

FIELD TRIPPING WITH THE ICPS

A VISIT TO FAR NORTHERN QUEENSLAND

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After the successful 10th ICPS conference in Cairns, I joined the two field trips that were available to the conference participants.

The first of those was a daytrip to Mount Bartle Frere to look for *Drosera schizandra*. As this was only a daytrip, more people managed to come onto this trip than the longer one that was to follow to Cape York. Just about all of the conference participants were loaded up in two small buses for a trip to the highest mountain of Queensland. The mountain stands 1622 meters high and is named for Sir Henry Bartle Frere, a former president of the Royal Geographical Society.

The slopes of this mountain are covered with rainforest and as such this is not a common place to look for a sundew, certainly not in Australia. However, *D. schizandra* is one of the “Three Sisters” from North Queensland, (the others being *D. adelae* and *D. prolifera*) that like it more shady than most of their relatives.

I was prepared for a nasty climb but actually I needn’t have worried. The plants were not near the top but still in the lower ranges of the mountain and the buses actually took us, somewhat sliding and whining, to sort of a parking spot where a trail started.

Greg Bourke and Richard Nunn had moved out ahead of us and had cleared the trail of the biggest obstacles so now it just came down to following a trail with only mild ups and downs and with a few “attractions” along the way. Mostly these were trees across the trail that couldn’t be walked around so the choice was over or under. The really nasty one was a spot where the trail had washed away, and the only option was to pass it by clinging to trees and go hand by hand while searching for footing (and checking for thorns, spiders, snakes, and whatever else before you put your hand or feet there).

A little further we found lots and lots of the plants we came for. The habitat was a bit of a surprise. Some were clinging to the rock face; others were sitting in the leaf litter. Some stood alone and others formed large clumps. What was immediately noticeable was that the plants that were growing in the light were considerably smaller than the ones in the shade. Actually, some of the plants in the shade were giants, considerably larger than a hand spread out (Fig. 1).

The ground was drier than expected, but it had been not very wet the last few days and actually we were in the dry season so that explained something. We sure saw enough evidence to suggest that rain and wind could get pretty nasty up here.

After taking lots and lots of pictures, we hiked back. Unfortunately the growing spots of the other sisters were too far away, being to the north and south of Cairns, so we couldn’t visit those. There was time to take a walk around a crater lake which had us meeting stinging trees (just how long did your hand hurt Andreas?), a python, and we visited a large curtain fig before returning home.



Figure 1. *Drosera schizandra* on Mount Bartle Frere.

That evening was a sad goodbye to those who wouldn't be making the big field trip, but as some of those were going to be whacking around in New Guinea and other places it just came down to choices.

Now for the big trip. A full week of travelling up the Cape York Peninsula! There were 23 CP explorers from countries as far apart as Japan, Belgium, Australia, USA, New Zealand, and of course myself from The Netherlands. All of us were to be driven around in a specially adapted 4x4 bus (something like the so called "Overlanders" they use in Africa) by a real barefoot bushman named Gary, the driver/guide/cook.

As I said earlier, we were taking this trip in the dry season and that had several advantages. The first and most obvious from the start was that there weren't that many mosquitos, leeches, and other nasty things around as could have very well been the case. Actually on the whole trip the bug spray came out just once. That was pleasant as it is much easier to keep the blood level in your alcohol in check when you are not being sucked dry. The other advantage started to dawn upon us as we traveled further. While at several points we were wading through knee deep (and deeper) water to get at the plants, there was no way we could have visited this place in the wet season. The best illustration for that was when we crossed the Wenlock River and noticed a sign at least 15 meters up in a tree stating that people had been there in a boat during the wet season of 2003. A snorkel on your truck isn't going to be much use in those conditions.

The trip was a bit of a mixture of a solid basis of known locations and a couple of spots we just gave a try because they looked promising. If I have to sketch plant and animal life at the Cape, I would say that there is an incredible variation of life, much of which is unique to the area. However, the density of that life is not very high, with a few exceptions. Some things that we knew were there we didn't find, while on the other hand *Utricularia chrysantha*, *Drosera serpens*, and *D. burmannii* were just about everywhere.

So enough for the general remarks; now back to the trip. The first stop was a nice waterhole with water lilies and some water birds we just spotted while driving along. Nice spot and good to get our feet wet and our eyes in, but apart from some lost *Utricularia gibba*, there was not much to be found.

