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***Pomaderris sericea* (Rhamnaceae): Rediscovery of a critically endangered shrub that is almost, but not quite (yet), extinct**

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Abstract

Rediscovery of threatened species that are presumed extinct is not an uncommon occurrence. Indeed, discoveries of this nature, intended or accidental, ultimately ensure that listings enshrined in threatened species legislation remain current and truly reflect a species' conservation status. Rediscovery through targeted searches at former collection sites is one technique for addressing species that are potentially extinct, and is warranted given IUCN definitions require exhaustive, time-appropriate surveys throughout historical ranges.

Here we report on the successful rediscovery of *Pomaderris sericea* (family Rhamnaceae) in Wollemi National Park, a 'possibly extinct' Critically Endangered species not recorded in New South Wales since 1997. The single, aged individual and the absence of any unique or peculiar habitat characteristics in the landscape in which it grows, suggest urgent continuing surveys to determine if other populations exist. A second population near Berrima, not seen since 1984 and the only other known NSW population, is also in urgent need of targeted surveys.

Keywords: *Pomaderris*, critically endangered, extinction, rediscovery

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Background

Plant extinctions have reportedly increased significantly over the past 200–500 years compared to estimated baseline levels, although since the 1980s rates have seemingly reduced (Ledford 2019; Christenhusz and Govaerts 2025; Saban et al. 2025). Part of this reduction can be attributed to taxonomic uncertainty around the identity of a taxon, but often-overlooked factors are the detectability of a target species and the extent of survey effort that has been applied (Kéry 2004; Knapp et al. 2021). Additionally, the availability of regional data and expert knowledge ('grey data') can dramatically alter perceived extinction attribution (e.g. Knapp et al. 2019; Roberts et al. 2023); without these data sources, potentially misleading directives for policy and management may be promoted (e.g. Humphreys et al. 2019; Ward et al. 2025).

Extinction rates are closely tied with threatened species legislation throughout the world, although categories of 'Extinct' or 'Extinct in the wild' can be largely subjective. Burgman (2002) earlier questioned the real value of threatened species listings, noting them to be limited in use for differentiating between different levels of threat. He described a feedback loop that responded strongly to the subjective preferences of scientists but was largely unresponsive to active threats. Informal categorisation of a species as 'presumed extinct' is consequently reliant more on survey effort (over a specified time frame) and the knowledge of experts, than on a complete loss of individuals. As noted by Knapp et al. (2019), outcomes can be misleading without such survey effort and expert input, and some papers calling for action following high level assessments where expert input is limited (e.g. Ward et al. 2025) require scrutiny.

The IUCN Standards and Petitions Committee (2024) consider a species to be 'Extinct' if **exhaustive, time-appropriate surveys within its known or expected habitat throughout its historic range fail to record an individual**. This definition can be subjective and vary among different life forms, but key terms include 'exhaustive', 'expected habitat' and 'historic range'. Silcock et al. (2020) attempted to address the subjective nature of this definition by presenting an ecological framework and dichotomous key for assessing the likelihood of extinction of Australian flora. In that work, they assessed likely 'Extinct' plant species by reviewing lists of threatened species and those presumed to be 'Extinct', assigning them to one of: (1) almost certainly extinct; (2) probably extinct; (3) possibly extinct; and (4) possibly extant. Of 71 plant taxa, 12 were considered 'probably extinct', 21 were 'possibly extinct', and 18 were considered 'possibly extant'. Just two species were considered 'almost certainly extinct'.

