

Newsletter 59 June 2007

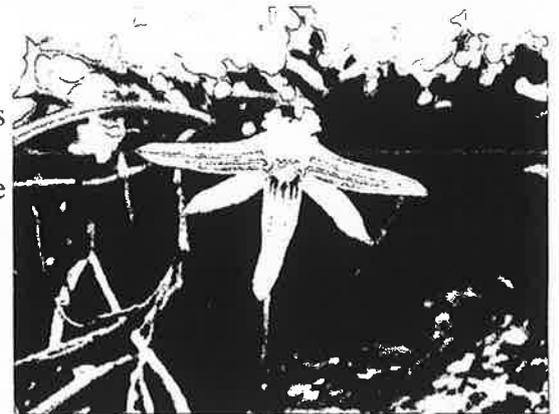
A PILGRIM'S PLEASURE (AND PAIN!) - ON THE HUNT FOR VICTORIA'S NON-TERRESTRIALS.

Kate Vlcek, Dept. Sustainability & Environment Warrnambool (Vic)

Of Victoria's approximately 360 species of orchid, only five have decided to live a life less grounded; *Thelychiton spectosus* (King Orchid), *Dockrillia striolata* subsp. *striolata* (Streaked Rock Orchid), *Sarcochilus falcatus* (Orange Blossom Orchid, hereafter known as OBO), *Sarcochilus australis* (Butterfly Orchid) and *Plectorrhiza tridemata* (Tangle Orchid). In late October of last year I decided to make it my mission to find them. This is my story.

All five species occur almost exclusively in the East Gippsland region and as I don't get over that way often I also decided to try and see some of the local terrestrials on offer. I was assisted from the outset by ANOS Vic members, local field naturalists, colleagues and friends who generously shared their homes, time and information including site details and locations. I set out on November 3 (later than ideal) for a fortnight, armed with a lengthy list of species and sites.

The first species I stumbled across was the *Dockrillia*, growing on a lichen-encrusted boulder lining the bank of the beautiful Tambo River near Bruthen at a place known locally as "Pilgrim's". I knew what to expect from my lithophytic Lake Tinaroo (FNQ) experience, so scrambled enthusiastically up the rock face and was quickly rewarded by a clump of purplish, pendulous succulent foliage. A short search revealed a single, sweetly scented flower. Enchanting. There were also several shiny purple pods present.



*Dockrillia striolata* subsp. *striolata*. Six Mile Creek NSW (photo Kate Vlcek)

Next I visited some grassland sites around Munro where I saw three threatened terrestrials in flower: *Prasophyllum correctum* (very rare), *Diuris punctata* and *Diuris* sp. aff. *dendrobioides*.

This was followed by a memorable day led by local naturalist James Turner, starting with a rock-ramble in the forests around Nowa Nowa, where we found more *Dockrillia* in flower (though a paler, less attractive form). We descended down into a dark valley and it was here that I experienced the delicate beauty of the Butterfly Orchid, *Sarcochilus australis*, in all its glory. Their scent is exceptionally sweet and alluring (I actually smelt them before I saw them). The flowers are fairly small and fall from their mossy hosts in sprays like little necklaces of jewels, greenish with attractive pink markings on the snowy-white labellum. Very pretty indeed. This species occurs as far west as the Otway Ranges, but is far more common east of Melbourne. One of my favourite orchids.

Then to the forests east of Orbost, where, at the base of a waterfall, James showed us the incredible Tangle Orchid, hanging untidily and conspicuously from its host trees. The plants displayed truly tiny but beautifully formed brown-green flowers, somewhat triangular in shape. Pollination is obviously not a problem - we saw plenty of pods. Of real interest was a specimen I noticed growing lithophytically, as the species is considered an epiphyte. Tangle orchids are encountered less and less frequently in the wild these days.

Next was a terrestrial fix at Marlo airfield, quite a botanically interesting place, (grassy heathland) home to *Prasophyllum brevilabre* (flowering very obligingly), more Purple Diuris and assorted *Cryptostylis* leaves. I thanked my friends and set off on the solo stretch of my journey, which was to become a sort of hell-bent expedition to see an OBO in flower at any cost.

