Finding every described sundew in the Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract: In September 2023, Boaz Ng went on a botanical expedition to the Western Cape province of South Africa. The region is renowned for its intense floral diversity, with many species of carnivorous plants growing amidst the stunning landscape. With the help of Alexander Dietrick and Hendré Barnard, he was able to observe every described sundew in the province over 19 days of exploration.

I was already zooming off to see sundews within an hour of landing in Cape Town. With Alex Dietrick at the wheel, we weaved through the chaos of South Africa's streets, breaking out into the open countryside in no time at all. A short while later we met up with Hendré Barnard at a small nature reserve around an hour north of the city. Within seconds I caught onto his infectious enthusiasm and the three of us set off into the renosterveld, a biome of open, fertile fields nestled between the sharp mountains of the Western Cape landscape.

Under the balmy morning light, the renosterveld was alive with colour from the confetti of wildflowers scattered amongst the incredibly lush grass. My jaw dropped when I realised that the showy pink and white flowers surrounding me were *Drosera cistiflora* (Fig. 1 and front cover)! Never



Figure 1: Pink-flowered *Drosera cistiflora*.



Figure 2: Hendré photographing red-flowered *Drosera cistiflora.*

had I seen such beautiful blooms on a sundew with flowers so large I could cup them in my hands. Their foliage is also arresting, with alternating linear leaves elegantly arranged on an erect stem, all emerging from a ground hugging basal rosette.

We took advantage of the sunshine to visit another nearby location, keeping our eyes peeled to the side of the road as we approached. Suddenly we gasped in unison when flashes of red appeared in the ditch. We knew instantly that we had spotted the very rare red form of *Drosera cistiflora* (Fig. 2), and there were hundreds of them! Their flowers are truly a sight to behold with petals that are unmatched in the vibrancy of their scarlet colour. A blackened eye marks the centre of each bloom, attracting metallic green monkey beetles that pollinate the long and feathery stigmas. It was such an honour to be shown this incredible location and I wondered how I could possibly top such an amazing start to my trip.

The following day was equally sunny, so Alex and I prioritised finding more colour forms of *Drosera cistiflora*, as the flowers only open in warm weather. Again, we set off to the plains north of Cape Town. We pulled up at a dodgy roadside reserve that was scattered with trash and choked out by thickets of invasive *Acacia* shrubs. We found a small path leading into the bush and it was there that we found the violet-coloured form of *D. cistiflora* (Figs. 3, 35).

These plants surely have the most evocative blooms for the species. The intense purple displays an incredible depth from the shadows cast by the heavily reflexed petals, with dark centres that scatter a glittering sheen when hit by sunlight. The more we looked around, the more violet *D. cistiflora* we found in both cleared and invaded sections of the reserve. It was reassuring to see that these plants could persist even in a degraded environment, but it remains unknown for how long they will survive without active management.



Figure 3: Alex photographing violet-flowered *Drosera cistiflora.*

Buoyed by our early morning discovery, we set off to find more rare colour variations another hour further north. I was ushered along an informal trail until we reached a moist sandy accumulation at the base of a small slope bordered by farmland. There grew a small patch of the yellow form of *Drosera cistiflor*a (Fig. 4). The plants have deeply cupped petals, each coloured a delicate shade of pastel yellow. Strikingly, the pollen is a dark tangerine colour, contrasting beautifully against the subtle backdrop. This is one of the rarest forms of the species and from the size of the very small population it became exceedingly apparent that they were endangered by habitat fragmentation.

Having observed a rainbow of *D. cistiflora* in the flats, we chose to hike into the mountains for a change in scenery the following day. As we drove out of the Cape Town basin, I got my first up-close look at the '*fynbos*' biome the region is most famous for. The habitat consists of short, heathy scrub and mainly occurs on mountainous slopes where the abundant winter rain, scorching summer sun and ancient landscape has leached the soils of their fertility. This nutrient limitation has driven intense botanical biodiversity, including many species of carnivorous plants.

