



I am in awe. Aghast might be a better word. This is a day I never expected to come, and I played it for all it was worth. (Article on next page)

Bettinna, I believe, is fillipping one of the insidious gnats into an early demise.



The area just past the site. The Lithe River in all its resplendent glory. Photos by J. Zielinski

THE QUEST FOR (and pilgrimage to) *S. OREOPHILA*

by James Edward Zielinski (2630 Valleybrook Dr., Huntsville, AL 35811)

From the moment I heard of the seldom-seen pitcher plant, *Sarracenia oreophila*, I was determined to locate it, never dreaming the quest would take four years. As with most naturalists who have no idea of what they are doing, I took the direct approach of scavenging the underbrush between Fort Payne, Alabama and the Desoto Falls, dragging my hapless friends behind me. At first, it did not occur to me to undertake any heavy research, and my ramblings took me through terrain that rivalled the jungle canopies for verdure and the ensnaring tendrils of animated vegetation. Though the labours yielded nothing, I can at least reminisce and laugh hideously at the memories of my compatriotes being swept away by the torrential waters of the Little River.

One day, however, a stroke of fortune befell me. At an old friend's house, in the midst of sampling a homemade liqueur called, if memory serves, "Plum Bounce," and prior to setting aside its remainder so that memory would continue to serve, I chanced to mention the plant to my friend's wife, who was originally from the Fort Payne area. Not only was she familiar with the plant, which in itself was cause for alarm, she had a friend who could probably reveal its precise location. Needless to say, I plum bounced from the recliner and began mapping out strategy for the imminent safari. First, I contacted my contact (that is, after all, what they are for), a self-made naturalist of the area; a lover of wildflowers and gardening. Following this, I assembled the massive band of explorers, which consisted, after all was said and done, of two. My sole partner in this endeavor, Bettinna Student, shares many of the same loves as I do, with the possible exception of me. Indeed, we had travelled to this area together before, and therefore, a portion of the remaining narrative is co-authored.

Arriving in the Sand Mountain area late in the day from our home in Huntsville, we at once proceeded post-haste to the Little River Canyon State Park and, as dusk approached, set up our camp, which consisted of two sleeping bags and a colony of mildew held together by strands of pup tent. It was to be a real back-to-nature trip. After two seconds of famine, we decided it was our nature to eat all our meals at the local restaurants, most of which were closed. First, however, we decided to consult our benevolent guide, whose name, for the sake of her privacy, we will not divulge. It was a doomed attempt. (Incidentally, if anyone wishes to visit the hamlet of Mentone, we would discourage the use of payphones in the area, as there are none. Luckily, the wildlife preserve was more civilized than the towns surrounding it, and it afforded the opportunity we needed. We were, sad to relate, unable to reach her, and decided to try again the following day.) For the moment, we would content ourselves with the perusal of the nearby villages. In addition to their being within a dry county, the area as a whole seemed extremely languid, with the most exciting phenomenon being the impending opening of the local Food World at midnight. Within moments, we were quite hypnoid, and spent the remainder of the evening committing sloth.

The following morning, we enjoyed some of the natural beauty of the state park, and finally reached our guide, acquiring the directions to her hidden domicile. Her home is nestled in the mountain range, and we spent much of the early part of the day looking about her lavish garden of wildflowers and the most herbaceous grounds and woodlands which surrounded the area. The prickly pear was in full bloom; the flowers of the mountain laurel were beginning to fade. We discoursed extensively on the flora of the region, including *S. oreophila* and its declining colonies and, eventually, the dear lady took us to the beginning of the trail. As we parted company, heeding her admonition not to reveal the plants' whereabouts, the heart of the expedition began.

Following her instructions to the letter, we proceeded parallel to the river and upstream. The area was laden with intriguing boulder and rock formations. As we meandered in

wayward fashion, I espied the pale green hoods first. In the fervor of the moment, we broke into jubilant hosannas and a spontaneous rendition of the "Hallelujah Chorus." Then we dashed to the edge of this sanctuary and fell into uncontrollable paroxysms of mirth and general hysteria.

One could trundle for miles in this stretch of wilderness, never venturing near any of the remaining sites of *S. oreophila*, and yet this particular site, a mile or so trek from the origin of the path, was scarcely 30 feet from the trail itself. In a seeming attempt to corroborate this theory, several hikers, and a few bikers, chanced to pass by during our stay there, but none appeared aware of the plants' presence. Evidently, the site had only recently been visited, for upon one of the larger plants, the only one that flowered, there hung a silver tag stating the date inspected and the number of plants in the area. There was also some disturbance of the soil. The plants were growing in a clearly-defined pattern of lateral progression, with only a very few scrub plants interspersed amongst them. One could almost envision the hand of Nature clearing this secluded area within which the pitchers were ensconced, so clearly were the dimensions marked. On the whole, however, the site and its contiguous regions were a morass of flora, and eventually, the brush could overtake the *Sarracenia*. In addition to the *S. oreophila*, there was an abundance of mosses, including sphagnum, and a variety of ferns. All of the foliage were plushly green, growing out of a sandy-peaty soil which was fairly dry and rocky. The area, roughly 500 square feet, is approximately 5 feet from the river, which is 11-15 feet wide at that point. This close proximity results in a humidity level that is extremely comfortable, if you happen to be a trout. Obviously, the site is prone to flooding and perhaps this accounts for the differentiation of the species therein. The area looked healthy, but astonishingly small. A rough count of the leaves totalled about 65, which, when compared to stands of *S. purpurea*, *leucophylla*, or *alata* we have seen in the gulf coast area, was very meager by any means. Our confidante had indicated that there were two other nearby locations of the plants, one further up the river and the third on the Sand Mountain plateau but, pressed for time, we tendered all our care to the scrutinizing of this one.

We spent some time enjoying the pitchers; investigating their contents; taking photographs. However, we had no foreknowledge of the possibility of writing an article for CPN, and the pictures, rather than candid shots of the plants, were merely a means by which we could commemorate the journey. The pitchers were robust and a good size, ranging from a diminutive 4-6 inches to approximately 2 feet in height. The hoods were a somewhat paler hue of green than the remainder of the plant, and many of them were infused with a reddish tone. The mouth area and the interior were flushed with a white tinge as well. The lone flower, already opening, was a pale yellow. We noted at the area a preponderance of gnats which, in fact, appeared to be the pitchers' primary food source as they hovered about in multitudinous herds and considerably satiated the trumpets' entomophagous cravings. A foolish attempt to observe their capture resulted in their mounting a formidable battalion and a resultant blitzkrieging of our formerly beautiful physiognomies. Having observed all we could, and having eaten our quota of gnatmeat, we ran and plunged headlong into the Little River.

Eventually, the time came to **take** our leave. Wary, lest we should fall victim to another ambush, we surveyed the area once more before hying ourselves to a neighboring cafe and toasting the event with iced tea. It had been an exhilarating experience, to say the least. However, it troubles one to think that this and only a shade more are all that exist of an entire species. The locations in central Alabama, I have been informed, have vanished, and rumors of the plant's existence in a montane area near Huntsville, at least of this writing, are just that. Indeed, the areas that do exist are, to their detriment, being encroached by more woody plants. Worst of all, we had been earlier informed by a park ranger of a very large stand of plants which is nowhere to be found. From the perusal of various publications, it appears the plants were "harvested" by an unscrupulous plant company. At any rate, they are gone now, and it is our hope that the remaining few will be nurtured and cared for, in order that they may attain the once-prevalent numbers they knew. My cohort and I, even now, are planning further and more in-depth studies of the plant in the very near future.