

Scenery and Flora of the Western Cape of South Africa

On Wednesday March 11th, Gill Young took the members and guests of Berwick Wildlife Group thousands of miles away from Northumberland's cold weather. For several years now she has been travelling with her husband to the Western Cape area of South Africa to study the flora. The climate is Mediterranean in nature with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Here, of course, is where the colder Atlantic Ocean meets the warmer Indian and this has a bearing on the climate. The major rock groups date from the Cambrian period with shales, granites and sandstones predominating. These influence the plants that grow there and hence the animals which are found.

The Cape Floral Kingdom is the smallest of the 6 in the world, covering 6% of South Africa from the Cederberg mountains north of Cape Town eastwards towards Port Elizabeth. There are over 8 700 plant species, 68% of which are endemic here. The diversity of plant species is greater than any other in the world. The largest of the vegetation types is the Fynbos, with more than 7 000 species, 90% found nowhere else. The plants here have adapted to heavily leached soils, low in phosphates and nitrogen, and to the long summer drought. There is open shrubland with scattered, taller bushes, heathers and proteas with an understorey of reeds and bulbs. The leaves of some of the proteas and ericoids contain aromatic oils which, because of their use in herbal medicines, are economically important.

There are few butterflies in this region and pollination takes other channels: the cape sugar bird pollinates the leucosperma; the sunbirds ericas, bulbs and proteas; rodents pollinate proteas and insects the brightly coloured flowers. Many seeds lie dormant in the soil for years and their germination is triggered by smoke from bush fires.

Gill then showed a stunning collection of the flowers and the scenery. Many of the flowers that grow wild there were familiar, having been brought to Britain as garden plants. Particularly lovely were the scenes from Kirstenbosch Botanic Gardens. She concluded with photos of the animals found, such as the rock hyrax, ostriches, baboons and of course African penguins.