

British Cactus & Succulent Society

Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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Branch Secretary

D & M Corina
79 Shirley Avenue
Shirley
Southampton
Hampshire
SO15 5NH

(023) 80779057

Newsletter Editor

Vinay Shah
29 Heathlands Road
Eastleigh
Hampshire
SO53 1GU

(023) 80261989

vvshah@clara.co.uk

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Editorial

The past couple of months have been a busy period for the Branch, with us having participated in a number of shows and displays. Later this month, we will take part in the Summer Garden Show at Romsey, and this marks the final show and display of the year.

The dry weather at the start of July has been replaced more recently with a rainy spell, which is just as well since many of my outdoor plants were beginning to suffer from lack of water during the dry period. It's amazing how green everything looks after a couple of weeks of sustained rain.

In my conservatory, it is mainly the non-showy succulents such as Haworthias and Adromischus which are currently in flower. By comparison, the orange flowers on a couple of Aloes look quite striking. A couple of cacti (Notocactus and Rebutia) have been in bloom during the last week and there are buds forming on *Borzicactus (Cleistocactus) samaipatanus*.

Announcements

Our stand at the **New Forest and Hampshire County Show** attracted a good deal of interest. The wet weather meant it was a rather muddy event (on the 2nd day, quagmire might have been a better description!), but there was a good turnout of people, and over the three days our

plant sales were at a similar level to last year. We had been allocated a bigger area this year and this meant that there was more space behind the sales table. Our display won a gold award – pictures can be seen on the branch website.

An **Open Day** will be hosted by the Corinas' between 3pm and 5pm next Sunday (August 7th). The idea of an Open Day is that a member of the branch opens their greenhouse/collection to other Branch members, so this is effectively an opportunity to view someone else's collection. It is also a chance to have an informal chit-chat with other members outside the confines of our monthly meetings. Maps are available from the front table.

Our next major event will be the **Summer Garden and Flower Show**, which is due to be held at Broadlands (Romsey) on the weekend of 20th and 21st August. On the Saturday, the event will be used to host the Zone 11 Show (show schedules are available from the front table). Then, in the evening, the Show will be broken down and the show plants will be replaced with a conventional display. Branch members who can spare time on either day would be welcome. If you are going to help, you can use the back entrance (@ Romsey Rapids) – just follow the signs for exhibitor car parking.

After good sales at the Southampton Festival and the New Forest Show, we have run out of our stocks of **cactus seed!** If you find your plants have set seed, please collect these and pass them on to Ivor Biddlecombe.

The June issue of the BCSS Journal is in the process of being sent to the printers and it should be posted to members within a couple of weeks.

Finally, it is sad to report that the BCSS Vice President, Keith Mortimer, passed away last week.

Last Month's Meeting

Plants of Interest

Glenn had originally volunteered to bring in some *Plants of Interest* for this meeting but had phoned Margaret Corina to say that he was going to be late for the meeting. Margaret Corina therefore filled in at the last minute. She mentioned that she could have chosen several bulbs and cycads and other unusual plants from her greenhouse but had decided to stick with some conventional succulent plants.

We started with a collection of *Faucaria* plants. These mesembs are commonly known as "Tiger's Jaws". They are relatively easy to grow and have yellow flowers which open in late summer or autumn. The plants vary considerably, from being tuberculate, having spots and teeth to featuring none of these. *F. boscheana* has white edges, and teeth down the sides. Margaret's her plant was 15 years old and was still within a 4 inch pot. Other species Margaret had brought along included *F. tigrina*, *F. felina*, and *F. tuberculata*.

F. longifolia cv. *minima* had been bought from Uhlig at the National Show. It was in a 2 inch pot and according to Margaret, it wasn't likely to ever need more than a 3 inch pot. She had also found a couple of attractive hybrids at Fresh Acres – these had pink teeth, and the back of the leaves were marked with pink and white stripes.

Next were some *Glottiphyllum*s, with Margaret attempting to illustrate the smallest and largest types she had. The smallest growing *Glottiphyllum* is probably *G. pygmaeum*, and the largest one she owns had been obtained from Iris Palmer. Although unnamed, it might be *G. nelii* or *G. oligocarpum*, or perhaps a cross between these two species.

