

The Rhododendrons of the High Daga

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Just over a year ago I wrote about the rhododendrons of the Daga country of South-east Papua, concentrating on those of the lower altitudes, from about 2,000 to 6,000 feet above sea level. I said that I would write about those of the higher Daga later, when I had an opportunity to visit them. I have recently had such an opportunity when Mr. Patrick ('Paddy') Woods of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, came to this area to collect plants. Unfortunately, Mr. Michael Black, who was with him on the earlier part of his tour, had to return before they came to the Daga. His place was taken by a Papuan, Mr. Michael Galore, of Lae Herbarium, whose knowledge of trees and collecting ability were a great help to us.

We started out from Agaun - our base and my Mission Station - on July 9, walking to Birat, where we spent the first night. I have already described the gorge-side above Birat where at 4,200 feet Rhododendrons *konori*, *zoelleri* and *christianae* grow side by side. From here we ascended the long, steep slope to Mt. Wayat, 6,250 feet at the pass.

Growing both on the ground and as an epiphyte is a beautiful species of rhododendron, as yet unidentified. I saw this in leaf last year and in flower this April, but by July the last flowers had faded. It has trusses of four or five waxy trumpet-shaped flowers, three and a quarter inches across the petals. Each petal has a basal crimson streak as in *R.konori*, and the flower smells strongly of hyacinths. The foliage is rigid, dark green and oblong in shape, highly lepidote and rusty when young.

Descending to Nepesip, we saw a single plant on a rock of a rhododendron which may be a natural hybrid between *R.christianae* and *zoelleri*, being exactly intermediate in flower and leaf.

Climbing again, we crossed over Mt. Gaugun, where the magnificent ericaceous climber, *Dimorphanthera moorhousiana*, was decking some of the trees with ropes of rose-pink or crimson. Rhododendrons *leptanthum* and *wrightianum* were growing on mossy tree-trunks and banks. On the way down to Tua the slopes were covered with *R.christianae*.

We made Tua our base camp for the exploration of Mt. Simpson, the easternmost summit of the Owen Stanleys, rising to almost 10,000 feet. We approached it by a new route, from the west, the opposite side from that which I had climbed it in 1947.

We started off up the slopes of Mt. Tara, passing plenty more *R.christianae*, with flowers of deeper shades as we ascended. There is also a beautiful *vaccinium* on these slopes, with masses of waxy vase-shaped flowers in various shades of shell-pink, with coral-red buds. In gathering this I fell on the slippery slopes and was saved by strong brown arms from going over a cliff.

Further on we reached a ridge covered with *R.macgregoriae* with trusses of flat apricot flowers, and a slender species near *R.leptanthum*, but terrestrial, and with a characteristic brown lepidote midrib to the leaf. The sparsely produced flowers were somewhat zygomorphic and bright pink. We camped on a pass between Mts. Tara and Idop, called Unanip, pitching our tents in a clearing of the mossy forest at 6,000 feet.

After a pouring wet Sunday in camp we set out again for Mt. Idop. From Unanip we started up the long ridge of Mt. Idop, which leads onto the great peaks of Matawan (the native name of Mt. Simpson) itself. This was forested in parts, but mostly covered with bare bracken and heathery grassland, with patches of rhododendron shrubbery on the slopes and at the margin of the forest.

In addition to the species already described were *R.inconspicuum*, with its far from inconspicuous small, but bright crimson flowers, and another beautiful rhododendron which I have never seen before. This formed low, compact bushes absolutely covered with coppery-orange flowers. These had a short tube, intermediate in size between *christianae* and *macgregoriae*, but the petals opened wide and flat, longer and slenderer than *macgregoriae*. It could possibly be a hybrid, but it was so common on these slopes that a hybrid origin seems unlikely. The four species flowering together turned the mountain slope into a veritable rhododendron garden.

We continued to climb up this ever-steepening spur until we reached the peak of Mt. Idop at 8,000 feet. There is a little col here filled with the stunted mossy forest which has come to be known as elfin wood. Here we cleared a hollow for our next camp. The forest was full of rhododendron plants, few of which were in flower, but when we did find a spray its tubular, pink corollas with white petals and its ovate lanceolate leaves showed it to be *R.tuba* (first discovered by me on Mt. Dayman).