The second spot brought us more interesting plants. A check of some notes prompted an instruction to the driver to take off into some bone dry land on a barely visible track. Who would go look for CP's in such a spot? However, it soon became clear that there was a small stream behind some more dense vegetation. Splashing through some ankle deep water we found several plants, including *Stylidium austrocapense*, *S. tenerum*, *D. burmannii*, *U. chrysantha*, *U. caerulea*, *U. minutissima* and even a possibly new species of *Utricularia*...as it was tiny, there was no way to be sure in the field (Fig. 2).

Our first camp was at Musgrave. No need to set up tents as the company we were using (Heritage Tours) had a permanent camp here. Like most small clusters of population in this



Figure 2. Greg Bourke with possible new species of *Utricularia*.

area there was a small airstrip (if a plane needs to land, you have to chase away the cattle first) and a quick walk down said airstrip produced large amounts of *D. serpens*, *D. burmannii*, and *D. petiolaris*. In the general area we also found *Stylidium delicatum* and the unavoidable *U. chrysantha*.

Next day was a big drive to Elliot Falls/Twin Falls. We arrived just in time to set up our tents (no permanent camp this time) and have a quick swim and look around with the hour or so daylight we had left. Our campsite was roughly in the middle, so those who went to one side came to Elliot Falls and those who went the other way came to Twin Falls. We found *Nepenthes mirabilis* growing all along the banks at both places and there is something to be said for having a swim amongst the *Nepenthes* pitchers (especially after sitting in a bus for most of the day).

The morning greeted us with heavy rain....dry season? Not really! I actually found out later that the wet and dry season division is a European thing. The local aboriginals recognize 6 seasons! We took down the tents and drove off without much further exploring, though I did see 3 species of ant plant thanks to our driver who knew exactly where they were.

Next came a long drive, the crossing of the Jardine River that really brought us to the actual remote north and onwards to the real carnivorous highlight of this trip, a bog area known as Jacky Jacky (named for an aboriginal guide of Edmund Kennedy during the days of great explorations). Here we found *D. petiolaris*, *D. serpens*, *D. spatulata*, *N. mirabilis*, *N. tenax*, *N. rowaniae*, *U. chrysantha*, *U. lasiocaulis*, *U. bifida*, and *U. caerulea*. A special treat, but extremely difficult to find and even harder to get a halfway decent picture of was *Utricularia quinquedenta*. Though in flower this tiny plant just was very hard to spot as the flowers were hardly bigger than the sand grains the plants were standing amongst.



Figure 3. Four species in one spot: *Drosera serpens*, *D. spatulata*, *Utricularia chrysantha*, and *Nepenthes mirabilis*.

The finding of *Byblis liniflora* rounded out the display at this carnivorous heaven and we finished the day at a prepared camp at Seisa.

The following day was set up for touristy things. We stayed at the same camp Seisa for two nights and drove to the actual northern tip of the Australian continent to have a look around and take pictures with the famous sign saying exactly that. We also stopped at a place where there used to be a camp. As the water source of this camp might yield some carnivores, it was worth a try.

Unfortunately the whole area was one big pig wallow. If there was ever any discussion that hogs might be just as big an imported pest problem as rabbits that argument was now settled...they are far worse. The whole area was completely cleared of vegetation and bore a remarkable resemblance to freshly ploughed fields. The rest of the day we relaxed.

Next morning brought a nice surprise; a Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*) was nice enough to pose a little for us. The bird was hidden from view from the better camera angles when considering the light, but just to have a look at this magnificent and large black and red bird was a great start of the day.

The road took us to a boggy area to look at one specific plant, a *Nepenthes*. This plant is known as “mini-tenax” to some, but there are those who wish to name it as a separate species. Not being a *Nepenthes* grower myself, I will leave a judgment of the validity of that idea to others. The location was special enough and while a reasonable shot could be obtained from more or less dry land, some actually were willing to risk crocs and other nasty things by going knee-deep in the mud and vegetation that was at least as high and often much higher as the mud was deep. I’m happy to report that all who ventured in made it out alive, though Glen had a nasty argument with some wasps; the perils of exploration. At the edge of this swamp we also found some *D. petiolaris* and *D. spatulata*.

