

The Orchid Conservation Alliance
564 Arden Drive
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January 27, 2013

Dear OCA Member -

Well, the 2012 OCA Orchids in the Wild trip to Ecuador is history. Seven travelers, two weeks, nearly 100 species of orchids in bloom, and the rarest bird in Ecuador. Herewith a brief history of OCA's Ecuador, 2012 Orchids in the Wild trip.

Nov 3: Before the trip. At the IVth Scientific Conference on Andean Orchids Joe Meisel presented his work to date on the GAP Analysis of Ecuadoran Orchids supported by the OCA. Joe has come up with a list of 38 locales, ranked from 1-100, that should be explored as sites for new orchid reserves. The highest scored site, at 100, is in southern Ecuador, south of Loja. As best I can tell from Google Earth, the site is well forested and definitely worth a visit. The second site worth a visit in the north east. After that the priority scores drop off and some of the sites are next to national parks, meaning that the orchids in the sites are likely to be found also in the adjacent national park. Stay tuned for further news.

Nov 4: First trip day. We met our van driver, Oswaldo, and our guide from Ecuagenera, Gilberto Merino. Gilberto is Ecuagenera's principal plant identifier. We are very lucky to have him as our guide. Gilberto proved to be very knowledgeable about the identities of plants we found, very capable at finding the plants, and apparently infinitely patient with our many requests. We visited the orchid show associated with the conference, the Ecuagenera nursery in Guayaquil, and the Guayaquil historic park. The show was great, with many plants that you and I would be happy to have at home; I started keeping a list of plants to obtain. By the end of the trip it was hopelessly long and will have to be pruned mercilessly. Guayaquil Historical Park was quite interesting, with a lot of historical buildings that have been assembled along the bank of the Guayas River.

However, I think the most unusual sight was the iguanas in Simon Bolivar park in front of the Guayaquil cathedral, just across the street from the Unipark Hotel where we were all staying. They are wild iguanas, perhaps 75 of them, all vegetarians, that are in the park and because they are fed there, see no reason to leave. Would you?



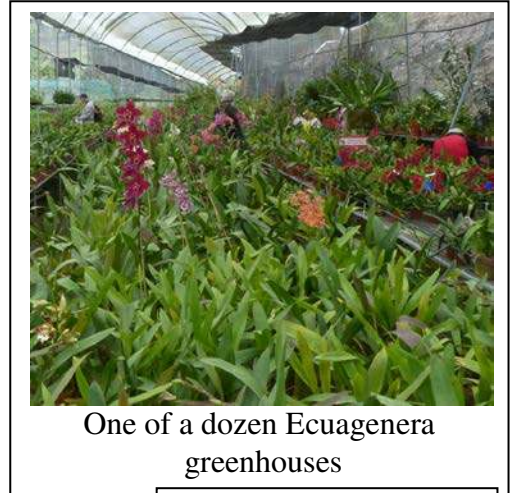
Nov 5: After breakfast at the hotel we headed out on the road to Gualaceo, where Ecuagenera's principal nursery is, and where we would stay for three nights in the Ecuagenera guest house. It turns out to be a very comfortable place to stay and had the advantage that we were very well fed; after all, Pepe and Ingrid Portilla, the owners of Ecuagenera eat there too. After crossing the coastal plain outside of Guayaquil, which is populated mostly with rice, sugar cane, cacao, and other crops, we head up into the mountains. At our first stop, a small break in the bluffs along the



Masdevallia bucculenta

road, we saw the first of many orchids. Several *Stelis* sp., *Epidendrum* sp., *Trichosalpinx chalepanthes*, and *Masevallia bucculenta*. Crossing the high altitude Cajas national park it was raining petty hard, so we pressed on. There was even snow on the ground. There are probably orchids there somewhere, but nobody was eager to get out in the cold rain to find them.

Nov 6: In the morning we prospected for orchids in the greenhouses at Ecuagenera. The only problem was that there are sooooo many and each one begged to be purchased. In the afternoon we visited the market in Gualaceo, where some of us bought farm boots for the muddy and wet trails to come, and visited Chordeleg for a little shopping in the silver jewelry stores. Many stores there had beautiful silver jewelry. Nothing like buying jewelry from the artisans themselves although it was hard to see how they could all survive, with twenty or more stores all lined up next to each other.