I started with a day spent searching (unsuccessfully) around Genoa for "Father Christmas", the rare albino form of the bearded *Calochilus robertsonii*. I was later to discover that the plants had suffered from drought and simply weren't there to be seen in 2006. I encountered *Calochilus campestris*, *Prasophyllum appendiculatum*, *Arachmorchis ancylosa* past it's best (newly described from one known site) and a *Lyperanthus suaveolens* (that had gone off) along the way, mostly on roadsides.

The Orange Blossom Orchid (OBO) is now very rare in Victoria, in part due to illegal collection and is now considered to be confined to the wild Howe Ranges at almost inaccessible sites. I'd arranged to venture in with experienced guides, but we were forced to cancel our plans last minute. By this stage I'd decided the OBO was my 'Holy Grail' of the orchid world and if I had to cross the border into NSW to see it, then so be it!

The first site I visited was just over the border and called "Maxwell's Rainforest Walk" or something similar and I spotted the distinct sickle-shaped leaves almost straight away. Telltale blackened floral remains were also present. So I set out, optimistic despite the drizzle. After an entire day's fruitless searching at what was considered to be a reliable site and a scary fall down a steep slope I must admit that the clouds weren't the only ones shedding a few tears. It also saddened me to note the clearing/logging/forestry activity in the area where these orchids were once abundant. May be connected?

Disappointed, I headed up the coast to the aptly named Eden, which I used as my base to explore the South East Forests N.P. To my utter amazement I also found the *Dockrillia* growing happily on a boulder atop a cliff that drops off directly into the ocean at Eden, a very exposed and windy site. The Goodenia Rainforest Walk near Wyndham proved to be the best OBO site in the area - parts of the path are lined with host trees and their OBO treasures. All growing suspiciously high up, out of anyone's arm length... I spotted the white suggestion of a bud about 7 metres (21 feet) up and decided to revisit my childhood tree-climbing days. The OBOs are much better at it than me now; that is all we will say on the matter! I didn't find any flowers.

I had one last attempt at 6 Mile Creek (between Candalo and Cathcart), which looked to be ideal habitat but only for more *Dockrillia* as it turned out. A quick stopover at Lake Tyers on the way home turned up an early flowering Large Tongue Orchid (*Cryptostylis subulata*) best viewed from below.

All in all, I felt it was still a successful pilgrimage - I saw some exquisite flowers and learnt some valuable lessons (EARLY OCTOBER for OBOs, don't try to climb trees in the rain - dangerous). I didn't reach my destination (looking into a fresh and open sparkling OBO bloom) but I enjoyed the journey, I gave it my best shot and I came oh-so-close.

## PLECTORRHIZA TRIDENTATA

Don Lawie

Kate's journey in search of Victoria's epiphytic orchids made fascinating reading, and I was particularly impressed by the generous assistance that she was given by fellow orchid enthusiasts. It is always a pleasure to reveal the forest's secret treasures to somebody new, and when they already have a considerable knowledge of orchids, as does Kate, the pleasure is multiplied.

One orchid found by Kate was the Tangle Orchid, *Plectorrhiza tridentata*, growing in a typically moist spot at the base of a waterfall. These orchids, at first sight, appear to be about to drop to the ground since the entire plant is only supported by a few tenuous threads of root, with the main root system consisting of a confused, hanging tangle. We could empathise with Kate in particular with this species,

since it occurs along almost the entire eastern length of Australia and is not uncommon in the northern reaches. (A couple of specimens of its closest relative, *P brevilabris*, appeared spontaneously in our garden, a result, presumably, of seed blown across the valley from the mile-high Bellenden Ker Range opposite us. Orchid seed had a particular affinity to two Pineapple Guava (*Feijoa*) trees which had the knack of producing orchids from nowhere, but have since died – we did relocate the orchids.)

The Tangle Orchid can grow to a quite large specimen through its southern range, but in the north they are small, twig epiphytes that are quite inconspicuous when not in flower. They sometimes grow fairly low to the ground in light shade and their narrow leaves can blend in well with the surrounding foliage. When in flower though, they are a delight to encounter, with their perfect, miniature flowers in some abundance enticing us to appreciate their perfume. Kate's discovery of a plant growing lithophytically is of interest: I have not been able to find any record of this adaptation in any of our books, though it is not really surprising. Other orchids that are essentially epiphytic e.g., *Dendrobium jonesii*, grow very happily on granite rocks, often in quite exposed situations, subject to strong, cold winds. It is a sad but inevitable comment by Kate that Tangle Orchids are encountered less frequently in the wild nowadays. The only answer seems to be education of the general public, but I do feel the depredation of wild plants is a decreasing occurrence.

