Meadow Clams
by Alan Weakley, Curator of the UNC Herbarium

I had the pleasure on April 30th of making a plant-collecting trip with Natural Heritage Inventory Biologist and Herbarium Associate Richard LeBlond to a series of wet savannas in Pender and Onslow counties, not far from Wilmington. Pine savannas are among the most beautiful, scientifically interesting and floriferous natural habitats in the state. Within them, a scattering of picturesque longleaf pines (Pinus palustris), pond pines (Pinus serotina) and pond cypresses (Taxodium ascendens) provide vertical structure over a meadow of grasses, orchids and carnivorous plants.

At the savannas we visited, the carnivorous plants included pitcher plants (Sarracenia flava, Sarracenia purpurea and Sarracenia X catesbaei), butterworts (Pinguicula caerulea), bladderworts (Utricularia spp.) and the celebrated Venus flytrap (Dionaea muscipula), endemic to the coastal plain of the Carolinas.

As we walked, I noticed that the ground was almost covered with the bright red flytraps, and I thought of my friend, the late Reverend Tucker Littleton, who told me in 1979 that his fisherman father and other Onslow County old-timers called Venus flytraps “meadow clams.” Now, “Venus flytrap” is a good name, in a fanciful and literary way, and one can imagine it being coined in the cultured drawing rooms of the English upper class naturalists of the 17th century. But what a down-to-earth and truly “common” name is “meadow clam” for these plants which grow in grassy meadows and open and shut their hinged leaves like clams!

The Shaken Creek Savannas and the Beargarden Tract, remotely located down gated sand roads in Pender and Onslow counties, are remnants of a world now nearly lost, where extensive savannas, pocosins, and swamps harbor an amazing diversity of plants and animals, many of them restricted to a small area of the Carolinas. Tucked in the edges of the savannas are some exceedingly rare plants, known only from a handful of sites rangewide — Cooley’s meadowrue (Thalictrum cooleyi, named in 1959 by former University of North Carolina Herbarium Curator Harry Ahles) and golden sedge (Carex lutea, named in 1994 by LeBlond).

A number of private organizations and public agencies — The Nature Conservancy, the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, the North Carolina Plant Conservation Program, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission and North Carolina Division of State Parks — are now working to ensure the long-term conservation of this area of the state. These tracts, along with the adjoining Holly Shelter Game Land, comprise the largest and best remaining landscape complex of savannas remaining in North Carolina.

Long may the “clam flats” thrive!