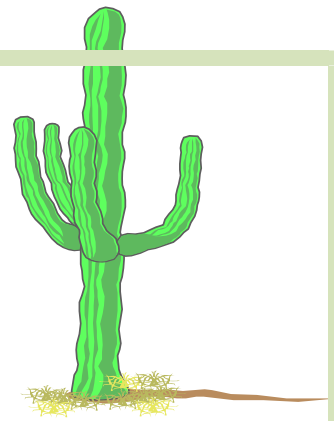


# Oxotica

The bi-annual newsletter of the Oxford Branch of the  
British Cactus and Succulent Society

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## Chairman's Chat

Well I wonder where the year has gone already, I seem to have been running around all over the place with various BCSS events, talks, auctions etc. I think looking at my collection recently in preparation for our show (more on that in the show report) that the plants have perhaps not had the attention they should have had, even so some are still flowering well.

I am encouraged that our monthly meetings are being well attended. with some new members and visitors from other branches swelling our numbers. We are still able to attract some speakers from afar and it is at this time of the year we start thinking about next year's talks, so if there is something specific you would like to see or hear do let me or one of the committee know.

Our events this year have been a great success. We spoke to lots of folk at Bury Knowle and the 3 days at Blenheim Palace Flower show were extremely successful:- we managed to get another "Silver Gilt" award for the display, as well as selling lots of plants.

As I write this we are all recovering from an absolutely wonderful show at Grove. I can only thank all those Branch members who came and performed various tasks on the day to make it a marvellous day for the Branch and all those members who attended. A special thanks go to all the exhibitors from other branches who continue to support us in making the show one of the best in the country.

*Bill Darbon*

**OXFORD BRANCH SHOW  
with the Haworthia Society  
at the Old Mill Hall, Grove, Oxfordshire, on Saturday 1 July 2023**



2023 Branch Show (*David Greenaway*)

Members of the BCSS Oxford Branch were joined by a number of other members of the Society from as far as Essex, Harrow, Hampshire, High Wycombe, London, Milton Keynes, Peterborough, Reading, South Wales, Wiltshire and Woking as well as a large number of members of the public at the Joint Branch Show held at The Old Mill Hall, Grove on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> July, we even attracted some folk from Greece who had travelled especially to visit the show (so our fame is spreading).

30 Exhibitors staged over 450 individual entries in the 95 competitive classes, which included 30 specifically for members of the Haworthia Society, which are designated for a number of plant species and varieties which originate from various areas of South Africa. The special section was well supported with over 150 entries.

This year we had some new and returning folk visiting and exhibiting at our show, advertising on social media may have helped.

The car park was extremely full from 0930; it is difficult to exactly say how many people came (as we don't charge admission) but at its height I would say over 100 people were in the two halls at any one time, I suspect that some were drawn by the smell of Bacon.

My thanks go to all who helped out on the day - Jules and Hannah in the kitchen, Nick and Mary on plant sales and John, Alan, Curt and Martin for assisting recording the results, (my son Gareth from Nottingham Branch) for filling in wherever he was needed and of course Gillian (our own David Bailey) for taking photos of all the prize winners; A flicker site" will be set up so you can see the wonderful specimens that were on display.

Congratulations go to all the winners, the prizes for Best Cactus and Best Succulent were awarded to Gillian, several awards of merit were shared between a number of other exhibitors.

*Bill Darbon*



Branch sales 2023 (*David Greenaway*)

## WITH FORKED TONGUE

*by John Watmough*

It used to be the custom of High Wycombe Branch to reserve one meeting per year for a lecture on a subject other than cacti and succulents. Thus it was that, one year, their members and visitors were treated to a slide show by a herpetologist who had been sent on an expedition to record all the reptiles of North-West Mexico. That is how I know that the chuckwallas on the islands grow bigger than their mainland cousins, a fact for which I have not yet found an application. A typical slide portrayed a large bushy plant with spiny pads, at the foot of which was coiled a snake.

“I think that plant is called an *Opuntia*, but you'll know more about that than I do. The snake is...” and he went on give the full scientific name of the reptile down to subspecies level, and to explain how it differed from other snakes, plus a great deal of information about its lifestyle.

Towards the end of the session he said: “I suppose you are wondering what is in this big red lacquer chest that I have been leaning on”. He opened it, and it was full of...snakes. He proceeded to drape a snake round the neck of each member of the audience. That is the most intimate contact with snakes that I have ever had in my entire pursuit of our hobby.

It stands to reason that many of the world's snakes can be found in the subtropical semi-deserts in which most of our favourite plants have arisen. Yet any self-respecting serpent on feeling the distant scrunch of sensible boots, and hearing the excited jabbering of groups of succulentophile hominids, will discreetly disappear, so it is not so often that the two vertebrate types come into contact. (I speak not of Australia, where my No 1 son was chased by a taipan *Oxyuranus scutellatus*, the world's deadliest land snake.) Even so, such encounters do take place, and more often than not both parties have lived to tell the tale. And here are some of the tales.

