bare stem separates the two. After pollination, males fall away. On the female cylinder, hairs spread till the inflorescence bursts, launching tiny fruits on wind and water. One stalk might produce over 200,000 seeds. No wonder cattails rule!

WILDFLOWER #85

Clues: This evergreen pioneer has aromatic wood and berrylike cones.

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