

ENDANGERED SPECIES WHITE BIRDS-IN-A-NEST

By Libby Hopkins



White birds-in-a-nest or *Macbridea alba* as it's known by its scientific name, is a rare and unique wildflower endemic to only four counties in Florida's Panhandle. White birds-in-a-nest is a species of flowering plant in the mint family.

Its flowers bloom from May through July and attract mostly bees. The plant occurs naturally in coastal pinelands, seeps, bogs, and wet savannas primarily within the Apalachicola National Forest, and is fire-dependent. White birds-in-a-nest's flowers each have a double-lipped white corolla and a hood-like upper lip. Bracts are bright green to greenish-yellow. Leaves are lanceolate to spatulate and succulent with toothed margins. They are oppositely arranged. The leaf surface may be rough or sticky. Stems are square, erect, and may be covered in tiny hairs. Although it is in the mint family, the plant is typically without fragrance.

White birds-in-a-nest gets its common name from the way its white mature flowers resemble birds encircling a green "nest" formed by bracts. The unopened white flower buds appear egg-like, nestled within the nest. They are glandular and may be sticky in texture. The inflorescence is a thyrse, which is a raceme that is divided into cymes. The inflorescence is filled with tightly packed pointed bracts between which blooms the flowers. Each flower has a double-lipped white corolla around 2.5 to 3 centimeters long. There may be pale purple markings in the flower's throat.

This plant grows in the counties of Gulf, Liberty, Franklin, and Bay in Florida. There are just under 10,000 individuals in total divided amongst several scattered populations.

White birds-in-a-nest grows in pine flatwoods, seeps, wet savannas, and the ecotones next to swamps and sand hills. It prefers grassy areas with wet, infertile soils, often sandy soils rich in peat.

This region, located in the Apalachicola River Basin, has been altered by human activity. Historically, part of the area was devoted to the pulp industry, but much less today. Urban development threatens the local habitat as residential areas are constructed and associated utilities such as roads are built and maintained; many occurrences of the plant are on roadsides and are vulnerable during this process. It is federally listed as a threatened species in the United States.

The flatwoods habitat depends on a regime of periodic wild-fires for its maintenance. Fire prevents the ecological succession of the flatwoods, keeping large woody vegetation from building up and shading out the herb layer of the understory. Now fire suppression is practiced, preventing the normal fire regime and leading to the degradation of the habitat, making it less hospitable to this and other herbs. Tracts that have not burned in many years have less of the mint, but it tends to become quite abundant in the years after fire sweeps through. Good management practices will involve the maintenance of a proper fire regime. If done properly, White birds-in-a-nest will continue to grow and thrive.

