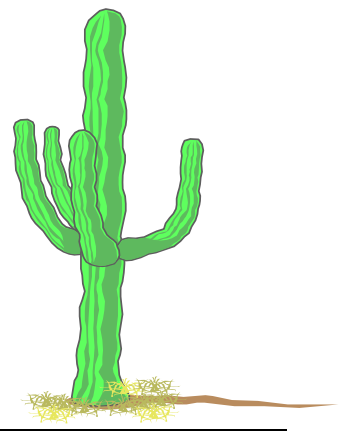


Oxotica

The Newsletter of the Oxford Branch of the
British Cactus and Succulent Society

June 2018

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CHAIRMAN'S CHAT

We are celebrating an extraordinary year in our Branch's history of 60 years from its formation in 1958 as part of The National Cactus & Succulent Society. A lot has changed over the years, however the passion and joy of our plants has not. There are many more species now available, some of which provide a greater challenge. Enthusiasm for growing our plants still spurs every individual no matter how large or small their collection: the thrill of seeing plants grow from small seedlings or cuttings into larger plants and bursting into flower still provides lots of satisfaction and joy. On a personal note I feel that my own plants are a little behind this year, but hopefully the better weather will entice them into growth. It's now that you find out about those who sadly have not made it through what was a very strange winter.

The first six months of Branch meetings have seen some first time visiting speakers to Oxford, so I hope that those who have attended the meetings have enjoyed their presentations, ranging from Lithops in habitat, plants from Mexico and Texas to Gasterias in the flesh. We have a lot more interesting topics to come later in the year, so it has been pleasing that we have seen some new faces coming along to the meetings. I hope that they will continue to enjoy the friendship and hospitality that we offer.

As I write we are looking forward to our up and coming Branch events: the plant stall at Bury Knowle, the Display and sales at Blenheim Palace Flower Show, and of course our Branch Show in July at Grove with the Mammillaria Society. You should all have received a schedule either by hand or post, so do try and come along and even enter a few plants - the more the merrier - and make it a real celebration.

We are hoping to plan an Open Day later in the year, but we are also arranging a very *Special Celebration* to mark our 60th year: a one day symposium on **21st October** with

four specialist speakers, details of which will be published nearer the time. I do hope that you will be able to participate in this very special day.

Please remember that it's *your* Branch so do let us know your views.
Good growing!

Bill Darbon

DROOLING SPINES

John Watmough

NON COMPOST MENTIS

The question I am asked the most on my travels is: can I recommend a good compost and grit, and where can I get them? My favourite grit is Jondo crushed flint as supplied to keepers of poultry. It is available in four grades, called Chick, Growers, Hen and Turkey. All are useful to ourselves, and all used to be available sporadically from Country Markets just south of Witney Bypass. Alas, that business has folded and I have as yet not found an alternative short of going to the Jondo headquarters in Lincolnshire. There is, however, a new product on the market called RHS Horticultural Grit; this is available from North Leigh Garden Centre and from Notcutts at Nuneham Courtenay.

The best top dressing used to be Dorset Gravel. Unfortunately for us the good citizens of Bridport put a stop to the commercial plundering of the west end of Chesil Beach, which is all that lies between them and inundation. I am still using Jondo crushed flint as a top dressing, though I would recommend exploration of aquarium suppliers. At Blenheim we used "Golden Grit" on our display plants and it looked pretty good. Cornish Grit, which is crushed grey granite, is good for mixing into compost, and it is rich in trace metals. It is not good for top dressing, though, because it attracts green algae. It is, moreover, not always easy to find. Bishops Cleeve Garden Centre south of Bristol is a long way to go unless you are just passing through.

