

Book Review

Wildflowers of the Central Highlands of Namibia

By Coleen Mannheimer

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This book is the second of a series of guides to the flowering plants of Namibia planned by the National Botanical Research Institute. The first covered the biodiversity hotspot of the southern Namib and it is fitting that the second covers the central highlands of Namibia. As clearly explained by John Irish at the beginning of this book, the central highlands by virtue of its diverse geology, topography and climate provides a variety of habitats and niches for numerous plants and animals. This area that supports this high diversity of plants, including many endemics, is also one of the most highly populated and rapidly growing areas of the country. It is therefore important that an awareness of and interest in these plants is created because the area is vulnerable to development.

Wildflowers of the Central Highlands of Namibia covers over 450 species. As the name suggests, it focuses on wildflowers – herbs, small and dwarf shrubs and bulbs. Only the most common of woody shrubs are described, as well as the more conspicuous ferns, grasses and sedges. No trees are described – but these and other woody plants are comprehensively covered in *Le Roux and Müller's Field Guide to the Trees and Shrubs of Namibia* (Mannheimer & Curtis, 2009). Each species described in *Wildflowers of the Central Highlands of Namibia* is illustrated with photographs, usually showing the whole plant, as well as a close-up of flowers and/or fruits. Almost all of these photographs are of a high quality and for many of us, who are not necessarily plant specialists, provide a useful and first point of departure in identifying a wildflower.

The plants are presented in phylogenetic order, starting with terrestrial ferns and grasses and working through more than 70 families to the daisies, and alphabetically within each family. For those not familiar with the characteristics of each family, the thought of paging through the whole book in identifying a wildflower, is a little daunting. Nevertheless, I tried it – and to my delight found it works and I managed to identify a number of flowers I collected around Windhoek after the rains that fell over the Easter weekend of 2013, and I'm certainly no plant expert. Presenting the species in this order has the benefits of being able to provide brief descriptions of the families and the more common genera close to the species and enables you to easily compare similar species and those of the same genera. This would not be as easy in flower guides that group species according to colour or growth form. A simple key to guide you to the relevant family or section of book would, however, be a useful addition.

Each species description provides not only the known common names of the plant in Namibia's main languages, but also the derivation of the scientific names (Latin or Greek). These derivations are very often useful in helping to remember identifying features of the plant. For example, *aptosimum* is Greek for 'not falling off', which aptly describes the genus of cheerful, purple flowers commonly seen even during the driest times; the species names, just as appropriate, refer to the white leaf edges (*albomarginatum*), preference for sandy habitats (*arenarium*) or long, slender leaves (*lineare*). Coleen further helps us in identifying the plants by generously sharing her knowledge gained from following her long-time passion by providing very useful hints to tell one species apart from others.

The species are comprehensively described, but with her vast knowledge, Coleen has been able to describe each species using the most important characteristics and keeping technical terms to a minimum. Those technical terms that are used are defined in the illustrated glossary at end of the book preceding the full index of scientific and common names. Useful information on flowering times of the plants in the central highlands, occurrence, and habitat preferences, as well as interesting facts on its conservation status, use and toxicity are incorporated into the discussion of each species.

In spite of covering so many plants in detail, the book is a manageable A5 size and weight for carrying in the field. It has a durable, flexible cover, which is strengthened by folded leaf extensions of the front and back covers and a glossy varnish finish. The book is a must for everyone with an interest in Namibia's flora – especially those residing in central Namibia – and provides an excellent training tool for environmental students and reference for tourism professionals.

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Other books in the series: Mannheimer, C, Maggs-Kölling, G, Kolberg, H & Rügheimer, S. 2008. *Wildflowers of the southern Namib*. Windhoek: Macmillan Namibia (Pty) Ltd. 312 pp.