

Pitcher's Thistle

A Species at Risk

By Geoff Peach, LHCCC

The Pitcher's Thistle (*Cirsium pitcher*) is a native flower that grows on the open sand dunes and low beach ridges of the Great Lakes' shores.

For thousands of years, this thistle has coped with blowing sand, low soil nutrients, and herbivorous mammals and insects. Today however, the

Pitcher's Thistle's greatest threat is human activity.

In unprotected areas, shoreline development, all terrain vehicle use and trampling have led to the destruction of dunes and the loss of critical Pitcher's Thistle habitat and populations.

In response, the Pitcher's Thistle has been declared an endangered species in Canada.

Although it is related to other thistles found in fields or roadsides, Pitcher's Thistle is a separate species that is found only on the open sand dunes and low beach ridges of Great Lakes shores.

Less prickly than other thistles, Pitcher's Thistle has distinctive blue-green leaves covered with fine white hairs that give the plant a downy appearance.

Its range is restricted to the Great Lakes, primarily along the shores of Lakes Huron and Michigan. The plant's life cycle includes a long 5 to 8 year



Pitcher's Thistle rosette
(Coastal Centre photo).



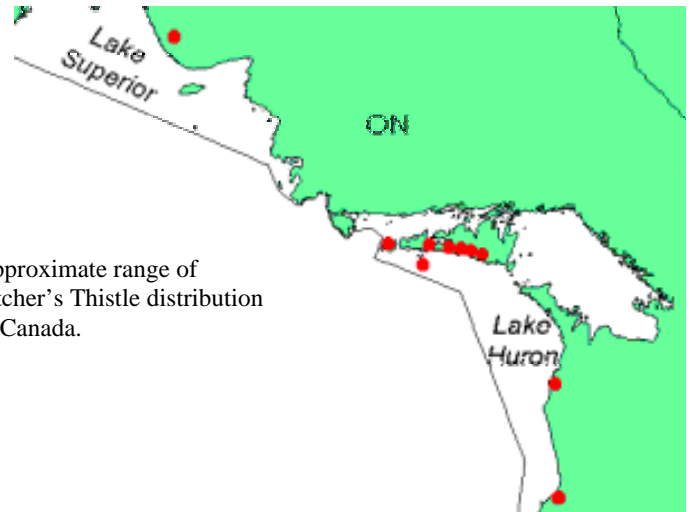
Pitcher's Thistle in full flower.
(R. Otfinowski photo).



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Approximate range of
Pitcher's Thistle distribution
in Canada.

growth period, and once its seeds form and disperse, the entire plant dies. This unassuming plant is an important to the ecology of the dunes they inhabit, and are effective sand stabilizers, helping prevent erosion.

How Can You Help?

- Keep vehicles out of beach and dune areas.
- When hiking, stay on established or authorized pathways to avoid harming rare plants like Pitcher's thistle and damaging fragile natural dune areas.
- Use native plants in landscaping and gardening and avoid the use of invasive plants that have been imported from other countries, such as purple loosestrife, dames rocket, black locust and Lombardy poplar. Invasive plants destroy the habitat of native coastal plants.
- Residential, condominium, and marina development along with associated landscaping directly eliminates Pitcher's thistle and its habitat within the footprint of the development. Development can also fragment remaining populations and dune habitats, reducing the diversity of the dune. Development should be planned with dune grasslands conservation as a priority.
- Learn more about beach and dune conservation and preserving the value of our coast. Explore the Coastal Centre's website (www.lakehuron.ca), as well as the Pitcher's Thistle website (www.pitchersthistle.ca).

www.lakehuron.on.ca