Our destination was the Kleinrivier Mountains, a coastal range that overlooks the town of Hermanus. After a bit of whale watching and souvenir shopping in the seaside town, we set off to the base of the mountains to begin our ascent. The trail rose quickly and soon we were zigzagging up the side of a steep valley.

As my blood got pumping my eyes were drawn to the most beautiful sundew in South Africa. The sprawling stems of *Drosera hilaris* (Fig. 5) snaked through the undergrowth to proudly display a large rosette of long, broad leaves. A dense covering of hairs catches the sunlight and makes the plants glow in the dark shadows of the steep mountain face. Each plant along the hillside provided a welcome opportunity to catch my breath as I stopped to photograph them.

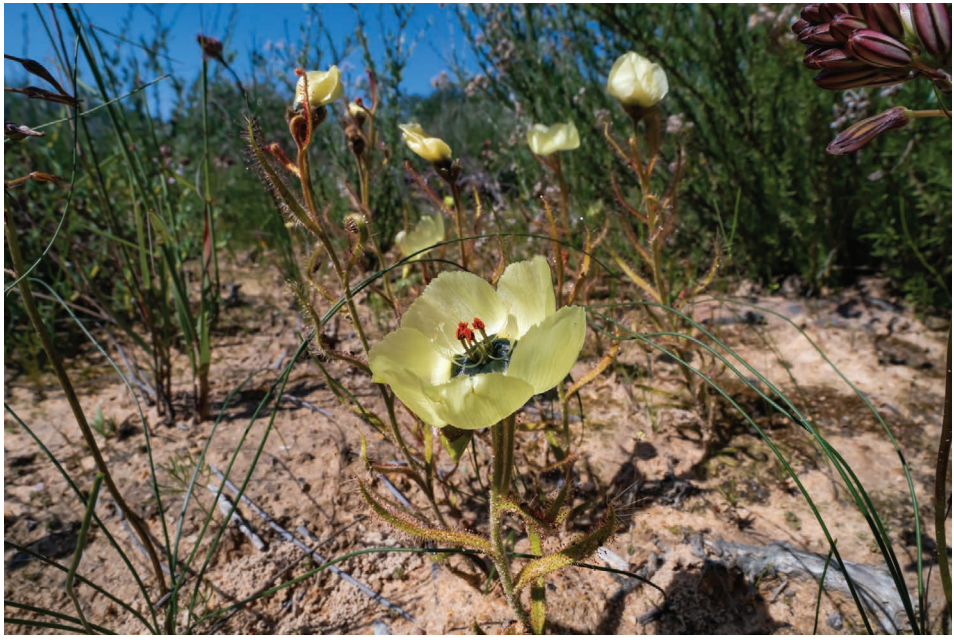


Figure 4: Yellow-flowered *Drosera cistiflora.*



Figure 5: *Drosera hilaris*.



Figure 6: *Drosera xerophila*.

The path began to plateau out as we reached the top of the gorge. Before me lay an incredible expanse of *fynbos* habitat. The area was generally well-drained with a shallow, sandy substrate underlying the open heathland. Here *Drosera xerophila* (Fig. 6) was found in abundance. Their bright, matte green rosettes of flat-lying leaves are easily recognisable in the rocky terrain. Close by we found the similarly coloured *D. esterhuyseniae* (Fig. 7), which differs in that its leaves are semi-raised. Both species prefer niches that are well drained locations in the coastal fynbos, growing long roots to access moisture in the dry summers.

We followed a creek line further up into the mountain until we reached the seepages at its headwaters. I was distracted by the strenuous exercise, so it came as a total surprise when Alex nonchalantly pointed out that we were in the middle of a grove of carnivorous giants.

