

## A SIGNIFICANT RANGE EXTENSION FOR *UTRICULARIA CAPILLIFLORA* F.MUELL.

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**Abstract:** In May 2025, the two authors conducted a field trip to Cape York Peninsula in northern Queensland, Australia. While searching for other species of carnivorous plants at a location near Yarraden, *Utricularia capilliflora* was discovered. Previously, this species was thought to be only contained in the Northern Territory in the greater Darwin, Kakadu National Park, and Arnhem Land areas. This represents a range extension of some 700 km east and suggests that this species may be found elsewhere in Cape York.

Cape York Peninsula in tropical northern Queensland, Australia is home to a diverse roster of carnivorous plants. *Nepenthes*, *Utricularia*, *Drosera*, and *Byblis* are all represented, with several taxa being endemic, including the iconic species *Nepenthes rowaniae*, *Utricularia lowriei*, *Drosera petiolaris*, and *D. schizandra*, but also with less well-known species such as *D. stipularis* (Fig. 1D), *U. albiflora*, *U. terraereginae* (Fig. 1C), *U. blackmanii* (Fig. 1A), *U. simmonsii*, and *U. brennanii* (Fig. 1B). The authors conducted a field trip in May 2025 to observe some of these less frequently observed carnivorous plants. Our path over 5 days would take us from Cairns, west to Dimbulah, east to Cooktown, and finally north to Musgrave.

Travelling through Cape York requires a four-wheel drive vehicle as many unsealed roads and tracks can be quite rough due to the high rainfall during the wet season. We had deliberately chosen early May to coincide with species emerging after the wet and this proved to be a good decision as we were fortunate to see all of our target species, and many others, with the exception of *Utricularia albiflora* and *U. simmonsii*.

In search of *Utricularia simmonsii*, we travelled to a promising location near Yarraden, with location data kindly shared by fellow CP enthusiast, Boaz Ng. After finding a safe place to park, we shouldered our gear and set off on a long, hot and humid walk to the site.

During the hike, we inadvertently navigated too far east, extending the walk considerably. This detour was not without reward. After crossing a creek and soaking our feet, we emerged into a striking landscape: hundreds of termite mounds scattered across an open field of paperbark trees—an unexpected and memorable sight (Fig. 2A).

Realising we were off course, we corrected our bearing, recrossed the creek, and soon arrived at the intended location. Our first indication of carnivorous plant life was a field of glistening *Drosera serpens* (Fig. 2C), visible from more than one hundred metres away, growing within a broad seepage. Drawn in immediately, we hurried towards it and began searching for the distinctive red flowers of *Utricularia simmonsii*, a species Glen had never encountered in the field.

The seepage was extensive, measuring approximately 100 × 30 m. A shallow layer of standing water covered the soft, muddy substrate, creating ideal conditions for carnivorous plant growth. The seepage was bordered by open grassy areas, forming a clear transition between saturated and

