

Notes on African plants

VARIOUS AUTHORS

POACEAE

AIRA PRAECOX, A NEW RECORD FROM SOUTHERN AFRICA

Aira praecox L. (Aveneae: Pooideae) is a cosmopolitan grass. Originally from Europe, where it is widespread, it has become naturalized in N America, S America and Australia (Hubbard 1984), with no records from sub-saharan Africa till now (Gibbs Russell *et al.* 1985; Clayton 1970, 1972). The species has recently been found on Table Mountain, Cape Peninsula, along the footpath from Window Stream to Maclear's Beacon, where it grows in disturbed acidic sand, especially in shallow sand on rocks, and flowers from September to November. This habitat agrees closely with that described by Hubbard (1984). There is one previous collection of the species, predictably made by Ms Esterhuysen in 1977 from the same locality. This specimen was, however, misidentified as *Aira caryophylla* L.

The genus *Aira* L. only includes annual grasses (Clayton & Renvoize 1986), and its members can be recognized by the two florets of which the upper is sessile or subsessile. The rhachilla between the florets is absent or very short, and indeed there is no rhachilla extension either. *Aira* includes eight species, of which two or three are known from southern Africa. This depends on whether *A. cupaniana* Guss. and *A. caryophylla* L. are both recognized locally (Sokutu in Gibbs Russell *et al.* 1990). However, *A. praecox* is readily distinguished from both these species by its compact, spikelike inflorescences.

Aira praecox L.

Plants delicate, annual; stems solitary to several in a fine cluster, to 180 mm tall. *Nodes* three, swollen, nitid, the culms directly below the nodes coarsely deflexed-scabrid. *Leaves* two per culm; sheaths 15–30 mm long, smooth to finely scaberulous; ligules membranous, to 3 mm long, the apex lacerated; blades to 30 × 1 mm, V-shaped, margins scabrid, the apex rounded. *Inflorescence* a spike-like panicle, pale green, 10–25 × 3–5 mm, the rhachis generally obscured by the spikelets; nodes pale, nitid;

rhachis and pedicels scaberulous; pedicels shorter than the spikelets. *Spikelets* 3 mm long, with two flowers inserted practically at the same level, i.e. there is no visible rhachis and no rhachis extension. *Glumes* 3 mm long, 1-veined, taller than the florets, acute, scaberulous in the apical third. *Lemmas* 5-veined, 2,5 mm long, shortly bilobed, rounded on the backs, the lower half smooth and the upper half scaberulous, with a small tuft of hairs at the base; awned from $\frac{1}{4}$ above the base, awns 3,5–3,7 mm long, with a short column. *Palea* 2 mm long, bikeeled, bilobed. *Lodicules* two, fleshy, ovate with a small basal tooth. *Anthers* yellow, 0,2 mm long. *Ovary* glabrous.

Specimens examined

CAPE. — 3318 Cape Town: Table Mountain, along path from Window Stream to Maclear's Beacon (–CD), Esterhuysen 34816 (BOL); Linder 5045 (BOL, PRE).

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