Practical Advice to Botanical Collectors.

Mobile School of Taxonomy and Ecology

Professor Bartlett's Summer Field Work

Botanical Excursion to the Sierra Nevada Club.

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GRAY MEMORIAL BOTANICAL ASSOCIATION

Edited and published for
A BOTANICAL EXCURSION
TO THE SIERRA MAESTRA
(ORIENTE PROVINCE, CUBA)

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DURING the summer of 1951, when Roy Jervis and I were in Cuba collecting plants for the University of Michigan Botanical Gardens, we intended to explore not only the serpentine ranges in extreme eastern Oriente province (although that was our primary interest) but also to take a trip into the Sierra Maestra. This is the mountain range running west of the city of Santiago, rising steeply from the Caribbean to the highest peak in Cuba, Pico Turquino (altitude about 2,000 meters). This mountain was apparently first ascended in 1915 by the celebrated Swedish botanist Ekman, although, as will be mentioned later, there has been some controversy on this point. Roy and I had naturally thought of making a trip up this mountain, since it has a fine altitudinal belting of vegetation types, from lowland dry scrub at sea-level to cloud-forest at the top.

When we arrived in Santiago, therefore, we got in touch with Dr. Pedro Cañas, who is professor of geology at the University of Oriente and an active member of the famous Humboldt Group ("El Grupo Humboldt, Sección de Excursiones de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Oriente"). This group of mountain-climbers and explorers had in 1942 scaled the second highest peak in Cuba, La Bayamesa (1700 meters high), for the first time, but no botanists were along and no botanical collections were made on the summit. The ascent of La Bayamesa immediately presented itself as a worth-while endeavor which would be a fitting climax to our summer's expedition.

To further this plan, Dr. Cañas then introduced us to the secretary of the Humboldt Group, Mr. C. D. Bingham, who invited us to his home for lunch and entertained us with an excellent meal and enlightened conversation. Although it was a rainy afternoon, Mr. Bingham showed us around his yard to look at his collection of Cuban plants, of which he was justly proud, and we took specimens of some particularly interesting species. Furthermore, he gave us a letter of introduction to the caretaker of his "finca" (plantation, in this instance a coffee plantation) near the village of San Pablo de Yao at the foot of the Bayamesa, and a map showing how to climb the peak. It was from Bingham's finca that Dr. Cañas, Bingham, and other members of the Humboldt Group had departed on their now historic climb.

We reached the town of Bayamo late on the evening of August 14 and registered at the Hotel New York. From the very first, Bayamo
impressed us more favorably than most Cuban towns we had seen. As we parked at the town square, a friendly policeman came over and assured us that he would watch our jeep to see that it wasn't harmed. After we had had a late supper of fish, rifones (kidneys), corn fritters, "plátanos maduros" (ripe fried plantains, delicious when properly done), and a delicious "postre" of sweetened grated coconut, we felt quite content to go out and briefly watch the promenade of pretty girls around the town square before retiring. The glory of a proud history seemed to be the secret of Bayamo's attractiveness; we discovered everywhere markers testifying to the part the city had played in the uprising of 1868, which formally initiated the Cuban struggle for independence. Carlos Manuel Céspedes, the leader of the revolution of 1868, and Thomas Estrada y Palma, the first president of the Cuban republic, both came from Bayamo, and it was here that the initial pitched battle between Spaniards and Cubans resulted in the firing of the town by the insurgent forces, the famous "Incendio" of 1868. Today the citizens of Bayamo have a proud, free-spirited bearing which is not to be seen in the towns around Havana.

From Bayamo it is perhaps a forty mile trip, only a part over paved roads, to the terminus, San Pablo de Yare. The morning of the 15th we arose leisurely (in accordance with prevailing custom), did some shopping, and finally left Bayamo shortly before noon. We drove through the undulating sugar-cane country toward the inviting bluish heights of the Sierra Maestra, which stretched entirely across the southern horizon, and all went well until we reached the village of Buycitos. We had by now left the pavement and here the villagers assured us that the road to San Pablo de Yare was absolutely impassable by jeep. Since it had rained heavily the day before, we were not really surprised, for we knew only too well how miry the soil of the sugar-cane country became when wet. We pondered for a while in indecision, wondering whether or not to give up the attempt entirely. But by now I had a positive obsession to climb La Bayamesa, and when some villagers said that a "commando" would soon be coming through on its way to San Pablo, I decided to go on that. So Roy and I for the first time split up the expedition; I took from the jeep some of the plant presses, a bottle of formalin for preservative, and most of the canned goods. When the "commando" arrived there was no little difficulty in lashing these things on the back and sides, and the car was so crowded that I had to ride on one of the fenders. It was very interesting to see what an integral part of the Cuban transportation system the demilitarized U.S. Army Command Car has become; it has almost offset the misappropriation of public works funds by Cuban politicians. It operates in many parts of rural Oriente where even the intrepid and uninhibited Cuban drivers cannot take a conventional bus.

