

Ceropegia multiflora: subspecies or natural variation?

R.G. Peckover

In describing animals and plants, the binomial system is used. The genus rank helps to group together similar plants or animals with overlapping characters. The species rank is given to plants which have identical characters including growth form, floral structure, seed and capsule shape and many other diagnostic characters.

Often animals or plants have most of the characters to conform to the species rank, but do not quite conform, due to small variations. Burchell's zebra and the mountain zebra afford an example in the animal kingdom, where the stripe patterns differ. In the case of *Ceropegia multiflora* the character in question is the corolla tips – whether free or united. The two recognised subspecies are subsp. *multiflora* and subsp. *tentaculata*. In subsp. *multiflora* the very fine tips of the corolla are joined, whilst in subsp. *tentaculata* the tips are free.

The validity of these two subspecies is in question, however. In 1982, during a walk around my plot to inspect the fire-break, I noticed two



Fig. 2. *Ceropegia multiflora* subsp. *multiflora* showing the green corolla lobes and joined tips. Note the broader leaves.

creepers, climbing up the border fencing. On closer inspection the creepers originated from tubers, 30 mm in diameter, and I could see that these plants were *ceropegias*. The tubers were subsequently planted into a pot, and the next season they flowered.

The plants were subsequently identified as *Ceropegia multiflora*. The flowers of the one plant had the characteristic joined corolla tips, indicating that it belongs to *C.*

multiflora subsp. *multiflora*, but the corolla tips of the other plant were completely free, pointing to subsp. *tentaculata*. The plant classified as subsp. *multiflora* had short broad leaves and green flowers, whilst the plant classified as subsp. *tentaculata* had short thin leaves and darker, almost bluish flowers. These characters have been consistent year after year, and seedlings grown from each plant have floral characteristics resembling the parent.

In my opinion the joined or free corolla lobes in this case represent only a normal variation, as do the leaf form and flower colour. The two plants were growing naturally within 3 metres of each other, and it is doubtful that these are different subspecies. An interesting observation is that a shower of rain will cause the corolla tips of most flowers of subsp. *multiflora* to become detached.

References

Dyer, R.A. 1983. *Ceropegia*, *Brachystelma* and *Riocreuxia* in Southern Africa. Balkema, Rotterdam.

R.G. Peckover
P.O. Box 29191
Sunnyside
0132

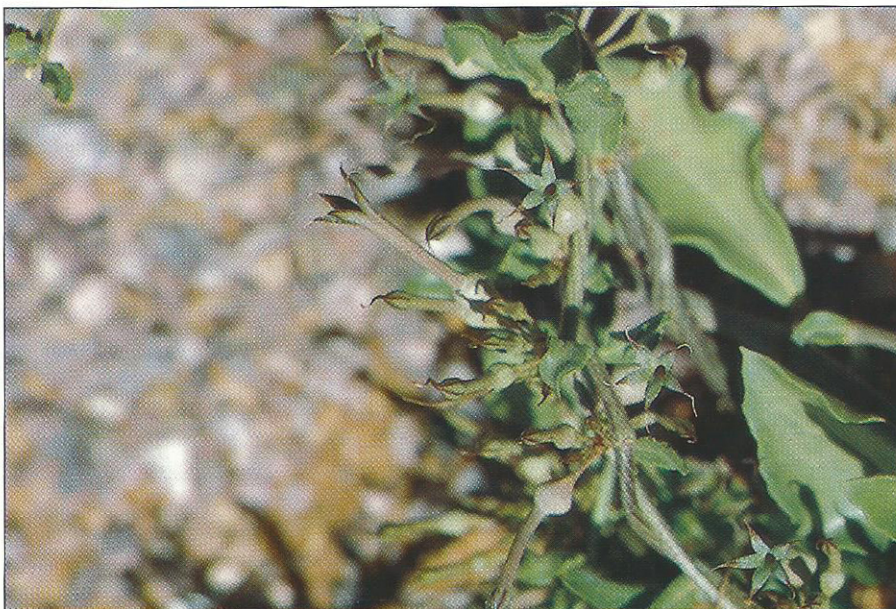


Fig. 1. *Ceropegia multiflora* subsp. *tentaculata* showing the bluish corolla lobes and free tips. Note the thin leaves.