

# BOTANIZING IN ZIMBABWE

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In January this year, a group of Botanical Society members set off on a week-long Zimbabwe eastern districts flower tour to magnificent mountain sites between Harare and Chimanimani..

After meeting our leader Darrel Plowes, author of *Wild flowers of Zimbabwe*, at Harare Airport, we stopped off to have lunch and buy plant recognition books from the Mukuvisi Woodland Centre Bookshop run by the Zimbabwe Wildlife Society, before travelling south via Rusape to the Rhodes Nyanga Hotel, and botanizing in the roadside grassland to look at our first wildflowers. Among them were *Pratea angolensis* var. *angolensis*, a dwarf shrub with a white flower-head, the long-tepalled white irid, *Lapeirousia odoratissima*, and some interesting grasses including a tall *Aristida* grass with conspicuous dense white ligular (an outgrowth from the top of the leaf sheath) tufts of hairs and delicate, tawny open heads which would have made an interesting addition to any garden.

Above.  
Punch Rock chalets with the Nyanga flat top acacia, *Acacia abyssinica*.  
Below.  
*Indigofera hiliaris*, a legume encouraged by disturbance, growing in the grasslands of Nyanga.

We stayed at the Rhodes Nyanga hotel for three nights. This historic old hotel, once the private home of Cecil John Rhodes, abandoned during the war but now restored, has fine gardens, views and rondavel accommodation on a steep grassy slope. The garden restoration was the work of Mary Clarke, an expert on Nyanga wild flowers, the author of *Nyanga flowers* and our local leader for three days.

Sunday was spent on the upper western flanks of Mount Nyangani, the highest peak in Zimbabwe at 2593 m. Geologically rather a complex area, the rocks give rise to sticky soils, so as the last portion of the access road is gravel, which is not negotiable to heavy buses when wet, we were lucky to have a fine day. On our arrival we had a clear view not only of the whole impressive peak, but also of a fine re-introduced herd of sable antelope. While some of the party managed to get almost onto the uppermost summit ridge, others botanized within view of the parking area. A warning to those planning a visit to Nyangani: the wooden double cavity walls of the lady's toilet now accommodates a swarm of very busy bees whose flight path is through the door and into the cavity wall via a split in the wood. The bees were well behaved when we were there...

The approaches to Nyangani are covered with grasses and scattered shrubs, including *Pratea angolensis* var. *divaricata* and *P. caffra* amongst others forming pleasant open walking country. Afromontane forest was confined to small patches in sheltered kloofs, and included a preponderance of the re-sprouting *Widdringtonia nodiflora* with which we from the Cape





were all familiar. This is almost its most northerly population, which has in all five areas of distribution: the mountains of the Cape to the Drakensberg; the south-west corner of Swaziland; a horseshoe shaped area curving around the north of what was the old Transvaal, and lastly two populations in the eastern districts of Zimbabwe, each population separated widely from all the others. Such discontinuities



An entrance into a stock enclosure at Ziwa monument, which was built between 1400 and 1800 AD.

hint at vast climatic changes in the past, allowing the plant to spread, then cutting it off into relict stands. Time did not allow us to explore the interior of these forest patches.

The grassland around the parking area was a delightful meadow of diverse herbs and geophytes. One of the loveliest was a re-sprouting silvery leguminous sub-shrub, *Indigofera hiJaris*, whose carmine pink flowers toned well with the foliage, and whose lignotuber, almost as wide as the 75 cm spread of the plant above ground, must have been of considerable age. Also common here were a pretty member of the Apiaceae, *Alepidea swynnertonii*, with snowy white flower clusters arising on a long peduncle out of a rosette of attractively fringed leaves, and a rather coarse-leaved *Helichrysum nitens*, whose specific name means 'gleaming', with silvery basal leaves and a branched scape of bright gold daisies.

The day was concluded with a visit in the Juliasdale district to Punch Rock to see a group of the Nyanga flat-tops, *Acacia abyssinica* subsp. *calophylla*, the trees forming a closed, dark green canopy forest at the base of a striking whaleback granite koppie. According to Palgrave (*Trees of southern Africa*) it has a rather local distribution in east and southern Africa, the other subspecies, *A. abyssinica* subsp. *abyssinica*, being confined to Ethiopia. This is another striking example of a disjunct distribution.

Juliasdale district grows sophisticated crops such as flowers for the export markets of Europe. We saw rolling fields of the *Leucadendron* 'Safari Sunset', and great-reas of orange marigolds, the flowers of which are harvested as an additive for the feed of laying hens to create what must be the most feverishly orange-yoked eggs in the world;

more organic than organic?

*Scadoxus pole-evansii*, a spectacular amaryllid of deep shade in evergreen forest, probably needing much water in the summer growing season. I remember a few years back cracking eggs in my parents' flat in London and being aghast at the colour. Maybe I've stumbled on the explanation.