As for basic compost, all experienced growers have horror stories, and this issue is discussed whenever cactus growers meet. One of our most prominent growers says that we should use a highly organic compost such as Levingtons, especially for South American plants. A visitor to Blenheim recommended loam available from Batsford Arboretum and Garden Centre at Moreton-in-Marsh. It is still quite a distance to travel, though. Watch out for compost that claims to be "reduced peat": it is often still 60% peat! Some compost claiming to be "organic" contains traces of household detritus and is only good for growing toadstools and *Sciara* flies. The John Innes label means no more than that the supplier has paid £1000 for the right to print the name on the bag. It means nothing. Finding decent compost is a perennial problem.

By the way, all the Wyevale Garden Centres are being sold off piecemeal. There is no way of knowing what your local Wyevale will end up as.

[Charlton Gardens in Wantage sells the RHS grit: I discovered it this year and am using it now. Ed.]

WHEN THE HEAT IS OFF

I am always on the lookout for plants to keep in my unheated greenhouse. What is suitable is a matter of trial and error; in my case, severe trials and horrible errors. I took a lesson from the late Graham Hole and overwintered my *Gymnocalyciums* (except for a few lowland species) in the cold house. No good: they marked and were slow to get started the following season. Agaves were much the same. I killed a fine *Agave titanota*, though I had every reason to suppose that it would be frost hardy if kept dry.

Last winter I killed one of my Navajoas that I was very fond of. For these plants, I don't think it was cold enough. My Navajoas have never flowered so well as after being subjected to -19°C a few years ago. There are plenty of Opuntoids that like the cold, of course, but I don't like *them*. Another plant that turned to mush was the beautiful (and expensive) new discovery *Matucana rebutiiflora*. The label claimed that it came from 3,800 metres altitude, which puts it up with the Oroyas, which certainly are comfortable in the cold greenhouse. [Graham Charles reckons that Oroyas are essentially high-altitude Matucanas.] Some years ago I tracked down a specimen of *Escobaria vivipara* from Alberta. It died in the winter!

I can recommend some of the other succulents, though. Many Delospermas are genuine alpiners, and the rather beautiful mesembs of the genus *Aloinopsis* thrive in my cold house. They come from the region round Sutherland in the Northern Cape, which is notoriously chilly. Rhodiolas are interesting. They retreat into their caudices for the winter, when they expect to be covered with snow, and restart frantically in the spring. I have a specimen of the circumpolar *Rhodiola rosea* from Hokkaido (remember that the Winter Olympics have been held in Sapporo) and *R. amabilis* would you believe from Nepal.

Overall, I reckon that I have a lot of learning still to do. At least it keeps the brain from atrophying as I approach my fourth quarter-century.

PLANTS REQUIRED

The Branch sold 644 plants at Blenheim and a further 71 at Portishead. We shall need plants to sell at the National Convention (13th - 15th July), our Show (28th July as if you didn't know), and our 60th Anniversary Convention at the Lambert Arms in Lewknor (21st October). Plants should be well-presented and must contain a second label indicating the price and identifying the owner. The commission to the Branch on sales is now only 10%. Please contact myself – details are in the Branch programme card. By the way, can anybody help run the Branch Sales table at our Show? It's good fun. You need to be able to add up and enjoy chatting to people.

JW

**BRANCH MEETINGS
JULY-NOVEMBER 2018**

*4th Thursday in month, 7:30 pm for 8:00 pm
Please bring plants for the Table Show if you can - each of these meetings except November
We are always open to suggestions for the programme so if there is someone or something that you would like us to arrange please speak to one of the committee.*

**July 26 CLIFF THOMPSON
Southern Peru 2009**

Cliff is a new speaker to the branch, he is well known as a good grower of seedling plants and has shown his plants widely around shows in the Southern part of the country. He has travelled with others to South America on several occasions so I am sure we will enjoy his presentation.

**August 23 DAVID TRASH
The beauty of our plants**

David is secretary of the North Surrey Branch and has visited our shows, but has not spoken to the branch before. David is known as a wonderful photographer and I am sure that we will enjoy his presentation and may even get some tips on how we can do as well.

**September 27 KEITH GRANTHAM
Venezuela (BCSS Slide library)**

Many of you may know that the Society holds a number of sets of slides, many of which have now been put into digital presentations. Tonight we have picked one of the late Keith Grantham's talks.

