

**RESURRECTING *HIBBERTIA RUF*A (BROWN
GUINEAFLOWER)**

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The afternoon of 1st December 2008 found me botanising (i.e. having a pleasant stroll while looking at flowers) in an area of wet heathland a few kilometres west of The Gardens on the east coast of Tasmania. The heathland, part of the Doctors Peak Forest Reserve, is one I have visited several times a year since I first saw it about ten years ago. At that time it had been burned quite recently, allowing a mass flowering of species which would not be able to compete with the sedges and shrubs that normally blanket the area. Even from the road, my wife Louise and I could see that this was worth a closer look. The fire meant that access was easy and we had soon discovered dozens of species in flower.

The heathland is rather like an archipelago with the “sea” being the low-lying swampy areas and the “islands” being very low rises covered in dry sclerophyll woodland (Plate 1). It is dissected by small creeks that eventually drain into either the Ansons River or the George River.

Ten years after the fire, the tussock grasses, sedges and shrubs again dominate the area and the thick growth of *Leptospermum lanigerum* along the creeks makes access much more difficult. Small clearings persist, probably maintained by wombats and other grazing animals, and in these grow prostrate herbs such as *Scaevola hookeri*. Despite the competition, a variety of lilies, orchids and other smaller flowering plants manage to put on an impressive display of colour.

As I wandered through this area on 1st December a small *Hibbertia* plant caught my eye. I had just seen *H. acicularis* with its needle-pointed leaves on the nearby better-drained heathy rise but this plant was different. It had smaller flowers and the leaves, rather than being pungent, were blunt and many of them had tiny tufts of hairs at their tips. It was new to me, so I took a sample and a GPS reading and then hurried back to the car as a storm rapidly approached.

Back in Launceston I consulted a key to *Hibbertia* and found the only match for my specimen was *H. rufa*, described as “Tas., known from one collection by W. Fitzgerald (1892) at St Helens” (Curtis 1956). Further checking told me that this species was now regarded as extinct in Tasmania (although it grows in Victoria and NSW). As I always do when in a situation like this, I sent my specimen to the Tasmanian Herbarium and within a short time Alex Buchanan had emailed me that he agreed with my identification. However, the Herbarium’s only record, that of the above-mentioned W. Fitzgerald, was on loan to the State Herbarium of South

Australia where Dr Hellmut Toelken was using it as part of a revision of Australian species of *Hibbertia*. Alex sent the specimen to Adelaide and within a couple of days Hellmut had confirmed Alex's opinion. *Hibbertia rufa* was very much alive after hiding for nearly 120 years!

Over the holiday period several people came with me to look at the *H. rufa* and together we found quite a number of plants spread over an area of about 1 km by a couple of hundred metres. It appeared that we had found several hundred plants but Hellmut cautioned that this species has a habit of spreading by suckering so that what looks like a number plants over an area of several square metres may be just one.

It has been a huge pleasure for me to find a species that had not been seen in Tasmania for over a century and was thought to be extinct in this State. It was also nice to be the first to photograph it in Tasmania (Plate 2).

I wonder exactly where Fitzgerald found his specimen, which he annotated as being "George Bay" (Plate 3). This was in the days before GPS and botanists at that time did not seem to worry too much about providing details for the locations of their discoveries, and the term Georges Bay was probably used to refer to much of the hinterland in and around the modern town of St Helens, and possibly as far afield as Ansons Bay.

The area around the Bay of Fires and Georges Bay contains a number of threatened plant species. The most notable of these is *Phebalium daviesii* (davies waxflower) that grows only in Tasmania. With only thirty or so plants in the wild and all of these on the banks of the George River, it must be one of the rarest plants in the world (although it is easy to propagate and grows well in the garden). I am pleased to have added to the number of these precious species known to exist in this wonderful part of Tasmania.

The rediscovery of the brown guineaflower reminds us of the need to protect our natural heritage. We do not have a complete knowledge of what is out there and it would be a great shame if we lost something before we even knew it existed. *H. rufa* is added to the growing list of vascular species previously considered extinct in Tasmania (e.g. Wapstra *et al.* 2006; Bonham 2008), giving hope to many of us that other species may yet be rediscovered.

H. rufa (commonly known as the 'brown guineaflower' from its red-brown branchlets) is one of fourteen species of *Hibbertia* present in Tasmania (Buchanan 2008). Species of *Hibbertia* are easy to identify as a group because all but one of the Tasmanian species have five showy yellow petals (hence the name 'guineaflower') that are slightly indented at the rounded tips. Some species have large flowers and make very good garden plants. They are not so suitable for the vase as they lose their petals quite readily, which is also of great annoyance to field

botanists collecting specimens for identification because often all one has left are loose yellow petals stuck to the inside of the collecting bag. *H. rufa* seems to be unique amongst our *Hibbertia* species in that the petals remain present after collection and during curation. Most of the Tasmanian *Hibbertia* species are very common but some are listed as threatened including *H. virgata* (also present in the St Helens area), *H. calycina* (restricted to dry ridgelines behind Scamander), *H. basaltica* (restricted to the basalt areas around Pontville in the southern Midlands) and *H. obtusifolia* (collected from Clarke Island in Bass Strait in 1892 and from heathlands near Conical Rocks on the west coast in 1983).

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Alex Buchanan (Tasmanian Herbarium) and Hellmut Toelken (State Herbarium of South Australia) confirmed the identification of the specimens first collected by the author. Hellmut Toelken kindly provided scanned images of the early collections of *H. rufa*.

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EDITORIAL POSTSCRIPT

Roy's rediscovery of *Hibbertia rufa* led to successful extension surveys being conducted in the St Helens to Ansons Bay area by Mark Wapstra, with funding by NRM North, and field assistance by Roy Skabo and Brian French. Several additional sites were located, and the findings will be formally presented at a later date but in the mean time for those interested, a report is available: ECOtas (Mark Wapstra) (2009). *Extension Surveys for Hibbertia rufa (brown guineaflower) in North-eastern Tasmania*. A Report to the Northern Tasmanian Natural Resource Management Association Inc. by Environmental Consulting Options Tasmania 1 June 2009.



Plate 1. Habitat of *Hibbertia rufa*. Note the archipelago-like arrangement of the “sea” of low-lying swampy areas and the “islands” of low rises covered in dry sclerophyll woodland. *H. rufa* grows in the transition zone between the heathy woodland and the denser wetter heathland, extending out on the broad flat terrain (about where the people are standing). Image: Jennifer Skabo.



Plate 2. Close-up of *Hibbertia rufa*. Note the trailing habit, small flowers, low number (less than four) stamens in a group on one side of the ovary, and leaf shape (including the small tuft of white hairs at the apex). Image: Roy Skabo.



Plate 3. First collection of *Hibbertia rufa* from Tasmania from “George Bay” by W. Fitzgerald in 1892.