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Palmetto



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Memories of a Champion

Article and photos by Roger L. Hammer



In the spring of 1988, when I was a mere 43 years old, I was exploring a linear coastal hammock near Flamingo (Monroe County) in Everglades National Park that was bordered by saltmarsh prairies to the east and west. The venerable botanist John Kunkel Small (1869–1938) explored this region in the early 1900s and reported cowhorn orchids (*Cyrtopodium punctatum*) growing on trees by the hundreds, and he wrote that one grand specimen that had 201 pseudobulbs took six men to carry out. Small planted it at the estate of his industrialist friend, Charles Deering (1852–1927), who built a palatial estate along Biscayne Bay in the town of Cutler and who funded many of Small’s collecting trips. There are old photos of horse-drawn wagons, and even Model T Fords, loaded with orchids collected from the Everglades, and this plundering continued even after the dedication of Everglades National Park by President Harry Truman in December 1947.

Left: A large cowhorn orchid in full magnificent splendor perches on a buttonwood stump. The individual flowers are interesting in both color and shape.

Today, the cowhorn orchid, or cigar orchid, is a state-listed endangered species with small local populations scattered around in Miami-Dade, Monroe, Collier, and Lee Counties, where it is protected mostly within the boundaries of Everglades National Park, Big Cypress National Preserve, and Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.

It was in 1972 when I first gained an obsession with finding and photographing Florida's native orchids, because that's the year when Carlyle Luer's magnificent book, *The Native Orchids of Florida*, hit the bookstores. I could not believe that there were more than 100 species and varieties of wild orchids in Florida, so my travels looking for them took me from the Lower Florida Keys to the far-western Florida Panhandle.

Little did I know, that beautiful spring day in 1988 was about to introduce me to what would become a dear and cherished friend. As I pushed through the hammock from its west side, I came upon an open saltmarsh with a solid groundcover of saltwort (*Batis maritima*) interspersed with other salt-tolerant native plants like seablite (*Suaeda linearis*) and perennial glasswort (*Salicornia ambigua*). Scattered about the saltmarsh were many sunbleached trunks of old buttonwoods (*Conocarpus erectus*) that were most likely killed by Hurricane Donna in 1960, as well as sporadic clusters of small buttonwoods and black mangroves (*Avicennia germinans*). Along the edge of the hammock were an abundance of manchineel (*Hippomane mancinella*), a poisonous native tree related to the poinsettia.

As I made my way out of the hammock, I decided to hike back to the main park road, and I noticed a large patch of reddish-yellow flowers out in the middle of the saltmarsh to the east. This is not the easiest habitat to walk through but I felt a need to see what belonged to those flowers and, as I got closer, I realized it was a very large cowhorn orchid in full magnificent splendor perched atop a stout buttonwood stump. I recall sitting down on a log about 50 feet from it just so I could savor the moment and take in its beauty from afar before admiring it up close. I had seen many plants of this species before but none were anywhere near as grand as this one, and I could now relate to the cowhorn orchid J. K. Small had collected from this same region many decades ago.

Remember, this was 1988, so now fast-forward to 2017 because during those 29 years I made annual pilgrimages to visit my newfound friend each spring during flowering season to pay homage, and with each passing year it was even more spectacular than the year before. I checked on it shortly after Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and also after Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma in 2005, and it survived all of those storms. But then came Hurricane Irma in early September 2017. Irma skirted Cuba's north coast before turning north and hitting



Above: Hurricane Irma left the cowhorn orchid toppled from its perch and upside down in a pool of brackish water.

the Lower Florida Keys and the southwest Florida mainland as a Category 4 storm, weakening to a Category 3 as it swirled north up the Gulf Coast.

Everglades National Park was closed for weeks following Irma, and my wife, Michelle, and I had plenty to do at our home in Homestead cleaning up Irma's considerable mischief, plus dealing with being without electricity for 12 days, but the big cowhorn orchid remained in the back of my mind. Finally, in October, a biologist friend of mine who works in Everglades National Park informed me that she was going to be surveying the area around Flamingo and Cape Sable from a helicopter, so I sent her the GPS coordinates of the orchid to see if she could check on it for me. When she sent an aerial photo of it later that same day, my heart sank. It had not only toppled from its perch, it was upside down with parts of it sitting in brackish water.

It wasn't until mid-November before I finally had an opportunity to make the trek out to visit it again, but by then much of it was dead or too far gone to rescue. The good news is that there are other smaller cowhorns out there in the same vicinity, so maybe many years from now an aspiring young botanist traipsing through the saltmarsh will come across another grand champion. One can only hope.

About the Author

Roger L. Hammer is an award-winning professional naturalist, author, botanist and photographer. His most recent book is *Complete Guide to Florida Wildflowers*. Find him online at www.rogerlhammer.com