

Newsletter 29 December, 1999

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## LEONARD JOSEPH LAWLER - AUSTRALIAN ORCHID FOUNDATION AWARD OF HONOUR

The prestigious Award of Honour from the Australian Orchid Foundation was presented to Len by Bill Lavarack on Sunday, 5th December, and Don and I were delighted to be there to celebrate with him. Don congratulated Len on behalf of the Society for Growing Australian Plants, and in doing so added his voice to those of representatives of Orchid Societies from around Far North Queensland and as far afield as Townsville. In the half hour of that official ceremony we learned more about Len's forty year involvement with orchids than we have in the many hours we have spent walking around the scrub with him over the past five years. The certificate included several commendations. We were aware that Len had found, and had named after him, *Malaxis Lawleri*, but we didn't know that he started the seed bank in 1981 and was its curator for some time; he is still a very strong supporter. Also noted was that Len wrote what is still the definitive work on the Ethnobotany of Orchids. He is the world expert on the use of orchids by traditional people for food, medicine, decoration and as a source of fibre. AND he and his wife Kate are members of our Orchid Study Group. We have taken the liberty of congratulating them both on your behalf. Other well known 'names' attending the presentation were Alick Dockrill and Bruce Gray.

What the certificate didn't say was that Len is an untiring advocate for the study of orchids. He shares his knowledge in a most unassuming manner after first giving the novice a chance to have a go at identifying a plant. He has the knack of making you feel your opinion is worth hearing and that you are learning. His encouragement to us has been invaluable.

## STUDY GROUP BY-LAWS

We had an immediate and satisfying response from members with regard to our views on the by-laws. It appears that most of the matters to which we objected are, at this stage, recommendations only, and it is just as well, as our members' responses ranged from "I really don't mind if my name is published, but why would they want to" to "If they insist, I will resign from all study groups." Jan Sked sent us a detailed letter outlining her views on the proposals, and reassured us that there will be no imposition of impractical or hard-line decisions.

Jan has 16 species growing, including mobs of *Dendrobium gracilicaule* and *D. speciosum* and, like the rest of us, has lost quite a few too. Jan says, "My *Dendrobium kingianum* are flowering better this year than they have for quite a long time. I have them in a hanging basket of sandy potting mix and they seem to do quite well there. The *D. gracilicaule* all flowered in their various colour shades, but not as well as last year, and the *Dockrillia schoenina* are still flowering." Among the books Jan mentions are two with which I am not familiar - *Australian Terrestrial Orchids* by Collin and Dorothy Woolcock, and a little booklet by Barbara Mullins and Margaret Martin called *Australian Orchids* which has some very nice photographs. She adds that there are a number of orchids featured in SGAP's *A Horticultural Guide to Australian Plants*.

## ORCHIDS OF THE ROYAL NATIONAL PARK by Margaret Bradhurst

We were delighted to see Margaret's article published in *Australian Plants* in September. Weren't those photographs a knockout! Congratulations, Margaret. Unfortunately, the Study Group was not mentioned. Bill Payne, editor of *Australian Plants*, is still looking for someone who has had personal experience in growing *Thelymitra* to write an article for him.

Margaret lives in one of the areas of Sydney worst hit by the hail storm last April: "The garden and nearby bushland were shredded. Fortunately most of the terrestrial orchids had not developed too far and they are starting to flower now as they usually do at this time of the year. (mid July) At the first sound of hail, I did manage to grab a tray of terrestrials I had growing in pots – I got my priorities right! No time to save Doug's car; it all happened too quickly.

"I have managed to find a *Corybas* orchid growing on the coast (*Corybas hispidus* which is normally only found on the tablelands, so I am looking forward to investigating that further. Tomorrow I join the National Parks Threatened Species Unit and Australian Native Orchid Society members in their 'Recovery Programme' for *Pterostylis sp.aff.plumosa* (*Pterostylis 15*). I was involved last year too and they set out to establish the extent of the population and then make sure it is preserved in the future. It is one of the only three *Pterostylis* orchids in New South Wales which are listed as 'Endangered' under the Threatened Species Conservation Act. I am looking forward to being part of that and will keep you informed."

