

# ELF EAR BARRENS

## an otherworldly haven for bryophytes

By Brent Charette, Arc Director of Land Stewardship

The stories of the Arc's preserves are often blessed with turns of unexpected benevolence. A perfect example is Elf Ear Barrens, an 87-acre property in Adams county that is about to become one of the Arc's newest preserves. In late 2021, representatives from Dayton Power & Light (DP&L), contacted us because they were seeking a land trust willing to accept the donation of protected mitigation property that had frontage on Ohio Brush Creek.

Last December, I joined a number of naturalists and conservationists gathered to assess the property. The lower elevations of the property were typical of abandoned farm lands in Ohio. Bush honeysuckle and multiflora rose grew in abundance, while the open field areas had become a monoculture of non-native Chinese lespedeza. Nervously, I recognized that this landscape was not Arc of Appalachia preserve material, and I began to wrestle with how we might politely decline DP&L's incredibly generous offer.

We crossed Peterson Road and began ascending the hillside when we discovered an incongruity. The ground beneath our feet showed severe signs of what was likely

decades of overgrazing on naturally poor, thin soil - the backstory of what should have been an environmental disaster. The soil, quite literally, was just beat to death.

But, as far as my eye could see was a veritable moss and lichen garden. In typical Adams County fashion, Mother Nature had taken her licks and turned injury into something that was botanically awe inspiring. I marveled over the varieties, colors, and textures of literally carpets of lichens and mosses that covered the ground. Suddenly I realized, "Whoa. This property DOES have preserve potential after all! Knock-your-socks-off potential!"

Two of Ohio's best naturalists, John Jaeger and John Howard, were already amassing an impressive plant list. They recommended we invite Ohio's leading moss and lichen experts to break down this bryophytic jungle into its component species.

Following our footsteps in April, then, an impressive group of experts took a botanical inventory. One of those botanists was Robert Klips, professor emeritus at OSU. He is the author of the recently published book, *Common*

*Mosses, Liverworts, and Lichens of Ohio*. This extremely in-depth, colorfully illustrated book is destined to do for bryophytes what earlier field guides did for popularizing birds, wildflowers, butterflies and dragonflies. My copy was just delivered today!

*The botanists' findings were absolutely remarkable. They recorded 49 species of mosses and an astounding 118 species of lichens!!! Oh my word, what a wonder! We already had a staggering list of 361 plant species for Elf Ear Barrens and it wasn't even summer yet!!*

I am sure you are asking, "Why call the preserve Elf Ear Barrens?" No, I'm sorry to report there are no Tolkien-inspired Orcs or Ring Wraiths confirmed on the site. But, there IS a diminutive extremely rare lichen, *Normandina pulchella*, the Elf-Ear Lichen, that was found here that serves as this property's namesake.

The story of this land's journey from worn-out farmland to a biologically-significant nature preserve is another tale of good fortune for the wildlands preservation mission of the Arc of Appalachia - with more chapters yet to come.

*Top Left Photo: Cedar glade understory a carpet of reindeer lichen and mosses. Top Right Photo: Red Cedar Glade. Middle Right: Blue Juniper berries scattered on moss. Bottom Right: Elf-Ears Lichen, Normandina pulchella. Photo taken on site by botanist Robert Klips.*



Elf-Ears Lichen