



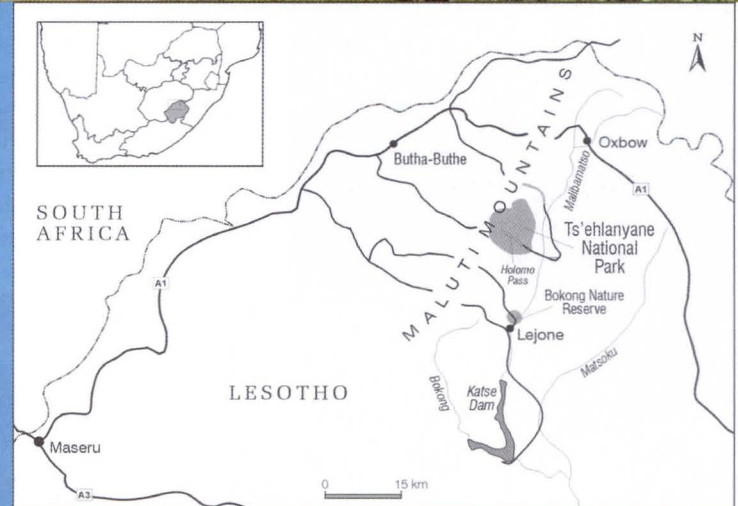
Wildflowers of Lesotho's Tséhlanyane National Park

by Wim Wybenga

Tséhlanyane is one of the few unspoilt wilderness areas of Lesotho, situated in the northern part of the Maluti Mountain range. The camping area and lodges give a sense of being right in the heart of the Maluti escarpment with the surrounding peaks varying

in altitude from 2 300-3 150 m above sea level. On a short visit at the beginning of February 2006, we were quite amazed at the abundance and diversity of wildflowers Tséhlanyane had to offer. In three days we recorded close to eighty species in flower - lilies, orchids,

herbs, succulents, shrubs, climbers and trees. According to Elsa Pooley's fieldguide (2003) on mountain flowers of the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg and Lesotho, more than 2 200 species of plants occur in the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Park (MDTP) area of which



TOP: Early morning mists near Tséhlanyane National Park in Lesotho. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

ABOVE: Map by Sally Adam, Technodraft.

400 are endemic. This is close to 8% of South Africa's plant species.

Tséhlanyane is one of three reserves that were developed by the Lesotho Highlands Water Commission (LHWC) as part of their contract with the Lesotho government. (See text box on p. 85.) During our stay at the park, we embarked on two hiking trails, the Matsá-Mararo waterfall via the lower Letsá-le-tsó path (11 km) and the Holomo Pass 4x4 track (6 km). Although the major trails at Tséhlanyane are well made and well marked, they can become quite confusing as numerous alternative routes have been constructed recently which are not described on the laminated map at the park entrance. At the moment this is the only map available to tourists. I'm quite certain that we would have got lost if we hadn't arranged for a guide to accompany us.

Our guide, Johannes Mofokeng, was exceptionally helpful and managed to keep us on the right path to Letsá-le-tsó, pointing out various medicinal plants, as well as their scientific names, on the way. I'm sure birders would also find Tséhlanyane a most enriching experience.

The lower Letsá-le-tsó trail to Matsá-Mararo Falls

The lower Letsá-le-tsó trail is an almost level path for 3.5 km. The name Letsá-le-tsó means 'black pool' and it is situated on the Liqaleng River (pronounced 'Diqaleng') which is the Basotho name for mountain bamboo *Thamnocalamus tessellatus*. This is a fascinating plant 1-5 m tall, that is used by the Basotho people as a construction material and an under-layer for thatch. I was only recently made aware of the fact that bamboo forests occur in certain parts of Lesotho. The trade in mountain bamboo is a livelihood for many Basotho and explains why the forests are decreasing. In the Free State Province it is listed as an endangered species in the IUCN Red Data Book. It seems that the loss of habitat and the over-utilization of it for construction material by early settlers in the 1800s are the main reasons why it is now so rare in the Free State. The mountain bamboo is the host plant of an endangered species of butterfly, *Mestisella syrix*. The bamboo's preferred habitat is undisturbed, moist mountain slopes and riverine areas.

En route to Letsá-le-tsó one passes through large patches of cheche forest.

Cheche (oldwood or ouhout) *Leucosidea sericea* is an important ecological constituent of mountainous regions as it provides shelter to various kinds of ferns, herbs and the seedlings of indigenous trees. An entomological study that was done in Golden Gate Highlands National Park recorded 117 different kinds of beetles on one cheche tree. Veld fires usually prevent cheche from growing taller than a shrub or small tree, but at Tséhlanyane I was amazed to find specimens up to 7 m tall.

