

### 2011 November Guess that Plant:



***Tipularia discolor* (Pursh) Nutt. – Crane fly orchis**

November's *Guess that Plant* was the crane fly orchid, known in other parts of the Southeast as the crippled crane fly. This unusual orchid is a denizen of the hardwood forests. The elegant feature of this species is it is easiest discovered during the dormant season, late October through early May. The plant's reproductive strategy is interesting, providing photosynthetic tissue (leaves) during the dormant season for deciduous canopy trees. As canopy trees sleep the winter away, their open branches allow sufficient light to reach the forest floor. The thick and well-protected leaves exist within a near-earth micro-climate that allows food production even on the coldest of days, as long as there is no snow cover. The temperature at ground level can reach 60° F by solar radiation, which is more than warm enough to allow the photosynthesis. As the season warms in late April and early May, our deciduous canopy trees return the dense leaf cover, signaling the crane fly to shed its basal leaves. From this point into summer, the plant is subterranean. This habit changes in late July and early August when it pushes a 12-18" flower stalk from the buried buds. The plant is now ready to flower. The copper to flesh-toned flower raceme is not the striking display visible on some of our other more flashy species. This neutral color makes observation by human eyes difficult. Once fertilized it becomes a multi-ribbed capsule that droops on the stem, distributing seeds until the capsule is either emptied or buried by the next winter snow event. And the cycle starts over again.

Records exist for most New Jersey counties. Current populations exist in all Coastal Plain counties, with extensive populations visible throughout Gloucester, Salem, Cumberland and Cape May. The plant has a State S3 rarity rank indicating its widespread distribution is still imperiled. Look for basal leaves from October to May in any hardwood forest, but it is more likely to exist under young sweet gum forests at or near the wetland boundary.