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LAW-LYNGDOH

(Sacred Grove)

MAWPHLANG

**VISITOR'S GUIDE**

## 'LAW-LYNGDOH' OR SACRED GROVE AT MAWPHLANG

The 'Law-Lyngdoh' or sacred grove near the village of Mawphlang is a natural treasure house of plants typical of the Meghalaya plateau, and offers excellent scope not only for the professional botanist and naturalist, but also for all those interested in plants and natural landscape.

The sacred grove is kept in a comparatively undisturbed condition, due to the faith and regard of the local people and the belief that the sylvan deities would be offended, if trees are cut, flowers and fruits plucked. The vegetation composing this sacred grove is very different from that of the surrounding areas, which are marked by the dominating Khasi pine or *Pinus kesiya*. More than a century ago the celebrated English Botanist Sir J. D. Hooker who visited the woods had commented on the unusual wealth of species present here. Much later another English Botanist (and a forest officer) Dr. N. L. Bor studied this and two other sacred groves including that of Shillong peak, and has pleaded for the preservation of these forests in an undisturbed condition, for all to enjoy the beauty and grandeur of the primeval forest.

Mawphlang with its nearby sacred grove lies about 25km south-east of Shillong and is easily approached by a black-topped road which winds its way through a picturesque landscape of scattered little hamlets and paddy fields in the narrow valleys. The houses in the hamlets have hedges of bamboo clumps, *Cestrum* shrubs with flowers fragrant at dusk, and rose bushes. The panorama keeps changing

with the seasons, and has its attractive features during each season. During spring, in the months of March, April and early May, the entire area is gay with sprinkled bushes of *Rhododendron formosum* all densely covered with large white blooms, and the more flamboyant tree species *Rhododendron arboreum*, many individuals dwarfish and gnarled, and all with globose trusses of fiery red flowers standing out amidst the dark green foliage. Another outstanding tree is *Pyrus pashia* fully enveloped in white blossoms, the young leaves slowly sprouting



*Rhododendron arduum* sm.

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after the shedding of the flowers. In the fields, amidst grass are scattered little tufts of the tiny herb **Gentiana quadrifaria**, which with their starlike azure-blue flowers attract the eye. More prominent due to their long stalks and golden yellow flower heads are the dandelion like **Hypochoeris radicata**.

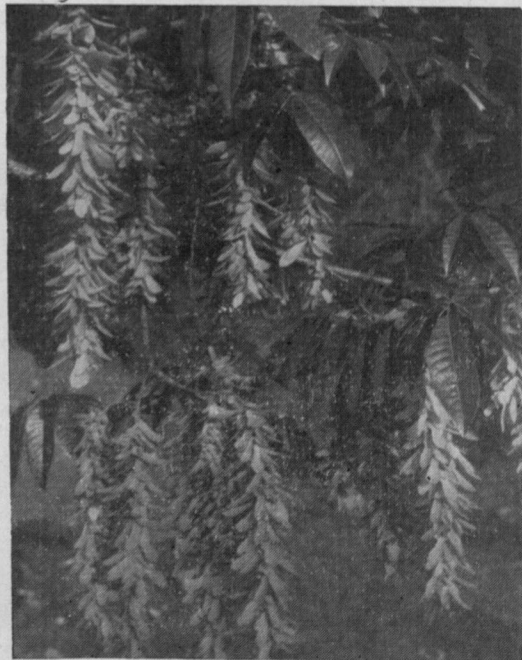
The sacred grove occupies the basin of a saucer shaped depression with the hills slopping all around. The ancient nature of the forest is emphasised by the outlying numerous tall rough-hewn monoliths, erected in memory of the departed Khasi elders. A bird's eye view of the entire forest, can be obtained from the approach point along the footpath leading from the village, down to the meandering stream that winds its way into the forest. The sight of brightly clad Khasi women and girls, fetching water for domestic use, from the stream in their typical conical baskets with the strap on their forehead, adds aspects of human interest, rarely seen in the vicinity of normal forests. The sloping ground is rocky and patches of darker green herbaceous growth of **Swertia** with star-like flowers, **Anemone** with white flowers and smaller herbs of interest like the bladder wort-**Utricularia bifida** with yellow flowers and the sundew or **Drosera peltata** with interspersed clumps of sedges and short grass. **Osbeckia crinita** a low undershrub is also prominent due to its foliage marked with 3 equally emphatic nerves and the deep pink-violet flowers with the contrasting yellow sickle-shaped anthers on short stalks. Here and there can be seen patches of the prostrate rosaceae plant **Potentilla polyphylla** with yellow flowers.



