

EXPLORATIONS OF WESTERN CAPE - SEPTEMBER 2016

by *Bill Darbon*

This trip all started from a passing remark made to me by Rodney Sims that he wished to visit Western Cape again but needed another enthusiast to accompany him. I had long wanted to go to South Africa, so eventually, after also suggesting the idea to John Watmough, Rodney planned an expedition itinerary for September. We all duly flew to Cape Town, collected our hire car from the airport, and with great anticipation set off on our trip. Rodney had arranged our first accommodation in Montagu, but I had found out that Sheliams nursery was not too far off our route in Robertson, so we took a slight diversion to call in (we had not booked an appointment) and found the proprietor weeding the beds in the Cactus Garden. I got the impression that they had not done much maintenance for a while as the “chick weed” and other indigenous weeds had somewhat taken over in places. However, the plants were laid out in several beds and there were some nice specimens to see.



Shielam's Nursery (Robertson)

Our first trip was via Lemonshoek and Brandriver where we encountered first of many Gibbaeums, and on the track to Ockertskraal our first crop of Conophytums. My initial impressions of what South Africa had to offer was not disappointing; I was amazed at the general flora that one could see. This was only to be enhanced on every trip that we subsequently made into the Veldt off the main roads. Back via the Barrydale road to our hotel, where we refreshed ourselves at a local bar “Mulligans” with Karoo Lamb and Soggy Stone (a local Beer).



Gibbaeum petrense nr Brandriver

Our next excursion was out to Warmwartberg via the Plathuis loop. The dirt road led us to more superb Gibbaeums and our first Euphorbia (atrispina). Pressing onward where we were confronted with a large electrified fence and gate to the Sambona Game reserve (which was not marked on our map), and were a little discomforted to be challenged

by an Africaans carrying a large rifle. However we managed to explain to the rangers what we were doing and they eventually allowed us to pass through on the proviso that we “*did not stop as there were wild game loose*”. This saved us several kilometres from the alternative of retracing our steps on the somewhat uncomfortable road. Fortunately it was some way after exiting the reserve that we sustained our first puncture (more of this type of event later). We duly put on the spare tyre and returned somewhat cautiously to our hotel.

After a pleasant night in the hotel we arranged the repair/replacement of the tyre as I did not wish to tempt fate without a spare tyre, if the first experience of travelling the ‘R’ roads was anything to go by. We eventually decided that ‘R’ meant rough or rutted and that the higher the number the rougher it seemed. We were moving from Montagu to Oudsthoorn via Barrydale and Ladismith, stopping off on the R62 and the road to Calitzdorp, and the hill overlooking the dam. We found more Euphorbias and our first tortoise.

Overnight stay at the very pleasant Karoo Sun boarding house then off on our next venture through the pass to De Rust and loop to Beaufort West stopping off in De Rust at the radio antenna hill and returning to Oudtshoorn. We had decided that we should write home (knowing what the South African postal service is like). Having purchased the necessary cards we need to get stamps, but where - Oh! The Post Office does not sell stamps, need to find a local Bookshop. Anyway after a trip into town on the advice of our landlady the following morning, Eureka! We found a small shop selling stamps, cards duly posted off home, then on to Laingsburg via Swartzberg pass and road to Prince Albert. We had already experienced an abundance

of different habitats of Mesembryanthemum plants, bushes of various sizes and colours and wonderful scenery, but we were delighted to see a large plant of Aloe claviflora growing by the road side and even more surprised to find Euphorbia stellaspina just the other side of the fence. Finally, on to the turn to Seekoegat off the Kruidfontein road to overnight at Laingsburg.



Euphorbia stellaspina (nr Seekoegat)



Tylecodon (butterbalm)

The following day we were to travel to Sutherland and Keurkloof. Just out of town we were stopped by the Traffic Police (nothing more than a routine check). We continued onward and made a couple of stops *en route* and found several different Tylecodons amongst the bushes, some of which were quite large specimens. Looped back via Ceres to the N1 (we

travelled on this road a lot of the journey much to the relief of the passengers from the shaking and bumping of the ‘R’ Roads). On the following day travelling out from Laingsburg via the Sutherland road and Komsberg pass to Calvinia, we stopped off on the roadside. But apart from the wonderful display of flowers on the bushes we did not see many Mesembs. However, the hillside of Tritonias located 120k from Calvinia was a marvellous sight.



