

A Hot Spot for Orchids

The Tatamá National Park in Colombia

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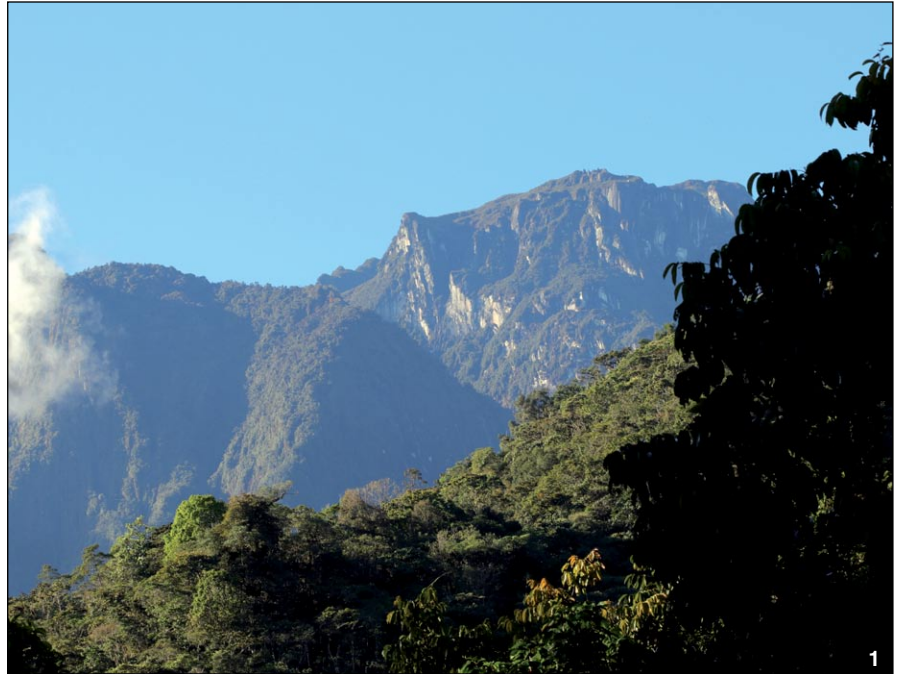
COLOMBIA IS A country with an immense orchid flora. Many special and endemic species are found there in diverse and often pristine habitats. Together with Ecuador and Peru, it is considered the center of orchid speciation in the New World. The country has at a minimum 4,000 species with new ones discovered all the time. One would need several lifetimes to get to know and study this number of species.

I have had the opportunity to join a small group of nature lovers on a two-week trip to observe and photograph orchids in their native habitats. The areas we visited were varied and distant from each other and included the Tatamá National Park, La Linea, Viterbo, Jardín, the Colombian Orchid Society's Reserve (Reserva Orquideas), the Orchid Conservation Alliance (OCA) Rainforest Trust Preserve (La selva de Ventanas), Yarumal and areas near Cali, as well as private collections and at least two large orchid nurseries. The tour was organized by the Orchid Conservation Alliance (orchidconservationalliance.org) and guided by In Situ Expeditions (Colombia).

We saw approximately 300 orchid species in bloom on the entire trip with 120 in Tatamá National Park alone!

This article covers our first major stop, namely the Tatamá National Park, an area rich in diversity of both fauna and flora, many of which are endangered. This protected and pristine natural area covers ca. 200 square miles (519 km²) of Colombia's Western Andes (Cordillera Occidental) and is between 6,988 and 10,007 feet (2,130–3,050 m) in elevation. It is essentially a cloud forest, sunny and breezy in the morning, foggy and rainy after 3:00 pm, and always cool. We, therefore, had to do our walks and exploration as early as we could, often returning to the lodge in the middle of the afternoon rain. There is only one facility for visitors to stay in the park, owned by a family that has been caretakers of the area before it was even a national park.

The rooms are often booked well in advance by birding groups that come to



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see and photograph another one of the park's riches: the avifauna of the area. As a matter of fact, all that is needed to attract dozens of species of hummingbirds is a few feeders around the breakfast patio.