'Law Lyngdoh' sacred grove at Mawphlang

The sacred grove is a sharp contrast to the surrounding low grassland. It is rimmed by a dense growth of **Castanopsis kurzii** trees as if forming a protective hedge, halting the intrusion of the pine, which is present here and there at the edge of the slope. Amongst these trees, with their somewhat glaucous foliage, are scattered trees of **Quercus griffithii**. Only after getting into the forest and walking about on the soft cushion of accumulated humus and looking around, one can see that what appeared at first sight to be a somewhat uniform greenery only, is really composed of many species with much varied foliage and floral display. There

are some very ancient, large **Rhododendron arborea** ablaze with their scarlet boquets of large flowers. Scattered and more modest are the white-flowered shrubs of **Rhododendron formosum**. There are gregarious shrubs of **Daphne connabina** with sweet smelling white to pinkish flowers. Again white flowered, shrubs to trees of **Symplocos chinensis** easily recognised by their toothed, rough leaves and the much-twisted and grooved branches and trunks. Amongst other trees that can be easily spotted are **Exbucklandia populnea** with heart shaped leaves and large ovate hoodlike stipules, **Engelhardtia spicata** with bunches of pendant 3-winged fruits and **Elaeocarpus lancifolius** with very young and very old leaves scarlet amidst a generally glossy green foliage of lanceolate leaves. The trees are heavily loaded with epiphytic growth of aroids, piper, ferns, fern-allies and Orchids. Some of the branches are bent under the pressure of this accumulated epiphytic growth, and often parts of these fallen on the forest floor, and there itself forming a small colony of their own. The most conspicuous of these are the variedly fancyleaved ferns, and the easily recognised and quite ornamental Orchids. In October, the pink coloured large flowers of **Pleione praecox**, solitary or in clumps attract attention, as also the large dangling clumps of semiopen white to cream-coloured flowers of **Cymbidium elegans** from clumps of dense strap shaped leaves and stout rhizomes, tantalisingly perched on top branches of trees. There are also numerous other 'botanical' orchids with small flowers like species of **Oberonia**, **Otochilus**, and **Eria**. Sometimes the long pendant spikes of medium sized white flowers of a **Pholidota** may also catch the eye. On the ground



*Engelhardtia spicata* Bl.

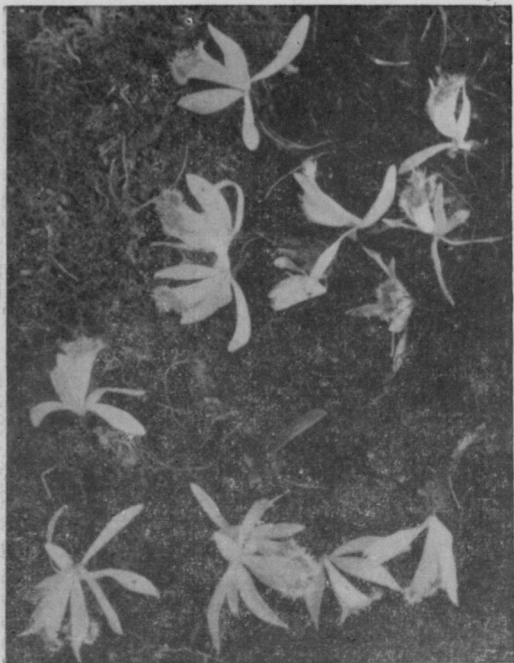
itself, in some shady moist places, one may find the rare jewel orchids **Ancistrochilus** with intricate variegated patterns on the leaf (the leaves being ornamental and not the flower) and the close relations of the jewel orchids—**Zeuxine** and **Goodyera**. Occasionally the saprophytic orchid—**Epipogium roseum** can also be seen, in groups of 4 to 8 white sickly



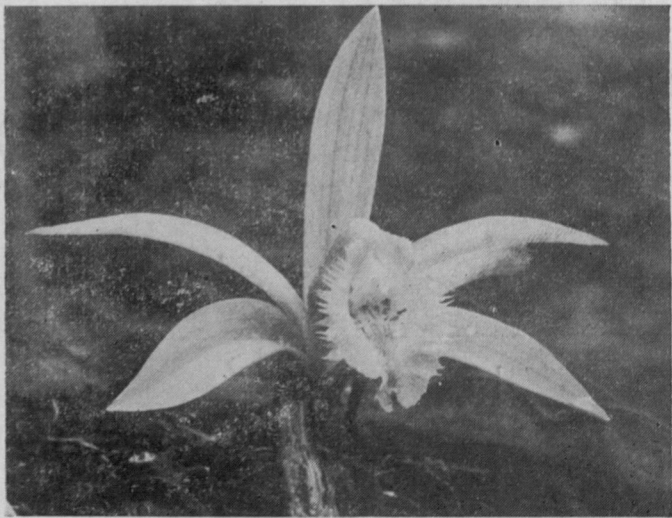
*Cymbidium elegans* Lindl.



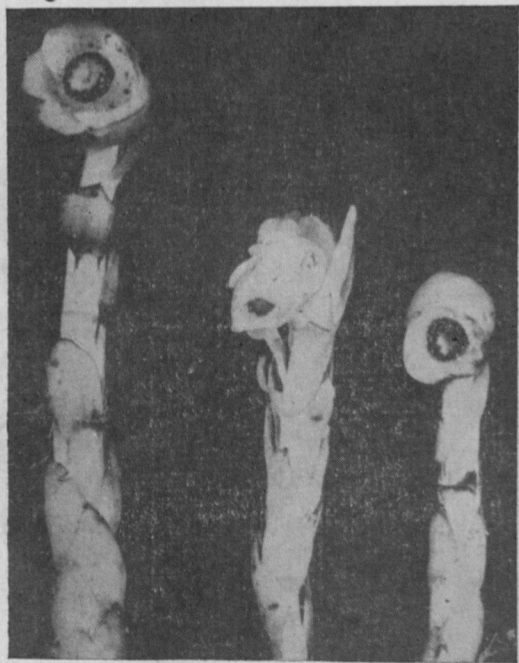
*Rhododendron formosum* Wail.



