

MARCH FIRE - FABULOUS FYNBOS

Brunsvigia orientalis





Amaryllis belladona



Erica cerinthoides



Watsonia tabularis

Leucadendron argenteum (left)

As my wonderful and tolerant wife will testify, once this particular dog has a botanical bone he doesn't let go! I had embarked on creating our second book Flora of the Mediterranean and back in the days when travel was straightforward, I was determined to travel to South Africa to complete the work first hand. After all it does possess the richest Mediterranean climate flora in the world, and parts of the Western Cape also have the world's highest level of per unit area plant diversity. It was also a new flora for me and I was thankful to have the guiding hand of Callan Cohen to help me make sense of it.

In truth I rather started on easy street (or easier street) by first arriving in the South African autumn - March. In common with the Mediterranean Basin, it has a rich geophyte flora at this season, especially the spectacular amaryllids. I was not long out of the plane after the overnigher from Istanbul before Callan had me climbing up towards Lion's Head. We were not interested in peak bagging, rather this was a top spot for one of the first Cape bulbs to reach European shores, the very showy *Amaryllis belladona*. There they were sprouting from the trackside, the perfect start. They grew scattered in scrub beneath the silvery foliage of *Leucodendron argenteum* - silver tree - one

Orbaea variegata



fo the largest Proteaceae to be found here and one which did formerly comprise forests, prior to European settlers more or less felling the lot. Moving on toward the Cape of Good Hope the evening licked out the fiery flashes of *Erica cerinthoides* scatetred across a section of burned fynbos. Fires are an integral part of the ecosystems here as I was to discover, invariably promoting vigorous growth and flowering in their aftermath. There was time in the fading light to appreciate big stands of wild red-hot pokers *Kniphofia uvaria* and then popping up like torches among the charcoaled stems of ex-shrubs were the flaming clubs of *Haemanthus sanguineus*.

A fabulous start, and the goodies kept coming. It is fair to say there is less on show at this time of year, but what there is is outstanding. Who could resist a 06.30 start up Table Mountain? The steep route began from within the famed Kirstenbosch botanical garden, passing through rare patches of woodland before coming out onto the rugged plateau summit. Everywhere was thickly clothed in fynbos shrubs, most notably *Protea cynaroides*, surely one of the most remarkable woody plants in the world, the complex dinner-plate sized

flowers besieged by thirsty sugarbirds. The target today was a more delicate gem, the exquisite blue disa. Its cousin fiery *Disa ferruginea* was a fairly common and after a half hour of walking I found the first stunning blue too. Showy *D. uniflora* also grows up here but alas flowers best a month earlier (I would return for that in ten months' time). I enjoyed a wonderfully scenic ramble across the plateau, before retracing my steps and walking down past more sensational proteas.

