**Naturalist Notes - Three Little Birds**

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**The orchids are a fascinating group of flowering plants. Long sought out for their many exotic forms, orchids are the oddballs of the flower world. Unlike the regular symmetry of many flowers, orchids feature fabulous and intricate designs. For instance, the lateral sepals of orchids are often symmetrical to one another but the third sepal often acts as a sort of hood, hovering over the reproductive parts within. Those flower parts, the stamen and pistol, are fused together into one piece in orchids.**

**Another unique feature of orchids is that their seeds are tiny, barely visible, lacking enough energy stored within to carry them through the germination process. Thus orchid seeds must develop a symbiotic relationship with the underground mycorrhiza of certain fungi species.**

**Among our most well-known orchid species, the June blooming pink lady’s slipper is probably the most famous and conspicuous. It’s famous for its pouch-like lip that gives it its common name. Orchids reach their peak of abundance and diversity in the tropics, many growing as so-called air plants on the trunks and branches of large trees in cloud forest environments. Here in New England though we still have a healthy diversity of orchids that bloom throughout the growing season.**

**After the bloom of the lady’s slippers look in wetlands for such orchids as grass pink, rose pogonia, and the hard to find arethusa, all growing out of sphagnum and muck in wet environments. As June fades into July the rich soils of shady forests yield such gems as round leafed orchids and spotted coral roots. I find these orchids in various spots every year at one point or another while wandering the woods.**

**As the calendar turns to the end of July, downy rattlesnake plantain and various species of ladies` tresses orchids join the woodland fray of the more common orchids. Throughout July the large purple fringed orchid and white fringed orchid are common sights in wetlands.**

**Here at Tin Mountain Conservation’s Center’s land in Albany we have an August blooming orchid that is, despite being found throughout the eastern third of the United States, quite rare over just about all of its range. It is commonly called the three birds orchid, *Triphora trianthophora.*  In the lakes region and southern foothills of the White Mountains here in New Hampshire it is locally common in some spots. We’re fortunate to have two areas at the Rockwell Preserve in Albany where it blooms, usually at some point between the first and second weeks in August.**

**Three-birds orchid is a tiny orchid, only 3 to 8 inches high at the stem with a tiny white or pink petaled flower. It has a few, usually one or two, tiny leaves attached to the stem. The “three-birds” moniker refers to the three flowering stages of the three flower buds on a typical stalk, representing the three stages of life; birth, vitality, and decline. The flowers bloom in order from top to bottom and each one only lasts about a day. Like all orchids, three birds orchids have asymmetrical petals with a distinctive hood like top petal. Inside it has green stamens fused with a purple colored pistol. When it has been pollinated and gone to seed this orchid will start to nod its petals, leading to its other common name, nodding pogonia.**

**Beyond a typical orchid seed’s need for energy from the mycorrhizae of fungi, a mature three- birds orchid has a lifelong relationship with fungi that inhabit the roots of beech trees. Thus three birds orchids typically are found in beech dominated forests with soils of rich humus. On Tin Mountain’s land that is where our three birds orchid indeed grows, popping out of the soil to live out its brief time as a flower in the open air, surrounded by an entanglement of beech sprouts.**

**This year the three-bird orchid bloomed around August 4th. A few days earlier I invited Emilie Talpin, a professional photographer who resides in Lincoln to take some photos of the anticipated blooms. Emilie specializes in taking macro-images, perfect for such a small orchid. It’s amazing what one can see in tiny objects when the details are enhanced. Whether with a microscope or a macro lens, there is so much intricate beauty to be seen in nature. We see details that our normal seeing eyes miss in our haste to move on quickly before adjusting our focus.**

**Emilie especially loves to photograph insects, especially pollinators and we both observed a tiny fly that appeared to be a rarely observed pollinator of this orchid species. The fly species was barely large enough to be seen but Emilie was able to capture some photos of the fly in the flower that came out wonderfully. We’ve posted a bunch of Emilie’s macro images of the three birds orchids on our website at** [**www.tinmountain.org**](http://www.tinmountain.org)**. Please check them out!**

**PHOTOS BY EMILIE TALPIN (TMCC Member and professional photographer based in Mt Washington Valley).**

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