Next was a summer flowering *Conophytum* - *C. minusculum* ssp. *aestiflorens*. This forms ¼ inch purple flowers which bloom before the new bodies emerge. The featured plant had around 30 heads, each only a few millimetres across.

Delosperma sphalmanthoides stays compact and small. It is very tolerant and grows all year, just needing to be splashed with some water from time to time. It covers itself in purple daisy flower from the end of April to May.

Rabiea albiflora is a geophyte with a tuberous root. The leaves of this genus tend to be covered in little bumps and they are worth looking out for. *Rhombophyllum rhomboideum* has yellow flowers which have orange backs. The leaves were angular and white-edged.

Finally, we saw one of David Corina's plants - *Aloe thompsoniae*. It comes from the Transvaal and has the virtue that the plant and flower spike remain compact. It flowers at a small size and needs some water all through the year. The flowers are orange.

Argentina 2004

Pete Down and Geoff Card presented this talk, featuring their trip to Argentina last year. The trip was held in association with a number of other BCSS members and enthusiasts, and once in Argentina they were due to meet some locals who would lead them to the cactus sites worth seeing. Geoff explained that they were due to start at the capital, Buenos Aires, and then were due to travel north-west towards the Bolivian border along the base of the Andes mountain range.

The trip had an eventful start. After waiting in the check-in queue at Heathrow, they were told that due to fuel shortages and strikes their flight had been cancelled and they would now have to go via Rome. They eventually transferred to Milan and then found that this would only get them to Sao Paulo in Brazil, where they would have to catch another flight to Buenos Aires. Going through customs in Brazil, Geoff noticed Peter running past him in the other direction. It turned out that Peter thought he had lost his passport, but it was eventually found in a trouser pocket! At Sao Paulo, they had to wait 2½ hours for the flight to Buenos Aires.

After all that excitement, they were glad to get to their hotel. The next day, they moved on to Merlo. The following day, one of their colleagues (Brian) was taken ill and had to be taken to hospital with a suspected stroke. In the event it turned out to be a heart attack and he had to be left behind. Since Brian didn't have any insurance, none of the airlines were prepared to fly him back home. Eventually he had to have an operation in Argentina. Fortunately he has since made a full recovery.

Peter Down then took over the floor to show some slides from their trip. He mentioned that

Argentina is a very large country, some 3000 miles long. While they were travelling, they saw enormous fields of wheat and soya. On a map, he pointed out their route to get to the mountains and on to the Bolivian border would take them through Cordoba. In response to questions from the audience, he mentioned that most of the roads were tarmac, and the party was travelling in a coach which could accommodate up to 25 people.

Buenos Aires is a very modern city, with different quarters around the city. An aerial view showed a section of the main road many lanes wide. There were some pictures of dancers practicing the tango. We also saw some of the local members of their expedition. Willy Smith was their main guide, and they were also accompanied by Fabian (a University botanist) and a seed specialist Raul, whose wife Lidia was an English teacher.

Peter mentioned that they were there at the end of September/start of October, which is springtime in the southern hemisphere. Two or three weeks later might have been better to see the flowers on the cacti. However, they still encountered plenty of things they hadn't seen before. A Commelina bush was covered in magenta flowers, and we also saw a shot of a flowering tree, rather like a cherry.

Their first succulent was a *Jatropha* of some sort. *Lobivia aurea* was one of the first cacti they saw. As the name suggests, it has a yellow flower. *Gymnocalycium stellatum* was in bud, and we saw *Gymnocalycium achirasense*. A picture of a cultivated version of this species showed white/pink flowers. An *Opuntia* reminded Peter to comment that these were to be found everywhere during the trip and it was important to wear tough shoes. *Harrisia pomanensis* was 2 feet tall but was still a young plant. It had a nice new shoot emerging.

Peter said there were masses of bromeliads everywhere. The featured plant had yellow flowers. The leaves of some have very nasty teeth along the edge, and in some instances they can be just as dangerous as cacti.

We saw a small *Trichocereus candicans*, and what looked like goat droppings was actually a lumpy *Tephrocactus articulata*. We also saw *Gymnocalycium ochoterenai*, with 7 buds. *Tephrocactus articula* v. *papyracantha* had long papery spines and was growing in the shelter of

a bush. A cristate *Gymnocalycium* was carrying some buds, but it was hard to identify the species. An example of *Gymnocalycium acorrugatum* looked very brown and unhealthy. Peter commented that it was very dry in some areas.

