



The Berg River looking south towards Bridgetown with the double-hillock of the Heuningberg in the background. The cliffs on the right of this picture harbour the wild bee nests mentioned below.

Swartland and its famous honeybee colonies.

A further 19 honeybee colonies were recently discovered in the cliffs about a kilometre downstream from Bridgetown, several of them having been recently robbed by honey-hunters. There are certainly many more colonies yet to be located within this zone. The 15 km sweep of the Berg River from the Diepgat at the southern foot of the Heuningberg to beyond Bridgetown forms a refuge to multiple honeybee colonies in an area otherwise totally transformed by agriculture.

Having inhabited this territory for millennia, this honeybee population certainly constitutes a Berg River ecotype that is adapted to the riverine environment and constitutes an integral part of the ecology of the territory. During winter the

nests are enveloped in thick banks of clouds bringing rain as the various fronts from the Antarctic make landfall, while the cloudless sky in summer causes temperatures to rise over 40°C. These magnificent natural colonies are largely unknown to the surrounding farming community and have yet to be recognised as an ecological asset that should be preserved for generations to come.

Today the Berg River banks are overgrown with reeds and various exotic shrubs and trees, but early photographs (and Burchell's painting in 1811) show sandy beaches along the river. Yet, as in the past, biting midges of the family Ceratopogonidae still inhabit the river and inflict wealds that itch for days afterwards.

New species found on the Heuningberg

A new species of Satin flower, aptly named *Geissorhiza mellimontana* has been discovered on the Heuningberg by Riaan van der Walt²⁰². This brings the number of *Geissorhiza* species, which are nearly all endemic to the Western Cape, to 105. It is restricted to the Heuningberg, its only known locality where it flowers in late July to early August.

The *Geissorhiza* are cormous geophytes where their bulb-like structure is used as a storage organ during the dormant summer period and are adapted to a variety of habitats and pollinators. They are not self-compatible and so need cross pollination by insects, especially monkey-beetles (Hopliini), long-tongued tabanid and nemestrinid flies, and bees. *Geissorhiza* corms are eaten by Namaqua rock mouse and porcupines, with cormlets often breaking off to allow regeneration of the *Geissorhiza* patch.

According to Riaan van der Walt, further new species including that of a *Pelargonium* may exist on the Heuningberg.



Photo: Riaan van der Walt