



Left: *Luzula comosa* flowers and the soft hairs on the edge of the leaf margin and hairy culm, March 30, 2018. Right: *Luzula comosa* with *Sisyrinchium bellum* and *Ranunculus occidentalis* along a roadside, April 17, 2020.

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: by Emily Allen¹ Photos courtesy of the author

Hairy Wood Rush (*Luzula comosa*)

I was out hiking with a local botany group in early February a few years ago when someone pointed at a small, dark green, clumping, grass-like plant and asked if I knew what it was. At first glance, the dark brown flowers made me think it was a *Juncus* species, but looking closer, I saw long hairs on the leaf and culm. This confused me made me wonder if it was, in fact, a grass. I asked Andrea Williams, CNGA's president, for help, and she excitedly told me it was a wood rush! She said she often gets this question in early spring and that in general, when there is a graminoid (grass-like plant) that doesn't quite look like a sedge, rush, or grass and has a visibly hairy culm and leaf edges, it is a wood rush (*Luzula* sp.).

The rush family, Juncaceae, has two genera: the well-known *Juncus* genus and the lesser-known *Luzula*. The key in the Jepson Manual distinguishing the two genera includes the following features: *Juncus* species have noticeably smooth (glabrous) leaves with an open sheath, and their fruits have many seeds, while *Luzula* leaves have hairy margins and a closed sheath and their fruits contain only three seeds each (Baldwin *et al.* 2012). The genus *Luzula* may be derived from the Italian word *lucchiola*, which means firefly or glowworm, a good description for how the light shines through dew drops that cling to the leaf hairs, while *comosa* means “tufted,

furnished with a tuft of some kind” (Calflora.net 2020). Keep an eye out this spring for these charming early-blooming plants. There are several species of wood rush native to California, however there is currently opportunity for further differentiation of species and varieties (Baldwin *et al.* 2012). As recently as 2015, Zika *et al.* proposed two new species of wood rush in California, with potential for further reclassifications.

Hairy wood rush (*Luzula comosa*) is the most common wood rush species in California, and like all the wood rush species in California, it is a perennial. This bunch-forming (cespitose) graminoid can have short rhizomes (Baldwin *et al.* 2012) but usually grows in clumps in wetter areas with partial shade (Calscape 2020). Hairy wood rush can be found in a variety of habitats including meadows, forests, and woodlands throughout much of the state, although it is noticeably absent from the Great Central Valley and most of the lower deserts and Modoc Plateau. The *Jepson Manual* lists the flowering period as June through July, where Calflora.org has the boom period as March through June. I have observed it blooming in several locations in February, so it doesn't hurt to keep an eye out for it at the end of winter. The easiest time to spot this fascinating species is early spring while their flowers are showy and visible, and before the other colorful flowers have begun to bloom.

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