



# Palmetto





# Fringed Orchids of August – *A Journey to North Florida*



Article and photos by Roger Hammer

---

*What's nice about North Florida* is that it is the least-developed part of the state. There is still a relative abundance of Old Florida to be seen and enjoyed, and a plenitude of undisturbed natural habitats protected within a number of state parks and national preserves that dot the region. And, there may be no prettier vistas in all of Florida than the longleaf pine flatwoods that stretch for endless miles across the rolling hills in the northern parts of the state.

*Above, top to bottom:* Michelle Briois-Hammer stands beside a waist-high flowering plant of the yellow fringed orchid in Jefferson County, Florida; the glistening flowers of the white-fringed orchid (*Platanthera blephariglottis* var. *conspicua*) stand out among the yellow-flowered species.



Unless you're in tune with native plants, people don't think of orchids when they envision North Florida, yet nearly half of Florida's more than 100 native orchids occur in the northern third of the state.

The genus *Platanthera* (meaning "wide anther" in Latin) is represented in Florida by seven species and three naturally occurring hybrids, and typically in August each year the flatwoods, bogs, and even roadside ditches become emblazoned with their flowers. They are without a doubt among the prettiest flowering orchids one can find anywhere.

Because none of them occur further south than the central peninsula, in the summer of 2011 my wife, Michelle, and I went on a 4-day road trip to admire and photograph these floral beauties. I had not seen them since August 1973 when I drove my 1965 Volkswagen van to southeastern Georgia, along with detailed directions from Dr. Carlyle Luer, where I photographed them in the beautiful pine forests of Charlton County, about fifty miles north of the Florida border. I only stayed a few days, sleeping in my van at night, because in 1973 they'd not seen many hippies sporting a long ponytail in those parts before, and I was refused service in every single motel and restaurant that I entered. Even at a roadside marketplace, the tobacco-chewing country lady behind the counter asked if I was just passing

Continued on page 6



Above: *Platanthera x bicolor*. The rare, natural hybrid between the yellow fringed orchid and the white fringed orchid typically produces two-toned flowers.



Above, top to bottom: The yellow fringed orchid (*Platanthera ciliaris*) produces eye-catching blossoms ranging from rich apricot to pale orange; the quaint flowers of the crested fringed orchid (*Platanthera cristata*) are crowded atop the flowering stems.

## Fringed Orchids of August

through, and when I answered affirmatively, she replied in a long southern drawl, “Well, that’s good!” Luckily, times have changed since those days because I’m still a hippie with a long ponytail.

On this trip we stayed in the quaint little town of Thomasville, Georgia, north of Tallahassee, where we met up with Gil Nelson, Wilson Baker, Virginia Craig, and Carol Lippincott, all well versed in North Florida botany and other wild things, so we were in exemplary company.

The first morning we drove south to Jefferson County, Florida and visited a privately owned, 400-acre longleaf pine forest that is managed for quail hunting. The owners very graciously gave us special permission to botanize on their property. Because they manage the land to create prime quail habitat, the property is on a prescribed burn regimen, which also creates superlative habitat for native wildflowers, including an impressive array of wild orchids that benefit from the understory fires that thin out competing vegetation. Just standing in one spot, while quail whistled bob-WHITE all around us, we could see three species of *Platanthera* orchids, with their flowering spikes standing above the surrounding vegetation. They are commonly called “fringed orchids” because of their fringed lips, but another poetic colloquial name is “bog torch,” and the orange-flowered species do resemble fiery torches protruding from the wet ground.

The first species we saw was arguably the prettiest, and is called the yellow fringed orchid, *Platanthera ciliaris* (the species name is Latin for “eyelashes,” in reference to the fringed lip). The flowers of this handsome species range from rich apricot to pale orange, depending on the individual plant. Spicebush swallowtail butterflies (*Papilio troilus*) were seen visiting the flowers of some plants. Close by was the white fringed orchid, *Platanthera blephariglottis* var. *conspicua*, with conspicuous snow-white blossoms sporting their characteristic frilly lips (the species name is Greek, meaning “tongue like an eyelid,” alluding to the frilly lip that resembles eyelashes). Because they were flowering close to one another, there was a good chance we would find the natural hybrid between these two orchids and, sure enough, it wasn’t long before the troupe of intrepid botanists discovered several of them interspersed with the two parent species. The hybrid is typically two-toned yellow and white, and is called *Platanthera x bicolor* (the ‘x’ in the botanical name indicates a hybrid, and bicolor refers to the two-toned flowers). According to Paul Martin Brown (2002), flowers of the hybrid can either be lemon, pale coffee, or bicolored. Wunderlin (2011) reports it as rare in the counties of Bradford, Clay, Escambia, Madison, and Nassau, but we were in Jefferson County, where it apparently has never been vouchered. Wherever the two parents flower in close proximity, hybrids can be expected throughout their range across the East Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plain. Other members of this genus hybridize as well.

