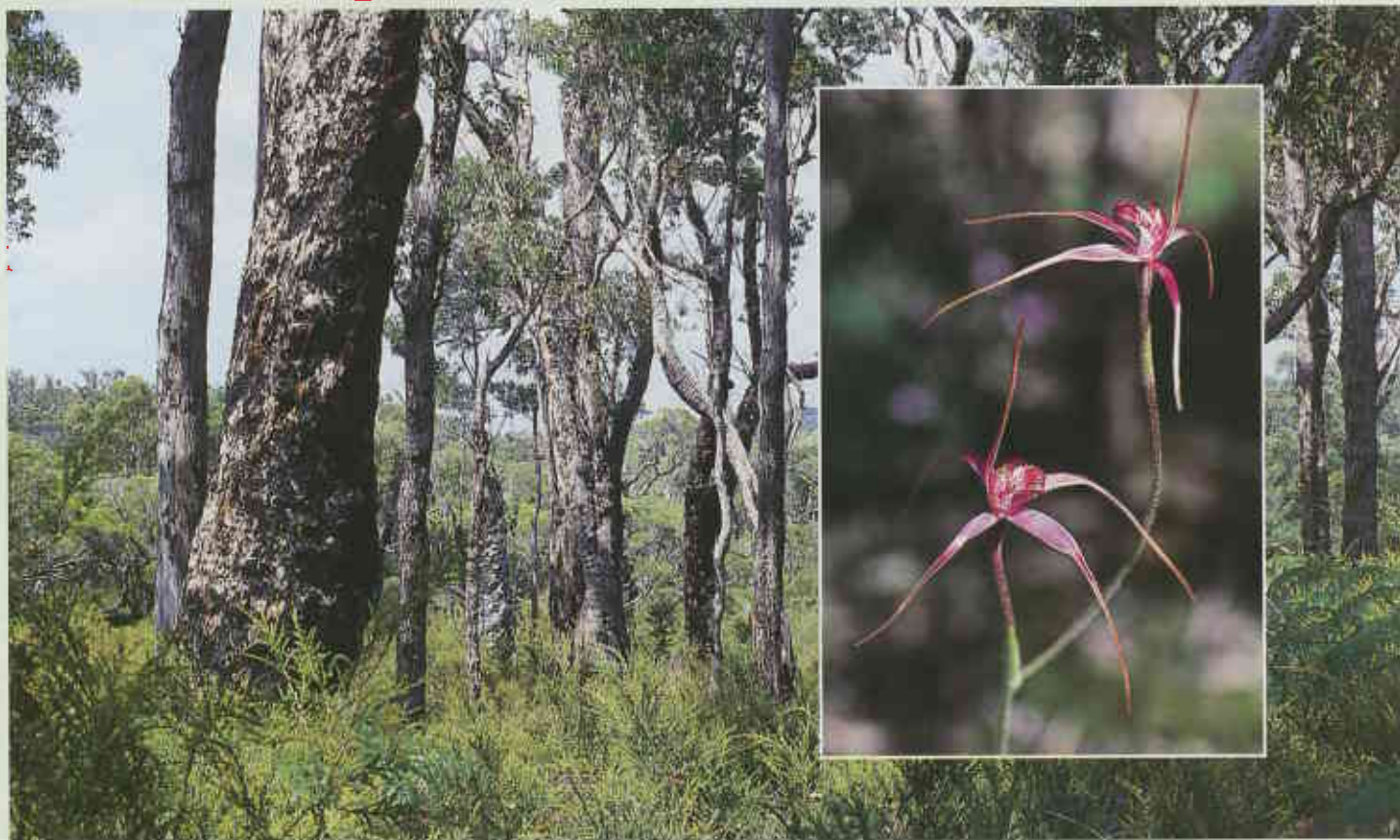# endangered by Rachel Meissner

Majestic spider orchid

Spider orchids (members of the genus *Caladenia*) are one of the largest and most complex groups of Australian orchids. There are 260 species of *Caladenia* known in Australia, with almost half of them occurring in the South West of Western Australia.

The majestic spider orchid (*Caladenia winfieldii*) is one of 33 threatened orchid species in WA. It has a very restricted distribution, and is known from only two populations of just more than 100 plants south-east of Manjimup. It grows in a seasonally-swampy depression, adjacent to a drainage line in jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*), flooded gum (*E. rudis*), modong (*Melaleuca preissiana*) and swamp banksia (*Banksia littoralis*) woodland.

The majestic spider orchid is a small herbaceous perennial plant that arises from an underground potato-like storage tuber in late April, and grows 30–60 centimetres tall. It flowers from late October to mid-November, with brilliant deep pink flowers that darken towards the apex of the labellum (lower lip). It grows with another rare orchid, the pink spider orchid (*Caladenia harringtoniae*), but differs from the latter in its larger, deeper pink flowers with a larger labellum and broader petals.

This spectacular orchid was named in 2001 after the late Harry Winfield, who discovered it in the late 1970s. He brought the species to the attention of Steve Hopper and Andrew Brown, and directed them to the wild population in 1987. Since then it has been studied closely, and was listed as Critically Endangered in 1995.

The main threats to this species are altered fire regimes, changes in hydrology in its winter-wet habitat, feral pigs that destroy the underground storage tubers and the effects of dieback on its habitat. Majestic spider orchid, like many other orchids, will often flower in greater abundance following summer fire. However, fire during its growing season between late April and November can kill plants.

An Interim Recovery Plan was developed in 1995 to address threats to the species, and strategies have since been put in place. Most plants are now fenced to protect them from feral pigs, fuel reduction burns are excluded from the area and hand pollination has been carried out to increase seed production. Numbers of flowering plants have increased from a low point of seven to more than 100. Consequently, the threat status of the species has been down-ranked from Critically Endangered to Endangered, and this is one of our recovery successes.

Photos by Andrew Brown

contents

DEPARTMENT OF
Conservation
AND LAND MANAGEMENT
Conserving the nature of WA