Next came a drive to Fruit Bat Falls. Though close to and superficially similar to Eliot and Twin falls, the general agreement was that this was a much prettier place. It had a nice deep swimming hole with the falls plunging down into it and upstream one could take a nice walk through crystal clear knee-deep (mind the holes!) water (Fig. 4).

As we had more time and more importantly more daylight at this location than our previous falls visit, we managed to have a good look around and found a nice area with plants. Along the stream we found *Nepenthes mirabilis*, *U. chrysantha*, *U. gibba*, *D. serpens*, *D. burmannii*, and *D. spatulata*. However, the big prize at this location was *Byblis aquatica* growing just a few steps from the plateau most people use to go into the swimming hole.

We also found a Cane Toad (*Rhinella marina*), which was a few moments later a late Cane Toad, as this is yet another invasive pest and a very bad one at that. It kills not only many small local species by eating them, but kills even more native predators by being deadly poisonous.

Camp that night was at Bramwell Station. This very large cattle ranch gets some serious extra income by operating a really nice campground. Again camp had already been set up. A bell rang to announce happy hour and while we enjoyed our beer, a guy stepped up with a microphone and started telling about the history of the station. That was a nice touch and later it turned out that he was the one man band/singer/DJ that



Figure 4. Robert Gibson, Mason McNair, and Carson Trexler exploring near Fruit Bat Falls.

was to entertain the campers that night. However we didn't spend much time listening as our driver had set up a huge barbeque and we enjoyed a steak dinner with the group. By the time we were finished eating most went to bed and not to the bar, which tells you how bloody tired we all felt.

Next morning was a long drive back to Musgrave where we had stayed before, basically it was the same route we had taken before (there are no other options) so nothing really new on this day besides some nice birds, including a Blue-winged Kookaburra (*Dacelo leachii*) (Fig. 5). No CP's were to be seen before we got back to Musgrave. Some of us took the time to get a couple of extra shots of the plants we had already found before, most however just relaxed after a long ride.

The morning of our last day left us a bit sad on going back to Cairns. However, our driver had a couple of surprises in stock for us. From Musgrave to Cairns there are a couple of more tracks so we could take another route if we wanted. So we did.

This route took us first to a really nice lake surrounded by woods. Lots of water birds, including Magpie geese (*Anseranas semipalmata*) sitting in the trees. The area was not that boggy in itself, but some visiting wild pigs had turned large parts into deep mud. Luckily the water plant zone was more or less intact and a check of the water's edge revealed a nice group of *U. aurea*.

Next came a drive to more arid land, the habitat that comes to mind when most people think of outback Australia. We did some stops and found some very nice non-carnivorous plants including *Nymphoides indica*, a small water lily with frilled flowers and the local name "White Snowflakes" that would be a bestseller for everyone with a tropical garden.

The next surprise had more of a bite. In all honesty, while we were constantly mindful of crocodiles (specifically saltwater crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) as the other species of croc that occurs here (*Crocodylus johnstonii*) is not considered dangerous to humans), up to now they had left us pretty much alone. That was of course nice for our safety, but not so much fun if you want to see things. Our driver had just the solution. We stopped along a river and sneaked (for as much as a group of 23 can sneak) through the vegetation to the river's edge a couple of 100 meters away. On the opposite bank we got our crocodiles. Mrs. Croc wasn't dressed for visitors and quickly slid her 3-meter something body in the water and went into hiding. Mr. Croc wasn't that shy. Actually, he was pretty much convincingly communicating: "I'm well over 5 meters, this is my spot and what are you going to do about that mate?"

After filling a lot of SD-card space, we boarded and drove back to Cairns.

After saying our goodbye's to the driver we freshened up, had dinner and said goodbye to everybody as we were all leaving on different flights, at different times, and to different places. I went on a two-day trip around the world to go home, others left for such interesting places as Papua New Guinea to do some more field tripping with Ch'ien Lee or to climb a couple of mountains to look for more Asian weeds...oops I mean lovely *Nepenthes* species.

Anyway, it was a great trip and I had a lovely time. My thanks to those who made it possible by preparing this trip, driver Gary for putting up with a bunch of plant geeks and that lovely bunch of nutcases that I like to call friends who have made this trip so much fun.

When the next conference comes, don't hesitate, come!



Figure 5. Blue-winged Kookaburra.