IN THE FIELD

Some might claim that treasuring hunting disappeared with the decline of high seas exploration and quests to unmarked territories. However, those people just might be wrong. Deschutes National Forest's Crescent Ranger District Botanist, Christina Veverka finds ways to break out her explorer hat on a regular basis.

"One of the best parts of my job is treasure hunting for rare and obscure plants," explains Veverka, a botanical Indiana Jones. "When I find a rare plant, it's often accompanied by a botany dance—something along the lines of 'Woohoo, I found it!'"

Veverka's enthusiasm for her field is easy to spot. She speaks of her career with passion and a familiarity that comes with a wealth of experience and practice. While studying for her undergraduate degree in biology and marine science at the University of San Diego, Veverka took a field botany course and fell in love with the work. She continued her education at Idaho State University, where she earned her master's degree in botany and restoration ecology.

Throughout her education, she held seasonal positions to gain on-the-job knowledge. She worked for a variety of agencies, including the Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Conservation Service and a restoration program based out of Miramar Marine Base. She began her career with the Forest Service as a seasonal botany technician on the Ochoco National Forest. From there she became an assistant botanist on the Lassen National Forest. After a brief hiatus from the Forest Service, working as a natural resource coordinator, she returned to the agency in 2008 to assume her current position as Crescent Ranger District botanist on the Deschutes National Forest. In total, she's spent over 15 years of her career with the Forest Service.

"The best part about this job is working in the forest," affirms Veverka, who spends much of her time off the clock in the trees as well. An avid outdoorswoman, she enjoys mountain biking, paddle-boarding, skiing, hiking and camping.

A typical field day for Veverka and other botanists often begins by heading into the forest to survey for rare plants. As the day progresses, they might find themselves changing locations to a new site to spray for noxious weeds or collect native seeds. Throughout the field season, Veverka also works with youth crews to

complete restoration projects, such as tree planting. During conservation education field days, she's invented a popular game called "Invasive Invader" to help kids understand the effects of invasive species on an ecosystem.

While any day in the field is a good day for Veverka, one of her favorites was taking a field taxonomy course on the Sisters Ranger District with her fellow botanists.

"I feel so privileged to have experiences like that," believes Veverka. "It's incredible to be able to learn in such a beautiful place."

The beauty of the landscape is never lost on her. For Veverka, the Broken Top backcountry is her favorite area on the Deschutes National Forest to explore. And even when she's not on a botany mission, she still gets excited about running into a rare plant or two.

While botany truly has become a way of life for her, Veverka cautions people looking into a similar career—botany positions aren't always easy to find. She suggests that those interested start by getting a degree in biology with an emphasis in botany. With a more universal degree, people can be flexible to change paths. Veverka also stresses the importance of getting lots of field experience as a seasonal. And while education and training go a long ways, for Veverka the most important part of pursuing a career in botany—the desire.

"You've got to follow your passion," she stresses. "A career in botany really takes perseverance."

Veverka's botanical drive is easily apparent. She's enthusiastic about projects in a way some people might be about their favorite hobby. One of the projects she feels most connected to, was "March Ecosystem Services," a new style of study that paved the way for how Forest Service scientists view an environment. Serving as a new nationwide model for the Forest service, the project looked at an ecosystem in terms of what it provides to humans, such as clean air, water, etc.

Of her current projects, Veverka is most excited about "Survey and Manage Fungi," which allows botanists to target a specific species and then survey for it. Veverka and her fellow botanists chose a rare and unique fungi, for which they are currently in the process of surveying. As with any of her work, Veverka gets excited at the mention of her quest for the rare fungi. No doubt about it, come field season Veverka will be back on the hunt!

"This is so much more than a job or a career," articulates Veverka. "It's a vocation—I'm passionate about it and I love what I do! I feel like I'm doing good work and giving back to the planet."