

THE 13TH ICPS CONFERENCE *PINGUICULA RAMOSA* EXPEDITION

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Abstract: The 13th ICPS Post-Conference tour climbed Mt. Nyoho, Tochigi Prefecture to meet the Japanese endemic *Pinguicula ramosa*.

On 31 May 2023, the last day of the 13th ICPS Conference in Japan, 27 brave explorers (Fig. 1) climbed Mt. Nyoho, Tochigi Prefecture to meet the Japanese endemic *Pinguicula ramosa*.

Pinguicula ramosa is a cold temperate *Pinguicula* and is so far found in only 5 sites in the Nikko area in Tochigi Prefecture, about 2.5 hours north of Tokyo. What's so unique about this plant is that its flower stalk branches out to hold 1 to 3 flowers (Fig. 2). This is the only *Pinguicula* species which does this weird but amazing thing.

Another interesting characteristic of this plant is that when they fruit, they bend their flower stalks backwards and bury them into the wall of the cliff on which they are attached. Because of the rarity and the sensitivity of the ecosystem where they grow, *P. ramosa* is classified as an endangered species, and considered one of the national treasures of Japan. *Pinguicula ramosa* is



Figure 1: The *Pinguicula ramosa* explorers. In front of the hotel in Kita-senju, Tokyo.



Figure 2: *Pinguicula ramosa* showing branched flower stalks. Photo by Justin Dunning.

also notoriously difficult to grow in cultivation. So, the only way we could see them was to go to where they grow naturally. My role here was to help non-Japanese participants navigate during this expedition.

From the Himeji station, where the conference venue was located, we took the Shinkansen (the Bullet train) to Shinagawa ward in Tokyo. Then we transferred to a local train to the town of Kita-senju where we stayed for the night. I stayed at my folk's place in the town of Koiwa, about 40 minutes away by train. We had bought a ticket for the special train to the Nikko area ahead of time which departs from Kita-senju station the next morning. The Japanese train system is fantastic in a sense that you can get to anywhere you want, but the downside is that it is quite complicated. It seems to me that it gets more and more complicated every year. Kita-senju station is huge and has multiple train lines. The last time I used the train to Nikko was in 2016, when I went to the same site to see *P. ramosa* for the first time. It's been a while since I'd taken this train, and the train systems could have totally changed during this period. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to navigate the participants around Kita-senju in time for our 8:03 a.m. train, so Naoki Tanabe, the leader of the ICPS conference, jumped in to help me out. He and I met the participants at the hotel lobby at 7:00 a.m. in the morning of the expedition. Then Naoki led us to the correct platform for our train at the Kita-senju station. Boy, was I glad Naoki came just to help us, because the platform where we got on the Nikko train was at the tip of the platform of a different train line (i.e., two train lines shared a single platform)! It would have taken me so long to figure it out, and we would have missed the train otherwise! Another little surprise was that we had to buy an additional ticket to get on the train. It turns out the online ticket we bought in advance was only the "Express" ticket. What we were missing was the "Local" ticket which was

only available by cash at the train station. Living in the US for so long, I completely forgot that we needed two tickets to get on the Nikko train. Why cash only in the year 2023? Why don't they just make them into a single ticket? That's beyond me! Naoki kindly took the train with us and saw us off at the Nikko station.

At the Nikko station, we met Mr. Os-hita, the leader of the expedition, and several other participants who came with their cars. Between a rental car and the cars provided by the participants who drove there, we took a c.15-minute ride to the entrance to Mt. Nyoho (many thanks to those who volunteered their cars, especially Ako Minami who made multiple trips to help us get there). It was about a 2-hour climb up the paved road which was made for the dam construction. After that was about a 30-minute climb over fallen rocks and gravel. The path was not too steep but still made my heart race quite a bit. Japanese endemic flora such as *Arisaema nikoense*, *Primula japonica*, and *Rhododendron kaempferi* decorated the path and made the climbing pleasant (Fig. 3).

Here's a side story to it. When we saw *Primula japonica* blooming away down a little hill off to the side of the path, some of us decided to climb down the hill to take a closer look. I hesitated but decided to follow them despite the bad feeling I had about this. "Snap!" the branch I held onto broke off. Down goes Emmi, making a few 360s and landing on her knees and face. It was so painful I couldn't get up for a long time. Apparently, I made a scene as everyone was staring at me. I got some scratches, but luckily, I was still able to walk. It wasn't my knees that hurt so much as my dignity!

Halfway up the path, we saw the *P. ramosa* cliff standing proudly in the distance, a U-shaped cliff wrapping around the south- to north-eastern sides (Fig. 4).



