

UNFORGETTABLE KOGELBERG



Protea eximia



Mimetes hottentoticus

Mediterranean flora is something that strongly appeals to us and indeed drove us to prepare our latest book *Flora of the Mediterranean*, which includes all five Mediterranean climate regions; the Mediterranean Basin, California, central Chile, south and south-west Australia and the Western Cape of South Africa. All of these places have many fabulous plants and tremendous diversity; totalling over 50,000 species or around 12% of the world's plant species, in a mere 2% of its land surface.

And the Western Cape takes this to an extreme, somehow cramming in 8500+ species into a relatively tiny area that is by far the smallest of the five Mediterranean climate regions. But, how does the first-time visitor begin to tame this goliath of the plant world? I was incredibly fortunate to have a knowledgeable contact in Cape Town - Callan Cohen (of Birding Africa), at once an expert birder, keen botanist and all-round natural historian, he provided me with generous assistance for my visits there. We spent many productive days in the field, tracking down the many plants on my dream list, finding plenty of others I had no idea I would see. It was eye-opening and thrilling to see so many new plants, which changed at every turn. To fully understand the flora here would take a lifetime, but to see the crown jewels need not take so long.





Leucadendron gandogeri



Erica longifolia



Erica thomae



Retzia capensis

I began with a whirlwind tour in the southern autumn - March, finding many fine amaryllids, some rare such as *Haemanthus canaliculatus* and *Brunsvigia radula* and I was pleased to supply images of these for just published *Field Guide to the Amaryllis Family of Southern Africa & surrounding territories*. We also saw the extremely rare *Disa forficaria* near Hermanus. This orchid had not been seen in sixty years!

Rarity always has its appeal and glancing through the very useful *Fynbos*, by John Manning, my eyes were drawn repeatedly back to an extravagant proteoid; *Mimetes hottentoticus*, a plant with beauty and a great sounding name. During my second trip in September-October I asked Callan about the possibility of finding this wonderful plant. It was not an easy request. As it turned out, it was confined to a small the mountain top area of remote Kogelberg, with very restricted access. It shares its scarcity with other members of the same genus; *M. stokoei* and *M. splendidus* are also highly localised endemics. Indeed, this is something the Western Cape excels at. Its complex topography and geology have generated a huge number of very range restricted plants and it's something I can relate to. Lycia in south-west Turkey is much the same with over 2000 species and dozens of highly localised endemics. The *Mimetes* I mentioned are not only rare but have a finely-tuned life cycle



Erica massonii



Erica coriifolia



Kogelberg highlands



Thesium euphorbioides



Crassula coccinea



Protea cynaroides

dependent on fire and ants. Fire is a crucial and naturally occurring aspect of fynbos. It not only removes the existing vegetation, but the heat and smoke triggers germination of dormant seeds held within the soil. Seeds that were carried below by ants (attracted to an edible appendage on the seed) - a relationship known as myrmecochory, which is very prevalent in fynbos plants.

When I returned for round three in January, Callan had a surprise for me. He had arranged special access for a biodiversity survey on the Kogelberg, and would I like to join? Early one morning we embarked on one of the most memorable plant hunting days I've ever had. The drive into the untrammelled wilderness passed stands of *Erica longifolia*, just one of dozens of species here. During the day we saw a great diversity of these, from the long white tubes of *E. thomae* to showy pink-belled *E. coriifolia* and the wonderful woolly-stemmed *E. massonii*. Fiery flames of *Watsonia schlecteri* lit up the fynbos near bushes of pink starred *Phaenocoma prolifera*.

There was no path to the summit area, this was pure wild land. Striking out through the shimmering restios and boulder strewn slopes we came across bushes of *Retzia capensis*, gangly *Thesium euphorbioides* and crevices packed with the carmine umbels of *Crassula coccinea*. Once



Watsonia schlecteri



Phaenocoma prolifera



Misty ridge



Sunset ridge

or twice a magnificent Pride of Table Mountain butterfly swooped in to nectar on these. The views back across the bay to Cape Town were stunning. As were the views into the hinterland and from the narrow ridges that plunged a thousand metres to the Atlantic Ocean below. Tight cushions of *Bryomorphe aretioides* grew here among the rocks, whilst the fynbos was brushed with reddish tints from *Leucodendron gandogeri*. The outsize plates of that fynbos classic; *Protea cynaroides* were also bursting into flower now.

And then there it was, a masterpiece of silvered-foilage, topped by dense heads of exploding fireworks - *Mimetes hottentoticus*. It was worth every step fighting across the trackless mountain and time was spent in reverence. We were among a lucky (very) few dozen people who had ever set eyes on this wonderful plant. All too soon we had to retreat to the vehicle - if only we'd brought tents! We drove a bit further into the hinterland and all was magnificent and wild as the day burnished and concluded in a molten sunset. A perfect end to an extraordinary day in the field. I had seen a true rarity and in such a virgin setting. And that is what was so special about magical Kogelberg, it was as if man had never set foot on it.



Bryomorphe aretioides