

Extraordinary orchids



Each spring, Western Australia comes alive with thousands of species of colourful and vibrant wildflowers. One of the State's richest areas for wildflowers is the south-west, with the Dunsborough–Cape Naturaliste region accommodating a number of native spider orchids found nowhere else.

by Danielle Le Moignan

Wildflower season in Western Australia is one of nature's true spectacles of colour and diversity. More than 75 per cent of the 11,000 Western Australian wildflower species grow in the State's south-west corner, between Geraldton and Esperance. The area around Busselton, Dunsborough and Margaret River, is particularly diverse in its wildflowers. Species commonly seen in the area include the grey-blue smokebush, boronia, wattle, red grevillea, banksia, white myrtle and numerous orchids.

The Ambergate Reserve, in the Dunsborough–Cape Naturaliste region 10 kilometres from Busselton, has more than 170 species of wildflowers located within 70 hectares alone. Spider orchids are particularly well represented in the Dunsborough region, which supports many orchid species.

There are also several extremely rare wildflower species found only within the Dunsborough area. These species are often confined to areas of



only a few kilometres. Their rarity and restricted habitat places them at significant risk, and constant care must be taken to ensure that each species is protected from possible threats. Bussell's (*Caladenia busselliana*), Dunsborough (*Caladenia viridescens*) and cape (*Caladenia caesarea* subsp. *maritima*) spider orchids are among the rarest. However, they can occasionally be seen along the coastal walktrails near Meelup and on the Cape to Cape Walk Track that runs north-south between Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin.

Facing page

Top far left Aniseed boronia (*Boronia crenulata*).

Photo – Andrew Davoll/Lochman
Transparencies

Top left centre Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse.

Photo – Andrew Davoll/Lochman
Transparencies

Top left Holly-leaved banksia (*Banksia ilicifolia*).

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Left Dunsborough spider orchid (*Caladenia viridescens*).

Photo – Andrew Brown/CALM

Above Cape spider orchid.

Photo – Andrew Brown/CALM

Bussell's spider orchid occurs further inland to the east of Yallingup.

Brilliant blooms

Bussell's spider orchid is found in winter-wet areas, on sandy loam over clay soils and beneath canopies of jarrah and marri. The plant is able to survive the long, dry summer period



Left Red-tailed tropicbird.
Photo – Dave Watts/Lochman
Transparencies

Far left Bussell's spider orchid.
Photo – Andrew Brown/CALM

by dying back to underground, potato-like storage origins (tubers) and re-emerging in autumn as a single hairy leaf. When flowering in spring (September to October), the plant produces one to three pale yellow, spider-like flowers on a flowering stem 20 to 30 centimetres in height. Bussell's spider orchid is one of only three clubbed king spider orchids in Western Australia that lack a red apex to the labellum (the distinctive median petal of the orchid).

This species can be found on the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge around the Dunsborough area. It was discovered as early as 1954, but was only collected and recognised as a new species in 1990 by Greg Bussell, after whom the flower is named. Threats to the orchid include degraded habitat, weeds, accidental destruction during roadworks, poor survival of offspring and death of adult plants. Because of these threats, Bussell's spider orchid is ranked as critically endangered and declared as rare flora under Western Australia's Wildlife Conservation Act.

Another rare orchid specific to the region is the Dunsborough spider orchid. The plant is a small, fine, single-leaved orchid that grows between 25 and 40 centimetres in height. Flowering in September–October, it produces one to three attractive, spider-like flowers. These flowers are pale green (the scientific name *viridescens* is taken from the Latin *viridis* meaning green) and grow in well-drained, lateritic and sandy soils in the Yallingup area. The species has been recorded in just four locations.

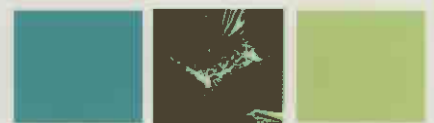
The Dunsborough spider orchid was discovered in 1985 and ranked as critically endangered in 1995. As well as facing threats from weed invasion and accidental destruction from road maintenance, clearing of native vegetation has significantly reduced suitable habitat and is probably the major factor contributing to the plant's rarity. Fire can also pose a threat to the plant, if it occurs during its active growing period. In the summer of 1994–95, the population of the species near Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse was burnt by wildfire. No population has been recorded in the area since then.

A third rare orchid species found in the Dunsborough-Cape Naturaliste area is the cape spider orchid. The scientific name of the subspecies is derived from the Latin word *maritimus*, meaning 'growing by the sea', due to its coastal habitat. The plant grows to between 15 and 20 centimetres high and bears one to three flowers with stiffly held petals and sepals and a prominent yellow and brown striped labellum. The cape spider orchid differs from other *Caladenia caesarea* subspecies

in having smaller flowers, a coastal granite habitat and an earlier flowering period, between August and mid-September.

The plant usually grows among low heath and herbs on shallow soil pockets of reddish-brown sandy loam soils. Its distribution is limited to the coastal granite areas near Cape Naturaliste, and over a geographic range of just five kilometres. Unlike the Bussell's and Dunsborough spider orchids, the cape spider orchid is listed as endangered rather than critically endangered. Despite this, conservation is still extremely important for the species.

The spider orchids growing in and around Dunsborough are just a few examples of the many unusual plants and animals that abound in the Cape Naturaliste region. Other rare species, such as the Meelup mallee (*Eucalyptus phylacis*) or the red-tailed tropicbird (*Phaethon rubricauda*), which visits Sugarloaf Rock, further enhance the region's appeal for its many visitors. Together with attractions like the Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse (see 'Beacons of the capes' on pages 32–38), annual whale sightings and world-renowned surf beaches, cliffs, walks and wineries, Dunsborough's wildflowers contribute to the area's wealth of beautiful natural scenery, and its status as one of the State's leading tourist destinations.



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