Building on this work, Mesaglio et al. (2026) documented the rediscovery of one species considered 'possibly extant' by Silcock et al. (2020), with the assistance of iNaturalist. In that case, an opportunist viewing of images uploaded to iNaturalist by a species expert ultimately led to the rediscovery of *Ptilotus senarius*, not collected for nearly 60 years. This is a remarkable outcome and illustrates the value of platforms such as iNaturalist to further plant conservation. Other rediscoveries have relied on original collection notes and landscape attributes to relocate long-lost populations (e.g. *Rumex drummondii*, Scott and Yeoh 1995; *Leionema lamprophyllum* subsp. *fractum*, Bell et al. 2023),

have been incidental collections made during other activities (e.g. Scott and Yeoh 1995; *Atriplex acutiloba*, Doyle et al. 2025), or have followed targeted searches at original collection locations, perhaps following a major environmental change inducing new recruitment (e.g. multiple taxa, Silcock et al. 2015; *Mollinedia stenophylla*, de Liro et al. 2017; multiple taxa, Field and Renner 2019). Taxonomic uncertainty can also conflate assessments of extinction (Christenhusz and Govaerts 2025), with some authors suggesting incorporation of genomics into conservation policy and threat assessments (Cascini et al. 2025).

Rediscovery of presumed extinct species can consequently arrive via several pathways, yet these are rarely reported in the literature and potentially contribute to the reporting of seemingly high extinction rates. This paper outlines the rediscovery of *Pomaderris sericea* within New South Wales, reported as 'possibly extinct' by Silcock et al. (2020), and given its perilous status discusses the need for urgent targeted surveys in similar habitat.

Study species: *Pomaderris sericea*

Pomaderris sericea (family Rhamnaceae) is listed as Critically Endangered on the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*, and the Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*. Vouchered records of the species are very few, with just two historical locations known from New South Wales (NSW) and a third (possibly with multiple sub-populations) in north-eastern Victoria (VIC). *Pomaderris sericea* is currently considered Data Deficient under the NSW Saving Our Species (SOS) initiative, meaning that it is difficult to allocate to an appropriate management scheme. The few confirmed but now dated collections led Silcock et al. (2020) to report the species as 'possibly extinct' (i.e. considered extinct on the balance of evidence, but requiring further surveys to confirm status).

Taxonomically, *Pomaderris sericea* is superficially similar to a range of other small leaved species in the genus. In the Flora of New South Wales, *Pomaderris sericea* is positively identified through a specific sequence of steps involving leaf venation, indumentum and size, and an absence of petals (PlantNet 2026). Morphologically, *Pomaderris sericea* is most similar to *Pomaderris mediora* (both are apetalous), which grows on coastal headlands and associated ridges on the NSW Central Coast (Walsh and Coates 1997). That species lacks the shining golden-brown hairs on new growth and branchlets, instead bearing long, spreading fawnish hairs above a short white tomentum. Without fertile material, *Pomaderris sericea* can also be confused with *Pomaderris andromedifolia* subsp. *andromedifolia*, both supporting similar leaf morphology although the shining golden-brown hairs on new growth are less sparkling in the latter.

Pomaderris sericea was not formally recognised until Wakefield (1951) described it from eastern Victoria, the Type (MEL 1509471A; Figure 1) designated from the Upper Genoa River in 1949, and the location where most Australian collections have been made. Wakefield's description (a Latin diagnosis, holotype details, and the words '*plentiful but localized, and otherwise collected once in New South Wales*') suggests he did know of an 1889 specimen from Berrima on the NSW Central Tablelands.



Figure 1. Isotype of *Pomaderris sericea*, from the Upper Genoa River in Victoria, collected 2 Oct. 1949.

Confirmed records of *Pomaderris sericea* within New South Wales are sparse, with just six collections from two locations (Australasia's Virtual Herbarium AVH; searched 19 June 2026); four records from April 1889 from a location west of Berrima, and a more recent 1984 collection by P. Moore from this same general location. Douglas and David (2013) could find no evidence of this Berrima population in their targeted search and noted the high level of threats posed by past clearing, weed invasion, fire absence and potentially flooding associated with nearby dam construction.