San Pablo de Yare turned out to be a row of three or four general stores and a few scattered houses. I got off at Casa Pinilla, which was a very respectable general store such as used to exist in many rural parts of the United States, and handed my letter of introduction to Rafael Pinilla, the proprietor. He dispatched it by bearer to Luco Sancesaro, the caretaker of the finca, which was about five kilometers upstream on the Río Yare; I left the luggage with Pinilla and walked up the river, having a guide the first couple of kilometers but thereafter asking the way. Finally, at a sharp turn in the river after what seemed like at least ten kilometers, there was a "bohio" — the typically Cuban thatched hut often made entirely of the leaves of the royal palm — and sitting in the window a really attractive Cuban girl. A little startled at this incongruous combination, I managed to blurt out the formula Bingham had suggested: "¿Donde está la finca del americano?" With really queenly bearing she made it plain that it was just across the next ford, and that I was a little stupid for asking such an obvious question. Sure enough, a hundred yards or so beyond was a little concrete house with a thatched roof, set well back from the "road" and almost swallowed up in the luxuriant vegetation which sprawled over the steep hillside. Luco, a thin, spare, dark-haired man, came out to greet me and sent his two boys off to town for the equipment. It was by now sundown; over supper we agreed that the day after the morrow we would start for the Bayamesas, a day being necessary to make preparations.

The next day (August 16) I collected around the steep hillsides above the finca, not finding much in the way of native vegetation since much of the land was planted in coffee; the considerable harvest in mosses (which I had promised to collect for my friend Howard Crum) was, however, sufficient compensation. In the evening we all (for the neighbors had come over) listened to the radio, which was no doubt the only one in the neighborhood. It was a historic occasion, for Senator Eddy Chibás, the leading candidate for the oncoming presidential election, had died as the result of a pistol-wound self-inflicted at the close of one of his Sunday afternoon political speeches. Out in this remote area of Oriente province the people seemed to feel that Chibás was their brightest hope for cleaning house in the national capitol at Havana, and that his death was a real tragedy. In Oriente this summer there seemed to be widespread resentment against the central government in Havana, which everyone said swallowed up Oriente's taxes and gave nothing in return.

The morning of August 17th we were to leave for the Bayamesas by sun-up. I woke up about 5:00 a.m. to find Luco and some others listening intently to the radio. The announcer was saying that a storm was coming across Jamaica and Haiti. Luco, shaking his head, said that the climb was quite out of the question, for we would be in very bad shape if the storm hit while we were up on the peak. I argued this point at some length, for it appeared that the storm might miss Cuba entirely, as indeed it did, but finally agreed that it was too much of a gamble.
Instead of the great expedition up the Bayamesa, then, I, my "pratico" (guide) Ventura, and a "muchacho", went up over the steep ridge on the east bank of the Río Yao. The ridge was barren and grassy and most uninteresting botanically; a few scattered trees of Ouratea americana (Dilleniaceae) looked and acted the part of live-oaks. At the top of the ridge were coffee groves and scattered bohios, and not until we descended into the valley of the Río Oro did we see any native vegetation of interest.

