

Natural History Snippets

Brief reports by members based on their observations of nature

Members are invited to submit their photographs and stories to muhudubella@gmail.com for publication



The Star Orchid

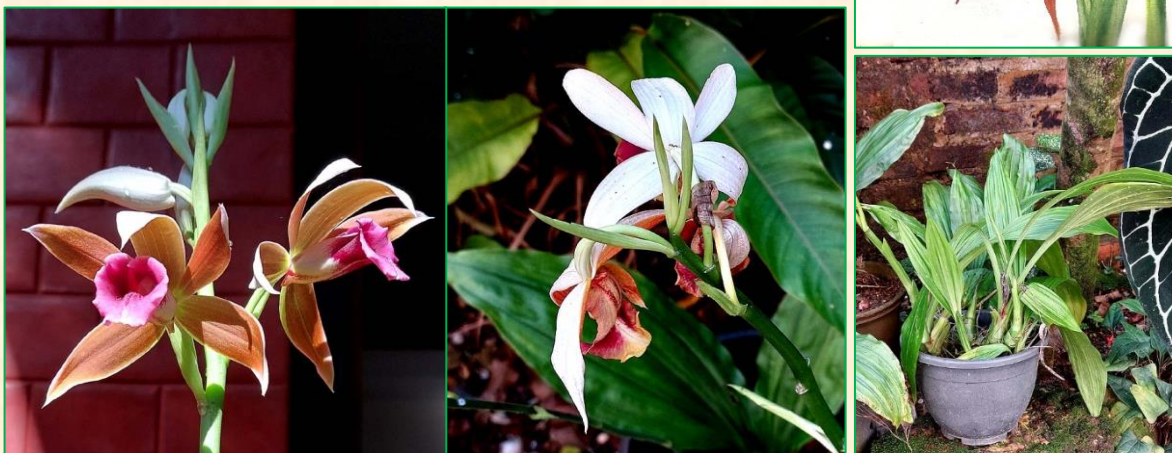
Phaius wallichii

One of Sri Lanka's more spectacular ground orchids was photographed by Chris Corea on 9th July 2022 on the *Kotaganga hike* in the Knuckles. The details of the flower and the plant are clearer in the nineteen-seventies watercolour by Dorothy Fernando, a former President of the SLNHS (below).



This observation by the hikers is noteworthy. This orchid was fairly common on the upcountry hills many years ago, but due to over collection has become uncommon. It was known as *Phaius bicolor* at first, then changed to *Phaius tancarvilleae*, and now accepted as *Phaius wallichii*—the only representative of the genus in Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, many wild-collected plants would have been bought by visitors to Nuwara Eliya as they were hawked on the roadside along the Ramboda Pass by little boys, only to die a lingering death in the lowlands due to heat stress. This is a plant of cooler climates.

The cultivated plant seen in Colombo collections that looks similar is an imported species—*Phaius tankervilleae*, or the Nun's Hood Orchid. It differs from *wallichii* in that the flowers droop and have clear white colour on the backs of the floral segments.



Phaius tankervilleae: flowers, front and behind, and the cultivated plant.
Photography Malik Fernando