

MASON RIVER — A Treasure Trove of Plant Life

by T. H. Farr



Nui's Hood Orchid: (*Phaius Tancarvilleae*)



Blaker trinervia (endemic)



Wild Scallion: (*Trimezia martinicensis*)



Ground orchid: (*S. pirantheslanceolata*)

E. Fisher

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The Mason River Field Station is near the geographical centre of Jamaica some four miles northwest of the village of Kellits in the parish of Clarendon. This field station/nature preserve comprises 101 acres and experiences as much as 100 inches of rainfall annually. It's really not an eye-catching sight as you ride along the road bordering its southern boundary. There are no rugged hills or tropical forest and it reminds me very much of some of the landscape I've seen in southern

Michigan. One has to go into the preserve in order to appreciate its value and you certainly will appreciate it if you are a botanist — either professional or amateur.

The mass and variety of vegetation there is truly impressive - ferns, grasses, shrubs, orchids, bromeliads - many of which are rare species and some of which are endemic, or known only in Jamaica. Over 400 species of ferns, and flowering plants have been recorded from here and the mosses, lichens and

algae have not yet even been catalogued. There is a bog, a pond and a considerable amount of marshy area interspersed with drier sections. This is a most unusual occurrence for a region located in the hills of the island as Mason River is little over 2000 feet above sea level. As late as 40 or 50 years ago, the region was heavily forested but tree cutting since then has left it with few large trees. According to Dr. George R. Proctor, Botanist, formerly on the staff of the Institute of Jamaica, the roots of a few

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trees that formed part of the original forest are still alive and sending up shoots. It is his opinion that we can identify from these relics all of the trees that once grew there.

Now a bit about some of the plants that you will find there.

Orchids. Two hundred and twenty species of orchids are known in Jamaica and of these 33 are endemic. There are 21 at the preserve and one is especially rare, *Habeneria Purdei*, a green flowered ground orchid. Fairly common are two other ground orchids - the purple flowered *Bletia Purpurea* and the white flowered Nun Orchid, *Phaius tankervilleae*, the latter being an introduced species.

Melastomaceae. This large family which is most abundant in the warmer regions of the Western Hemisphere has 81 species in Jamaica and 21 occur at Mason River. The flowers of many species of the family are not very conspicuous but a showy endemic known as Cup-and-Saucer or Jamaican Rose (*Blakea trinervia*) grows at Mason River. The flowers, borne singly, are pink or crimson with a conspicuous, yellow, spur-like connective uniting the anthers and arising from the centre. This is one of Jamaica's most attractive native flowers and it is produced on a scrambling shrub with dark green rather than thick leaves.

Grasses and sedges. If you are particularly interested in Jamaican grasses, Mason River would be a good place to begin collecting them because there are 43 species of grasses plus 37 of sedges. (It would only be a beginning though, because 232 species of grasses and 114 of sedges have been recorded on the island).

The most conspicuous grasses are the six species of *Andropogon*, very tall which bloom with plumes at their tops making it very nice for floral arrangements.

Ferns. Jamaica's 4411 square miles is home to an astonishing number of ferns. There are 579 species plus 30 varieties including 52 of Jamaican origin. There are only 32 at the preserve and it is quite possible that there were many more when the region was heavily forested. Nevertheless, there are a few interesting species left such as the climbing fern, *Lygodium volubile*, which trails along the

A.E. Nicholson ground or scrambles as high as 30 feet in trees. Then there is *Lindsaea portoricensis*, a rare plant in Jamaica but it can be seen at Mason River as can two species of tree ferns.



Prickly Pole: (*Bactris Jamaicana*)
Endemic

Insectivorous plants. As far as is known, Mason River is the only place that you can see Jamaica's single species of insectivorous land plants, Sundew, *Drosera capillaris*. This plant is known from Canada to southern Brazil as well as Cuba. It is not believed to have been brought here by man but it is fairly common along some of the pathways. Two species of Pitcher Plants and a species of Venus Flytrap were imported from the United States in the 1960's and, while they were holding their own, they haven't spread much.

As might be expected the Pitcher Plants do trap a mass of insects but one can see ants crawling in and out of the "pitchers" with apparent ease.

These aren't the only insectivorous (or carnivorous) plants at Mason River. In the Pond, are two

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species of Bladderworts (*Utricularia*), tiny plants with little bulbous traps in which they catch minute insects, crustacea, rotifers and protozoa. Reading about the functioning of these traps is rather like reading paragraphs about hydraulic engineering. Bladderworts are well worth a close examination but you will need a magnifying glass to study them.

Other plants. I have touched on only a few highlights of a heterogenous assemblage that forms a rather remarkable natural garden. There are over two dozens species of Composite which flower in profusion: *Aster*, *Argeratum* and *Eupatorium* being some of the more familiar names. There is a pretty letter yellow iris which is common along some of the pathways and in the ponds are two species of water lillies. The strawberry Guava (*Psidium guajava*) is common, a native of Brazil, and how it got here no one seems to know. There are Morning Glories, Passion Flowers and the Jamaican Blackberry (*Rubus jamaicensis*). There is even a species of cactus, one of the Queen of the Night Group (*Selencicereus*), but the Mason River species has not been identified and may be a new species.

Even from this short account, the reader can get some idea as to why Jamaica is anxious to protect this area and let me tell you something personally - it hasn't been easy!

Visiting the Mason River Field Station. Since 1964, the Natural History Division of the Institute of Jamaica has administered this field station/nature preserve. There is accommodation for visiting scientists. A caretaker is in residence and lives in a separate house. The buildings had deteriorated somewhat and the hurricane of September 12th caused more damage (although the vegetation held up fairly well) but some renovation is presently going on.

If you wish to visit or stay at Mason River, please contact the Head of the Division. The address is:

Natural History Division
Institute of Jamaica
12-16 East Street
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