

Liverworts by Rebecca Lexa

If you take a walk around the Cutthroat Climb at the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters, you may notice strange flat green plants on the ground. These are liverworts, and they are among the most primitive types of plant in the world. They were once classified as bryophytes along with the more familiar mosses. Some liverworts are even mistaken for moss, but certain small structural differences make the liverworts truly unique, and they are now grouped separately.

Liverworts got their name because people used to think that they could be used to treat liver ailments, perhaps because of their liver-like shape. We know now that this isn't true. But these little plants are ecologically important, as they help reduce erosion along stream banks and trails, and they offer shelter to insects and other tiny animals. Certain species are even adapted to live in deserts and polar regions, where they are important additions to sensitive habitats known as soil crusts.

You can most easily find a distinctive type of liverwort known as a thallose [pronounced THAL-ohs, rhymes with "gross"] liverwort near the stream that the trail crosses around the eastern bend of the trail. They look a little like tiny spinach leaves scattered on the ground, and on a wet day their bright green color shows up vividly against the darker soil. Living near water helps keep them from drying out, and also helps them in fertilization.

As with all plants, you are not allowed to pick liverworts on the Refuge. But we encourage you to take photos of these unusual ancient plants!