

White Fringeless Orchid Listing Questions and Answers

What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is listing the white fringeless orchid as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

What is the white fringeless orchid and where can you find them?

The orchid's distribution is concentrated in the Cumberland Plateau of Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky, with isolated populations scattered across the Blue Ridge Mountains, Piedmont, and Coastal Plain. Most occurrences are in forested wetlands; though, some are in utility or transportation rights-of-way, where the plant sometimes thrives in the well-lit, open conditions.

There are 57 known occurrences of the orchid, spanning five southeastern states. There are an additional 23 sites, where the plant is suspected to occur, though in most cases positive identification, which requires the plant's flower, has not recently been made. There are known populations in Calhoun, Clay, Cleburne, DeKalb, Marion, Tuscaloosa, and Winston counties, Alabama, with suspected populations in Jackson and Marion counties. In Georgia, known populations are found in Bartow, Carroll, Chattooga, Coweta, Pickens, Rabun, and Stephens counties, with one suspected population in Forsyth County. Kentucky's Laurel, McCreary, Pulaski, and Whitley counties are home to known populations, with Laurel and McCreary counties also home to suspected occurrences. In Mississippi, Itawamba and Tishomingo counties are home to known and suspected populations, while the plant is suspected in Alcorn County. In South Carolina, the orchid is suspected to persist in Greenville County. In Tennessee, the plant is known to occur in Bledsoe, Cumberland, Fentress, Franklin, Grundy, Marion, McMinn, Polk, Scott, Sequatchie, and Van Buren counties, with additional suspected occurrences in Bledsoe, Franklin, Grundy, Sequatchie, and Van Buren counties. The orchid has disappeared from at least 28 sites, including the only known site in North Carolina, and a site in metropolitan Atlanta's Cobb County.

Why is the Service listing the white fringeless orchid?

White fringeless orchid was originally known to live in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The orchid has disappeared from North Carolina, and likely South Carolina. Today it's known or presumed present at 80 sites across six states, the majority of which consist of fewer than 100 plants. The best available information indicates many sites are impacted by a variety of factors, such as poaching, invasive species, or impoundment construction, that directly harm orchids or alter key parts of their habitat. The combination of threats; the plant's existence in small, widely dispersed populations; and its dependence on a limited number of butterflies and a single fungus to complete its life cycle led the Service to conclude it will likely become endangered throughout its range in the foreseeable future.

What specific threats have been identified as impacting the survival of the white fringeless orchid?

Populations of white fringeless orchid have been lost to habitat-altering activities such as road construction, residential and commercial construction, inundation of plants due to impoundment construction, damage caused by All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) traffic, poaching, and invasive

species encroachment are all among the threats faced by the plant. One or more of these threats has historically impacted or is currently operating at the majority (likely more than 90 percent) of known occurrences across the orchid's range. These factors, combined with the small sizes and low reproductive rates of many populations, leave the species vulnerable to localized extinctions throughout its geographic range.

What does a listing mean for federal agencies?

The ESA requires federal agencies to consult with the Service to ensure that any activity they fund, authorize, or carry out will not jeopardize the survival of a listed species. Therefore, federal agencies must consult with the Service for an activity involving federal funding, jurisdiction, or authorization that occurs on public or private land.

What does a listing mean for the private landowner?

Plants are the property of the landowner where they grow. However, the ESA Act makes it illegal to trade in listed plants or plant parts without a permit, and it prohibits removing, cutting, digging, damaging, or destroying the plant from federal lands or in instances involving violation of state law, including trespass law.

What is critical habitat?

Under the ESA and subsequent case law, any species that is determined to be threatened or endangered requires critical habitat to be designated to the maximum extent prudent and determinable. Critical habitat is defined as the specific area(s) within the geographic range of a species at the time of listing that contain the physical or biological features essential to the conservation of the species and which also may require special management considerations or protection. Critical habitat also may include areas that are not occupied by the species at the time of listing and are essential for its conservation. Critical habitat designations affect only federal agency actions or federally funded or permitted activities. Critical habitat designations do not affect activities by private landowners if there is no federal funding or authorization needed.

Why is the Service not proposing to designate critical habitat for the white-fringeless orchid?

Poaching is an historical and ongoing issue. Hundreds of specimens were collected in the 1940s. A 1992 status survey for the orchid included reports of two nurseries collecting white fringeless orchid plants for resale. More recently, evidence of collecting was observed at a Georgia site in 2004; and, in 2014, biologists from the Service and the state of Tennessee documented the loss of 52 plants to collecting from a roadside occurrence in Tennessee. Since designating critical habitat would require publishing maps that could lead poachers to known orchid locations, the Service is not designating critical habitat in order to decrease the possibility of poaching.

What are the next steps?

With the listing of the white fringeless orchid, the Service will develop a recovery plan for the species identifying and prioritizing the steps needed to recover the orchid so it may be removed from the threatened and endangered species list.

Who should you contact for more information?

The Service's lead biologist for the white fringeless orchid is Geoff Call, in the Tennessee field office in Cookeville. He can be reached at geoff_call@fws.gov, or 931/525-4983.