



A new species of *Ornithogalum* growing amongst flat dolomite pebbles and rocks, adjacent to *Rabia albipinata*.



The initial stages of bud formation in the new *Ornithogalum*. The bud is just starting to develop at ground level at the base of the leaf. The photograph was taken in June.

## AN UNUSUAL DWARF *ORNITHOGALUM* FROM THE NORTH WEST PROVINCE

by Charles Craib

The southern African species of *Ornithogalum* were revised by Amelia Obermeyer\* in 1978. Since then several new species have been found, many of which remain to be formally described. The North West Province is not a well-explored area botanically, and not surprisingly it is starting to yield quite a lot of rarity.

high from November until early February, and plants that grow here are either dormant at the hottest time of the year or else are adapted to grow during rainy periods in the late summer and autumn (February to early May). In late May severe frost occurs and the ground dries out completely. At this time most late summer and autumn growing plants enter dormancy until favourable conditions the following autumn.

The niche occupied by the *Ornithogalum* consists of pockets of soil amongst dolomite rocks or gravel beds over larger stretches of soil situated on extensive sheets of exposed dolomite.

The bulbs occur singly or in scattered groups of two to forty plants, rarely more. The species is plentiful at some localities particularly where there are deep soil patches which remain moist for longest after rain. These areas are likely to afford the best opportunity for seeds to germinate and young bulbs to develop.

The growing season of this strange species starts in late summer in February but not until substantial rains have fallen. Bulbs make their appearance from mid-February onwards with each successive good shower of rain. They emerge from dormancy at their peak during March and early April. The last bulbs to emerge from dormancy are those where the soil cover is thinnest and, consequently, likely to be the driest. It is improbable that the plants emerge from dormancy during years which experience a dry late summer and early autumn.

The *Ornithogalum* leaf takes about two weeks to develop fully. In late

May severe frosts occur in the general habitat and these continue throughout June, July and the first half of August. The leaves are unaffected by the severe conditions but the end of leaves start to shrivel slightly on some plants, usually growing where the soil is thin and where the ridges become very dry and exposed to sunlight throughout the day. The bulbs produce flower buds in mid-winter (mid to late June). A peculiar characteristic of the flowers is that there are only two to four buds on each flowering stem and the plants appear to flower at ground level or a little above. The flowering and fruiting process has not yet been fully observed but will be likely in this case to play a significant role in the taxonomic placing of these plants.

The same habitat is also occupied by a *Syringodea* species that may also be undescribed. These plants come into leaf in March, usually towards the end of the month, and put on a spectacular display of golden yellow flowers. They flower at ground level and their seed capsules are produced just below ground level. The leaves wither very slowly and are still green at their bases in mid-June.

A lot more remains to be learnt about the *Ornithogalum* particularly about its flowering and seed distribution habits, and also whether or not it is a narrow endemic. The bulbs have a great deal of horticultural potential as pot plants and miniature rockery subjects. They also make a good foundation for the production of unusual and interesting cultivars and hybrids. ♀

\*A.A. Obermeyer. 1978. *Ornithogalum*: a revision of the southern African species in *Bothalia*, vol. 12(3), 323-376.



*Euphorbia davyi* can often be found growing with the new *Ornithogalum* and is often tinged with pink during the winter months.

One such species is an interesting *Ornithogalum* from the Marico district. The plant is characterized by a single prostrate leaf covered in short white to ivory coloured bristles, which give the leaves a silvery appearance when they are in strong direct sunlight.

At the time of writing the plants are only known from a few exposed low dolomite ridges in an area of about 10 km<sup>2</sup>. The ridges are littered with dolomite rocks and well-worn shiny blackish dolomite pebbles. The habitat is very hot and arid with an interesting succulent flora. Ground temperatures on these ridges are very