

Universidad Nacional de Colombia,
Bogotá, made the drawing.

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PALM BRIEF

Barcella odora

In 1874 the Scottish botanist James Trail collected a palm on the Rio Padauri, a tributary of the Rio Negro in Brazil. He thought this palm was a species of the genus *Elaeis*, the oil palm, and in 1877 described it as *Elaeis* (subgenus *Barcella*) *odora*.

Actually Trail's palm is quite distinct from *Elaeis*. It is acaulescent with a few erect pinnate leaves, up to 2 m long, and with non-spiny petioles. The inflorescence is borne on a long peduncle, and although the prophyll is below ground level, the peduncular bract is erect and woody, and persists while the fruits are forming (Fig. 1). Inflorescences have either all staminate flowers or both staminate and pistillate (Fig. 2). In the latter case the staminate flowers open first, and, as noted by Trail, have a strong sweet scent which attracts numerous bees, wasps, and flies. These differences persuaded Drude, in his treatment of the Palmae for Flora Brasiliensis in 1881, to recognize this palm as a distinct genus, and so it became *Barcella odora* (Trail) Drude.

For the hundred years following Trail's discovery *Barcella odora* was only known from its original locality. However, in recent years it has been found in other

areas, and is now known to occur in certain localities over a very large area north of the Rio Negro. This area stretches from the Rio Padauri in the west almost four hundred kilometers east to the Manaus-Boa Vista road. The habitat of the palm is campinarana, a kind of low, dense, shrubby vegetation found on white sand, transitional between savanna and forest. *Barcella* is extremely abundant in the campinaranas.

The derivation of the name *Barcella* was not given by Trail. Harold Moore guessed that it may have come from the Latin word for boat in its diminutive form, "barca-ella," in reference to Trail's form of transport. It seems more likely that Trail took the name from the nearby town of Barcelos, a town more important than it is now, and just downstream from where the Padauri flows into the Negro. The common name for the palm is piassaba brava, piacaba preta, or piacabarana. The name piacaba or piassaba is usually given to another Brazilian palm, *Leopoldinia piassaba*, and to the strong fibers it yields. *Barcella* also has fibers, in its petioles, and these persist on the ground even after the leaf has died and rotted away. But the fibers of *Barcella* are of little economic value, and hence the name piacabarana, or false piacaba.

ANDREW HENDERSON



1. *Barcella odora*, inflorescence with some staminate flowers open and pistillate buds near the bases of the rachillae. Note peduncular bract among rachillae at left.



2. *Barcella odora*, inflorescence with young fruits.