



Silverglen Nature Reserve

A jewel that sparkles in the midst of moral decay and urban sprawl

by Desiree Marimuthoo

Asclepias albens. Photo: D. Marimuthoo.

A tide of moral decay and urbanization has invaded the serenity that once pervaded Silverglen Nature Reserve in the grasslands of KwaZulu-Natal. It's been almost four years since I can reminisce about the 'casual botanizing' amongst the grasslands with little regard to my safety other than knowing that my companion, the resident field ranger, was watching my back.

I hold Silverglen Nature Reserve dear to my heart as that was where I was given my first opportunity by the dedicated Ross Crouch, the area manager who cracks the whip around there. 'There is no substitute for field work', he would often preach like a mantra to me. You can never imagine the hunger in me for knowledge. As an intern I was told that 15 plants a week was sufficient. This hampered me a bit as I became a troublesome student who wanted to become better than my mentors in a matter of weeks. What a cheek! Twenty a day I demanded much to their protesting and all sorts of colourful comments we won't mention. Armed with scotch tape and a lever arch file I would meet Thulani and Petros, the two field rangers, at the entrance of the reserve knowing full well that they would leave much earlier just to get rid of pesky little me. Yes it was the place where the senses of taste, smell, touch and observation took over and hinted to me what a good ecologist should be all about.

Caught amongst many political battles, taxi wars and many other minor factions, Silverglen Nature Reserve is snugly tucked between the second largest township Umlazi (developing at an alarming rate), and Chatsworth, a much smaller community in Kwazulu-Natal. It comprises almost 300 ha of coastal grasslands and forest patches with about 35

grass, 280 grassland plant, 150 bird and 120 tree species. Each patch of grassland is unique with its own diversity of plant species. There are also unique pockets of wetland grasslands hoarding inconspicuous looking creepers, bulbs and ground orchids.

Sadly I have come across many bare grassland spots indicating that a harvester has paid an illegal visit. *Hypoxis* species, *Callilepis laureola*, *Aster bakerianus*, dieramas and several others are highly in demand from the medicine bags of traders. I have however come across many traditional healers who pay homage to the land that feeds their healing pouches. 'Take only what you need and leave a seed bank for the next generation so that our future may sustain itself' is murmured amongst few wise 'Babas' (fathers) of our times.

Within 10 m² there are as many as 15 grass species and more than 40 other plant species. Caterpillar Grass *Harpocloa falx* and Black Seed Grass *Alloteropsis semialata* are my favourite. Over the months each species of grass will have a turn to dominate the land, from Boat Grass *Monocymbium ceresiiforme* to Bristle-leaved Red Top *Melinis nerviglumis* in sprays of pink. The grass paints a picture that one should pause to absorb as I feel that very soon all will be gone if the spillage of urbanization along with its fumes of disregard, disrespect and disgrace continue to contaminate this timeless masterpiece. Not many will come to botanize for fear of some misfortune that might occur to them. I will never lose hope for this little jewel so long as we have the likes of Ross Crouch and Bongani Nzama. I salute both of them for their dedication and uncomplaining devotion to preserve Silverglen Nature Reserve. 🌿



TOP LEFT: *Crassula alba*.
 TOP RIGHT: Grassland with *Melinus nerviglumis*.
 ABOVE LEFT: *Hesperantha lactea*.
 ABOVE: Yellow Stars, *Hypoxis hemerocallidea*.
 LEFT: Sunflower Seed Bug, *Agonoscelis versicolor*, on *Scabiosa columbaria*.
 BOTTOM LEFT: An Eyed-flower Mantis, *Pseudocreobotra wahlbergi*.
 BOTTOM CENTRE: Hairy Trident Grass, *Tristachya leucothrix*.
 BOTTOM RIGHT: The Natal Watsonia, *Watsonia densiflora*. Photos: D. Marimuthoo.

