

Manitoba Native Orchids Compendium

Western Prairie Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera praeclara* Sheviak & Bowles)



The Western Prairie Fringed Orchid grows in remnant native prairie grasslands in the Tall-grass Prairie Preserve near the towns of Gardenton and Tolstoi in south-eastern Manitoba. This is the only location in Canada where this orchid, listed as "endangered" by the Committee of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), may be found.

Blooming generally starts in early July and usually lasts for three weeks. The Western Prairie Fringed Orchid is a sturdy plant and in ideal habitat can rise to nearly a meter with as many as 25 flowers on a stem. The flower and its long nectar spur (up to 6.5cm) is white with a heavily fringed lip. A pleasant fragrance is particularly noticeable from dusk to dawn. Meadows of several hundred orchids in blossom create a spectacular sight, and over the years visitors have been drawn from as far away as Germany and Australia. In 1998 participants of the North American Native Orchid Alliance conference held at Itasca State Park, Minnesota, attended a field workshop at the Tall-grass Prairie Preserve in Manitoba featuring the Western Prairie Fringed Orchid.

The seed production of this population of the Western Prairie Fringed Orchid is often poor with few seed pods developing on mature plants. Over the last several years, Dr. Richard Westwood of the University of Winnipeg, and Christie Borkowsky, a graduate student have been studying the pollination of this orchid. Although this research has not been concluded, two species of Sphinx moths with Western Prairie Fringed Orchid pollinia attached to their heads have been collected in specially designed traps. These night-flying moths have a proboscis that is of sufficient length to reach into the long nectar spur and have been deemed the principle pollinators of this orchid. The research gained from this study will be valuable in the identification of the habitat requirements of these moths for the development of protection measures for both the moths and their habitat.

The Tall Grass Prairie Preserve of south-eastern Manitoba comprises a tract of over 2000 hectares and is managed under the Critical Wildlife Habitat program. More information on this important preserve can be found [here](#).