THE WILDFLOWERS OF MEADOWRIDGE COMMON

Paradise lost and regained? A challenge to the Friends of Meadowridge Common.

*by **Fiona Watson**, Meadowridge, Cape Town*

At the entrance to Meadowridge Common in the Cape Town suburb of Meadowridge, a signboard (right) **greets visitors with the words, 'The Meadowridge Common is one of the last remnants of Sand Plain Fynbos. These remnants have the highest concentration of plant species threatened with extinction recorded for Africa. TREASURE YOUR HERITAGE.' It is signed by the 'Friends of the Meadowridge Common'.**

The history of the Common stretches back to 1685 when Simon van der Stel named a farm 'Constantia'. On his death this farm was divided into the present Constantia and Bergvliet and in 1769 Petrus Eksteen bought Bergvliet and built the Bergvliet farmhouse, now a national monument. Most of the veld in Bergvliet remained an undisturbed paradise and Dr William Purcell, manager of the farm from 1902 to 1919, collected herbarium specimens of 595 different species from an area of 3.43 km^2. These are still in the Compton Herbarium at Kirstenbosch and represent 26.4% of the Cape Peninsula flora. In 1952, the suburb of Meadowridge was developed as a 'garden city' and, with the suburb of Bergvliet, the area has become thoroughly urbanized.

Meadowridge Common today

The largest green lung for Meadowridge, the Common occupies a small area of 0.06 km^2. It surrounds two football fields and has tennis courts, bowling greens, apartments and other buildings on its border. It is a popular place for residents to walk their dogs. Much of the Common is covered by pine trees, which suppress some of the flora, but not as much as I expected. Abuse of the Common at night has included drunken parties, visits by drug abusers and vagrants using it for cooking, drinking and sleeping.

It was this abuse of a nature area that led some local residents, in 1996, to band together to clean up the Common and confront the problems. In December 1997 they formed a committee and, in co-operation with the South Peninsula Municipality, have organized clean ups, arranged for the removal of 100 pine trees, covered a path with bark chips to encourage people to stick to it, blocked access to cars with pine logs and reported suspicious activities to the police. Dr Purcell's list of species, as identified by J. Rourke, P. Fairall and D. Snijman, has been consulted and some of the remaining flora identified. The committee has also endeavoured to remove alien Port Jackson plants as they appear.

Above.**One shrub of *Diastella proteoides* (1.5 m^2 in diameter) occurs on the Common. It needs protection!** **Photo: F. Watson.**

Right. ***Moraea collina.*** Far right. ***Wurmbea monopetala*, standing only 110 mm tall, is easily overlooked unless one is on hands and knees.** **Photos: F. Watson.**

Top right. ***Carpobrotus acinaciformis*** **and the yellow** ***Carpobrotus edulis*** **are the largest flowers on the Common: 90 mm in diameter.**
Centre right. ***Ixia dubia.***
Bottom right. ***Monopsis debilis*** **is one of the smallest flowers on the Common: 3-4 mm across.**
Photos: F. Watson.

The flora

As an amateur botanist with only one year of botany at university level, I have, for thirty years, been interested in what remains of our rich floral heritage. In November 1999, I decided to undertake a survey of the flowers as they appeared on the Common over the course of a year and to make a photographic record of this survey. It is this activity that led, recently, to my being co-opted onto the Friends of the Meadowridge Common Committee.

I did not realize at the time that I had chosen a year that would include one of the driest winters and hottest summers on record. I have noted about ninety different species and am continuing to find more. Some appear *en masse* like *Sparaxis bulbifera*, *Senecio littoreus* and *Ursinia anthemoides* and some have only one plant like *Diastella proteoides*, a threatened species of protea. Some are brightly coloured, like *Moraea collina* (previously *Homeria flaccida*) and others are well camouflaged against the brown sand like *Wurmbea monopetala*. Some are large as is the sour fig *Carpobrotus acinaciformis* with a diameter of 90 mm, and others small, like *Monopsis debilis* with a diameter of 4 mm.

In **November**, the threatened *Diastella proteoides* is at its best, but it continues to flower throughout the year. Needing to protect it, and being conscious of not disturbing its roots, we have had to carefully weed out infestation of a tendrillous introduced *Vicia hirsuta*, *Senecio littoreus* and grasses. A patch of beautiful golden *Ixia dubia* at the southern fringe of the pine trees was followed by a collection of golden sticky-stemmed *Moraea elsiae* opening in the afternoons on the northern fringe. The only specimen of the pink-flowering *Cryptadenia grandiflora* shrub that grew under the pine trees was destroyed by a tractor sent in to mow the grass. (This 'need' by the authorities to mow nature areas is another problem to be confronted.) An area of *Otholobium decumbens* was also destroyed – in a fire started by vagrants.

December provided displays in blue: a patch of *Aristea dichotoma*, flourishing surprisingly in a very dry, sandy area, *Lobelia erinus* fringing a damper pathway, and 3 m high shrubs of *Psoralea pinnata*.

