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The incredible Queen of Sheba orchids

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THE SPECIES ORCHID
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The purpose for this article is to introduce you to one of Western Australia's best-known, but less often seen terrestrial orchids, *Thelymitra variegata*. Commonly named the Queen of Sheba, this amazing species is, after the large blue sun orchids such as *Thelymitra macrophylla* due to their striking blue colour and tall flowers, the Western Australian orchid which attracted the most comment from our promotional slide show when we were in South Africa in 2014 and Ecuador in 2017. It is this group of striking sun orchids that most people we talked to when promoting Orchids WA's bid to host a World Orchid Conference in Perth wanted to see.

I, along with 20 other WAOS registrants, and Garry Brockman as our guide for the post-WAOS tour to the mid-west were thrilled to see three plants of *Thelymitra pulcherrima* in flower in August 2017.

Understandably, the Queen of Sheba is the orchid flower emblem of WOC2023Perth. It will appear in a stylised form in our banners, on our website, on promotional material and all correspondence and registration information. The rich variety of Western Australian terrestrial orchids, and the significant number that are unique to WA are one of the major attractions for international orchid enthusiasts to come to Perth for the WOC. When we remember that Perth is one of the more remote state capital cities in the world, and a considerable distance from Europe, North and South America, we believe that it is these extraordinary terrestrial orchids as well as our relaxed lifestyle, and unique flora and fauna that will bring people to WOC2023Perth.



The Queen of Sheba group of sun orchids, *Thelymitra variegata* (Lindl.) F. Meull., *Thelymitra pulcherrima* (the Northern Queen of Sheba) and *Thelymitra speciosa* (the Eastern Queen of Sheba) are for many orchid enthusiasts, the jewel in the crown amongst Western Australia's fabulous terrestrial orchids. They are found in shrub lands and woodlands from Kalbarri – Esperance.

Thelymitra variegata, from the Latin *variegatus* (variegated) for its striking flower colouration was named in 1839 as a species of the genus *Macdonaldia* from specimens collected and was subsequently moved to the genus *Thelymitra* in 1865.

Thelymitra pulcherrima and *Thelymitra speciosa* were both identified in 2009, the first from specimens collected along the Eneabba –Leeman road in heath sandplain, and the second from specimens collected west of the Twertup Creek – Fitzgerald River

junction.

Garry Brockman told me on his return from a field trip to the mid-west that *Thelymitra pulcherrima* seems to have two flushes of flowers with some plants flowering early August and others in early September.



Thelymitra pulcherrima

Photo: Garry Brockman



Habitat photos Chris Jones



Thelymitra pulcherrima Photo Manee Poffley

According to Brown, Dixon, French and Brockman, 2013, there are two races of *Thelymitra speciosa*, the type form from Fitzgerald River-Esperance, and the second later flowering form from Stirling Range- Esperance. The two forms occasionally grow together but flower several months apart.

Thelymitra variegata

Photo: Garry Brockman



The photos of *Thelymitra speciosa* and *Thelymitra variegata* on this and subsequent pages demonstrate the significant colour variation in these species, often observed in plants in the same population and in close proximity.



Photos: Andrew Brown and Gary Brockman

Thelymitra apiculata (Cleopatra's Needles) is the other of the strikingly coloured members of the *Thelymitra spiralis* complex, grouped for their distinctive narrowly, spirally twisted or laterally curved leaves. Note the difference in flower colour and spotting.



Photos: Garry Brockman



As described by Brown, Dixon, French and Brockman, 2013 in the Field Guide to the Orchids of Western Australia, the plants were growing in dense heath covered sandplain. After walking a few hundred metres from the road down a sandy track to where Andrew Brown's group had seen a plant the previous day, we found three plants in flower. We were fortunate as there was sufficient sun on the day for the flowers to be open.



While researching this article, I came across a story from ABC in August 2015. The Southern Queen of Sheba (*Thelymitra variegata*) had been spotted in flower on Bluff Knoll in the Stirling Ranges near Albany in landscape covered in a light dusting of snow.

Photo: Ayleen Sands
<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2015/08/13/4292742.htm>

The concern for all of us is that these rare orchids are often damaged by people trampling them, picking the flowers, or worse still, removing them from their natural habitat. While it is an offence to do, given the sparse distribution of these species, it is difficult to catch offenders unless they are seen in the act. For this reason, actual sites where these orchids can be found are generally a well-guarded secret.

Andrew Brown, interviewed on ABC radio in August 2016 remarked that while it was illegal to take native orchids from the wild, theft was an occasional rather than widespread problem in WA. Habitat clearing and degradation from slashing, herbicide use and fire were bigger threats to orchid populations than theft. The Government had plans to safeguard all critically endangered flora by purchasing land for reserves, and undertaking weed control, fencing, propagation and translocation.

There are many excellent photos of the Queen of Sheba orchids that demonstrate the incredible colour variation in these species. Photos of *Thelymitra pulcherrima*, *Thelymitra speciosa* and *Thelymitra variegata* and their habitat can be found at:

- Noel Hoffman's website, <http://orchidswa.com.au/thelymitra-sun-orchids/queen-of-sheba/> ,
- the Ron Heberle collection on The Species Orchid Society of WA website
<http://members.iinet.net.au/%7Eemntee/Thelymitras%20Page%20198.htm>,
- the WA Native Orchid Study and Conservation Group website at <http://wanoscg.com>,
- Terry Dunham photography
https://www.facebook.com/pg/TerryDunhamPhotography/photos/?ref=page_internal; and
- http://chookman.id.au/wp_orchids/?page_id=1417

I strongly encourage each of you to take the time to look at some of these websites and Facebook pages so that you too can appreciate just how spectacular our terrestrial orchids are, how fortunate we are to live in a part of the world where their beauty can be appreciated, and why international visitors would want to come to see them.

If you visit Heinrich Beyrle's website at <http://www.myorchids.de/main1.htm>, you will find that he has many Australian terrestrial species for sale. Heinrich's business is in Bavaria and his list demonstrates the level of interest and commitment that orchid enthusiasts in other parts of the world will go to acquire, grow and flower our orchids.

With help from Dr Kingsley Dixon, Ron Fautleroy, Ben Vrieling and Kevin Western, we hope to have terrestrial orchids in vitro for sale over the next few years.