

REVIEW

H. P. LINDER & H. KURZWEIL: *Orchids of Southern Africa*. A. A. Balkema, Rotterdam, 1999. xii + 492 pp., 500 colour plates, 82 b/w line drawings, 458 maps. ISBN 90-5410-445-7 (hard cover). Price: EUR 90.

This fine book consists of two parts: a general account (pp. 1–64) and a taxonomic account (pp. 65–451). The taxonomic account consists of detailed descriptions of all 466 species in 52 orchid genera that are known to occur in Southern Africa, i.e. the area covering the territories of South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Botswana. A surprisingly high percentage of the species is illustrated with colour photographs of excellent quality. Distribution maps are provided for almost all taxa, while for each taxon a number of selected vouchers are given. This part of the book leaves little to be desired: keys to the species, references, synonymy, illustrations, cladograms, almost all one could wish to find in such a book is there, and this solid comprehensiveness makes *Orchids of Southern Africa* by far the best source ever produced on orchids from this region.

Unlike European botanists working on tropical orchids, the authors of this book live in the area where their subjects occur, which is obviously a great advantage. It is for this reason that I feel justified in slightly qualifying my otherwise uniform praise. I am a little disappointed to find the notes on the ecology of the species in many cases quite superficial. The photographs often show the species growing in their habitats, and it is readily apparent that they usually occupy highly specific niches. Yet, not infrequently all that we learn of the ecology of a particular species is that it grows in damp grassland. Surely much more is known to the authors and their collaborators than what we find here.

The general account consists of eight chapters, some of which are further subdivided into a number of essays on particular topics. The chapter called *Biology* for example consists of paragraphs on habitat types, orchid structure, and ecology. Information on habitats can, however, also be found in the chapter called *Vegetation* and in the paragraph with the cumbersome title *Different life strategies and habits*, which is part of the chapter called *The Orchid Flora*. In other words, the organisation of the topics in this general part is somewhat incoherent. Besides, some topics are treated in a rather uninspired way. For example, the chapter on classification starts with the sentence: "For practical reasons orchid species are combined into groups called genera, different genera are further grouped into larger units called subtribes, and these further into tribes and subfamilies." To my mind it conveys a wrong idea to the public to suggest that 'practical reasons' (whatever that means) are the driving force of taxonomy. On the whole, however, this general account is a rich source of information that is not easily accessible elsewhere, if at all.

This well-produced book ends with a glossary, an extensive list of references, and two indices. *Orchids of Southern Africa* is not only warmly recommended to anyone fascinated by orchids, but it is simply indispensable to those interested in the orchids of Southern Africa.

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