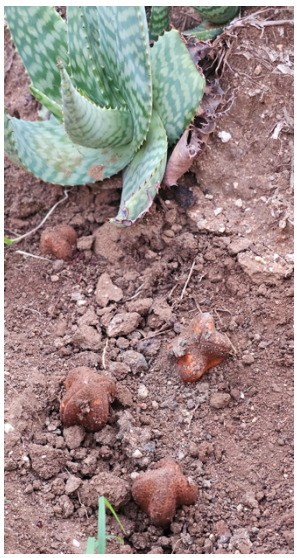
As a plant biologist, I have a penchant for plants that defy the ordinary—those that have abandoned their autotrophic ancestry, evolving into plants with little semblance to one. Take *Rafflesia,* for example: a botanical enigma bereft of stems, roots, or leaves, living surreptitiously within the woody tissues of its viny host, only to emerge to produce the world's largest bloom that reek of rotting flesh.

So when I learned about a conservation genetics workshop in Namibia, Africa, scheduled for January 2025, I submitted my application six months in advance, eager not only to learn from the expert faculty but also to witness another parasitic marvel: *Hydnora africana.* This subterranean oddity, reputably foul like feces to lure dung beetles, was an irresistible draw to me as well.

On the first day of the workshop, during the meet-and-greet, I found myself flashing a Google image of *Hydnora* to anyone who would listen, asking, 'Where can I find this?'—pining to witness yet another delightfully disturbing dicot in the wild. I was told it grows in Dr. Laurie's backyard. Dr. Laurie, the director of CCF, was hosting the conservation genetics (ConGen) workshop for the next several days. CCF—an expanse of [X] acres of savannah—is both a sanctuary and a research center dedicated to cheetah conservation.

For the next seven days, we ConGen students were immersed in informative morning lectures, drilled with bioinformatics and R coding tutorials in the afternoon, then capped each evening with dinner and a keynote talk. That was the rhythm—except for one glorious Friday afternoon when we were finally allowed to escape the classroom for a safari game drive. It felt like stepping into an Attenborough documentary—fleeting jackals, cackling guinea fowls, grunting warthogs, pirouetting ostriches, towering giraffes, and an endless procession of eland. A truly indelible experience—one that will last a lifetime, which I could not say for the R commands we struggled to memorize over those long afternoons.

Yet, I was still pining to see *Hydnora*—until, finally, a day before the workshop ended, Anne Schmidt-Kuntzel, CCF's director for animal health, called me over excitedly during one of the coffee breaks. 'We can go see *Hydnora* at Dr. Laurie's house!' And I wasn't the only one eager—our little gang of *Hydnora* enthusiasts gathered and hurried over, where we found it: small brown bumps emerging next to an *Aloe* in Dr. Laurie's garden. But something didn't add up. The literature states that *Hydnora africana* parasitizes euphorbs, yet none were present. Could this be a new host record? A different *Hydnora* species entirely?



That evening, as I sat near the front during the keynote lecture after dinner, my mind was elsewhere—frantically googling through papers for answers. Then, I found it: a recent paper by Hatt et al (2024[1]). pointed to *H. solmsiana*, which parasitizes *Acacia* species in the Fabaceae family. But wait—where were the acacias? We hadn't seen any near the *Aloe*! Determined to solve the mystery, we made a plan: tomorrow, we'd return and venture deeper into Dr. Laurie's backyard, where we were told even more *Hydnoras* awaited.

In the afternoon, Anne, Mati (CCF's ecologist), two interns (Lapaka and Thresia), and I met Bruce, Dr. Laurie's partner, who welcomed us into their backyard. There, we saw bricks in the pathway being pushed up. 'That's the

[1] Hatt, S.A., Thorogood, C.J., Bolin, J.F. *et al.* A taxonomic revision of the genus *Hydnora* (Hydnoraceae). *Kew Bull* 79, 459–514 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12225-024-10193-5

pesky plant,' Bruce said. 'The buds somehow break through the bricks.' Then, with a grin, he added, 'Take them all—they're a nuisance!' One man's trash is certainly my treasure.

We eagerly began lifting bricks to free the emerging buds, carefully tracing the *Hydnora* rhizomes with trowels and delicate hands. Following the underground network, we finally found the host—*Vachellia* (formerly *Acacia*). Its frail, thin roots, oddly scented like onions, somehow sustained the massive, warty *Hydnora* rhizome. When cut, it was eerily steak-red but, surprisingly, odorless. Victorious, our team posed for a photo, proudly holding our *Hydnora* haul.

My mind is now buzzing with research ideas. In a few months, I plan to return—bringing nanopore sequencing technology to CCF to mentor Lapaka and Thresia. One idea is to use genetics to unravel the spread of *Hydnora* infection in its *Vachellia* hosts. A new collaboration has taken root, pun intended.

In the meantime, back in New York, I'll be navigating the next step: applying for research permits from Namibia's forestry ministry. These permits will allow sampling not just for genetic studies but also, hopefully, for *ex situ* propagation and conservation in the U.S.—a mission much like my ongoing work with Philippine *Rafflesia*. I am driven by this incessant pursuit to inspire public appreciation for nature's anomalies and the singular evolutionary forces that shape them—whether it's the prodigious bloom of the *Rafflesia* corpse flower or the brick-breaking buds of *Hydnora solmsiana*.

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