Roridula gorgonias (Fig. 8) is unlike any carnivorous plant I've ever seen. The thin, woody stems form a branching bush around waist height, each stem terminating in a tight cluster of spiky leaves. Stiff hairs on the leaves exude a very sticky resin that is strong enough to capture large prey. The plants have a symbiotic relationship with *Pameridea roridulae* mirid bugs, which freely roam the plant without getting stuck. These bugs prey on the insects trapped by the plant, fertilising their host with their droppings. I spent ages photographing the *Roridula*, allowing my legs to rest before taking the ankle straining hike back down the mountain.

I was still keen to check out more *fynbos* so the next day, we elected to visit the Table Mountain National Park. As we left the car, we were buffeted with icy winds as a cold front swept over the Cape. We firstly stopped by an old reservoir to check out a sighting of *Drosera capensis* (Fig. 9) at its banks. The plants here were grand, with long arching leaves that contorted around the insects they caught. Despite its reputation as a weed in cultivation, the species is not particularly common in the wild and grows only in scattered perennially wet habitats like persistent creek lines and seepages.



Figure 7: *Drosera esterhuyseniae*.



Figure 8: *Roridula gorgonias*.



Figure 9: *Drosera capensis*.

I was definitely shivering when it started hailing, but I soon warmed up as we hiked up the hillside. About an hour in, Alex abruptly turned off into a tiny side trail that led down to a creek basin. It was there that we found *Drosera cuneifolia* (Fig. 10), a species endemic to the Table Mountain Range. The sundew has large, flat rosettes and is named for its wedge-shaped leaves that are dilated and flattened at their ends.

The sun broke through the clouds as we reached the crest in the trail, with a beautiful view of the Atlantic Ocean stretching before me. We precariously edged onto a very steep slope where we found one of the plants highest on my bucket list to see. *Drosera ramentacea* (Fig. 11) is an epic sundew known for its impressively long stems of old growth and attractive rosette of hairy, semi-raised leaves. Although superficially similar in appearance to *D. capensis*, it inhabits the opposite of niches, growing amongst rocks on well-drained hillsides. With storm clouds brewing on the horizon, we quickly made our way back to the car just in time to avoid the heavy rain.

After a bitterly cold night where the heater didn't work due to power cuts, Hendré joined us the following day as we drove through the mountains to Ceres. I marvelled at the extraordinary scenery of the winding mountain passes, enhanced by the magical snow-capped peaks high above our heads.

Alex was leading us on what he said was a moderate hike into the mountains to check out a few spots. The walk started off as described in the foothills but soon began to steepen as we approached the rocky incline of the slopes. After a few switchbacks, he guided us off the trail onto a large seepage emanating out of the hillside.



Figure 10: *Drosera cuneifolia*.



Figure 11: *Drosera ramentacea*.



Figure 12: *Drosera rubrifolia*.

Glistening rosettes of the incredibly rare *Drosera rubrifolia* (Fig. 12) grew in the seeps that flowed out of the permanently wet rocks. The species truly lives up to its name, attaining the most intense shade of ruby red from the cold and bright high-altitude environment. Although the individual plants are small, the species grows in dense colonies that form a very impressive visual display.

The ground got drier and drier as we continued up the ever-steepening trail. About halfway up the mountain, we encountered hundreds of gigantic *Roridula dentata* (Fig. 13) bushes in the slopes all around us. The species is named for the 'toothy' serrations on each of its leaves. Its sparse bushy growth, drab coloration and preference for dryer slopes makes it blend in with the rest of the fynbos plants and we wondered how many populations we had driven past without noticing.

Alex was eager to check out a coordinate that didn't seem too far away on Google Maps. The thing is satellite imagery of the area is incredibly hard to interpret as the rocky terrain disguises the topography. It was only after we topped the ridge that we discovered that what we thought was a flat plateau area was actually an even steeper slope behind the false summit.

By now I was starving, and my legs were close to failing. I seriously contemplated whether this '*cistiflora* thing' was worth the effort but I decided to power on. The trail was literally crumbling beneath my feet, so I was completely depleted by the time we finally reached the plants near the top of the mountain. At this point, I was so exhausted I honestly didn't care less for it. It was a quiet trudge back down to the car but after the restorative power of a bag of potato chips, we quickly regained our vitality.