And now the rains came in earnest. We set off on the third day to see one of the world's loveliest views, and Africa's second highest falls, Pungwe

and Mtarazi, and in reality caught only glimpses of the former, and nothing of the latter. However, parking the buses at the entrance to the Nyazengu Private Reserve, we set off down a wet and slippery slope into a patch of dense high altitude evergreen forest whose canopy created a deep twilight. Suddenly there came into view a magical sight, a vast population of *Scadoxus pole-evansii*, a

local rare endemic geophyte in peak flowering condition. Borne knee high on long stalks, dozens and hundreds disappearing into the near darkness of the distance, spheres of brilliant red flowers, the head a little too big to be encompassed by cupped hands, they were breathtaking. I supposed anything else might be thought banal, but no, on the outskirts of the trees many flowering plants, ferns and club mosses were listed.

By now our footwear had become aquatic and we were experiencing a problem getting our washing dry. Complaining about wet underwear, our driver came up with an African solution, 'Don't wear any', he remarked, dare I say, drily? And the weather was making a mockery of Darrel's plans because our transport could not traverse wet gravel roads, and even narrow tar was a problem because road verges became traps for their heavy weight. Ultimately, we were confined to the main highways, but such is the glory of the flora, that everywhere we went and everything we saw was of interest.

After a stop at Troutbeck Hotel, World's View showed itself briefly to us, enough to find many herbaceous plants including a local *Gladiolus zimbabweensis* and *Eucomis pole-evansii*, as well as *Clematopsis villosa*. The rain setting in once more, we fled down to the lowlands, to the fascinating Ziwa ruins, with stone terraces spread over 8000 km<sup>2</sup>. Ziwa has had human occupancy going back a third of a million years, leaving traces in stone tools and rock paintings, but probably not affecting the ecology of the area very much. Between 300 and 900 AD a group of agriculturists built permanent villages and smelted iron here. After a hiatus about which little is known, in the 1400s another group immigrated from the lower Zambezi. They used their stone building skills to create miles of rock walls in the valleys and up the slopes of the koppies which held back terraces on which they grew sorghums, and pits for the safe-keeping of the stock, which are still visible and traceable today. It was probably soil exhaustion and over-use of

*Stathmestelma spectabile*, a milkweed growing in the rubble at Ziwa.







Above. Yellow flame lilies, *Gloriosa superba*. Flame lilies come in a variety of colours, pale yellow to yellow-edged red or brick were common and regrettably harvested and sold in large bunches along the main highways.

Below left. *Bauhinia petersii*, a common tall shrub in the warmer areas often found in association with *B. galpinii*.

Below right. The orchid *Eulophia streptopetala*.

natural resources in this restricted area that led to the dispersion of these people in the early 1800s. One wonders whether a similar collapse occurred at Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe and other sites in southern Africa, as is also suggested for the Mayan civilization in the New World. In any event, the natural vegetation is now restored and has a surprising diversity of tree and herbaceous species, including *Stathmostelma spectabile*, a splendid milkweed with brilliant red flowers, and *Lapeirousia grandiflora* also with red flowers.

These sandy valleys surrounded by granite koppies which make up such vast areas of Zimbabwe are happy botanizing grounds, as are the granite slopes themselves.

The local rainfall in some cases being effectively trebled in the valleys by the run-off from impervious high granite mountains, a great diversity is supported. Capetonians accustomed to the paucity of tree species in their home environment are bound to be amazed by the diversity of just the trees alone. The Matobos is another such botanically richly diverse area. Despite living in the vicinity for eleven years, and leading student and tree society parties through the area several times a year, in addition to making frequent sorties there for the sheer pleasure of the surroundings, I still kept finding unknown taxa up to the end of an eleven-year stay in Zimbabwe. And it is not only the trees that are diverse. Grasses, sedges, orchids, water-plants, climbers, geophytes and all manner of herbaceous species add to the assemblages. As Darrel remarked, a lifetime is not long enough to get to know all the local plants.

Along the main roads a few noteworthy plants included red and yellow flame lilies, *Gloriosa superba*, masses of *Bauhinia galpinii* climbing to huge heights up woodland trees, often in company with the more shrubby white *Bauhinia petersii*, the tree *Cussonia spicata*, with striking branching candelabras of flowers, the yellow pea-flowered huilboom *Peltophorum africanum*, msasa *Brachystegia spiciiformis*, the mountain acacia *B. glaucescens* and the pod mahogany *Azelia quanzensis* whose flowers even after falling are violet-scented, and whose seeds, capped by a large red aril, are used in necklaces.

We also saw smaller species. The climber, *Cyphostemma montanum*, with clusters of bright red tendrils clinging to the exposed surfaces of granite boulders, carries well-groomed, flat-topped clusters of grapes which turn from red to black and deserves a place in the garden. It was a revelation to see the metre-tall orchid *Eulophia streptopetala* (which I was growing exposed to the full blast of the sun in a pot in my garden in Cape Town) nestling in company with shrubs and metre-tall thatching grasses (*Hyparrhenia*) in a damp, protected ditch in rich red soil. Now I understand the pale bleached leaves on my plants and can rescue them from their purgatory.

