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OBSERVATIONS ON FLOWERING PLANTS FOUND ON THE  
NORTH-WEST SLOPES OF THE NGONG HILLS FROM

October, 1960 to July, 1961.

By

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Beside the murrum road, winding away to the right from the main Nairobi/Ngong road, the plants are much the same as those found near and in Nairobi. The pretty yellow Abutilon mauritianum (Jacq.) Medic (Malvaceae) was in flower after the very short rains, and there were also a few bushes of the yellow daisy, Aspilia. But of more interest were three very small plants; the pink Cycniopsis obtusifolia Skan (Scrophulariaceae) clinging to the roadside banks, Justicia elliotii S. Moore (Acanthaceae) with silvery foliage and small magenta flowers, and the bright blue Pentanisia ouranogyne S. Moore (Rubiaceae). This last plant must be one of the longest - flowering on the plains around Nairobi.

Once, however, one reaches the rocky ground on the north-west slope of the Ngong Hills the plant life is generally very different. A peculiarity of the flowering plants in this dry area is their brief existence. In October I found one bush of Ochna growing in a small pocket of soil among the rocks. It was then in full bloom, with many small yellow flowers along the thin branches. Instead of taking the spray I collected to the helpful staff of the Herbarium for proper identification, I put it in a vase. The unaccustomed water went to its head, and petals and pollen were soon scattered all over a corner of the room. My hope of collecting a further piece a fortnight later was not justified as there were neither leaves nor flowers on the dry twigs.

Three other plants, of which only one bush of each species was found in October and November, were Grewia tembensis Fresen. var. kakothamnos (K. Schum.) Burret with many small pale pink flowers, Dombeya rotundifolia Harv. which was more in bud than flower, and an odd rather than attractive species of Ormocarpum with a few yellow pea flowers. Each of these shrubs was almost leafless.

At the beginning of December a very handsome orange species of the parasitic Loranthus was collected - with some difficulty as it was covered with many little red ants. There were also a number of bushes of mauve Grewia similis K. Schum. in flower. At the end of December, when there had been a few showers, the pale blue tubular flowers of the shrub Barleria stuhlmannii Lindau were in evidence, and in the grass Dicliptera napierae Bruce in the same family (Acanthaceae) and the pretty red Hibiscus aponeurus Sprague & Hutch. were found. Both are slender herbs, the former only some 9ins. in height and bearing 2-lipped magenta flowers; the latter varying in height, according to local conditions, from 1-2ft. Beside a cattle track there were clumps of a low-growing member of the Labiatae family, Coleus caninus (Roth) Vatke with purple blooms - rather strong smelling, and a tall shrub, Maerua johannis Volk. & Gilg. (Capparidaceae), which is not exactly eye-catching

from a distance, but on closer examination it is seen to bear many caperlike buds and spidery blooms, the spidery effect being caused by the numerous stamens protruding beyond the rather insignificant white petals.

In the early months of 1961 this area, like many others, was very badly affected by extreme drought. If the grass was not in fact burnt, it looked as though it had been. The only plant found flowering in March was an asparagus, and it was not until the middle of April, when there had been a week of moderate rainfall, that signs of life appeared. The grass was faintly green, and most shrubs were coming into leaf. Another asparagus A. racemosus Willd. was an attractive sight with its large feathery sprays of small yellow flowers. This species differs from other asparagus in the area in that it stands out as a low bush (about 3ft. high) instead of creeping about among other shrubs as most of the asparagus do. A member of an allied genus, Boweia, was found, although not in flower until the middle of May. This rather odd plant with its mass of bright green leaf-like branches and very insignificant pale yellow flowers definitely prefers the support of other shrubs. The only other plant found in flower in April was a species of Solanum (near S. incanum L.) one of the more attractive of this genus, having large mauve flowers, small velvety leaves and less obtrusive spines.

On the plains bordering the approach road the only plants seen in flower were a small Oxalis (O. purpurata Jacq.) and the magenta Justicia elliotii S. Moore, like Pentanisia a very persistent flowerer.

