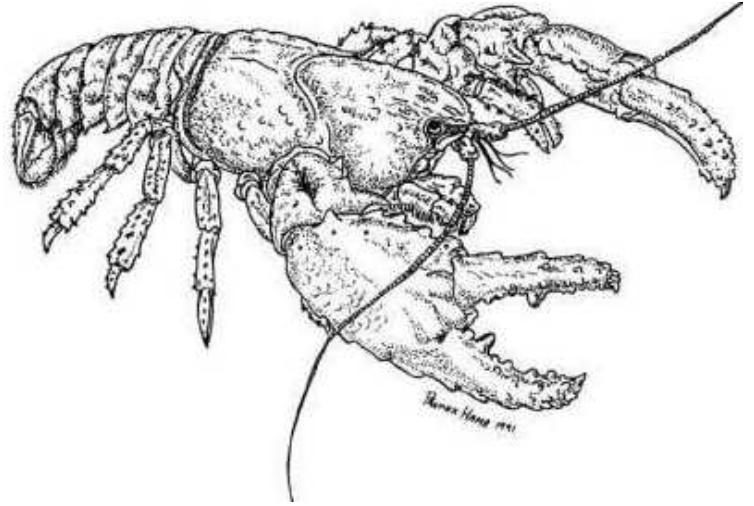


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Rediscovering Hibbertia rufa

by **Roy Skabo** - 16 September 2009



One of my favourite places for botanising (i.e. having a nice walk and looking at flowers) is a wet buttongrass heath a few kilometres west of The Gardens and about 2 km east of the Ansons Bay Rd, north of St Helens. This wet buttongrass heathland is part of the Doctors Peak Forest Reserve.

It 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. The whole area is dissected by small creeks which drain into either the Ansons Bay River or the Georges River.

My wife, Louise, and I first stopped there about eight or nine years ago when we noticed a wonderful display of white paper daisies (*Argentipallium dealbatum*) as we drove past. The area had been burnt off perhaps a year before this visit and we could wander around the area quite easily, marvelling at the varied and abundant flora which included a number of orchids, lilies, several pea-flower species and *Drosera binata* in full flower along the creek banks.

Since then we have been back several times per year and each time it is harder to cross the creeks because of the heavy regrowth of woolly tea tree and other shrubs. There are still open areas but they are fewer and further between. Smaller plants struggle to compete with the taller sedges and shrubs, so the floral display is dominated by the shrubs. Still, it is a very interesting place to visit and almost every time I go there I find something I have not seen before. Because it is wet, the flowers last longer than they do in other areas and many of the species are not found in drier heaths.

On December 1st 2008, during yet another visit to the area, I noticed a tiny-flowered (1cm diameter) prostrate *Hibbertia* which I could not put a name to. Because a storm was approaching, I took a small sample and a GPS reading and did not bother with any other details.

On returning to Launceston I tried to key out the *Hibbertia*, and found that the only species to match my specimen was the 'extinct' *Hibbertia rufa* (brown guinea flower). Not quite believing my tentative identification, I sent the specimen to Alex Buchanan at the Tasmanian Herbarium and awaited his verdict. Within 24 hours I had an email from Alex saying that he thought I was correct. By coincidence, however, the only Tasmanian Herbarium record for *H. rufa* (from the collection of Leonard Rodway and dating from 1892) was on loan to the South Australian Herbarium where Dr Hellmut Toelken is making a study of *Hibbertia* species, including some found in Tasmania. I sent Hellmut a specimen of my plant and within a couple of days he emailed that he agreed with the identification too.

The next step was to register my find on the Natural Values Atlas, the Tasmanian database for information on all species (flora and fauna) which have been found in Tasmania. Within a few hours I had an email from the Threatened Species Unit in Hobart (the custodians of the NVA) congratulating me and alerting other interested people to the 'resurrection' of the brown guinea flower.

Over the next couple of weeks a number of people asked to see the brown guinea flower. With their help we have found many more plants and determined that they are growing in patches over an area of about 1km by a couple of hundred metres. This sounds like a pretty healthy situation, but if it is the only population in the state then the plant is very much at risk. Furthermore, it is difficult to count populations of this species because it suckers extensively and what appears to be a patch of several plants may turn out to be just the one plant.

To find a species which had not been seen in Tasmania for nearly 120 years and was thought to be extinct in this state (although it occurs near the NSW/Victoria border) has been a huge pleasure for me. It was also nice to be the first to photograph it in Tasmania.

I wonder exactly where Leonard Rodway found his specimen, which he annotated as being in the Georges Bay area. 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.

The area around the Bay of Fires and Georges Bay contains a large number of rare and threatened plant species. The most notable of these is the Davies waxflower (*Phebalium daviesii*) which grows only in Tasmania. With only thirty or so plants in the wild and all of these on the banks of the Georges 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 guinea flower 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.

Guinea Flowers

Tasmania has fourteen species of guinea flowers, the common name for members of the genus *Hibbertia*. They are easy to identify as a group because all but one of the Tasmanian species have five showy yellow petals which 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. Many of the species are very common and several of them, including a number of rare species, grow in the Break O Day municipality. *Hibbertia rufa's* common name comes from the reddish-brown colour of its branches. Its petals, though small, are similar to those of other Tasmanian species.

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