

The Sabah Society Mesilau Trip, March 26-27, 2011



Our Sabah Society Mesilau trip began and ended the same way: with rain! But in between showers we were able to accomplish all our objectives and have a very enjoyable excursion. We departed KK around 7am on Saturday, March 26 and met at 9am for breakfast at Kinabalu Rose Cabin. Our group consisted of Tony, Anthea, & Alex Lamb, Rina & Bill Jamieson, Christine Hardie, and me (Gina Hamilton, trip organiser).

After a delicious repast we drove another half hour to Mesilau resort where we met our guide for the *Nepenthes* walk, Herman Kunsian, at the Mesilau Centre. Herman is an enthusiastic young trainee, who was delighted to have the famous Tony Lamb augment his knowledge of the trail's flora. We carefully squelched passed the historic caves, along the very wet path that led to the suspension bridge crossing the Mesilau River. Because of the rains, the river was gushing white and there were several waterfalls shooting out of the sides of the rocky canyon. Tony showed us a delightful yellow and white orchid in full bloom—it turned out to be named after him—*Calanthe Lambii*!



Calanthe Lambii

After the bridge, the trail leads steeply upwards by sturdy rock steps to a high ridge. Many wonderful plants were growing along the way, but the most marvelous (and what we particularly came to see) was the *Nepenthes Rajah*, the largest pitcher plant in the world. These amazing carnivorous pitchers, (discovered by Sir Hugh Low), can hold up to two litres of water and become filled with a whole world of life: dead and/or drowning insects, frogs, small, unwary mammals, larvae, bits of leaves and detritus, and most amazing of all: tree shrew poo! Tony explained that the shrews often sit on the lips of the *Nepenthes* and literally use the pitcher-bowls as toilets! This interesting nutrient mixture



then serves to nourish the plant, and due to the quantity of robust specimens along this trail, I can vouch that they were very well nourished indeed.

Our cameras were clicking away and we barely noticed the steepness of the climb, as we slowly progressed, pausing to enjoy each new discovery. One very beautiful and valuable orchid was growing very near the trail called

paphiopedilum hookerae.



A very important discovery was made on this walk—a new record was set for the largest recorded *Nepenthes Rajah*! An especially large one was spotted down a steep side path, and Alex Lamb was sent down to take the measurement, which turned out to be 41cm! (Of course, his Mum, Anthea is never without her trusty measuring tape, as she's researching plant sizes for some upcoming articles she is writing). The standing record for *Nepenthes Rajah* is 38cm, and on this walk a 40cm and 41cm were found. Herman approved the collecting of this pitcher, and it is now residing at the Mesilau Headquarters, where hopefully it will be properly preserved.



Alex, Herman and the whopping 41cm Record Breaking *Nepenthes Rajah*!



Magnificent colours!!

A one-half hour walk had turned into two hours of pure joy, but we had to get on with lunch and our afternoon tours. After a sumptuous lunch back at our accommodation, the Cottage Hotel in Kundasang we set off on our tours with Tiki, our guide. She took us first to a nearby nursery where we were most impressed by the quantity of blooming cacti. Next, we went to the Hotel's private vegetable plot where they have fields full of cabbages, onions and beetroot. After that we went to Desa Dairy, where we saw the Holstein cows being milked on machines. There have been several improvements to the



Fertile fields of Kundasang

facilities these past few years, and the main building has a large interior space with viewing windows designed to accommodate crowds. Unfortunately, I can't say that the dairy herd has improved since I saw them last several years ago; the cows still look bony and underfed, and many had sores upon their backs. Our next stop on the tour was much more pleasant—a visit to the mushroom houses. This particular business produces Shitake and Abalone mushrooms, and edible fungus, all organic. They are grown in long, dark buildings, encased in individual fire-log sized plastic bags. The bags are full of a rich, sawdust mixture, shot with mushroom spores.



Anthea viewing Abalone Mushrooms

The Abalone mushrooms can be ready for harvest in only a few days, whilst the Shitake and fungus take a full month. We were amazed by the way the mushrooms just thrust themselves forth from the ends of the bags, ready for plucking when the size is right.



We returned to the Hotel for a nice cup of tea and a welcome rest before dinner. Dinner was delicious, with many Chinese-style dishes on offer, and afterwards we were entertained by the talented Alexander Lamb who played us some stirring songs on his guitar. This was followed by a game of “Taboo” and many laughs until it was time to trundle upstairs to bed.



Tony animatedly describes a “Taboo” word

We all slept well in the cool mountain air and met again for breakfast at 7am. Afterward, we climbed to the top floor observation deck where we could gaze out upon Kundasang town, the Pinosok Plateau (elevation approx 1,500-2,000m), and the lovely terraced fields full of the many varieties of highland vegetables that have brought this area fame. After departing the hospitable Cottage Hotel we visited the Kundasang War Memorial. We were happy to see that it has remained well-maintained, and the flowers still beautiful in spite of so much rain. Next stop was Kinabalu Park, where we stopped for coffee at the



Lodge. We had the pleasure of being entertained during our coffee break on the open air deck by a darling little pied flycatcher defending “his” hanging baskets full of blooming fuchsias against the quick little scarlet sunbirds that were darting in for a sip of nectar.



Pied Flycatcher



Scarlet Sunbird

Next we visited the beautiful and lush Mt Gardens, originally designed and planted by Tony Lamb, with a few extra additions by Anthea, such as the beautiful King Fern. Tony and Anthea highlighted for us the most special plants of this garden, and we would have lingered longer but the heavens once again protested and we were forced to run for shelter. We departed the Park and headed back to KK through a thick, soupy fog and heavy rain. It was nice to arrive safely at home with many

memories of a unique nature trip, made much more enjoyable by the added information provided by the Lamb’s. On behalf of our group, I would like to extend many heartfelt thanks to them for sharing with us so many amusing stories and interesting information about the area’s flora and fauna.



Our group at the Kundasang War Memorial