

# Painting the Veld

A botanical artist's contribution to preserving African wilderness.

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Daily strolls from her studio in the Malmani Nature Reserve, South Africa, inspire Jenny Hyde-Johnson's work. She grew up on the outskirts of Johannesburg with an abundance of wildlife and indigenous flora on the doorstep. Hours rambling through the surrounding veld offered an opportunity to study plants, birds, and insects up close and nurtured her life-long love of nature. Following a 25-year career in graphic design, Jenny now paints full-time the flora and fauna of South

Africa. Her detailed botanical paintings won gold medals at all three Kirstenbosch Biennales she entered (2006, 2008, and 2013), and her 2008 pieces were named Best in Show. Jenny's work was selected for the Hunt Institute's 15th International Exhibition. Several private collectors, including Shirley Sherwood, own her paintings. Says Jenny: "My aim is to capture the rich tapestry of nature, habitat, light, posture, and jizz; to portray the very essence of organisms, their symbiosis, and the interconnectedness of life. So many subjects, so little time..."



*Parinari capensis* subsp. *capensis* with seed dispersal via single striped mice (amongst others), 12 x 20 in, gouache on paper, ©2008, Jenny Hyde-Johnson. This is one of Southern Africa's underground trees that populated the earth at the time of the dinosaurs and before grasses had evolved. I love to show habitat as this is what shaped and nurtured the plant into what it is when I painted it.

**PANTING, I HURRY UP THE LAST SECTION OF NARROW DIRT PATH** and crest the hill. I suppress a gasp at the magnificence of the view opening up before me. No matter how many times I come this way, the gorgeous unspoiled beauty, stretching from these gorges of Leeuwenkloof many miles to the majestic Magaliesberg mountains beyond, never ceases to amaze and delight my soul.

Flowering corkwood trees with penduline purple flowers have branches broken by wild eland that enjoy feeding on the tender top-shoots otherwise out of reach.

Wheaten grasslands meet wooded ravines. Ten-foot-high aloes stand tall. Cliff-dwelling plants, gnarled and weathered, hang out in the clean evening air. Scattered caves on these hillsides bear the richest hominid fossil finds in the world. I'm blessed to call this Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site my home. I share, of course, with a scattering of wild

creatures: leopard, brown hyena, serval, lynx, a variety of buck, baboons, monkeys, small mammals, reptiles, and more. The area hosts over 300 bird species and well over 2,000 plant types.

Time passes quickly up here. As I turn to retrace my footsteps down the hill, my eyes catch the first twinkling lights switching on in Johannesburg, some 25 miles away. This is one of the largest cities in Africa; its innocent twinkling-fairy-lights belie the suffocating asphalt and cement creeping closer every year.

I learned much more about the still fairly pristine area in which I live while illustrating and designing a new guide-booklet for Brenthurst Garden. This world-renowned Johannesburg garden, owned by a forward thinking and conservation-minded family, was turning large areas of this garden back into natural plantings. Needless to say, there was a public outcry that the color had gone from the garden, but this was offset ten-fold by the influx of wild creatures, most notably birds, into the naturalized sections.

At the time, I came across a call for entries for the Botanical Artists Association of Southern Africa's (BAASA) flagship exhibition, *Kirstenbosch Biennale*. I decided to enter the exhibition, which is limited to four pieces per artist of indigenous South African flora. As veld grass surrounds my home (and with the wild plantings of Brenthurst in mind), I decided to paint the grass. I love Albrecht Durer's work and if a master could paint humble "grasses and weeds" then it must be okay. My second painting was of a rare aloe found only in the Magaliesberg/Rustenburg area. A very spectacular specimen of this *Aloe peglerae* grew a few yards from my door. The fact that it had been named for a woman, Alice Pegler, who had collected plants in the area for scientific description early in the 1900s despite her ill health and very limited means, made it all the more noteworthy a plant for a woman to paint.

These works were the first steps on a road to painting and recording many plant species of the area. For my second *Kirstenbosch Biennale* I planned a set of paintings depicting mammals distributing the seeds of wild plants. I love the interconnectedness of life and especially the symbiotic relationships between species. My third *Kirstenbosch Biennale* took

me a number of years to source wild material. Luckily it was postponed by a year, as I had not found all the Bushman-arrow-poison-plants which I required to make up the four. *Adenia* species had been collected almost to extinction and, sadly, we found only two male plants. I also learned a valuable lesson about painting plants from the wilds of Africa—one cannot depend on a plant coming up in the next season.

Some of the more showy flowering plants in this arid climate normally have only enough energy to flower every second or third year and we have just come through four years of drought.

About this time I teamed up with a local veterinarian and a computer-savvy friend, both from the area and with a great love of the environment. We started a bi-monthly online newsletter, *Wild News*. We wrote about nature topics, be they animal, bird, plants, invader species, insects, reptiles, etc. Our readership grew

and grew and we even got requests from nature-lovers in neighboring areas to join our mailing list. Sadly, life has got busier and we have had to shelve this project for a while. However, we regularly conduct nature walks in the spring and summer, showing and teaching local people about the wonders of our area.

In early spring, the University of Pretoria's botanical faculty uses this area for study purposes and I regularly have the privilege of tagging along. I'm over the moon with delight at learning more about the endemic pre-rain forbs with their underground storage systems, which require fire and smoke to trigger flowering. Underground trees and beautiful root parasites send a flower above the ground only for pollination and propagation. These are only a tiny sampling of the floral delights in this area.

We encourage outings and surveys by interested parties such as the Wits Bird Club and the Lepidopterist Society. Many local inhabitants participate in these regular visits to our nature area and the BAASA women have come to sketch and paint from the veld.

I feel a great urgency to record and paint what natural things still dwell around my home. I have compiled a vast list of plants with their flowering dates, have pressed herbarium specimens of rarer species, and have a lengthy future painting list. In the relatively short time that I have been here I have been party to the recording of many new species in this region. I love being a citizen-scientist and I'm grateful every day to be part of this wonderful, exciting environment! 🌿

**ABOVE.** *Adenia digitata*, 18 x 16 in, watercolor and gouache on paper, ©2013, Jenny Hyde-Johnson. These plants were harvested nearly to extinction due to the highly toxic, heart-stopping, glycosides in the bulb. The flowers are full of cyanide and eaten to ribbons by the larvae of the showy *Acraea anemosa* butterfly. **RIGHT, TOP.** *Ledebouria marginata*, 20 x 30 in, watercolor and gouache on paper, ©2016, Jenny Hyde-Johnson. I portrayed this specimen just as I found it. It's quite toxic and had been illegally harvested from this area for a traditional medicine market in Johannesburg. It made a lucky escape and now grows safely close to my home. **RIGHT, BOTTOM.** *Aloe peglerae*, gouache and graphite on paper, 19 x 14 in, ©2006, Jenny Hyde-Johnson.

