

An Oasis of

A year of flowering on

by Betty Dwight and Joanne Eastman



Rondebosch Common was declared a National Monument in 1961, thereby preserving, unintentionally, a small piece of Cape Flats flora 'sand plain fynbos', of which so little remains, in the southern suburbs of Cape Town. Standing in the middle of the Common, surrounded by busy roads, one can still feel a sense of peace as the noise of the cars fade in the background. On closer inspection, with eyes turned to the ground, a wonderful miniature world of flowers, insects, birds and butterflies opens up. It is truly an oasis of wildness within the city.

In **January** amongst the dry grass there are little patches of yellow *Lobelia*, *Monopsis lutea*. The African Monarch butterfly with its russet brown wings, tipped with black and white, flutters around the papery white *Helichrysum* flowers. Blue *Aristea* are flowering. This *Aristea* is taller with a strap-like stem compared to the *Aristea africana* seen in September. A few white *Roella prostrata* straggle along the ground. The *Psoralea pinnata* shrubs with their pale mauve flowers appear bravely in the dry season.

Even in hot **February** there is something to find. The *Struthiola* shrublets are covered in small creamy, sometimes pale pink flowers. The restios stand out amongst the yellow grass with their green stems and dark brown flower heads. There are also many interesting seed-pods beginning to form. Grasshoppers, dragonflies and the Citrus Swallowtail butterflies are evident.

In **March** the large black ants are on the move, very busy carrying seeds to their nests.

The history of Rondebosch Common

A plaque on a stone at the south-west corner of Rondebosch Common reads:

'The Rondebosch Common is part of an area used as a camping ground by General J W Janssen's Batavian Troops in 1805 and by the British troops after 1806. In 1855 grazing rights of the Common were granted to the rector of St Paul's Church, Rondebosch, on the condition that the public have access to the area.'

In the early 1800s Napoleon of France was determined to crush the British, who, fearing the loss of the refreshment station on the route to the East, decided to occupy the

Cape once again. In anticipation of this attack, in 1805 General Janssens and his Batavian forces camped on Rondebosch Common. Holland at this time was under French influence and known as the Batavian republic. In January 1806, 6 700 British soldiers under the command of General David Baird landed at Losperds Bay in Table Bay. The British soon overran General Janssens' 2000 men, in what is now known as the Battle of Blaauberg. From 1806, the British used the Common as their campsite for many years.

In 1854 Governor George Cathcart, granted the campground

land to the Anglican Church, provided that it remain open public space. The Bishop of Cape Town then handed it to Rev Fry of St Paul's Anglican Church to administer. Rev Fry lived at Charlie's Hope (today part of Rustenburg High School) and grazed his own cattle on the Common or 'pasturage' as well as charging other farmers a fee to do likewise.

Under the administration of the church the common survived many uses. From the early 1850s sand and stone was quarried. This left a deep depression which in winter used to fill with water, on which the local children used to sail their

Wildness

Rondebosch Common.

of Rondebosch Common, Cape Town

A few grey skinks scuttle under the nearest plant.

Of the ten species of oxalis on the Common, the pale mauve *Oxalis monophylla*, is usually the first to be seen in April. It has a most unusual, almost heart shaped leaf. The tiny russet coloured *Tulbaghia alliacea* can also be seen.

May is most exciting as the fruit of the kukumakranka pops up and seeds. Other oxalis species start flowering - the dainty leaved *Oxalis glabra* range in colour from white, to pale pink and from deep pink to mauve. Bright pink *Oxalis purpurea* also flower quite widely over the Common.

Come June and July, and hopefully the winter rains have set in, making rivulets of the Common paths. Tiny black squiggly tadpoles make an appearance in the pools, attracting egrets and a heron or two. The ground becomes carpeted in white and yellow *Cotula*, while the new leaves of the bulbs start to push up between them. The short-stemmed *Babiana villosula*, the yellow and cream *Romulea* and the thorny *Asparagus capensis* with its tiny white flowers are in bloom.