Pyrhocactus bulbocalyx is difficult to grow in cultivation, but these plants were 6-7 inches across and high. Another specimen was a foot high. These were growing in full sun. *Trichocereus strigosus* forms enormous clumps, although each individual stem is only 6-9" high. We saw Geoff standing next to a *Trichocereus terscheckii* which was 15 feet tall. The altitude at this location was around 8000 feet, and there were many Trichocerei, *Opuntias* and *Gymnocalyciums* amongst the scrub. In habitat *Echinopsis leucantha* can get to 3 feet tall and have spines 4 inches long. We also saw a large *Gymnocalycium saglionis* out in the open.

Between San Juan and La Rioja is the Parque Provincial Ischigualasto, a National Park which houses a natural science museum (Museo de Ciencias Naturales). This location is famous for dinosaur remains and some interesting weathered rock formations. Here, they also found *Denmoza rhodacantha*, 2 feet high and with erect tubular red flowers. It is very slow growing in habitat. Peter has some in his collection which are a few inches high but there are no signs of them wanting to flower yet.

The next shot showed a "field of balls" – which consisted of circular rocks around 8 to 15 inches in diameter. There was a formation called "The Submarine" and various Trichocerei were growing near this. Down in a valley there were more plants which were out of bounds. They weren't allowed to get close to these, but Fabian reckoned the plants were a hybrid of *T. terscheckii* and *T. strigosus*. Another rock formation which was called "The Mushroom" was some 40 feet high! There were also some red rock cliffs, making for some stunning scenery.

A distant view showed 5 vicunas which were hard to spot against a grey cliff. These animals are not domesticated but they are used to produce the most expensive wool in the world. We also saw *Soehrensia (Echinopsis) formosa* with buds. There was a clump of the bromeliad *Abromeitiella* which looks rather like a miniature haworthia. There's a claim that *Parodia chrysacanthion* often grows in amongst

this bromeliad, but they didn't find this to be the case in this instance. They also came some dwarf Opuntias (*Tephrocactus*) some of which had nicely coloured spines. They also found a clump of *Trichocereus spachianus* with a dozen heads, and another clump with over 50 heads.

Next was a picture of the whole group next to a sign marked "Londres". This was taken near Belén, in the province of Catamarca. There was lots of colour in the hills around. *Cereus aethiops* only gets to 2 feet high but there was a nice blue colour on the new growth. They also found *Acanthocalycium thionanthum* and *A. glaucum* which was indeed a glaucous blue colour. They also found a giant (18 inches x 12 inches) specimen of *Gymnocalycium saglionis*.

One of their stays was at the Quilmes Ruins Hotel. This was the site of an ancient civilization. Peter mentioned that it was worth noting that the best beer in Argentina was also called Quilmes. The people in this area have a thing about "faces" and we saw several examples of murals and wall paintings featuring exaggerated faces. There was also a building with cacti growing on the roof. We also saw a picture of their hardworking driver, Jorge. Originally, they had started off with 2 drivers but one was prevented from driving because his licence was out of date so Jorge had to handle the rest of the trip on his own.

There were lots of Trichocerei around the hotel, and we saw photo of a flower on one of these. An *Acanthocalycium* in the undergrowth was hard to photograph. There was nice spination on an *Acanthocalycium thionanthum*. There were also lots of *Parodias* around but it wasn't as easy to spot these because the stems were small (an inch across and two inches high) and were also obscured by scrub. *Parodia microsperma* ssp. *horrida* had yellow flowers and another old one 5-6 inches long hanging down from a cliff edge. *Gymnocalycium spegazzinii* was buried in the sand. Some of these had dark spines and others had masses of spines pressed against the body.

We saw another view of red rocks and then a tourist trap – where a family had a baby llama. Of course, everyone wanted a photograph with it. There were more examples of the faces. A picture of a *Trichocereus* skeleton showed the vascular bundles which strengthen the main stem. This skeleton is used by the locals for various items, as a substitute for wood. There was a nice form of *Gymnocalycium spegazzini*

with a brown body and white spines which had been potted up in a fancy pot by one of the stall holders.