Left. ***Aristea dichotoma.*** Below top. **The monarch butterfly, *Danaus chrysippus*, visiting *Nylandtia spinosa*.** Below centre. ***Romulea hirsuta.*** Below bottom. ***Geissorhiza aspera.*** **Photos: F. Watson.**

One plant of *Lapeirousia corymbosa* flowered profusely at the foot of a pine tree. The white-flowering shrubs of *Erica subdivaricata* provided a contrast to the blues.

From **January to April** it was extremely hot and dry, broken by only seven days of light showers. Large fires raged around the Peninsula and the Common had two small fires of its own. Grasses and restios were to the fore. In April only *Eriocephalus africanus*, *Metalasia muricata* and *Chrysanthemoides monilifera* shrubs came into bloom.

By **May** the skilpadbessie *Nylandtia spinosa* was in full bloom with details of its exquisite small flowers only evident on close inspection. For a week, one of these large shrubs was continually visited by numerous monarch butterflies, *Danaus chrysippus*, surprisingly as I have not seen it recorded as a host plant.

Three days with rain and eight with showers brought a floral response in **June and July**. A week after the rains at the end of June, a patch of autumn stars, *Empodium plicatum,* came into bloom under some pines. Interestingly, the same happened with patches of small sterretjies, *Spiloxene capensis*, after the rains of 2 and 21 August – but in different places under the pine trees. The rains also brought *Oxalis* species out in profusion: *Oxalis obtusa*, *O. luteola*, *O. versicolor* and *O. purpurea*. *Lachenalia reflexa* also flowered but did not age from yellow to orange as it normally does, but shrivelled up as the drought of July took hold. Was there time to set seed? I wonder.

August began with three days of rain and heralded spring with mass displays of yellow *Senecio littoreus* and white *Sparaxis bulbifera*. *Salvia africana-lutea* displayed its brown blooms, and the pelargoniums were represented by shrubs of *Pelargonium capitatum* full of dark pink blooms as well as the pale pink *P. myrrhifolium* and the smaller cream and brown *P. triste*. At ground level the rich rose colour of *Romulea hirsuta* and the lilac flowers of *R. rosea* glowed, as did the iridescent yellow *Lampranthus reptans*. The trachyandras, *Trachyandra ciliata* and *T. revoluta* provided contrast with their muted white colours.

September brought rain and evidence of Paradise. Among the fields of yellow *Ursinia anthemoides*, I found many gems. Sheets of blue *Geissorhiza aspera* were followed by a smaller number of cream *Geissorhiza imbricata*. Butterfly-dainty moraeas have always been a favourite of mine, and clump of blue *Moraea tripetala* bloomed in a damp area over a period of two weeks. On two afternoons, the Common's single plant of *Moraea lugubris* (previously *M. plumaria*) displayed its two purple and gold flowers with their plumes of style crests. *Moraea fugax* subsp. *fugax* flowered over a wide area, with its eye-catching yellow iris-shaped flowers. Lots of flax-blue *Heliophila africana* flowers provided Nature's perfect complementary coloured counterfoils to the dominant yellows.

Quaint and not easily noticed were the small flowers of *Wurmbea monopetala*, with their six claw-like cream and brown perianth lobes. *Triglochin bulbosa* flowers are odd in appearance with narrow brown tubular flowers tipped with the red hairs of their stigmas like lighted cigarettes. The orchids

Satyrium odorum and *Pterygodium catholicum* in their greens are interesting but could not rival the exotic orchids. *Albuca flaccida* showed how apt its Latin name 'sentry in a box' is.

The heat retuned in **October** affecting the insectivorous sundew *Drosera trinervia*. The flower buds seemed to be aborting in the hot, dry weather, and the only buds that I observed opening into full flower were a group that I had experimentally watered the previous evening. *Geissorhiza tenella* opened their narrow perianth lobes each morning for a couple of weeks, and also successful were members of the Campanulaceae family: the tall blue *Wahlenbergia capensis* (growing in an area with some shade) and the minute *Microcodon hispidulum*. *Monopsis debilis* also flowered. Iridescent yellow *Carpanthea pomeridiana* and shrubby glistening *Ruschia sarmentosa* were highlights in areas already turning brown.

These are but some of the flowering plants. I observed. If 2001 is not as dry, it will be interesting to observe any differences and to see if the *Lachenalia reflexa* and *Drosera trinervia* were able to set seed.

The way forward

This remnant of the flora of the original Bergvliet is worth preserving and needs to be well managed. Are there any lists of flora from other Bergvliet remnants? Where species are now only represented by one or two specimens, they could be augmented to better re-establish the species. Access to the Common for walking and experiencing a little bit of nature needs to be continued for residents. They should also be introduced to and made aware of the sensitive nature of their heritage on the Common.

The Friends of the Meadowridge Common are considering joining with other Friends in affiliation with the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa in order to share ideas and support each other.

Above. ***Moraea lugubris.*** Right. **The red glands on the leaves of this sundew, *Drosera trinervia*, trap insects and secrete protein-digesting enzymes.** Below left. ***Moraea fugax* subsp. *fugax*.** Below right. ***Moraea tripetala.*** **Photos: F. Watson.**