

# Virginia Sneezeweed

*Helenium virginicum*

## Description

Virginia sneezeweed is a rare wildflower found only in Virginia and Missouri. An herbaceous perennial in the Aster family, its stems grow 1.5 to 3.5 feet above a rosette of basal leaves. Coarse hairs are visible on the basal and lower stem leaves. The basal leaves may be broad in the middle tapering towards the ends, but others may appear oblong. Stem leaves are lance-shaped, and become progressively smaller as they go up the stem. The stems are “winged,” the wings being continuous with the bases of the stem leaves. The flower ray petals are yellow and wedge-shaped with three lobes at the ends. The central disk of the flower is nearly ball-shaped. Flowering occurs from July to October. Virginia sneezeweed closely resembles common sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*). The two are differentiated by a number of characteristics including leaf shape, stem and leaf hairs, and habitat requirements.

## Distribution

Virginia sneezeweed was first discovered in 1936 in Virginia. Extensive field work in the more than 100 limestone sinkhole ponds along the western edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Shenandoah Valley in Augusta and Rockingham counties has resulted in fewer than 30 known sites for this plant in Virginia. The species was long thought to be limited to Virginia, but, by 2000, results of morphological and genetic investigations supported the recognition of a single disjunct Virginia sneezeweed population in southern Missouri. Since that time, intensive surveys by Missouri botanists have located 53 occurrences in eight counties in southern Missouri.



IRVINE T. WILSON

Virginia sneezeweed

## Habitat

Virginia sneezeweed is a wetland species found only on the shores of shallow, seasonally flooded ponds. Ranging in size from a tenth of an acre to eight acres, the ponds in Virginia supporting Virginia sneezeweed may be seasonally flooded, semipermanent to permanent bodies of water. These ponds have poorly drained, acidic, silty loam soils, and are generally flooded from January to July. Pond conditions range from relatively undisturbed to those subject to grazing and mowing. Characteristic plants found with Virginia sneezeweed in the relatively undisturbed pond basins in Virginia include least spikerush, warty panic grass, northern St. John's wort, long-leaved panic grass, black-fruited spikerush and narrow-leaved violet.

## Life History

Virginia sneezeweed has adapted to survive the water level fluctuations of the seasonal ponds, giving it competitive advantage in this habitat.

From year to year, Virginia sneezeweed populations may greatly vary. High water level one year may leave the ponds flooded, resulting in less shoreline for plants to establish or survive. However, a high water level also eliminates invading shrubs and trees that try to colonize the pond shores. When water levels are lower, more pond shore is exposed. This allows a sneezeweed population to bounce back from surviving plants and seeds stored in the soil.

## Conservation

Virginia sneezeweed is listed as state endangered in Virginia and Missouri, and is also federally listed as threatened. Five populations are within the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests in Virginia and many others are found on private lands. The life cycle of Virginia sneezeweed is closely tied to the natural hydrologic regime of the ponds and the low nutrient conditions of the acidic soils. Wetland habitats are vulnerable to land uses that may result in erosion, siltation, toxic or nutrient runoff, permanent flooding, dredging, or draining. Landowners can protect sinkhole ponds against these effects by following best management practices that maintain or protect water quality and quantity in fragile wetland communities. Land uses in surrounding uplands should be carefully evaluated to avoid activities that may result in hydrologic changes and increased nutrient inputs into the ponds. If you find a plant you think may be Virginia sneezeweed, take note of the location as precisely as possible and photograph the plant. **DO NOT PICK THE PLANT!** Notify the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage.

## Virginia Natural Heritage

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage maintains a database of rare species, populations and natural communities in the commonwealth, and manages the state natural area preserve system. Natural Heritage biologists and stewardship and protection staff can answer landowners' questions about rare species and sensitive habitats. The staff also provides information and expertise on conservation and management practices that help ensure that we preserve our rich natural heritage and pass it on to future Virginians.

To learn more about Virginia's rare plant and animal species and rich biological communities, visit [www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural\\_heritage](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage). For additional information on *Helenium virginicum*, see NatureServe Explorer: [Helenium virginicum](#)