**October 25 JONATHAN CLARK
Ferocactus**

Jonathan is a member of our neighbours at Reading, and he has travelled with a number of other cactus folk to South America. He is probably best known for his 3D and Video presentations. Although his first love is Lithops, he has a good knowledge of Ferocactus and I am sure we will see some very impressive pictures of them in habitat.

**November 22
Branch Annual General Meeting**

Followed by a social get together.

Bill Darbon

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The Branch meets 7.30pm for 8pm on the 4th Thursday of each month (except December) at the Rose Hill Methodist Church, Rose Hill, Oxford OX4 4JP.

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A NAMIBIAN SAFARI
29th April to 14th May 2018
John Watmough

Four of us: Alan and Marion Brown, David Kirkbright and myself, flew into Windhoek's airport via Johannesburg, where we were met by our organisers Roy Earle and Janice Round, as well as Vaida Burbaite who had travelled from Vilnius via Schiphol. Our objective was primarily to see Lithops in habitat, though we pretended to be ordinary tourists now and again. For instance, we photographed each other grinning under the sign "Tropic of Capricorn" just south of Rehoboth.



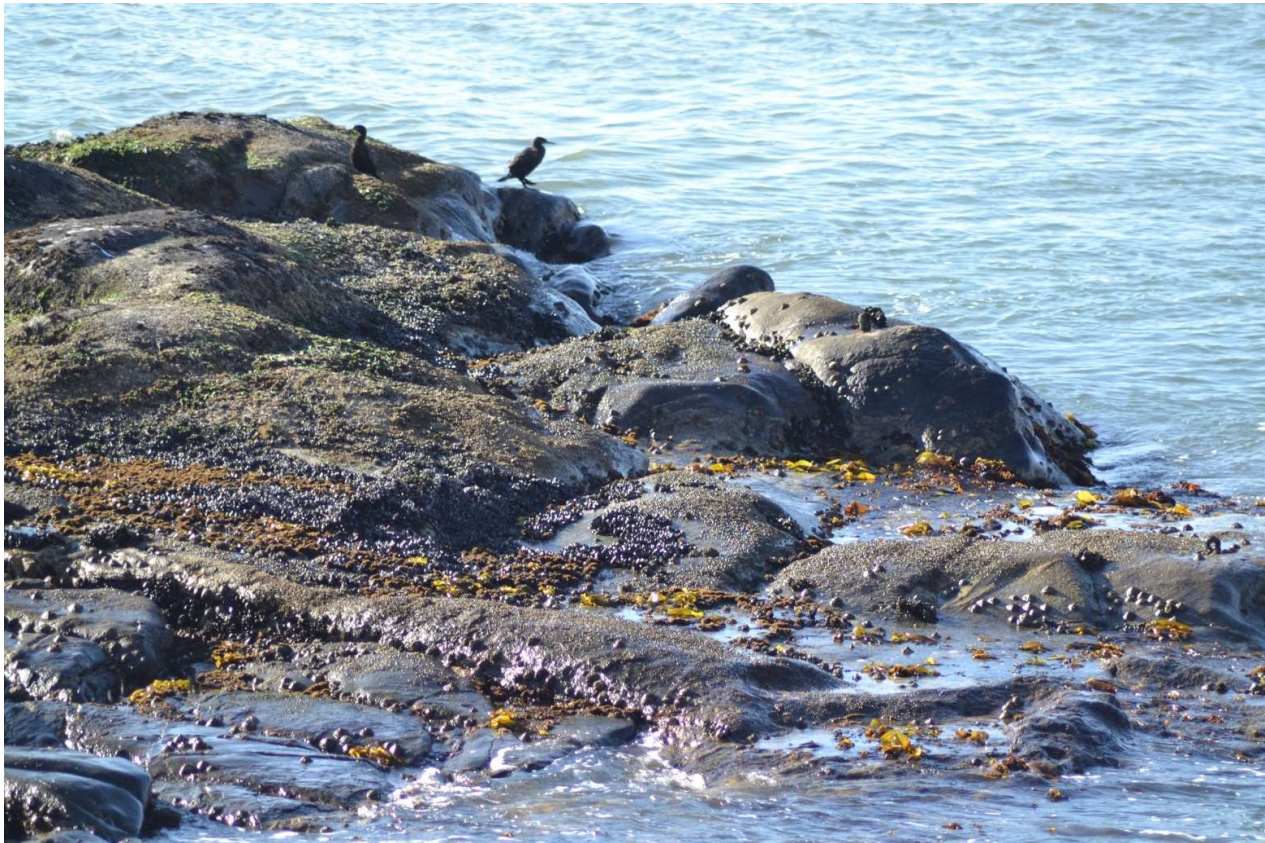
Dramatis Personae: Janice Round, David Kirkbright, Marion Brown, Alan Brown, Vaida Burbaite, Roy Earle.