Quiver tree forest



Field of Tritonias (120km from Calvinia)

Our next trip was from Calvinia east to Nieuwoudtville on R364 via Botterkloof and the Dorins River. At the Pakhuis pass we stopped at the memorial to Louis Leipoldt. Near the N7 junction at the end of the Clanwilliam Dam on the roadside was a large *Euphorbia tuberculata*. We returned via Vanrhyns pass. Overnight in Calvinia we visited the town to restock supplies, and encountered the largest post box in the Southern Hemisphere (more cards home). Off to the falls near Nieuwoudtville then on to the ‘Kokerboomwoud’ or the Quiver Tree Forest with wonderful stands of *Aloe dichotoma*. Back on the road, On the outskirts of Loeriesfontein, we picked up our second puncture, and again decided to replace the tyre before proceeding too far. Overnight night in Calvinia again

The next day we were moving to Vanrhynsdorp but first visited the nearby Nieuwoudtville wild flower reserve. I should say at this point that due to the lack of winter rain a lot of the normal wild flowers and bulbs had not been in evidence and also, as we found later, some of the Mesembs were quite dehydrated. On to Hantam National Botanical Garden. In the Garden we encountered a large tree full of Weaver Birds nests; I am still trying to figure out how the eggs don’t fall out. On to Grootdrift and Gembokrivier to overnight in Vanrhynsdorp at the very hospitable Lombard guest house. (We did not know then, but we were to return here again later on the trip).

Following overnight rain we changed our plans and ventured via Vrendenal and R362 to Lutzville and Doornbaai. Stopping on the road at two sites by the 26km marker we explored the bushes and rocks at the side of the road and found some wonderful *Conophytum* clumps and several different species of *Othonna*, *Pelargonium* and *Sarcocaulon*. Our search was disturbed by the rumble of a train on the bridge nearby (an exceedingly long train, we eventually counted over 330 trucks and six engines). We rounded off the day with a visit to the Kokerboom nursery in Vanrhynsdorp. Off again the next day to Nuwerus Road stopping near

the mineral works. On the quartz hill we were spoilt for choice of *Argyroderms*, *Oophytum* and *Mitrophyllum*. We continued our journey via Komkans and back on the N7 via Grootdrif so as to relieve the sore bottoms from the 'R' roads, then back to Vanrhynsdorp.



Hunting on the Knersvlakte

The following day we had arranged to visit 'Cape Nature' in the company of one of their rangers to explore the Knersvlakte. This turned out to be one of the best days for exploring. The quartz patches were abundant with plants of *Dactyloopsis*, *Conophytum*, *Pelargonium*, *Sarcocaulon* and *Crassula*. But you have to drag yourself away even from the most mouth-watering places so eventually we turned back via Groot Garaafwater to our guesthouse. Next trip was via Kliprand and Garies. We stopped off at some likely places *en route* and again found *Argyroderma*, *Conophytum* and clumps of *Cheridopsis*. Our guesthouse did not do evening meals, but we fell lucky by visiting the Namaqua Lodge who catered for coach parties and had an open buffet (help yourself - eat as much as you like) so we participated on more than one evening.



Dactyloopsis digitata

More overnight rain so we revised our plans as we were moving to Springbok via Kamiekroon. Off the N7 on the Henkries road Rodney was devastated to find a large pipeline which had obliterated a known site for *Avonia*. We did manage to find a few small plants. We then took the Groenhoekies turn and John was delighted to find a *Lithops* (*marmorata*). We continued on the Henkries road along the pipeline, but eventually decided to turn around and make for our Motel on the outskirts of Springbok, stopping off again by the roadside on a small outcrop where we found a lovely bush of *Ceraria namaquensis*.

Fully refreshed overnight we ventured off again. At a stop 14k out on the Komaggas road we found more *Conophytum*, *Pelargonium* and *Sarcocaulon*; we also encountered our second tortoise, scurrying in the bushes. Back on to the road to Kleinsee we visited the Molyneux reserve, where there were lots of plants bedded out with numbered tags; the most stunning was the colour of the Aloes. The evening was spent in a wonderful steakhouse in Springbok where I had the best steak that I had enjoyed for a very long time.



Molyneux Reserve, Kleinsee

Moving on to MacDougal's Bay, out on the Port Nolloth road to Eksteenfontein and Komaas, stopping off at various points, we found nice clumps of *Cheridopsis* and *Sarcocaulons*, and on the Wolfborg road we found *Euphorbia confluens*.

The following day, having stocked up with supplies in town and having briefly stopped to admire the Lesser Flamingos on the edge of the sea, we took our trip to the Augrabies hills (the site was quite a hike from the car). The prospect of what we might find, from Rodney's previous experiences, had wetted our appetite, mine in particular as this was the known location of *Conophytum stephanii* and *Crassula alstonii*. After much searching we found our quarry and eventually left delighted if somewhat exhausted. On our return to MacDougal's Bay we decided to visit the known *Fenestraria* site. Silly me managed to get the car stuck in the sand but fortunately a friendly local came to our aid (I made the decision with this experience coupled with the ones of travelling on the "rough" roads that a 4x4 is essential for this type of trip). We found the plants well covered by sand but we were rewarded by a local lady (who was walking her dog) showing us the Dune Orchid in full flower - she advised that this did not happen every year, so we struck lucky.



