



Swamp Pink

Helonias bullata

In spring, some wetlands in the eastern United States are graced with the presence of a fragrant pink wildflower that is both remarkable and rare. The simply named swamp pink cannot survive in the open sun and is found in shady, forested wetland areas. Swamp pink once inhabited wetlands from New York to Georgia, but is now only found on the coastal plain of New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland and in isolated spots inland in the southern Appalachian Mountains. Extensive human development has destroyed or degraded the plant's habitat, and swamp pink was given protection under the Endangered Species Act in 1988.

A member of the lily family, swamp pink looks unlike any other lily. The plant's evergreen, lance-shaped leaves form a circular cluster that lies fairly flat on the ground. Although sometimes occurring as individual plants, swamp pink is more often found in clumps, and large populations may be made up of thousands of plants in densities close to 50 plants per square yard.

The hollow flower stem grows from 1 to 3 feet tall, and in April or early May is topped by a pink flower cluster. What looks like one flower is actually a grouping of tiny individual blossoms on one stem – what botanists call a raceme. Each pink flower sports blue or lilac-colored anthers, the pollen-bearing structures. The sight of these tall, thick green stems topped with a bristle-brush of pink and blue flowers is a sure sign of spring in the wetlands.

Swamp pink is found in wetlands with the water table at or near the surface and water levels changing slightly throughout the year, such as small streamlets, wetlands at the beginning of streams and spring seepage areas.

For swamp pink, reproduction is primarily asexual, with new rosettes

growing from underground stems called rhizomes. Reproduction from seed produces relatively few viable plants. Also, seed dispersal is limited; however, swamp pink seeds have a high fat content and therefore can float – an advantage in a watery habitat. Young seedlings, which emerge close to the parent plant, have difficulty becoming established and are particularly vulnerable to human foot traffic, which destroys plants and plant habitat by compacting the soil.

In the past, draining and filling wetlands have damaged or destroyed swamp pink populations. State and federal wetland and endangered species protection laws have slowed the loss of wetlands, and currently the major threat to swamp pink is habitat degradation caused by changes to water flow and soil from disturbances on upland sites. These disturbances include water withdrawal for irrigation, discharge from sewage treatment plants, siltation from agriculture or construction, and increased nutrients or chemicals in the water.

Buffer zones may help protect wetlands, but they can isolate a wetland area. Swamp pink is already threatened by limited genetic variability, which is caused by its mostly asexual reproduction, limited flowering potential, limited seed dispersal, low seeding survival and slow growth rate.

The primary recovery goal for swamp pink is preserving its existing habitat. We can accomplish this by working with private landowners and state and other federal agencies to develop and implement protection strategies for each plant site. Private landowners who have swamp pink on their property can help protect this native wildflower with voluntary conservation agreements, preventing picking or digging up the plant, and by leaving forested areas undisturbed. Everyone can help by supporting wetland protection laws,



Gene Nieminen/USFWS

Swamp pink

learning to recognize swamp pink, and leaving it untouched where it grows.

A poet said that a thing of beauty is a joy forever. By working with all our partners to protect swamp pink's forested wetland habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is trying to ensure that the beauty of swamp pink remains a joy in our lives for now and for the future.

**Northeast Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
300 Westgate Center Drive
Hadley, MA 01035
413/253 8200
<http://northeast.fws.gov>**

**Federal Relay Service
for the deaf and hard-of-hearing
1 800/877 8339**

December 2006