We drove back into the Ceres valley hopeful to locate some remnant patches of habitat. Unfortunately, this proved difficult as the fertile basin has almost totally been cleared for agriculture. After a few failed attempts accessing properties, we found some intact bushland near the foothills with the help of Google Maps. On the way there, we kept our eyes peeled for the sparse patches of suitable



Figure 13: *Roridula dentata*.

habitat. With our highly attuned botanical instincts, all three of us turned our heads in unison and gasped when we saw a small wet creek line – it's amazing how great minds think alike. When we pulled up to the site, we instantly got to work and started surveying the renosterveld.

We spent around half an hour searching with no luck, each of us gradually drifting apart in the vast rolling hills. Eventually I stumbled into Hendré who confirmed that Alex had wandered off somewhere else. We were distracted by the amazing diversity of ground orchids and could both swear that we could hear a faint sound in the distance. A quick phone call confirmed that it was actually Alex yelling for us at the top of his lungs. He had found the sundews we were looking for.

Growing in damp clay along a small drainage line were hundreds of *Drosera variegata* (Fig. 14). This *cistiflora* complex plant is named for its three types of leaves – flat lying ones in the basal rosette, semi-raised ones emerging from the base and those on a short vertical stem. The flowers are equally as large as its cousins, but the petals are typically a bit narrower. This site was within the type locality for the species and allowed us to get the crucial observations for a holistic understanding of the taxon.

It was clear that Alex had unfinished business in the area because the next morning we returned to Ceres and picked up where we left off. We were heading further north into the Koue Bokkeveld mountains to find sundews in the high-altitude veld. After climbing out of the basin, we observed that the bushland had recently been burnt and decided to have a quick look around. In the vibrance of the early morning light, colourful rosettes of *Drosera trinervia* (Fig. 15) stood out against the dark shadows of the charred surroundings. This species is probably the most generalist sundew in the Cape, growing wherever winter moisture exists.



Figure 14: *Drosera variegata*.



Figure 15: *Drosera trinervia*.



Figure 16: *Drosera acaulis*.

We continued onwards into the mountains until we reached a well-preserved stretch of renosterveld flats sandwiched between two parallel mountain ranges. I was shown a rosetted sundew with an extremely short flower scape, the distinguishing characteristic of *Drosera acaulis* (Fig. 16). Although we were about 1000 m above sea level, the site was actually considered low for the species. The short scapes are presumably an adaptation to prevent frost damage in the high-altitude habitat.

There were still a few hours of daylight left so Alex thought it would be a good opportunity to drive a casual 2 hours to Darling to observe a single species in bloom. By the time we arrived, the afternoon wind had picked up considerably and we rushed out of the car hoping to catch the flowers before they closed. We did our best not to step on other plants as we approached large patches of *Drosera pauciflora* (Fig. 17). The species has one of the largest blooms in the genus that reach up to 6 cm in diameter! The pink flowers with cupped petals rival the beauty of the myriads of wildflowers growing all around it in the luxurious renosterveld lawn.

After a few days of heavy rain accompanied by boredom and a braai at Hendré's house, it was time for all of us to embark on a road trip to the Northern Cape. We set off at daybreak on the long drive towards Nieuwoudtville. After a few hours passing through the stunning Cederberg Mountains, we broke out onto the vast expanse of the Knersvlakte plains. I looked past the barren rocky desert and spied a line of misty mountains on the horizon. As we drove onwards, the imposing cliff faces of the Bokkeveld Plateau grew until it towered over us like an impenetrable wall. The road climbed quickly, and I admired the panoramic view as we topped the escarpment into the Northern Cape province.

