

Flower of the Snow
By Anita Carpenter

Winter has arrived. I rejoice for winter is my favorite season. I love being outside experiencing its many moods. It may be a gently falling snow from a snow globe-like shower to my favorite, a howling blizzard with strong northwest winds.

I admire the beauty and peacefulness of a fresh snowfall with its many snow diamonds sparkling on a sunny day under a clear blue sky.

As a tribute to winter, I think about Wisconsin's organisms that are blessed to have "snow" in their names.

The arrival of snowy owls and snow buntings from the frozen north enliven the cold months while the few snow geese that we may have seen in autumn have long departed for the warm, sunny south.

Snow fleas, tiny jumping black specks, are easily overlooked on the cold, white landscape but they are apparent to those curious about moving black specks. Snowshoe hares are larger jumpers whose unique snow tracks reveal their meanderings.

Snowy tree crickets chirp to us in summer but cricket music is now silent. Creeping snowberry, a diminutive evergreen plant, survives winter's harshness under an insulating snow blanket.



Over the years, I've discovered, studied, and enjoyed these snow-named organisms. However, one rare "snow" organism has eluded me. It's a small, easily overlooked plant called the snow trillium or dwarf trillium, whose scientific name is *Trillium nivale*. The trillium name is derived from Latin, "tri" meaning three and *lilium* for "lily", the plant family to which all trillium species belong. *Nivale* is Latin meaning "of the snow".

Five trillium species grace Wisconsin with 26 species found in North America. In general, trilliums are erect perennials. Three is an important number in the taxonomy or classification of trilliums. An individual trillium plant has a whorl of 3 leaves, 1 terminal flower with 3 petals, 3 sepals, 6 stamens and 3 stigmas. Species differ in height, leaf shape and venation, color (not all trilliums have white flowers), habitat preferences and flowering period.

Snow trillium is the smallest and shortest trillium reaching an awe-inspiring height of 3 to 6 inches. It sports a whorl of 3 small, oval, blunt leaves atop its stem. A one-inch wide, small, 3-petaled white flower is atop a 1/2" to 1-1/8" stalk arising from the top of the stem.

Snow trillium is Wisconsin's earliest blooming trillium appearing from March into April - about the same time as the early-flowering skunk cabbage. Snow trillium often blooms when snow is still on the ground - hence its name. It prefers to grow in rich moist woods in limy rich soil which is associated with the Niagara (limestone) escarpment along Wisconsin's eastern border.

Snow trilliums have long ceased flowering when our most common trillium, the large-flowered trillium, *Trillium grandiflorum*, commands our attention. From May into June it carpets rich woodlands statewide with its large showy white blossoms.

Snow trillium is a Wisconsin threatened species so perhaps it is beneficial for the species' survival to be small, short, and easily overlooked.

Even with the challenge of finding this rare, small plant, I hope someday, I will have the distinct pleasure of observing it in the wild.