

Nature Notes

Plant Predator



Lurking in the lakes and ponds of the Kimberley Nature Park (KNP) is an often-overlooked hunter called the greater bladderwort (*Utricularia vulgaris*). With no roots to obtain nutrients from the soil, this plant resorts to catching small water organisms for a large portion of its food.

Although the greater bladderwort is found in Europe and Asia as well as North America and is one of the more common aquatic plants, it is often thought to be rare because the showy yellow flower stem is seldom produced.

Only the flower and its 0.3-0.6m stalk emerge into the air while the leaves lie horizontally submerged under the surface of the water, held afloat by the small, 0.125cm (1/8") air sacs or bladders attached to the highly divided leaves. Because they also function as traps for small creatures, the remarkable and sophisticated air sacs are also the principal means by which the bladderwort obtains its food.



Photo: copyright by Steve Mason, 2006

A low pressure created inside the bladder forms a vacuum. When the tiny hairs at the opening of the air sac are triggered, the bladder opens and tiny organisms such as mosquito larvae, water fleas and smaller organisms are sucked into the bladder to be digested by the enzymes found there. Occasionally, larger creatures such as small fish or frogs have been found caught half in, half out of a bladder. The half within the bladder has been digested while the half outside is not.



Photo: H. Zell

A greater bladderwort plant may have over 500 bladders on it and can eat thousands of tiny organisms each day. Since at least a portion of those consumed are mosquito larvae, perhaps we in the KNP should be more appreciative of its presence!

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