The most recent collection location is from 1997 in western Wollemi National Park on the NSW Central Western Slopes by S. Bell (summarised in Bell 2001, 2008). The *Flora of Australia* treatment for *Pomaderris sericea* (Walsh 2025) also cites a further specimen from Morton National Park near Bundanoon (NSW215432, S.R. Corbett 172, September 1987), but this is uncertain; Douglas and David (2013) investigated this record and concluded that it is likely an error, citing Proust (2006) who also failed to locate the species there. The 'Riverview Ford' included in associated notes may refer to a ford on a property named 'Riverview', but this is unclear. AVH currently attributes this specimen to *Pomaderris andromedifolia* subsp. *andromedifolia*.

Presumably, the four Berrima 1889 records (NSW361138; NSW5495; NSW361145; MEL 2391117A) were retrospectively allocated to *Pomaderris sericea* by Neville Walsh in 1995 during preparation of the *Pomaderris* treatment for the *Flora of Australia*. The 1984 Berrima collection (CANB 816903.1), not viewed by Walsh, was ascribed to *Pomaderris sericea* by David Albrecht in 2016. Comments with that specimen entry in AVH note '*indumentum colour a better match for P. sericea than P. ledifolia, however flower buds appear to have minute developing petals*'. This observation suggests some uncertainty in that identification, particularly as *Pomaderris sericea* is apetalous.

Walsh (1999) described the habitat for *Pomaderris sericea* in Victoria as low shrubland on rock within the flood zone beside the Upper Genoa River. Little ancillary habitat information is included with herbarium collections, with three exceptions. A collection made by Wakefield in 1948 (MEL 0236597A) on the Upper Genoa River, simply notes '*Growing on steep rocky slope*', that by Melville and Wakefield in 1953 (MEL 0542365A) from the same general area has '*sandstone rocks of river bank*', and a collection by Neville Walsh again from the same location in 1987 (MEL 0113245A; CBG 8905363.1) provides a more detailed habitat description: '*rocky shrubland fringing river between Yambulla Creek and Black Jack Gully. Assoc. spp. include Grevillea parvifolia, Calytrix tetragona, Kunzea ericoides. Other Pomaderris spp. in near vicinity (e.g. P. angustifolia, P. ledifolia, P. prunifolia, P. pauciflora) in full or early flower*'.

The scant habitat data available suggests that Victorian populations of *Pomaderris sericea* appear to inhabit rocky stream banks and associated scrubs, while in NSW habitat appears to be open forest but still associated with creeklines. Data on population size at known locations are also few, with collection CBG 8905363.1 from the Upper Genoa River in 1987 noting the species to be '*locally not uncommon*', which supports the comment in Wakefield (1951) that the species was '*plentiful but localised*' at that location.

Bell (2008) noted habitat for the NSW Wollemi population as a narrow gorge along a creekline, and the specimen associated

with that population (MEL 2113669A) annotates habitat as '*Dry Sheltered Forest on Narrabeen Sandstone soils. Dominant species include Eucalyptus punctata, E. sparsifolia, Acacia buxifolia, A. doratoxylon, Isopogon dawsonii, Lepidosperma laterale, Dodonaea boroniifolia, Styphelia triflora, Grevillea mucronulata, Phyllanthus hirtellus, Entolasia stricta, Poa affinis*'. Bell (2008) reported the Wollemi population comprised up to 15 plants. There is no information on the Berrima population size in 1889 or 1984.

Rediscovery

Targeted survey at the site of the most recent collection in Wollemi National Park was undertaken in March 2025, 28 years after it was last recorded. A search of the gully line supporting the 1997 collection was carried out from the cleared private lands adjacent to Wollemi National Park to its upper reaches (a distance of ~2.5 km). All team members tracked search paths on apps within smart phones, although terrain and the density of understorey vegetation meant that most of the search area occurred along and immediately adjacent to the creek. Bearing in mind that the original 1997 record was pre-GPS and the precise location estimated using hard-copy topographic map, the databased location was not considered geospatially accurate. Field notes and the original annotated topographic map used in the 1997 work, viewed before field inspection, suggested that the collection was made directly on the creekline, rather than on the adjacent slope as shown in digital databases. This allowed a narrowing of the search area to concentrate on the creekline initially, and then to expand out from there. All specimens of *Pomaderris* were inspected and collected for further assessment. Comparison to a herbarium replicate of the 1997 collection was also made for any suspected *Pomaderris sericea*. A second inspection in October 2025 by TF and SF was made to assess flowering status and search for more plants in the surrounding creeklines.

