For our December EcoQuest, let’s dive into the intriguing world of cattails! Cattails grow in or near slow moving or still waters—think of the margins of ponds, lakes and streams. These species are easy to spot, even in December. They can grow up to 10 feet tall and have grass-like leaves, with long, slender stalks topped with a brown, corn-dog-shaped flowering head.

Cattails, known scientifically as the *Typha* genus, are very useful. Every part of the plant—from roots to shoots, leaves and the fluffy bits—all have practical use. For example, Native Americans would use the cottony fluff for dressing wounds and for pillow stuffing, while the leaves were used for weaving baskets, mats or roof thatching. In addition to practical uses, nearly all parts of the plant are edible. Flour can be made from the pollen or the roots, and the tender young shoots are delicious steamed or fried.

While spotting a cattail might be quick and easy, distinguishing between species is trickier. Colorado hosts three common cattail species, broadleaf cattail (*Typha latifolia*), narrowleaf cattail (*T. angustifolia*) and southern cattail (*T. domingensis*). The flower spikes are very helpful when distinguishing species. The corndog-like part of the spike holds the female flowers, while above is a thinner spike that holds the male flowers.

Broadleaf cattail doesn’t have a gap between the male and female parts, but narrowleaf and southern cattail do. In narrowleaf cattail the male and female spikes are roughly the same length, but in southern cattails the male spike is longer than the female spike. Additionally, narrowleaf cattail is typically taller and has narrower leaves (6-15 mm wide) compared to broadleaf cattail (10-30 mm wide). These species can be difficult to tell apart, especially in the winter when the male flower spike might not be present. If you can’t distinguish the species, leave the genus at *Typha* and take good pictures of the leaves and flower spike.

Cattails are ecologically important as they provide important habitat for animals. If you find cattail, notice what other creatures you might see or hear in the water or perching on the stalks. Wetland habitats are important hotspots for biodiversity so monitoring the species present in these areas is a meaningful endeavor. So, let’s bundle up for a frosty adventure, search for cattails and post our findings on iNaturalist to better understand these useful and ecologically important plants.

**What is an EcoQuest?**

EcoQuests, part of the Denver EcoFlora project, challenge citizens to become citizen scientists and observe, study and conserve the native plants of the City via iNaturalist, an easy-to-use mobile app.

**How Do I Get Started?**

1. Download the iNaturalist app or register online at [iNaturalist.org](http://iNaturalist.org).
2. Take photos of the plants in bloom that you find on your daily neighborhood walk. It is ok if they are weeds! But avoid taking photos of cultivated plants in gardens or in your home.
3. If you are concerned about revealing the location of sensitive organisms or observations at your own house, you can hide the exact location from the public by changing the “geoprivacy” of the observation to “obscured.”
4. Post your findings on iNaturalist via the app.
5. Your observations will automatically be added to the Denver EcoFlora Project.
6. You can add an identification to your photo when you post your findings on iNaturalist, or leave it blank for others to identify.

**What is the Goal?**

The EcoFlora project is designed to meaningfully connect citizens with biodiversity, and to assemble novel observations and data on the metro area’s flora to better inform policy decisions and conservation strategies.