The Upland Pasture

On barren upland pastures of Maine's coastal islands worn thin like threadbare carpets the ground is covered by an assortment of specially adapted plants. Such sterile fields, long since adandoned for the pasturing of cows or sheep, offer a great deal to see. These rocky slopes are usually edged with prostrate junipers waiting to move in. Prickly to bare ankles, junipers thrive in these sun-flooded fields and will eventually fill them up, crowding out all the smaller plants, until they in turn are overshaded by the invading forest and die too from lack of light rather than lack of nutriment.

Observed casually, an upland pasture gives the impression of being sparsely inhabited, of supporting a mat of growth and no tall plants or grasses. But enter on a dewy morning and one will be surprised how wet his feet become in the first few steps. Although hardly noticed until the burden of shining droplets each old stalk and spear of grass holds chills and dampens one's feet, they are seen then to be growing so close it is impossible to take a step without brushing against them. They grow like the first stubble beard of an adolescent boy, but they are the product of old age not of youth. As these stalks dry off in the morning sun, they vanish into the confused background of matted vegetation.

The vegetative cover is dominated by three varieties of plants, one primitive and two flowering. They from a patchwork of colors and shapes that solidly occupy ~~XXXXXXX~~ the ground, but intermingle at the borders between the colonies of each species. The primitive plant is a bluish, gray-green, branching moss-like

organism commomly called reindeer moss - not a true moss but a lichen. A lichen is a working or symbiotic arrangement between a single-celled alga and a fungus in which the concept of discrete individuals as with trees or flowering plants is quite meaningless. Reindeer moss is often seen covering a considerable area with a continuous gray growth, brittle and crackly in dry weather and spongy after a rain.

The two commonest flowering plants that do well in barren Maine fields are blueberries and hawkweed. The blueberry bushes of New England are low-growing tangled shrubs with densely arrayed, small lanceolate leaves that exclude all other plants. In late May or early June before the hawkweed has begun to bloom the pink, panicled, bell-shaped flowers make their appearance. After a while the bells drop off leaving behind tiny hard berries which gradually enlarge as they change from green to pink and eventually in July to a powdery blue, turgid fruit, each with a little crown of sepals to mark the original point of attachment of the flower. Everyone familiar with blueberries knows that when the bloom is rubbed off the underlying skin is a dark navy blue and contains all the dye of the berry, the pulp being almost colorless.

Hawkweed, the other common flower of these impoverished meadows, also crowds out grass but by different tactics. It spreads by runners on the surface of the ground from which at intervals narrow leaves grow into a mat of XXX over-lapping rosettes bristly with white hairs. From the center of each whorl of leaves in June appears a hairy stalk which grows to a height of X half a foot or more and carries a single terminal bud that soon opens out into a flat yellow disc of square-ended petals like a little windmill. This is the mouse-ear hawkweed. When in full flower these hawkweed beds give the field a speckled appearance.

The blossoms seem to have been arranged with purposeful geometric precision, an impression which gains strength as they mature and all go to seed with marvelous unanimity. Then instead of yellow wheels the pasture is dotted with white puffy spheres that seem to float in a disconnected dancing layer above the background of dark green leaves.

Along the borders where junipers are advancing, under the sheltering edges of their spreading branches and in damp meadow hollows, true mosses, the Bryophytes, colonize as microforests of closely packed stems tufted with primitive tiny leaves. At fruiting time each miniature tree grows from its top a smooth golden rod tipped with a knob in which spores develop. From the shapes of these spore cases the common names of several of the mosses have been derived. Thus we have the Crane's-bill and Hairy cap mosses.