She certainly did. In an October letter Margaret tells us: "Not much headway was made, unfortunately, apart from ascertaining that those colonies located last year were still thriving. No new populations were found despite much searching in likely areas. Now that the bushland has grown so dense, unless a bushfire occurs, it is unlikely that any new locations can be found. So *Pterostylis sp. Botany Bay* still remains 'Endangered' under the NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act."

With regard to publishing membership lists, Margaret is ambivalent as she often wonders if there is a member nearby "who is prepared to accompany me as I crawl around on hands and knees in the bush hunting for those elusive species!" Other members have the same problem. We have to travel up to 2½ hours to join groups which are looking specifically for orchids, but we join almost every outing on offer and whilst some people look at trees and others for ferns, we search for and record orchids. It doesn't really matter what the others in the group are looking for, unless of course there is nobody in the local branch wanting to look at whatever else is in the orchid habitat.

Doreen from Malanda writes: "Your September newsletter gave me a prod along, as I hope it did with many others.

"Your par about orchid seedlings on your cherry guava (feijoa) trees prompts me to add that jacarandas also appear to be good hosts for seedlings. From one mother plant of *Eria* either *queenslandica* or *eriaeoides* (waiting for verification at next flowering), I can count 14 seedlings. And what about the old mango tree at Henrietta Creek? Wasn't it a beaut host?"

Book four of the *Australasian Families* by J. N. Rentoul shows that he favours the she-oak (or casuarina) tree. Citrus are reputed to be good hosts too. Perhaps other members can enlighten us on further plants they have had success with. "arf yer luck, Pauline!! What treasures can blow your way from your mountain backdrop and Bellenden Ker Range. How exciting – like a huge treasure-hunt.

"When in the Herberton Range area years ago (before legislation), I came across what I thought was a strange looking palm scrambling over rocks close to the ground. As soon as I picked up a stem to look closer, it broke in my hand. I brought the pieces home. After reading *Australian Tropical Orchids* by Lavarack and Gray, I was quite convinced I had found *Dipodium pictum* or even *Dipodium pandanum*, both described as having the brittle stems and scrambling habit I had seen. However, Len Lawler, who came with me to see it in its habitat, identified it as *Dipodium ensifolium*. Because the text on *Dipodium pandanum* said that broken pieces would grow readily, I put them into a terrestrial mix and delightedly watched them grow. In October they flowered with three sprays of very unusual flowers, about 2-3cm across with purple spots on pink/lilac tepals and a deep purple labellum. Most *Dipodiums* are saprophytic, but *D. ensifolium* (because of having leaves for photosynthesis?) does not require this relationship, although there is conjecture that it too may be partly saprophytic. Lavarack and Gray say the plant may do well initially, then slowly goes backward and dies after a few years in cultivation.

"*D. elegantulum*, described by Dockrill as a fungus parasite is now (mid November) in flower just off the main road some kilometres out of Mareeba.

"This has been a great year for flowering in North Queensland. Perhaps because of the record rains early in the year. *Dendrobium jonesii* burst forth with 35 racemes of lovely flowers. The plant is out in full sun and exposed to all sorts of predators but the flowers survived – not like other years when each bud has been eaten before maturity. I was pretty constant with my hobby-horse spray, "Envirospray", which is meant to deter predators, not kill. This should be ideal as it doesn't then kill our beneficial insects. Though I'm not prepared – yet – to give the spray full thumbs up, as I haven't trialled it for long enough, I do feel that it played a part, and will continue to monitor the results.

"Another source of great pleasure this Spring has been my *Dendrobium smillieae*. This huge orchid has grown from a small piece obtained when my daughter lived in Cooktown some years ago. This is the first time I have had it flower. I was worried I was losing the plant when leaves fell off and left bare stems until I read that this is normal. The plant flowers from the leafless stems – what a joy! In my cool, moist climate at Malanda (not at all related to its natural habitat) I was dismayed to find a first small flower consumed by a fungus growth. Out came my trusty "Multipest" spray. This is a combined insecticide/fungicide/miticide and by using this on forming buds I got three lovely full bottle brush type flowers on the bare stems without any fungus. Growing orchids has taught me (a most impatient person) to cultivate a little patience and a lot of perseverance! (or should that be perverseness?)

