

Cypripedium flavum



SEDUCTIVE SLIPPERS



Cypripedium flavum

There are two irresistible forces in the universe; black holes and Yunnan, the first sucks in everything including light, the second any plantsman who has ever set eyes on a Chinese plant. Like moths to a flame, botanists are drawn to Western China, where they fly around and around before crashing to the ground, exhausted and completely confused.

Yunnan does indeed have a mind-boggling array of plants, around 15,000 species, probably many more, contained within habitats as varied as tropical rainforest and high alpine tundra. One of the most diverse families within this maelstrom of flowers are the orchids, of which Yunnan has a mere 1200 species - the UK has 52, and even the richness of the Mediterranean can only double that. Admittedly, many of these are tropical or subtropical, but two genera in particular stand out with their seductive allure - the slipper orchids; *Paphiopedilum* and *Cypripedium*. The former is more or less lowland or at best a foothill genus, whereas the latter contains species that grow as high as 4000 metres or more and are very much in the area most plantsmen visit - the mountains.

There are around thirty-six species of *Cypripedium* in western China, a whilst some are rather localised and do not occur in Yunnan (or adjacent parts of Sichuan), a wonderful selection is readily found. And, let's not forget that when you are finding orchids there will be an abundance

Cypripedium flavum & *yunnanense*





Cypripedium yunnanense



Galearis wardii



Oreorchis erythrochrysea

of other beautiful Chinese plants alongside them too such as primulas, anemones, incarvilleas, androsaces, rhododendrons, omphalogrammas, louseworts and gentians to name but a few.

My first experience of these charismatic plants was a pristine specimen of *Cypripedium flavum* growing on a bank in Yulong Shan, its large soft yellow pouch flanked by delicately red-striped and speckled sepals. This species turned out to be one of the most frequently encountered and common slipper orchids, invariably growing with other *Cypripedium* species such as *C. guttatum*, *C. plectrochilon* and *C. tibeticum*. Around the placid waters of Napa Hai (near Shangri-La) they also grow quite literally among clumps of the lovely pink-pouched *C. yunnanense*, a smaller-flowered species that favours slopes and banks. These were mixed in with white anemones and the big pink trumpets of *Incarvillea zhongdianensis* too.

Diminutive *C. plectrochilon* grew nearby on a steeper limestone slope that was a huff and puff to reach, especially on just day 4 of the trip when 3800 metres altitude was still hard work. Dainty, slim spikes of *Oreorchis erythrochrysea* were plentiful too, together with a muddle of rhododendrons and mats of *Androsace rigida*. In another patch of birch trees, I found *Cypripedium flavum* with the gorgeous discs of *Nomocharis aperta*, it seems to insist on keep beautiful company.

The other widespread showy species in



Nomocharis aperta



Cyripedium tibeticum



Cyripedium lichiangense



Cyripedium tibeticum



Cyripedium plectrochilon

Cyripedium tibeticum, a fabulous brute with big somewhat sinister dark purple-pink or pink pouches. The gaping dark orifice is apparently to deceive bumblebees into entering the flower as they search for burrow nest sites. This wonderful plant is still plentiful in woods and way up on high alpine turf in lush mixed meadows packed with fritillaries, corydalis, veratrums and marsh marigolds, as well as the much smaller and cryptic *Galearis wardii*.

However, for us the most remarkable Yunnan flowers with such colouration are two other cyripediums, and two that are now much harder to find, having suffered from over-collection. On my first visit to Yunnan, I spent an entire morning searching a steep rocky slope with two friends, eventually finding hidden away among giant boulders one flowering plant of *C. margaritaceum*, one of the extraordinary spotted-leaved species. It was five years later when I then somehow caught sight of the even lovelier *C. lichiangense*, each flower shaped like a little boat and beautifully freckled. They grew as a little colony among rocks and oaks above a stream, a place I take great care to visit when nobody else is around. Worrying, on my last visit the season had been so dry there was not a sign of the plants and I only hope they have survived to flower another day.

Thankfully, the other species are still common and widespread. A magical sight when I finally catch my breath in the high hills of Yunnan.



Cyripedium margaritaceum