

Florida Trails

by Winthrop Packard

Chapter 11: Spring in the Savannas

Spring and autumn kissed yesterday in the savannas east of Lake Okeechobee, and autumn died of it. Autumn was lucky thus to be raptured out of existence, for he was but a weakling, lingering along inertly, showing little of that brown tan in which, farther north, he glories. In all the woodland hardly a fallen leaf rustled under his footstep and on the open savanna only the dull olive wild grasses paid homage to him. On the day he died I thought I saw tribute to him, in the red of a swamp maple's passing leaves, but I was wrong. It was the blush of spring blossoms instead, so little does the world of the twenty-seventh parallel care for autumn, so potent is the aura of spring as the lusty hussy sweeps in on the wings of the southeast trades. I suspect spring of being born on the tropic edge of the Sargasso Sea whence these winds blow, mothered by the cool brine of its vast depths, fathered by the most vivid sun and bringing in her amorous heart the alchemic vigor of both, whereby she transmutes all things into golden bloom. The long surges of this sea following her, leap in adoration and desire. A dozen miles inland from the Atlantic I yet hear the roar of their plunge on the beach, a roar softened and made into a sleepy lullaby, an undertone droning in soothing cadences when the breeze is hushed for a moment. They may not follow her farther, these devoted waves, but they send the cooling scent of the brine far beyond the sound of their voices, sometimes to the very heart of the peninsula.

Yet it is not altogether the scent of the brine which gives the amorous softness to the winds that brought



spring, yesterday. The garments of the goddess, trailing over the Bahamas, have caught the scent of all wild flowers in their folds and there wooed and welded them into a fond sweetness which no man may describe yet by which all must know when spring comes, whether in the Everglades or the New England pastures. On nights when the wind blew gently I have caught whiffs of these odors of spring before, breaths to make one fill the lungs to their very depths in long-drawn inspirations, to reach one's arms towards the stars in sudden joy of yearning, but now the air of day as well as night is full of it.

The savannas are the pine barrens of the northern part of the State, made, somehow, more open hearted, lovable and kindly in stead of lonely and aloof. The pines are here still, but they no longer grow in close-set ranks that shut off the view in the near distance with a wooden wall of brown trunks. Instead they grow far apart and the glance trots merrily along for miles among their trunks before it finds its way barred. There are enough of the long-leaved variety to give stateliness to the view, but in the main the pine of the savannas is a shorter-leaved, less straight and dignified tree, smaller, though a good-sized tree, and one that is enough like our Northern pitch pine to be a friend at sight. These and the palmettos that sway in picturesque groups along on their way, no one knows whither, are all the trees one finds for miles on miles.

It is rather odd, this matter of the palmettos being on their way. It is not so with the pines. They stand. But the palmettos stroll on. I do not know what gives them this semblance of groups in motion, but they surely have it. I fancy it is their erect trunks which are never quite erect. They seem to lean forward just poised for a step. Under foot is the scrub palmetto, brown grasses that fatten the range cattle, and the gallberry bushes now black with fruit. At first glance this seems all and you have to live with the savannas for a little before they give up more. At rare intervals you may find a tiny streamlet that in flood time has dug its course down through the sand to a hard bottom where its clear water slips gently along. This will be bordered by myrtles a dozen feet tall, making a wall of foliage that you may see a mile ahead of you barring your way beneath the pines. But this is only an incident and does not affect the general tenor of the landscape.

But, though streams are rare, there is water in abundance in the saucer-like pools which make the savanna so lovable. Just when your way is becoming weary and the place the abode of monotony and loneliness, one of them bars your path and fills you with sudden admiration of its wild beauty. You may count them, little and big, by the score sometimes within a mile, you may find a mile without one, or you may find a single pool which takes



up the mile. However long your walk in the level plain, it can never be lonely because of the comradeship of these. Here is one that is rimmed with prim, green rushes, standing close-set and bristly pointed as if guarding the clear, unvexed surface. Here is another so shallow that the wild grasses grow up through the water all about, spiring in tender points that are olive brown with the touch of autumn. Yesterday in such pools olive brown was the only color above the water which reflected the blue of the sky. To-day, under the touch of this amorous spring that swooped down upon them, these somber spires stand guard over prickings of tender green that sprang up in a night to meet the call of the passing goddess.

Here is another pool, deeper, this one, whose borders are halberded with the leaves of the pickerel weed, already flying blue banners here and there, starred with the white of the



water plantain. In spots in these clear, deeper pools the tape grass stripes the surface and the crow blackbirds ride dry-footed on the round, floating leaves of the yellow pond lily. Many of the smaller pools are fairer yet, their clear, black water all rich with gold ornaments, curiously and beautifully carved and shining yellow in the sunlight which seems tangled in embossings and fret work. Not till

I wade knee deep into the middle may I find out whence comes this curious and delightful ornamentation. After all, it is but the tangled blooms of *Utricularia vulgaris*, riding free and floating on the bladder-bearing whorl of leaves till gentle winds push them close and the spurred, bilabiate flowers tangle golden heads in nugget-like masses. Nowhere in the world, I fancy, can you find utricularias so large flowered and massed in such profusion as in the little, quiet pools that star the savannas from the Indian River westward to the northernmost beginnings of the Everglades.

