
Wildflower Spot – February 2015

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

CRANEFLY ORCHID

Tipularia discolor

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

A familiar site in rich woods in the winter is the single leaf of the summer-blooming Crane-fly Orchid. This species usually occurs in colonies – several leaves, each representing a single plant, are usually seen together. The top of the leaf is gray-green, often mottled, and the underside is bright purple, a combination of colors which may increase the light captured under winter conditions. After the flowers disappear, an ovate leaf grows up and is visible in the local woods all winter.

When the orchid blooms in mid-July, no leaves are visible. The flower of Crane-fly Orchid is inconspicuous. Pale green and pale purple to beige, no more than ½ inch across, it is easily overlooked, unlike the winter leaf which signals the presence of this orchid. The flowers are inconspicuous but very delicate. They are only noticed when a shaft of slanting fall sunlight highlights what reminds some people of a swarm of small insects - hence “crane-fly.” The genus name of the crane-fly is *Tipula*.

Another common name, “Crippled Crane-fly” refers to the flowers which incline



slightly to the right or left. This is necessary for pollination by night-flying moths, when the pollen-bearing sacs become attached to the moth’s eye.

Growing naturally in nearly all counties of Virginia, Crane-fly orchid is found in rich damp woods from Massachusetts to southern Michigan, Florida and east Texas. The species name *discolor*, “of different colors,” refers to the leaf surfaces. This genus has a complex geological past; its 3 species are located in the Himalayas, Japan, and here in the eastern U.S.

Crane-fly orchid is not usually available in nurseries since, like all native orchids, it is dependent on fungi in the ground. And, all parts of the plant are inconspicuous. However, on a walk through local woods in the winter, the leaves are a welcome sight in the midst of brown leaf litter. ❖



Photo: Crane-fly Orchid (*Tipularia discolor*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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