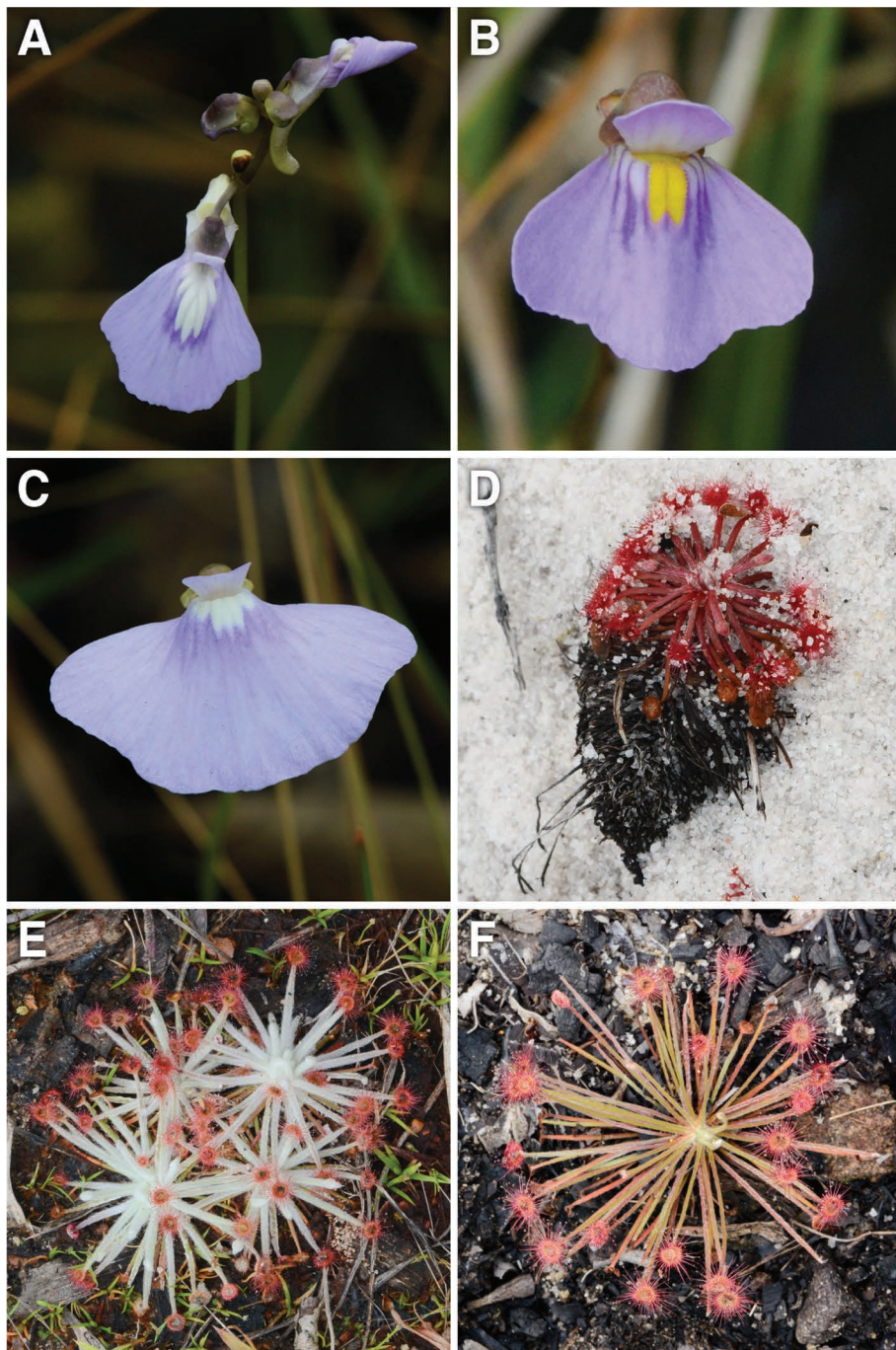


Figure 1. Carnivorous plants seen on Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, Australia. (A) *Utricularia blackmanii*, (B) *U. brennanii*, (C) *U. terraereginae*, (D) *Drosera stipularis*, (E) *D. lanata*, and (F) *D. petiolaris*. Photos by R. Nunn.