A single individual plant of *Pomaderris sericea* was located within the search area during our March survey, approximately 800 m downstream from the databased location. This individual was of considerable age, perhaps 30 years old, and due to impacts from flash flooding over the years was bent over into a horizontal position and occupied a precarious position on the eroded creek bank (Figure 2). The measured length (height) of this plant was over 4 m, substantially taller than the 'low shrub' and 2 m height documented in PlantNET and VICFLORA descriptions respectively. Despite its apparent age, it carried a substantial head of foliage (Figure 3) and was in early bud (Figure 4). No further individuals were located, despite considerable search efforts by five people.

The *Pomaderris* site was very close to the likely junction between Narrabeen Sandstone geology (upstream) and the older, underlying Permian Sediments (downstream). This was assumed due to the dominance of *Eucalyptus punctata*, *Eucalyptus agglomerata* with some *Eucalyptus sparsifolia* upstream of the location, while downstream the dominant canopy species were *Eucalyptus dawsonii* and *Eucalyptus albens* with occasional *Angophora floribunda* and *Eucalyptus blakelyi*. Protected areas on sandstone high in the catchment also supported *Eucalyptus piperita*, although this tended to be localised. The creek itself became very bouldery upstream of the *Pomaderris sericea* location, with some narrow gorges flanked by sandstone cliff lines in particularly narrow sections, supporting tall shrubs of the



Figure 2. *Pomaderris sericea* from Wollemi National Park (March 2025), showing plant base (arrow) and foliage (circled). Photograph: Stephen Bell.



Figure 3. *Pomaderris sericea* foliage, Wollemi National Park (March 2025). Photograph: Stephen Bell.



Figure 4. *Pomaderris sericea*, showing upper leaf surfaces and densely golden-villous buds (top), and leaf undersides (lower), Wollemi National Park (March 2025). Photographs: Stephen Bell.

fire-sensitive *Gaudium polyanthum*. Streambed vegetation was otherwise typified by *Elaeocarpus reticulatus* and occasional *Ficus rubiginosa* and *Eupomatia laurina*, while adjacent slopes carried dense shrubs such as *Bursaria spinosa*, *Goodenia ovata*, *Trema aspera*, *Cassinia quinquefaria*, *Acacia buxifolia*, and *Grevillea mucronulata*. Within the context of Wollemi National Park, this habitat can be included in the Growee Ranges Grey Gum Sheltered Forest of OEH (2012), or for eastern NSW the Western Blue Mountains Grey Gum-Stringybark Forest (PCT 3623) of DPE (2022).

Later comparison of 2025 collected material against voucher specimens from the original 1997 *Pomaderris sericea* collection at this location provided a good match, despite some slight leaf discolouration of the 1997 specimen. Early thoughts that the individual may actually be *Pomaderris andromedifolia* subsp. *andromedifolia* were allayed after flowering material was examined and flowers were confirmed as apetalous (present in *P. andromedifolia*). Key features observed included the glabrous upper leaf surfaces; the dense appressed golden-brown and sparkling hairs on leaf undersurfaces and new growth, completely covering the stellate-haired tomentum; and the obscure, hair-covered secondary veins.

