Kaas Plateau in Maharashtra is no ordinary place. The mass flowering in the monsoon is simply magical, an adventure waiting to happen.

By Anuradha Arjunwadkar

The plateau has been in the news for the last few weeks... reports of the kaleidoscopic mass flowering that occurs during the monsoon after year, of the fear that rampant tourism and windmills could destroy the magic of such areas, of UNESCO's proposal to declare this a world heritage site - for it hosts some 1450 plant species! We had set out to experience the magic of the plateau of flowers at the beginning of October, when the rains had subsided. As the winding hill road that took us west of Satara city climbed onto the plateau, we saw a sea of colours dancing in the cool pleasant breeze. The dean mountain air had an exhilarating effect on visitors like us. There were plants everywhere, most no more than a few inches high, crowding together in wild profusion, across every square metre of area; standing erect in the soil or in the puddles, or creeping along the wet rocky expanse, they bloomed in every direction.

**Herbs and grasses**

Many of these herbs and grasses are endemic to such laterite plateaus, meaning that they are peculiar to this sort of geographic area and are not found elsewhere. The plateau has been in the news for the last few weeks... reports of the kaleidoscopic mass flowering that occurs during the monsoon after year, of the fear that rampant tourism and windmills could destroy the magic of such areas, of UNESCO's proposal to declare this a world heritage site - for it hosts some 1450 plant species! We had set out to experience the magic of the plateau of flowers at the beginning of October, when the rains had subsided. As the winding hill road that took us west of Satara city climbed onto the plateau, we saw a sea of colours dancing in the cool pleasant breeze. The dean mountain air had an exhilarating effect on visitors like us. There were plants everywhere, most no more than a few inches high, crowding together in wild profusion, across every square metre of area; standing erect in the soil or in the puddles, or creeping along the wet rocky expanse, they bloomed in every direction.

**Yellow flowers**

Bugs, caterpillars, beetles, grasshoppers, butterflies, and insects that we were seeing for the first time, crawled and flitted among them. Occasionally a crooked stalk - a sprightly sprig of the flower, stretching rows along the leaves. Crowding in for a better view, we wondered if it was dew, or raindrops. But dew on the warm, breezy hilltop? That was when we noticed that one of the stems was curled up. A new leaf unfurling? Maybe...

**Tiny insect**

As we gazed, we noticed that the spines were curled around a tiny insect. What was it doing there? Could this plant be an insect-eater? We consulted our field guide and confirmed that it was! Called sundew, it ensnarls, with the sticky drops, any flies and other small insects venturing too close! The acids and enzymes in the liquid help the plant dissolve the outer layer of the prey and digest the life juices. These plants must be ingenious creatures!

As we wandered across the plateau, we came across a bunch of small buds, half-hidden in a thicket. Not much bigger than a jasmine bud, each reddish and light-green oval wore a collar of dappled maroon. We followed the strands of the long, winding creeper to locate any that had opened. There seemed none.

But as our eyes adjusted to the gloom under the thicket, we discerned that some of the bigger 'buds' had gaps like narrow, hairy windows! As we watched, a tiny insect crawled through one of the tall 'windows' and down into the depths of the flower. For the 'bud' must be a flower, we realized - one whose petals, unlike those of most flowers, did not open wide, but remained just separated, continuing to touch one another delicately at the tips! A Ceropogia - so like a cage!

**Purple puddles**

The bladderwort with its small blue flowers, the balsam with its pink-purple ones, the heart-shaped star that carpeted ponds and puddles in purple, all danced like Wordsworth's daffodils. How do they endure the heat, the wind and the fury of nature? Who knows what secret lives each of these beings leads!