

Lost, but wait..... *Brachystelma tenellum* by Ralph Peckover

Background :

During the 1990's, trips were undertaken by myself to various areas in South Africa and further afield to look for already described as well as for any new *Brachystelmas* and *Ceropegias*.

One of the *Brachystelmas*, *B.tenellum* held a special interest in that there was only an illustration in the Book by R. A. Dyer and had also only been found on Gibraltar (which is a large pillar of rock at Oribi Gorge in southern Kwazulu Natal) and Highlands Farm.

The original collection and type locality was made by Mr R Strey in November 1970 on Gibraltar and subsequent collections were with Mr H Nicholson next to the dirt road on the farm of Lynton Neetling.

At that time R Strey had passed on and I obtained the phone number of H Nicholson who in 1991 was in an old age home and he indicated that the plants were on the sandstone pavements in shallow soil around a hundred metres from the pillar of Gibraltar.

After giving agricultural extension advice on the 27 February 1992 for community gardens in this general area, I found *B.australe* near the Umtamvuna Nature Reserve as well as *B.rubellum* in the grasslands.

The next day it was off to the Oribi Gorge and from Nicholson's directions, the sandstone platform was easily found.



The type locality

in 1992, looking south, note variety of plants



Three well camouflaged plants



Flower of *B. tenellum* 1992

There was an amazing plant life on the soils which included a few plants of *Brachystelma pygmaeum* , *B.tenellum* of around 30 plants in the few square metres together with, *Eriocephalus* sp. *Crassula* sp. *Delosperma caespitosum* , *Hypoxis* spp. and an *Eucomis* sp.

Adjacent to this area, around 50m distant were sugar cane fields. These plantings, in my opinion were to become a critical factor in the demise of this plant at the type locality in the future.

The area was not visited again for around 20 years, but in Nov 2011 out of curiosity a visit was paid to the area again to see what had happened to the plants.

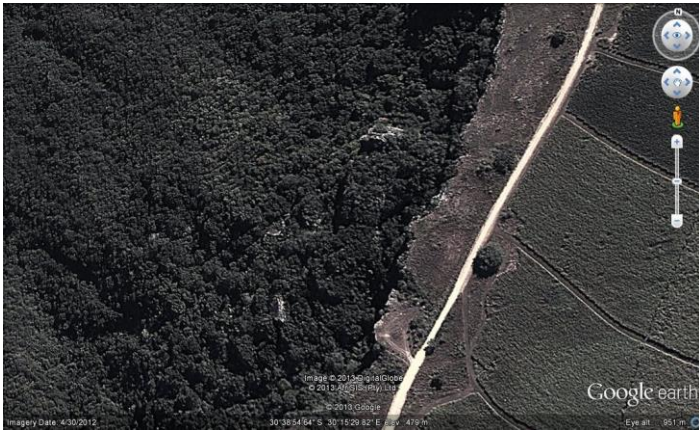
This area is in the mist belt of Natal and this visit was conducted in mist and typical drizzly Natal rain. No plants could be found at the site and it was decided to delay a thorough search until the next visit to the area in a year's time. During the next trip to the area, an hour and a half was used to comb the area where plants were seen 20 years previously but although the whole ridge was examined, no plants were found.

What was found however, were numerous small excavations and the culprit was determined via the many faecal porcupine droppings. This animal I think increased in numbers in the last 30 or so years due to an ample source of food namely the sugarcane. Before this, the area was planted mostly to Wattle which would not have sustained many porcupines as it would not have been on their menu. The sugarcane is harvested every two years and at this time there would be a shortage of nourishment. The animals would have to look elsewhere for food until the sugarcane grew out again and any edible plant would suffice, ie the *Brachystelmas* with their corms, *Eucomis*, *Hypoxis* and others would now be on its menu.

Another induced human activity is that, at the type locality, (see the short turnoff at the bottom left of the Google photo) is a recent lookout area. There was vehicle and also human trampling of vegetation and this would have also affected a few plants although vehicles appear to have kept off the main sandstone sheet.



Here is Graham at the original type locality site looking north



Type locality of *B.tenellum*, at track to the left of the road

With the type locality now devoid of any *Brachystelmas*, it was decided that any other nearby suitable habitats should be investigated.

The opportunity arose on the 18<sup>th</sup> December 2013 when Graham and Kate Grieve of CREW accompanied me first back to the type locality to finally see if there were no overlooked plants missed from the previous two inspections.

At the type locality no plants were seen by anyone and Graham suggested we go to another undisturbed site a few kilometres away as there were similar habitats there. It did not take long, a few

minutes of searching and Eureka, the first plant was found, photo below



The first plant found, very cryptic .With further searching another 15 plants were found.



See if you can see the three plants here

At this site, which appears to be free of regular human activity, some type of conservation strategy should be implemented to ensure that

another species of plant does not become just a statistic due to the effects of mankind. Nearby, other suitable areas should also be examined to find, at least more of these plants as 15 plants cannot secure a viable population.