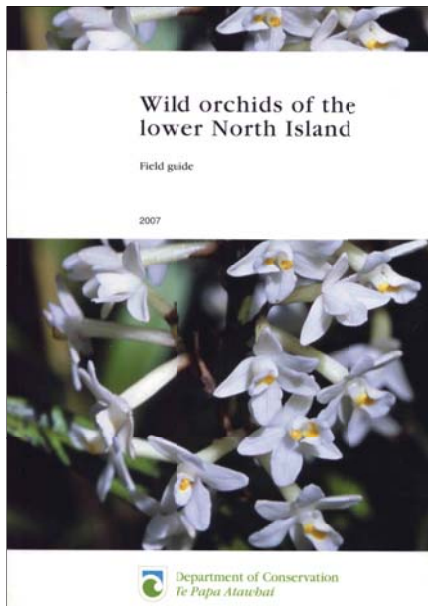


Wild Orchids of the Lower North Island: Field guide 2007

By Peter de Lange, Jeremy Rolfe, Ian St George, and John Sawyer
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Reviewed by Murray Dawson



Comprising some 25,000 species worldwide, the Orchidaceae is one of the largest families of flowering plants. Many hybrids and cultivars have distinctive and showy flowers and constitute a major part of the horticultural and cut-flower trade. Indigenous species are also greatly regarded by enthusiasts and some have high conservation values. Most countries, including New Zealand, have devoted orchid groups and societies.

For these reasons, the new field guide *Wild orchids of the lower North Island* is sure to attract interest. This book is published by the Department of Conservation (DOC), and three of the authors are well-known DOC staff: Peter de Lange is a leading plant conservation scientist based in Auckland, and the other two are based in Wellington; Jeremy Rolfe is a botanist and photographer, and John Sawyer is a plant ecologist and a founder of the New Zealand Plant Conservation Network (NZPCN). The remaining author, Ian St George, is also Wellington based and editor of the New Zealand Native Orchid Group (NZNOG) journal.

When glancing through this beautifully presented new book for the first time, my immediate question was why wasn't it written as a guide to all of New Zealand's indigenous orchids? In its current form, the nearly 200 pages of text are equally applicable to the remainder of the country and already cover 72 taxa – representing the majority of species.

One reason may be that the guide was published and largely funded by the Wellington DOC Conservancy. In the Foreword, it is claimed that the "lower North Island is a centre of orchid diversity", but this sounds more like a justification than a reality. The political boundaries simply do not reflect the majority of the orchid species' natural distributions. However, this is not an unusual circumstance as evidenced for example by Hugh Wilson's classic *Wild plants of Mount Cook National Park*. In Wilson's (1996) field guide, the author comments in his Introduction that many of the species in his guide are found beyond the study area and for some other regions the book remains useful. This equally applies to his *Field guide: Stewart Island plants* (Wilson, 1994) and to *Wild orchids of the lower North Island*, both of which have much wider geographic applicability than their titles suggest.

Another reason for this regional focus may be that there is already the *Field guide to the New Zealand orchids*, first published in 1996 and now in its fourth edition (St George et al., 2006). This book is also co-authored by Ian St George, and he has published a third relevant title, *The nature guide to New Zealand native orchids* (St George, 1999). All three orchid books are of similar physical dimensions, and, in my opinion, are complementary resources that each deserve a place on your bookshelf and in your tramping pack.

I should also make mention of two comprehensive online resources on New Zealand native orchids, the NZNOG website (www.nativeorchids.co.nz) and the NZPCN website (www.nzpcn.org.nz); the latter shares many of the images and similar text with the book *Wild orchids of the lower North Island*.

It is obvious that a lot of careful thought has gone into the production of *Wild orchids of the lower North Island*. The layout is among the best I have seen for any plant or field guide in New Zealand. The style and use of colour throughout is excellent and provides a clean, modern appearance that is easy to use.

Orchids are undoubtedly photogenic but challenging subjects, and this book contains a wonderful collection of images mainly provided by two of the authors (Ian St George and Jeremy Rolfe) but also other contributors including Michael Pratt and Eric Scanlen. In the main section there are up to four images for each species with emphasis on the diagnostic floral characters.

