

**Common Name:** SOUTHERN WHITE FRINGED ORCHID

**Scientific Name:** *Platanthera conspicua* (Nash) P.M. Brown,

**Other Commonly Used Names:** large white-fringed orchid

**Previously Used Scientific Names:** *Platanthera blephariglottis* (Willdenow) Lindley var. *conspicua* (Nash) Luer, *Habenaria blephariglottis* var. *conspicua* (Nash) Ames

**Family:** Orchidaceae (orchid)

**Rarity Ranks:** G4G5/S2?

**State Legal Status:** Special Concern

**Federal Legal Status:** none

**Federal Wetland Status:** OBL

**Description:** Perennial **herb** with an erect stem up to 3½ feet (35 - 110 cm) tall. **Leaves** up to 14 inches (5 - 35 cm) long and 2 inches (5 cm) wide, reduced in size near the top of the stem,

alternate. **Flowers** 30 - 65 per plant, pure white, in a large cluster at the top of the stem. **Lateral sepals** rounded, held backward along the side of the flower; one **upright sepal** overlaps with 2 narrow **petals** to form a hood over the center of the flower. **Lip petal** up to  $\frac{3}{8}$  - 1 inch (9 - 26 mm) long, spoon-shaped with deeply fringed margins. **Spur** about 1 - 2 inches (3 - 5 cm) long, curving down behind the flower. **Fruit** a capsule, nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  - 1 $\frac{1}{4}$  inch (18 - 31 mm) long, with many tiny seeds.

**Similar Species:** Snowy orchid (*Platanthera nivea*, synonym: *Gymnadeniopsis nivea*) flowers have a slightly toothed lip held at the top of the flower and a showy yellow column in the center of the flower. Also see monkeyface orchid (*P. integrilabia*) on this website.

**Related Rare Species:** Northern white fringed orchid (*Platanthera blephariglottis*, Special Concern) occurs in wet seeps in Georgia's Coastal Plain and closely resembles southern white fringed orchid. It is usually shorter, less than 2½ feet (8 - 80 cm) tall and has a smaller, denser flower cluster bearing only 20 - 45 flowers. Its flowers are also smaller: the spur is always less than 1 inch long (1.5 - 2.6 cm), about the same length as the ovary, and the lip has shorter, relatively coarser fringing. It blooms somewhat earlier than *P. conspicua*.

Also see on this website: Chapman's fringed-orchid (*Platanthera chapmanii*), large purple fringed-orchid (*Platanthera grandiflora*), and monkeyface orchid (*Platanthera integrilabia*).

**Habitat:** Pitcherplant bogs, wet savannas, seepages, openings in Atlantic white cedar swamps, wet roadsides.

**Life History:** Southern white fringed orchid is a perennial herb that reproduces sexually. Its flowers are adapted for pollination by long-tongued insects, such as butterflies, moths, and certain bees, who probe the long spurs for nectar. Typically, white flowers are pollinated by night-flying moths and brightly colored flowers by day-flying butterflies, but the northern white fringed orchid (*Platanthera blephariglottis*), a close relative of southern white fringed orchid, is pollinated by both butterflies and moths. In the process of probing the spur for nectar, sticky packets of pollen adhere to the front of the insects' heads and are brushed off onto the stigmas of flowers that are subsequently visited. Flowers must be cross-pollinated for fruit to set. Each fruit contains thousands of dust-like seeds which contain no stored food reserves. Seeds must land on a patch of soil containing a specific fungus that provides nutrients for germination and subsequent plant growth.

**Survey Recommendations:** Surveys are best conducted during flowering (August–September).

**Range:** Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, South Carolina, and North Carolina.

**Threats:** Fire suppression. Ditching, draining, and logging of wetlands. Plant poaching.

**Georgia Conservation Status:** Fewer than 10 sites are known, only one protected on a conservation area.

**Conservation and Management Recommendations:** Apply prescribed fire to savannas, bogs, and seepage slopes every 2 - 3 years. Avoid ditching, draining, logging, or other soil-compacting activities in wetlands. Prosecute plant poachers.