The generic name - *Plectorrhiza* – was given by Alick Dockrill in 1967 and is a combination of two Greek words: *Plecto* means twisted, and *Rhiza* is "root" hence "twisted root", a most apt name. The species name *tridentata* signifies that there are three teeth, but just where they may be is something I haven't been able to discover!

Regular readers of this newsletter will know how we feel about the incessant attempts of the taxonomists to alter the names of almost every orchid ever found. In Dockrill's *Australian Indigenous Orchids* Vol 2, 1992 ed., he gives the pedigree of *Plectorrhiza tridentata*. The plant was first mentioned in 1838 when it was called *Cleisostoma tridentata*, then until Alick finally sorted the title in 1967 it enjoyed a series of names bestowed by some quite prestigious orchidologists such as Lindley, Rupp and Bailey. Names listed are *Saccolabium calcareum*, *Sarcochilus tridentatus*, *Sarcochilus calcaratus*, *Thrixspermum tridentatum*, *Cleisostoma cornutum* and *Sarcanthus tridentatus*. Truly, "everything changes, yet everything remains the same."

As a closing note to this article, I am sure readers will be pleased to know that Alick is still up and about, still working on our indigenous orchids and making his meticulous drawings, though with some optical aids. With the help of his longtime friends Kate and Len Lawler, he was able to attend the recent exhibition of The Atherton Tablelands Orchid Society. The mass display of numerous varieties of Cooktown Orchids, along with many other flowering orchids grown by the talented members of this Society, was stunning.

## RESOURCES

Pauline Lawie

Some time ago Kate suggested we make a CD of photographs for members' use. I demurred as I felt most people had cameras to record what they see and we all had access to good photographs in easily accessible books for identification purposes. I now feel, prompted by the following occurrence, that what we need is a basic resource covering orchid information for the use of members.

One of our newest members recently asked if we had such a resource as the arranged speaker for her group cancelled at short notice and she could not find another "orchid person"; all I could do was refer her to the books. Lyn stepped into the breach herself, did heaps of research, and gave a first class presentation of interesting orchid facts with photographs of species which grow in their area to demonstrate the differences. When I become more technically competent, I would like to produce a resource based on Lyn's should we receive a similar request.

How do members feel about having their photographs used in such a resource?

**TWO GROUND ORCHIDS**

Margaret Bradhurst

I want to tell you about two terrestrial species I have found in the Royal National Park at the end of last year which I had not found before. From your newsletters I know you experience the thrill of a new orchid find.

Firstly there was *Caleana minor* (Small Duck Orchid) which David Jones is calling *Sullivanii minor*. It flowers from November to December here and I know now why it has been so difficult to locate – it gets eaten by the deer or wallabies in the Park! The few that I saw were gone the next day, eaten off to the ground. They were about 8cm tall and had a narrow reddish leaf. They like to grow on mossy rock platforms in eucalypt forest or heathland. The flower is yellowish-green or reddish and the labellum is covered with black shiny warty glands.

The other orchid I found, and not recorded from the Royal before, is *Pterostylis uliginosa* (Marsh Greenhood). I had previously noticed tiny rosettes growing along a creek bank, but could never find them in flower. That is because they are December and January flowering, not a time I usually do much bush-walking! I was determined to catch them in flower this year though and a chance visit to the creek found one or two in flower. The flowers are very tiny, only 10mm or less and shiny green. The labellum is not visible and I did not want to disturb them to take a closer look. Someone else has since located more further up the creek. They are scattered in NSW, Vic, SA and Tas, but are uncommon, mainly because of their swampy habitat. They obviously like wet feet.



*Caleana minor* (Small Duck Orchid)



*Caleana major* (Large Duck Orchid)

(Photographs: Margaret Bradhurst *Caleana Major* shown by way of contrast)



*Pterostylis uliginosa* (Marsh Greenhood)

Congratulations, Margaret (and to the rest of the team too, of course) for your part in the realisation of the new CD – *Plants of the Coastal Area of the Royal National Park*. The article in *Australian Plants*, September 2006, Vol.23, No.188 reads: "....and Margaret Bradhurst for her specialist knowledge on native orchids and her photographic expertise."

(Margaret's encouragement has kept me focussed on the quest for the perfect photograph. P)