Orchids begin to appear as well all around us as we had our breakfast: *Erycina*

[1] Colombia's Tatamá National Park, November 2018.

[2] *Phragmipedium longifolium*

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(*Psygmorchis*) *pumilio* naturalizes in the shrubs, and a *Phragmipedium longifolium* at the base of another nearby shrub.

A small detour from the road on the way to the cabins leads to a trail by the river. There, in the constant high humidity and mist, we found *Lepanthes calodictyon*, an undescribed species of *Scaphosepalum* or possibly a form of *Scaphosepalum swertiifolium*, several other *Lepanthes* species, and *Maxillaria acuminata*, as well as many other plants not in flower.

An observation: *Lepanthes calodictyon* plants, as well as many other species of this genus, do not become large plants in nature; most have no more than 3–4 leaves. Only in cultivation have I seen plants with 10 or more leaves. On the way back to our rooms, various other species were seen along the trees: *Epidendrum* species, *Cyrtochilum meirax*, *Oncidium poikilostalix*, *Acianthera sicaria*, *Masdevallia nidifica*, *Stelis* species and many others.

On this same muddy road, one evening we almost stepped on a poisonous snake, a Fer-de-lance (*Bothrops asper*), that was resting in the mud. Having no medical facilities in the area, the chances of surviving a “good” bite are slim. After that we shone our flashlights on the ground and walked carefully back to our cabins after dark!

Orchid-wise, the great majority of species were seen on the road that leads up to the peak and along the various footpaths that cut into the forest from both sides of the road. On the first day’s outing, we saw and photographed an incredible variety of orchids in bloom: pleurothallids and *Maxillaria* species. This area also has an unusual concentration and diversity of former *Cryptocentrum* species.

All the different vegetative types are represented here: tiny “pine-needle” tufts less than 1 inch (2.5 cm) tall of *Maxillaria* (*Cryptocentrum*) *standleyi*, trailing dichaea-like plants, large monopodial clusters of *Maxillaria sciabolata* (*Cryptocentrum spathaceum*), etc. The various *Masdevallia* species were a welcome sight: *Masdevallia bucculenta*, *Diodonopsis* (*Masdevallia*) *anachaeta*, *Masdevallia ventricularia*, *Masdevallia peristeria*, *Masdevallia nidifica* and *Masdevallia mutica*, as well as the numerous *Lepanthes* species, the diversity of which was mind-boggling!

The species are too numerous to discuss. Among them were several undescribed species that our *Lepanthes*-expert guide did not even recognize.



[3] *Maxillaria speciosa*

[4] This deadly Fer-de-lance can barely be made out against the mud.

[5] *Lepanthes furcata*

[6] *Epidendrum laucheanum*, generally considered to be a Central American species, can also be found in Colombia.



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I offered to lend my name as a possible species epithet for any that prove to be new (just to make things easier for them, you understand), but that did not go down well with the experts. Oh well, there is always tomorrow.

Large and small *Elleanthus* species (*Elleanthus aurantiacus*, *Elleanthus lancifolius*, *Elleanthus aureus*, etc.), all very colorful and mimicking gingers, were interspersed throughout the trails. They are mostly pollinated by hummingbirds; hence the tubular flowers and yellow-orange-red color palette. Among the several terrestrial species we saw in bloom, two stand out for their elegant flowers and unusual growth habit. The first is *Pterichis acuminata* with its tall spikes of nonresupinate orange-and-green flowers, and the other is *Crossoglossa* aff. *hirtzii*. The latter has spidery orange flowers, and a fan of delicate wavy-edged leaves. *Dracula carcinopsis* was spotted by one of our members in full bloom; its flowers hanging like bells fully visible only from below. A real treat was finding a rare, spectacular species that our guides knew to inhabit these woods. That was *Brachionidium imperiale*, a giant species by brachionidium standards. We spotted two plants, the first in bud and the second in full flower. It is a sprawling, scandent plant in a delicate habit, a small leaf every several inches (centimeters) on an upwardly climbing stem, and at the juncture of leaf and stem, a giant (ca. 6 inches [15.2 cm] from tip to tip) purple flower, which was waxy and glistening in the mist. It was an unforgettable sight! Various *Oncidium* and *Cyrtorchilum* species clambered over shrubs in open areas where the sun reaches deeper into the understory.

