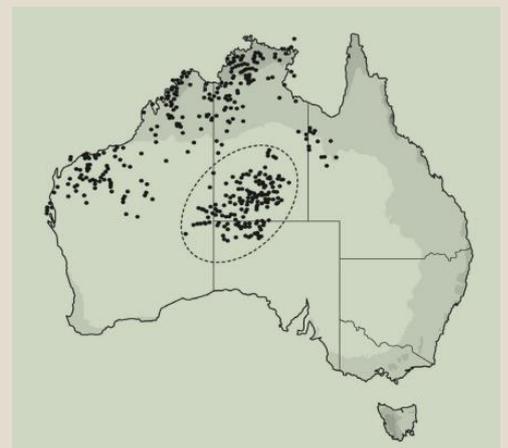


Ficus desertorum

The Desert Fig – a new species from Central Australia



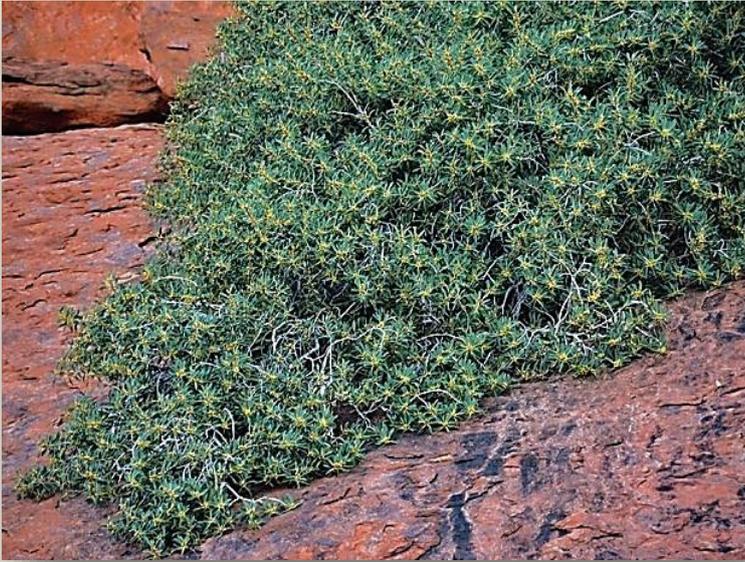
In July 2021, botanists, Brendan Wilde and Russell Barrett published a description of a new species of fig from some iconic Northern Territory landscapes, including Uluru (Ayers Rock), Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) and Karlu Karlu (Devils Marbles). The figs were growing on rocky outcrops, on mesas and near waterholes, scattered throughout Central Australia, most commonly in the MacDonnell Ranges of the Northern Territory), but also extending as far south as the Everard Ranges of South Australia and as far west as the Rawlinson and Walter James Ranges of Western Australia.



Distribution of figs *previously* thought to be *Ficus brachypoda*. Those within the ellipse are now known to be Desert Fig, *Ficus desertorum*. (From Wilde & Barrett 2021)



Previously plants were thought to be other species, *Ficus brachypoda* or *Ficus platypoda* and perhaps the beginning of the title of Wilde and Barrett's paper, *Hiding in plain sight....* is a little



Ficus desertorum From: Wilde & Barrett 2021

puzzling as the figs have long been known from Central Australia. The difference is that only *now* they have been recognised as a completely different species from those found in surrounding areas.

Worldwide there are about 850 species of figs (*Ficus*) that can be trees, shrubs, climbers or epiphytes; most grow in the tropics but some extend into more temperate regions. About 500 figs are native to Asia and Australasia, and although

Australia only has 43 native species, a considerable number of these, including the *Desert Fig*, are unusual in that they grow successfully in arid environments. The survival of figs in deserts is dependent on extremely long tap roots that can grow into and follow cracks and crevices in cliffs and rock piles, enabling them to access water reserves hidden sometimes at considerable depth underground.



Ficus desertorum From Wilde & Barrett 2021

Desert Figs are of great importance to First Nations people of Central Australia, as a traditional source of food, for shelter and for spirituality. Nutritionally, they are rich in calcium and potassium. Even the dry fruit fallen to the ground was ground with water to form hard balls that could be

redried and stored for later use. Historically the indigenous people are known to have transplanted the figs and moved them to distant waterholes to provide future food resources, so in part, the present distribution of the species is considered likely to have been due to human dispersal. Even in current times, cuttings and seedlings are transplanted by

communities to provide food reserves. The fig features in oral histories and is such significance to the Pitjantjatjara people of Central Australia that historically, damaging a tree could be punishable by death.



There is a delightful account of cooperation between the indigenous communities and the botanists. When considering a suitable name for the fig, the botanists consulted Traditional Owners as they had hoped to use an appropriate indigenous name. However, they found that every group had a different name for the fig and no indigenous name covered all the different language groups.



To resolve this dilemma, Traditional Owners respectfully asked the botanists to choose a *standard* scientific name for the species – and as the most commonly used name for the species is *desert* fig, Wilde and Barrett decided on *Ficus desertorum*.

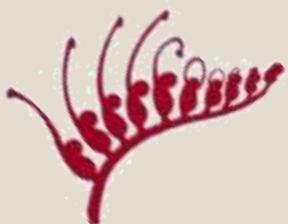
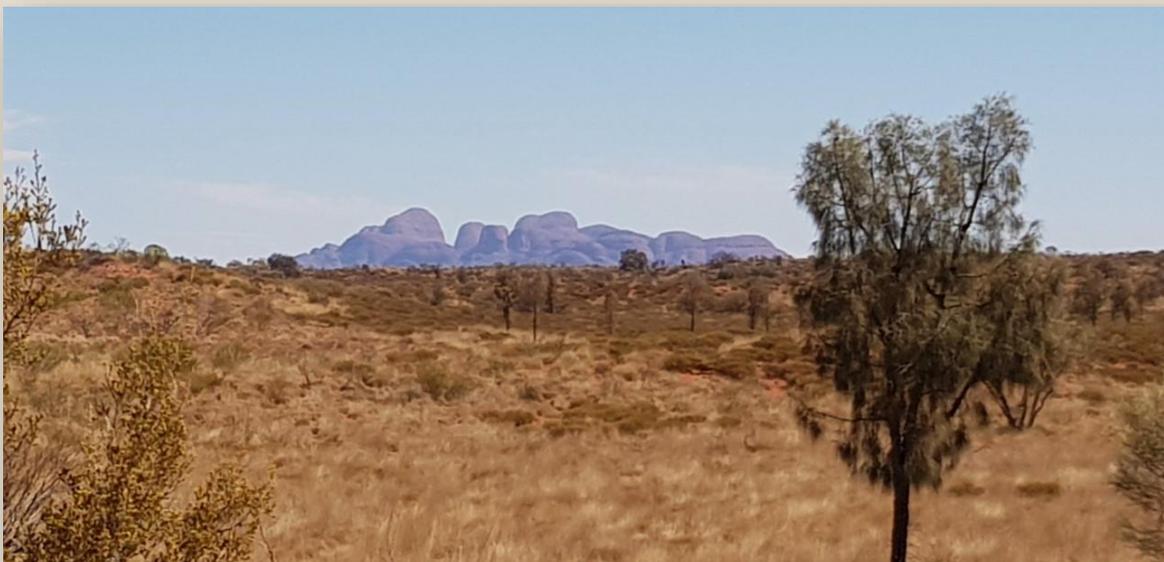
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Wilde B C, Barrett R L. 2021. Hiding in plain sight, *Ficus desertorum* (Moraceae), a new species of rock fig for Central Australia. *Telopea* 24: 293-298.

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