

Alpine Garden Society & Merlin Trust Botanical Trip to Yunnan Report By Robert Champier-Clarke

Tour Leader: DR Phillip Cribb

Introduction

When I received the email confirming that my grant application had been successful, it was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. For years I had dreamt of retracing my idols footsteps through china. With so many big hitters of the plant hunting world having explored Yunnan the chances of seeing some exquisite flora was certain.

The first book I reached for to research the area was Roy Lancaster's 'Travels in China', I had been slowly reading through the book, but now with an itinerary I could search for the information I needed. I made a list of plants I aimed to see whilst exploring, the list mostly consisted of trees and shrubs but out of everything on the list the plant I wanted to see the most was *Lilium* growing in the wild.

My career history has been varied but always horticulturally based with a stint working in the lovely gardens of Highgrove House and more recently Head Gardener of a beautiful Cotswold Garden. Horticulture is not just my chosen profession it is now my way of life and I live and breath every aspect.



Plate 1 Road to Deqin

June 4th Chendu-Kunming

Although a large portion of the first two days were traveling the chance to botanize was still available. Straight out of Chengdu airport we were greeted with some interesting street trees. *Ginkgo biloba* was prolific on the streets around the airport with some specimens growing higher than the overpass we walked along. They also had a rather unique way to stake these trees with four to five stakes fixed all around the tree. The second thing to catch my eye was the sheer quantity of *Bougainvillea* growing everywhere, it scrambled up fences, hung from balconies and trailed from bridges.

After transferring to Kunming we drove to the hotel where all along the road were huge concrete sections to retain the motorway banks, these were split into roughly five meter sections. The sections of bank were all planted with varying flora, most familiar to cultivation in England. Plants such as *Berberis*, *Viburnum*, *hypericum* to name just a few were planted on mass to soften the hard concrete edges. As we reached the city, *Veronica* was planted on mass in a style very similar to *Piet Oudolf*, this was odd as it didn't match any of the other planting.



Plate 2 *Bougainvillea* growing in abundance on all the streets

June 5th Kunming-Tengchong

After a short flight we explored Heshan old town and World War II cemetery. The entrance to the cemetery was flanked by a very good specimen of *Catalpa fargesii*. As we walked up the steep steps to the monument at the top, the banks were covered with a small grass *Ophiopogon bodinieri*. There was an incredible noise coming from the trees, it sounded like a chain saw or some sort of power tool, it turned out to be a secarda. Walking round the town there were people everywhere selling jade, or a stone similar to jade.



Plate 3 Heshan old town

Whilst walking along the river bank we reached a clearing where we came across a huge tree, it was a very large mature *Cinnamomum camphora*. A great aroma was produced by crushing the leaves. We then walked back to the bus finding a very large specimen of *Nandina domestica* growing with a good contrast plant *Loropetalum chinense*.

Our trip to the waterfall was probably most fruitful botanically. Some very attractive street trees such as *Magnolia grandiflora* and on the path to the waterfall we found *Kalopanax septemlobus/pictus* a very good specimen. The stream running along side had multiple *Betula alnifolius*.

We reached a clearing where perched on a bank was a great specimen of *Schima khasiana*, its glossy leaves visible from some distance.



Plate 4 Stunning waterfall in the middle of the town



Plate 5 Around the water wildlife was plentiful

June 6th Langyahan

Langyahan was our first proper field outing to see plants. It was a long journey but there were some interesting things on route. Growing in abundance on the side of the roads was *Pinus yunnanensis*, There was also the odd splash of color as we passed various Rhododendron growing in the undergrowth. We passed a village where it was almost like a grave yard for mature trees, the amount of great, huge old trees piled up was heartbreaking. The whole area was heavily involved with the manufacture of decorative items from huge tree stumps. Some of these root artworks were as big as small cars.

Having only traveled for a few hours we came across a plant that made my trip. I had always wanted to see *Lilium* growing naturally and there it was high up on a bank. I scrambled up the bank passing a lovely example of *Cornus capitata* and there at the top of the bank was a perfect example of *Lilium brownii*. It felt like all my christmas's had come at once, the trumpet drenched from the down pour that had now moved in. I reluctantly headed back to the bus buzzing with the excitement of seeing my first lily in the wild. Jumping onto the bus I noticed the sharp thorns and dainty flowers of *Rosa sericea*. On the bus we seemed to pass many great plants on our quest to get to our desired location. The terrain became very rough and the mini buses struggled, I was glad to reach our destination and start the hunt for some plants.



