

Anina Heystek

I grew up in Pretoria at the foot of the Magaliesberg. When we moved to the Western Cape, the unfamiliar shrubbery of the fynbos seemed rather dull without the trees and large mammals of the bush-veld. It was only after I finished school in Stellenbosch and started studying biology at the Stellenbosch University that I discovered the amazing intricacies of the fynbos biome. Several of my undergraduate courses and working as a field and lab assistant exposed me to the research world and I decided to continue with post-graduate studies. Thus, after I completed my B.Sc. degree in Biodiversity and Ecology in 2010 (*cum laude*), I started my honours degree in Botany at Stellenbosch.

With my pollination biology research project, I am able to combine my interests in plant and bird ecology. The project is looking at the pollination of co-flowering *Erica* species (Ericaceae). Since this is the largest flowering plant genus in the Cape Floristic Region, these species often occur together in fynbos communities. I am investigating whether and how the species affect each other's interactions with their pollinators. The bird-pollinated species are a particularly interesting case since there are over 60 species which are mainly pollinated by the Orange-breasted sunbird *Anthobaphes violaceae*. Species with the same and with different pollination syndromes could also potentially affect each other differently. I am taking an experimental approach by transplanting an *Erica* species into the community of another *Erica* species that is growing in patches of different floral densities. The anthers of ericas form a ring around the style which is disrupted by flower visitors and this is a reliable technique to record their pollination rate. I will try to determine how floral densities of coexisting species affect each others' pollination and nectar robbing.

My field work is turning out to be a challenging adventure and finding suitable field sites and flowers often feels like a treasure hunt. It certainly is a privilege to be able to study botany in the fynbos biome. I hope that all the work I do as a biologist can eventually be used for the conservation of nature.

