

ON THE TRAIL OF FLOWERS

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

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We just couldn't believe our eyes! Our friend had enlarged a close-up photograph of a bead grass flower-head, a pea-sized white cluster of tiny flowers, on his laptop. As he did that, a tiny spot of yellow came into clearer view. We gaped in sheer disbelief as the yellow spot grew into a bug that stared at us, although a little hazily, with round black eyes. Black on yellow on white, what fabulous strokes from the palette of nature!

We had just returned from a day's trip to the Kaas plateau in Satara district of Maharashtra. Located in the Western Ghats, at an elevation of over 1200 metres above mean sea



level, the hill-top tableland has thin, poor soil that barely endures on the weathered rusty red rock. Whipped by strong winds and lashed by very heavy rains during the monsoons, it is subsequently baked in strong sunlight until June each year. It looks entirely barren in the summer. But the rains cast a spell over this inhospitable terrain. A myriad plants suddenly spring to life!

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 years... reports of the kaleidoscopic mass flowering that occurs during the monsoon year 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 sub-



SMITHIA: Mickeys on a Rocky Plateau! PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHARI

sided. 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 clean 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 crested lark - a sprightly sparrow-like bird with a princely crest - was to be seen. Small yellow flowers were everywhere, each with a pair of larger petals sporting red patches bordering on two smaller ones that together curved over the centre of the flower. Belonging to the smithia family, they each resembled the popular cartoon character Mickey Mouse!

A bright pink flower near my

feet caught my eye. The plant looked like a dwarf pink-headed multi-armed warrior, its arms stretching in every direction. Tiny spines, tipped with what looked like dew, stretched in 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 arms 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 ensnares, 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 quarry 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 realised - 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 *Ceropegia* - so like a cage!

Purple puddles

The bladderwort with its small



SUNDEW: The pink-headed warrior. PHOTO: KALPAVRIKSH



Ceropegia - the flower with tall 'windows'. PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHARI

blue flowers, the balsam with its pink-purple ones, the bearded marsh 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!