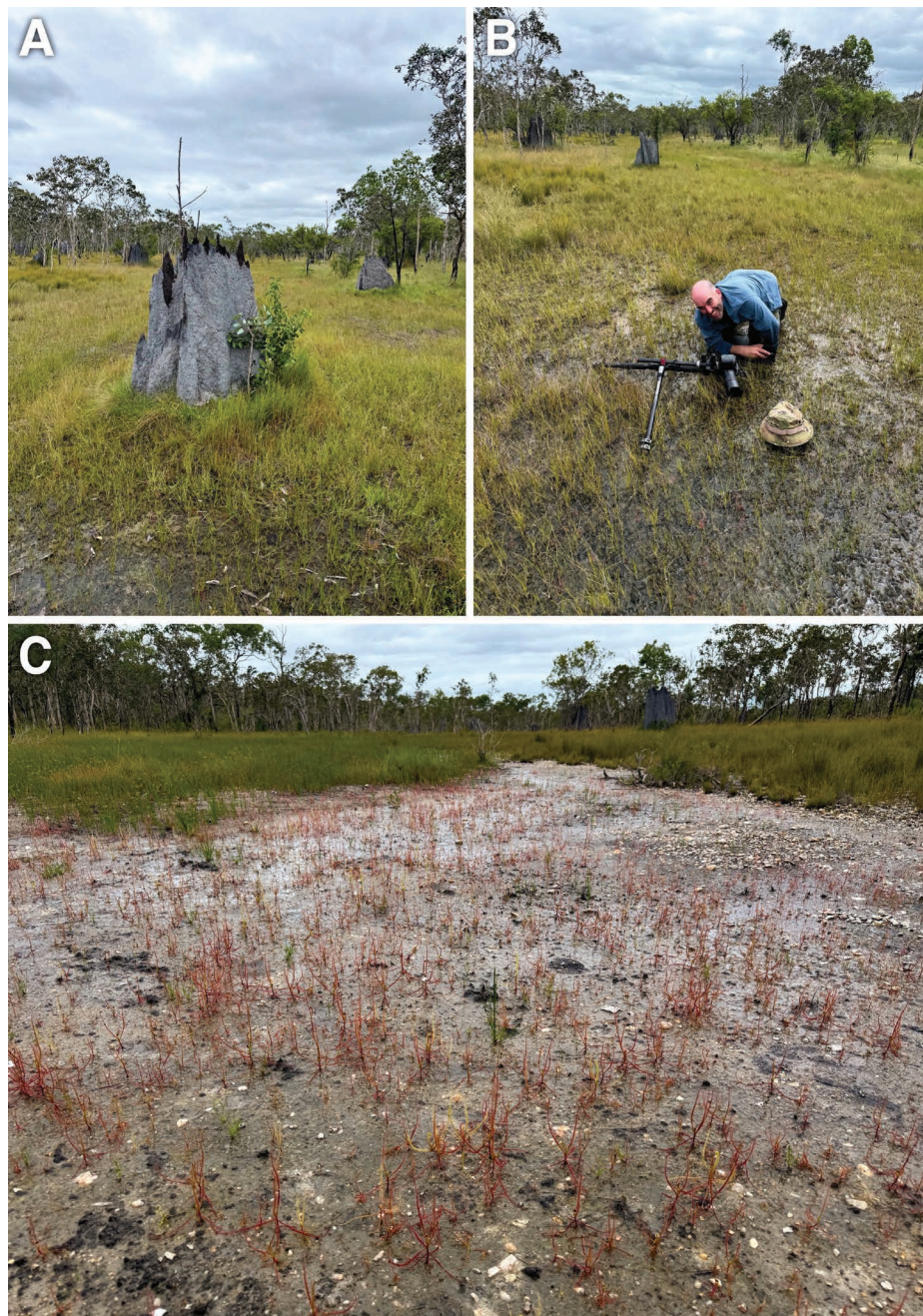


Figure 2. Habitat at Yarraden, Queensland, Australia. (A) Termite mounds are common, (B) Glen Moss photographing *Utricularia capilliflora*, (C) *Drosera serpens* in a seepage. Photos by R. Nunn.

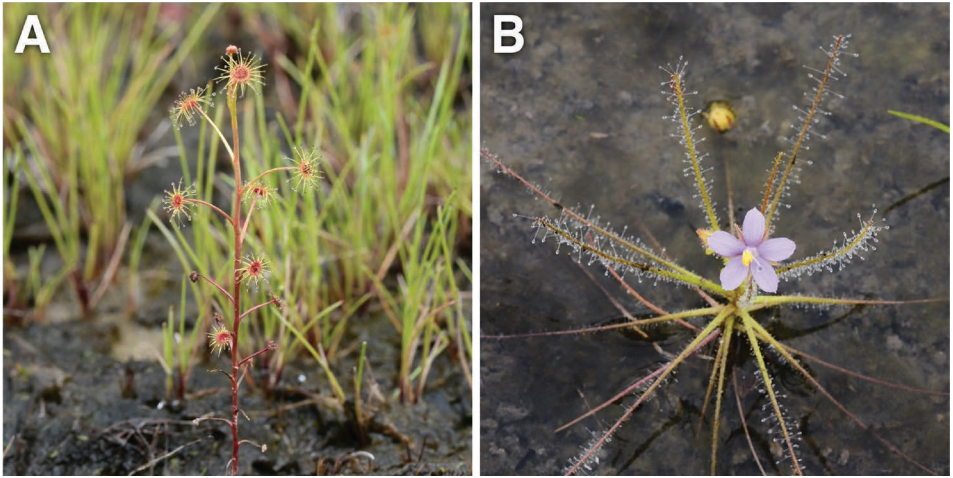


Figure 3. (A) *Drosera banksii*, (B) *Byblis liniflora*. Photos by R. Nunn.

drier habitats. In addition to *Drosera serpens*, several other carnivorous plant species were present, including *D. petiolaris*, *D. burmannii*, *D. banksii* (Fig. 3A), *Byblis liniflora* (Fig. 3B), and *Utricularia chrysanthia*, highlighting the botanical richness of the site. *Utricularia simmonsii* (Fig. 4) was not observed during this visit, but a week later was abundant when Glen revisited the site.