We saw Geoff posing near a large wine vat at a café. At one of these there were also a lot of Aloe plants. At another the aloes had a yellow flower (someone from the audience suggested this could have been a *Bulbinella*). A picture of the sky was clear blue, with hardly a hint of any clouds. They also came across *Rebutia wessneriana*. In cultivation we can get *Rebutias* into nice clumps, but in the wild they are usually small, with just a head or two. They also found this species growing in an epiphytic manner on a tree, along with a *Cleistocactus*. *Cleistocactus hyalacanthus* looks similar to *C. strausii* and had horizontal pink flowers. They came across a sign saying "Private Property - do not take cacti etc." but they did not see anyone around to enforce this. Here they found an enormous *Gymnocalycium saglionis* 2 feet across which had formed a ring of flower buds along its top.

Near the village of Purmamarca in Jujuy province, they found *Gymnocalycium saglionis* ssp. *tilcarensis* and in the valley above Purmamarca, they found *Parodia stuemeri*, growing high up on a cliff and covered in grey dust which made it hard to spot.

After the mid-meeting break, we carried on with some more shots of *Parodia stuemeri* growing in rocks and *Parodia microsperma* ssp. *horrida*. A photo of a spiny *Gymnocalycium spegazzini* was washed out because it was taken with flash, but there was no option since it was quite dark under the scrub.

At the village of Purmamarca, they again found the facial features on buildings, with windows and doors painted to resemble eyes and a mouth. In the local church, the furniture such as the pews, altar, and lectern were all made from cactus "wood". There were some pictures of the siesta hour at the local market, with the stallholders enjoying a nap. There was also a pot stall with some very nice pots. A picture of the native population showed how they tended to resemble the original Indian population in this northern part of Argentina.

A cactus garden in a local park at Tilcara contained *Pyrrhocactus umadeave* which was 9 inches across. A tree was dropping red berries and some of these had landed on the top of the cacti. They also found *Parodia chrysacanthion*

here, with a yellow flower on top. These are one of the first *Parodias* to flower each year. The flower is quite small. They also saw a *Cleistocactus hyalacanthus* in flower. At Tilcara, a blonde haired musician was playing a instrument like a banjo which in the old days would have been made from the shell of a armadillo, but now is made from wood. Also taken at Tilcara was an artistic shot of *Trichocereus pasacana* in flower, with a hazy background.

At the Bolivian border near La Quiaca, they found *Oreocereus celsianu*, the “Old Man of the Andes” with stems 3-4 feet tall. One of these plants was in flower. A photograph of a circle in the sand was trying to highlight a tiny plant in the centre of the circle. This was none other than *Yavia cryptocarpa*, which is a new species, first described in 2001. The plants are small and very hard to find in dry conditions since they tend to sink into the ground. The Argentinians have collected seed from this species and have sent it to various approved nurseries to help propagate the plant. The next slide showed a group of three plants and this was followed by a slide which Fabian had sent him, of a *Yavia* plant bearing a light magenta flower.

Parodia maassii occurs over a thousand mile range and hence varies considerably. We also saw orange flowers on *Tephrocactus bolivianus* - 50 or 100 years ago this location would have been in Bolivia, but that country has seen its borders contract over the last century as various neighbouring countries have pinched land from after various disputes. It can also be found with yellow or red flowers. *Lobivia longispina* was about 6-8 inches across, and had spines 4 inches long. *Lobivia ferox* was almost obscured in a mass of dark spines.

Following a picture of Ian Robinson (a BCSS member from Wales) we saw a spiny *Austrocylindropuntia weingartiana*. *Opuntia (Puna) subterranea* pulls itself right into the ground and looks like a small headed plant. They dug one out, which showed the massive tap root. They also found *Rebutia pygmaea*, but the plants were small, with only two or three heads as most. We saw what a beautiful plant it makes in cultivation when bearing pastel pink flowers.

Pictures of some wild llamas reminded Peter of an incident at the Quilmes Ruins hotel. Everyone had gone to bed, but their driver had

wanted a word with the hotel staff. As he made his way to the front, he was attacked by some llamas in the porch! Apparently they make very good shepherds and are very defensive of anything of which they are put in charge.

At a high point in the Humahuaca Pass, Peter had taken a photo of a sign stating “3780m altura sobre el nivel del mar” which meant 3780 metres (11700 feet) above sea level. The views around here were spectacular.

