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Smokies biodiversity researchers to survey rugged wilderness

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Biodiversity researchers looking to survey as many living specimens as possible in a backwoods haven of the Smokies will have to take more than a walk in the park.

The five-person team four staffers of the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont and an intern from a youth leadership program is scheduled to spend four days beginning Wednesday at the headwaters of the Raven Fork.

They will set up camp next to a deep pool where three streams come together in one of the park's most rugged regions.

Little is known about the biodiversity of the Raven Fork basin. On the North Carolina side of the Smokies near the boundary of the Cherokee Indian Reservation, the area is a little explored wilderness.

The research venture means hiking 4.4 miles with gear and scientific equipment along a trail, then whacking through rhododendron thickets, undergrowth and fallen trees for 2 miles on a steep ridge.

The goal: survey as many living organisms as possible.

Specimens will be analyzed as part of the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, a long-term project to identify the park's estimated 100,000 living organisms.

"It's kind of the Indiana Jones syndrome, except instead of finding gold, we'll be finding interesting critters, maybe some that are new to science," said Jason Love, citizen science director for Tremont.

The lineup of prospects includes salamanders and moths. They'll also have nets for catching dragonflies, and they'll pack leaf litter into paper bags.

"At night we'll be checking light traps, and by day we'll be up early and exploring the best we can," Love said.

One species the team members will be looking for is a federally endangered rock gnome lichen that grows in high-elevation streams.

The Tremont staff will focus on an area in the upper watershed known as the "bowl," which reportedly has some of the largest red spruce trees in the world.

The expedition will be camped at a 4,200-foot elevation.

Since 1997 scientists working with the ATBI project have identified 12,000 organisms in the Smokies, including 5,000 park records and hundreds of species new to science.

The project, managed by the nonprofit **Discover Life in America,** is expected to take another 15 years to complete.