The arrow-leaved arum *Zantedeschia albomaculata* grows in various habitats: the shade of cheche forest in moist areas or on higher exposed mountain slopes. It is distinguished from the white arum lily *Z. aethiopica* by its spathe, which is cylindrical and white or cream to pale yellow. In *Z. aethiopica*, the spathe is large, wider, funnel-shaped and white only. *Z. albomaculata* is a high-altitude species found up to 2 500 m, whereas *Z. aethiopica* is usually found *en masse* in marshy areas below 2 250 m.

Growing near the path was a plant that is endemic to the eastern mountain region of South Africa: a tall shrub with bright yellow daisy-like flowers, *Euryops evansii*, also known as 'seh-lakoana.' It has attractive grey-green foliage at the top of bare stems. The disturbed areas of the path were covered in various pelargoniums and geraniums, notably *Pelargonium ranunculophyllum*, the leaves of which have a purplish fleck and, as the scientific name indicates, closely resemble that of cultivated *Ranunculus* species. We saw



ABOVE: Mountain bamboo *Thamnocalamus tessellatus*. The trade in mountain bamboo is a livelihood for many Basotho but in the Free State Province it is listed as an endangered species in the IUCN Red Data Book. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

FAR LEFT: The arrow-leaved arum lily *Zantedeschia albomaculata* grows in moist areas in the shade of cheche forest or higher up on exposed, damp mountain slopes. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

TOP LEFT: Cheche (oldwood or ouhout) *Leucosidea sericea* flowers from October till December. The Letsá-le-tsó trail passes through large patches of cheche forest. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

BOTTOM LEFT: The yellow everlasting *Helichrysum cooperi* growing on the way to the waterfall. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

large stands of *Plectranthus grillatus* directly next to the path in the shade of cheche. The guide, Johannes Mofokeng, pointed out a robust herb with large serrated leaves, known as lesoko *Alepidea amatymbica*. A tea made from the leaves is used as a cough and cold remedy

Near Letsá-le-tsó there was an abundance of mountain sage *Buddleja loricata* growing next to the path. It is very similar to the common wild sage *Buddleja salviifolia* that grows only a few hundred metres downstream. Take time observing the leaves: those of mountain sage are lanceolate (tapering to each end but broadest at about one-third from the base), leathery and darker green above, whereas those of the common wild sage are oval at the base and lighter green above, also softer and more woolly.

From Letsá-le-tsó to Matsá-Mararo a steep climb of 2 km followed with numerous new finds that we did not come across at the lower altitudes. These included the yellow everlasting *Helichrysum cooperi*, the night-flowering lion's spoor *Zaluzianskya schmitziae*, a prolific climber on a burnt cheche tree with pink-red paper-winged fruit (probably *Rumex sagittatus*), the hardy resurrection fern *Cheilanthes eckloniana*, the pineapple lily or khapumpo *Eucomis autumnalis* subsp. *clavata* on a steep basalt ledge and the highly fragrant *Selago melliodora* with white flowers. Appropriately, 'melliodora' means 'smelling of honey.'

At about 2 200 m on the damp basalt slopes, we came across a thorny sub-shrub with white daisy-like flowers *Berkheya cirsifolia*, and a bit higher up the slopes (at about 2 300 m) in similar habitat was a small pink *Hesperantha*.

Matsá-Mararo means 'three cascade pools' and it is indeed a spectacular waterfall consisting of three separate falls and pools on top of each other - a welcome sight and sound after a long hike!

On our return trip, we took hours to complete the descent as we observed numerous species that we did not see on our way up. Of particular mention were the purplish-brown flowers of *Schizoglossum atropurpureum* subsp. *atropurpureum*, also known as 'Basoetoeraap' as the roots are eaten raw as a sweet delight.

Holomo Pass Bridal Path

Holomo Pass is a fairly popular bridal path that connects the lower villages of the Tséhlanyane River Valley with the

RIGHT: *Euryops evansii* is endemic to the eastern mountain region of South Africa. It is known locally as 'sehlakoana.' Photo: Wim Wybenga.

RIGHT MIDDLE: Moss on wet basalt. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

RIGHT BELOW: The roots of Basoetoeraap *Schizoglossum atropurpureum* can be eaten raw as a sweet. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

BELOW: Matsá-Mararo means 'three cascade pools' and it is indeed a spectacular waterfall and a welcome sight and sound after a long hike. Photo: Wim Wybenga.



villages at the top of the escarpment (Solane and Motete). The lower part of the pass is also suitable for 4x4s, but even better for hiking and rambling as the burnt branches of cheche trees scratch your vehicle. This path is fairly straightforward and no guide is needed. We started on the 4x4 track that begins at the power station - and you can only ascend the valley and keep on climbing. A hiking trail proceeds from the top of Holomo Pass to Bokong Nature Reserve (a total distance of 39 km that takes two to three days).

Bokong is another jewel of Lesotho, acclaimed for the presence of the bearded vulture, its diversity of wildflowers and its unspoilt mountain scenery. It is situated at the head of the Mafika Lisiu Pass between Pitseng and Ha Lejone, on the way to Katse Dam. At 3 090m above sea level, it is the highest nature reserve in Africa that is accessible by motor vehicle.

