

Habitat exhibit opens at Betty Ford gardens

Exhibit invites guests to learn more about habitats and what can be done to preserve them

Vail Daily staff report
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Betty Ford Alpine Gardens in Vail invites visitors to explore the uniqueness and importance of the natural environment in the newly unveiled exhibition, “Habitat.” Featuring six thematic sections — Life Underground, Dead Wood is Life, Nests, Bug B&B, Key to the Montane, and Homes — that explore how “protecting habitats protects life,” the exhibit is set up at various locations throughout Betty Ford Alpine Gardens. Developed by Smithsonian Gardens and made available by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), “Habitat” will be on display through April 2026.

“We are excited to have ‘Habitat’ at the Gardens through next spring as it can be enjoyed by visitors of all ages,” says Gabe Starr, director of education for Betty Ford Alpine Gardens. “Bug B&B is located in the Pollinator Garden above the Education Center, Key to the Montane is by the Beaver Pond near the top entrance to the

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The “Habitat” exhibit is developed by the Smithsonian Gardens and made available by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. It will be on display from now until April 2026.

Colorado mushroom hunting season looking dry

Beau Toepfer
The Aspen Times

Within the 2.3 million acres of the White River National Forest are a number of fungi species people are about to start searching for.

This mushroom hunting season, however, is looking dry. There hasn't been a lot of rain, and the rain that has fallen has been inconsistent. This has left the soil arid, prevented the growth of fungi, and slowed down decomposition. According to Andrew Wilson, the curator of mycology at Denver Botanical Gardens, fungi grow better and quicker after consistent heavy rain. Fungi need saturated material to grow out of, whether that be the soil or the detritus it decomposes.

“If you're walking along the forest floor and it's all crunchy and crackling, you're not going to find very much,” said Ed Lubow, who's been a mushroom hunter in Colorado and the U.S. for 50 years.

When you see a mushroom,

you see the fruit of a complicated underground system. If you've ever flipped a log and seen white tendrils that look like little cobwebs, that's mycelium, or the “business end” of the fungi, according to Wilson. Those tendrils aren't the roots of the fruit, but instead they function more similarly to the leaves of a tree, gathering nutrients and creating energy.

“Fungi are the best decomposers on earth,” he said.

When the mycelium matures, they sprout up the fruit, which can distribute spores to reproduce. According to him, humans have two mating types, male and female, which have to reproduce to create offspring. Fungi, like *schizophyllum commune*, for example, have 23,328 mating types, and only two have to come in contact to create an offspring.

But when there's no rain or moisture, those fruits never sprout, and no new offspring are created. During arid periods, mycelium will slow down their

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BEAU TOEPFER/THE ASPEN TIMES

Mycologist Andrew Wilson describes a *Russula* mushroom while ACEs Naturalist Isa Haga crouches on the Roaring Fork River on Independence Pass on Thursday.

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Gardens, Nests is in the Meditation Garden, Homes is in the Edible Garden, Dead Wood is Life is next to the Schoolhouse Gift Shop, and Life Underground is in the Back to Nature area close to the Gore Creek.”

Habitats provide homes for all living things — from the tiniest ant to the tallest tree — and plants, animals and other organisms adapt to each other and their environments over time, creating a delicate ecological balance. This balance faces many threats — including pollution, deforestation and climate change — but humans can protect habitats by learning to be better stewards of the

environment. This exhibit invites guests to learn more about topics related to habitats, their importance to life and our ecosystem, and what people can do to help preserve them.

According to Starr, in addition to the six sections, the pika exhibit called “Shifting Habitats” focuses on how climate change is impacting pikas in their habitats. Pikas live in the mountains, where rock slopes meet alpine meadows, and are small creatures that are facing big challenges as a result of their sensitive connection to climate. Exhibit photos were taken by award-winning conservation photographer Kristi Odom, whose work showcases the world of pikas and helps visitors discover what their story reveals

about our rapidly changing climate. Another aspect of the “Habitat” exhibit is a mural of bee wings that Starr hopes kids and adults will use as a backdrop for memorable photos.

Smithsonian Gardens extends its museum experience with exceptional displays that educate people about horticulture, plants, environments and artistic design. Its research and programs promote the ongoing development of collections of living plants, garden documentation and horticultural artifacts. SITES deepens the impact of the Smithsonian by bringing its high-quality content, resources and expertise to people nationwide in collaboration with museums and cultural organizations. To learn more, visit SI.edu and BettyFordAlpineGardens.org.



BETTY FORD ALPINE GARDENS/COURTESY PHOTO

The “Habitat” exhibit has a mural of bee wings that will be a fun backdrop for photos at the Better Ford Alpine Gardens in Vail.

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decomposition rate, and much of it will go dormant.

“Right now, what we need is probably two weeks of good regular rainstorms, and then we’ll probably enter into peak mushroom season,” Wilson said.

“As long as the mountains can continue to see regular monsoons come through later in the seasons and those monsoons have plenty of moisture to deposit onto the mountaintops, mushrooms will keep coming back.”

But climate change has affected the rain patterns in Colorado,

he added, and the Colorado Water Conservation Board confirmed droughts are expected to get worse and more frequent, leading to less consistent mushroom hunting seasons, and also worse wildfires.

It’s not just about mushroom hunting, though. Fungi do more for forests than feeding humans. According to Wilson, they are the foundational element of a process called “coldfire.” Fungi, specifically wood-decomposing fungi, can break down forest detritus without scarring the soil, releasing carbon or causing wildfires.

“Learning how to take these wood decaying fungi to break down woody debris, what you’re doing is you’re replacing fire and a lot of these ecosystems because what forest managers are trying to do is thin out spruce (and other trees and detritus) because we don’t necessarily want the fires to be doing it,” he said.

Wildfires can scar and “sterilize” soil, and it could take up to a decade for plants to be able to regrow, he said. Fungi are also a substitute for pile burns, where forest managers pile ladder fuel and ground fuel into piles to burn, which can sterilize those sections of soil.



CAROLYN POPE/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

A mushroom of the genus *Cortinarius*, subgenus *Dermocybe*, growing in the saturated soil along the banks of the Roaring Fork River on Independence Pass on Thursday.

Fungi also play an important ecological role in feeding animals, especially rodents and squirrels

According to Wilson, there are estimates that humans only know less than 5% of fungal diversity.

“I feel like it’s wide open,” Jess

Loeffler, a CU Denver graduate student studying mycology, said. “There’s a lot of people doing a lot of really cool work ... I feel like advances in technology have really opened up what’s possible (to learn).”

This story is from AspenTimes.com



NATE DAY/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

ACES Naturalist Isa Haga holds a mushroom from the genus *Cortinarius*, possibly the subgenus *Dermocybe* on Independence Pass on Thursday. This mushroom is identified by the cobweb-like structures that cover the mushroom’s gills.



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