

Through the Bayous in Pursuit

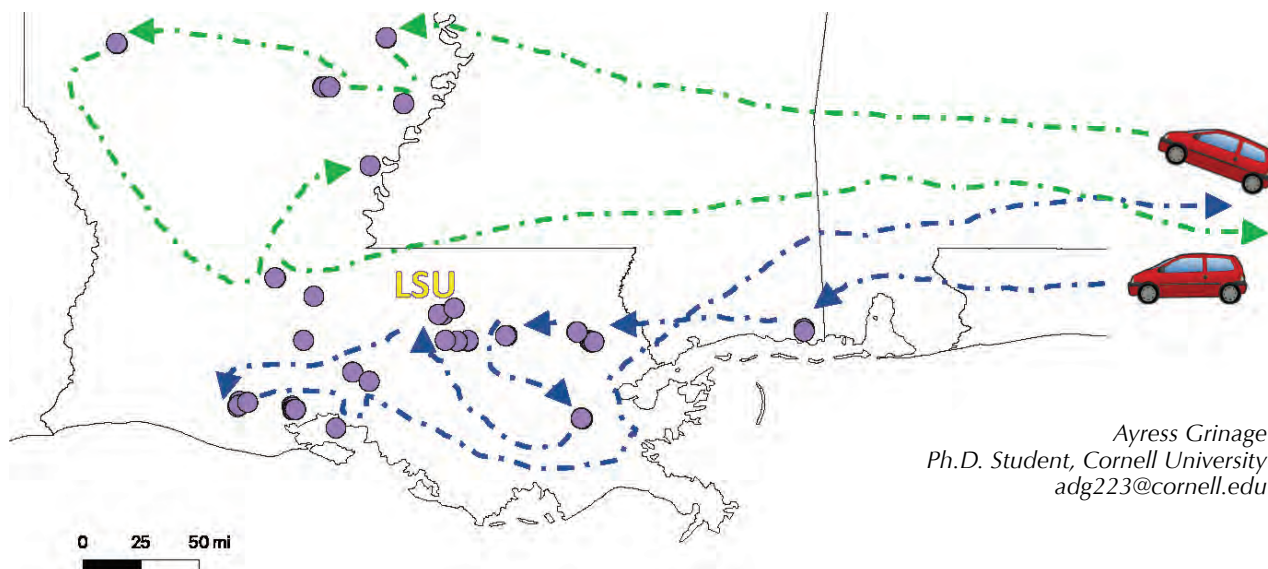
As a graduate student, I study the understory palmetto of the southeastern US, *Sabal minor* or the Dwarf Palmetto. The name “Dwarf” suggests differences from the Cabbage Palmetto (*Sabal palmetto*) through its typically smaller size with a compact subterranean trunk and an overall reduced leaf size. *Sabal minor* is a very common understory palmetto that occurs abundantly from North Carolina down and across into northeastern Mexico.

But interestingly, in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, *S. minor* can develop a robust above ground trunk that resembles the Cabbage palmetto. This deviation from “Trunkless” to “Trunked” in populations along the Gulf Coast (Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama) is what I study using genetic, morphological, and ecological data.

With funding from Montgomery Botanical Center, I traveled to Louisiana twice between December 2021 and January 2022 to kick off a series of collection trips to collect both the ‘Trunked’ and ‘Trunkless’ growth forms of *Sabal minor* across its native range. In preparation for my trips to Louisiana, I spent the past year working in the L.H. Bailey Hortorium (the Cornell University Herbarium) combing through the handwritten notes and maps created by L.H. Bailey, J.K. Small, and Miriam Bomhard nearly 100 years ago to lay out the historic distribution of *Sabal minor* in Louisiana.

Because *Sabal minor* used to be split into two species based on trunk form, *Sabal louisiana*, the ‘Trunked’ form, and *Sabal minor* s.s., the ‘Trunkless’ form, it was relatively easy to identify historical locations where each form occurred. Some locations have both forms present.

Once I had an idea of the historical distribution of both trunk forms, I used modern mapping tools to identify if any of the historical sites still exist. I was wonderfully surprised to find that not only many of the historical sites still existed but that they are now protected as either a park or a management area! With a solid understanding of the locations of both the ‘Trunkless’ and ‘Trunked’ growth forms in Louisiana, I narrowed down the sites for these trips. Splitting the sites between southern and northern populations, I was able to cover the entire range of these intriguing palms, and also examine important specimens at the Shirley C. Tucker Herbarium at LSU. I am now studying the specimens I collected at Cornell, and seeds of these intriguing palms are now germinating at Montgomery.



Ayress Grinage
Ph.D. Student, Cornell University
adg223@cornell.edu

Map showing populations visited in December 2021 (Blue) and January 2022 (Green) to collect *Sabal minor* – based on careful review of century-old notes and specimens.

of the “Tall Dwarf” Palmetto



A Trunked Dwarf Palmetto at Fairview Riverside State Park.



Ayress with a trunked *Sabal* palm at Palmetto Island State Park.



A Green Tree Frog (*Hyla cinerea*, the state amphibian of Louisiana) hides from the winter weather in the folds of this palmetto leaf at Manchac State Park