



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*
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Yellow Fringed Orchid

(*Platanthera ciliaris*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Of the 52 native orchid species in Alabama (Alabama Plant Atlas), *Platanthera ciliaris* is one of the largest and most spectacular. The plants are two to four feet tall, with a large cone-shaped terminal raceme of 30 to 75 dark yellow or orange flowers. Flowers have a fringed lip, about an inch long. As they develop, the flowers have the curious habit of rotating 180 degrees to move this lip to the bottom of each flower, where it seems to function as a landing platform for large butterflies and other insect pollinators.

The range of yellow fringed orchid is very large, from Michigan to New England, south through all of the eastern states, west into Oklahoma and eastern Texas. In Alabama it occurs nearly statewide. Flowering is in late summer, mainly from July into September. The large bright orange flower clusters are easy to spot in pitcher plant bogs, freshwater marshes, moist pine forests, and other open, acidic sites.

Like many herbaceous plants that are found beneath pine trees, yellow fringed orchids are fire-dependent. They rely on periodic burns for nutrient release and to maintain the open, sunny growing conditions which they require.

Cherokee and Seminole Indian tribes collected and used yellow-fringed orchids for medicinal purposes. The roots were used to make infusions to treat intestinal issues. The tuberous roots were also used for snakebites, and the flowers were remedies for digestive problems.

Orchids are true flowering plants, and they produce tiny, nearly microscopic seeds with almost no nutrient reserves for germination. They have developed mysterious, special relationships with soil fungi, which assist with germination and nutrient absorption. These fungal relationships make terrestrial orchids, including *Platanthera ciliaris*, extremely difficult to transplant.

Yellow fringed orchids should be left wild and free, undisturbed in Alabama's glorious piney woods and pitcher plant bogs. Future visitors, including the swallowtail butterflies, will be grateful. ♣



Photo by Fred Nation