

CROWN JEWELS



Thelymitra pulcherrima



Thelymitra speciosa

Some plants are truly iconic (at least to me), the jewels in the crown of any regional flora. In California there is *Calchortus kennedyi*, in South Africa there is *Protea cynaroides*, in Japan there is *Lilium auratum*, in Peru there is *Puya raimondii*. And, in south-west Australia there is the Queen of Sheba. In fact there are three queens, with three species sharing a similar appearance and a few more that are clearly out of the same royal stable. These diminutive beauties rather defy description, with most of us resorting to the 'as if painted by a child' line, but they really are rather outrageous dazzling stars of pink, red and gold straight out of a infant school gallery. It is as if everything has to be extraordinary about them, even their solitary leaves are quite bizarre, spiralling upwards in a neat coil like a miniature helter-skelter.

On my last visit to WA (Western Australia) I was very fortunate to see all three of these lovelies. However, knowing what a plant looks like is one thing, finding it is another. What followed was a combination of local knowhow, luck and persistence. A late friend, Bob Griffin, had put me onto a good location for *Thelymitra speciosa*, the most southerly of the three species with locations around Albany. I rolled into the



Thelymitra variegata



Thelymitra antennaria



Thelymitra villosa



Thelymitra macrophylla



Thelymitra campanulata

first site fairly late in the afternoon to suss things out. *Thelymitra* are also known as sun orchids and are well-named, refusing to open unless it's warm and bright enough. It was too late for any of these beauties to be open and my options were limited - either sleep in the car or in a barn. The barn won and one lumpy night later I joined a tour led by Jenny Alford, who took me around all of her prime orchid sites in a patch of preserved kwongan heath that was packed with orchids. Pick of the bunch was a colony of pristine *Thelymitra speciosa*. Here I also met Karen, the first of many other orchid enthusiasts in WA, people who make exploring WA so productive and fun and she shared some useful info (and agreed to take me to see another very special plant when I made it south to her town).

A later visit to this same site also produced the very different *Thelymitra villosa* (this time guided by Terry) and this wonderful genus has other stunners which are chestnut-and-gold, clear yellows such as widespread *Thelymitra antennaria*, as well as a whole range of little and large blues. One blue species stubbornly refused to open on a granite outcrop one chilly morning near Hyden, despite my use of plastic-bottle greenhouses to warm it - a trick I use successfully on crocuses in the Mediterranean. Thankfully, this method did work on *Thelymitra campanulata*



Anigozanthos manglesii



Thelymitra cyanea



Cephalotus follicularis

near Wongan Hills and I managed to coax this spike into action. Near Perth, I also found amazing colonies of *Thelymitra macrophylla* a towering sweet-scented species that grew among plentiful *Anigozanthos manglesii*, one of those classic WA plants, that is also the floral emblem of the state. In fact this striking genus (11 species) is endemic to WA. *Thelymitra* on the other hand is not, it is found in other parts of Australia and beyond and I've seen the rich-blue of *Thelymitra cyanea* in New Zealand.

Back to the Queen of Sheba and from Albany I drove cross country to meet my tour group in Perth. Serendipity shone bright that morning. Stopping at a random layby near Lake Grace I walked ten metres into the spiny kwongan and there in front of me was a perfect rich pink *Thelymitra variegata*! Despite searching high and low in the surrounding area I found no more.

Time to get to Perth to pick up my group. After a night there, we drove north to Enneaba. The season was a little late this year and I knew we had a chance of queen number three. But, she proved elusive at first. The various site information I had drew blanks. Then a chance chat with fellow orchid enthusiasts at our accommodation and I had GPS co-ordinates to a plant that was in flower that day, so we tried one more time. Sure enough, after five minutes searching Joe aced the *Thelymitra pulcherrima* and we all got to see this rare and desirable (if tiny) gem, though I may have been more excited than

most.

WA has a bewildering flora, 8000+ species with new plants at every turn, far too many to include here. But, along with *Anigozanthos* and the Queen of Sheba, another equally iconic species for me is *Cephalotus follicularis* a remarkable little pitcher plant that has its origins in the oxalis family and is completely unrelated to the much larger Asian pitcher plants (*Nepenthes*). Previously, I had found some near Albany, but Karen who I'd met searching for my first queen, had told me of a good population that grew right by the sea. "You might have to wade a bit" to reach it she said. "Fine" I said.

However, Karen is a tall, long-legged lady, a fair bit taller than my six feet (180 cm) and although we set off along the shore well enough, on entering the water it quickly became apparent that wading for her was almost swimming for some of my group. Everyone else wisely retreated. Karen was undaunted and strode on. I was already soaked from the waist down and wasn't going to give up now. Rounding a headland there it was, an amazing colony of exquisite little carnivores, clinging precariously to a bank. What I had considered such a delicate plant was here well in range of salt spray and rough weather - the last place I would have searched for them.

It was well worth the wet socks and big thanks to the ever helpful folk of WA who know a plant-nut when they see one.