Plate 6 Local people seasoning their wood in pools to prepare for construction



Plate 7 Very close to the Burmese border our site was flanked by a plantation of *Juglans*

We walked along the track finding various interesting plants including more *Lilium brownii* and more Rosa species including *R. multiflora* and *R. bracteata*. High up on a bank I was pleased to see *Leycesteria formosa* as this is a bit of a rouge in my garden growing everywhere. There were several *Arisaema* species including *A. erubescens*, *A. consanguineum* and *A. yunnanense*. A lovely Anemone was found by clambering on to a bank, *Anemone rivularis*.



Plate 8 *Anemone rivularis*

You had to look fairly closely in the shrub and trees running along the track but there were some treasures hiding. *Clematis montana* thrived climbing over anything that got in its way. Several good

specimens of *Cornus capitata* were perched on the bank. The terrain was rugged and the river bed impressive with huge rocks and a bridge with a roof that looked as if it had been there for hundreds of years. As we walked back we saw yet more plants with *Vaccinium delavayi*, *Rubus biflorus*, *Sophora davidii* and a nice *Houttuynia cordata*.



Plate 9 Old bridge, could a plant hunter have walked over this very bridge?

On the way home we stopped in a small town for the drivers to eat. It was interesting to see how the local people lived. Poverty was an obvious issue, the houses were basic and hygiene poor. After bartering and purchasing some local beer we boarded the bus and headed back to the hotel.



Plate 10 Local village



Plate 11 Local shop

June 7th Gaoligongshan

2200-2500 meters above sea level

After a fairly long drive we arrived at our destination. A young man on a motorcycle swerved in front of our bus, beckoning us to pull over. I first thought he was a guide and was trying to help. What was actually happening was an effort to extort money from us. After lots of waiting around and phone calls the local people decided we needed a permit to access the area. So instead we decided to visit another area locally (Gaoligongshan) this also gave our guide enough time to sort out any necessary paperwork for our return to the area.



Plate 12 Unhappy Locals



Plate 13 The local equivalent of security guards

After a very bumpy trip to the top of the mountain we grabbed food and set off at a brisk walk to try and make up for lost time. Our destination was a waterfall some two hours walk away, we had learnt by this time, a chinese 2 hours walk was around one hour. On route we found several good *Cornus* tucked in the undergrowth. *Cornus Controversa* and *C. alternifolius*. Several *Betula* were seen with the most common being *Betula alnoides* and a huge dead specimen looking very popular with the local wildlife. Most trees of interest were marked including *Padus Wilsonii*, that caused some controversy as to the difference if any with *Prunus*. The next tree was *Castanea cathayana* a very handsome tree, although by this point we were hurrying along as time was not on our side. We found a lovely clump of *Disporum cantoniense* as well as many *Arisaema* already discovered previously.

Upon reaching the waterfall, it can only be described as something of a disappointment, a trickle of water ran down the waterfall. We did however find a lovely example of *Aeschynanthus linearifolius*.

As we walked back I came across a nice example of *Lindera erythrocarpa*, it was then back to the hotel to have a much needed rest.



Plate 14 *Aeschynanthus linearifolius*. Growing high in a tree next to the waterfall

June 8th Datang Gaoligong Shan

2250-2500 Meters above sea level

As we arrived at this destination for the second time we actually managed to drive up to our destination. This time the draw back was the weather, after an hour of walking the heavens opened and didn't stop. Our intention was to see a giant tree *Rhododendron*, the walk was long and treacherous with several people suffering falls. We saw some great *Acer* species including *dauricum* and *A. campbellii*, as well as *Tetracentron sinense*. It got increasingly damper and I was glad to reach the huge rhododendron at the top. The rhododendron was somewhat overshadowed to me by a great *Arisaema nepenthoides* and after a quick bite to eat we descended. As we walked back I noticed a lovely *Stachyurus himalaicus* as well as several *Polypodium* species. After a short break we started our journey back to the hotel. As we bumped down the lane to the main road I yelled to stop the bus as I thought I had seen a *Cardiocrinum* growing, we went past it so fast it was difficult to tell but worth a look. Unfortunately it wasn't *Cardiocrinum* but was a very nice example of *Lilium brownii*.

