

My favourite *Haworthia*

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My wife likes playing the game with me by asking “without thinking, tell me what image comes up immediately when I say” and then she would name something. The technique is called ‘active affective imagination’ or something. She is a psychologist and undoubtedly one of her reasons for marrying me was that I offered an intriguing lifelong study project. Her study has so far revealed that my brain has the illogical ability to find instantaneous emotional connections between a rather wide variety of subjects and a rather restricted range of images, all of which somehow seem to cause her eyes to roll upwards.

It is a mystery what information she subtracts from these studies. In an effort to

figure it out, I’ve been playing the game with myself lately.

So, when I read in the recent issue of *Haworthiad* the editor’s suggestion for articles upon one’s favourite *Haworthia*, I allowed myself no time to think and I was quite surprised that the image that jumped to mind was not that of a spectacular shining *H. splendens* or a beautiful bronze *H. badia*, but it was the rather ‘dull’ coloured form of *H. magnifica* growing in the Soetmelksrivier area east of Riversdale!

It is true that I have a very special appreciation for those *H. magnifica* plants growing in that area despite the fact that I must admit that there are several other species and



A particularly attractive specimen showing both beautiful colour variation as well as prominent pimpled upper leaf surfaces. (Photo: M. B. Bayer)

varieties that are more strikingly attractive to me. But perhaps it is specifically the subtleness of the beauty of these plants that placed them a millisecond ahead of other favourites during my self-imposed active affective imagination test.

Perhaps also it has something to do with the fact that during my first attempt to find these plants in the wild, I stumbled, an entire day in vain, up and down steep and slippery pebble-covered hills and ended up in a deeply



A plant with very rough and densely tubercled leaf surfaces and bright red-brown colour despite growing well hidden in dappled shade.



In this plant the leaves are more subtly pimpled, allowing the facial lines and flecks to show more prominently.

disappointed semi-coma of exhaustion.

Only after receiving more detailed instructions from that most inimitable of all Haworthia field explorers, Bruce Bayer, did I go again and finally managed to find the plants.

In self-defence I must add that part of the reason for my initial fruitless search was that after Bruce Bayer had discovered the plants there, a house had been built within fifty metres of the habitat! Each time I neared the house



Some plants are very dark in colour, closely matching the colour of some of the dark black-brown ferricrete pebbles that are scattered amongst the more numerous ochre and red-brown stones.



Another plant with dense and very prominently pustuled leaf surface.

during my first attempt I figured that it can't be right as nowhere did Bruce mention anything of a house. That portion of the Soetmelksrivier farm had been sold to a new owner who built a house there and he has since built several self-

catering guest houses nearby as well in addition to fencing the farm with a high game fence and introducing some wild antelope amongst other wildlife. It is therefore a very nice place for a *Haworthia* enthusiast to stay over during a visit



Looking south at the habitat on Soetmelksrivier: north and north-east facing slopes of a low ridge covered with dense layers of ferricrete gravel overlying kaolin-like clay.

and enjoy not only Haworthias in habitat as well as some wildlife. Unfortunately I have lost the contact details of the place, but I should actually obtain it again and publish it in *Haworthiad* as a recommended Haworthiaphile-friendly stopover.

In fact, on the hills behind the house are not only *Haworthia magnifica* but also a rather attractive form of *H. retusa*, while *H. floribunda* is also very nearby on a hill on the same farm.

The *H. magnifica* plants in this area are very variable and some plants show a clear and close link to the variety *splendens* while others again remind of a chunky red-brown *enigma* variety of *atrofusca* and others have transparent flecked leaves of typical *magnifica* as found at Riversdale.

I seem to remember seeing the informal reference ‘*subsplendens*’ given to these

H. magnifica plants from this area. None of these plants is as glossy and heavily flecked as the typical *splendens*, however and can’t ever be confused with it. The restricted area where *H. magnifica* var. *splendens* occur is only 12 km to the south-east.

To me the most attractive individuals in this area are plants with densely ‘pimpled’ upper leaf surfaces and with some subtle flecking shining through the windows framed in opaque dull bronze-brown.

The farm Kruisrivier where a most interesting and well-known *H. magnifica*-imitating form of *H. retusa* occurs is only 10km to the west. These Kruisrivier plants look so similar to *H. magnifica* that they are still grouped under *H. magnifica* (or ‘*mirabilis*’) in most publications.



H. retusa var. *vernalis*, the well-known *H. magnifica*-mimicking variety of *H. retusa* growing on the nearby Kruisrivier farm.

However, the form of *H. retusa* occurring together with these *H. magnifica* plants at Soetmelksrivier is the grass green ‘*fouchei*’ type with semi-erect and very sharply acuminate leaves.

The typical *fouchei* type of *H. retusa* is known from Komserante north-east of Riversdale, only about 8km to the west. At Komserante it also grows very close to a variety of *H. magnifica*, in the latter case the so-called ‘*asperula*’ variant. Both the *retusa* and *magnifica* have the tendency to form offsets at Komserante while both are solitary growing at Soetmelksrivier.

The Soetmelksrivier *H. magnifica* flowers in mid-summer which is a key character of the *H. magnifica* and *H. mirabilis* groups.

For numerous practical purposes and more balanced nomenclatural arrangement, it works best to keep the *H. magnifica* group separate from *H. mirabilis* based upon various leaf characters and distribution of *magnifica* largely east of the Overberg region. *H. magnifica* is therefore characterized by having smooth leaf-sides and subtle to prominent rounded pimples on the upper leaf surface. The typical variety of *H. magnifica* also features few to numerous silvery-white flecks inside the leaf windows. The latter feature is frequently shared by some varieties of *H. pygmaea*, but the flowers and flowering seasons differ distinctly between the two groups.



The form of *H. retusa* growing amongst *H. magnifica* on Soetmelksrivier has light yellow-green, strongly acuminate and somewhat semi-erect leaves. It belongs clearly with the *fouchei* and *geraldii* forms from Riversdale but tends to be small and mostly solitary.