

## A Self-Guided Walk October - November 2024

WITTUNGA



Wittunga is spectacular at this time of year. If you can tear yourself away from the more eye-catching displays, this list contains some of those, and some, perhaps even more interesting, which may need a bit of help to get your attention. NB: In this age of DNA sequencing there is much taxonomic revision, so if you follow up a species online you may be directed to a name which doesn't quite fit the label.

See over page for map

\*An Australian native

- 1 *Phylica pubescens*** Cape featherhead South Africa  
Next to a bench on the side of the path is an attractive shrub from the family Rhamnaceae densely covered with softly-hairy leaves which appear to make the plant glow in sunlight. Popular in floral arrangements for its foliage, it is long-lasting as a fresh cut-flower and also dries very well. Tiny inconspicuous flowers with a faint cinnamon scent attract beetles, flies and bees in its native fynbos. Fruits forming after pollination contain seeds with an attached elaiosome (fat body). The seeds are collected by ants which eat the elaiosome and discard the seed in their nests, where they may germinate safely after the passage of a fire.
- 2 *Erica sessiliflora*** (Green, or white bottlebrush heath) South Africa  
An unusual erica, it has dense heads of delicate pale-greenish flowers in season, but the most interesting feature of this species is the storage of seed on the plant (serotiny) the only erica to do so. The knobby thickening of the stems are fruiting bodies formed by sepals growing and hardening around ovaries with their developing seed. These may remain on the plant for years or until a fire releases the seeds.
- 3 *Salvia aurea*** Beach sage, golden sage Coastal South Africa  
Directly behind the ericas is *Salvia aurea*, a large hardy shrub with the square stems and aromatic leaves characteristic of the mint family. Its unusual flowers quickly age from bright-yellow to a rusty orange-brown, leaving a persistent cup-shaped papery calyx when the petals fall. It is often a constituent of the vegetation on coastal sand dunes, where its nectar-rich flowers are very attractive to wildlife, including bees, moths and sunbirds. Flowers of golden sage are said to be too big for efficient pollination by visiting bees, so most pollination is done by birds. Sunbirds in particular rely on its nectar when the proteas are not in flower.
- \*4 *Calothamnus* spp.** Claw flowers, one-sided bottlebrush Endemic to WA  
The most conspicuous elements of these flowers are the many bright-red stamens, often fused along part of their length into four or five 'claws'. The petals are small and fall off soon after opening. Floral nectaries attract bees and honeyeaters, and after pollination the flowers form woody capsules with seed that may be retained on the plant for years. Unlike callistemons, *Calothamnus* flowers usually form on only one side of the stem. *C. halophyllus* (4a) in the WA heath beds is a better example of a 'one-sided bottlebrush'.
- \*5 *Lasiopetalum behrii*** Pink velvet bush Mainly SA and NW Victoria, eastern goldfields of WA  
Set back from the path, pink velvet bush is a small shrub with stellate hairs on the stems and undersides of the leaves. Prominent white to pink sepals enclose five tiny red-brown petals at the base of the central stamens and ovary. Widespread in the mallee it grows on a range of substrates from sand dunes to granite or limestone hills. For a closer view, look for flowers of *Lasiopetalum discolor* further north along the path.
- 6 *Eriocephalus racemosus*** Coast wild rosemary, strand kapokbos South Africa  
The Afrikaans name for this hardy, aromatic member of the daisy family means snowbush, a reference to the dense growth of silky hairs around each miniature seedhead in the long the racemes of mature flowers. Many species of birds, in particular the karoo prinia (*Prinia maculosa*), take this fluffy material to their nests. A 2017 paper titled 'Fluff-thieving birds sabotage seed dispersal' found no evidence that this behaviour aids seed dispersal. A simpler explanation is that the fluff assists in wind dispersal of the tiny intact seedheads.
- 7 *Protea cynaroides*** King protea, giant protea Fynbos of the Cape province  
About halfway along the path is a king protea, the national flower of South Africa. Most mature plants only reach a height of 1 to 2m, but the flowerheads are the largest in the genus, and much-prized by the cut flower industry. In its native range, the many small flowers inside the large colourful bracts are pollinated by sunbirds and sugarbirds when probing for nectar. Seed set is low in the nutrient-poor fynbos, but this species can also regenerate from dormant buds in a buried lignotuber after fire.
- 8 *Nymania capensis*** Chinese lanterns, klapperbos South Africa  
Klapperbos is a slow growing shrub whose puffy, pale-pink fruits develop from single pale-pink to dull-red flowers borne in the leaf axils. These papery seed capsules are often blown under other bushes (so-called nurse plants), where conditions for germination and early growth of the young seedling are more favourable. Once established it can tolerate the extremes of frost and heat in its dry, rocky or sandy habitats. New seed capsules will begin to form soon, but you should find a few old ones in the canopy above eye height.
- 9 *Leucospermum reflexum* var. *reflexum*** Rocket pincushion South Africa  
Next to a naming sign for the genus is a large, robust old rocket pincushion, so named because, as the small flowers in the initially globular flowerhead open, rapid growth of the upper surface forces the floral tubes and 'pins' to reflex down toward the stem forming a 'fiery tail'. The pins are the central styles or pollen presenters of each flower. Once again, like many species in the fynbos, the hardworking sugarbirds and ants are involved in pollination and seed dispersal for a reward of either nectar or an energy-rich fat-body.

**To limit the spread of soil-borne diseases, please avoid walking on the garden beds**