



Rare and Interesting Plants of the Chattahoochee National Forest

Photos and text by: Tom Govus



Isotria medeoloides - small whorled pogonia

This rare and diminutive member of the orchid family is federally listed as threatened. It has a very wide range from New England south through the Southern Appalachians. It is either imperiled or critically imperiled in every state that it occurs. Since 1990 several important populations have been found on the Chattahoochee National Forest. Populations tend to be small and ephemeral. Like many orchids it has a symbiotic relationship with mycorrhizal fungi. Interestingly, this species is said to be able to occur within almost any forested habitat.



Monotropsis odorata - sweet pinesap

This species is considered a mycotroph and has no chlorophyll but gathers its nutrition from decaying leaf litter and mycorrhizal fungi. It is quite rare throughout its range and may have as few as five locations in GA, most of these are on the Chattahoochee National Forest. A small plant that is hard to discover (it grows during the winter and blooms in the early Spring), some populations have been found by tracking down the odor emanating the very fragrant flowers. It has been recently found in the Rich Mountain Wilderness area.



Heracleum maximum - masterwort

This striking member of the parsley family is not globally rare but a northern disjunct species left behind by plant migrations resulting from periods of glacial activity some 15,000 years before present time. This species is extremely rare in Georgia and so far has only been documented within the Rich Mountain Wilderness Area. It is associated with rich geologic substrates that have weathered into extremely deep organic soils. It is also believed that the special soils important for this species are related to unusually high rainfall accumulation in the Rich Mountains.



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Trientalis borealis - northern starflower

This wildflower is another example of a northern disjunct species left behind from periods of plant migrations associated with glaciation. Interestingly, despite the fact that Georgia has much lower mountains than adjacent North Carolina, the Georgia Blue Ridge has far more populations than the more rugged North Carolina Mountains. This attractive plant can be found usually at high elevations in shallow to rock areas where it can make sizable colonies. Known populations occur around Brasstown Bald, the Rich Mountains and recently has been found (at low elevations) in the Cohuttas.



Trillium discolor - pale yellow trillium

A narrow endemic to the Tugaloo - Savannah River Drainage in Georgia and North and South Carolina. It is distinguished from the yellow trillium by virtue of the pale, broadly spatulate petals. It can be found in the rich hardwood forests of the Brevard Zone in Stephens County of the Chattooga District. It is considered a globally rare species.



Spigelia marilandica - Indian pink

This species in by no means rare but is unusual in the Blue Ridge and serves as an indicator of nutrient rich rock. It forms spectacular and showy populations in the western portion of the Cohutta Mountains.



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Trillium decumbens - decumbent trillium

This species is very infrequent in the Chattahoochee National Forest, but is more common on limestone in adjacent Alabama. It is distinctive in forming large colonies that appear to have their leaves plastered on the ground (hence decumbent). Populations are known from the Cohuttas and Rich Mountains.



Corydalis sempervirens - rock harlequin

A very infrequent inhabitant of rock outcrops in widely scattered locations in the Georgia Blue Ridge, particularly granitic exfoliation domes. A member of the Fumitory family, it is related to more familiar wildflowers such as Dutchman's britches and squirrel corn. This plant is only known from about a dozen locations in Georgia. It can be found on rock outcrops in the vicinity of Brasstown Bald and Rabun Bald.



Trillium undulatum - painted trillium

Not a rare species at all, but an extremely beautiful and infrequent plant. The common and scientific name are both appropriate. The wavy petal margins are the source of the epithet "undulatum". Typically found at high elevations and usually associated with rhododendron. Georgia's finest population occurs in the vicinity of Lake Conasauga in the Cohutta Mountains. A special variant occurs here that lacks the painted V at the petal base (forma *enotatum* Patrick).



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Frasera caroliniensis - columbo

A very strange looking member of the Gentian family, this species is always associated with nutrient rich substrates, either limestone or a broad category of rock referred to as "mafic" - an igneous rock high in iron, magnesium and calcium. The plants get quite tall, up to six feet in height. A good area to look for this plant is on the ring of ultramafic material that encircles Brasstown Bald. Because of its particular association with uncommon geologic material, it is quite infrequent on the Chattahoochee National Forest.