a change from the Appalachians

By ELIZABETH MURRAY
Charlottesville

Photographs by James and Elizabeth Murray

Over the past few years I have talked about members of a number of plant families which are familiar to every naturalist in this state. I should like to give a brief account of some other plants which belong to these same families but which occur in a totally different continental setting. During a recent trip to East Africa, my husband and I spent a few days on Mount Kenya, and the botanical surprises of the expedition were unforgettable.

Mount Kenya has a spectacular setting, rising from hot savannah country at about 6,000 feet to the glaciers of the peak region at about 17,000 feet. It was formed as the result of volcanic activity 2-3 million years ago. The high altitude of the peak results in a climate colder than the temperatures in the eastern United States.
years ago. The great tectonic disturbance which caused the Rift Valley in Kenya triggered off widespread movement of the earth’s crust in that area. There are many smaller volcanic cones in and around the Rift Valley, and the three most striking outlying ones which dominate the East African scene are Mount Kenya, Mount Elgon (14,000 feet on the Kenya/Uganda border) and Mount Kilimanjaro (19,000 feet in Tanzania).

The drop in temperature with altitude, together with the accompanying variations in rainfall, give rise to clear-cut belts of vegetation surrounding the mountain. Above the savannah there is an area of cultivated land which has been reclaimed from the forest and above this is the forest itself where the rainfall is maximum. Predominant among trees are the local cedar (Juniperus procera), “podo” or yellow wood (Podocarpus milanjianus), a tree similar to a yew, and the East African wild olive (Olea hochstetteri). Around the more humid eastern side of the mountain there are really big trees, some with massive buttressed trunks, such as Ficus sp. (fig), and Vitex keeniensis in the verbena family. Underneath the forest and along the edge of the trails are many herbs, among them several species of Impatiens (Family Balsaminaceae, to which our jewel weed belongs), one huge lobelia, Lobelia gibberosa and a prolific mauve clover, Trifolium johnstonii.

Above the forest is a belt of bamboo, Arundinaria alpina. The bamboo plants are large, some of them reaching over 30 feet. In many parts of the belt they form practically pure stands, unmixed with other kinds of vegetation. We spotted a group of Sykes’ monkeys (Cercopithecus mitis), popping in and out of the bamboo stalks, scratching in the roots for their evening meal. Later, we were lucky enough to see a troop of Colobus monkeys (Colobus polykomos), with their beautiful white tails and faces. When we first saw them, they were in the top of a very tall tree, but as we watched, they started to leap into the bamboo below. They launched out, sometimes falling free for as much as 20 feet, landing in the top of the bamboo which bent according to the weight of each monkey, and bounced them up and down after each jump. It looked like wonderful sport!

From the bamboo we passed into a belt of partially open parkland. Here we encountered Hypericum, better known as St. John’s Wort (Family Guttiferae or Hypericaceae). However, instead of the 3-foot roadside herb we were used to, we were confronted with immense trees towering 50 feet over our heads. The leaves were narrow and lanceolate, and a deep blackish green; and the yellow flowers were like larger editions of those on our native species. The other main tree here is Hagenia abyssinica which has dangling red flowers. There is bracken (Pteridium) in the clearings and dense stands of a shrubby species of Alchemilla (Rosaceae).

We stayed the night at 10,000 feet in this zone, sleeping in one of the huts provided by the Mountain Club of Kenya and maintained by the Mount Kenya National Park. African buffalo (Syncerus caffer) occasionally crashed through the clearing below the hut and the tree hyraxes (Dendrohyrax arboreus) shrialled at each other all through the night.

We started just before dawn next morning and walked quickly through the parkland to the giant heather zone. Here two genera of heather, Erica and Philippia, towered 15 feet above our heads. The heather belt is quite narrow and soon gives way to the moorland or alpine zone which is a fascinating area. Huge tussocks of grass which are characteristic of this region may be four feet high. Walking through them can be exhausting, although we were there just before the onset of the spring rains when conditions were still quite dry.

One group of plants for which these uplands are just-

(continued on Page 24)
ly famous is the everlasting, *Helichrysum* spp. There are at least half a dozen of these composites in the alpine zone. After the flower is over, the whole plant dries with its original shape intact and turns a glorious metallic silver which glistens in the bright sunlight. It was also in this region that we first saw the brilliant scarlet *Gladiolus watsonoides* (Iridaceae), Mackinder’s gladiolus, perched in solitary splendor on a rocky outcrop.

The strangest plants of all are the giant lobelias and groundsel (*Senecio* spp.: Compositae). Up here in the alpine zone there are two readily distinguishable species. *Lobelia kenensis* has flower spikes 5-6 feet high, and small smooth bracts which leave the dark purple flowers exposed. *Lobelia telekii* is the ostrich plume lobelia in which the bracts are long and thin and covered with fine silky hairs so that the rather dull green flowers are completely hidden. Standing 15 feet high, it presents an extraordinary appearance, like an immense bean pole round which a greyish, shaggy rug has been evenly draped.

The two largest groundsel are *Senecio brassica*, the cabbage groundsel and *Senecio keniodendron*, the tree groundsel, cousins to our 9-inch roadside weeds with their dull little yellowish flowers, Cabbage groundsel produce huge sessile rosettes of leaves covered with white hairs. From the rosettes, inflorescences 5-6 feet high shoot up with bright yellow flowers. Often a whole community of cabbage groundsel will bloom synchronously. The tree groundsel sends a stem up 20 feet from the ground which branches a few times. Each branch ends in a shiny rosette of bright green leaves from which arise a tall inflorescence of dull purple flowers, so that the whole plant may tower some 25 feet into the air. It is a bizarre landscape, beautiful in a grandiose and massive way.

We walked in the alpine zone all the way to the head of the Teleki valley at about 14,000 feet. Beyond this point the real mountain climbing begins. The two main peaks are Batian (17,058 feet) and Nelion (17,022 feet) and there are about a dozen slightly lower peaks in this whole complicated massif. Between the peaks are a series of permanent glaciers. It was incredible to remember in the presence of all the snow and ice that we were right on the Equator.

In looking back on our expedition we found that the views which became more and more spectacular as we climbed higher, the contrasts in the countryside as we crossed the various belts of vegetation, the weird and wonderful plants and animals, and above all, the magnificent mountain mass itself all combined to make a truly memorable time.

**AN ERROR:** In the November 1975 issue, the title of "In Nature’s Garden" by Elizabeth Murray was misspelled. The title should have read, "The Closed, Blind or Bottle Gentian." Our apologies to Mrs. Murray for this mistake.

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE