

Rare Orchid Finds Safe Haven

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THE WHITE FRINGELESS or “monkey-face” orchid (*Platanthera integrilabia*) is native to the southern Appalachians and is considered one of North America’s rarest terrestrial orchids.

For terrestrial orchids, the soil means the difference between life and death. The white fringeless orchid prefers an area with black, mucky, acidic, organic soil found most frequently in bogs at the head of streams or seepage slopes. These mucky areas need to be wet nearly all of the year and over most years.

On the August day that County Manager Tony Avery and I visited Wayne Holcombe’s TREASURE Forest in Marion County, Alabama was suffering from another sweltering summer day of a drought. Sun-baked roads and a dry creek bed did not bode well for the rare orchid discovered a few years earlier on Wayne’s place.

However, as Tony cut a path through dense foliage, we noticed the ground becoming spongy, mossy and thick with moisture. As we stepped under a canopy of deciduous trees with filtered sunlight, we were soon rewarded with the unexpected beauty of the white fringeless orchid in bloom.

Finding the orchid on his property was a “pleasant surprise,” said Holcombe. Tony had been reading about the plant and thought there was a good possibility that it existed in the swampy area on Wayne’s TREASURE Forest. He talked to Wayne about it and, sure enough, they found a healthy population there a few years ago.

A status survey of the plant in 1991 found only 30 populations remaining from the original 65 sites first identified from literature and herbarium specimens. These 30 populations are in five states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, South Carolina and Tennessee. Ironically, the



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Wayne Holcombe with Marion County Manager Tony Avery.

site-specific plant was spared in Marion County only because a prior landowner found the land too wet for logging equipment.

Known in the Cumberland Plateau as “Ole Monkey-face,” the plant was first recognized as a distinct species and genus in 1941, when Dr. Donovan Correll published “Two New American Orchids” The new identity contributed to its first brush with extinction as botanists rushed to collect hundreds of flowering specimens of the “new” plant for herbariums.

In a February 1996 *Orchids* magazine article, Dr. Lawrence Zettler discussed the mystery behind the disappearance of the white fringeless orchid. “By 1950, the orchid had become noticeably scarcer and during subsequent decades had been

exploited by nurseries. Other factors were habitat destruction, invasion by kudzu and browsing by deer and feral hogs. Further complicating the problem is the orchid’s dependence on a single fungus species (sphagnum moss) to complete its life cycle in the natural habitat.”

A perennial herb that grows from a single tuber, it has two to three large strap-shaped leaves, largest at the base and then decreasing in size as they ascend to the smooth light green stem. White flowers grow in a loose, round to elongated cluster at the top of the stem. There are normally six to 15 flowers in each cluster. Flowers are white with a distinctive smooth lip and very fragrant sweet scent.

This orchid is typically found in red maple/black gum swamps and along sandy, damp stream margins; also on seepy, rocky thinly vegetated slopes. Leaving a streamside management zone when harvesting timber is critical to its habitat.

Wayne Holcombe’s 80-acre TREASURE Forest is southwest of Hackleburg in the Rocky Top community. Purchased in 1995, it is part of the original home place and adjoins his parent’s TREASURE Forest. It had been cutover when he bought it, so an aggressive management plan was in order. He now has a healthy combination of pine plantations, mixed hardwood stands and several acres of food plots, SMZs, roads and firelanes. Timber is his primary objective and wildlife habitat enhancement is secondary.

On that hot August afternoon, Mr. Holcombe was pleased to see that the delicate plants were not only surviving the drought, but also were blooming abundantly. Though not required to preserve the plant, he is easily able to provide it safe haven simply by following Alabama’s Best Management Practices for Forestry, which recommend adequate streamside management zones in all future thinnings and harvests.

SMZs are buffer zones of vegetation along water bodies that collect sediment from soil disturbance, keep water shaded and provide shelter to wildlife. Voluntary compliance with this practice will pay great dividends to any forest landowner and may offer protection to a true “Hidden Treasure” on your property.