This is the characteristic and most abundant rhododendron on this side of Matawan, and we saw shrubberies of it all the way up from here. But we did not see its close relation *R.rhodoleucum*, nor *R.crutwellii*, which I had seen on the other side of Mt. Simpson before. Both *R.tuba* and *rhodoleucum* have the appearance of apple blossom at a distance.

The next day Michael Galore and I and a couple of others set out to try to reach the summit. But the weather was appalling; bitterly cold rain, driven upwards by the wind, battering against the ridge. It numbed our fingers and crinkled our skins. At 8,200 feet we decided to turn back as the track was getting very steep and there were huge precipices below us.

However, the effort was not wasted as we found another species of rhododendron completely new to us on the edge of the last patch of mossy

forest. It had shiny obovate leaves and glabrous secund flowers of a glowing coral-red. These were much larger than those of *R.inconspicuum* and borne singly. Soaked with rain, they glistened and shone in the dim light. On the slopes nearby we found a short white hebe (*Veronica*) and a straggling gaultheria with white heather-like flowers and black berries. There were also species of *vaccinium*, *agapetes* and *dimorphanthera* in these shrubberies, but to describe them would take up too much space.

The next day we left Mt. Simpson and descended to Tua, having collected a wonderful variety of plants, including *Ericaceae*, *Orchids* and alpinas. Thence we returned to Agaun for a short recuperation before setting off again for the Dayman range.

After an interlude, attending a huge feast at Bonenao, where sixty-two pigs were disposed of and full dress regalia worn, we started up from that village to Mt. Mon, a spur of the Dayman range. This lies in the opposite direction to Mt. Simpson, the two big mountains enclosing the Daga country on either side.

Mt. Mon is covered with huge *Nothofagus* trees, which are hanging gardens of epiphytes. On a previous visit I had found the scented corollas of a white rhododendron on the forest floor, which I suspect may be the same as the one which I discovered on Mt. Wayat, but this time we could see no trace of it. We camped on the other side of Mt. Mon, at the base of Mt. Donana, the easternmost peak of the Dayman complex.

Climbing Mt. Donana the next day, we emerged from the forest at about 7,500 feet onto alpine grassland with blue gentians and *Patersonia*, and *Rhododendron macgregoriae*, as usual margining the forest. At about 8,000 feet, we struck a patch of elfin wood, of which about half the stunted 'trees' are *R.rhodoleucum*. The pink and white flowers are similar to *R.tuba*, but tend to be fatter and more brightly coloured. The leaves are ovate-cordate, sessile, and clasping the stem, and rigidly at right-angles to it, quite different to those of *tuba*. A few hundred feet higher there was another patch of elfin wood across the ridge, this time completely dominated by *R.tuba*. Neither species

seemed to be admixed with the other, but practised complete apartheid. *R.inconspicuum* was locally abundant, but always in exposed open places. A very fine species of *vaccinium* with dense clusters of split-petalled flowers of a bright pink or red was common in these upper elfin woods.

The weather was kinder here than on Matawan and I was able to reach the summit of Mt. Donana, which registered 8.750 on my altimeter. I had to return from the summit as we had not time to go on to Mt. Aniata, the highest of the Dayman peaks, which I had explored in 1962. The only rhododendron missed by this was *R.nummatum*, a dwarf shrubby species with box-like foliage and small tubular red flowers, which grows on the other side of Mt. Donana, and near the summit of Aniata (9,600 feet).

The next day I left Paddy to re-explore the Donana elfin woods, while I went off in another direction to the plateau of Ideve, where I had formerly found *Rhododendron cruttwellii*. I had no difficulty in re-discovering it with a few sprays of its pure white tubular flowers, with yellow stamens. They are longer and slenderer than *rhodoleucum* or *tuba* and are well shown off by the dark shining foliage. *R.crutwellii* grows to a larger size than the others and seems to be able to withstand more shade. It was growing on the margin and well inside the mossy forest, some of the older plants being fully twenty feet high. In 1962, further up towards Mt. Aniata, I had seen a tubular-flowered rhododendron with pale apricot flowers which I suspect to be a hybrid between *cruttwellii* and *macgregoriae*. But I was not able to reach it this time. This completes the account of the Daga rhododendrons so far seen in flower. However, I have seen foliage which does not seem to fit any of these, so I suspect we have not discovered all the Daga rhododendrons yet. I have collected many seedling plants, which I hope will flower in the future and reveal their identity.

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