One of a dozen Ecuagenera greenhouses



Phrag. besseae

Nov 7: It was a long drive, but it is tough to resist seeing *Phrag. besseae* in the wild. About three and a half hours from Gualaceo was a cliff above a stream where the *Phrag. besseae* live. After about fifteen minutes of trying to get a picture of small brilliant red flowers at least 75 feet above our heads, Gilberto walks around a bend in the road and finds a *Phrag. besseae* at waist height. There's only one flower, but it's unchewed by any bug, perfectly situated, and very photogenic. Along the way we also saw *Ida longipetala*, *Epi. ibaguense*, *Onc. aureum*, *Elleanthus capitatus*, *Stelis coriacardia*, *Sobralia luerorum*, *Sobralia rosea*, *Prosthechea vespa*, and *Cranichis fertilis* among others.



Mother pot with baby on back

Nov 8: We're in Ecuador and Ecuador has more than orchids. It was time to visit Cuenca. Cuenca is an old colonial city with lots of sights, among them cathedrals old and new, a museum of many bird, small animal, and human skeletons, Panama hat factories, and a wonderful museum of archeology tracing the human inhabitants of the region from about 14,000 BCE to the fall of the Inca Empire. The museum also has a very nice gift shop, with replicas of many of the ceramics in the display cases.

Nov 9: It was a day for a long drive up the dry central valley of Ecuador, interesting but not orchidaceous, ending in Baños. Along the way we stopped to visit the old and new cities of Ingapirca. The new one is a small town where it just happened to be market day. I don't know if the lady at right was selling her pig or had just bought it, but she seemed happy with her pig. Less than a kilometer away



Woman with pig at market.



Marcy as goddess or sacrifice ?

was the old Ingapirca, an Inca and pre-Inca religious center. At right, Marcy Robinowitz either played the part of an Inca goddess or worried about her upcoming sacrifice. There's no clear evidence about what the niche was actually for, but the guide was full of theories.

Nov 10: We spent the day with Lou Jost visiting the Reserve Rio Anzu outside Baños near the town of Mera . This reserve was OCA's founding project in 2006. Lou Jost is an interesting guy, a combination of idealistic conservationist, botanical explorer, and math nerd. He started his conservation career as a bird guide in Central America and kept going south in search of ever greater biodiversity. His math talents have led to new ways to quantitatively describe biodiversity. He refers to the Baños area as an island in the sky; an island because it is isolated by mountains and in the sky because it is at such high elevation. The biodiversity there is astonishing. Lou noted that the Galapagos islands are justly famous due to their history with Charles Darwin and the fact that they have 150 endemic species. Yet, the Baños area has over 160 endemic species and is still being explored. The



Reserva Rio Anzu: *Phragmipedium pearceii* and the canyon of the Rio Anzu

The Reserva Rio Anzu is one of several reserves now managed by the Fundación Ecominga, which Lou was critical to organizing. The Rio Anzu reserve protects a limestone canyon and a large number of colonies of *Phrag. pearcei*. On the cliffs along the road leading to the reserve were many *Phrag. lindenyi*, among many other orchids, and the mile or so hike in the reserve to the Rio Anzu had many interesting non-orchidaceous plants. Happily, the constellations were aligned and there were lots of blooming *Phrag. pearcei* when we got to the river.



Left to right: *Sobralia virginalis*, *Ida fimbriata*, *Ida hendrixii*.

Nov 11: Baños is at an altitude of about 6500 feet and the previous days of orchids have been at similar altitudes. Today we were headed to Archidona, on the “Amazon side” of Ecuador, at 1800 feet, a significantly lower elevation. However, before leaving we explored along a road above Baños, finding *Sobralia virginalis*, *Ida fimbriata*, *Ida hendrixii*, *Epi. densiflorum*, *Gongora ruffescens*, and whole cliff faces of an unidentified pleurothallid in full sun. The two *Ida* species look remarkably similar.