They found an attractive red-green bromeliad and *Echinopsis (Lobivia) aurea*. They also found *Parodia microsperma* of which there are about 50 subspecies, if you're a splitter. They also found clumps of *Blossfeldia liliputana* in amazing condition, with dozens of ½ and ¾ inch heads. This was apparently growing just 10 feet from the side of the road. The plant is widespread in this area but difficult to grow well in cultivation. There are jungles near here as the geography causes moisture to be deposited from clouds which roll in from the Pacific coast. They also found the golden spined *Soehrensia bruchii* and the columnar *Trichocereus schickendantzii* growing amongst grass on cliffs and high terraces.

At a mountainside market, there were many handmade products including balaclavas made from the wool of local animals. In a valley with a stream of water at the bottom, there are many epiphytes growing in the trees. There were some big bromeliads here, with leaves 2 feet long, and a pink flower. We saw other bromeliads growing on bushes and on trees. A flowering tree was some type of *Fuschia* or *Thalia*.

The next slide featured a large spider, with a 6 inch long pen near it for scale. The audience asked whether the pen had been carefully placed or just thrown down there! It looked like the spider measured at least 4 inches across its legs.

On the way home, they passed a “forest of cardones” which is Spanish for candelabra. This term is generally applied to plants which grow in groups – the specific plant may be different at different locations. We saw an exceptional and very ancient *Stetsonia coryne* which was probably several hundred years old. The base of the trunk was a metre across. Some of the plants bore white/pink flowers.

The talk ended with a view of *Cleistocactus baumannii*. The plants appeared variable and they found different spine colours. These plants are quite rewarding with their red flowers.

I think everyone would have found this talk interesting. It's always good to see plants in habitat and to compare them with our plants in cultivation. And it was also good to see some of the scenery and aspects of local life.

Vinay Shah

For those who want to study further, the following links may be of use. Willy Smith's website features pictures of plants, many of which are probably the same ones that Peter discussed during his talk.

Willy Smith's Website

<http://www.cactusargentina.com/index.html>

<http://www.cactustours.org/>

Other Argentinian Tours

<http://www.cactusexpeditions.com.ar/index.htm>

Table Show – July

There were 9 entries in the July table show.

	Cacti – Echinopsis Group	Succulents – Aloe Group
Open	(1) B Beckerleg Pygmaecereus bylesianus	(1) B Beckerleg Aloe erinacea
	(2) G Finn Lobivia maximiliana	(2) J Roskilly Aloe peglerae
	(3) R Courtney Lobivia arachnacantha?	(3) J Roskilly Aloe sinkatana
Intermediate	(1) B Beckerleg Lobivia spiniflora	(1) B Beckerleg Aloe erinacea
	(2) G Finn Lobivia ancistrophora	(2) -
	(3) -	(3) -

Ivor Biddlecombe

Branch Committee Meeting

A committee meeting was held at the Corinas' on 18th July.

An updated BCSS membership list had been received. There were 75 names on the list, of whom 62 had renewed their subscriptions this year.

The branch dinner went well, although there was some comment that perhaps Friday is the busiest day of the week for restaurants and perhaps not the best choice of day for us.

Our recent displays and shows at Whitely, Southampton Festival, and Hilliers Arboretum were discussed. Preparations and a manning rota for the New Forest Show were also discussed, as were arrangements for the Zone Show/Display at Romsey in August.

Quotes had been obtained for a new pin badge for the branch. Stocks of the previous badge ran out some years ago. The design being considered is a slight variation of the previous design.

The Branch will be hosting the Zone 11 Quiz at the November meeting, and David Neville/Vinay Shah will be responsible for setting the questions. Catering arrangements for this event were also discussed.

Vinay Shah

The following article is from Ian Acton. He has also given me a copy of the referenced article on *Peyote Intoxication* which was published in a NCSS Journal in 1952.

The Peyotes of Big Bend - Where are They Now?

Imagine Wild West country where Colonel David Crockett had died in the siege of The Alamo. Both were real, although not in the manner glamorized in the John Wayne film. The heavily restored ruins of The Alamo are now a major tourist attraction in downtown San Antonio, whilst the mortal remains of Colonel Crockett rest in peace in Acton cemetery. This is Bible-belt America (and all that goes with it) as well as the home of George W Bush, but I reckon you will have heard enough about that already from the media.

