

The Quarterly Journal of the Florida Native Plant Society

# Palmetto



# Ghosts of the Hammocks

## *Voyria parasitica*

by Jim Drake

The sky was gray with clouds threatening to produce an extended downpour at any moment on that mid-November day as I drove my rental car from Miami International Airport toward that Miami-Dade County Park. My mission was to see and hopefully photograph rare ghosts. The overcast sky would provide less than ideal conditions for photography, but no matter, the ghosts would be hiding deep in the darkened hammocks, anyway. Fortunately, park botanist, Cristina Rodriguez, had already scouted out some locations, knew just where to find them, had agreed to meet at the park and lead me to a site. Rain or shine, I was not about to miss this opportunity to capture (digitally) some of these state-listed apparitions.

My affinity for Gentianaceae had begun months earlier in the mountains of north Georgia during an encounter with rare fringed gentians (*Gentianopsis crinita*). Following this epiphany, my goal became compiling a folio encompassing that entire family of the Eastern U.S. The ensuing months were filled with road and air trips to various sites in search of far flung members of this family, and I was now closing in on one of the rarer and more highly unusual members.

Parasitic ghost plant [*Voyria parasitica* (Schltdl. & Cham.) Ruyters & Maas], a tropical species, occurs within the States in a few sites only in the two Florida counties of Miami-Dade and in the keys of Monroe. Superficially, ghost plant may not appear to be related to such cousins as blue bottle gentians, but experts in plant systematics say it's so.

On arrival at the park, the rain was still holding off and the sky seemed to lighten a bit. After we entered the suspect hammock, a few plants became visible – then more until a respectable number stood posing for photographs. Many of the diminutive, 4-6 inch tall, cream-colored, non-chlorophyll bearing stems terminated in cymes of tiny whitish blooms. Seemingly misunderstood, this frail plant lives off the nutrients of decomposing leaf litter in a saprophytic, not parasitic relationship.

A bevy of shutter clicks resulting in numerous plant images ended with a fond farewell to one of Florida's most interesting natural parks. This successful adventure made the return flight to Atlanta much more pleasurable.



*Voyria parasitica* – photo by Jim Drake

### Acknowledgements and special appreciation

Without the insight of the legendary botanist, naturalist, author and photographer Roger Hammer and the excellent assistance of Miami-Dade County Park and Recreation Department's Christine Sexton, Pam Rose, Jennifer Possley and Cristina Rodriguez, botanist superb, I would not have had the pleasure of seeing first hand and photographing the unique ghost plant.

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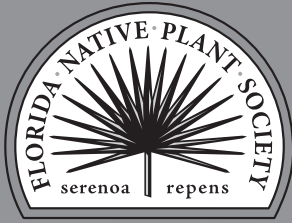
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