

**Treading the Paths of Dr. Sleumer
in the Arfak Mountains,
Vogelkop Peninsula, New Guinea**

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**from the Journal of the American Rhododendron Society
Volume 55, No.4, Fall 2001**

When Mr. Erhard Moser of the German Rhododendron Society sent me an excerpt from the Yearbook 1963 of the society, I was immediately fascinated by Dr. Hermann Sleumer's reports of the rhododendrons in the area around the Anggi Lakes in the Arfak mountains on the Vogelkop Peninsula of New Guinea.

I decided then and there to visit the area at some point in time. So when I found a trekking guide of tours in New Guinea, which included the aforementioned tour, my wife and I scheduled the journey for August 2000. On August 15, we flew via Singapore-Makassar to Biak, a small island in the northwest of the New Guineas. Biak can be accessed by large aircraft from Garuda and Merpati.

In Biak the weather was unfriendly, so we reached Manokwari at the foot of the Arfak mountains one day later than expected. More bad news was waiting for us: there had been continuous rainfall for the past four weeks. None of the rivers could be crossed, and the rare flights to the Anggi Lakes had been cancelled. Having been utterly disappointed, we flew to North Sumatra, where we collected a few rhododendrons on the volcanoes surrounding Brastagi and Lake Toba.



The author in the rhododendron forest, Koebre, Arfak Mts.

The original trip sticks in our minds, however, and so we try again in January 2001. This time we arrive in Biak via Bali. Again we are greeted by rain. The flight to Manokwari has to be postponed. On the next day, the small 14-seat Twin-Otter cannot start because of a technical problem. The engine is examined and after the second try we are airborne for some five minutes before we have to come down again. We can't help thinking that the Arfak mountains are reluctant to receive us. But miracles do happen, and so we change aircraft and arrive in Manokwari but a few hours late. Matthias, our guide, is expecting us with the unpleasant news that there is not going to be a flight to the Anggi Lakes that week. He convinces us that it is now possible to reach Anggi-Gita (the male lake) with a jeep on the newly built road via Ransiki and the 7200 feet (2160m) high Trikora.



Soubg hunter with *Rhododendron konori*

Arriving at the first river, the Maruni, we discover why we could not beat the rain here. The riverbed is 1700 feet (510m) wide with several arms, and the bridges are destroyed. Fortunately it carries little water at that time of the year, so we cross the Masabui River at Ransiki and go up to the mountains. The road runs along the river and then through untouched lowland forest, where a breach of 23-25 feet (7.5m) has been cut to build a road. How long will there be such a forest with such mighty trees? At the first steep part, the road is entirely washed out. The jeep gets stuck in a hole and is about to capsize. We fill up the largest holes with stones and manage the ascent after trying three times. We reach the Mati River and continue our way to the mountains. The road is in pretty good condition and climbs up through dense virgin rainforests. At approximately 5250 feet (1575m) the substance of the ground changes. The fine-grain quartz sands that make up the mountains here seem to pose a massive problem for road builders. On both sides of the road, deep holes of 17-20 feet (6m) have been eroded, holes big enough to swallow our jeep. The road surface is marked by grooves up to 3 feet (1m) in depth, and we barely reach the highest point, the 7200 foot (2160m) Trikora. Here we spot the first rhododendron, *Rhododendron phaeochristum*, which is related to *R.beyerinckianum*. Through the mist we see the first lake, the Anggi-Gita. We continue downhill until we reach Trikora, the first little village by the lake. The

swamp is full of *R.laetum* with yellow/orange blossoms; also the small-blossomed *R.inconspicuum* can be found. We are warmly welcomed, the whole village running to meet us. Very soon we have to go back; the next rainfalls could make the road impassable.



Rhododendron laetum in a swamp near Iray, Arfak Mountains.

I find out that the name of the village is North Pole. In his report, Dr. Sleumer mentions the North Pole bivouac, where he landed with a helicopter, coming from Manokwari in 1962. The children bring us a whole bunch of *Rhododendron laetum*. The night is very cold. The thermometer shows 54°F (13°C), and our Papua carriers, coming from the lowlands, are freezing.

On the next morning, we cross the lake in a dug-out. By the lakeside and on the surrounding hills we see vast colonies of *Rhododendron konori*. We also see the first blossoms - white and some 4 inches (10cm) in diameter, fragrant. The mountain scenery is impressive, the climate mild. On the other side we begin the ascent of the Koebre - the mountain ridge separating the two lakes. On the scorched slopes, rhododendrons are the most frequent form of vegetation. We find *R.arfakianum* with its red blossoms, *R.lindaueanum* (a small-leaved bush) with red blossoms reminding one of *R.gracilentum*. Further uphill we discover *R.asperum*, with yellow blossoms (hybrids) instead of the usual white and pink. Near the peak we find the first "giant *konori*", with blossoms 7 inches (17.5cm) long and 4 inches (10cm) wide. The impressive blossoms are white and a dark hue of pink. *Rhododendron phaeochristum*

can also be found here. From the peak we can see the second lake, the Anggi-Giggi (the female lake). The carriers light a smoking fire to hire a boat from Surerey, which lies on the other side of the Anggi-Giggi. But there is no reply and Matthias states dryly that "the Johnson is broken", meaning all outboard boats on the lake.