Long before we got to Archidona, near Puyo we visited Omar Tello, a now elderly gentleman who set out to reforest some pasture about 30 years ago. He spread compost, planted trees and other terrestrials, tied up orchids and bromeliads in the trees, kept out the cows, and waited patiently for the forest to return. And return it has. It's still not primary forest, but it does illustrate that with sufficient protection and some effort the forest

will recover. Tello currently has plans to involve the local schools and do more outreach to the community in the hope that his example will spread. The OCA hopes to find healthy forest to preserve, but efforts like Tello's are necessary too.



Nov 12: Exploring around Archidona we saw a whole new set of orchids that live at a lower and warmer elevation - near 1500 feet. For me the biggest surprise was a field full of seasonally leafless guava trees full of *Psychomorchis pusilla* and, in a different location, full of *Psychomorchis glossomystax*. These are tiny little twig epiphytes with oncidium like flowers that are at least the size of the plant. I've tried to grow these and seeing them in the field gives me hope that I can make them thrive at home.



Nov 13: We set off for Baeza. Along the way there were lots of orchids. At the foot of a very wet rocky cliff, one of the richest single stops we made, we came across nearly pure white *Sobralia pulcherrima*, *Habenaria microrrhiza*, *Epi. lacustre*, which is a big white epi looking a lot like *Epi. nocturnum*, tiny little *Epi. fimbriatum*, white *Maxillaria ecuadorensis*, orange *Elleanthus hirtzii*, white *Elleanthus condorensis*, lots of other epis and maxillarias, and the non-orchidaceous carnivorous plant, *Utricularia humboldtii*. A montage of many of the epis we saw at this site is just above. Shortly after we explored this site the heavens opened and, after waiting an hour or so for the rain to stop, we gave up and continued on to Baeza. Baeza has an old town, heavily damaged by an earthquake about 10 years ago, and a new town in a safer location. We ate our meals in the old town, in quite a good restaurant, and slept in the new town. The rooms in our hotel seemed to have been built as an add-on to a swimming pool. The rooms all opened onto balconies from which one could do a dive into the pool. I was very tempted to do a cannonball from our second floor room, but the water was unheated and cooooooold, so the wisdom of not jumping from the balcony prevailed. In the town square was a statue, not to Simon Bolivar, who liberated most of South America from Spanish colonial rule, but to the town's dairymen, shown at right; clearly, dairying is an important industry in Baeza. And, no, that's not the 'old way' of moving cans of milk. Hitched to a street sign in town was a horse carrying two cans of milk exactly as in the statue.



Epi. calanthum



Lepanthes aculeata

Nov 14: We headed off to Cascada San Rafael, a very large waterfall where a large *Lycomormium esqualidum* sprawled its flowers on the ground. There were not too many other orchids around, probably because too many people had been to the waterfall to have a look. There was *Stelis uniflora*, several *Epi. sp.*, and quite a few interesting gesneriads. On the way back to Baeza we stopped at another waterfall, Cascada del Rio Malo, where we found *Epi. calanthum* and lots of *Habenaria*

microrhyza. Still further along the road we stopped and explored the edges of an old pasture where red *Epi. cochlidium* decorated many of the trees. Tiny *Lepanthes aculeata* was also there; that's my thumb and forefinger holding its leaf for a size comparison.



Nov 15: On this Thursday we drove from Baeza through Quito and on to Mindo, getting to the pacific side of Ecuador and back to higher altitudes. The 'Amazon side' of Ecuador hasn't been particularly hot or buggy, contrary to my expectation. Before getting to the highest elevation crossing the Andes we made a stop at the junction of two rivers. After some searching, we found two species of *Telipogon*. The first was *tesselatus*, at left in the figure, the other was that common species 'sp.' *Telipogons* are amazing flowers, the *tesselatus* is two inches across, but they are very hard to grow and rarely seen in collections, probably because few collections are housed at the edge of a cow pasture between two rivers at 6000 feet in the Ecuadoran Andes.