"As well as that so-and-so dendrobium beetle pest, I learned recently of two more that are sent to try us. Ned Fittock, a well-known Mareeba nurseryman, came to a meeting of the Atherton Tableland Orchid Society with specimens (firmly encased in glass jars) of a weevil which has devastated a lot of his orchids as well as those of growers around Cairns and Innisfail. I don't know if it is found further south. It is about the size of a scrub tick and looks very much like this, but has a hooked proboscis which makes it easily identified. It is slow moving and does not fly off at disturbance, as does the dendrobium beetle, so can easily be

beheaded between thumb and forefinger ( what a pleasure this gives us growers!) It is a major pest world-wide, especially in Hawaii, and one Tableland grower can remember it appearing in Cairns around World War Two. Ned has tried many sprays and thinks Rogor may control it. After annihilating the adult, constant vigilance is required because the larvae which is buried well down in the pseudobulbs take three months to hatch. The first noticeable sign is rotting of bulb tips. He suggests cutting back to beyond this point and thoroughly destroying the piece. (Don't forget to use sulphur on the cut edge – or alternatively rub it with aloe vera as one Cairns grower does.)

“Another pest I was told of recently is the black and white tit butterfly. All this makes you ponder why we don't grow roses, or camellias, instead doesn't it? Or does it now? Not really! We can contend with all the so and sos, can't we? To see our unique Australian orchids in full flower surely makes up for all the vigilance necessary.”

After receiving Doreen's report, Don hotfooted it to Mareeba and was rewarded with seeing the lovely flowers of *Dipodium elegantulum* for the first time. Later when I was able to go, there was just one sad flower left, but we are going in search of them again soon at a higher altitude in the hope that some may still be flowering.

Marjorie has had difficulty tracking down species orchids to buy. “Three years in a row I headed for the Dayboro Orchid Show, reluctantly buying the odd tiny hybrid and asking for species on the local list (The one compiled by Jan Sked). At last Frank Simpson admitted that they hang onto their species for propagation. They told me of the ANOS, but not long after I discovered that species are sold by some nurseries (with their tags of course) at around \$8 - \$10 for small ones. I have about a dozen at present. I am a bit of a purist for local species, because I'm rather taken by the idea of creating a little rainforest with as many truly local species as I can get my hands on. So far I have about 325 local rain forest species.

“Most of the species I have flowered this year IN the shade house. I did take the advice of these Dayboro orchid people in choosing beige shade cloth to enhance light reflection and therefore flowering. This has benefitted other species slow to be planted out – especially *Proiphys cunninghamii* (Brisbane lily). This has seeded generously, in the shadehouse. Apparently this protection has prevented the seed capsules being lost to the food chain. So I have some offspring of this for swaps and for my little gully when I get it finished.”

The use of beige shade cloth to enhance light reflection is an interesting idea. I shall have to make enquiries as to whether this is considered to be best in all areas. That gully with 325 local rain forest species, (including understory and ferns?) with orchids to come is a fantastic, and no doubt rewarding, project.

#### TERRESTRIALS DOING THEIR OWN THING by Cherree Densley

“In our neck of the woods, we look down at our feet to see orchids, as to the best of my knowledge there are no epiphytic orchids (in Victoria we have only a couple of rock orchids – *Dendrobiums*, a *Plectorrhiza* and a couple of *Sarcochilus*) within several hundred kilometres from the south-western part of Victoria where I live. So it should be unusual to

record two examples of orchids that SHOULD be growing at one's feet to be found well above the ground.

"Firstly on my bush block I have discovered quite a large colony of mixed greenhood orchids shoulder high. Both *Pterostylis nutans* and *Pterostylis longifolia* are thriving along the top of a huge and old tree trunk. Pushed down about 30 years ago to make way for a road, huge stringybark messmates (*Eucalyptus obliqua*) now lie rotting amongst fairly dense regrowth trees almost the same size as they once must have been. I haven't measured around their girth but they lie at shoulder height and they rest along the ground. (I'll take a tape measure next time.) However, amongst the rotting wood, bark, collected leaf matter and heavy growth of mosses along the top of the trunk are hundreds of the above species of greenhoods. Well protected from grazing animals – grey kangaroos, swamp wallabies, the odd rabbit or hare - these beautiful orchids are flourishing. I have shown them to several friends who are as delighted as I was in finding them. How did they get there? Perhaps one or two bulbs were growing at the base of the tree before it was pushed down and they clung to the roots as it crashed to the ground. These took root and multiplied all along the trunk? Or did seed blow in to get trapped by the moss. The logs are in a very damp area – I need to be careful of leeches always when in this spot as conditions are ideal.

