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Ducks and *Raphia australis*

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My regular golfing partners, the Smyths, having returned from holiday in South Africa were showing me the photographs of their travels. Among these, was a panoramic shot of the Durban Botanic Gardens, where a waterside scene and a gaggle of waterfowl had attracted their attention. Plum center in the print was a fine specimen of *Raphia australis*, apparently in flower but, as the prime concern of the photographer had been essentially zoological, the vital part at the top of the palm was obscured and part excised (Fig. 1). Having resigned myself to yet another example of "Murphy's Law," I discovered that another old colleague and his good lady, the Smiths, were due to proceed on a very similar vacation in the republic. Armed with the Smyth photograph, they were requested to make every effort to include the Durban Botanic Gardens on their itinerary and, assuming a successful arrival, to seek out the palm and to photograph the missing bit at the top. This, with the most helpful aid of a young lady on the Gardens' staff, they were able to do (Fig. 2). In fact, this may not be the same individual, but it clearly shows the impressive, erectly held compound inflorescence that is a unique feature of

this species. Of the 20 or so species of *Raphia*, only the West African *R. regalis* has a similar, erect, compound inflorescence but here, it is a far more linear structure arising from a short trunk, virtually at ground level. As proof of their endeavours, the Smiths made a point of photographing the label on the palm (Fig. 3). By so doing, they have illustrated two valuable field characters for the identification of nonflowering specimens: first, the robust and persistent leaf-bases; and secondly, the contorted mat of epigeal roots arising from the trunk, hidden within the leaf-bases. Such "aerial" adventitious roots are common within the genus, but they are typically linear, more scattered, adpressed to the trunk, and markedly negatively geotropic. Within the known geographical range, the only other probable species with which *R. australis* might be confused is *R. farinifera* and this last feature could well prove to be a most useful device for separating sterile specimens in the field. Thanks are due to the Smyths and the Smiths for their efforts and for freely making available the photographs and also to the helpful member of the Durban Gardens staff.

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1. *Raffia australis* in Durban Botanic Gardens, photographed by the Smyths. 2. Top of *Raffia australis* in Durban Botanic Gardens, photographed by the Smyths. 3. Bottom of *Raffia australis*, showing persistent leaf-bases and mat of epigeal roots, photographed by the Smyths.