

Spring (and Orchid) fever has arrived

October 2005

Spring fever and orchid fever are closely related conditions for people who are passionate about these highly specialised plants. I confess to being infected with this virus and warn you, it can be contagious. A further confession, I am more interested in the native ground orchids than the cultivated glasshouse varieties. Our district has a wonderfully rich variety of both rare and common orchids. This essay will concentrate on some of the more common orchids.

Waxlip are perhaps the most common orchid in Victoria. It is an early spring-flowering species and the first of those with brightly coloured flowers. It is easily recognised by its five blue to mauve evenly spaced “petals” with its waxy white triangular tongue in the centre. They are a brave sight when dotted amongst grasses or other variously coloured heathland plants. This year we have noticed that the Waxlips have been paler and shorter than usual, perhaps as a result of the dry early winter.

Golden Moths should be sought in our remnant open woodlands and roadside grasslands. These are a pale yellow member of the doubletails or donkey orchid group. Sometimes they go under the name of Snake Orchid because the flower resembles the flattened head of a snake. We have often come across small dark native bees completely embedded in these flowers. The insects appeared to be intoxicated or drugged as they were completely immobilised and even when shaken from the flower fell listlessly to the ground.

Leopard Orchids are a member of the same donkey orchid group. It is more likely to be found in open dry forest or heathlands. It is also a yellow coloured flower but has dark brown, sharply defined patches even on the backs of its petals. We have seen some excellent specimens growing near Casterton recently.

Red Beaks appear in areas burnt in last summer’s wildfires. This is a plant that usually only flowers profusely after fire, although the large fleshy oval leaves are commonly seen year-by-year as the species waits for a fire to initiate flowering. Good specimens have four or more, mainly white drooping flowers with red stripes and blotches, growing up the stem. They have a cheerful, clownish appearance. Other names for this plant are Fire Orchid, Undertaker Orchid or Black Widow, the latter on account of its habit of turning totally black when the flowers dry off.

Sun-orchids are spring and summer-flowering beauties. On one memorable morning recently we found four different species in flower. They were the Spotted, Slender, Salmon and Rabbits Ears sun-orchids. We were surprised because the weather was, although humid, generally overcast and showery. Sun-orchid flowers usually open on warmer days.

This is a small sample of the many kinds of orchid to be found in our district. Many populations are in decline and people with long memories tell us of many places where orchids were once common and are now extinct. We must do all we can to preserve the remaining populations of even these, our common orchids.

Photos

Red Beaks (*Pyrorchis nigricans*)

Waxlip (*Glossodia major*)

Golden Moths (*Diuris chyseopsis*)