We were literally up in the clouds and the moisture all around reminded us that we were in carnivorous plant habitat once again. The dirt road we followed had turned into a muddy mess in the rain. It was a nerve-racking drive in some stretches, especially when the car started slipping down a



Figure 17: *Drosera pauciflora*.

steep slope into a gully, but Alex's bravado got us to the rocky terrain deep into the plateau. Out of the corner of our eyes, we simultaneously spied a series of exposed seeps atop a flat rock platform and knew that there must be sundews there.

We found a beautiful population of *Drosera alba* (Fig. 18 and back cover), one of the most elegant sundews with its gracefully thin raised leaves emerging out of a ground hugging basal rosette. Its name is somewhat of a misnomer as the entire plant is coloured a very vibrant crimson colouration. Growing alongside it was an undescribed sundew known as *Drosera* sp. Nieuwoudtville (Fig. 19). The plant is very similar to *D. alba* but lacks its raised filiform leaves. Both species have a thin flower stalk that produces a few relatively small pink or white flowers. There were even a few specimens that looked like intermediates and could possibly represent a hybrid between them (Fig. 20).

With the light quickly diminishing, we pried ourselves away from the site and set up camp. That night was one of the coldest I've ever experienced. I woke up at 4 am and was unable to fall back asleep when the temperature plummeted down to freezing. Clearly, I wasn't the only one on the verge of hypothermia – I heard the car engine start, and I joined Alex in the toasty heated cabin for a nap before the sun rose.

We spent the morning surveying a few sites on the plateau before making our way back down the plains. It wasn't long before the dramatic cliffs of Gifberg appeared before us. The striking block of rusty sandstone rises abruptly out of the surrounding plains like a fortress and with a sense of awe, we climbed the steep road up its side. At the top lies an extensive tableland covered with very exposed fynbos growth. We came across some seepages that flowed atop rock platforms and knew that there were carnivorous plants there.



Figure 18: *Drosera alba*.



Figure 19: *Drosera* sp. Nieuwoudtville.



Figure 20: A possible hybrid between *Drosera alba* and *D.* sp. Nieuwoudtville.

Thousands of *Drosera alba* immediately drew our eyes, colouring the seeps with streaks of intense red. Alex told us to look closer and it was only after staring for a while that I realised that *Utricularia brachyceras* (Fig. 21) was growing amongst the sundews. The bladderwort is absolutely tiny, with flowers around half a centimetre in size. Up close, they reveal an intricate beauty with candy-striped purple and white upper corolla lip.

After hiking into the bush, we reached some seepages draining into a creek. There we found *Utricularia bisquamata* (Fig. 22) in full bloom. The species varies enormously in its size, colour, and shape, and is extremely widespread throughout the Cape. The local form is one of the most attractive, with a large deeply folded lower corolla lip that wraps around the base of the bulbous centre.

We were originally going to spend another night camping but after two nights in the cold we'd had enough. The following morning, we started the long drive back to Cape Town via the northern Cederberg Mountains. The landscape here seems particularly ancient, with interestingly shaped sandstone formations eroding out of the rusted bedrock.

At a large, sloped seepage, we found beautiful rosettes of *Drosera afra* (Fig. 23) glistening against the rocks. This species is distinguished from similar plants by its larger and sparser rosette, pink-flowered scapes and a preference for mountainous seepages. Growing alongside it was a lilac-coloured form of *D. cistiflora* (Fig. 24A). At another nearby site we spotted other varieties that were cherry and salmon coloured (Fig. 24B, C). After a day full of quick stops, we arrived back at Cape Town to finally get a comfortable night's rest.



Figure 21: *Utricularia brachyceras*.



Figure 22: *Utricularia bisquamata*.



Figure 23: *Drosera afra.*

Alex and I awoke refreshed and headed straight towards Hermanus to check out some new sites. We pulled up beside a small creek that had been recently scorched by fire. This afforded easy access to the stream, which would have otherwise been impenetrable.

