

Orchid Conservation – Photographing Wild Orchids

I recently read a post on an orchid forum which took me by surprise and really hit a chord for me. We have all read about the loss of forest habitat around the world and the resulting loss of thousands of orchid species. We are encouraged to buy pieces of rainforest in order to preserve the natural habitat of the plants we love. But there is an even more insidious kind of destruction going on that I had not even considered: the habitat destruction caused by those of us who love our wild orchids to death.

The post I refer to was done by Leo Schordje of Illinois who has been a member of the orchid world for years. North America is the home of more than 150 native wild orchids, some of which are showy enough to be interesting to photographers and orchid enthusiasts. We organize tours to go find them during their blooming season; and spend a great deal of time setting up just that perfect shot for our collections.

What we do when we are engaged in our hobbies is just as bad for the orchids as the habitat destruction in tropical areas ... we are killing the plants we love. According to Leo, many native temperate orchids grow in sandy prairie soils that are soft and loose. As people crowd around to view flowers the soil is compacted to the point that the plants often can no longer grow and any surrounding seedlings, or non-blooming plants are trampled. Other types of terrestrial orchids grow in bogs or wet areas which are quickly destroyed by foot traffic of any kind.

We're killing not only the mature plants, but often the next generations too. He cites one example in the Chiwaukee Prairie Preserve with trails circling individual beautiful specimens and trampled areas up to fifteen feet in circumference around the plants. Nothing grows in the compacted areas for a number of years until rain, earthworms and freeze/thaw cycles eventually return the soil to its natural state.

He has even documented a specific specimen of [Platanthera psychodes](http://orchidspecies.com/platpsychodes.htm) (http://orchidspecies.com/platpsychodes.htm), The Purple Fringed Orchid, in Illinois Beach State Park which was trampled and killed twelve years ago and has never reappeared at the site.

As the spring season comes upon us, please think about this as you explore and look for plants. Stay well away, use only established trails and a long-range lens to get your pictures. Tell your photography societies of the dangers of killing the plants they're trying to capture for posterity. A living plant will be much more important to the ecology of the region than a spectacular closeup!



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