

Natives to Know!

Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera leucophaea*)

By Joyce Tuharsky

The Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid is an impressive rare orchid native to eastern North America. At one time, it was far more common: hundreds of its flowers could be seen blooming in prairie habitats. It has now declined by more than 70 percent from original county records.

Growing up to 4 feet high, this orchid has an upright leafy stem and light green leaves which sheath the stem. The leaves are alternate, 2-8 inches long, elliptical to lance-shaped, with smooth edges and texture, and faint parallel veins.

When in bloom, large showy clusters of 5-40 creamy white fringed flowers extend above the leaves. Each flower (1 -1 ½ inches across) has a 3-part fringed “lip” that serves as a landing platform for pollinating insects. The flowers also have very deep “nectar spurs” (1-2 inches long) that contain lots of nectar; but which only large insects, such as Hawkmoths with long probosci (mouthparts), can reach. The flowers open gradually, starting from the bottom of a stalk upward, lasting anywhere from ten days to three weeks. Pollinated at night, the orchid attracts flying insects with its fragrance.

The orchid’s seeds are almost dust-like and are easily carried aloft by the wind, traveling considerable distances. While the seeds are produced in huge numbers, germination and seedling growth depend critically on the presence of special fungi in the soil.

This orchid is a long-lived perennial that



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More information and photos at:

[http://www.centerforplantconservation.org/collectio
n/cpc_viewprofile.asp?CPCNum=3520](http://www.centerforplantconservation.org/collectio
n/cpc_viewprofile.asp?CPCNum=3520)

[http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/pl
antx/pwf_orchidx.htm](http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/pl
antx/pwf_orchidx.htm)

[http://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/rareplants/
profiles/tep/platanthera_leucophea/index.s
html](http://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/rareplants/
profiles/tep/platanthera_leucophea/index.s
html)

does not begin to reproduce until it is 3-7 years old. Its tuber root stalk helps it survive grass fires. In fact, fires and rain stimulate the plant to grow and flower. The plant emerges in May and begins flowering by late June. However, this orchid may not flower every year. It can lie dormant for several years between flowerings.

Formerly widespread in wetlands, fens, swamps and tallgrass prairies east of the Mississippi River, the Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid is now listed as a federally threatened species. The decline is the result of habitat destruction, over-collection, competition from non-native species, and fire suppression. Also, the increasing use of pesticides may be impacting both its pollinators and the soil fungi needed for seed germination.

The Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid is now known to persist in about 60 populations in six states. Most of these populations are located in Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan and Ohio.