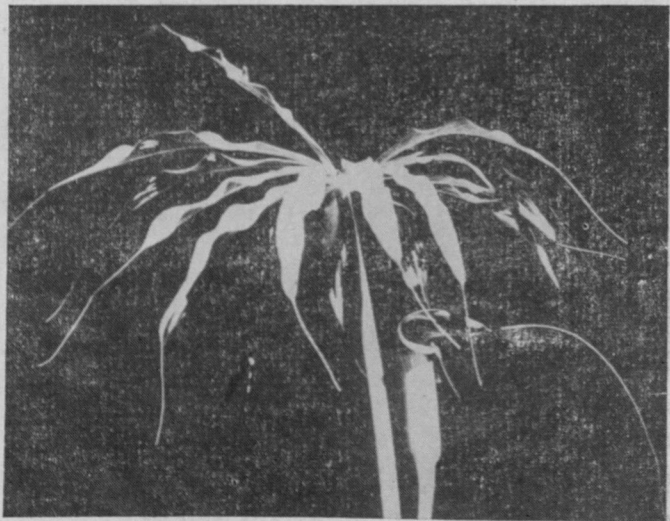
*Pleione humilis* D. Don



*Pleione praecox* (Sm.) D. Don



*Monotrepa Uniflora* L.



*Arisaema consanguineum* Schott.

looking stems producing white to pink flowers on a long stalk. These are short-lived, and sprout up on decaying humus. It is also possible to occasionally discover here another rare flowering plant **Monotropa uniflora** growing in dark moist habitats, very much like that of the orchid **Epipogium**. While one is looking around on the forest floor, depending upon the season, one may stumble upon different kinds of fleshy fungi like **Scleroderma** and **Geaster** or the Earthstar, **Lycoperdon** or the puff balls, **Clavaria** or the coral-fungus, **Dictyophora** or the lacefungus, **Clathrus** or the cage-fungus, **Morchella** or the edible morel or rarely on pieces of decaying wood **Nidularia** or the bird's nest fungus. The most common of the fleshy fungi are **Polyporus** or the bracket fungus responsible for the death of old trees, **Agaricus** or the mushroom forming fairy rings on the forest floor.

A touch of beauty can also be seen in the overhanging or sometimes clasping grey-green to ash-brown layers of lichens-often a very neglected element in any flora-but certainly deserving attention not only as a hardy element in the flora but also for their picturesqueness. It can be appreciated after a second look by the density and pattern of their covering on long neglected rocks or tree-stems or even old stems and branches they add an atmosphere to the ancient nature of these woods. Some of them, which could be recognised even by layman with a little effort, are fruticose lichens like **Usnea** with long creeping string like thallus freely branching and often ending in flat disc like fertile tips--foliose lichens with leaf like, lobed to deeply incised thallus, like **Parmelia** with variously sized patches each dotted with large pin-head like fertile points.



*Botrychium lanuginosum* Wall

Another attractive group of plants that would strike the eye, notwithstanding their perpetual greenness is the ferns. The ferns compensate their lack of different colours by the grateful beauty of their young fronds, in various stages of uncoiling and by their infinite variety of lobes of the mature fern leaves and often with the variously coloured and textured silky covering of the rhizome and other parts. The pattern of the fertile spots or sori, on the back surface is also greatly varied as also their protective flaps or indusia and helps in distinguishing the different kinds. The most common one is the scented fern used by the

Khasi villagers for keeping their wardrobe fresh—**Lindsaea cultrata**. Another conspicuous fern is the silver-fern with its back full of silvery scales. The frond leaving a fine pattern of itself, if pressed on the back of one's hand. Other conspicuous ferns are **Botrychium, Peranema, Dryopteris, Polypodium** etc.

A tour to Mawphlang with its sacred grove and relaxed wandering around within it, is an exhilarating experience to a visitor. Those who are curious and want to know more about the plants in the forest and their names, can attempt to use the 'Key' that follows. The 'Key' has been framed in such a way that the reader can choose one of the alternatives (1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, etc), after looking at the relevant characters of the

plant he or she wishes to identify. It has also been made simple by avoiding practically all technical terms. Since the plants at the Mawphlang sacred grove occur in other places of the Khasi hills like in Shillong peak, it is possible to use this key to identify the plants seen during visits to such places. The key includes most of the plants common in the area, and likely to be observed by a casual visitor. It can be made comprehensive, if visitors pick up plants that are not included here and send them to the Forest Department or the Botanical Survey of India, Shillong.

No matter at what season of the year visitors go to this place there is always some aspect of nature to appreciate.