

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS



Senecio cooperi



Senecio cooperi and *Centradenia gracile*

The green and very pleasant land of Costa Rica is rightly renowned as a first-class wildlife destination, the chance to see many resplendent quetzals, red-eyed tree frogs, howler monkeys and vivid butterflies. I should know, I've been there thirty times. However, all my visits there held a tinge of frustration - I never seemed to have time to fully enjoy the highland flora. This February, I put that right and spent a few days in the high cloud forests and paramo of the Cerro de la Muerte. This wonderful mountain range rises quickly from the capital San Jose and runs south-east, passing close to the near untouched Talamanca Range that crosses into neighbouring Panama. Cerro de la Muerte reaches 3451 metres and the Talamanca 3820 metres at Cerro Chirripo and they both include areas of the most northerly paramo in the world. It is quite distinct to the paramo I have seen in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. In Costa Rica it is dominated by a tough bamboo, *Chusquea semiverticillata* and bushes of *Escallonia*, *Buddleja*, *Comarostaphylis* and *Pernettya*. It is a meeting point and contains a blend of flora, mixing northern and southern floral elements together. It is also sufficiently isolated as to have many endemic species. Luckily for the plant lover, a good (very windy) road passes up and over, though it should be



Senecio cooperi



Bocconia flavescens



Cerro de la Muerte



Cirsiium subcoriaceum

mentioned the name of the range translates as Mountain of the Dead!

It is in fact the ecotone just below the bamboo between 2600-3100 metres that contains the showiest plants and in December to February the roadsides are awash with colour, something that is rare in the tropics. Once again one of the most dominant plants belongs to Asteraceae, *Senecio cooperi*. This impressive shrub is common in light gaps and open areas from 2000-metres upwards, stopping shy of the paramo itself. For weeks it is decorated with big, weighty corymbs of yellow flowers and can form a sizeable branched shrub. In my mind I wanted to capture them in the mist. Cerro de la Muerte straddles the continental divide, between Atlantic and Pacific slopes and luckily one of the best stands was on the Atlantic slope that receives a lot more cloud and moisture. My main problem was parking, recent road renovations having made all of the convenient pull-ins impossible. This meant lugging my heavy camera bag a few hundred metres along the road, much to the bemusement of passing busloads of locals.

Sometimes I found them with flowery bushes of *Centradenia gracile* too, a rather lovely shrub packed with pink flowers. It belongs to the Melastomaceae, a widespread tropical family, many of which are showy. Across from the *Senecio*



Calceolaria irazuensis



Fuchsia paniculata



Bomarea costaricensis



Gunnera talamancana



Wigandia urens

were some fine cascading plants of *Calceolaria irazuensis* too and the huge rounded leaves of *Gunnera insignis* gave everything that lush tropical look. Related *Gunnera talamancensis* has attractive lobed leaves. Other plants are well capable of this too, including *Bocconia flavescens*, a wonderfully architectural member of the poppy family, though it looks quite unlike any members we have in Eurasia. As with some paramo (and the African highlands) megaherbs abound and on Cerro de la Muerte there is the tall 'tree parsnip' *Myrridendron donnellsmithii* and the gigantic thistle *Cirsium subcoriaceum*, a magnificent if menacing brute of a plant. Both of these also grow up into the paramo proper, where they might be among an array of predominantly northern hemisphere genera such as *Lupinus*, *Castilleja*, *Alchemilla*, *Geranium*, and *Gentiana* that freely mix with southern hemisphere bromeliads, *Centradenia*, *Calceolaria* or *Escallonia* often draped in *Bomarea*. The latter is a widespread genus of showy (often climbing) plants. The hummingbird-pollinated flowers are often orange or red and on Cerro de la Muerte the boldest species is *Bomarea costaricensis* a frequent sight tumbling over shrubs.

Passing down onto the drier Pacific slope



Hemichaena fruticosa

different plants start to appear such as *Hemichaena fruticosa*, red *Lobelia laxiflora* and the fabulous oval-leaved *Wigandia urens*, one of the most striking tomato-relatives (Solanaceae) you are likely to see. They can form small trees, sometimes in large stands on sunnier, rocky slopes. They are frequently alongside two more surprising plants, the first *Fuchsia paniculata* is a very atypical member of its genus, the flowers densely packed and small. More

typical species with pendant flowers can also be found here too. The other unmissable (literally) in this world of outsize herbs is *Dahlia imperialis*, a towering species that reaches three or four metres tall, topped with pink or white flowers. It is way too large for any bedding plant display but is perhaps a plant you might want to unleash on an unpleasant neighbour, along with a giant thistle or two.

Dahlia imperialis

