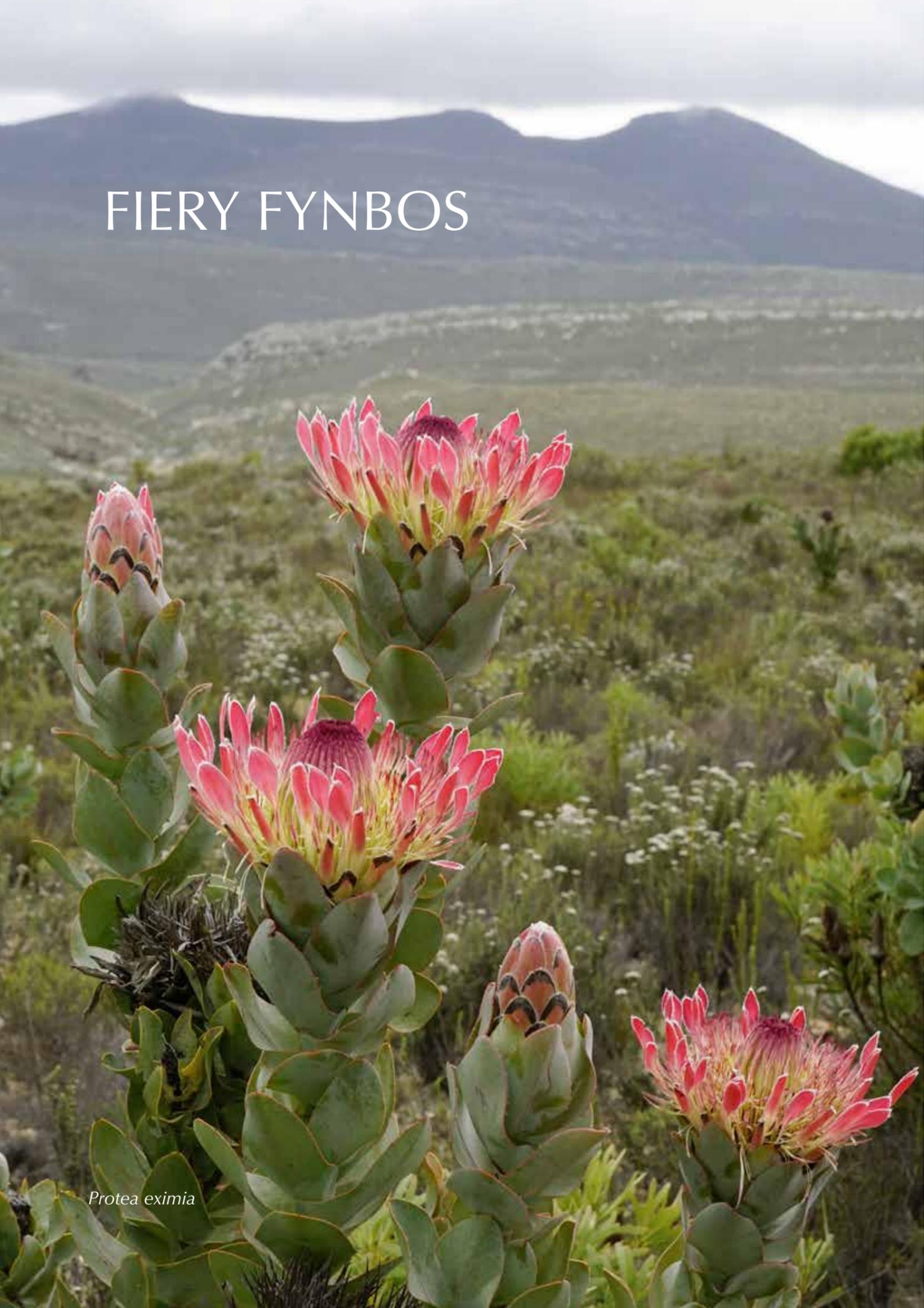


# FIERY FYNBOS



*Protea eximia*



*Leucospermum conocarpodendron*

The Western Cape's legendary fynbos contains a bewildering array of plants. It all falls within the Cape Floral Kingdom (which is also a Mediterranean climate flora) that contains around 8500 species. Broadly speaking, a combination of geological stability, nutrient poor soils, complex geography and a wide variety of pollinators has driven a tremendous diversification of flower design and colour. On top of which there is one final element - fire! It is an inescapable truth of this habitat that fire will happen on a regular basis and is absolutely necessary for many species.

