Gasteria polita was first found in Whiskey Creek Nature Reserve (then part of Department of Water Affairs and Forestry and now part of the Garden Route National Park). It was described by Ernst van Jaarsveld in 2001. The species was thus only known from the Whiskey Creek location 20 km north of Plettenberg Bay and accordingly assigned the Red List status ‘Critically Rare’. Another species, G. acinacifolia, grows abundantly along the Nature’s Valley coast, while a stunted form of G. acinacifolia, which may be confused with G. polita, occurs along the Harkerville coast.

In August 2010, a single Gasteria plant, resembling G. polita, was found in De Vasselot Nature Reserve (also now part of the Garden Route National Park) north of Nature’s Valley. Plant material was collected and sent to Ernst van Jaarsveld to identify. Great was our joy when the plant was confirmed to be G. polita.

The SANParks Scientific Services unit based in the Garden Route monitors plant species of conservation concern (SCC) within the Garden Route National Park as part of their SCC programme. A pragmatic approach is followed whereby SCC are prioritized for monitoring or surveying to look for new localities of known SCC. In August 2011, we re-visited the G. polita plant found in 2010 which was now flowering. The fate of this particular plant was of concern as it grows within sight of a trail commonly used by hikers. During this same field trip, the area in the vicinity was surveyed for more G. polita plants. The habitat is low, sparse Covic Coastal Proteoid Fynbos along a steep, dry, north-facing slope and the soil is mostly covered by loose stones amidst small outcrops of Table Mountain Sandstone. Initially the survey was fruitless, but later on three plants were found; and thereafter a population of more than 100 plants. About 20 individuals were in flower. The inflorescences are approximately 1m tall which makes these plants hard to miss in the low, sparse vegetation matrix. Hikers and reserve staff presumably do not commonly venture off existing trails, particularly along very steep slopes such as where the population occurs, which may account for it not having been noticed before. However, ignorance is probably the main reason why this population has never been reported before. Most people just don’t realize which plants are threatened or of conservation concern.

Interestingly, the habitat of the newly discovered population differs from that described by Ernst van Jaarsveld which was rocky outcrops in Afrotemperate forest. Some physical features, such as leaves and inflorescences, are larger than what was described. The flowering time for the species is indicated as October to November, whereas most of the plants in the newly discovered population were in full flower by mid August, some of them already past flowering. Many of the mature fruiting capsules had opened already. One immature inflorescence was observed while many plants were not in flower. Most plants were solitary, spaced a few metres apart, but clusters of plants were also encountered. The discovery of this new population of G. polita thus not only bolsters the total number of known plants but it also contributes to existing knowledge of the species’ ecology.
OPPOSITE PAGE: *Gasteria polita* mature fruiting capsule with seed clearly visible.

TOP: *Gasteria polita* in its characteristic habitat of steep slopes and rocky soils at De Vasselot Nature Reserve (now within the Garden Route National Park).

ABOVE LEFT: *Gasteria acinacifolia* in its coastal forest habitat.

ABOVE: A typical *Gasteria polita* with a young inflorescence.

LEFT: *Gasteria polita* mature flowers.

BOTTOM LEFT: A cluster of *Gasteria polita* plants.

Photos: Johan Baard.

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READING


A vegetation map for the Garden Route Initiative. Unpublished 1:50 000 maps and report supported by CAPE FSP task team.

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