

Chasing dipterocarps across tropical Asia



The life of a botanist is an open storybook, full of places most people never turn the page to see. This chapter began in July 2025, amid the tropical monsoon, as I followed the Dipterocarpaceae family across Thailand and Bangladesh. The aim was to collect samples of dipterocarps in the form of silica-dried material and voucher specimens from diverse habitats. As Muir said, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else.” This trip was hitched to the local community and tropical biodiversity.

In Thailand, we set out before dawn to slip past Bangkok’s traffic, a van packed like a moving field station. Our driver knew the drill—happy to stop the moment a canopy looked promising. Thai iced tea and coconut water kept spirits up as the mountain chains rolled by in green waves, forming a perfect color palette with the reddish limestone soil. Temples appeared everywhere, and with them, living monuments: *Hopea odorata* trees protected for generations. Elders gently reminded us to make a small offering to the Buddha before collecting nearby—a moment of respect that felt right.



The trees themselves were both generous and stubborn. Dipterocarps often tower 20–30 meters, keeping their flowers and fruits far out of reach. In the rain, trunks are slippery and crowns sway at the exact wrong moment. Thamarat managed a telescopic pole-pruner once, and we waited after storms for windfall—nature’s gift to collectors. The days ended with kindness and good food: grilled fish, papaya salad, and pad Thai. Some days ran very long—out from 6 am to past midnight, but returning to the same station in Bangkok most nights kept the team rested. My limited free time between herbarium work, field visits, and data sorting was spent on local food and culture. Thoreau wrote, “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.” Thai friends helped me see.



A week later in Bangladesh, the monsoon felt like home again. I collected samples along the south-eastern coast, from Cox’s Bazar to nearby forests and protected areas—places where dipterocarps still dominate the skyline. Mornings started early, with vans headed toward national parks and reserves, guided by forest department personnel. The abundance of tall, mature trees and good visibility along edges allowed us to collect efficiently. Local people and field staff made all the difference, spotting fruiting crowns from a distance, guiding us to ridgelines we would never find alone, and, when necessary, sending a sure-footed climber up safely. What I will remember most is the grace and professionalism of the forest rangers. They welcomed us with food and shelter, shared precise local knowledge, and stayed open-minded when plans shifted with the weather. Their hospitality turned hard days into good ones.



Timing was crucial for the expedition. Dipterocarps synchronize flowering with early rains, so a few days can make the difference between empty branches and a treasure trove of petals and developing fruits. I recorded GPS coordinates, canopy height, and collected soil samples, leaves, and reproductive materials, and photographed bark, branching, and habitat context.

Enough to learn from; not enough to harm. In the evenings, I pressed specimens between newspaper, changed silica gel for DNA samples, and logged details while they were still fresh in my mind.

Working during the monsoon is a practice in patience. Every sample demands attention, keep labels dry, keep mold away, keep boots from slipping. When storms broke, the forest erupted with sound, and branches shed water like sudden applause. Leave the umbrella behind once, and nature offers instant feedback. Spare clothes became our daily luxury after soaking walks along the stony, slippery limestone trails of Kanchanaburi and Sakaerat, and the layered and continuous forests in Cox's Bazar and Khao Yai. And yet, few things beat standing by a monsoon-swollen stream or waterfall, mountains looming like gentle guardians, reminding us exactly why we do this work. Wildlife set the rhythm; leeches and snakes were more active in the wet areas. Asian elephants left signs in quieter parts of the forest, but we kept a safe distance. The sharpest surprise came from a tiny thrips in Kanchanaburi—one sting that felt like a thousand bees.



This work was possible due to the support and guidance of our local collaborators, Forest Department of Bangladesh and Thailand, Davis Expedition Fund, and the kindness and expertise of so many people. Back at the herbarium, the specimens are drying flat, labels are tidy, and the real comparisons are ready to begin at the lab. For now, I am grateful for laughter in the rain, steady hands on slippery trails, and the open-door welcome that brought the canopy a little closer to the ground.

