

Elephanthead



Scientific name: *Pedicularis groenlandica* Retz.

Common names: Elephanthead, Elephanthead lousewort, Bull elephant's-head, Elephantella, Pink elephants

The next time you come across this plant, take time to look at the shape of its flowers. Each individual flower of this plant strongly resembles an elephant's head complete with ears and a trunk. Many of these small, purple to violet, elephant heads are spirally arranged in dense elongated clusters at the top of each stem.

Elephanthead is a perennial plant with many stout, erect stems that usually grow 10 to 50 cm tall. The fern-like leaves can grow up to 25 cm long at the base of the plant and are reduced in size upward.

Elephanthead is a hemiparasitic plant, meaning it is capable of some photosynthesis but often parasitizes on the roots of another plant for nutrients.

Like the Shooting star which can often be found growing with Elephant's head, this plant is pollinated via 'buzz pollination', where the fast vibration of a bee's wings causes that pollen to fall out of the flower and drop onto the bee.

Elephanthead can often be seen growing by the hundreds and possibly thousands in grass-sedge communities in wet openings and meadows within montane coniferous forests and alpine communities. Although reported in Uinta County, the best chance of spotting this plant in our area is on a hike or horseback ride in the Uinta Mountains. This plant grows throughout the Western U.S.

The genus name, *Pedicularis*, means 'pertaining to lice' in Latin. Many members of this genus are referred to as Louseworts (wort meaning 'plant'). According to some sources, this genus was named because of an old superstition that people or cattle who ate this plant would be infested with lice. Others say it was once believed that this plant could cure people or cattle of lice. Either way, Elephanthead is grazed early in the summer at least by elk. The leaves of this plant were used medicinally by Native Americans.