We took a couple of days out to look at wild animals in the Etosha National Park. This is an area the size of Wales in the north of Namibia dedicated to wildlife conservation. We saw giraffes, wildebeest, zebra, and of course elephants, but not big cats. Roy revealed himself to be a serious ornithologist, and with his guidance the trip would have been a wonderful experience even if we had gone just to see the birds.



David and Bristles.

Vaida had been initially wary when she found out she was the only young person on the trip. However, she soon asserted herself as a young woman should, and her subtle sense of humour was revealed when she accused Roy of planting the Lithops just ahead of our visit. Of course Roy knew where the Lithops were: Namibia is his native land and his chief interest is the study and conservation of these plants. Vaida with her young eyes was our champion Lithops spotter. Finding the plants is by no means easy. Fortunately the eastern half of the country had recently experienced rain and the Lithops were plump and often in flower. In the west it had not rained. Our trip to Lüderitz to see *Lithops optica rubra* was abortive. As it happened, it rained there for the first time in seven years just after we came home, and a few days later the plants had popped up above ground level and had started to come into flower.



Cormorants at Luderitz

On day 8 we reverted to tourist mode to see the Welwitschias in the Namib-Naukluft Park. There the biggest Welwitschia in the world has a fence around it and a viewing platform. In the old days people like us used to photograph each other sitting on top of the plant.



The Biggest Welwitschia in the world

Most nights we stayed in “Guest Farms” or “Lodges”. Because of the aridity of the land, the farmers (at least the ones we met) resorted to a variety of expedients to eke a living out of a patch of ground sometimes big enough to build Greater London on. One method that benefited us was taking in paying guests to see their wild plants and animals. Alas, one farmer, the custodian of a Cole-numbered locality near Bethanie, had discovered some Germans on his property with a shopping bag full of Lithops, and now he keeps visitors out with a shotgun.

Also near Bethanie is the site of *Lithops schwantesii* v. *urikosensis* where Roy has indeed been replanting them. Bethanie is the nearest town (about 50 km) to the epicentre of Lithops studies, the Alte Kalköfen (Old Lime Kiln) Lodge. This is where the magnificent Cole Lithoparium is situated. It contains some of the Cole collections and other Lithops bequeathed by the late Tok Schoeman, plus experimental breeding programmes. Fancy cultivars and the new giant *pseudotruncatella* can be seen too. Unfortunately thieves have even penetrated this sanctuary. The proprietors, Frikkie and Hilde Mouton, have sought to interest other farmers, who are now keeping a close eye on their land. In this way more than a hundred new sites have been identified since the Coles. One of these that we visited was identified to the Moutons by the son of a roadscaper, that is, a man who operates the heavy plant that keeps the unmetalled roads in good order.



Alte Kalköfen - inside the Cole Lithoparium

I was delighted to be able to visit the Fish River Canyon, which is said to be the second biggest canyon in the world. The 13 kilometres leading to the Fish River Lodge are rugged indeed, not made any easier by four-by-fours arrogating precedence by virtue of superior traction. The management do not like visitors to go unchaperoned to the site of *Lithops schwantesii* v. *schwantesii* “Grey form” among the piles of klipspringer droppings. (Note to growers: do not spare the fertiliser.) Perhaps they do not want the plants stolen, or perhaps they do not want visitors falling into the ravine.