Fenestraria at McDougals Bay

The next day we were off to Alexander Bay, Holriver Canyon and The Orange River. We stopped off at a number of places en route, finding clumps of *Conophytum*, *Cheridopsis* and *Othonna*. We ventured as far as Sendelinsdrif for more *Tylecodons* and *Dracophilus*. *En route* back we turned off by the 49km marker to find *Jordaaniella* and *Euphorbia ramiglans*.

Off again the next day on the Lekkersing road, *Cheridopsis pillansii* and other *Cheridopsis* species prominent here. On the road to Karappapoort we found *Conophytum* and *Mitrophyllum*, and near the Eksteenfontein turn we found evidence of a meerkat colony, but apparently no one was at home. We had intended to visit the Richtersveld National Park area, but abandoned this due to lack of any directions and poor roads (definitely not suited to anything other than a 4 x 4) from previous experiences.

The following morning we were due to move back to Springbok, but first we revisited the *Fenestraria* site and the *Cheridopsis peculiaris* site just out of Steinkopf. On to the Hester Malan reserve, where they had a very well laid out garden with a lot of the indigenous succulents on display as well as a small conference centre (now that's a thought!). Overnight

back at the Springbok motel and out the next day on the Goodhouse road; we stop on the road at several places to find more *Sarcocaulons* here, both *crassicaule* and *pattersonii*. We looped back via Concordia to our accommodation and revisited the wonderful steakhouse in town that evening.



Cheridopsis umdausensis nr Goodhouse

Out to Bulletrap and Nigramoep road the next day: more *Cheridopsis* and *Conophytum* in evidence here, We decided to revisit the peculiaris site near Steinkopf again, I am pleased to say that this time they were all in flower and made a wonderful display. We stayed in the motel again and the next day took the road to Soebatsfontein. Off the N7 more *Cheridopsis* and near Komaggas we found *Euphorbia pentops*. We made a couple of stops off the N7 on the way back, at Nababeep and Arkoep, without encountering anything new apart from Sacred Ibis and a Blacksmiths Plover (John had become our travelling twitcher and had crossed off many of the birds species in his book by this time).

We were moving on again the following day and had intended to stay at Clanwilliam, but decided that we would avail ourselves of the hospitality we had earlier at The Lomabard guesthouse in Vanrhynsdorp. *En route* we stopped at

Douse the Glim and the Grootgraafwater turns to explore more *Argryodermas*, *Dactylopsis* and *Crassula* species (there were so many plants we encountered on the trip it was difficult to put names to them all). The guesthouse had a delightful garden with a number of succulent plants and we were thrilled to see a sunbird visiting the Aloe flowers.



Sunbird on Aloe in Vanrhynsdorp

Off to Worcester for an overnight stay, stopping off the N7 after the pioneers pass near the Eendekull turn to search for *Diplosoma* (as usual when you are looking in a known location you only find the plants when you are going back to the car), a small population growing close to the road. On to Worcester via the Karoo Botanical Garden; although this was well laid out, it appeared as though the beds were in the process of being replanted. Our last night before our trip home was spent reflecting on our ventures.

It is difficult to pick out favourites from such a wonderful experience as we visited so many different and sometime challenging locations. The *Gibbaeums*, *Cheridopsis*, *Argryodermas* and *Tylecodons* were all outstanding, the colour of and diversity of the different bushes were amazing, the *Fenestrarias* in the sand at MacDougal's Bay and the *Dactylopsis* in the quartz flats of the

Knersvlakte were very probably the most memorable, as was the Quiver Tree Forest with stands of Aloe, but I think one of the unscheduled stops we made off the main road was possibly the most rewarding for the number of different species we found. Although wildlife was not much in evidence we saw a remarkable number of different birds and experienced absolutely stunning scenery.

On to Cape Town for our flight home but you cannot go without visiting Kirstenbosch set in 520 hectares at the eastern foot of Table Mountain. Walking around the well manicured beds with a number of different themes and diverse plantations was a relaxing way to end what was a wonderful trip with lots of lasting memories, but you realise that you have only touched the surface of this vast country and that the experience whets your appetite to return.



Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden (protea)

Thanks Rodney and John for your friendship and camaraderie.
(especially for your patience and tolerance for all the shuddering and bouncing around you suffered on the 7,500 km trip)

Bill Darbon