

The Queen of Oconee Station

A Trail Snack

By Gregory Bruner

My heart pounded faster as I pulled into the park entrance to Oconee Station with my family. For years I had heard about this incredible location for plant hunting. I had chosen this hunt specifically for this day because my wonderful wife and I were marking 22 years of incredible horticulture adventures. Oconee Station is one of the most biologically diverse areas in the state of South Carolina and is a destination for any plant hunter in search of the unique and unusual.

The junior plant hunters, Sir Trips-a-Lot and Sir Stumblefoot, noisily scampered down the trail around the next bend, energetically expending energy stored up during the car trip. Oh the exuberance of youth! Wildlife sightings would definitely be a challenge today. I enjoyed the momentary peace as I took my wife's hand and ambled down the trail in relative tranquility, with the boys' chatter fading into the distance around a bend in the trail.

The first dusty mile passed under my boots as we crested one of the many hills. Thoughts bounced around inside the wide open spaces of my mind. "Who's bright idea was this anyway?! Plant hunter utopia? Right." The English Ivy invading the woods had not impressed me so far. I was beginning to question my choice of locations and all of the incredible things I had heard about this site.

The trail opened up, and I saw something large flash across the trail. I blinked as I focused on the next large object that zipped past. A road? Hmmmm. Had I taken a wrong turn? We crossed the road and encountered a wonderful sight—a sign announcing the beginning of the trail. Beginning? What had the last mile been then? A warm-up? Oh well. I smiled and started down the trail again.

Hello little trillium! Solomon Seal. Bellwort. Finally... This was more like it! I crouched down by an exceptionally photogenic trillium while attempting to figure out the best angle of attack—otherwise known as picture taking. Too bright. Too dark. Too much wind. Wind? Where had that come from?

I was crouched over the photogenic but uncooperative trillium that refused to remain still so that my camera could focus clearly when my son called out, "Daddy, Daddy, come see this one!" My knees cracked in protest as I slowly rose up and turned, expecting to see one of the many common leafy denizens of the forest. Instead, what I saw took my breath away. I heard a gasp as my wife also noticed what the junior plant hunters had found.

I quietly and almost reverently walked across the trail and knelt down in a bed of pine needles by a fallen tree to examine this rare woodland beauty. The junior plant hunters and my wife were all crouched down beside me. To confirm that I was not dreaming, I reached out trembling fingers and gently touched the nodding pink flower. Beside me Sir Trips-a-Lot whispered, "Daddy, it's beautiful." I returned the whisper. "Yes it is, son. Yes it is," not wanting to disturb natural perfection.

I was in the presence of a rare incredible beauty. My mind suddenly became very cluttered with thoughts zooming in from every direction. Slopes... well-drained sites... acidic soil... organically rich. Thoughts fluttered around in my head like a cluster of excited butterflies.

Cypripedium acaule, also known as Pink Moccasin Flower or Pink Lady's Slipper, is one of the true treasures of the woodland. More thoughts percolated to the surface of my cluttered mind. Lady Slippers have a fairly wide range, being found in the eastern United States and north into Canada. However, because of the specific site conditions needed for them to thrive, they are rare gems to find in the wild.

I was kneeling in a soft bed of pine needles on a gentle slope. I looked around and saw a mixture of hardwood and pine trees on slopes in this section of the woodland. This provided for their needs of an organically rich, well-drained site as well as a very acidic soil. Sometimes the pH may be as low as 3.5, but it is seldom higher than 5.0. The hardwood leaves supply the rich organic matter, while the pine needles lower the pH and the slope allows for excellent drainage. I ran my finger along the edges of the two dark green strap-like leaves. The uniquely intricate flower is held up regally on a single stem above the leaves, drawing all to gaze at its majestic beauty. Normally there is only one flower per set of leaves.

As I gently cupped the flower in my hand while gazing at its royal beauty, I retreated into the fertile grounds of my mind. My internal processor finally kicked in, and the butterflies fluttering around my mind scattered, clearing the way for the next batch of dusty long-lost plant tidbits. This orchid has a unique relationship with its environment. It has a tag-team partner in the wrestling match of life. There is a fungus in the Rhizoctonia genus that must be present in the soil for Lady Slippers to thrive and reproduce. The fungus actually attaches to the seed coat. The tendrils of the fungus crack open the seed coat and attach to the seed. The fungus then generously feeds much-needed nutrients to the seed, allowing germination to begin. The favor is returned as the Lady Slippers mature, and the fungus actually begins to draw back nutrients.

Lady Slippers can thrive for 20 or more years if they like where they are growing. It was hard to imagine that this beauty could have been around almost as long as I had known my wife. That might be just getting started for a good relationship, but for perennials that's getting up there in years. This unique relationship with its environment makes it almost impossible to transplant Lady Slippers, so it is best to enjoy them in the wild.

The gears were spinning fast. In fact, the old processor may have been smoking a bit. In the far distance I heard two voices. "Daddy?" It was barely a whisper to my subconscious, but it beckoned me back to reality. A gentle touch on my shoulder from my wife brought me fully back. As the glazed look left my eyes, I focused once again on the woodland wonder before me. I have no idea how long I had knelt before nature's perfection before I slowly rose to my feet, releasing the flower from my gentle grasp.

I glanced at my family, then down the trail, and once more longingly down at the Lady's Slipper. My feet began to move down the trail with purpose as I took my wife's hand and signaled Sir Trips-a-Lot and Sir Stumblefoot to come along as we headed toward the next adventure of the crazy plant hunter. The sun was still high in the sky above the canopy of towering trees, and there was plenty of daylight left. This was definitely turning into a day to remember.

The regal and elegant Pink Lady's Slipper is the queen of the woodland—one of the true gems to be admired by young and old plant hunters alike. Oconee Station is definitely a botanical treasure trove in the northern part of South Carolina.