

Roger Hammer, Dade Chapter

Interview by Gwladys E. Scott

When Roger Hammer is the scheduled speaker for the Dade Chapter's monthly meeting at Fairchild Tropical Garden, the room is guaranteed to be packed. Roger is always a popular speaker, both for his knowledge of native plants and his presentation style. A recent meeting started with Roger's literally hands-on introduction to poison ivy, poisonwood, and manchineel, three (normally) topically poisonous plants. The audience stayed very alert and, hopefully, listened very carefully. Roger's revelations of South Florida's special world of native plants are always a mix of laughter and learning. (I recently discovered that a manchineel tree, in Roger's own yard, exacted a small revenge for his cavalier attitude toward poisonous plants.)

Roger is a native from Cocoa Beach, Florida. He lives in south Miami-Dade County with his wife, Lisa, a horticultural consultant, and three large friendly dogs. They have created wetland and forest habitats in a former avocado grove, after Hurricane Andrew cleared most of the grove. There are many interesting natives and exotics planted onsite, often with the intention of attracting and sustaining wildlife. Many species of birds, butterflies, and other creatures visit the plants and ponds at this user-friendly way station.

Native plants entered Roger's life dramatically in 1972. He read the book, *Native Orchids of Florida*, by Dr. Carlyle Luer, and was "stunned" to learn about Florida's 102 orchid species. He armed himself with camera equipment and set out to find native orchids, ultimately photographing 80 native and naturalized orchids. In the process, he added two new orchids to the list. After he ran out of orchids, he moved on to photographing other native plants. During his wanderings in the plant world, Roger became acquainted with the Native Plant Workshop, a plant study group that has been meeting in South Dade since the sixties, and ultimately became chairman of the group in 1975. This study group still meets once a month at Bill Sadowski Park.

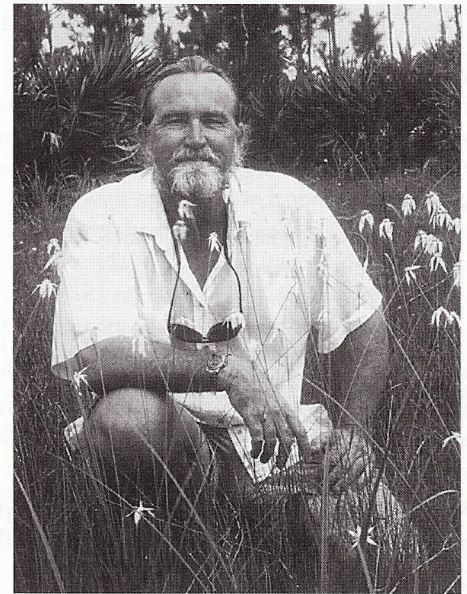
Natural environment education is the core of Roger's work and volunteer life. He

wishes to pass on knowledge of entire South Florida environment, the native plants, the life that depends on them (local and migratory wild life), and their medicinal uses. He has been particularly interested in wildflowers, butterflies, and hummingbirds. This has led to the creation of several books on the subject. Roger has produced books that focus in depth on South Florida, a relief to those of us looking for South Florida information and confronted with too many generalized books.

Everglades Wildflowers will be available in November 2002 and *Hummingbird and Butterfly Attracting Plants for Tropical Florida* is under way. A third book will be written about the cultural and natural history of the Everglades, *Exploring the Everglades*. All three books will be illustrated with Roger's photographs.

Roger joined the staff at Castellow Hammock Park in 1977 and has been Director of the Castellow Hammock Nature Center since 1980. The center's programs are utilized by elementary school children and adults. To Roger's regret, the junior and senior high public school students are not being reached. The program has attracted several college classes from the northern states. As the county's senior naturalist, Roger is involved in training and advising Miami-Dade County Park naturalists and the creation of special programs. Currently, an eco-tourism program is being developed.

Roger is a member of the FNPS Dade Chapter, gives talks at chapter events, and writes articles for the chapter newsletter, *Tillandsia*. He was keynote speaker at the 17th annual Florida Native Plant Society Conference in 1997. He has taught courses, led field trips, and been a volunteer at Fairchild Tropical Garden since 1980. He does a very important job of helping train seasonal naturalists at Everglades National Park. His speaking engagements now extend into neighboring counties. Roger was a member of the Board of Directors of the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (FLEPPC) from 1997 to 1998, and has been a member of the Board of Directors of Tropical Audubon Society since 1998.



For his work in education, research, and the promotion and preservation of native plants and natural resources, Roger has received the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Award from the Dade Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society in 1982 and the Charles Brookfield medal from the Tropical Audubon Society in 1996. He has also received an award from TREEmendous Miami for educating the public on the value of planting and protecting native trees in the community. Roger's proudest moment was receiving the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Award, then sipping whiskey with the Everglades icon herself.

Gardening, fishing, cooking, and camping are some of Roger's activities of choice and pleasure. He has had some special experiences living close to the natural world: solo canoeing the approximately 100 miles of intricate orchid and epiphyte covered mangrove waterways between Chokoloskee and Flamingo (recommends the first 10 days of April) and hiking from the Tamiami Trail north to Alligator Alley through the cypress and hardwoods of the Fakahatchee Swamp.

Roger believes the Florida Native Plant Society was born from an awareness of the growing loss of Florida's native plant habitats. He would like to see the organization play a more political role and become a name with some clout concerning controversial environmental issues and decision making. Roger feels that education, rather than regulation, is the key to saving habitats and the appropriate use of more diverse native plants in public settings. ✨