Book Review: The Cape Orchids


The Cape Floristic Region (CFR) comprises 35 square miles (90,000 sq km) and includes about 9,100 plant species, 70–80 percent of which are endemic, making it just about the hottest of biodiversity hotspots. Orchidaceae make up the 10th largest plant family in the CFR with 24 genera and 241 species, of which are endemic. All have been treated in previous modern floras (e.g., Stewart et al. 1982, Linder and Kurzweil 1999) from the angle of systematics with artificial keys to the taxa. The Cape Orchids focuses instead on natural history — what the authors call a holistic approach — to understand that unique orchid flora. Bound in two volumes with a four-color slipcase, this title represents over 20 years of fieldwork and photography, supplemented by invited essays from 23 contributors. It includes more than 2,000 color photographs and reproductions of both historical and modern paintings of the species printed on 80-pound (128-gsm) matte art paper. As a result, the set is heavy, weighing 13 pounds (6 kg), hardly a convenient field guide that can be tossed into a stuffed backpack at the last minute.

But neither is it meant to be consigned to the coffee table. This is a masterwork that provides such an overwhelming amount of data that it can only be considered encyclopedic. The Introduction thoroughly covers the biomes and vegetation of the CFR as well as its geology, fossil plants and past climates, ethnobotany, habitat loss and conservation status of South African orchids. That fascinating commentary is followed by authoritative chapters on the history of botanical exploration in the CFR from 1652 to the present with emphasis on the life and work of Harry Bolus (1834–1911), orchid morphology, fire ecology, pollination and natural hybridization, and cultivation and artificial hybridization.

Most of the two-volume set is devoted to species accounts: first the terrestrials and then the relatively few epiphytes. The systematic account of the tribe Diseae in The Cape Orchids is in general accord with that of Kurzweil and Linder (2001) in volume 2 of Genera Orchidacearum, although some updating has been necessary in light of more recent molecular studies by Bellstedt et al. (2001), Van der Niet et al. (2005), Bytebier et al. (2008) and Waterman et al. (2009). For each species the authors include derivation of the specific epithet, common names, description, flowering period, history and relationships, distribution, field notes and biology, and references. Illustrating the habitats and key characters are high-definition photographs (principally by the authors and Austrian orchid photographer Herbert Stärker); historical watercolors from Edwards’s Botanical Register, Curtis’s Botanical Magazine and Bolus’s Orchids of South Africa (among others); and modern watercolors by Fay Anderson, which are often juxtaposed with photographs to reveal features not otherwise shown. A fire in Ms. Anderson’s home in 1996 destroyed many of her paintings, but some could be salvaged and repainted for publication here. Many species accounts are supplemented with well-written, short essays on the collector or eponym of the species. One of the most interesting in this respect is Holothrix burchellii (Lindl.) Rchb.f., commemorating William John Burchell, who was trained as an apprentice at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and became a fellow of the Linnean Society at the age of 21. He traveled throughout the Cape from November 1810 to October 1812 and described his fieldwork in Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa. Burchell returned to England with over 40,000 plant specimens and 120 skins of 95 quadrupeds and 265 bird taxa. He described the white rhinoceros (Ceratotherium simum Burchell) and discovered Burchell’s zebra (Equus burchelli Gray) as well as the orchid genus Pachites. Disabled and depressed, Burchell committed suicide at the age of 81. Essays on other well-known eponyms include...
Swedish botanists Carl Peter Thunberg and Olaf Peter Swartz, British astronomer Sir John Herschel and British botanists John Lindley and Francis Masson. Masson's specimen of the cycad *Encephalartos altensteinii* Lehm. (collected as *Encephalartos longifolius* (Jacq.) Lehm. in the Eastern Cape in the 1770s) is still thriving in the Palm House at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, making it one of the oldest potted plants in the world.

Volume 2 begins with a 350-page account of the 180 species of *Disa*, arranged in 18 sections (17 occurring in the CFR), and ends with coverage of the five genera of epiphytes found there — *Polystachya*, *Angraecum*, *Cyrtorchis*, *Mystacidium* and *Tridactyle*. The work closes with recent Cape orchid photographs, references to Cape orchids in Bolus's published works, a glossary of botanical terms, vignettes of the authors and contributors, glossary and index.

A trivial criticism is that a given species account is difficult to find without consulting the index, so the reader is forced to juggle the volumes for those taxa treated in volume 1. A quick locator list of the taxa by page number on the endpapers of each volume with corresponding page numbers would have been useful. In the Table of Contents, those few genera outside of tribe Diseae are listed without any systematic context; inclusion of at least their subfamily name in parentheses could have added significant systematic information (complementing Table 1 on page 15) with little loss of space. The wealth of data and treasury of superb illustrations make this one of the best regional monographs (regardless of plant family) in recent memory. I recommend *The Cape Orchids* to botanists in all disciplines and to institutional libraries, as it is a valuable work that will not soon become obsolete — barring extinctions, of course.

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References


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