August heralds the spring carpets of flowers with the start of many different flowering bulbs and daisies. *Galaxia fugacissima* line the paths like yellow confetti. The large pink *Drosera cistiflora* catches the eye as it stands above many of the smaller flowers. The early pinky mauve and mauve *Babiana disticha* (which used to be called *B. plicata*) are sprinkled along some of the paths while the different colours of the beautiful *Romulea rosea* resemble a Persian carpet.



boats. It was later (in the 1950s) filled with rubble and grassed with Kikuyu, as a field for the Rosebank School. In the 1860s Bishops School played rugby on the Common. Rondebosch Boys School also used it for a variety of games and as a venue for athletics. Villagers Football Club played rugby here from 1876 - their clubhouse was roughly where the Scout hall is today. Between 1891 and 1937 the Common was used by the Cape Golf Club, and evidence of their nine-hole golf course can still be seen on aerial photographs. All the while dairy cattle continued to graze on the Common. In 1890

the church sold the area that is now Park Estate, and in 1909 the church transferred the remainder of the Common to the municipality of Rondebosch. From the 1930s soccer and cricket was played on the Common by people from all over Cape Town. The old cricket pitches too can still be identified. During World War II troop manoeuvres occasionally took place and a searchlight was put up. After the 1950s large areas on the edges of the Common were taken to widen the surrounding roads.

Today the indigenous flora of the Common is threatened by invasion from alien plant species, especially

Eragrostis and Kikuyu grasses which are very difficult to eradicate. Annual weeds have spread in the disturbed area. Dumping of builder's rubble and garden refuse is becoming increasingly more prevalent, bringing unwanted weeds and garden species. Fires also occur too often, before vegetation is able to regenerate or set seed. Nevertheless, despite all this disturbance, more than 200 plant species still remain on this land today.

Please note that evening primrose, in the illustration above is not indigenous.

September and October bring numerous new flowers, while some of the earlier arrivals have disappeared. Hundreds of the striking dark-centred blue *Felicia heterophylla* mingle with the yellow *Ursinia* daisies. The yellow star-shaped *Spiloxene capensis* flowered profusely last year after the fire, while the exquisite dark-centred white variety is becoming more difficult to find. The sticky red bristles on the leaves of the delicate little white *Drosera trinervia* shine in the morning sun. Other flowers to be seen are *Triglochin bulbosa*, *Baeometra uniflora* with its unusual dark yellow petals with brown underside, shrublets of pink *Nylandtia spinosa* (which used to be called *Mundia spinosa*), the upright *Satyrium odorum*, *Disa bracteata* (formerly *Monadenia bracteata*) and *Holothrix villosa*. Mauve *Babiana disticha*, the perfumed *Wurmbea spicata*, the small *Pharanceum incanum* and the red seeds of *Aizoon sarmentosum* are also present. The small white *Eustegia minuta* creeps over the ground prompted by the recent fire. As you walk along the centre of the Common, the large orange gazanias brighten the veld while the miniature blue *Aristea africana* grow on the bare koffie-klip. The bright purple of the small *Geissorhiza aspera* is easily spotted and the white *Sparaxis bulbifera* is everywhere to be seen.

November brings the drier weather and the grasses give the Common a hue of Naples yellow. However, hidden from the hurried passers-by, many species still flower - the most special being the ixias. First to bloom is the yellow *Ixia paniculata*, followed by the pinky mauve, white, yellow and blue *Ixia monodelpha*. Other flowers to be



found are *Wahlenbergia capensis*, *Cyanella hyacinthoides*, mauve *Roella ciliata*, blue *Micranthus junceus* which stands up like cats' tails in amongst the grass, *Falkia repens*, the tall yellow *Moraea ramosissima* and the bright blue *Heliophila*.

In December up comes the very beautiful kukumakranka - *Gethyllis afra*, the emblem of the Friends of Rondebosch Common. ❖

Many brilliant patches of Gazanias - Their centres differ in design



Patches of *Bobiana disticha*



Further reading

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- Welsh, Frank. 2000. *A History of South Africa*. Harper Collins.

The Friends of Rondebosch Common

The Friends of Rondebosch Common are interested in the biological, natural and cultural history of the Common and wish to spread this knowledge to others. The Friends are affiliated to the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa and also liaise with the Unicity in the conservation and management of the Common. They also have regular conducted spring walks and a newsletter. After retiring in 1972, one of the authors of this article, Betty Dwight, (nee Bowker), started to paint the flowers, insects and birds on the Common, ending up with a series of eighty water-colour paintings. Betty has allowed the Friends to print some of her work as notelets to raise funds for their activities. The Friends may be contacted at PO Box 41, Rondebosch, 7701 or e-mail rondebosch-common@mweb.co.za.

