

RARE ORCHID REARS HEAD ONE YEAR AFTER BLAZE



An internationally-renowned plant conservation biologist has described the discovery of a rare orchid species near Albany, Western Australia, this week as an exciting "needle in a haystack" find.

Professor Stephen Hopper, a Winthrop professor of biodiversity at UWA Albany, discovered and named *Caladenia granitora*, or Granite spider orchid, in the 1980s.

It is listed as rare flora by the Department of Parks and Wildlife.

Until now, the spectacular species has only been recorded at two locations in the world, Professor Hopper said.

This week, Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve, 35km east of Albany, joined Cheyne Beach, 68km east, and Manypeaks, 38km north-east, on the list.

"I just felt really delighted that it turned out to be in a new place," Professor Hopper told ABC's Andrew Collins.

"[They are] the largest plant family in the world but some of these things are so hard to find, you are lucky to see them in a lifetime.

"I would equate this orchid as pretty close to one of those."

The new granite spider orchid sighting was made almost a year after a bushfire ripped through Two Peoples Bay Nature Reserve in November last year.

After the blaze, Professor Hopper and a student found a few granite spider orchid leaves on Mt Gardner.

"It wasn't flowering last year so we waited a year and we went out this week," he said.

'Low and behold, it was this very rare species that was previously only known from two other places.

"I felt a little bit like a father because I was the first Western ... scientist to see this thing in the 80s and subsequently gave it a scientific name.

"Lots of people have been looking for this one for a long time. Professor Hopper said the fire, which was sparked by lightning strike, may hold a clue to the orchid's surprise appearance.

"It does flower without fire but the fire provides extra nutrient smoke for germination for a lot of native plants," he said.

"It's worth having a look after very rare fire events like this, because you're going to be surprised almost certainly.

"It's given us a few clues about where to look so we can explore other places."

An orchid hunt is planned for Torndirrup National Park, 10km south of Albany, which was scorched by bushfire about the same time as Two Peoples Bay.

Professor Hopper said as well as extending the orchid's range, the rare flora find could help safeguard the species against extinction.

"It's in a nature reserve so it's secure and one extra bit of insurance against extinction," he said.



*The rare granite spider orchid was found in a third location.
(Photo by Professor Stephen Hopper)*