Just before the highest point of the pass between Napo and Pichincha provinces was a field of lava blocks with two species of *Odontoglossum* in full sun, *pardinum* and *ramosissimum*. At the highest point of the pass between Napo and Pichincha provinces, at 12,700 feet, was *Aa cundinamarca*. Members of this terrestrial genus typically grow at very high altitudes. They're not particularly decorative, but when seen above the tree line against the sky, they are quite amazing and unlike anything else growing there. The plants, at right, were about 16 inches high.



Aa cundinamarca

About three hours in the middle of the day was spent going through Quito. It has two million people, way too many cars, and lots of road construction. We're headed for Reserve El Pahuma and later, Mindo. El Pahuma reserve, is to the west of Quito, in a steep river valley. It was only the second reserve in Ecuador to take advantage of the country's then new law enabling conservation easements. In return for establishing a conservation easement, the owner receives a tax break but must give up, in perpetuity, any plans of harvesting the trees or developing the land. With the help of the Quito

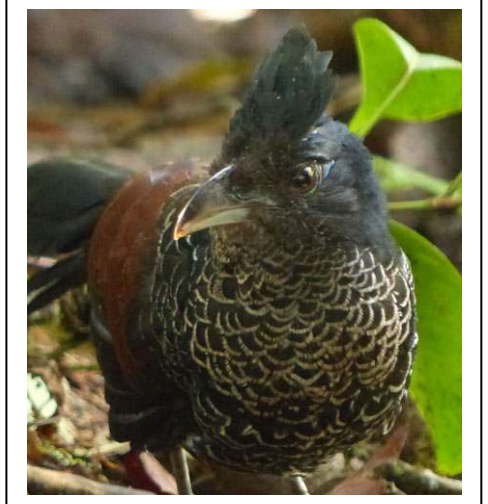
Orchid Society, the Ceiba Foundation for Tropical Conservation, the San Diego County Orchid Society, the American Orchid Society, and several individuals, Efrain Lima and part of his family have established the reserve as an orchid ecotourism destination for many people, from foreign travelers to the school children of Quito. They have a very nice visitor center, a small and well run restaurant for visitors, and 1500 acres of pristine Andean forest with many orchids, birds, frogs, and everything else a rain forest has to offer. The Ceiba web site at www.ceiba.org/elpahuma.htm has more details. We were a little late getting there, so mostly we ate lunch and wandered around the visitor center. However, when I



introduced myself to Mr. Lima and mentioned that I was a member of the San Diego County Orchid Society, he grabbed my hand and pulled me a little way up the trail to see the nesting Cock of the Rock hen. Its nest was some twenty-five feet below the elevation of the trail, just across the narrow gorge that the trail follows up into the reserve. It was quite hard to see by eye, but with the electronic advantage of light amplification using my camera I was able to take a few pictures of this beautiful red-headed bird.

On to Mindo and the Mindo Gardens Hotel. The hotel was a few miles outside of Mindo. Nice gardens, a great central lodge with dining room and bar, and the rooms are in buildings scattered about the property which stretches along a river - probably the Mindo river. Dinner was elegant and very tasty.

Nov 16: For me and three others, this day started at 4:30AM. Through an unlikely chain of events I happen to know a German woman who has a bird reserve, “Un Poco del Chocó,” about two hours from Mindo. And, even more unlikely, she had the rarest bird in Ecuador on her property. And, still more unlikely, she has been hand feeding grasshoppers to this rare wild bird. The bird is the banded ground cuckoo and the German woman is Nicole Büttner. One of the OCA travelers was more of a bird person than an orchid person and several of us were intrigued by the idea of seeing the rarest bird in Ecuador. I was also interested to know whether Nikki’s property would make a good stop on a future orchid trip. To get there we hired a local driver with a four wheel drive Jeep. This was definitely necessary since Nikki lives at the end of a largely unmaintained six mile long dirt road. Leaving the hotel at 4:30 AM was also necessary because the bird tends to disappear for the afternoon. After a two and a half hour drive, we discovered that Nikki had breakfast and coffee (YES!!!) for us and then she went off to hunt for the bird. This cuckoo is an ant-follower. The army ants that live in the forest forage through the leaf litter, attacking insects and anything else edible. Some of the insects fly up to get away from the ants and then are attacked by a variety of birds that follow the ants around. Yes Virginia, it’s a jungle out there. If the ants had left Nikki’s property, and they do move on when they have exhausted the food supply, the bird would be gone also. But after half an hour the walkie-talkie in her husband Wilo’s hand crackled and Nikki had found the ants and the bird. Sure enough, after a five minute walk, there was a chicken sized bird hopping up and down the slope to grab the grasshoppers that Nikki was carrying in a wire cage. The bird stayed around for at least fifteen minutes with a seemingly inexhaustible appetite. I got lots of pictures but forgot to take video. However, someone else has already posted video on YouTube, where anyone can see it.



