Going Pitcher Plant Hunting

by Eric Sathre

Until recently I never realized how easy it is to find carnivorous pitcher plants (Sarracenia) in the wild. I discovered it when I took a trip up to Mexico Beach in north Florida. For most of the trip I would look out of the car window and say (while going 60 M.P.H.), "I think that's one!" I never really was sure if they were pitcher plants or not.

When we arrived at Mexico Beach I was ready to go out plant hunting, but instead my mother said we had to go to The Mall. On the second day we were going to go back, but the weather looked so bad in the direction of The Mall (where we had already spent too much money) that I — being a noble and modest leader — suggested we turn around and go plant hunting instead.

I looked at all the roads on the map, trying to find the one with the most chances of being bogy. This meant that the road had to be close to several streams but far enough away from the beach so the plants wouldn't be exposed to the salt from the ocean.

On a gamble, I chose a small country road leading north. After traveling about halfway up the road, I "knew" I saw a Sarracenia flava. I hollered at the driver (my mother) to stop, and finally she did. To my utter delight, there were some!

I jumped out of the car whooping — and landed right in the muck in which they were growing.

Undeterred, I explored further. I came upon some flowers that were what I thought was more S. flava. When I looked closer I realized that they actually were S. psittacina! It was the happiest day of my life! My goal on the trip was to find S. flava and S. psittacina, which was not expected.

Periodically, my son would run tops. My son was in ecstasy! He indicated what looked like a stretch of pavement, but when they stretched out of the car almost before I could find a suitable pulling-off place, and I instantly became security officer, parking attendant, and safety patrol. The cars didn't come often along this deserted stretch of pavement, but when they did, they slowed and stared. My son would act as though he were just walking along the road, and I locked the doors. When one of the passing pickup trucks decided to stop to see what we were doing, I vowed to carry a machette henceforth. Or a pitbull.

Plant hunting could be dangerous. A Mother's Version

by Ann Sathre

Knowing that my son was very interested in finding carnivorous pitcher plants in the wild, and having been told that the panhandle area of Florida was where several varieties grew, I planned a trip for us to the Panama City area. I certainly didn't expect this trip to be the high point of my travel memoirs, but neither did I anticipate all the fun, fellowship, and adventure we were soon to experience.

The first day's drive was long, so I tried to keep a steady speed. This was met with constant requests to "Slow down! I think I saw one!" As a compromise to slowing down, I started looking, too. If we did see pitcher plants that first day, we were never sure.

Rain and more rain accompanied our stay in the Panhandle. Our visits to state parks and local towns soon became soggy, hurried excursions. On one particular morning, when heavy rains barred our path to the mall (where we had waited out the rains the day before and spent too much money), we decided to turn the car any direction away from the rain clouds. My son took the map and indicated what looked like a suitable country road where we could look seriously for pitcher plants. So I turned off the highway, slowed down, and began to peer through the windshield wipers, looking for what, I wasn't entirely sure.

Shortly, he began the "I think I see one" chant, and this time I slowed the car. Sure enough, we found them! in the ditch beside the road stood three- to four-foot, light green stalks with the familiar hoods at the tops. My son was in ecstasy! He bounded out of the car almost before I could find a suitable pulling-off place, and I instantly became security officer, parking attendant, and safety patrol. The cars didn't come often along this deserted stretch of pavement, but when they did, they slowed and stared. My son would act as though he were just walking along the road, and I locked the doors. When one of the passing pickup trucks decided to stop to see what we were doing, I vowed to carry a machette henceforth. Or a pitbull.

Plant hunting could be dangerous. Periodically, my son would run back to the car, and in breathless gasps would tell me that he was finding not only Sarracenia flava, which he had expected to find, but also S. psittacina, which was not expected. When his appetite for wild things was satisfied, my son climbed into the car with mud-soaked shoes, dirty fingernails, and a broad smile. "We did it, Mom."

By this time the rain had subsided so we drove on. Now I was looking as hard as he was. Every once in a while we were sure we saw more, but didn't stop. (Amazing how quickly adventure dulks.) But then we passed a cleared pine tree field where the ground cover had been removed perhaps a year ago, but the trees were left standing. And there in the field were hundreds of pitcher plants (S. flava I'm told), each with numerous greenish-yellow stalks standing erect and proud. It was truly a beautiful sight.

We came home a few days later feeling quite the victors. Between my son's faith in the possibilities and my reluctant willingness to try, we found carnivorous pitcher plants in the wilds of Florida!