The pools do not have a monopoly of the beautiful yellow blooms of the utricularia. Along one tiny path or another which I follow along level miles, made by the range cattle and kept open as highways for all the wild creatures of the place, tiny motes of richest sunshine dance aside for my passing feet. Scarce larger than a pinhead are these blooms of *Utricularia subulata*, most elflike blooms, that seem to have no connection with earth. If you try to pluck them they shake all over with mirth which they cannot contain at your clumsiness. Leaves they have none, and the stem which bears them up is of such a neutral tint and of such gossamer fineness that it is almost impossible to see it. And that is all there is to it; a stem like a spider's thread, springing from moist sand or mud in the path, bearing on



its invisible support this tiny scale of sunshine, making the most elusive and fairylike plant that one might find on a continent. In Northern swamps and on the borders of still lakes the utricularias have given me pleasure, but never have they supplied such an amazement of delight as they spread before my feet in these wild savannas of southern Florida.

Along with the path-haunting utricularias is another tiny plant whose Northern prototype is familiar. This is the sundew. I take the one that carpets portions of these moist, wild ways with rich red to be the *Drosera brevifolia* from its shorter, wedge-shaped leaves. The nap of fine glands that clothes these holds diamond glints of infinitesimal dewdrops that flash finely in the sun and catch my attention and hold it, even as they do the tiny insects for whom the snare is spread. In favored locations these round mats of the sundew half carpet the gray-black soil along the path edges with a diamond-frosted, cerise velvet and should pleasantly pad the footfall of all small, wild creatures that pass that way.

The sundew grows only on the moist places. In the dryer spots, now that spring has come wooing with warmth and with showers, troops of sun-bonneted beauties show up, these seeming to have sprung magically forth in a night. It may be that there were golden yellow sunbonnets nodding coquettishly in the wind all along the savannas ten days ago. I can only say that I tramped them back and forth and did not see any. It may be that the smaller, more modest blue sun-bonnets were there too. I can only say that I did not see them. There is a freemasonry of the wild that keeps secrets from you till you are found worthy. Hence to know a wood or a plain you must visit it often. Often in coming back along a path which I have scanned in going I find flowers, nodding by the very path brim, that I did not see in going out. It is not to be believed that these opened in the interval; rather we must think that like children they lose their fear of strangers after a little.

So with these butterworth girls that wear the yellow and blue sunbonnets. I fancy there were a few of them along the path on my first day, but they did not care to be seen. Now they have taken heart at the boldness with which spring scatters love tokens all about and are trooping forth on the level sands. *Pinguicula pumila* I actually found first, though she is the more modest. Her blue bonnet is smaller and she herself is shorter of stature, nestling down among the wild grasses in a snugly confiding way which makes them love her. They cling close and it is difficult to pluck *Pinguicula pumila* without getting a half handful of defending grass stems with hers.

Pinguicula lutea is a bolder creature. In her yellow sunbonnet she is a flaunting blonde and the gold of her flaring ribbons is visible far under pine and palm. When the full warmth



of the sun is on the savannas she flips back the rim of this big, yellow bonnet till it flares in salver form and shows her buxom face and the gold of her hair to all who will look. I do not think it possible that Pinguicula lutea let me go down the path on the very first day without noticing her and I am therefore confident that, her season begins here in mid-January. She and her shyer sister have given a sudden joy to the wide spaces that was not there before and I welcome them as near relatives of the utricularias.

Over them all on the day that spring came, over the sandy levels, the round-eyed, flower-decked pools, rang the tinkling, joyous songs of I do not know how many million meadow larks. A day or two before I had seen but a scattering one or two and not one had sung for me. On that day they appeared everywhere, not in flocks like the robins and blackbirds, but singly and by twos and threes well distributed over all the landscape. They sing from lowly stations, a short, dead stub in the lonely reaches, a fence post near the farm, or the low ridgepole of the farmer's shack. Nothing could be more spring-like than their music and they are the first Northern birds that I have found singing freely so far South. The robins and the redwings are songless, the bluebird carols shyly as he flies but so gently that he is rarely heard. The crow blackbird works hard but it is hardly a song that he produces, and so the mellow tinkle of these myriads of meadow larks is a delight to the Northern ear.

It is a joy also to see one of them after his song flutter forth from his perch, spread his wings in mid-flight and sail sweetly down, lighting in among the wild grasses as if he loved them. The meadow lark's breast wears a rich yellow that pretty nearly matches that of the sunbonnet of Miss Pinguicula Lutea. I am wondering if there is anything in it. That might account for her persistent strolling along the sunny reaches of the interminable savannas. It might account for his melodious outbursts from low observation points and the quivering set of his wings as he soars down into the grass at her side. This spring that came sailing up over the Bahamas brought many a yearning along with the tropic odors in her train.

As out of the lark-filled air the spring has brought melodies, so out of the yellow-flecked pools she has brought two sounds which are in vocal adoration of her. One is a queer little rap of a sound that is like the hitting of dry sticks together in a rub-a-dub-dub. If fairy frogs march the borders of the pools to drumbeat, this is the drumbeat.

The other is a frog sound, too, the love call of the tree frog. The hyla's voice with us, North, is the first sure call of spring. When we hear that we know that the ice is gone from the marshes and the tiny fellows have come out of their winter's sleep and are down in the open water, piping, Pan like, their love songs among the reeds. Neither amorous scent of



stephanotis bloom borne from islands of the Southern seas on the soft air, nor amorous tinkle of lark love songs could so mark to my Northern trained ear the presence of spring. There is no chorus as yet; just an occasional shrill peeping, such as I have heard in April out of the moist ruck of last year's grasses in a cold meadow, while yet there is a touch of frost in the air and the low sun scarcely gives color in his slanting beams. Here it comes in warmth as of June out of pools where bewildered flowers bloom the year round, not knowing of a certainty where one summer ends and another begins. Yet the sound and its meaning are unmistakable, the final evidence whereby I know that spring came to the savannas yesterday.

