

## Common Plantain

*Plantago major* L.

### Alternate Names

common plantain

### Description

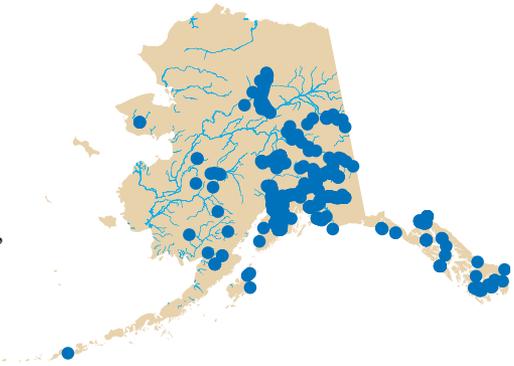
Common plantain is an annual, biennial, or perennial plant with a thick rootstalk and extensive fibrous roots, up to 3 feet deep

and wide. Flowering stalks can grow to 2 feet tall but are generally 6–8 inches tall. Common plantain is hairless except for a few hairs on the undersides of leaves. It has a basal rosette of stalked, ovate to cordate leaves with smooth margins. The leaves are 2–12 inches long and up to 4 inches wide and are strongly 3–5-ribbed. The flowers are borne on 1 to many spikes from a leafless stalk. It has numerous small, greenish-white flowers that fade to brown. Flowers are wind- and fly-pollinated and self-compatible, and the fruit is an ovate capsule that splits around the middle and contains 5–30 seeds. The seeds are brownish-black, small, and elliptic to 4-sided.

Plantain is very morphologically variable, and many sub-specific forms have been recognized.

### Similar Species

Six other *Plantago* species are known in Alaska, 4 of which are native. Common plantain can be distinguished from these species by the presence of broad, nearly hairless leaves and more than 6 seeds per capsule.



National Park Service photo by Jeff Heys

### Management

Common plantain can be pulled with relative ease, although several weedings may be necessary to eliminate plants germinating from buried seeds and root fragments (Densmore et al. 2001). It is easily controlled through herbicide application.

### Notes

Dried plantain leaves are used in anti-smoking herbal tonics. This plant is originally from Europe, and Native Americans observing its spread named it “white man’s footprint” or “Englishman’s foot.” Europeans saw the same resemblance to feet or affinity for paths; the genus name *Plantago* is a Latin word meaning “sole of the foot.” Common plantain is now naturalized throughout the United States.



US Geological Survey photo by Chris McKee