"I am also at a loss to explain the second example. This time it is a sun orchid, *Thelymitra pauciflora* or Slender Sun Orchid (we think) which is growing in an unusual spot. I was shown this one plant several years ago just a couple of kilometres from my bush block, growing in the fork of a healthy and upright messmate and about **2½ metres from the ground**. The plant was obviously quite mature judging by the dozens of dried and old flower stems hanging down from the base of the bulb, I haven't been back to see this plant – it should be flowering this week as other sun orchids are now out - but it is growing in thick, waist high and very prickly heath country with an overstorey of trees, and I wouldn't be game to wade into there without someone else with me – it is really good tiger snake country! But the person who took me last time, mentioned it in a phone call this week, so we may get there soon and he can go first!

"NB I only mention the leeches and snakes to remind Don and Pauline that they are not the only ones surrounded by dangers when orchid hunting. However their crocodiles along the Russell River take top prize for MOST dangerous. (By the way, the news of the recent crocodile attack on the Russell River made our local Warrnambool papers!)

#### BLACK AND WHITE TIT, *HYPOLYCAENA DANIS*

This is a truly beautiful little blue and white butterfly. Don and I used to be delighted to see so many of the lovely creatures attracted to the plants and moisture around the back of our house, UNTIL I one day observed one lay eggs on an orchid. Peter Valentine in *Australian Tropical Butterflies*: "It is difficult to imagine such a lovely insect as a pest but the Black and White Tit is well known as such to orchid growers. The adult butterfly lays its eggs on the buds of epiphytic orchids and the larvae feed on the flowers. In the Cairns area they create much damage for commercial growers who need to keep their plants well sealed in shade houses. The butterfly is known from Papua New Guinea and Cape York to Wallaman Falls, near Ingham. They are rarely seen in any numbers in the rainforest, partly due to the dispersal of their larval food plant and its location in the canopy." Of the 129 colour photographs of 118 species featured in this book, 49 are exclusively tropical, 50 mainly tropical and 19 widely distributed in temperate Australia.

Don and I do regular patrols when flower spikes start appearing. The adult butterfly is so small, about 1.5cm, that it can lay its little white eggs in hard-to-see places. As one grower said, they start at the top and lay on the tip of each bud, then come back up again laying underneath the buds where the uninitiated would not think to look. Don finds that the eggs stick to his fingers and he has to be sure that he is not just relocating them to the next flower. When I was using a toothpick to pollinate vanilla flowers, I also found it a useful tool for removing the butterfly eggs. I'm sure Cherree has some equally dastardly insect in Victoria.

**BOOK REVIEW – THE ORCHIDS OF VICTORIA** – by Gary Backhouse and Jeffrey Jeanes. Published by the Miegunyah Press, an imprint of Melbourne University Press. Hardcover \$59.95 (in June, 1995)

Cherree responded to our call for a review of this publication and sent us the media release:

*The Orchids of Victoria* is the first comprehensive and up-to-date pictorial identification guide to Victoria's diverse and beautiful native orchids. More than 270 species occur in the wild in Victoria, making the orchids one of the largest native plant families represented in the state. It is one of the most diverse flora in the world and is also potentially at risk: more than one-third of the species are considered threatened and many are highly endangered.

*The Orchids of Victoria* is designed for the amateur and professional alike. Every species - including several that have not been illustrated before - is shown in full colour in over 270 high quality colour photographs. The detailed description of each species is designed to make identification simple, and is accompanied by a distribution map and information about its flowering time, habitat and conservation status. Also included is the most up-to-date information on the biology and ecology of orchids.

With its easy to follow aids to identification and authoritative text, *The Orchids of Victoria* is an invaluable companion for orchid lovers in the home or field.

Gary Backhouse is a scientist with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Jeffery Jeanes is an amateur field botanist and photographer.

Cherree endorses this review: I have used the book a lot and find all the above information to be accurate. During 'orchid season' - now - I have the book constantly open, so it is a very user-friendly publication - wonderfully clear photographs too.

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