Rhododendron konori

The crisis of the Indonesian economy has reached the Anggi Lakes and so the large boats are rotting away in the mud by the lakeside. Having no other options, we begin our long way around the lake. When we reach a swamp by the lakeside, heavy rain sets in and we are soaked through. But tempests do not last very long here, and we continue through tall ferns and *Rhododendron konori* to Surerey, which we reach after three hours.

Surerey is a relatively large village with a mission station. A German missionary lived there a few years ago and translated the Bible into the local Soubg language. The Soubg that form the local population subsist mainly on sweet potatoes but also grow corn and vegetables. They have been

Christianized long ago. This is one of the nicest villages, with small houses and gardens with flowers and very friendly people.

Dr. Sleumer climbed the Gwamongga-mot (mountain) and the Sensenemes, both abundant in *Ericaceae*. So we set out the next morning to hike along the ridge of the Gwamongga-mot to Surey-mot and Sensenemes. The ascent to Gwamongga-mot leads through misty forests, where we keep finding *Rr. lindaueanum*, *culminicolum* var. *angiense*, *konori*, *inconspicuum*, *arfakianum*, *erosipetalum* and *asperum*. In his report, Dr. Sleumer describes a new rhododendron that he found near the peak, *R. proliferum*. So we decide to look for it. The "giant *konori*" grows everywhere, and in the shade of a thicket of trees that are 6-9 feet high (1.8-2.7m) we find a different species with hard, oval-shaped leaves with scales, 3 feet (0.9m) high, no blossoms. We find seeds - perhaps this is *R. proliferum*.



Rhododendron erosipetalum

We also take cuttings as from other rhododendrons. We continue along the ridge of the Surey-mot, where we find another *Rhododendron proliferum*. It is wonderful to walk through the clear mountain air, with a beautiful view of the lake and the surrounding mountains. On the Surey-mot there is a little lake with dark brown water. It is not allowed to take photographs here. Matthias explains that lightning will strike from the sky if photographs are taken. The Soubg are very superstitious. In Iray we observed that women would rather lift an electric cable and slip through underneath it than step over it.

We return to Surerey and row our dug-out to Iray, where we are hoping to catch a flight to Manokwari. From Iray, we walk into the surrounding mountains. Near a hill whose vegetation has been destroyed by fire, hundreds of *Rhododendron laetum* are sprouting. Also the *R.konori* has grown from seedling to bush.

Dr. Sleumer found a new rhododendron here, *Rhododendron bullifolium*, with large leaves, colour unknown, maybe red. So we search the area, always at an altitude of 6700 feet (2010m) - as indicated by Dr. Sleumer. *Rhododendron konori* is everywhere, but after a while we find a different species in the shade of surviving trees: yellow and red blossoms, with five petals, 3 inches (7.5cm) long, 2 inches (5cm) wide, yellow calyx, the petals red on the outside. Maybe this is *R.bullifolium* or a hybrid *konori - laetum*. Finally we find two more, always in the shade of trees, while *konori - laetum* grows in full sunlight. It is time to return home now and we make our way back to Iray.



Rhododendron bullifolium or *R.konori* x *R.laetum* cross

The next day is our scheduled flying day. There are heavy rainfalls during the night, but the weather is bright on the next day. We are waiting for the Merpati to arrive. After two hours of anxious waiting, we are informed that the flight has been cancelled.

We dread the long way back to Ransiki and there is another flight scheduled two days later. The Merpati is very unreliable, however, and there is a high risk of cancellation due to bad weather. As the local passengers all decide to walk, we have no other choice. From Iray we take a seven-hour walk via Kobrey to Trikora by the Anggi-Gita lake, where we spend the night.

In Trikora, I am struck by the size of the araucaria and some sizeable specimens of the palm trees (*kentia-gibbsiana*) that was used for building rafts and is now almost extinct.

The next day brings us an eleven-hour walk to Ransiki. At the steep part, where we had problems with the jeep, 23 feet (7m) of road have disappeared in the ditch. Thus, the road cannot be used. After three hours' drive and completely worn out, we arrive at our hotel in Manokwari. Instead of a flight of 25 minutes, we have done 18 hours of walking!

On the next day we bathe in the warm sea on Mansinam Island, where two German missionaries (Otto and Geissler) brought the Christian religion to New Guinea.

On the following day we fly back to Biak, back to civilization. From here, we take the Garruda back to Makassar and Bali, where we relax for a few days and continue via Bangkok and Vienna to our home in the Tyrol.

This was a journey into mountains of breathtaking beauty, certainly an unforgettable experience to remember in years to come!

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