

The Find of a Lifetime

by

Benny P. Trahan Sr.*

Slidell, Louisiana

When most people think of Louisiana irises they visualize flowers that are large and frilly. I envision something a little different. I think of where all these large and frilly irises came from. They all came from the wild species and their natural hybrids that were originally collected. I am currently growing over one hundred different Louisiana iris cultivars and enjoy these newer varieties, but the species will always have a greater attraction for me. I think seeing any of the five Louisiana iris species growing and blooming in their natural habitat is one of the most spectacular sites possible. We owe much to these Louisiana species and the early collectors, for they were the means that gave us all the Louisiana iris cultivars that we love and enjoy today.

As mentioned in a previous *Fleur de Lis* article, each year I make several trips into the wilds (swamps, marshes, etc.) and along road side ditches and canals when the Louisiana irises are blooming. These trips are made in search of interesting species and their hybrids. I began searching many years ago for the tall blues (*I. giganteaerulea*) and small reds (*I. fulva*). I have found, collected, and studied these forms for over a decade but after finding the location of *I. nelsonii* in Abbeville, La., I became less interested in the tall blues and small reds and became fascinated with the large red species, *I. nelsonii*.

Year after year, I collected several forms of this specie—but my dream was to find a yellow *I. nelsonii*. Several old publications mentioned that at over time a few yellow *I. nelsonii* had been found but they were very rare. Many years of my searching in those Abbeville swamps yielded no yellow *nelsonii*. There was an area of the Abbeville swamps I had never previously explored because of the higher water level in that locale and several sources had mentioned that there were no

longer *I. nelsonii* in this swamp. I decided late last April that I would make one attempt to explore what I could of that area. My sweet, supportive wife Kathy accompanied me on the four hour trip from Slidell to the Abbeville swamps. She waited in our parked car while I went in with hip boots and my camera. The walk in was grueling with about a foot of water and an almost equal amount of sticky mud. The path was made more difficult due to fallen trees and protruding cypress knees. After about an hour of my struggling through large spider webs, biting mosquitoes and so many caterpillars that at times I thought I could hear them chewing—and with no iris sightings—I decided to turn back and find my way out.

As I was crossing over a beaver dam I saw my first *I. nelsonii* plant about a hundred yards away. I was extremely exhausted from the hard wading and was having difficulty breathing due to the high temperature and humidity but I wanted to check out this plant. When I got to within 10 feet of the clump I noticed that all the blooms were spent except a few that were almost completely eaten by caterpillars. What was left of these few blooms looked like they could be pink or yellow? I have seen



*Benny Trahan lives in Slidell, La. near New Orleans. He is a long time member of the Society for Louisiana Irises.



A typical red *I. nelsonii*

these flower colors on some *I. fulva* but it was usually caused by some type of stress on the plant and the true flower colors appeared the following year. I was still excited and took a few pictures. I then pulled several rhizomes with their stalks and placed them in a plastic bag.

It took me an hour and a half to get back to the car and my patiently waiting wife. I was really excited and wanted her to see what might be the find of a life time. The bag had taken a beating and the stalks were in worse condition than when I had found them. I pulled them out and said what do you think? She said nonchalantly, yea they could be... are you ready to go? That's not exactly what I wanted to hear after the find of a life time. Any way, I drove the four hours home and immediately trimmed the stalks and planted the rhizomes in several three gallon pots. The pots were placed in a rubber lined area that contained about four inches of water. I sprinkled Osmacote on top. I am sure that each day for the next year my mind was on these plants wondering if I had indeed found the very rare yellow *I. nelsonii*.

Well this year, 2008, the long wait was over. The color on the first bud appeared and to my disappointment, it was as red as any nelsonii I had ever seen. Two days later I noticed the bud was a little lighter, almost orange and the next day it was a lighter orange and when it