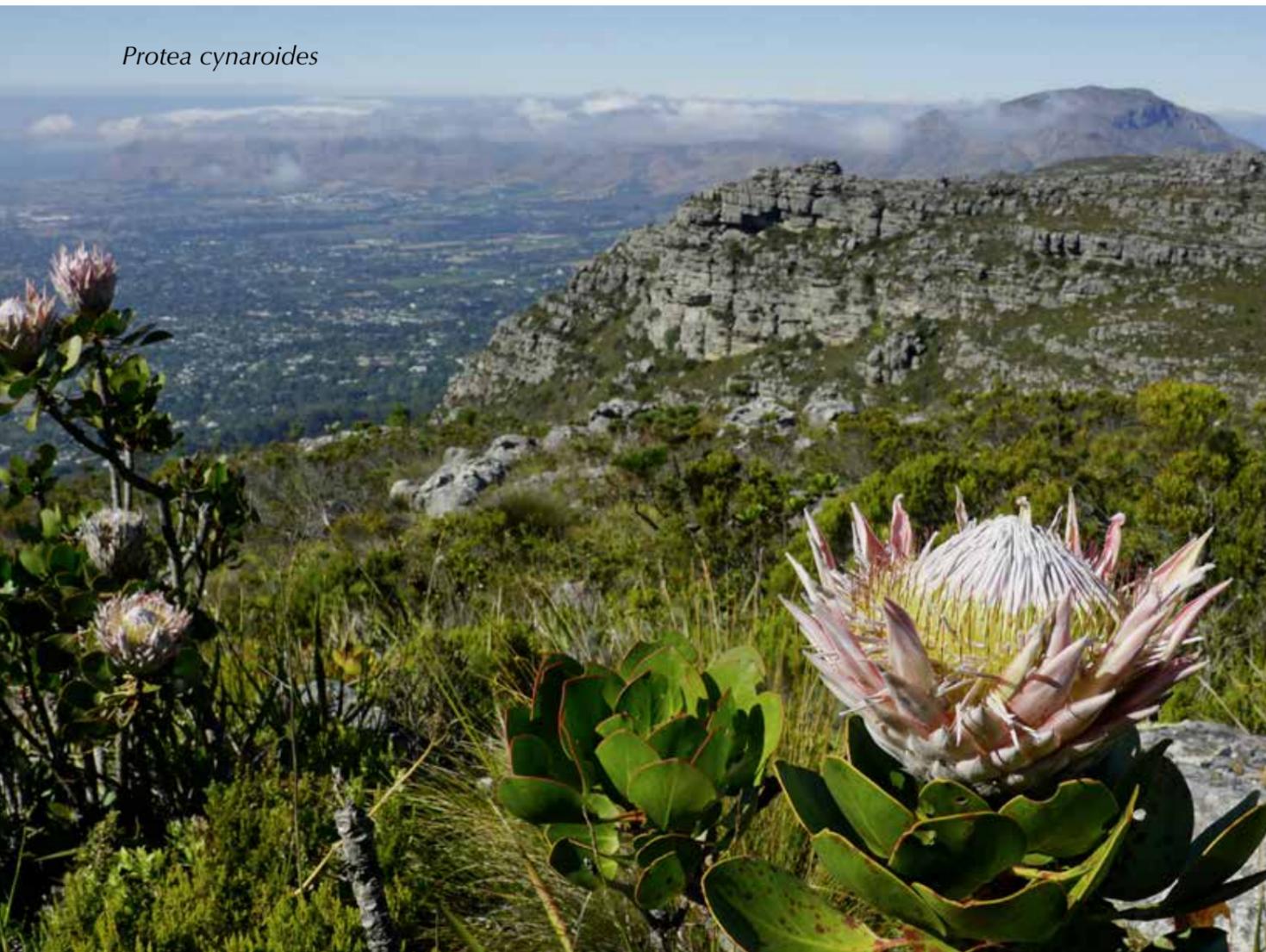
The landscape of Cape of Good Hope is impressive too and the very point itself was embellished by an outrageous bulb - *Brunsvigia orientalis*, an outlandish, gangling plant, some 30cms of more across. These monster amaryllids are a real feature at this season. Accompanying these were more modest *Bulbinella*, *Gladiolus brevifolius* and *Watsonia tabularis*. We followed the coast north the next day, seeing incredibly displays of *Brunsvigia orientalis* and the odd *Haemanthus pubescens*. Most of the rock in this region is either granite or sandstone, so rare outcrops of limestone are bound to have some specials around them. Sure enough, wedged into crevices were plenty of deep pink *Brunsvigia*



