

A Trip to the Rhododendrons of Irian Jaya

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A few years ago I happened to receive information about the vireya rhododendron species from the American Rhododendron Society. Because I could not find any literature concerning vireyas in Austria, I asked the German Rhododendron Society for help. Mr. Erhard Moser of Chemnitz was very helpful, and in an Australian and New Zealand book about rhododendrons I could find some useful information. By accident I found "Rhododendrons in New Guinea" written by Dr. Hermann Sleumer in Holland. Since my wife and I always like hiking and travelling, we decided to spend our holidays on the various islands of Indonesia.

Our first trip was to Mt. Kinabalu in Borneo. Although we had difficulties in finding the plants we were looking for in the lush green of the mountain forests, it was an unforgettable experience to see *Rhododendron lowii* in full bloom. Trips to Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi and Papua New Guinea followed. In doing so we obtained a good general overview of the islands. Finally we made it to Irian Jaya / New Guinea, an area that is home to about 160 different species - a "vireya dreamland" - in January 1999.

After forty hours of exhausting travelling we finally got to Jayapura, where we went through all the formalities necessary for a flight to the highlands. The next day we flew in a "Fokker" to Wamena in the Baliem Valley. This very wide valley situated at a height of 1600 metres (5300ft.), at the foot of Mt. Trikora (4760m, 15,800ft) offers a wide variety of trekking tours. Our goal was Lake Habbema, which is located at a height of 3200meters (10,600ft.). It is home to a lot of small growing rhododendron species, among them



Ibele Valley, Irian Jaya

Rhododendron caespitosum, the smallest of them all. We were very disappointed to learn that Lake Habbema had been closed to tourists since a hijack took place a few years ago. The bribe demanded by the police was beyond our means.

Paul Smith wrote about the vireyas in the Ibele Valley in the Royal Horticultural Society 1994 yearbook "Rhododendrons with Camellias and Magnolias". This is why we decided to change our route and organised guides and carriers for our new destination. The Baliem Valley, which was first discovered in 1938, has still remained quite untouched. The men of the tribes "Danis" and "Lanis" are mostly naked, wearing only a peniscane. For this reason our carriers are also mostly naked. We started our trip after a short car ride to Ibele Valley from where we wanted to get to the Dani village Tailarek in two days. The Dani tribe cultivates not only the valleys but also the steep hills of the surrounding mountains. They grow sweet potatoes, bananas, sugarcane, peas, beans, and tobacco.



Forest at the foot of Mt. Trikora, 4760m



Dani carriers

Our Trek to Tailarek

Our carriers cook rice and vegetables for lunch in the shade of the trees at the river. On a strong branch above the river I count ten different orchids, among them a *Dendrobium* species with hairy yellow panicles.

After lunch we climb higher and higher up the mountain, and I try to discover the first vireyas in the deserted fields. Rhododendrons grow very quickly in the fields, but so far we have not seen any. We camp in the teacher's house in Ibele.



Rhododendron macgregoriae, Ibele Valley

The next morning we spot the first yellow blossoms of *Rhododendron macgregoriae*, which are very common here. A few hundred metres further up we see a huge rhododendron, 3m (10ft) high, with big leaves and new felty brown shoots. A little later we also find the blossoms, which have a diameter of 12 centimetres (5in). Some have a pink spot inside; others are completely white - a *Rhododendron superbum*. It is a great sight and the smell is breathtaking. Hundreds of them are growing in bright sunshine. They are bushy and in great shape. A little higher up we find the white trumpet-like blossoms of *R.inundatum*. In between them are a lot of natural hybrids of all different forms. It is very hot and the sun is burning down from the blue cloudless sky. We get to a meadow where the grass is one-half metre (1.5ft) high. It is covered with *R.maius*. Among the many sweet smelling white blossoms I am also able to discover a pink blooming species.



Rhododendron inundatum, Ibele Valley

We nearly overlook a species with small leaves, which was growing up to 2 metres (6.5ft) with red 2cm (1in) long tube-like blossoms. Maybe it is *Rhododendron vitis-idaea*, which is known to grow in this area. I am not a botanist and it is hard to identify all the different species of rhododendrons in this natural environment.

We are crossing a little brook with crystal clear water, which springs from the rhododendron forest. A little bit higher up I discover another kind of rhododendron, whose leaves are a little bit smaller than those of the *Rhododendron superbum* and which has big white, very intensely smelling blossoms. Maybe it is the *Rhododendron gardenia* which was discovered here about fifty years ago.

After a two hour hike we get to Tailarek. On the way we come across a lot of *Rhododendron macgregoriae*. Our carriers often sing a rhythmical canon-like song that is answered from the opposite side of the valley.

We cross the river Bele with the help of a suspension bridge made out of lianas. We spend the night in the house of the teacher next to the church. The

majority of the Danis are Christians. The next day we return to Wamena and take cuttings from different plants. After one day of relaxation we organise a taxi and try once more to get to Lake Habbema.



Dimorphanthera kempteriana, Ibele Valley

Trek to Lake Habbema

A little bit outside of Wamena on the softly rising hills we find a rhododendron with white trumpet-like blossoms and brown stamens. It has round oval leaves, but we cannot identify the species. Thousands of them grow here together with *Rhododendron macgregoriae*.

We drive for about one hour on a gravel road towards the lake. Then we get out of the car and hike for two hours. Suddenly we see *Rhododendron haematophthalmum* with 5-6cm (2-2.5in) long lightly red and inclined blossoms in full bloom. We try to get to the forest which is not an easy enterprise because dead trees, bushes and moss are all over the floor. We find a small trail, but on some parts we sink deep in the mouldy ground. Three

metre (10ft) high rhododendrons with red blossoms grow everywhere between the trees.

On a bright spot in the forest we see a beautiful bushy plant, which is about 30cm (12in) high. It is *Rhododendron wrightianum* with crimson hanging blossoms and dark green leaves. It is very hot and our guide tells us that it did not rain in the Baliem Valley last year.



Rhododendron wrightianum, Baliem Valley

I think of the rhododendrons in my greenhouse, which I keep very cold in the winter at only 8°C (46°F) during the night. Here at a height of 2000 metres (6600ft) the temperature never falls below 20°C (68°F), even during the night. The sky gets cloudy and it starts to rain for the first time in six days. However, we have to return to Wamena.

After a short bathing trip to Biak, an island in New Guinea, we return to Austria with a lot of seeds in our luggage. We hope that a few of our cuttings take root so that we have a living memory of our trip to Irian Jaya.

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