Foreword

Book Section

How to cite:


For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2011 Charles Craib John Lavranos

Version: Not Set

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
Foreword

The story of the Bushman Candles goes back to the dawn of botanical exploration in southern Africa. The first published image of these plants dates from Johannes Burman in 1738, but that, confusingly, appears to show two different species in the single engraving. Somewhat later, William Paterson (1789) and Charles L’Héritier de Brutelle (1782) both published engravings representing distinct species still currently recognised today. These wonderful early works of botanical art are reproduced in this new publication, now for the first time in full size, commended in the name Sarcocaulon marlothi, first collected by him in the present day Namibia. Above all, it has described eloquently what makes these plants unique. Most distinctive of all is their structure: swollen, fleshy, spiny shrublets that are archetypal succulents, but distinct in being heavily impregnated with waxes, making them inflammable, from whence comes their common name. This drought-resistant structure is an adaptation for survival in the harshest, most arid and hence inhospitable environments of southern Africa. It is this ruggedness that both intrigues and appeals to all of us who are captivated by succulent plants. Marloth intimated that the taxonomy of these plants has not been uncontroversial. He knew them as Sarcocaulon, but prior to that some of them had been classed as geraniaceae and monsoniaceae, and it is back in the genus Monsonia where they currently sit. This taxonomic shift is unfortunate because this distinctive small group of plants now no longer has an exclusive home, since they have been classified small, non-succulent herbs. However, the term Bushman Candles uniquely identifies the 15 species that feature in this book, so this is a useful handle.

These Bushman Candles have staunch devotees in Charles Craik and John Larrainos, who have been observing these plants in their habitats for over 30 years. It is the plants as they occur in the wild that is the focus of this book, so this is not a traditional taxonomic work. The Bushman Candles follows on from Charles’s earlier books Grass Aboes in the South African Veld (Umdaus Press, 2005) and Geophytic Pelargoniums (Umdaus Press, 2001) where the main themes were ecological, unusual for works on succulent plants. Hence Charles and John follow in the footsteps of Marloth in bringing the Bushman Candles to our attention in this, the first book ever to devote to these remarkably resilient plants.

My own involvement with these plants has been a small contribution in the publication of the new combination Monsonia marlothi and I am delighted that this commemorates one of the authors of this book, a well-deserved accolade indeed. This book also follows a strong tradition in South African botanical art. Marloth’s book was beautifully illustrated with colour plates and the current book is also visually appealing. The exquisite and botanically accurate water colour paintings of Elliphiea Ward-Hilhorst were first published by Rodney Moffett in his paper The genus Sarcocaulon, in the journal Rothalia in 1979. Most of these paintings, though, were reproduced in a reduced size, but are now published in full size where their artistic merit can be fully appreciated. These provide the detail of each distinct species of Bushman Candle, based on plants in cultivation. To complement these, the plants in nature are portrayed in newly commissioned paintings by the renowned artist Gerhard Marx, along with pencil drawings of their habitats by Bowen Boshier, that together bring the harsh, arid environments in which these plants reside vividly alive. Reflections of all of this work are provided by the photographers Connall Oosterbroek and the taxonomist Rodney Moffett. This book, then, is truly a collaborative venture amongst a wide group of enthusiasts bringing together a diverse collection of skills to produce a book that not only provides a fascinating insight into an intriguing group of plants, but also presents them in a range of beautifully evocative images.

Monsonia crassicaulis. This plant, typical of the species in the Little Karoo, has long pterygial spines. Drawing: Gerhard Marx.

Marloth’s book is a wonderful work but far, far more than a traditional flora: it includes beautiful colour plates and a considerable amount of ecological information, as the above extract exemplifies. He was familiar with the Bushman Candles and indeed a new species, commemorated in the name Monsonia marlothi, was first collected by him in the present day Namibia. Above all, it has described eloquently what makes these plants unique. Most distinctive of all is their structure: swollen, fleshy, spiny shrublets that are archetypal succulents, but distinct in being heavily impregnated with waxes, making them inflammable, from whence comes their common name. This drought-resistant structure is an adaptation for survival in the harshest, most arid and hence inhospitable environments of southern Africa. It is this ruggedness that both intrigues and appeals to all of us who are captivated by succulent plants. Marloth intimated that the taxonomy of these plants has not been uncontroversial. He knew them as Sarcocaulon, but prior to that some of them had been classed as geraniaceae and monsoniaceae, and it is back in the genus Monsonia where they currently sit. This taxonomic shift is unfortunate because this distinctive small group of plants now no longer has an exclusive home, since they have been classified small, non-succulent herbs. However, the term Bushman Candles uniquely identifies the 15 species that feature in this book, so this is a useful handle.

These Bushman Candles have staunch devotees in Charles Craik and John Larrainos, who have been observing these plants in their habitats for over 30 years. It is the plants as they occur in the wild that is the focus of this book, so this is not a traditional taxonomic work. The Bushman Candles follows on from Charles’s earlier books Grass Aboes in the South African Veld (Umdaus Press, 2005) and Geophytic Pelargoniums (Umdaus Press, 2001) where the main themes were ecological, unusual for works on succulent plants. Hence Charles and John follow in the footsteps of Marloth in bringing the Bushman Candles to our attention in this, the first book ever to devote to these remarkably resilient plants.

My own involvement with these plants has been a small contribution in the publication of the new combination Monsonia marlothi and I am delighted that this commemorates one of the authors of this book, a well-deserved accolade indeed. This book also follows a strong tradition in South African botanical art. Marloth’s book was beautifully illustrated with colour plates and the current book is also visually appealing. The exquisite and botanically accurate water colour paintings of Elliphiea Ward-Hilhorst were first published by Rodney Moffett in his paper The genus Sarcocaulon, in the journal Rothalia in 1979. Most of these paintings, though, were reproduced in a reduced size, but are now published in full size where their artistic merit can be fully appreciated. These provide the detail of each distinct species of Bushman Candle, based on plants in cultivation. To complement these, the plants in nature are portrayed in newly commissioned paintings by the renowned artist Gerhard Marx, along with pencil drawings of their habitats by Bowen Boshier, that together bring the harsh, arid environments in which these plants reside vividly alive. Reflections of all of this work are provided by the photographers Connall Oosterbroek and the taxonomist Rodney Moffett. This book, then, is truly a collaborative venture amongst a wide group of enthusiasts bringing together a diverse collection of skills to produce a book that not only provides a fascinating insight into an intriguing group of plants, but also presents them in a range of beautifully evocative images.

Monsonia crassicaulis. This plant, typical of the species in the Little Karoo, has long pterygial spines. Drawing: Gerhard Marx.