A month later, however, the situation on the plains was very different. It is here of interest to note that the plants on the Athi plains were in full flower at least a month before those at Ngong. Although both areas were previously very parched by the drought, it is probable that there is more subsoil moisture in the Athi plains than the Ngong Hills area which looked as though every drop of moisture had drained away. Whatever the explanation for this delay, the bright orange Thunbergia gregorii S. Moore was well worth waiting for.

Another striking plant seen, although not very common, was Celsia floccosa Benth. (Scrophulariaceae) with its long spikes of bright yellow flowers, the plants seen were about 2-3ft. high. On a bank beside the road the spreading, bright magenta, Commicarpus pedunculatus (A. Rich) Cuf. (Nyctaginaceae) was abundant. The flowering stalk of this plant is about 5ins. long, and grows from the axil of opposite broad based leaves. Small bulbous plants seen in numbers were the white Chlorophytum moniliforme Rendle (Liliaceae), the white bells of Acidanthera candida Rendle (Iridaceae) and the starry yellow Hypoxis villosa Linn, f. (Hypoxi-  
daceae).

A list of other attractive small plants found would include the purple Lightfootia abyssinica Hochst. (Campanulaceae) - small starry flowers on a slender stem; pink Silene burchellii [Oth ex] DC. (Caryophyllaceae); members of the Labiatae such as the mauve Plectranthus longipes Bak. with round opposite leaves and clumps

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of another species of Coleus; Rhamphicarpa heuglini Hochst., the large pale pink flowers of which are quite visible although the foliage is hidden in the grass; the low-lying shrub Sida ovata Forsk. with pretty pale yellow cupped flowers, and Vigna vexillata Benth a trailer with large 'sweet pea' flowers in shades of mauve and pink. Even smaller plants found were Monsonia biflora DC. with pale mauve flowers and the typical 'Storksbill' carpels; a member of the Convolvulus family Ipomoea sinensis (Desr.) Choisy; and a very pale mauve daisy - Aster hyssopifolius Berg.

I would here comment that although a number of these plants are also found on the plains to the east of Nairobi, the attractive salmon Crossandra subacaulis C.B.Cl. which is very much at home in the Nairobi National Park, is not seen at all at Ngong, and the Ngong Thunbergia gregorii (also of the Acanthaceae) is not to be seen elsewhere near Nairobi. A matter of altitude I should imagine.

When next I visited the area about the middle of June, the hills were looking fresh and green, although the rain had not been particularly heavy. A number of plants previously mentioned were still in flower, but small newcomers on the plains were Rhynchosia memnonia DC. (a creeping member of the Papilionaceae), white Helichrysum glumaceum DC. and two white Justicia-J. uncinulata Oliv. and J. exigua S. Moore. A larger species of Hypoxis (H. urceolata Nel.) was seen, and by the road the attractive tall Heliotropium pallens Dell. was in flower; also Vernonia brachycalyx O. Hoffm. and a few Clerodendrum myricoides (Hochst.) R.Br. ex Vatke (the blue Butterfly bush). The roots of the latter are said to be used medicinally, particularly by some of the pastoral tribes.

On the lower slopes the plants again varied. Several Compositae were found - as well as the common Athroisma psyllioides (Oliv.) Matt f. the small white Nidorella pedunculata Oliv. was fairly widespread, and Helichrysum schimperi (Sch. Bip. ex A. Rich.) Moeser, with bright yellow flowers and silvery foliage, grew in small clumps among the rocks. Quite the most attractive plant in flower here was the tall Ferula communis L. (Umbelliferae). The leaves are very deeply cut and 'fernlike' in appearance. The main flower stalk grows erect from the centre of the plant; it then branches almost horizontally and produces typical umbels of numerous bright yellow flowers. On the same day on which I found this plant blooming, I also surprised three klipspringer on the rocks. We stared at each other, equally curious, until a large truck coming along the road was too much for these antelope.

In July the shrubs were in full flower. The most abundant were Barleria stuhlmannii, Vernonia brachycalyx and Jasminum fluminense Vell. Only one specimen of Crotalaria saxatilis Vatke was seen with its small yellow to mauve flowers among the dense foliage. The red fruits of Coccinea trilobata (Cogn.) Jeffery (in ed.) added a cheerful note to the scene, an ever-fascinating scene, whether at close quarters or as part of these Hills overlooking the vastness of the Rift Valley.

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