June 9th Tengchong- Dali

The trip to Dali was mostly cultural although the differing climates on route was fascinating. From exposed damp mountains to dry mountains in a rain shadow, the flora must have been very diverse here. Stopping at the services was a welcome break with a display of chinese equipment.



Plate 15 Chinese Tank on display in service station

When we reached Dali it was immediately apparent that it was a very tourist focussed area. The streets were lined with stalls and at night there were barbeques everywhere with lots of jolly people enjoying the warm evenings. Once settled into our hotel we visited the Three pagodas, although impressive we wandered round the impressive site marveling at the size of everything.

We finished the day sitting and relaxing by a stunning lake with the reflection of the three pagodas in the water.

June 10th Dali-Cangshan Mountain

4000 meters above sea level

As we jumped in the ski lift the change in flora as we steadily gained altitude was fascinating. The lower slopes were covered with smaller trees and shrubs as an understory to some of the larger *Abies* and pines. *Sorbus Micropylla* and *Spiraea canescens* were spotted in the lift as well as *Clematis montana* scrambling to the top of some large specimens of *Abies delavayi*.

When we reached the top the air was definitely thinner making walking tough. This was my first experience of being high up and I chose to pace myself walking the boardwalk to the top.



Plate 16 *Omphalogramma delavayi*

Strolling up the boardwalk we were spoiled for choice of alpine plants, Multiple *Omphalogramma delavayi* mixed in with *Primula caliantha* *P. serratifolia* *P. bella* and *P. sillimensis*. There was a small stream running out of a small pond growing next to this were numerous *Caltha palustris* mixed with various primulas mentioned above. In the dim light the sharp blue flowers of *Hackelia uncinata* shone through the fog, Characteristic of *Myosotis* from western gardens. Other notable plants were *Rheum forrsetii* growing near to that was *Bistorta vivipara* and the incredible *Megacodon stylophorus*. Reaching the top there was time to catch your breath and when the patches of fog cleared, enjoy the views.



Plate 17 *Hackelia uncinata*



Plate 18 *Caltha Palustris*.



Plate 19 Incredible bird life

There were a multitude of *Rhododendron* including *Rhododendron taliense*, *R lacteum*, *R fastigiatum*, *R impeditum*, *R hippophaeoides*, *R haematodes* and *R rubiginosum*. Unfortunately very few were in flower due to a poor year for flowering, however the quantity spread across the mountain side was a site to behold in itself.



Plate 20 The Boardwalk

Jun 11th Dali-Zhongdian

A long day of travel was ahead of us but there were a few opportunities to botanize. We meandered up many steep mountain passes until we reached a clearing at around 3000 meters. The site was perfect with a huge amount of alpine plants. There was an impressive thicket of *Betula platyphylla* var. *Szechuanica* mixed with *Prunus serrula* and both *Euphorbia jolkinii* and *E. stracheyi*. The euphorbia seemed to give off a subtle sweet scent and mixed beautifully with *Gentiana chungtienensis*. Further down the road we noticed a stunning group of *Iris bulleyana* and further still *Iris barbatula*. This area was truly stunning however we continued to Zongdian where we were to spend the night.



Plate 21 *Iris bulleyana*



Plate 22 *Prunus serrula*

June 12th Zhongdian Shika Snow Mountain

An early start meant we could be first on the ski lift to give us the best possible chance of finding some interesting flora. As the ski lift climbed higher up the weather got foggier and visibility was poor. When we finally reached the top there was a notable drop in temperature and it had started to rain. We followed the board walk down, the rain became torrential and we tried to lose some altitude to escape the weather. As we worked our way down the vegetation started to liven up and we saw the first *Mecenopsis*, it was *sulphurea* and a mad frenzy of cameras followed.