While searching the seepage, Glen noticed an antennae-flowered *Utricularia*—small, yet locally abundant within a confined area. Initially, we identified it as *Utricularia lowriei*, the only antennae-flowered *Utricularia* previously known from Queensland (Jobson 2013). Both authors had seen and photographed this species before, hence our casual assessment without much further thought. The differences between *U. capilliflora* (Fig. 5B) and *U. lowriei* (Fig. 5A) are rather obvious; however, the diminutive stature of these taxa requires close observation to distinguish in the field. Such observation often involves crawling in the mud and requires keen eyesight. The most immediate distinguishing character is the corolla morphology: *Utricularia capilliflora* has a five-lobed lower lip, whereas *U. lowriei* has three central lower-lip lobes that are filiform (Jobson 2013).



Figure 4. *Utricularia simmonsii* flower. Photo by G. Moss.

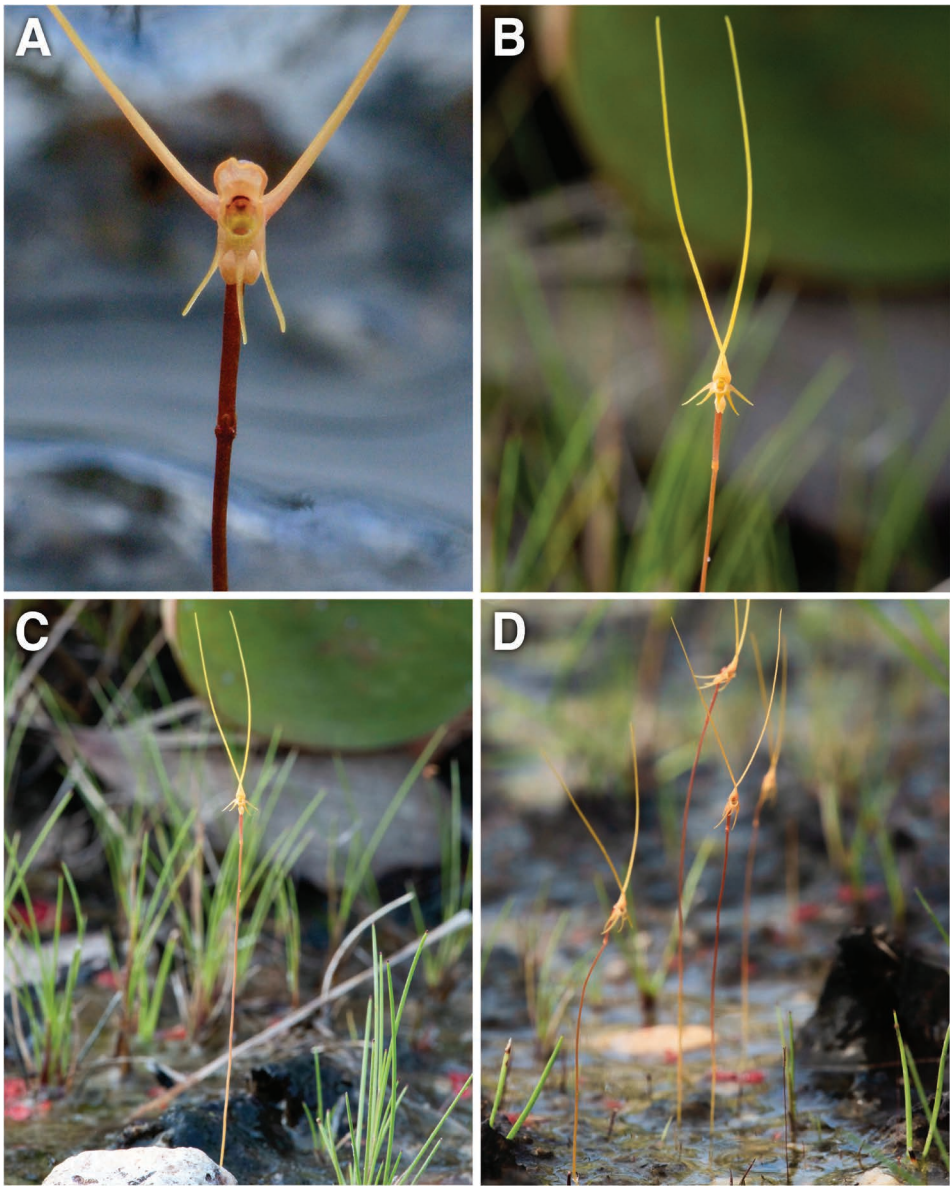


Figure 5. Comparison of *Utricularia lowriei* and *U. capilliflora*: (A) *U. lowriei*, Sanamere, Queensland, Australia, (B) *U. capilliflora*, Yarraden, Queensland, Australia. *Utricularia capilliflora* at a new location, Yarraden, Queensland, Australia: (C) Front view of the flower of *U. capilliflora*, (D) A group of *U. capilliflora*. Photos (A) by R. Nunn, (B – D) by G. Moss.

Antennae-flowered *Utricularia* are particularly difficult to photograph, and it was fortunate that Glen made the last-minute decision to take a few images for completeness (Fig. 5B). That evening, Glen shared photographs from the day with Boaz Ng, who, to our great surprise, identified the plant as *U. capilliflora*. This identification was particularly exciting, as it represented a significant extension of the known range of this species. The authors celebrated that evening, reflecting on what proved to be an unforgettable highlight of our carnivorous plant exploration in northern Queensland. However, this discovery prompted a return visit one week later, during which Glen revisited the site to document *Utricularia capilliflora* in greater photographic detail (Fig. 5C–D). In the space of a week, the landscape had changed markedly. Flowering in *U. capilliflora* had significantly declined, while *U. simmonsii* was now prolific, with numerous flowering individuals scattered throughout the seepage. Further exploration of the surrounding area revealed large populations of *U. terraereginae*. Additional photographs of the remaining *U. capilliflora* were obtained, and the return journey provided time to reflect on how rapidly these ephemeral wetland habitats can change.