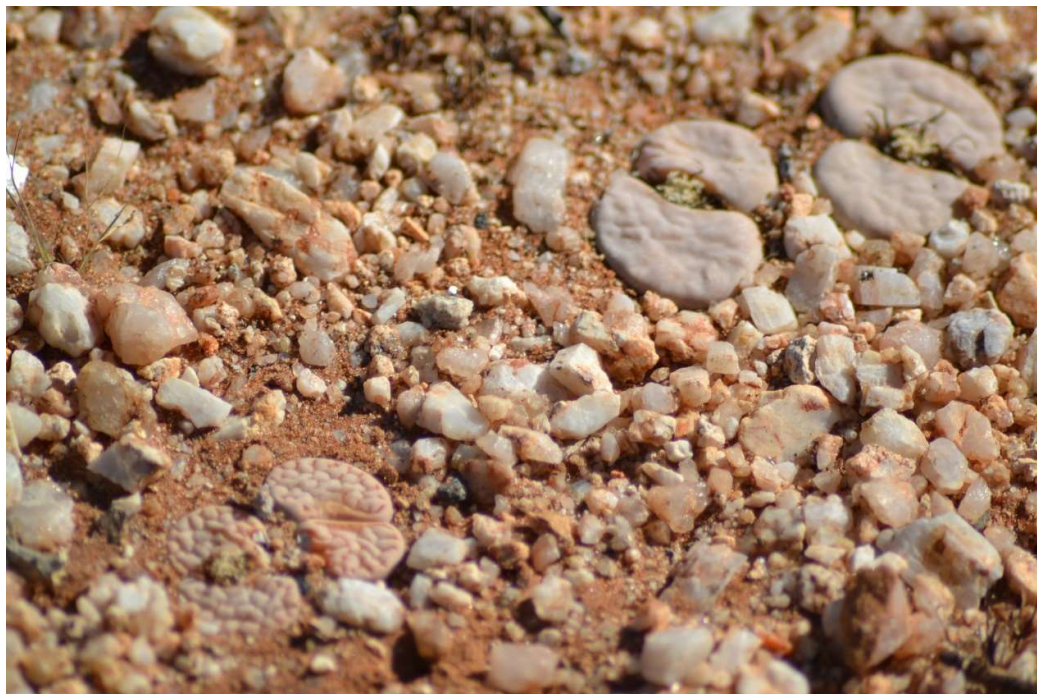


Fish River Canyon



Klipspringer dung

On our last day of exploration we found ourselves outside Karasburg at the type locality of *Euphorbia rudis*, where the ground was covered with *Pelargonium odoratissimum* almost overwhelming with its sweet fragrance. At another site near the town we found both the immaculate and the reticulate forms of *Lithops julii* growing together.



Immaculate and Reticulate forms of *Lithops julii* growing together

There followed an epic drive, refuelling at Keetmanshoop, through dusk and dark to Mariental, surely qualifying Roy for competing in Le Mans. We screeched to a stop at our hotel only to find that they were not expecting us, even though they had acknowledged our booking by e-mail. They did manage to find us rooms but all the eateries were shut, except the nearby Wimpy Bar, because it was a Sunday. So we celebrated our last night in Namibia with coffee and rooibos, and in Roy's case a luminous green confection, instead of Pinotage.

Overall we visited by my count twenty-five Lithops sites, with plants seen at twenty-four of them. We saw lots of other succulents, wild animals, beautiful birds and some amazing landscapes; enjoyed delightful hospitality, Janice's cheese and ham, cheese, ham or neither sandwiches in remote places, and Roy's almost bad language-free driving over no fewer than 5,500 kilometres. It was the most wonderful fortnight.



A Presidential potful