The Rio Grande River, which forms a natural border between Mexico and Texas, flows in a generally South-westerly direction towards the Gulf of Mexico until its path is blocked by the Chisos Mountains. It then makes a diversionary loop southwards through what would otherwise have been Mexico before turning back to follow its logical course to the sea. America thereby gains a large slice of the Chihuahuan Desert in an area known as Big Bend National Park (although on the map it looks more like a U-bend). Had the river turned the other way and flowed Northwards around the mountains, The Alamo might already have been situated in Mexico making the siege unnecessary, not to mention the effect on more recent American politics!

The Big Bend National Park authorities claim to have the largest number of naturally occurring cactus species of any area in the United States. Casting my sceptical 'lumpers' eye over the official check list, I would reduce the number to perhaps in excess of forty distinct species plus some varieties. This is still an impressive figure. For instance, I would seriously question whether

the depth of the depression in the growing point is sufficient evidence to distinguish *Epithelantha bokei* from the more usual *E. micromeris*, or that the altitude at which they grow is sufficient to warrant two varieties of *Mammillaria heyderi*. The differences between *Opuntia engelmannii* and *O. phaeacantha* are confused at best: is one a variety of the other or is it the other way round, or are they really distinct? In addition, there are nine species of other succulents about which I have no such doubts.

There are vast geographic and climatic differences over this area. River level is about 1,500 feet falling gently towards the West, and summertime temperatures are consistently over 100°F with maxima reaching 120°F in the river gorge. Our lodgings were at 5,400 feet above sea level (one mile is 5,280 feet), and there was overnight frost on the car. Yet we found *Agave havardiana*, *Mammillaria heyderi* and flat-padded *Opuntias* growing up to about 7,000 feet. Granted these were not pristine specimens, but they had survived to reach some size and had flowered. Rainfall is erratic here, and it usually comes in torrents. There had been one such cloudburst just before we arrived, which caused flash flooding. We saw cactus plants completely submerged in water just like pond weed. The local paper reported that a woman had been swept away and drowned whilst trying to escape from her stranded car. By the time we left, there were only some deep (seriously deep) patches of mud which had been washed down. Who knows what seeds were waiting for the opportunity to germinate there?

Agave havardiana is the signature plant of the National Park. The grey-green toothed leaves with terminal spine resemble *Agave americana*, but the similarity between the species ends there. This is a very compact plant only about one-quarter to one-third of the size of its cousin, with much more densely packed leaves. It does not have the annoying habit of producing offsets from underground stolons, nor does it produce adventitious plantlets from the inflorescence. However, it does appear to set viable seed. One wonders why such a desirable plant does not appear in cultivation over here?

Another *Agave* hereabouts is *A. lechuguilla*. This offsets freely, and dies back almost equally freely, producing large mounds of herbage. It has little merit for cultivation. Other *Agave*-related species include *Dasyliirion*

(Sotol), *Hesperaloe parviflora*, *Nolina* (Beargrass), and three species of *Yucca*. The residual scarlet flower spikes on the *Hesperaloe* plants suggested they must have made a spectacular sight earlier in the season.

Fouquieria splendens (Ocotillo) is a borderline succulent, but worthy of mention. It has long thin spiny stalks which, regardless of season, respond to rain by producing fresh green leaves and brilliant scarlet flowers within a few days. It then returns to complete dormancy until the next precipitation.

Flat padded *Opuntias* were everywhere and could not be missed. The official check list claimed eight different species plus varieties. I am no expert, but many of these looked the same, and I have alluded already to the confusion in nomenclature which existed in local publications. One very distinct species was *O. macrocentra* (purple prickly pear). This turns conspicuous and rather attractive purple colour when stressed by drought and/or cold.

The pencil-thin stems of *Opuntia leptocaulis* carried formidable central spines up to about two inches long which I have not seen on cultivated plants over here. They also carried clusters of bright red fruits which are not seen over here either. The Americans have the annoying habit of giving vernacular and often inconsistent names to everything (such as “Texas nipple” for *Thelocactus*), and they call this the Christmas Cactus. Perhaps it did look like a holly bush to the early settlers, although personally I would hesitate to cut branches to make a wreath for the front door!!