Fiery clumps of *Drosera slackii* (Fig. 25) arose from the blackened earth. The species is recognised by its semi raised rosettes of guitar-shaped leaves, the undersides of which have strange fleshy red protuberances. Like a phoenix from the ashes, the sizable plants were fed by the influx of light and nutrients resulting from the fire.

We drove up a nearby trail unsure whether the rental car could handle the loose road until we broke onto a ridge overlooking the ocean. While Alex was looking for some *cistiflora* thing, I gingerly ventured closer to the cliff edge until I was looking down the drop off. *Drosera glabripes* (Fig. 26) colonised rock cracks within the steep cliffside, the towering stems of the sundew displaying its rosette prominently above surrounding shrubs. It was a thrilling experience navigating the precarious terrain to find the most beautiful patches of plants to photograph.

We moved a bit further inland past the coastal ranges and found ourselves in the broad valley basin of the Overberg region. Patches of habitat are extremely limited here due to widespread agriculture, and we once again relied on satellite imagery to track down remnant patches of *veld*. On a steep hillside we found *Drosera zeyheri* (Fig. 27) growing in clay. I was intrigued by the wide variation in their morphology. Some plants only had a basal rosette whereas others had a rather well-developed erect stem with a few cauline leaves.

We had a window of a few hours the following morning before we expected heavy rain, so we hastily drove high up the mountains near Franschhoek to get some hiking in. Unsurprisingly we were the only car at the trailhead that morning. The clouds swirled around us, intermittently revealing the jaw dropping scenery as we got our blood pumping in the thick morning fog.



Figure 24: (A) Lilac, (B) cherry, and (C) salmon coloured *Drosera cistiflora*.



Figure 25: *Drosera slackii*.



Figure 26: *Drosera glabripes*.



Figure 27: *Drosera zeyheri.*

As the hillside got steeper, we inspected the clay embankments beside the trail and found *Drosera ericgreenii* (Fig. 28). The rarely observed sundew has a raised rosette of thick leaves, and extremely hairy flower stems that look like they're covered with shaggy fur. The plants seemed to prefer sheltered positions in between shrubs, which is not surprising given how exposed to the elements we were. The rain rolled in as we completed the hike, and we took an early break in preparation for a massive day tomorrow.

We awoke before sunrise to start the 1000 km round trip east towards the town of George. After about 2 hours of driving, we made a quick stop at an alluvial flat in the Overberg region to see one of South Africa's most elusive sundews. Growing in silty brown deposits were small rosettes of *Drosera coccipetala* (Fig. 29). The plant is named for its alluring carmine-red coloured flowers. However, it was too late in the season to see the flowers open so we quickly moved on.

The landscape changed as we travelled further east. Towering stems of *Aloe ferox* suddenly appeared on the roadside verges and signalled the transition from winter- towards summer-dominant rainfall patterns. About half-way to our destination, we turned onto a pass that climbed through the Outeniqua Mountains. Thousands of *Drosera aliciae* (Fig. 30) covered the sides of the walking trails here. The small rosettes do not undergo dry dormancy and require a habitat that is wet year-round. Although they grew on very well-drained slopes, the orographic lift of the coastal mountain range keeps the soil moist.

It was late in the afternoon by the time we finally made it to George. With only an hour left of usable light, we quickly drove into the mountains overlooking the town. We kept our eyes peeled for wet seeps and it wasn't long before we found what drove all the way for. Semi raised rosettes of *Drosera venusta* (Fig. 31) clung to the embankment. Their dark red leaves blended in beautifully



Figure 28: *Drosera ericgreenii.*



Figure 29: *Drosera coccipetala.*



Figure 30: *Drosera aliciae*.



Figure 31: *Drosera venusta*.



Figure 32: *Drosera liniflora.*

against the damp shadows of the mossy wall. As the sun set, we rewarded ourselves with a hearty traditional meal at McDonald's before driving the five hours back to Cape Town.