Discussion

Rediscoveries of species formally listed as 'Extinct' are often excluded from conservation initiatives, as there can be a bureaucratic lag between rediscovery and updated legal listings. This is an unfortunate reality, and one in which Doyle et al. (2025) have attempted to highlight and encourage change. Applying the 'possibly extinct' phrase to a species highlights the imperiled position it may occupy and provides some level of buffering against information uncertainty. IUCN (2024) define 'Extinct' as when there is no reasonable doubt that the last individual of a species has died, while a presumption that a species may be extinct (i.e. presumed 'Extinct') is reserved for situations where exhaustive surveys in known or expected habitat throughout its historical range, at appropriate times, fail to record an individual. Rightly so, Roberts et al. (2023) highlight that, unlike all other IUCN categories, that for 'Extinct' lacks a quantitative framework and is more dependent on expert opinion and lifeform group. The four categories of 'extinction likelihood' introduced by Silcock et al. (2020) effectively injects such a framework, albeit partly subjective, by utilizing data on taxonomic uncertainty, location and identification confidence, positional accuracy, habitat quality, perceived search effort, and life history. Subjective elements of this framework, such as 'thorough searching', 'lightly modified habitat', and 'moderate understanding of optimum survey times', still rely on expert opinion.

Silcock et al. (2020) allocated *Pomaderris sericea* to their 'possibly extinct' category, because the balance of evidence suggested it was extinct and that further surveys would confirm this. Stepping through their extinction likelihood key, *Pomaderris sericea* aligned to 'possibly extinct' because <70% of the remaining potential habitat has been searched with (presumably) at least one accurate location revisited without success. In March 2025, we rediscovered this species following targeted survey in the same Wollemi National Park gully as the 1997 collection. Despite efforts from five observers searching along the full length of the target creekline (and a second visit by two members in October 2025), just a single individual of *Pomaderris sericea* was located.

Given the last record of *Pomaderris sericea* from this site was in 1997, and the population at that time was very small, the finding of one individual (potentially the same plant observed in 1997) is of considerable significance, confirming the species as extant (albeit quite tenuously), and removing the 'possibly extinct' tag applied by Silcock et al. (2020). Plants were last observed at Upper Genoa River in Victoria in 1987 (38 years ago), and near Berrima in 1984 (41 years ago). Historically, the Victorian populations were reported to be locally common (in 1951 and 1987), the Wollemi population encompassed up to 15 plants (in 1997), but there are no data on the Berrima population size.

Like many *Pomaderris* (e.g. Haines et al. 2007; Patykowski et al. 2016; Le Breton et al. 2020, 2023), *P. sericea* is expected to require fire to break seed dormancy, although as we have observed in other species (e.g. *P. reperta*, *P. queenslandica*) germination can occur without fire under prolonged wet conditions following drought (unpubl. data). Depending on intensity, fire is also known to kill most adult plants, but some species do have the capacity to resprout basally (e.g. *P. oblongifolia*, Simmons et al. 2025). Working with other riparian *Pomaderris* species, Le Breton et al. (2020) found strong adaptation for high severity fire to initiate seed germination, as well as some resprouting of adult plants. For the Wollemi population, NPWS fire records show the last fire to have occurred in 1994-95 (i.e. prior to the 1997 find), but it is uncertain if the occupied gully was directly affected. It is possible that a future wildfire of sufficient intensity, followed by adequate rainfall, may break seed dormancy and repopulate *Pomaderris sericea* within this gully, although the viability of the remaining seedbank here is unknown. There is little research on the longevity and persistence of the seed bank in *Pomaderris*, and this is an avenue for future research.

Encouragingly, the habitat in which *Pomaderris sericea* was rediscovered within Wollemi National Park in March 2025 is widespread across the central western parts of this reserve (particularly the Growee Ranges Grey Gum Sheltered Forest of OEH 2012). Given the perilous nature of the sole surviving individual, targeted searches of this habitat across western Wollemi National Park are urgently required, commencing in the Growee and Upper Bylong catchments.

The 1984 collection from Berrima also warrants reassessment given notes in AVH made by David Albrecht implying an inconclusive identification; if reinspection indeed proves an incorrect identification, then the last collection from this locality would have been in 1889 (136 years ago). The Berrima area was visited by Douglas and David (2013), but they could find no trace of the species. They noted the low geospatial accuracy of historical records, and highlighted the threats of clearing, weed invasion, inundations due to nearby construction and a long absence of fire, but also recommended further targeted surveys be undertaken along the Wingecarribee River and its tributaries.

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