The late Doug Donaldson related how one of a group of cactus tourists in Arizona poked a stick into a pack rats' nest under a Cholla bush and a Gila monster *Heloderma suspectum* ran out. They all scattered, screaming. Yes, I know, it is not a snake, but it is one of the only genus of venomous lizards. Also, in the same part of the world, while the late Sonia Barker-Fricker was preparing to photograph the rattle of a rattlesnake sticking out from behind a rock, the head end of the snake was creeping up behind her, preparing to bite her on the bum. Luckily for her, her husband George saw what was happening and dragged her out of range in the nick of time.

Not all snakes are venomous, of course. A whip snake (I think that is what it was) shot across my shoe as I was tramping through *fynbos* in South Africa. There must be plenty of snakes there because we saw secretary birds *Sagittarius serpentarius* in pairs hunting them. Much more dramatic is the tale of an explorer in Madagascar who was trying to photograph the plants on the other side of a ravine using a very large and expensive telefoto lens attachment, when a large yellow snake leapt out at him and hissed. Startled, he dropped his camera into the ravine. He said that just as the camera was leaving his grasp he remembered that “there are no venomous snakes in Madagascar”. (I do not know this for a fact.)

At one BCSS Convention the late Dr Graham Williamson displayed an illustration of an unexciting snake from Namibia. It was not even half a metre long.

“You don't want to get bitten by that,” he said. “If you do, you've got ten minutes to get to the nearest hospital”.

“Where is the nearest hospital?” somebody asked.

“Groote Schuur, six hundred miles south.”

When I was in Namibia a farmer showed me a photograph of one of his farmhands holding a puff adder *Bitis arietans*. The snake, obviously dead, was being held aloft in the crook of both the man's elbows as high as he could reach. The head and the tail ends extended some distance along the ground.

There is even a town in the Northern Cape called Pofadder that would seem to be a good base for succulent hunting. It was somewhere near there that a couple of visitors had been invited to dinner by a friendly farmer. As they were about to start on their inevitable lamb course, the farmer said in a quiet voice:

“Don't shuffle your feet or move suddenly. There's a puff adder under the table. Just enjoy your dinner and I'll deal with it afterwards.”

On the OAPs' outing to South Africa (2016), our Bill, though very tolerant and patient, would, I suspect, become a little bored with my excitement at finding yet another shrubby mesemb, or Rodney's insistence on pursuing ludicrously erroneous GPS coordinates, and he would wander off in search of reptiles to photograph. And I will say he became very proficient at finding them. Once I caught him trying to rearrange a puff adder to obtain a more artistic picture. I was terrified and dragged him away. [The creature's scientific name *arietans* means “hard striker”.]

The great and still-living cremnophile Ernst van Jarsveld used to live near his then workplace Kirstenbosch. He told us that he had boomslangs *Dispholidus typus* hanging from the trees in his garden.

“Aren't you worried for your children?”

“No, they know not to go near the snakes.”

Because it has nothing to do with succulents, I will not tell the story of a friend of a friend, who, while safely tucked up in bed in Kenya, had a green mamba *Dendroaspis angusticeps* crash through the ceiling and land on him. Perhaps my favourite snake story concerns the late (but long-lived) John Lavranos. It was somewhere in Kenya that he had taken some students to hunt for small *Dorstenias*. They came across an immense caudex belonging to a succulent that I have forgotten the name of. The seeds of *Dorstenia* could very well have been blown or catapulted against this caudex, and have dropped to the ground and germinated at the base. Unfortunately the base of the caudex at ground level was occupied by a green mamba. As the wide-eyed students looked on from a considerable distance, John simply picked the snake up by head and tail and flung it over a bush. Then he got down on hands and knees to continue with his original objective.

If there is a moral to this article, it has to be: Do not stick your hand (or any other part of you) down a hole, and do not reach behind rocks or other objects without first checking carefully.

*JW*

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## BAOBAB

*by David Greenaway*

One of the twins of Wantage town and next-door village Grove is Mably, a neighbour of Roanne in the upper Loire Valley, France. Mably in turn twinned, or at least has a close relationship, with Po in Burkina Faso (previously French West Africa). On one of the visits of Jean and I to Mably an exhibition of the arts was being held, and we met an African painter who had brought some of his artwork over from BF. The succulent connection was that we bought from him this painting of a local baobab (*Adansonia digitata*). He told us that a habit of his was to put himself somewhere in each of his paintings.

This reminds me of the tenth anniversary of the 1991 twinning with Mably, a reaffirmation of our friendship; Jean went as representative of Wantage town council, and I went too. A party of Africans from Po had also been invited and there they all were, in flamboyant national dress. The party included a witch-doctor (je kid vous not) whom they consulted frequently.