On the same day, coming back late in the afternoon, while rain began to fall, a plant of *Miltoniopsis vexillaria* was spotted high up on a tree beside the road. It is a spectacular plant with showy, large pink flowers, but I was too exhausted and wet to climb on top of the jeep to get a decent photo of it. In any case, we would see excellent examples of this species in private collections later in the trip.

The next day we took another road to the top of the mountain (over 9,843 feet [3,000 m] elevation) stopping along the way to see many of the same species we saw the previous day, but with some additional species to be added to the list. Among the numerous *Pleurothallis*, *Epidendrum* and *Stelis* species, we saw a spectacular plant of *Telipogon* aff. *hausmannianus*, at 7,710 feet (2,350 m).



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This is a showy flower, bright yellow and with a network of netting in dark brown on the face of the flower. Large *Maxillaria* species were visible from a distance. They tended to be growing terrestrially and I must assume that the mass and weight of these plants makes them too heavy for life in the trees above.

Another special plant seen, unfortunately only in bud, was *Paphinia rugosa*; a pretty thing when in bloom. Again, the variety of plants overall, and orchids in particular, in these forests is incredible. There are black-spathed anthuriums and tubular-flowered begonias, variegated gesneriads, carnivorous utricularias, and the list goes on and on.

As far as the orchids go, I will give one final example of the diversity found here by concentrating on orchid species found in bloom on a single rock in a clearing near our sleeping quarters. Here were *Maxillaria (Trigonidium) egertoniana*, *Maxillaria pseudoreichenheimiana*, *Maxillaria porrecta*, *Maxillaria boliviensis*, *Elleanthus oliganthus* and *Erycina pumilio* — and all were in bloom on this one rock!

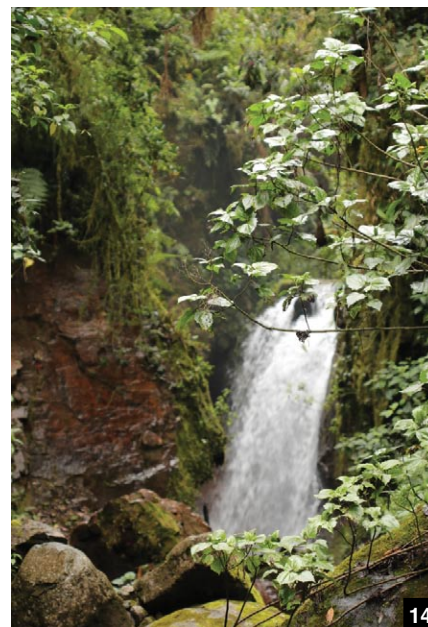
Nearby on a low tree, *Rodriguezia granadensis* was blooming. All in all, it was a wonderful destination, one of the richest in orchids that I have seen so far. It is also good to know that it is, and will continue to be, protected because it is a national park. Its remoteness and protection from overdevelopment are two more reasons why this small slice of paradise should make it intact into the 21st century and beyond.

I thoroughly enjoyed this wonderful tour with the great company of other like-minded participants.

Acknowledgments

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— *Spiro Kasomenakis has been growing orchids, and has been an AOS member, since the 1980s. Looking forward to traveling again, after the current plague is over, and seeing orchids in the wild (email: kasomenakis@aol.com).*



- [7] *Lepanthes calodictyon*
- [8] *Brachonidium imperiale*
- [9] *Lepanthes carunculigera*
- [10] *Epidendrum* cf. *homoion*
- [11] *Masdevallia mutica*
- [12] *Epidendrum cleistocoleum*
- [13] *Maxillaria (Trigonidium) egertoniana*
- [14] One of the many waterfalls in the park.
- [15] *Elleanthus oliganthus*