

## The Downy Rattlesnake Plantain Orchid

By Beatriz Lindemann

On a hot, sunny afternoon in June, I went into the forest of my family farm on Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau. It was very buggy and humid. There, I found something beautiful. I would never have thought that there would be orchids in the mountains of Tennessee, but there are. In fact, there are about 600 types of orchids in Tennessee. In the forest, I found a Downy Rattlesnake Plantain orchid next to a beautiful lily. The orchid and lily were not extremely colorful. They were pretty because of the little details like the white veins in the orchid leaves. The orchid and the lily were surrounded by moss which holds moisture for them. The plants were growing right on top of the moss.

An orchid is an orchid because it does not pollinate. Pollination is when pollinators - (bees, butterflies, and some hummingbirds) take pollen from one flower and transfer it to another. The orchid doesn't recreate with pollination. On the other hand, the lily does pollinate. The plantains—that's what the orchid I found is called—were in a shady and moist environment under a lot of forest trees. The canopy was thin enough to let sunlight reach the orchids, but thick enough not to burn it. The Downy Rattlesnake Plantain likes shady and moist areas, which explains why I found so many plants about fifteen feet from Coal Creek. It is a twenty foot wide creek which runs all year round.

The plantains do not have a stem, so the leaves are very close to the forest floor. They are about the size of the palm of an adult's hand. The leaves are oval-shaped, 3-8 centimeters long and 1.5-3 centimeters wide. They are kelly green and have white veins. In the center of all the leaves is a small bulb which is the same color as the leaves. The plantains live about three to four years. I found plantains both alone and in groups. They are called "Rattlesnake" because of the life cycle of the plant. They lose their leaves, like a snake loses its skin; and then they grow back.

The Downy Rattlesnake Plantain Orchid is native to eastern North America. It can also be found in many oceanic islands such as Australia. I found mine in Tennessee, but they can also be found elsewhere in the United States. These Plantains are endangered in some states such as Florida.

It was fascinating for me to see these beautiful native orchids. I like plants that are native because no one has planted them and they are just wild. They belong where

they are. Finding native orchids is a passion of mine and I love to find orchids in the woods because discovering and researching flowers that are wild is so very interesting.