

SOUTH FLORIDA'S EPIPHYTIC ORCHIDS

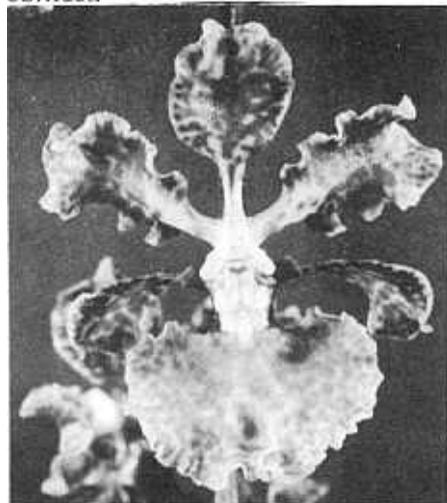
How Healthy Are They?

PART II

by Chuck McCartney

Of South Florida's much-sought *Oncidium* species, *O. floridanum* is not strictly an epiphyte. Most often it is found growing in the leaf litter covering the eroded limestone rock bases of hardwood hammocks of Everglades National Park. There, this robust species grows in healthy colonies in a number of hammocks of Long Pine Key. I also have seen a few plants north of Monroe Station west of the Monument Road in the Big Cypress, and the species is reported for the Naples area.

The pretty and much-collected *Oncidium bahamense* (*O. variegatum* subsp. *bahamense*) apparently grew in a limited area of sand pine and rosemary scrub along coastal areas of northern Palm Beach and Martin counties. Many of these former dune areas have been destroyed to make way for condominiums. Although still occasionally found elsewhere, it now appears to be most abundant only in Jonathan Dickinson State Park, where it is somewhat protected from collectors. Remember, however, that "abundant" is a relative term in this contest.

*Oncidium luridum*

Oncidium luridum, Florida's highly desirable "Mule's Ear Orchid," now apparently is found only in inaccessible buttonwood forests at the very southern tip of the peninsula in Everglades National Park. The inaccessibility of the few remaining (and occasionally extensive) colonies is perhaps the only reason the species still exists in the wild in Florida — despite the fact that the plants in the

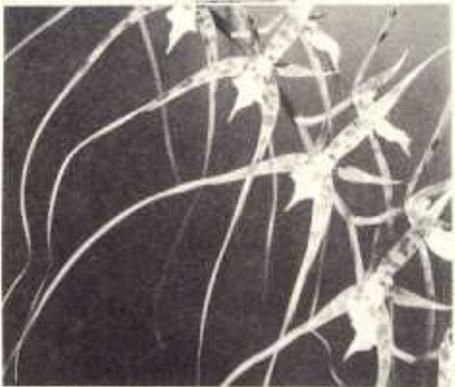
park are protected by law.

Oncidium carthagenense, although reported for Cape Sable, probably never was in Florida. Its inclusion on the state's list of native orchid flora probably is based on a misidentification of the place of origin of a plant of this species by John Kunkel Small in 1916.

Of the *Oncidium* relatives in South

*Ionopsis utricularioides*

Florida, only the dainty *Ionopsis utricularioides* continues to be widespread, inhabiting the swamp forests of the Big Cypress and the Fakahatchee Strand, where it usually is found dangling from pond-apple or pop-ash trees by a few slender roots.

*Brassia caudata*

Leochilus labiatus has been reported for only a single station deep within the Fakahatchee and is unknown to me.

The remaining *Oncidium* relatives, *Brassia caudata* and *Macradenia lutescens*, probably have been extirpated in their few South Florida habitats, the northernmost limits of their range. Both formerly were found in tropical hardwood hammocks near Homestead and in the Long Pine Key section of Everglades National Park. But the two species — especially the showy

Brassia caudata, the so-called "Spider Orchid" — were highly prized by orchid growers and all known specimens seem to have been collected from their few natural habitats. However, 20-25 years ago, Dr. Luer was able to find and photograph specimens of each in Everglades National Park. This was accomplished with the help of Dr. Frank C. Craighead, Sr., who had removed specimens of these two sought-after species from their more accessible haunts to isolated and secret hammocks in remote areas of Long Pine Key. But even these plants seem to have disappeared because they have eluded recent observers. Also, the *Brassia* especially seems to be very cold-sensitive and the last known plant of this species in the wild in South Florida succumbed following the frigid winter of 1977, when it snowed in Miami. Nevertheless, both of these species are present in nearby Cuba and could be re-introduced by natural means at some later date. And it's not entirely impossible that isolated specimens could still exist on some tree limb of a hammock somewhere within Everglades National Park.

*Cyrtopodium punctatum*

Cyrtopodium punctatum, Florida's famed "Cow Horn Orchid," has long been popular with hobbyists because of its showy sprays of yellowish flowers spotted with brown and, thus, the species has been hunted unmercifully. Collectors have vastly diminished its numbers. Still, it is possible to find occasional plants, although few approach the gigantic proportions reported earlier in this century. In the Big Cypress, the species grows near the bases of

Carlyle Luer

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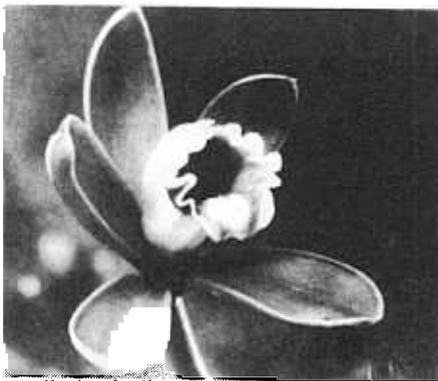
Chuck McCartney

cypress trees in open swamp forests. In Everglades National Park, it grows in the tops of lysilomas and other large trees at the top of the forest canopy in some hardwood hammocks and also inhabits the buttonwood forests of Cape Sable. It is reported for the Fakahatchee as well. Even suburbanized Broward County once had populations of this species. One particularly large plant was "rescued" a couple of years ago from a cypress forest site being bulldozed to make way for yet another shopping center. Pieces of the plant were re-established in Everglades National Park, the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, and at least one Broward County park. Fires are also a serious threat to this species. Some of the finest plants I knew in the northeastern Big Cypress were destroyed when an intentionally set fire burned out of control.

