

Tongass Rainforest Festival

By Karen Dillman, Ecologist, and Mary Clemens, Tongass National Forest

From fiddleheads to fungi, the first annual Tongass Rainforest Festival in Petersburg September 4-7 provided a venue for all ages to explore their interests in the different biota of the Alaskan rainforest. Events were attended by people of all ages from this busy fishing community with over a dozen guided nature walks, lectures, crafts and workshops to choose from.

The festival was organized and co-sponsored by the Forest Service, Petersburg Indian Association, Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, Alaska Cooperative Extension Service, Alaska State Council on the Arts, RuralCap, and many dedicated individuals and businesses of the community. Local artist Annabelle Baker created the 2008 logo, a painting of a skunk cabbage flower. This beautiful work was transferred onto

cloth bags that were sold to help fund the festival.

Inspired by the uniqueness of the Alaskan rainforest, organizers planned the beginning of the festival with a series of short lectures from regional and international experts in the fields of forest pathology, fern ecology, and traditional plant use. Paul Hennon, forest pathologist from the Forestry Sciences Laboratory in Juneau, presented a talk on the importance of wood decaying fungi in the rainforest and how these fungi kill trees, but at the same time create wildlife habitat, build soil, and alter the carbon cycle. Alaska Regional Botanist Mary Stensvold shared her knowledge of

the life cycle of ferns and fern allies (clubmosses and horsetails) that thrive in the rainforest across many habitats. Canadian botanist Nancy Turner, of the University of Victoria, presented a talk titled "The Culture of Forests: Indigenous Knowledge, Use and Stewardship of North Coast Rainforests". Nancy works in British Columbia with the Haida and other First Nations. Throughout the weekend, she enthusiastically shared the knowledge acquired from decades of experience with native plants, native cultures and forest stewardship.



Mushroom dye expert Dorothy Beebee delights in the find a large bolete, both an excellent edible and dye mushroom from the Tongass.



Melanie Chase proudly displays the fairy garden she created at the Tongass Rainforest Festival.

The "Taste of the Rainforest" potluck and Wildberry Cook-off contest was held at the Petersburg ANB Hall on Friday evening. Irish and folk music performed by local musicians called "The Fiddleheads" accompanied the diners as they enjoyed an outstanding display of tasty delights including goose enchiladas, marinated gumboots, steamed fiddleheads, and wild Alaska salmon. Homemade nagoon berry jam competed hard with the other local berries and took 1st place in the jams and jellies category. Along with other categories and prizes awarded, the People's Choice went to *Huckolates*, a memorable dessert of little baked balls of wild huckleberries and chocolate.

Sonja Koukel of the Cooperative Extension Service in Juneau provided pressure gauge testing and

conducted a workshop on how to properly preserve a harvest. Another workshop was offered to local fiber enthusiasts in the process of dying natural fibers with fungi. Artist Dorothy Beebee, co-founder of the Mushroom Dye Institute shared her knowledge and love of fungi for color. The group experimented with some locally gathered fungi, acquiring colors ranging from glacial ice

blue to bright orange and golds. For more information on mushroom dyes and what the Petersburg dyers experimented with can be found at <http://www.mushroomsforcolor.com/>

Themed nature hikes were also popular events lead by local and regional experts and enthusiasts focusing on birds, fungi, lichens, ferns, muskeg plants and traditional plant uses. For children, there were

two special nature hikes as well as activities, including a “make a fairy house” craft time. Dozens of kids used their imagination to create their own fairy houses with locally collected natural materials from the forest and beaches.

Local organizers had so much fun with the Tongass Rainforest Festival that they are already planning for next year!