Figure 3: (A) *Arisaema nikoense*. (B) *Primula japonica*. (C) *Rhododendron kaempferi*.



Figure 4: *Pinguicula ramosa* site standing proudly in the distance.

After passing a few “Watch your head for fallen rocks” signs and climbing over the fallen rocks and trees, we finally got to the top of the path where *P. ramosa* awaited us. It was about 1:00 p.m. when we arrived at the site. Back in 2016, the blooming on the south-eastern side of the cliff was already over. But we got to see the “bending” of the flower stalk trying to bury its seed pod into the very wall it’s attached to. However, this year, most of the south-eastern surface area where I saw the *Pinguicula* last time was carved off perhaps due to the erosion, and I did not find a plant except one. The flowers of the plant I saw on the south-eastern wall were mostly spent, but the most remarkable thing was that the plant had a single flower stalk branching into 6 different pedicels (Fig. 5)!

When we came to this site in 2016, we saw an individual with 4 flowers off a single stalk which was a big deal at that time. So having to find a 6-headed individual was beyond amazing



Figure 5: Six “headed” *Pinguicula ramosa*.

and record-breaking! Around the corner from the south-eastern facing walls, on the north-eastern side of the cliff, we found numerous *P. ramosa* in full bloom, hurray (Figs. 6-7; front & back covers)! And as the signs predicted, the cliff was steep and unstable, with an accumulation of crumbling volcanic rocks and gravel which had fallen (Fig. 8).

The plants looked healthy and beautiful. A lavender purple like the color of a kimono with darker stripes on its sides, the flowers had a pair of yellow pollen-guides that were contrasting to the lavender. It's hard to tell by the pictures, but it is a tiny plant (Fig. 9). Dainty but elegant, *P. ramosa* enchanted us all with its beauty.

As we examined the plants, we took care so as not to break off the walls or not to fall off the cliff ourselves. The appearance of the north-eastern facing walls had changed quite a bit from 2016. Erosion had carved some of the surface of the walls away. But *P. ramosa* appeared



Figure 6: *Pinguicula ramosa*. Photo by Justin Dunning.



Figure 7: *Pinguicula ramosa*. Photo by Justin Dunning.



Figure 8: The *Pinquicula ramosa* site, Mt. Nyoho, Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture, Japan.



Figure 9: *Pinguicula ramosa* with my train pass (size of a credit card) as a size reference.

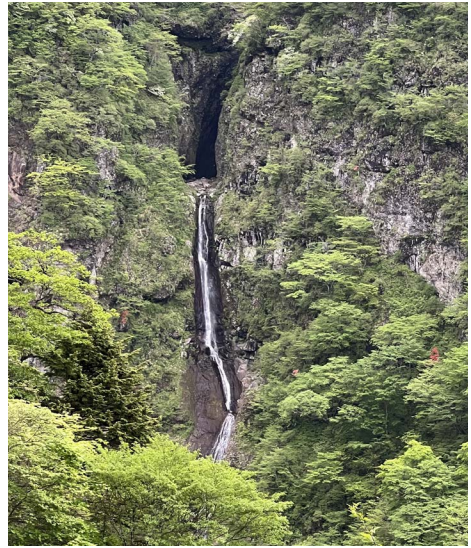
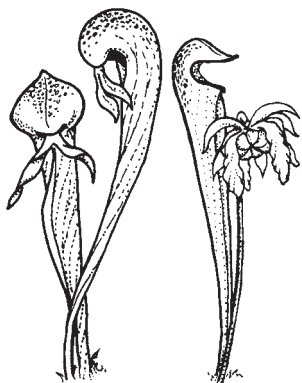


Figure 10: The waterfall facing the *Pinguicula ramosa* cliff across the valley.

to have grown back over the eroded surface, enjoying the gorgeous view of the waterfall across the other side of the valley (Fig. 10).

The air was cool and moist. Water was trickling down over the surface of walls. I collected the water and measured its quality using a handheld portable device. The water temperature was 14.2°C, pH was 9.1, conductivity was 27.5 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$, and TDS was 19.3 ppm. The conductivity and TDS were low as expected, but pH was high for most carnivorous plants. This is not surprising for *Pinguicula*, however, because they are known to grow in nutrient poor alkaline substrates.

It was already 2:30 p.m. Time to go. Everyone felt sad to leave the place, but we had to catch the last train back to Tokyo. One by one with a heavy heart we started to climb down. Goodbye, *Pinguicula ramosa*. Stay well until we see you again!



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**Front and Back Covers: *Pinguicula ramosa*, Mt. Nyoho, Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture, Japan.
Photos by Justin Dunning. Article on page 218.**

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