*Utricularia capilliflora* is a member of a remarkable group of six *Utricularia* species, each bearing flesh-coloured flowers, in which either the upper or lower corolla lip has been modified into a pair of tall, erect antennae-like flower lobes. These species only occur in the tropical areas of northern Australia (Nunn 2022).

Baron Ferdinand von Mueller published *Utricularia capilliflora* in 1890 (Mueller 1890). He described many new plant species sent by botanists from other parts of Australia, notably from Maurice William Holtze in the Northern Territory. Holtze was the director of the Botanic Gardens



Figure 6. Map showing the range extension of *Utricularia capilliflora*, the red circle is the current known distribution and the aqua circle shows the new location.

at Port Darwin. With the assistance of his son, Nicholas, he collected many new and undescribed species from the Darwin and Arnhem Land area. One such collection by Nicholas Holtze from the Adelaide River was described by Mueller as a new species, *U. capilliflora*. In his description, Mueller noted that this was one of the most delicate of all vascular plants and the two long hairlet-like segments of the upper corolla were quite exceptional in the genus.

The epithet *capilliflora* is derived from the Latin *capillus* (hair) and *floris* (flower). This references its long, lateral, semi-erect, antennae-like appendages rising from the upper corolla lip and extending above the main body of the flower, as well as its five, hair-like appendages of the lower lip (Lowrie 2014).

*Utricularia capilliflora* grows in damp sand in flooded, shallow depressions on sand plains, the margins of creeks and the wet season-flooded shores of lagoons in shallow water (Lowrie 2014).

The distribution of *Utricularia capilliflora* was thought to be limited to the Northern Territory in the Darwin region around Howard Springs, Girraween, Noonamah, Freds Pass, and Humpty Doo. Further scattered locations can be found eastwards along the Arnhem Highway to Jabiru, at the foot of the Arnhem Land escarpment and Ayangkidarrba (Groote Eylandt). (Lowrie 2014; Taylor 1989). This range extension of some 700 km east across the Gulf of Carpentaria (Fig. 6) was surprising and begs the question, are any other antennae-flowered *Utricularia* from the Northern Territory also to be found on Cape York Peninsula?

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