The Río Oro itself was a delightful spot. Swift, cool water ran over large boulders of igneous rock, and a lush forest full of mosses, ferns, begonias, and peperomias came down to the water's edge and sprawled over the wet rocks. Pitcairnia cubensis, the only conspicuous terrestrial bromeliad in this country, extended its bright red-flowered sprays from steep banks. Meriana leuca, a shrub with neat glossy tripinnerved leaves and numbers of waxy white flowers with pink stamens, was the most attractive of the several Melastomataceae. I was delighted to find growing on a rock at the edge of the water a plant of Phyllanthus maestrensis, a rare species known only from the type collection made by Ekman on the Río Oro, possibly at this same spot. Definitely a mesophytic species, it contrasts strongly with the xerophytic Phyllanthus of the Baracoa region in relationship as well as structure, for it belongs to a widespread section, whereas the xerophytic Orbicularia group is mostly endemic to Cuba. In this respect it typifies the flora of the Sierra Maestra as a whole, which is composed largely of species ranging rather widely in the West Indies, as contrasted with the markedly endemic flora of the older serpentine ranges in the eastern half of Oriente.

Unfortunately, vegetation such as I have just described was present only in a few oasis-like spots along the Río Oro; most of the hillsides, even very steep ones, had been cleared for maize and cassava planting. Where cleared fields had been left along a rank shrubby growth dominated by Cecropia took over, although here and there you might see a few trees-ferns incongruously maintaining a foothold among the ruderal species. Everywhere there were signs of recent and indiscriminate clearing, and it will not be very long before the native vegetation of the foothills will have been almost entirely removed.

I was a number of times astounded by the perspicacity of my "pratico" Ventura. Dressed in rags that gave him a somewhat wild appearance as though he might have been one of Pancho Villa's gang, he nevertheless had a mild disposition and a keen eye for plants; he brought in a number of striking species that otherwise I would probably have missed.

After narrowly escaping being caught in a rain-storm, we returned to the finca at only 2:00 P.M. but it required the rest of the afternoon to order up the plant collections, especially since Ventura kept bringing in additional specimens. While painting the plants with formaldehyde,
The next morning we were up in pitch darkness for a final breakfast of thick hot chocolate before leaving for San Pablo de Yao. Unfortunately my luggage had been loaded on a horse, which balked every kilometer of the way because of the unaccustomed weight. We arrived at San Pablo before 6:00 A.M., but the last commando had already left; they apparently left early in order to make the round trip to Bayamo before sundown. I hoped to catch a ride in a truck, but we were so far out in the country that not a single vehicle arrived all day. The Pinillas kindly put me up, and I caught a commando into Bayamo the next day. Missing a bus in Oriente can mean a pretty long wait.

In Bayamo, I found that Jervis had been keeping busy. He had met one of the most botanically interesting people in Cuba, John Nystrom, the man who was Ekman's guide over much of Oriente province. That evening we went over and had supper with the Nystrom family, enjoying at once the well-stocked table and the incongruity of these pink-cheeked Swedes talking perfect English to us, while we sat in a tiled Spanish patio with tropical plants banked along the wall behind our backs. Nystrom showed us a number of interesting plants growing in his back yard and told us stories of the trips he and Ekman made up the Sierra Cristal and Pico Turquino. He showed us the article Norman Taylor had published (Torreya 16: 211-225. 1916) asserting that Ekman had not been the first to climb Pico Turquino, but that W. F. Ramsden had done it many years previously. He disagreed violently and insisted that Ekman, in 1915, had indeed been the first; contemporary Cuban writers also give the laurel to Ekman.

Taylor's article gives a summary of botanical exploration in the Sierra Maestra up to the year 1915. There have been but few subsequent explorations in this part of the Sierra Maestra, with the exception of Pico Turquino. Ekman collected near the Bayamese on the Río Oro in 1916, but apparently did not ascend to the top. Dr. C. V. Morton, of the Smithsonian Institution, visited this region in the fall of 1914 and ascended to the crest of the Sierra Maestra midway between La Bayamesa and Pico Turquino; his collections, still undistributed, are at the Smithsonian Institution.

The visit with the Nystroms was our last night in Bayamo; the next day we had to leave for Havana and the United States, as our money was nearly exhausted. The Bayamesa was left unconquered, and the botanical expedition to its summit remains to be made. I have mentioned earlier that the Humboldt Group had explored the Bayamesa. Two ascents have been made: the first, under very trying conditions, in 1942, when only two men were able to make it to the top, and the second in 1948, when the weather was much more favorable. From the peak at an altitude of just under 1700 meters the climbers were able to look west and see between La Bayamesa and Pico Turquino the densely wooded valley of the Río Peladero, the last great stretch of untouched, uninhabited forested land in Cuba. While writing this paper,