

MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON

Dendrosenecio adnivalis



Some names just resonate with mystery and one such place that does that for me is the Rwenzori or Mountains of the Moon, a spectacular equatorial range that straddles Uganda and the DRC. It has that 'heart of Africa' appeal, truly somewhere off the beaten path - and given the effort required to get there it's no surprise so few tourists come here. Without doubt it is the domain of the serious trekker and climber, the trails penetrate dense mossy forests and climb steeply to breathless heights above the treeline, where the reward is some of the most remarkable alpine flora to be found anywhere.

I undertook my own journey with a university friend. We walked first through sweaty sub-tropical forests where the striking orange tubes of *Scadoxus cyrtanthiflorus* stood out from the dense undergrowth. Heavy bamboo dominated above this and then it was into the subalpine zone where the otherworldly stuff began. Gorgeous broad corymbs of *Helichrysum formosissimum* appeared, with silvery phyllaries blushed pink - surely the ultimate everlasting daisy.

Then we reached the alpine zone. Interestingly, as with the *Espletia* of the



Scadoxus cyrtanthiflorus



Lobelia wollastonii

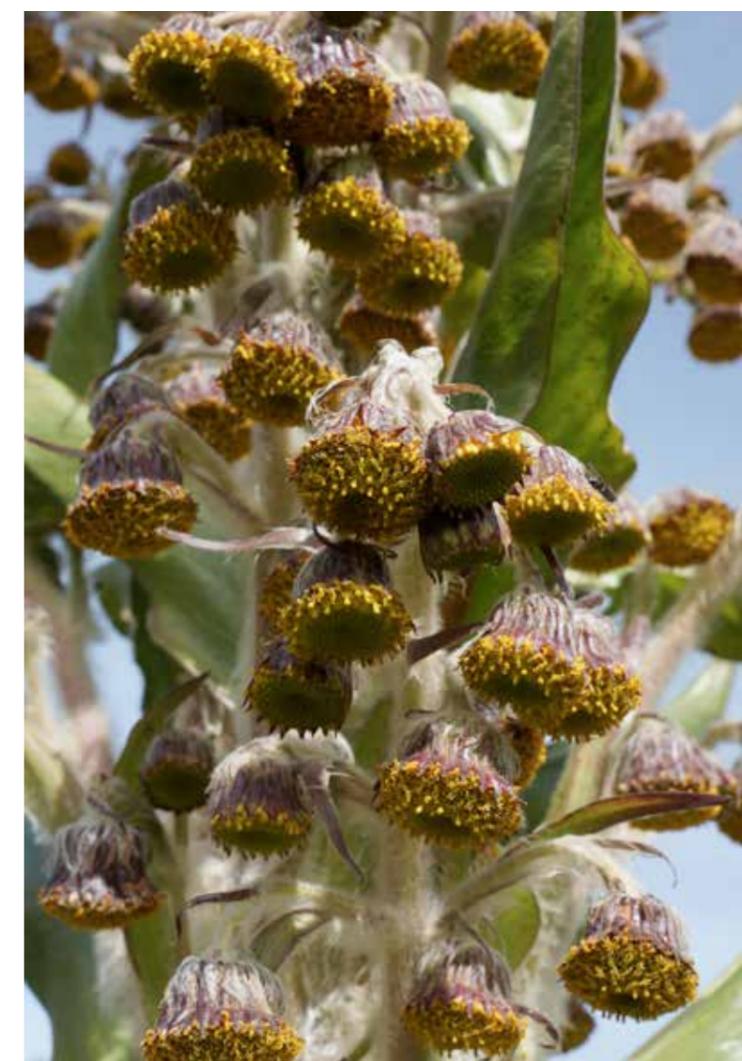
northern Andes, the alpine equivalent here also belongs to Asteraceae. The dominant species in the Rwenzori (with similar species in other east African mountains) *Dendrosenecio adnivalis*, a magnificent plant that formed dense forests in places, clothing whole mountainsides. The most obvious difference between the two genera is *Dendrosenecio* branch and *Espletia* do not. I remember seeing a specimen of a *Dendrosenecio* at Kew, sitting beneath a strong sunlamp. In keeping with *Espletia*, *Dendrosenecio* are challenging to cultivate, demanding intense sunlight during the day together with cool temperatures. Plants that are best appreciated *in situ* and our trail passed down between thousands of these giants, each with its trunk wrapped in dense papery dead leaves and topped by 'cabbagey' bright green leaves. The inflorescences were certainly reminiscent of some rayless *Senecio*, though here they are nodding, no doubt to keep the flowers out of the frequent rain. Indeed, the Rwenzori is renowned for its bad weather, but somehow I completely lucked out during my mid-January visit, enjoying mainly clear weather, save for the odd short blizzard at 4000 metres. *Dendrosenecio adnivalis* was everywhere, forming the most wonderful architectural stands,



Scarlet-tufted Malachite Sunbird on *Lobelia wollastonii*



Helichrysum formosissimum



Dendrosenecio adnivalis



Lobelia bequaertii



Hypericum bequaertii



Acanthus polystachyus



often augmented with another equally impressive species - *Lobelia wollastonii*. This megaherb-cum-tree formed incredible towers of flowers and was straight out of the *Puya raimondii* mould (see 'Big is Beautiful' post) - or is that other way around! What is fascinating is the evolution of such similar-looking plants on the opposite sides of the world, both targeting similar (shiny) bird pollinators. Here in Uganda it was the turn of the iridescent green Scarlet-tufted Malachite Sunbird, which probed the long-tubed *Lobelia* flowers for nectar.

There were constant photographic opportunities, as we crossed the lake studded highlands, walking through a near pristine environment. Occasional glances down from the ridge revealed the forested basin of the Congo and from a high pass at 4400 metres we had perfect clear views of the highest point of the range, 5109-metre Mount Stanley. However, if old photos of the range are examined the amount of glacial retreat is shocking. Huge areas of ice have vanished. Get here while there is still some snow! The other rub here is energy. The walking on steep muddy and rocky trails with frequent obstacles is demanding, so stopping too often is not easy. Luckily, our guides helped out with some crucial tripod-lugging.

There were several species of tree lobelia up here, though none was as tall as *L. wollastonii*. However, *L. bequaertii* did possess the most



Disa stairsii



Peucedanum kerstenii

Dendrosenecio adnivalis in front of Mount Stanley

beautiful rosettes and though it was not their main flowering season I did find a decent one in bloom, the tall spire aimed at passing sunbirds for pollination. The overwhelming lushness of the place is hard to convey, something I try hard to do with varying success. Within all of this was an interesting blend of the familiar and exotic. Here were tall shrubby *Hypericum bequaertii*, *Peucedanum kerstenii* fronting a misty lake and *Bartsia macrophyllum*. I'd also seen pink *Acanthus polystachyus* on the way up - all genera I could see in western Turkey. Here they rubbed shoulders with *Disa stairsii* a small orchid from a genus best represented in southern Africa and forests of tree heaths.

The descent was a long one passing through indescribably luxuriant lichen- and moss-clad forests. Sensory overload set in. My week here had been one of the most memorable anywhere in the world, I'd have loved to have a month to really get to grips with the photographic opportunities, but perhaps the weather gods would have lost patience with me if I had.

As it was there was time for a swift safari to see giraffes, hippos, elephants, chimpanzees and shoebills storks as well as a ranger-led walk with amazing white rhinos on much appreciated flat ground.