We were also elated to find several flowering plants of the crested fringed orchid, *Platanthera cristata* (the specific epithet means “crested” in Latin, and refers to the crest of a bird, alluding to the fringed petals that resemble a cock’s comb). The flowers of this species are orange, and decidedly smaller than the other species growing nearby.

Although native orchids were the objects of our desire, it was impossible to ignore the eloquent turk’s cap lilies (*Lilium superbum*) scattered around in the understory, with bright orange-and-yellow, speckled, eye-catching blossoms towering above our heads. At another location later that afternoon, we were treated with some flowering roadside plants of Chapman’s fringed orchid, *Platanthera chapmanii*, named to honor the noted Florida botanist, Alvan Wentworth Chapman (1809–1899).

Historically, unbroken stands of pine flatwoods blanketed the southeastern United States, but today one must seek out state parks, national forests, and private land holdings to see samples of this richly diverse and important habitat. Next August, pack up your camera and head for North Florida’s beautiful piney woods. You won’t be disappointed, even if you don’t find any flowering orchids. The first two weeks of August are best for fringed orchids.

### Author’s Note

Paul Martin Brown (2005) gives *Platanthera blephariglottis* var. *conspicua* species status, as *Platanthera conspicua*, and refers to the hybrid between *P. conspicua* and *P. ciliaris* as *Platanthera x lueri*. Charles Sheviak, in the *Flora of North America* (2002), recognizes the taxon as *P. blephariglottis* var. *conspicua*, and maintains the hybrid as *P. x bicolor*, as does Wunderlin (2011). The author would like to thank Dr. Richard Wunderlin and Dr. Bruce Hansen for taking the time to review this article prior to publication.

### About the Author

Roger L. Hammer is a retired professional naturalist and author of *Everglades Wildflowers*, *Florida Keys Wildflowers*, *Exploring Everglades National Park*, and *Florida Icons – 50 Classic Views of the Sunshine State* (Globe Pequot Press). He was the keynote speaker at the Florida Native Plant Society’s 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, and was the recipient of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Award from the Dade Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society, and the Green Palmetto Award in Education from FNPS. In April 2012 he received an honorary Doctor of Science degree from Florida International University. Roger lives in Homestead, Florida with his wife, Michelle. He will be a keynote speaker at this year’s FNPS Annual Conference in Jacksonville.

### References Cited

- Brown, Paul Martin. 2002. *Wild Orchids of Florida*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL
- Brown, Paul Martin. 2005. *Wild Orchids of Florida*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL
- Luer, Carlyle A. 1972. *The Native Orchids of Florida*. New York Botanical Garden, New York, NY
- Sheviak, Charles J. 2002. *The Flora of North America*, Volume 26. Oxford University Press, New York, NY
- Wunderlin, Richard P. and Bruce F. Hansen. 2011. *Guide to the Vascular Plants of Florida*, Third Edition. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL



The Florida Native Plant Society  
PO Box 278  
Melbourne FL 32902-0278

#### **The Palmetto**

(ISSN 0276-4164) Copyright 2014, Florida Native Plant Society, all rights reserved. No part of the contents of this magazine may be reproduced by any means without written consent of the editor. *The Palmetto* is published four times a year by the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) as a benefit to members. The observations and opinions expressed in attributed columns and articles are those of the respective authors and should not be interpreted as representing the official views of the Florida Native Plant Society or the editor, except where otherwise stated.

#### **Editorial Content**

We welcome articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information.

**Editor:** Marjorie Shropshire, Visual Key Creative, Inc. [palmetto@fnps.org](mailto:palmetto@fnps.org) • (772) 285-4286 • 1876 NW Fork Road, Stuart, FL 34994

**The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society** is to conserve, preserve, and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

#### **Official definition of native plant:**

For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

#### **For more Information:**

<http://fnps.org>

**To become a member**, contact your local Chapter Representative, call, write, or e-mail FNPS, or join online at [www.fnps.org/join](http://www.fnps.org/join)

#### **Follow FNPS online:**

Blog: <http://fnpsblog.blogspot.com/>

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/FNPSfans](http://www.facebook.com/FNPSfans)

Twitter: [twitter.com/FNPSonline](https://twitter.com/FNPSonline)

LinkedIn: Groups, Florida Native Plant Society