The rain followed us to our next hotel, the Inn on the Vumba, so once again we left the uplands for the lowveld down the Hot Springs road to see baobabs which never fail to impress even when young. The local whaleback granite koppies produced the expected diversity of interesting plants including that curious woody climber *Artabotrys brachypetalus* whose petals never unfurl, yet the flowers succeed in producing clusters of almost flavourless berries resembling Barlinka grapes which are a great gastronomic disappointment. There was a rich assemblage of plant species adapted to growing in small pockets of soil which for long periods are dry and desiccated. In consequence the plants are variously adapted to drought. The resurrection plant *Myrothamnus flabellifolius*, *Selaginella dregei*, sedges, *Xerophyta*, the 'brooms and brushes plant', and the





succulent stapelioid *Huernia hislopii* were seen. Growing in the shade of a *Sterculia quinquefolia* tree in a rock pocket, in accumulated domed organic matter, we discovered an unexpected colony of the succulent xerophyte orchid *Eulophia petersii*, with unmistakable rigid erect short-channelled leaves. I had been attempting to grow this plant with little success, and now I have a better idea of its needs. There is nothing to beat field observation to facilitate gardening.

The next day the Vumba mountain greeted us with yet more drizzly rain, intercepted by the closed canopy of the Bunga forest. Bunga was the nearest we came to jungle on our trip, the trees with conspicuous buttress roots were copiously draped in climbing ferns and filmy ferns. Grass in the glades, bright pink *Impatiens psychodelphoides*, *Dracaena odorata* with its conspicuous spike of white flowers and *Sansevieria metallica* with its huge spike of scented flowers were only a few of the treasures we saw. Our leader, Dr Colin Saunders, with a group of devotees working rather like our 'Friends' groups in South Africa, is promoting the conservation of this magnificent forest. He fights alien invasive acacias, pines and eucalypts which are as much of a problem in Zimbabwe as in South Africa, and attempts to raise awareness of the need to preserve this area, from invasive plants. The view from the lawn in front of his house looks out over the plunging escarpment down the Burma valley to the Chicamba Dam in Mozambique. Everywhere on this week-long trip we were reminded how close we were to the international border.

Our last hotel, the Chimanimani, was conveniently near our last botanical destination, the Outward Bound Scollbol under the peak of Chimanimani. We stopped briefly at the grave of Moodie, the leader of the first pioneer column into this area, and spent the rest of the day botanizing in the area of the School including Tessa's Pool and its waterfall. Here in yet more diverse vegetation, we saw the mahobohobo tree with its huge leaves, its distribution confined largely to the eastern districts of Zimbabwe and the adjacent Mozambique lowlands. It has edible fruits much in demand to eat and for fermenting into an alcoholic

Below left. *Berlinianche aethiopica*, a parasite on *Julbernardia globiflora* (munondo), is a species that probably produces the smallest flower we know, in a family which produces the largest flower on earth. Below right. Chimanimani's pale quartzite rocks catching the late afternoon sun: one of the most striking profiles in the Eastern districts.



*Sansevieria metallica* is probably one of the most striking of the mother-in-law's tongues. Its flower spike is raised high above the leaves in dense shade in the Bunga Forest.

drink. We returned through coffee and macadamia plantations. The produce of both, and of locally grown tea, is sold here and is good.

While January is not the peak time for orchid flowers, we nevertheless saw a goodly number, including a fine population of *Eulophia odontoglossa* in the tall grass of the roadside.

Thinking back to our field visits, and looking through slides and notes afterwards, brought the realization of how well Darrel chose our stops and localities. Each tended to reveal a number of plants not seen at any other place. To arrange things so effectively demonstrated just how authoritative he was after a lifetime of fieldwork, and how fortunate the tour was to have him as leader. The tour booklet he wrote for us makes the kind of reading that supplements what we saw, emphasizes that we were there for too short a time, and when happier times

return, will certainly persuade us to return.

We spent the last night at Mbizi Lodge, a small game ranch on the outskirts of Harare Airport with fine mixed woodland and generally comfortable accommodation. Here Darrel pointed out specimens of a totally parasitic flowering plant *Berlinianche aethiopica* whose vegetative parts live within the wood of the branch of the host but whose abundant small bobble-like flowers burst out from beneath the bark of *Julbernardia globiflora* (munondo) trees. *Berlinianche* belongs to the family Rafflesiaceae all of whose members are parasitic, and represented in the South African flora by one genus only, *Cytinus* (whose modest red flower is illustrated in the Botswana wildflower guide no 7, West Coast). One species of the genus *Rafflesia*, *R. titan*, produces the largest known flower on earth, with an 80 cm diameter and evil-smelling to match.

The return drive to Harare brought us back to the present with a jolt: long queues of vehicles waiting to fill up with almost non-existent fuel, and disconcerting stories about bush fires on the Cape Peninsula. Looking back on this trip, after two catastrophic cyclones and the politics flowing from a recent referendum, we might well have had to cancel a visit timed later in the year; but at the time our luck held, and we could not have had a better experience.