We walked only 3 km of the path and then returned the same way.

At the lower end of the pass we came across two species of orchid, locally called 'mametsana'. The first, *Satyrium parviflorum*, had small yellowish-green flowers of 7 mm on a long stalk, with large, oval or heart-shaped leaves at its base. The second, *Habenaria epipactidea*, had long white spurs and creamy green flowers. It is apparently pollinated by hawk moths.

On eroded areas above the track a white hairbell, possibly *Dierama cooperi*



TOP LEFT & RIGHT: At the lower end of the Holomo Pass Bridal Path we came across two species of orchid, locally called mametsana: *Satyrium parviflorum* (left) and *Habenaria epipactidea* (right). Photo: Wim Wybenga.

BELOW: The crimson metsi-matso or southern phygelius *Phygelius capensis*. Photo: Wim Wybenga



drooped in the wind. Numerous purple bloukappies (hlokoa-le-lelle) *Polygala virgata* were seen flowering with the green of the Selepeng Range providing a contrasting background. They look for all the world like little butterflies suspended in mid-air. A tall species of *Senecio* with yellow daisy-inflorescences *en masse*, set the lower slopes on fire. This species seems to be abundant in the low-lying areas of the park.

Steadily climbing the Holomo River Valley and crossing the small Holomonyane River you find numerous wildflowers. The crimson metsi-matso or southern phygelius *Phygelius capensis* has a varied habitat, sometimes evident on moist slopes in cheche forest (on the Letsá-le-tsó trail), or on mountain slopes or even near rivers and streams in rocky terrain. Unlike *Phygelius aequalis*, the flower tubes are curved, not drooping. The latter species is only associated with rocky stream banks.

At the Holomonyane River crossing the indigenous mountain hibiscus, ilefeta or wildestokroos *Anisodonteia julii* subsp. *pannosa* occurs. It is a shrub, 1-4 m tall, with shiny pink flowers, often found near streams in scrub forest. Traveller's joy *Clematis brachiata* is a delightful climber with fragrant

ABOVE: Purple bloukappies (hlokoa-le-lelle) *Polygala virgata* contrasting with the green of the Selepeng Range in the background.

RIGHT: The indigenous mountain hibiscus, ilefeta or wildestokroos *Anisodonteia julii* subsp. *pannosa* is often found near streams in scrub forest. Photos: Wim Wybenga.



Tséhlanyane National Park

TSÉHLANYANE IS one of three reserves that were developed by the Lesotho Highlands Water Commission (LHWC) as part of their contract with the Lesotho government. The implementation and current management of the park is the responsibility of the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA), which was set up to manage that part of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) that falls within Lesotho's borders: the construction, operation and maintenance of all dams, tunnels, power stations and infrastructure, as well as secondary developments such as relocation, re-settlement, compensation, supply of water to re-settled villages, irrigation, fish hatcheries and tourism.

Tséhlanyane National Park cannot be reached from the eastern side and the only access road to the park is the road between Butha-Buthe and Leribe, a 40 km dirt road from the tar road turn-off. It is, however, possible to drive to the top of the escarpment (eastern border of Tséhlanyane) by means of a 4x4 road from Lejone – of interest for any 4x4 adventurers planning on camping out in the remote Malutis.

There is another small LHDA nature reserve only 4.5 ha in size, located more or less halfway between Butha-Buthe and Oxbow, directly west of Moteng Pass, it is referred to as the 'Liphofung Cave and Cultural Historical Site'. Even though there is a lot of rock art in Lesotho, this is one of only a few rock art sites that are preserved as National Monuments.

white flowers that occurs all along the path. We saw masses of wild rhubarb *Gunnera perpensa* on a marshy slope – also a common sight on the lower Letsá-le-tsó path. The Afrikaans vernacular name 'rivierpampoen' (river pumpkin) is quite descriptive of its character as it usually grows in wet places near rivers or in grasslands, and the leaves are very similar to certain pumpkins, but not related. *Gunnera perpensa* has numerous traditional medicinal uses; the stems and roots are peeled and eaten raw and used in beer-making. 🍷

Further reading

Pooley, E. 2003. *Mountain flowers: A field guide to the flora of the Drakensberg and Lesotho*. The Flora Publications Trust, Durban.



LEFT: The stems and roots of wild rhubarb *Gunnera perpensa* are peeled and eaten raw and also used in beer-making. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

BELOW: The author, Wim Wybenga (left) with a rambler and friend.

BOTTOM: Basotho children at a village near Tséhlanyane National Park. Photo: Wim Wybenga.

Acknowledgements

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The author

Wim Wybenga is a violinist, based in Clarens in the eastern Free State. He is a fieldguide to overseas visitors, mainly to rock art sites. Recently he completed endangered and protected plant species lists for a Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Park sectional project - the Clarens Biosphere Conservancy. He is actively involved with the local Village Conservancy. Wim completed his UNISA violin examinations while still at school, and went on to study earth sciences at the University of the North West.