Later we took a hike on their property to look for orchids. Their property is only 18 hectares, about 43 acres, with mostly secondary but some primary forest. There were quite a few orchids but the most interesting for me was *Lycomormium fiskei* because it was being visited by a very persistent euglossine bee gathering waxes and fragrances for its sex life. I did manage to remember to take a movie, which I will post soon on our web site and YouTube.



When we got back to the hotel, the others had been to several sites in Mindo and were ready for a hike along the Mindo river. We crossed the river on a small hand powered cable car, which was lots of fun, and got back to the business of finding orchids. A very nice trail - a nice purple *Stelis*, yellow *Maxillaria lepidota* (at right), orange *Maxillaria chocoana*, very green *Sarcoglottis grandiflora*, yellow and brown *Mesospinidium incantans*, and quite a few others. Also notable was a 12 foot tall *Equisetum*. Before dinner it was amusing to watch the hummingbirds fight for precedence at the feeders set up in front of the hotel and the agouti which nonchalantly prospected for food under the feeders and ignored the aerial battles being waged above him.



Nov 17: It was the last full day of the trip and there was a lot to get done. We headed back uphill to stay in Quito for the night; Quito is at 9500 feet, the highest capital city in the world. To get back we took the 'old' road which affords some more orchid time. The best stop was where we could climb up into the forest along the road, plunge through the woods on a steep slope covered with slippery leaves, slide back down the bank along the road, and emerge through the dead fronds of a very large tree fern, only to look back and see many clumps of purple/brown *Epidendrum carchense*, at right, in amongst the tree fern fronds. The irony is that instead of spending 15 minutes crashing through the woods we could have just strolled three minutes along the road to find the same plant. Sometimes that's just how it is when you're looking for orchids.



Along the way back to Quito we made quick stops at Pululahua, where you can look down into a collapsed volcanic caldera with farms and houses in it and also at the equatorial monument. At the monument you can stand with one foot on each side of the equator. In Quito the most interesting site I saw was the church, La Basilica. Quito has many churches, the old cathedral, Santo Domingo, begun in 1580, La Compania, decorated in the baroque style with huge quantities of gold, and many more. La Basilica was only begun in 1892 but the architect and its artisans used many non-religious images to decorate it. The gargoyles which protect it are iguanas, crocodiles, and other actual monsters. Inside, one of the rose windows is filled not with stained glass saints, but with stained glass orchids of many kinds. It was quite a surprise to look up and see many marvelous the orchids up in the wall of the church. It would be interesting to know how it was decided to put them there and who did the work.



Well, this 'summary' took me almost as long to write as the trip itself. Of course, I had a few distractions of the 'getting ready for the holidays' and 'recovering from the holidays' type. I hope you've enjoyed our trip vicariously and can join one of the future trips. Our next trip will be in May of 2013 and is to China to see Chinese paphs and many other things. Details of the trip are on our website. It looks wonderful.

Before closing, I must thank all the travelers, novices Marcy and Bernard Robinowitz and John Daly, as well as the veterans, Spiro Kasomenakis, Dick Van Ingen, and Mary Gerritsen. Without fail they were good natured, patient with traveling in a van, willing to stay in some hotels that they wouldn't look at twice in the states, and forgiving of the occasional unexpected event, such as the time a beef bone was spooned up in the 'vegetarian' soup. Clearly, some part of the word 'vegetarian' had not translated. I hope they will all be back on the next trip, when a bone detector will be standard equipment. Thanks too to Gilberto Merino for expertly guiding our trip.

Best regards,



Peter Tobias, Pres.



The agouti