Plate 23 *Mecenopsis sulphurea*

We saw many many rhododendrons on the way down including *Rhododendron decoratum*; *R. irroratum*; *R. roxieanum*; *R. vernicosum*; *R. phaeochrysum*; *R. wardii*; *R. russatum*; *R. nivale*; *R. hippophaeoides*; *R. trichostomum* The plant that stood out most and that seemed to have a mesmerizing beauty was *Rhododendron wardii*, I scrambled up a bank to capture it and spent many minutes marveling at its beauty. In the damper areas next to the boardwalk *Rodgersia aescifolia* was thriving with *Ligulare nelumbifolia* and *N. langkongensis*; *L. liatroides*

Many primulas were inspected including *Primula sonchifolia*; *P. secundiflora*; *P. orbicularis*; *P. sikkimensis*; *P. minor*; *P. chionantha* var. *sinopurpurea*; *P. calliantha*; *P. deflexa*; *P. yunnanensis*; *P. polyneura*; *P. nannobella*. For me *Primula calliantha* was my favorite and several sizable clumps were discovered.



Plate 24 *Rhododendron wardii*



Plate 25 Lake with grazing Yak

June 13th Zongdian

Our trip today was to botanize around the Tianchi lake. As we drove up the bumpy track we suddenly came to an abrupt halt as an orchid had been spotted. The orchid was slipper orchid *Cypripedium flavum*. This was extremely exciting as it was the first time i had seen a slipper orchid in the wild. Not much further down the road another slipper orchid was spotted growing characteristically on top of a bank close to the road, it turned out to be *Cypripedium guttatum*.

When we reached the lake the ground was densely covered with *Rhododendron* species, spotted that day were the following *Rhododendron wardii*; *R. phaeochrysum*; *R. intricatum*; *R. impeditum*; *R. rupicola*; *R. telmateium*; *R. russatum*; *R. complexum*. As I walked towards the water I spotted my first *Reum* of the day, *Reum alaxandrea* and later spotted *R. likiangensis*. As we made are way back a small Lily was discovered *Lilium souliei* and not far away *Fritillaria cirrhosa*. There were several conifers surrounding the site *Picea brachytyla* and *P. lichiangensis*. I grabbed a short lunch so I could explore further and squelched in to a damper area where I once gain found *Caltha palustris* and *C. scaposa*.



Plate 26 *Cypripedium flavum*

June 14th-15th Zhongdian-Hongshan

Highest Altitude 4850 meters.

We set off in Jeeps up dirt roads filled with construction machinery and past many industrial sites making use of the power of the river. Reaching the top of one pass we came across a quarry and a line of over 50 trucks waiting to be filled, the driver skillfully squeezed precariously past and we continued up the mountain. As we gained some altitude we came across a few *Meconopsis* firstly *Meconopsis lancifolia* var. *eximea* then later *M. lijiangensis* and later the leaf rosette of *M. rudis*



Plate 27 *Meconopsis lancifolia* var. *eximea*

We then scrambled up a bank to view a lovely specimen of *Lilium lophophorum*. The area was prolific for primula species and over the two days we saw the following.

Primula polyneura; *P. secundiflora*; *P. heucherifolia*; *R. boreiocalliantha*; *P. chionantha* var. *sinopurpurea*; *P. nannobella*; *P. amethystine*; *P. sikkimensis*; *P. sonchifolia*; *P. dryadifolia*; *P. minor*; *P. brevicula*; *P. apoclita*. As we moved on to the next stop point we found a great little specimen of *Salvia evansiana* tucked alongside a rock. The vibrant blue of *Iris bulleyana* was also spotted and growing near to it *Iris chrysographis*. We reached our accommodation for the evening a simple wooden guest house high up in the mountains. The guest house was a farm that made Yak butter that I later mistakenly tried. The accommodation was next to a fast flowing river flanked by tightly growing conifers. We settled down to dinner after a long days travel, our drivers piling their food in a heap in the centre of the table, discarding any bones directly on to the floor.

On our return trip the tracks became smaller and more precarious, with sheer drops to one side things started to become a little unnerving. I was just thinking only a 4x4 with an experienced driver would be able to tackle this road, when around the corner came a huge fully laden bus not slowing at all. As we descended below the tree line we started to see Rhododendrons, I spotted *Rhododendron racemosum*, *R. Hippophaeoides* *R. rupicola* and *R. phaeocrysum*.