**Selected References:**

Brown, P.M. and S.N. Folsom. 2004. Wild orchids of the southeastern United States, north of peninsular Florida. University Press of Florida, Gainesville.

Brown, P.M. 2002. Revalidation of *Platanthera conspicua*, the southern white-fringed orchis. North American Native Orchid Journal 8: 3 - 14.

Chafin, L.G. 2007. Field guide to the rare plants of Georgia. State Botanical Garden of Georgia and University of Georgia Press, Athens.

Cole, F.R. and D.H. Firmage. 1984. The floral ecology of *Platanthera blephariglottis*. American Journal of Botany 71(5): 700-710.

FNA. 2003. Flora of North America, Vol. 26, Magnoliophyta: Liliidae: Liliales and Orchidales. Oxford University Press, New York.

Luer, C.A. 1972. The native orchids of Florida. New York Botanical Garden, New York

Luer, C.A. 1975. The native orchids of the United States and Canada, excluding Florida. New York Botanical Garden, New York.

McKeever, S. 2001. Some native orchids of the southeastern United States. Tipularia 16: 22-31.

NatureServe. 2008. NatureServe Explorer. Arlington, Virginia.  
<http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>

Nelson, G. 2006. Atlantic Coastal Plain wildflowers. Globe Pequot Press, Guilford, Connecticut.

Smith, G.R. and G.E. Snow. 1976. Pollination ecology of *Platanthera (Habenaria) ciliaris* and *P. blephariglottis* (Orchidaceae). Botanical Gazette 137(2): 133-140.

Weakley, A.S. 2008. Flora of the Carolinas, Virginia, Georgia, northern Florida, and surrounding areas. University of North Carolina Herbarium, Chapel Hill.  
<http://www.herbarium.unc.edu/flora.htm>

**Author of Species Account:** Linda G. Chafin

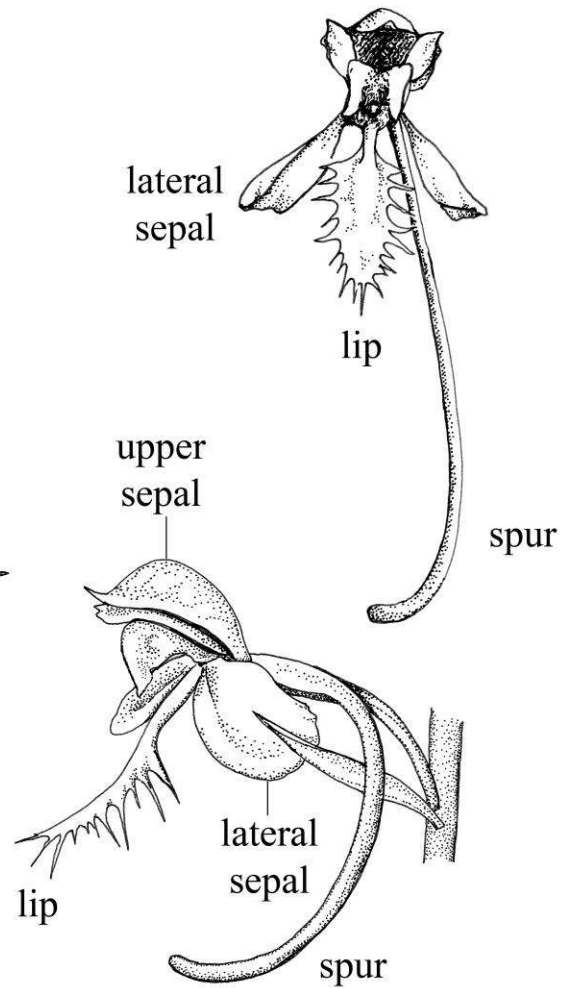
**Date Compiled or Updated:**

L. Chafin, July 2008: original account

K. Owers, Feb. 2010: added pictures

Z. Abouhamdan, April 2016: updated link

SOUTHERN WHITE FRINGED ORCHID  
*Platanthera conspicua*



©Hugh and Carol Nourse

