

Long Wait for Winter Orchids

August 2005

The long dry lead up to winter has slowed the appearance of winter-flowering orchids. Indeed, the autumn-flowering species barely raised their heads and were very thin on the ground. It was a pleasant surprise, therefore, during a recent walk to come across a natural miniature garden of Trim Greenhoods. They were growing in a moss filled depression of a large boulder. About 60 plants at various stages of development were growing in an area of no more than half a square metre. A further search soon found many more but none as spectacular as the first sighting.

Trim Greenhoods (*Pterostylis coccinna*) are well named, as they present a very neat, elegant appearance. A look under the hood of the Trim reveals a low V-neckline through which can clearly be seen a brown, notched tongue.

Dwarf Greenhoods (*Pterostylis nana*) are often confused with Trim Greenhoods. Both plants produce an upright green and white-streaked flower on stalks about 15 cm tall. The Dwarf has a more discreet, higher neckline than the Trim and only with difficulty can the green, round-tipped tongue be seen.

Trims generally flower a little earlier than the Dwarfs, which started to flower in the southern Grampians in the second week in August.

In common with most other greenhood orchids both of these flowers are pollinated by small insects such as mosquitos and gnats. An insect is attracted into the base of the flower where it triggers the sensitive tongue (labellum), and finds itself trapped. The only escape route is past the stigma and anther where it may deposit and pick up pollen as it struggles through the narrow passage. It ultimately escapes and flies off, perhaps to visit another flower. After the insect departs the labellum resets in readiness for the next visitor.

It should be remembered that native orchids are to be observed, admired and, if you like, photographed. They must not be picked or removed.

Photos

Trim Greenhood (*Pterostylis coccinna*) – showing its V-neckline and notched tongue.

Dwarf Greenhood (*Pterostylis nana*) – showing the enclosed flower

