

The last two spiderheads

The re-discovery of *Serruria furcellata*

Serruria furcellata in its natural habitat at North Pine.



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Less than twenty years ago the spiderhead, *Serruria furcellata* was sufficiently abundant to rate a mention in a survey done by Barrie Low in a stand of coastal fynbos near North Pine and was a common species on the Cape Flats at Brakenfell, Kraaifontein and Blackheath. Today there are two plants left. How could we be this destructive?

My interest in *S. furcellata* was sparked whilst working for the Protea Atlas Project. I was given the task of locating any evidence of this species. I failed to find any plants in the nursery at Kirstenbosch, but luckily re-discovered two plants in one of the old beds in the *Protea* section of the Kirstenbosch. Unfortunately, they were not healthy and died soon after I found them.

I almost believed that this species was extinct but, against my better judgement, decided to have another go. This was the beginning of an intriguing journey packed with highs and lows.

I contacted Barrie Low, who had done much research and field work on the Cape Flats. He suggested that I try and find the plants that were part of the rare species collection at the University of the Western Cape's nursery.

I contacted them and went to see them, but sadly the subject of my pilgrimage turned out to be one ancient plant, close to senescence, with little new growth.

Nevertheless, I took nineteen cuttings and rooted them at Kirstenbosch. I reluctantly handed my babies to Trevor Adams, a horticulturist at Kirstenbosch entrusted with, amongst others, the rare species collection. Over the next three years he did a wonderful job of caring for and expanding the *S. furcellata* population until we had twenty-five plants.

We needed to find a home for our spiderhead. An article in *Die Burger* led to a tremendous public response. One of the interested persons was Rod Saunders who let us establish twelve plants on his farm in Kraaifontein.

A chance conversation with Rupert Koopman, a botany student at the University of the Western Cape, led me to Dr Lincoln Raitt who knew of a natural population in North Pine. He had witnessed its decline from a few hundred plants to less than ten individuals. With thinly concealed disbelief, we followed his directions to an open field in between hous-

es and an industrial area. At first glance, the site did not look very promising as it was thickly covered with alien grasses and Port Jackson, but closer examination revealed the presence of *Wachendorfia paniculata*, *W. multiflora*, *Leucospermum hypophyllocarpodendron*, *Leucadendron salignum* and various *Restio* species, which revived hopes of finding *Serruria furcellata*. After unsuccessfully searching the site for about fifteen minutes, Dr Raitt beckoned to us. To our delight, he had found two small stunted spiderheads in flower.

About a month after our amazing discovery, Steyn Marais, Tygerberg's regional manager of Cape Town Nature Conservation, informed us that the municipality's brush-cutters had paid a visit and mowed the last wild population of *Serruria furcellata*. Fortunately the plants were just topped off and not totally destroyed.

The future of *Serruria furcellata* looks bleak. It is currently threatened by frequent brush-cutting and over-burning. These pressures need to be addressed lest we allow this enigmatic and elusive species to be driven to extinction again. So, if you would like to help ensure the survival of this species, especially if you live in the North Pine/Kraaifontein area, please contact Ismail Ebrahim at 021 799 8742 or email ebrahim@nbict.nbi.ac.za.

Can you help?

We require the assistance of individuals based in the Cape who have field botanical experience, are capable of working independently, can read maps and use GPS and have their own transport.

The Threatened Species Programme will provide volunteers with the information on the last known localities of the plants, species descriptions for identification purposes and booklets for capturing information on the status of the populations. Mileage expenses incurred will be reimbursed.

If you are interested in helping please contact Domatilla Raimondo at the Threatened Species Programme on 021 799 8751 or Ismail Ebrahim, telephone 021 799 8742.