The scene above of *Leucospermum conocarpodendron* went up in smoke a few weeks later, but this handsome shrub will regenerate and colour the landscape once more in September-October. It is a frequent plant on the Cape Peninsula, just one of the hundreds of beautiful Proteaceae that can be found. And, not only is fire essential for the fynbos it is so often embodied in the flowers themselves, the bright colours appealing strongly to the various bird pollinators. Walk past any stand of *Leucospermum* or related *Protea* and most likely a sugarbird or sunbird will be in attendance. Many flowers are designed with long-tubes and produce copious quantities of nectar for beaks to probe and drink. *Protea* include the national flower - *Protea cynaroides* - a simply magnificent





*Brunsvigia orientalis*



*Babiana sambucina*



*Aloe perfoliata*



*Lachenalia luteola*

plant that is able to regenerate from stumps after a fire (many other species regenerate from seed) and so re-establishes itself very quickly. *Protea* is a diverse genus with many different forms including prostrate shrubs that bear flowers at ground level for pollination by mice, whereas others such as the lovely *Protea eximia* are squarely aimed at birds. These were photographed in a wonderful tract of highland fynbos near Touwsriver, which also had a wonderful mix of *Erica* species too. These quintessential Cape plants have a mind-boggling diversity here with 600 species. Several of these are also bird pollinated including *Erica cerinthoides* and the rare, range restricted endemic *E. cameronii*, from high mountains near Ceres. However, this species flowers late and is probably also attended by Pride of Table Mountain butterflies, a fast flying insect that specialises in red flowers from January onwards. This remarkable butterfly (which has always eluded my camera) can be seen feeding on such vivid plants as *Gladiolus cardinalis*, *Crassula coccinea* and what is possibly the most spectacular orchid in the country - *Disa uniflora*. This stand out plant favours damp microclimates beside pools, streams and waterfalls.

Other non-woody flora that has embraced bird pollination with fiery flowers includes *Babiana ringens* a member of the iris family. This has



*Babiana ringens*



*Erica cameronii*



*Disa uniflora*



*Protea cynaroides*

designed its inflorescence with a bird perch above a ring of scarlet flowers so any potential pollinator can settle at leisure and easily feed. More typically members of this genus are blue (or yellow) and I've included *Babiana sambucina* just to give a break from all the hot colours. Other hot geophytes are *Lachenalia luteola* and the monster bulbs of *Brunsvigia orientalis* that explode from sandy areas in March with great fibre-optic inflorescences of deep red flowers, part of the superb late season flora in the Western Cape. They are common on the Cape Peninsula and along the Atlantic coast, their habitat passing below rocks where the showy candelabras of *Aloe perfoliata* tempt passing birds in the largely dried out landscape.

However, nothing quite compares to *Cyrtanthus ventricosus*, an extraordinary flower that only flowers two weeks after a fire has gone through, not appearing again until the next blaze several years later. They are pollinated by sunbirds and must shine like fiery beacons in the decimated fynbos. That same fynbos will recover and then offer the next cycle of sugary treats as the various species recolonise. I was very lucky to be here at the right time to see these and you never quite know where you will be chasing plants down here - it all depends on where the lightning strikes!

For a more thorough treatment of this flora please refer to our recently published *Flora of the Mediterranean* book.



*Cyrtanthus ventricosus*