Kniphofia uvaria



Haemanthus sanguineus



Protea cynaroides



Gladiolus brevicaulis



Disa ferruginea

Disa graminifolia



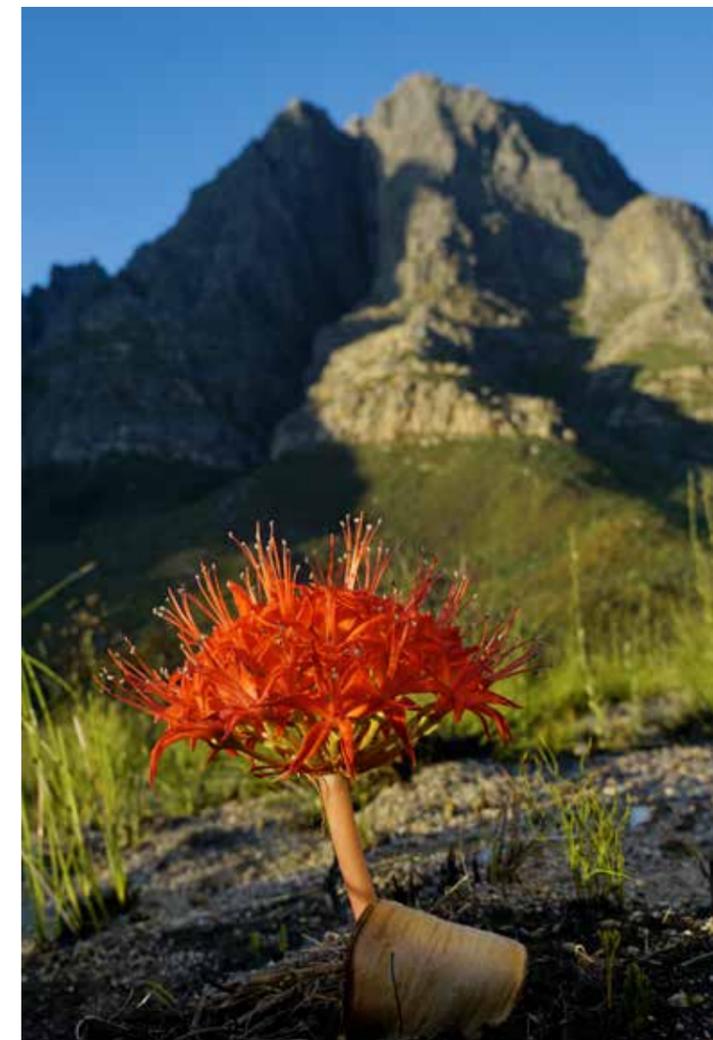
Brunsvigia radula

Brunsvigia marginata

radula a rare and localised species and we found a few coming into bloom too squeezing from the crack in the rocks alongside dense crusts of the succulent *Conophytum* living stones.

The route looped through the edge of the Karoo and I couldn't resist the chance to visit the kokerblom or quiver tree 'forests' (*Aloe dichotoma*) that populate the craggy hills north of Neiuwoudtville. They were sensational, their varied architectural forms bringing about near constant shutter releases. We timed the visit for the afternoon and the light only got better and better, bringing up the warm tones of the textured, peeling golden bark of this giant succulents. It was one of my most memorable afternoons of botanising. The extra-large *Crinum variable* grew in the dry river beds above a nearby waterless waterfall and around Neiuwoudtville there were also drifts of the stout pink drumsticks of *Brunsvigia bosmaniae* too.

Back in the Mediterranean climate areas I had hoped to find *Nerine sarmiensis* on the trip, but instead had to 'settle for' the stunning molten metal heads of *Brunsvigia marginata*. They grew conveniently close to the hotel! We were on our way back to the coast where word had it there were some good displays of rare



Aloe dichotoma





Gladiolus carmineus

Crinum variable

blood lilies. *Haemanthus canaliculatus* only flowers well for a year or two after fires and now was the chance to visit a population that had experienced a recent burn. Their fireworks look somewhat incongruous scattered in across the fast-regenerating emerald vegetation in fiery clumps. Like many other South African geophytes, they would enjoy their time in the sun and remain dormant (or at least flower dormant) until the next burn in ten years or so time. Close to these were showy stands of shrubby daisy *Phaenocoma prolifera*, the big violet bells of *Roella campanulata* and candy-pink *Gladiolus brevicaulis*.

A showier cousin of the latter, *G. carmineus* provided a finale of sorts, peppering the cliff tops at Hermanus as breakers of Atlantic crashed on the rocks below on a warm sunny morning. All too soon it was time to head for the airport and fly home, but I was well-satisfied, my South African adventure had begun and pages in the book were filling.

I just had to choose my moment (very) carefully to tell Basak that I needed to visit a few more times to finish the job.

Haemanthus canaliculatus