Dr. Luer cites reports of yellow-flowered *Cyrtopodium* plants, tentatively identified as *C. andersonii*, being found in the wild but none has been verified. This species or another very like it reportedly also has succeeded in naturalizing itself in some neighborhoods south of Miami, where populations of exotic *Cyrtopodium* species have been grown. At present, this is a doubtful species in the native orchid flora of Florida.

Vanilla is an aberrant, somewhat primitive vine-growing orchid which bridges the gap between an initial terrestrial lifestyle and the epiphytic habit it seemingly must achieve if it is to bloom and reproduce. *Vanilla* species, especially *V. phaeantha*, with its large and ephemeral flowers, are found sparingly in the Fakahatchee. There are also reports of *V. planifolia*, the vanilla of the spice trade, for that locality. However, the latter species is somewhat questionable as a native orchid. Its presence here seems to be due to the intervention of early man in Florida, possibly coming here in trade with Central American cultures. The reason for this supposition is that the major known localities for *V. planifolia* in Florida are associated with former Indian habitations. I have never seen *V. planifolia* in the wild.

Vanilla barbellata, called the "Worm Vine" because of its thick, most often leafless, jointed stems, reportedly is still plentiful in the mangrove fringe of Everglades National Park and on Big Pine Key in



N.M. Buswell

Vanilla barbellata

the Lower Keys. It also is said to be still found on occasion on Key Largo in the Upper Keys. The only population I knew — a healthy, blooming one — grew in the Taylor Slough Basin west of Homestead. Alas, these plants burned to a crisp in fires during the spring of 1975. (These fires were possibly arson, set under very suspicious circumstances, supposedly to prevent the land from being preserved for its unique Everglades environment.)

Vanilla dilloniana, supposedly found only once in Miami's long-destroyed Brickell Hammock, is a doubtful species. In photographs, it looks like little more than a hammock-habitat variant of *V. barbellata*.

Florida's fifth *Vanilla* species, the large-leaved and attractive-flowered *V. mexicana* (*V. inodora* in Luer) was apparently extirpated in its only known location south of Florida City. However, it has been discovered only recently in a coastal hammock of Martin County — four counties further north than its previously known station! The species supposedly is plentiful in its one new location.

Deep within the Fakahatchee Strand dwell a few tropical epiphytes that are found nowhere else in North America. Of the pleurothallids, only the large *Pleurothallis gelida* is encountered with any regularity — and even then usually as isolated



Lewis Ellsworth

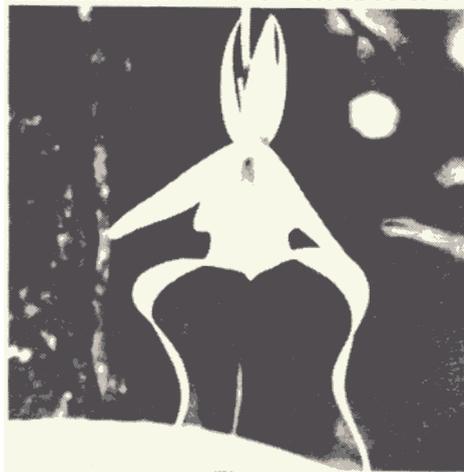
Pleurothallis gelida

single plants. Of the other two pleurothallids reported for South Florida, one, *Restrepiella ophiocephala*, may not actually have come from the state at all. The third, the lilliputian *Lepanthopsis melanantha*, is found only sparingly in the Fakahatchee and even then only by very keen-eyed observers. Although I have never seen it, I know individuals who have.

The Fakahatchee also has harbored plants of *Bulbophyllum pachyrhachis*, sometimes called the "Rat-Tail Orchid" because of the thickened rachis of its inflorescence (hence the species name). However, it appears that most of these plants have been collected by orchid hunters who have stumbled upon its few haunts.

Colonies of *Maxillaria crassifolia* reveal themselves on rare occasions in the pond-apple sloughs of the Fakahatchee. A second *Maxillaria* species, tentatively identified as *M. conferta*, has been found in one location in the Fakahatchee by Dade County Parks naturalist Roger L. Hammer.

But all is not gloomy for some of the rare tropical epiphytic orchids of South Florida. The leafless species of



Emma M.J. Northrup

Polyradicion lindenii

native orchids seem fairly healthy for the present. It's still easy to go into places in the Big Cypress and find the large-flowered and eerie *Polyradicion lindenii* (*Polyrrhiza lindenii*) on trees in deep pond-apple sloughs. This is Florida's famed "Ghost Orchid." In the central part of the Fakahatchee Strand, *Campylocentrum pachyrrhizum*, with its flat, ribbon-like roots, is still relatively abundant. The miniature *Harrisella porrecta* (*H. filiformis*) is more widespread. It's supposed to be common in old citrus groves in Central Florida. And not only is it well established in the Big Cypress and the Fakahatchee but it even shows up in urbanized Broward County!