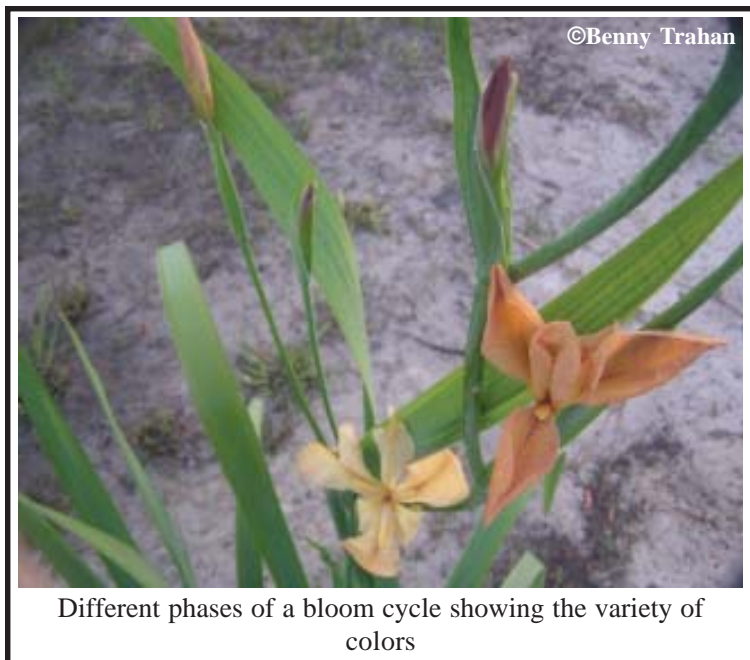
An *I. nelsonii* that the author thought could be pink or yellow



The color of the author's *I. nelsonii* as it opened



The author's *I. nelsonii* was yellow when it fully opened

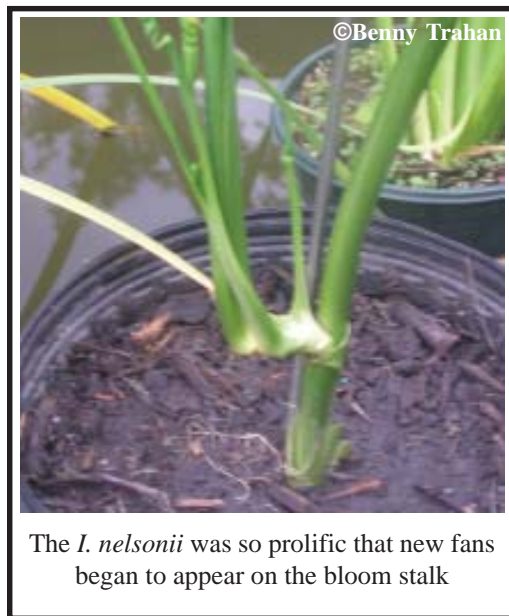


Different phases of a bloom cycle showing the variety of colors

began to open it looked like a pinkish/orange. The next day it was fully opened and was a totally different color. Yes, this is the rare yellow *I. nelsonii*! This yellow is not the bright lemon yellow, but more of a cloudy or muddy yellow. In the 2007 *Special Publication of the Society for Louisiana Irises*, page 64, Frank E. Chowning described them this way. "Then, too, these giant fulvas occasionally produced so-called yellows which lacked the vivid yellow tones of the hybrids derived from the Maringouin and Arkansas yellow fulvas and were more tan than yellow. Still they produced additional means of producing fine yellows." The *I. nelsonii* were discovered by Mr. W. B. MacMillan around 1940 and for the next twenty years or more were heavily collected. They have now somewhat stabilized but are still in danger. I believe that no yellow *I. nelsonii* have been found or collected from the Abbeville swamps in the last 50 years.

This plant is fascinating. Most positions bare two buds each except the top position which have three buds. All the stalks had two branches but several had three branches. Each stalk had from 18 to 21 buds. The stalks are thick and very zigzag reaching over 40" in height. New fans are sprouting from the stalks above the rhizomes. This yellow surpasses, in vigor and many other qualities, all the red *I. nelsonii* I have ever collected. This is an interesting plant and one that will require a great amount of study.

It is very disturbing to me that these beautiful irises, both the red and yellow *I. nelsonii*, are not going to be around in their natural habitat much longer. Their very small habitat is being filled in with rice hulls (30' high), being dried out by canals dug to drain sections of swamps and the sugar cane farmers are gradually claiming a little more of the swamps each year.



The *I. nelsonii* was so prolific that new fans began to appear on the bloom stalk

Whatever happened to protecting wet lands? I am fundamentally against collecting wild plants, but I really feel that I have the capability and desire to help this species survive. If left in their present location and without protection there will be no *I. nelsonii* for our future generations to have the find of a life time.