There have been extensive generic recircumscriptions of the Australasian orchids, most notably by David Jones and Mark Clements of Canberra. Some of these names have not been accepted by everyone, including orchidologists from Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. The authors of *Wild orchids of the lower North Island* have followed many of the new names throughout, and in my opinion this is appropriate as they are using the most up-to-date nomenclature and treatments available (with a preference for Jones and Clements revisions). It remains to be seen whether these new names will stand the test of time. However, I predict that many will endure to become more widely accepted as preferred names, rather than being sunk into synonymy. The authors accept that there may be differences in opinion over the names used (Acknowledgements) and on p. 3 have this to say:

"Orchids, perhaps more than any other group of flowering plants, have become a source of much emotive debate and scientific conflict. In writing this book we were aware of the continuing debate amongst professional and amateur botanists alike over the most appropriate orchid classification, nomenclature and the exact number of species in this country ..."

Although the authors do not present a full synonymy, they do provide in their table 1 (pp. 14–18) a useful concordance of names followed in their field guide compared with

those used in the New Zealand Orchidaceae section of an earlier Flora treatment (Moore, 1970).

To assist in the field identification of orchids the authors have provided some innovative 'orchid finders' (pp. 24–39). These divide the species up into several groups (orchid types, altitude and habitat, flower colour, and flowering time) arranged into a series of illustrated and coloured lists, along with the relevant page number to the main profile of each species. These shortlists provide a quick and simple way of identifying orchids that avoids constructing a traditional dichotomous key that would be loaded with specialist orchid terminology.

In the main section (pp. 40–183), two pages are devoted to each species and contain the following information: botanical name, common name, New Zealand distribution (with a distribution map confined to the lower North Island), description (based mainly on Moore's (1970) treatment), recognition, habitat, flowering and fruiting months, and when appropriate, conservation status and additional notes. Caption and photo credits accompany each image.

The profiles of each orchid are arranged alphabetically by genus and species. Species are not arranged following a classification system (formal or informal, due to the debate outlined in the aforementioned quote), so closely related and morphologically similar genera are not grouped together. This means, for example, that the relatively recently segregated genera in the *Corybas* alliance (the so-called helmet and spider orchids *Anzybas*, *Corybas*, *Molloybas*, *Nematoceras*, and *Singularibas*) and genera segregated from *Pterostylis* (the greenhoods, including *Diplodium*, *Linguella*, and *Plumatichilos*) are dispersed throughout the main section. However, I think the authors have made the correct decision to follow a simple alphabetic order rather than adopting a more complex system. Morphologically similar species, including those from different genera, are named under the 'Recognition' heading of each entry.

The book concludes with a concise reference list, appendices, and a useful glossary of terms.

There are a few idiosyncrasies and typographic errors that could have

been corrected by more rigorous proof-reading. However, their incidence is low and they do not generally detract from the overall high quality of the work. A few are mentioned below.

It is stated in the Foreword that this book "... is part of a series promoting and raising awareness of the indigenous plant life of the [lower North Island] region ...", but no indication is given on what the other members of this series are. The *Wild orchids of the lower North Island* guide book appears to be a stand-alone publication as it has an ISBN number, rather than part of a formal series with an ISSN number.

The first few chapters (pp. 1–19) at times lack coherence and give the impression they were written by different authors or perhaps at different times. They are repetitive in a few places and contradictory in others.

One passage (p. 3) states the number of orchid taxa is conservatively 120 and may be more than 200, whereas elsewhere (p. 13) the figure is given as c. 106 taxa. It would have been useful to have the range of estimates together in one place. From the text and species/taxon estimates, I cannot see how the percentage in the Foreword of "... 72% of New Zealand's orchid species recorded from the region" was obtained, and can only assume that it should instead have been a number rather than a percentage, as stated elsewhere (p. 1 and p. 13).

Perhaps it would have been helpful to have an introductory statement in the section on Orchid Conservation (pp. 4–12) mentioning that orchids are CITES species and as such are banned from commercial international trade, before moving on to management objectives.

The use of 'mānuka' for *Kunzea ericoides* and 'kahikātoa' for *Leptospermum scoparium* may be more correct (as is carefully explained in a footnote on p. 5) but are not in common usage and may confuse readers.

Druce (1950), cited on p. 6, is missing from the references. This citation was presumably extracted from Sawyer (2005, p. 7) where it is also missing from the references.

Of the large photographic collection represented, only two suffered from lack of resolution (as evidenced by the pixilation of images on p. 139 and p. 159).

However, these are minor quibbles primarily relating to editing – I found little to fault in the main content.

This field guide is very reasonably priced and contains a wealth of invaluable information and excellent photographs. I thoroughly recommend it to anyone who wishes to identify species or gain an appreciation of native orchids, not only in the lower North Island, but for New Zealand as a whole.

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