We must have been running on adrenaline as the very next day we decided to tackle Bainskloof for my final hike in South Africa. The iconic mountain pass is famous for its breathtaking scenery as it carves through steep slopes between sharp peaks and precipitous ravines. Alex gripped the steering wheel tight as we wound up the vertigo inducing road. On perched rock ledges, we could see glistening red sundews catching the morning light and we stopped to scramble up the cliffs to inspect them. *Drosera liniflora* (Fig. 32) grew in abundance, their long stems, each tipped with relatively small flowers, reaching high towards the sky.

After locating the trailhead, we descended down a steep gorge and were confronted by a fast-flowing river at the base of the valley. Due to the unseasonably high rainfall, the river was raging, and we spent a good half hour navigating upstream to find a suitable crossing site. Eventually we settled on a section that was only waist deep and stripped down to tackle the powerful current. Alex threw his shoes to the other side, which barely made it over and landed in some bushes, while I strapped my clothing to the top of my bag. The water was numbingly cold, and I had trouble balancing against the fast-moving stream but eventually I hobbled over the river.

While Alex disappeared into a thicket to retrieve his shoes, I unpacked my bag only to find that my pants were missing. I had to go back across the river, hoping the entire time they weren't washed downstream. Luckily, I found them snared on a bush. After rejoining Alex, we looked up the valley to find that we had an audience of people laughing at our misfortunes. A bit embarrassed but in good spirits, we climbed out of the gully to finally start on our hike into the Bainskloof wilderness.



Figure 33: *Drosera admirabilis*.



Figure 34: The author with *Drosera regia*.

As we gained elevation my legs started burning as we manoeuvred the rugged valley slopes, and I took a few breaks disguised as photo opportunities. It wasn't too long before we came across a swampy area where a mountainside seepage crossed the trail.

Pretty rosettes of *Drosera admirabilis* (Fig. 33) lined the path, their glistening rosettes appearing to float atop the shallow pools of water they inhabited. The sundew grows only in permanently wet niches and signalled that the rarest sundew in South Africa was nearby.

I rummaged through the thick grasses of the hillside and gasped in awe when I finally found the monstrous plant. The leaves of the giant reached up as if they were fleshy, slime-covered tentacles of a deep-sea creature. Each leaf emerges from the base as a tightly bound spiral, before unfurling outwards to reach over 40 cm in length. *Drosera regia* (Fig. 34) is truly the king of sundews, forming an enormous crown of long leaves that reach grand proportions.

I had done it! With the help of Alex and Hendré, I had actually observed all of the Western Cape's described sundews in just 19 days! As I sat with *Drosera regia* and watched the clouds tumbling over the rugged peaks of Bainskloof, I reflected on how South Africa was so incredibly rewarding in both its plant life and scenery. The pursuit of carnivorous plants in the wild has led me to the most beautiful corners of the world and I can't wait for the next adventure.



Figure 35: Violet-flowered *Drosera cistiflora* north of Cape Town.

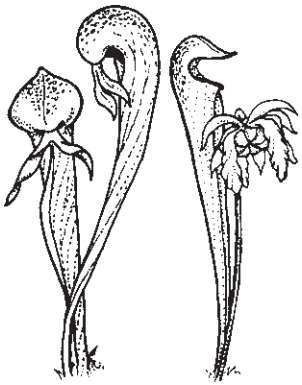
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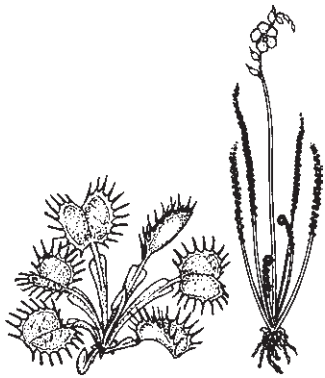




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Front Cover: White-flowered *Drosera cistiflora* in full bloom near Darling, South Africa. Photo by Boaz Ng. Article on page 190.

Back Cover: *Drosera alba* growing on a seepage at Gifberg, South Africa. Photo by Boaz Ng. Article on page 190.

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