

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #95 answer: CRANEFLY ORCHID (*Tipularia discolor*)

The only species in its genus, the cranefly orchid has an unusual survival plan. In September, when leaves start falling and more light reaches the forest floor, a single leaf sprouts from the fleshy corm. Dull green, splotched purple on top and rich purple below, and slightly pleated, this leaf feeds the plant all winter, despite snow and ice. In spring the leaf withers. Nothing remains to mark this secret orchid, unless you remember where you saw the leaf.

Come mid-July, a foot-long bloomstalk arises. The flowers are *discolor*—a not-color, a nondescript pink-brown. Asymmetrical in shape and tilted at an angle, extending long nectar spurs, each flower has the leggy look of a perching cranefly, genus *Tipula*.

You might easily walk right past the beige flowers, which open from bottom to top on the stalk. But their abundant nectar attracts noctuid moths, especially the armyworm moth *Mythimna unipuncta*. Homing in on the nectar, these moths get masses of pollen, called pollinia, stuck to their compound eyes. This is the way they transfer pollen between orchids.

Later on, tiny pods droop along the bloomstalk, holding thousands of dustlike seeds for the wind to carry. The seeds only germinate on old rotting wood, finding there the mycorrhizae needed for growth. Plants with fewer fruits spread vegetatively by corms.

Don't confuse this orchid with puttyroot, a fellow orchid with the same seasonal strategy. Puttyroot leaves have white pinstripes and pale undersides, and the flowers have no nectar spurs.

WILDFLOWER #96

Clues: Wear boots to look for these early risers.



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