Reference books consulted before our departure suggested that the most interesting species of cacti were likely to be found on limestone outcrops overlooking the river. The geological map looked like the proverbial technicolour dream coat. In practice, we found complex geology consisting mainly of various shales along nearly two hundred miles of river bank. Where should one start looking? Thinking back to England, subterranean water courses are usually associated with limestone, and an area marked on the map as Hot Springs seemed worth a try. Furthermore, it was accessible by a vehicle track. Luck was with us. We found a three mile stretch of limestone outcrop, and suddenly we were in cactus heaven.

Our five-star find was undoubtedly *Ariocarpus fissuratus*. These flat topped plants grow flush with the surrounding gravel, and are very well camouflaged. Fortunately November was their flowering season, and showy magenta flowers one to two inches across revealed their location. We then realised we had been actually walking on non-flowering plants growing in the path. They were tough; contrast this with how we cosset them. Looking at our photographs afterwards showed several variations in the arrangement of the areoles, such as straight and spiral lines, staggered lines, diamond patterns, and so on. Thankfully no one has thought to call these by different varietal names. Yet!

The only other cactus normally in flower here at this time of year is *Mammillaria pottsii*. The maroon flowers were constricted by the dense spination, and became quite tatty looking by the time they had forced their way through and opened. *Mammillaria lasiacantha* grows here also, but produces its flowers conventionally in springtime. Close relatives of *Mammillaria* included several *Coryphantha*, *Escobaria* and *Thelocactus bicolor*. None were in flower, and it was difficult to tell them apart in their shrivelled state at the end of the dry season. A few carried terminal red fruits, in contrast to the ring produced by the *Mammillarias*. These fruits are eaten by small desert creatures, ensuring that the seeds are deposited and hopefully germinate some distance from their parents. This prevents over-crowding whilst ensuring genetic variation for the future.

Ferocactus (Homalocephala) texensis made clumps of up to three or four heads, whilst *Ferocactus (Hamatocactus) hamatacanthus* grew to football size before becoming slightly columnar. Somehow we expect these plants to be easy to grow because of their names, but seeing them alongside *Ariocarpus* in this habitat makes one realize they are perhaps more tender and fickle than first thought. Perhaps losses from our own collections should be excused?

We found one of the other succulents growing in this area and nowhere else. *Euphorbia antisyphilitica* made low bushes of leafless pencil-thin grey stems, more like one would expect to find on the African continent. I felt no reason to test the alluded pharmacological properties of this plant. There is no doubt it would have worked in a perverse

sort of way, as the sap of all *Euphorbias* is poisonous to humans.

Advance reading had promised *Lophophora williamsii* (Peyote) around here, but we failed completely to find any. One flora published in 1984 recorded that *Lophophora* “formerly covered thousands of acres, but (is) now rare due to overcollecting.” Another published in 1989 reported that “in the past this cactus was very common but with the advent of the craze for hallucinogenic drugs, it has become scarce.” The National Park check list dated 1998 recorded that it had not been seen “in recent years”. One cynic suggested, with perhaps more than a grain of truth, that plants may have been removed deliberately by over-zealous officialdom who perceived them as narcotic.

I must confess to having purchased five habitat collected plants from a Dutch nursery in about 1968. These were the days when moribund imported plants were considered fashionable and won prizes at shows. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) came into force in 1975 putting an end to such practices.

The complete *Lophophora* plant resembles a parsnip, with a substantial tap root and only the top showing at or slightly above ground level. The plants I obtained had been chopped off just below the soil line leaving only the tops. They produced a few wispy roots around the cut edge, but never regenerated their tap roots before the inevitable demise. However, propagated material still survives in a juvenile form as clusters of small heads. This is characteristic of many plants propagated from small pieces of vegetative material (for example, single joints of *Schlumbergera* or *Zygocactus*), and calls into question the validity of the variety *caespitosa*.

The Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute is located about a hundred miles North of Big Bend. This boasts the most complete collection of Chihuahuan Desert plants, including cacti and succulents, assembled anywhere in the world. I found no reason to doubt this claim.

Most of the *Opuntias* and other succulents were grown outdoors. As the garden is situated some distance from, and a couple of thousand feet above the river, the more tender plants needed the protection of a crude but effective

plastic shelter. We saw proposals for a new cactus display pavilion to be located close to the inevitable visitor centre. Hopefully this will not mean a display of large and coarse plants for the benefit of the tourists, with the real gems hidden behind the scenes as happens with so many botanical gardens.

