

Another Roadside Attraction

By Carol Ann McCormick, Assistant Curator, UNC Herbarium

This past summer's dry conditions proved difficult for many plants. The wild oregano (*Cunila origanoides*) along my gravel driveway gave up flowering, and I feared that many flowering dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) may die.

Given the dryness, I was very surprised to receive a call from Johnny Randall, assistant director for conservation at the Garden, with news that he'd found a small population of yellow fringed orchid (*Platanthera ciliaris*) in bloom in Orange County! While yellow fringed orchid is the most common and least habitat-specific member of the genus *Platanthera*, it is usually found in open, wet or seepy places—an unusual commodity this summer. Also, it is rare in the Piedmont: it's a plant I'd only seen in photographs and on herbarium sheets!

The next morning, my entire family set off to find the orchids on a country roadside (Buckhorn Road) conveniently close to a county mini-dump (we could do our weekly trash/recycling and botanizing all in one trip). Since I was driving, I thought it best to review with the whole family our quarry: plants about knee-high, with flowers the color of a Creamsicle®. Yes, I know "yellow" is in the plant's name—but believe me, the true color is Creamsicle-orange.

Even at 45 miles per hour, the two-dozen plants were easy to spot. One doesn't have to be a botanist to appreciate these beauties. Each flower in a cluster has a long spur—a nectary that entices butterflies to the blossom. As the butterfly probes into the nectary with its long proboscis, pollen sacs ("pollinia") adhere to the animal's head and back, ready to be flown to a neighboring plant.

I returned to the roadside in late September to collect a single specimen for the herbarium. The more I wandered the area, the more I came to appreciate what an unusual little stretch of roadside it was—rich with wild colicroot (*Aletris farinosa*), blazing star (*Liatrix* sp.), milkwort (*Polygala* sp.), chain fern (*Woodwardia areolata*), and many grasses. While periodic mowing is beneficial to these sun-loving plants, the cheaper way to maintain power lines and roadsides—spraying herbicide—would be disastrous! Perhaps a cooperative partnership between the landowner, Orange County Department of Transportation, Duke Power, and the North Carolina Botanical Garden can ensure that this small botanical paradise will flower forever.

The UNC Herbarium has only four other collections of *Platanthera ciliaris* from Orange County: "Low place east of Athletic Field" (1919); "Low place between Class Athletic Field and Cemetery, Chapel Hill" (1924); "Battle Park, Chapel Hill" (1936); and "0.8 miles north of county road 1005 on county road 1951, cut over roadside under power lines" (1974).

I fear that the 1919–1936 locations around the Chapel Hill

Cemetery and Battle Park are lost due to "improved drainage" ("improved for whom?" ask the orchids) and other activities in that area. This summer, I repeatedly drove White Cross Road (county road 1951) but saw no orchids in bloom. *Platanthera ciliaris* is a notoriously fickle bloomer, particularly sensitive to subtle changes in water supply and sunlight, so plants may persist for years unnoticed by botanists and butterflies. I'll continue to watch both the White Cross Road and Buckhorn Road locations in coming years.

The UNC Herbarium is striving to database every specimen in the collection. Curator Alan Weakley targeted several groups for priority data entry: ferns, carnivorous plants, and orchids. Due to the efforts of a dedicated volunteer, Diane Butzin, the Herbarium's entire holdings of orchids from the southeastern United States have been databased. Herbarium Technician Lisa Giencke generated maps based on those specimen, and orchid enthusiast David R. McAdoo donated beautiful photographs of native orchids for our website. Go to www.herbarium.unc.edu/orchids.htm to (virtually!) enjoy spectacular native orchids—including yellow fringed orchid—of the southeastern United States.

And next summer, keep an eye out for Creamsicle-orange along the roadsides!



Herbarium staff (and family!) focus of magazine story

Readers of this column might enjoy checking out a story that appeared in the fall issue of *Endeavors: Research and Creative Activity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*.

"Rhiannon's Aster" tells the tale of how a long-languishing botanical mystery was solved by Alan Weakley, UNC Herbarium curator, his toddler daughter, and a small cadre of colleagues from as far away as Texas and Ontario, and as close by as western North Carolina.

You can read the story online at

research.unc.edu/endeavors/fall2005/aster.php

or call the *Endeavors* office for a copy (919-962-6136).

We have a small number of copies here at the Garden.