Plate 28 *Betula szechuanica*

We stopped again for lunch and a quick look around for plants, we found lots of rhododendron already mentioned as well as a stunning example of *Betula szechuanica*. As birch trees go this was a champion, the lovely white bark peeling and a slight glaucous leaf. As we reached a village the road we traveled on only the previous day was gone. A huge digger stood where the road once was, with the drive back being hours we drove over a farmers paddock and up a steep bank to rejoin the road, much to the annoyance of a local farmer.



Plate 29 Lake at nearly 4500 meters.

June 16th Zongdian to Deqin

Our trip to Deqin took in some of the most incredible scenery to date and again we travelled past areas with very changing weather conditions. On our first stop we saw *Rhododendron wardii* high on a bank as well as *R.impedita* both hidden from the road, so a lucky find. As we drove on a Peony was spotted so we stopped to view *Paeonia lutea*. Further down the road we found both *Allium prattii* and *Fritillaria cirrhosa*. When we reached the main area we planned to explore, we slowly made our way up the mountain, unfortunately I suffered badly with the altitude and missed a lot of the key plants, as I descended early. Some of the plants the others spotted included *Rheum delavayi*, *Anemone rupicola*, *A.smithiana* as well as *A.rupestris*. Also spotted were *Paraquilegia microphylla*, *Draba oreades*, *Primula zambalensis*, *Allium prattii*, *Silene davidii*, *Lloydia tibetica* and *L.yunnanensis*.



Plate 30 Imposing snow mountains in the distance

June 17th Deqin Baima Snow Mountain Pass



Plate 31 Baima Snow Mountain

We planned to stop in a similar location to our previous day but exploring a different valley.

Some stand out plants from this excursion included some lovely *Meconopsis*, *M. zhongdianensis* and *M. racemosa*, *Clematis rehderiana*, *Androsace spinulifera*; *A. delavayi* *Bergenia purpurascens*.

As the weather changed it made spotting plants harder however a few other specimens we noticed were *Ephedra likiangensis*, *Braya forestii*, *Draba involucrata*; *D. yunnanensis* and *Thermopsis alpina*.

This was to be my last day looking for plants as I had decided to fill the remaining time looking at some of the cultural elements of the country.

June 18th Zhongdian



The day started with a trip to Songzam Monastery, Our Guide was dressed in traditional Tibetan dress and her knowledge was fantastic. We slowly climbed the steep steps to the top where we were allowed to explore for an hour. Huge amounts of money is donated to the monastery and the extravagance was breathtaking. The prayer statues inside were so large they covered four floors in height, probably over 20 meters tall. A short walk away was a local tibetan family we had arranged to visit. The house was sturdily constructed with meat drying in the porch. The family were very friendly all living the majority of the time in one room with a central stove. Just as I was thinking how primitive their life seemed a mobile phone rang and the eldest family member answered.

All the decoration in the house was hand painted and all cooking seemed as though it would be a major social occasion.

June 19th Zhongdian-Lijiang

Lijiang was a beautiful little town with cobbled streets and small canals everywhere.

We wandered around the market stalls and had very relaxing day. During the evening we walked to dinner and were treated to very busy streets full of traders, musicians and generally happy people. We spent until late in the evening watching the various musicians and entertainers before retiring to bed.

June 20th Lijiang-Chengdu

Chengdu was a busy city with extreme wealth. We had a short tour of the city with some incredible beautiful old buildings. Much like many other cities the hustle and bustle didn't stop at night and we decided an early night would be beneficial.

June 21st Chengdu- Departure

Sadly our epic trip had come to an end but the memories will last a life time. The progression of construction in China is very shocking but there are still many many beautiful areas to discover.

For anyone wishing to explore similar areas I can recommend Yunnan and think some of the national parks are great for exploring and many have plants listed and information about the areas. I found all the people to be friendly, accommodating and generally all happy and hard working.

I must extend a special thank you to the Alpine Garden society and The Merlin Trust for making my dream a reality, the trip has truly been life changing. The knowledge of the group was extraordinary and a special thank you to Phillip Cribb.