



## *Nerine huttoniae* up the creek?

New populations of this rare endemic nerine discovered in the upper reaches of the Fish River and its tributaries in the Cradock district

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There was intense interest in *Nerine huttoniae* after the article by Tony Dold in the March 2000 issue of *Veld & Flora*, Vol. 86(1). I despaired of ever being able to see this rare endemic in flower. It was thought to be confined to a few isolated populations along the lower reaches of the Fish River valley. I made numerous trips to Committees Drift and other likely sites only to be rewarded by a few dried up leaves of plants past their prime or so affected by drought that we thought they would not survive. Areas in the former Ciskei territories are so severely degraded by erosion and overgrazing by goats that it appeared that this supposedly very rare plant was ultimately doomed to extinction.

This impression changed dramatically early this year when vast populations were discovered in full flower in the upper reaches of the Fish River and its tributaries in the Cradock district. My brother Nigel, who regularly visits farms in this district informed me of large tracts of a mysterious 'lily' he had observed in January.

I assumed that it would be *Ammocharis coranica*, which is common in this area and had enjoyed a prolific flowering season in late 2003. A week or two later I visited the Eastern Cape and he showed me a flower he had pressed. Imagine my excitement when I realized it was very likely the elusive *Nerine huttoniae* I had been searching for. We set off the very next day and found to our amazement that there were numerous populations consisting of vast numbers of plants in full flower. Tony Dold confirmed the identification soon

after when he visited the Mountain Zebra Park.

The peak flowering time for *Nerine huttoniae* in this district is late January. It occurs in seasonally wet flat Karoo plains, not necessarily adjacent to river banks. The rather sparse rain in this region falls primarily in summer - mostly in the form of sharp thunderstorms at irregular intervals. The area is subject to severe periodic droughts, frost in winter and extreme heat in summer.

The soil is clay/loam, sometimes very stony. The *Nerine* plants are massed over extensive areas and grow between the low Karoo bushes and shrubs. They are clearly very hardy and drought resistant to be able to thrive in such an inhospitable habitat.

Most of the populations occur in areas that are fairly heavily grazed by sheep and goats. While subject to trampling and erosion, they showed no evidence whatsoever that they are grazed, and seem quite unpalatable to herbivores, but not to the amaryllis worm *Brithys crini*. These will definitely tackle any amaryllid! On a later visit we saw some of these worms feasting on *N. huttoniae*.

Seeds set very rapidly. The typical nerine-type seeds are like little peas that eventually drop to the ground and are dispersed by running water in subsequent storms. Germination occurs soon after the seeds have dropped.

With large deep pink flower heads and rosettes of broad glossy green leaves, *N. huttoniae* is clearly among the most spectacular members of the *Nerine* genus.