

# On the road in search of lilies

Alan Mitchell

Readers of a certain age and literary taste will recognise that *On the Road* is an allusion to Jack Kerouac's classic tale of roaming around America. So at this point let me allay any concerns about what might come next: the trip I made was, thankfully, short on rebellious behaviour and existential angst, but full of encounters with most of California's beautiful species lilies and some of their perhaps slightly wayward, but naturally occurring, hybrid offspring.

The metaphorical road, preceding the actual 1500 miles in search of lilies, began when I met Charlie Kroell at the 2004 RHS Lily Conference, and spoke the words "*L. henryi* var. *citrinum*". This yellow variety of the orange type of *L. henryi* has a strong fascination for Charlie, as has the legend that it is a hybrid which was originally discovered in a garden in Melrose, Massachusetts in 1925. Whatever the truth of the matter, i.e. species variety or hybrid, it was this mystery, debated through many lengthy emails, that led to our friendship and later Charlie's suggestion that I might enjoy what he called a "lily chase" in California.

As Charlie knew about my preference for species lilies rather than hybrids, he thought the prospect of seeing a number of western American species growing in their natural environments would appeal, as would driving through the Canadian Rockies to the NALS Convention in Edmonton. I emailed Charlie to count me in. The other members of the lily chase foursome were Barbara Small (a native Californian whose local lily-knowledge was essential to the trip's success) and Kathy Andersen (who had just returned from plant hunting in China).

Some months later I met Charlie and his wife Marijean at Detroit airport and was welcomed to their home in Michigan. Charlie had already arranged visits to the gardens of some of his friends: Betty Sturley had a plant of *L. michiganense* in flower, a fine introduction to the many American species I was to see, appropriately growing in its home state; Jacques Thomson had another *L. michiganense*, which



Fig. 1 *L. kelloggii*



Fig. 2 Ditch lily *L. pardalinum*

had flowers of a richer red than Betty Sturley's, an example of variation within a species that became more apparent when considering species like *L. kelloggii* (fig. 1) and *L. pardalinum* (fig. 2) in their natural, Californian habitats.

The flight to Reno was uneventful and after collecting our rental vehicle, a fairly large 4x4 with excellent air conditioning – essential in temperatures that, except for part of a day spent in drenching Scots mist, ranged from 30–40°C – it wasn't long before we were heading across the Nevada/California State border by way of Verdi, (as in Guiseppe Verdi, but pronounced to rhyme with pie) to locate our first lily of the trip, *L. chrystalense*. For readers who do not recognise this American species there is an explanation: this lily has not yet achieved specific rank, but if Barb has her way it will, as she feels it is different enough from *L. parvum* (fig. 3) and *L. pardalinum* not simply to be labelled as a hybrid of those established species. This lily grows in restricted oases beside streams and aspen trees, which are typically surrounded by high desert terrain.

The following day we set off for Pole Creek to look for *L. parvum*. Unfortunately, all but one of the plants we found were still in bud and the plant that was flowering was fasciated. However luck was with us as we headed north to Eureka, when we found a number of *L. parvum* and *L. pardalinum* growing in a roadside ditch. Although somewhat unromantic as a name, 'ditch lilies' accurately describes *L. parvum* and *L. pardalinum* (and others of their ilk) in relation to their inclination to grow and flourish in the boggy habitats created through the process of

building roads. The chicken or egg question: were the ditch lilies there before the roads were built, or did they colonise these ideal habitats after the roads were built?

The next lily we encountered was *L. washingtonianum* (fig. 4). Again the plants were growing beside the road, not in a ditch, but near the top of a slope in very dry, loose soil. This would appear to be its perfect growing environment as, in the words of Dr Albert Kellogg (after whom *L. kelloggii*



© Alan Mitchell

was named), ‘At no time have I

met with a plant of this species in a soil the drainage of which was not perfect and when found on a slope did not face towards some point between east and south.’ I can’t swear to the exact orientation of the plants we found, but I can aver that the flowers were of a pure and lustrous white and very sweet of scent. I know it’s not impossible to grow this lily in the UK, as it grows in the Branklyn Garden in Perth. What is, apparently, impossible is finding an American supplier of bulbs of *L. washingtonianum*, or any of the other more challenging Californian species such as *L. rubescens* (fig. 5), *L. bolanderi* (fig. 6) and *L. kelloggii*.

In common with most committed lily hunters, we were on the trail of our first lily of the day before we had eaten breakfast. If asked, I would say there are two things I’ll remember about the park in Mt Shasta city. One is *L. shastense*, a lily that was growing in a muddy, heavily shaded environment surrounded by thickets of what looked like a giant version of the common horsetail, and the other is the source of the Sacramento river whose broad meanders we had crossed and re-crossed getting there and whose significant impact on the landscape seemed hard to reconcile with the insignificant stream that emanated from a modest hole in the ground in the corner of the park.

