

“World’s Ugliest Orchid” an OCA tour highlight!

The 2019 Orchids in the Wild® trip to Madagascar unearths the homely little flower, which has now been described and become a top story and the darling of the botanical world.

By Rick Burian, OCA member

Perhaps appropriately for this strange year, the Royal Botanical Garden, Kew (RBG Kew) released a list of 156 new species this week, including what they call the "ugliest orchid in the world," named by Kew as one of the "[Top 10 species new to science in 2020](#)." The story was picked up by news agencies across the globe, and the main photo in these articles was taken by OCA member Rick Burian, whose image was part of the scientific description. The discovery and narrative will hopefully highlight the need for protection of orchids and orchid habitat, which is the heart and soul of the Orchid Conservation Alliance. How amazing that the OCA was at the center of the tale!

The Orchids in the Wild® tour in September of 2019 was led by Kew honorary research associate Johan Hermans, his wife Clare, chair of the RHS Orchid Committee, and OCA director Mary Gerritsen. Johan and Clare are among the foremost authorities on the orchids of Madagascar and were the perfect guides for this amazing adventure.

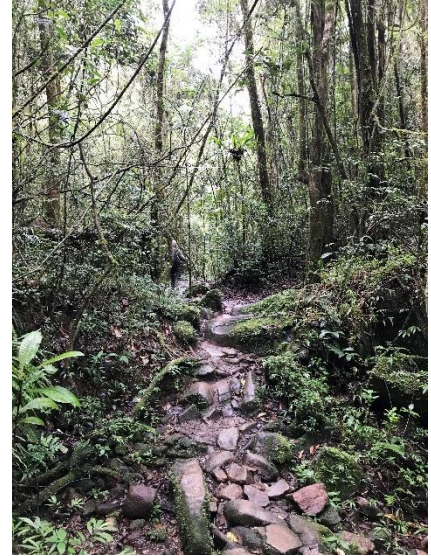


The recently named orchid, *Gastrodia agnicellus*, was described last month in Curtis’s Botanical Magazine, a publication of the RBG. Its story goes back almost 100 years, with some partial and incorrectly identified specimens, but there was little additional information until 2017, when a plant with only dried fruiting bodies was found in SE Madagascar.

In 2019 the OCA group revisited this area and was able to find a specimen in flower, which allowed further study and ultimately the description of the new species. The plant spends all of its life buried in leaf litter in rainforests that get about 80" of precipitation annually. It is suspected to be pollinated by flies, though it has a pleasant citrus-like fragrance, unexpected for a carrion type flower. It took some persistent searching to find the plants, which seem to prefer growing along the roots of a specific tree species. The 11 mm (0.4 inch) flowers are brown and fleshy, so they are difficult to locate in leaf litter with a similar appearance.



Researcher and guide Johan Hermans getting down and dirty with the new discovery



Views of the rainforest where *Gastrodia agnicellus* grows

Though beauty is in the eye of the beholder, this little member of the potato orchid genus has raised a few eyebrows, as it doesn't fit the public's idea of a typical pretty and alluring orchid. This area of Madagascar is rich in orchids, and our group also observed many wonderful and more typically attractive species. Here are a few of the delights encountered in the same forest. We visited several other habitats to find an even wider variety of orchid species.



Cynorkis lowiana



Oeonia rosea



Cynorkis nutans



Cynorkis ridleyi



Angraecum dryadum



Aerangis fastuosa



Bulbophyllum sambiranense



Cheirostylis nuda



Goodyera afzelii



Bulbophyllum francoisii



Benthamia elata

All photos by Rick Burian