This was a vast collection of plants grown in all sorts of containers on slatted wooden benches. It had obviously been arranged systematically to start with, but as some sections expanded they had overflowed into any space available elsewhere. All this added to the interest and quaintness of the place, as you simply did not know what you were going to find next.

Ariocarpus agavoides, *A. fissuratus*, *Mammillaria plumosa* and *M. pottsii* were in flower as this (November) was their appointed season. The flowers on *M. plumosa* had opened wide and were not sulking as they often do on cultivated plants. Our attention was drawn to a large plant of *Ferocactus latispinus* with an out of season crown of perhaps a dozen magenta flowers. This was an interesting change from the usual pale yellow flowers of the species of *Ferocacti* which we manage to flower over here. *F. latispinus* is a handsome plant even without flowers having a single flat, wide, recurved central spine marked with prominent cross banding.

The very wide range of forms within species such as *Mammillaria elongata*, *M. prolifera*, etc., was most noticeable. One variation simply merged into the next. It was impossible to differentiate where one ended and the next began, yet the plants at either end of the range were undeniably different. Where would the ‘splatters’ propose to draw their boundaries between varieties in these circumstances? A collection of *Astrophytum myriostigma* had varying densities of white scales, varying numbers of angular to plump ribs, etc. Some even had diminutive spines. What does this make of the varieties *nudum*, *quadricostata*, etc.? I accept that *Astrophytums* hybridize easily, especially in cultivation, but where was the genetic material to produce spines here?

There was no attempt anywhere in this collection to attach varietal names to plants. They were all simply, but accurately, identified with their specific name and collection data. I admit to being an unashamed

'lumper', and this only reinforced my views. I suggest that all botanists should visit a collection such as this before rushing into print with yet more new names.

It was noticeable that *Lophophora williamsii* was missing from this collection. The staff confirmed that it was regarded as a narcotic drug, and hence possession was illegal. They admitted they knew of private collectors who had specimens. Apparently the technique was to label the plant with a fictitious name: Texan policemen are taught to read but not to recognize plants.

Lophophora williamsii, known as "peyote" to the native Indians, contains mescaline and a number of other hallucinogenic alkaloids. Before the influence of missionaries, the Indians followed a religion which incorporated the practice of chewing dried peyote buttons. The ensuing hallucinations were supposed to foretell the future. The peyote cult was described in some detail in the (then) National Journal way back in 1952. The author suggested that the religious connotation was perhaps an excuse for recreational drug use. There is no doubt that present day American officialdom takes the same view, and that *Lophophora williamsii* might now be extinct in habitat.

Ian Acton

Next Month's Meeting

Our next branch meeting will be held on September 6th and will feature Paul Klaassen who will be talking about South American Cacti. Paul has said that he intends to use his computer and digital projector to give this talk.

The September table Show will feature **3 Cacti** and **3 Succulents**. Please note that members are allowed to submit more than one entry in any of the classes, and that points will be earned for each placed entry.

Forthcoming Events

Sun	7 th	Aug	Southampton	Members Open Day @ The Corinas, 79 Shirley Avenue
Fri	19 th	Aug	Isle of Wight	Open House @ Robin & Joan Goodredge's
Sat	20 th	Aug	Romsey	Zone 11 Show + plant sales @ Summer Garden Show Broadlands, Romsey
Sun	21 st	Aug	Romsey	Display + plant sales @ Summer Garden Show, Broadlands, Romsey
Tue	6 th	Sep	Southampton	"South American Cacti" – Paul Klaassen
Fri	16 th	Sep	Isle of Wight	"Deserts of the South-West USA" – Malcolm Pym
Sat	17 th	Sep	Portsmouth	"Mesembryanthemums" – Suzanne Mace
Tue	4 th	Oct	Southampton	"A Walk on the Wild Side – Part 2" – Eddy Harris
Sat	8 th	Oct	Portsmouth	Portsmouth & District Autumn Show – Christ Church Hall, Widley
Sat	15 th	Oct	Portsmouth	"Cacti of Ecuador" – John Hughes
Fri	21 st	Oct	Isle of Wight	"Plants and Things Around the World" – Jean Ellis

Branch website: <http://www.southampton.bcsc.org.uk>