After a hearty breakfast at a local diner we took the road that leads to Mt Shasta (fig. 7). It wasn’t too long before one of us spotted some lilies by the roadside. Parking our vehicle under a tree, some shade being necessary at 40°C, we walked back to where some *L. washingtonianum* var. *purpurascens* were growing through Manzanita plants, their tough protectors against grazing deer. The furnace-like heat and resulting hard and parched soil certainly exemplified dry-land lily conditions. The miracle was that something so fine and apparently so delicate could take such

Fig. 4 *L. washingtonianum*Fig. 5 *L. rubescens*

punishment. I wondered if below ground there might still be residual snowmelt moisture that enabled the bulb to counteract the grilling effect of the sun on the stem and flowers; but I would have needed a pickaxe to reveal the bulb and test my theory and, apart from any ethical considerations, all I had with me was a plastic spoon!

We saw many glorious lilies as we looped north into the wooded hills of Humboldt County and then south to pick up the road west to the Pacific coast. We found *L. rubescens*, then *L. kelloggii*, a happy accident that came about because we missed our turnoff. Back on track we were soon at Onion Lake, which was far more beautiful than its prosaic name suggests, and investigating plants of *L. pardalinum*, *L. wigginsii* and their hybrid progeny.

Our next lily was *L. bolanderi*. This lovely, much sought-after, dry-land lily has very pretty outward-facing campanulate flowers and glaucous stem, leaves and flower buds.

By the time we reached Eureka on the Pacific coast, the hot sun had been replaced with a chilly low-lying wet mist that reminded me of Scotland. The pleasure of seeing a dozen flowering plants of *L. occidentale* (fig. 8) was tempered by the dreich (damp and depressing) morning. (I have always thought the Scots have the best words to describe unpleasant weather, dreich being one of the more evocative – I wonder why that is?)

*L. occidentale*, so named because it is the most westerly American species lily, is much prettier than its relative *L. pardalinum*. On the outside of the flower the tepals are recurved, narrowly delicate and deep crimson, while the inside of the flower has a yellowish centre decorated with maroon spotting. This very rare lily had some protection from wire netting, but it is a moot point as to how effective it will be in denying the appetites of the deer we saw scampering off as we approached the breach in the fence around the sanctuary. Fortunately, local conservation efforts are in place at a plant nursery nearby in Kneeland, so the future for *L. occidentale* may

be more hopeful than it at first appears. Apparently this lily is not difficult to grow in the UK<sup>1</sup>.

After visiting the nursery we headed west until we found a number of plants of *L. kelloggii* flowering by the roadside. Although identified in reference books as a dry-land lily, these plants were growing in a lushly forested area that was heavily carpeted with moss, obviously subject to regular rainfall. The contrast with the rock-hard soil



© Alan Mitchell

Fig. 6 *L. bolanderi*

conditions where we had found *L. kelloggii* near Onion Lake suggests a lily that is more tolerant of the vicissitudes of rainfall than the reference books indicate. Also interesting was the variation in flower colour, from very pale to a deep rose pink (similar to *L. wardii*). When the yellow variant (mentioned earlier) is added to this range, it's a wonder the "splitters" have accepted that these variations are all expressions of the one species. By the time we were back to the coast the sun was shining, and our last roadside find was *L. columbianum*, a pretty, slightly recurved, orange lily.



© Alan Mitchell

Fig. 7 Mt Shasta (14162 ft), dramatic backdrop to part of the quest

<sup>1</sup> Patrick M. Syngé: *Lilies*



Fig. 8 *L. occidentale*

Up with the lark (or its American equivalent), we visited a graveyard in Georgetown on our way back to Reno, in the hope of seeing *L. humboldtii* in flower. Unfortunately the flowers had passed, but I did think what a splendid lily to have growing on one's grave – none better perhaps.

We had found 10 species and some interesting hybrids in perfect flowering condition. But as a seasoned (or old, if you prefer) hillwalker, someone who is used to parking his car, walking to his objective, climbing it and then walking back to his car, I found the modus

operandi of most of the lily-chase somewhat decadent – we parked beside or near lilies and with the minimum of physical effort observed them, photographed them and then drove on to the next location. Although it was very convenient that most of the lilies we found were growing by the hardtop, I couldn't help but wonder at their possible incidence and distribution away from the roadside. It would have been interesting to start from a group of roadside lilies and have a posse of hillwalking lily chasers fan out over a few miles to record the location of any lilies they found.

I wondered why there is no national collection of American species lilies – it could raise the profile of these beautiful and diverse plants and, concomitantly, the desirability of growing the two dozen or so indigenous lilies – would it really be beyond the bounds of possibility to locate a garden(s), in a more or less temperate state(s), that could be landscaped into environments for dry and wetland lilies. I have to admit to a selfish motive – American lily growers prefer hybrids as they are easier to grow and more adaptable to the climatic variations across the country than indigenous species, so a collection might lead US lily nurseries to stock all the indigenous species, and I could add to the 11 American species I grow currently.

I had met Charlie at a conference, and I had not met Barb or Kathy before. Yet we all got on well, so, as the Americans say, “How come”? I'm not sure what the answer is, but perhaps it's a tribute to our shared interest in our lovely quarry – the lily. Or, perhaps, lilies just make nicer people of us all. 🐾

**Alan Mitchell** is an optimistic gardener with a passion for growing lilies. He finds their difficulty a challenge and their diversity and beauty endlessly engaging and therapeutic. This is abridged from an article which was first published in *Lilies and related plants*, the RHS Lily Yearbook 2007.