

The Palmetto

**A Bog by
the Highway**

**Unique Flora
Faces an
Uncertain Future**
Pages 2 and 6



**American Black
Nightshade**

**The Wildflower
Garden Series**
by Rufino Osorio
Page 9



by Chuck McCartney, Broward Chapter

WILD LOVE AFFAIR:

ESSENCE OF FLORIDA'S NATIVE ORCHIDS

When a person makes a life-altering discovery, it is human nature to want to share that experience with others. For author and photographer Connie Bransilver, that discovery was the swamps of Southwest Florida, especially the deep, alluring cypress and pond apple forests of the fabled Fakahatchee Strand, home of the legendary Ghost Orchid featured so prominently in Susan Orlean's best-selling book, *The Orchid Thief*.

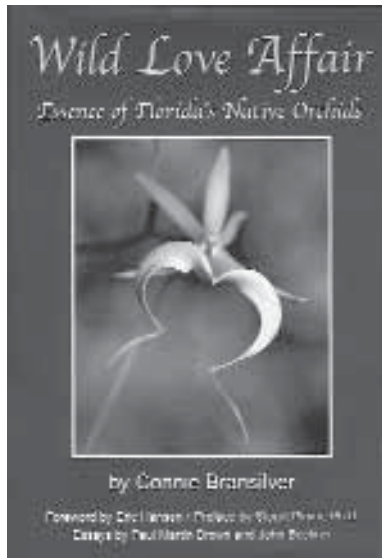
Bransilver's zeal for her newfound paradise first manifested itself in the book, *Florida's Unsung Wilderness: The Swamps* (2000, Westcliffe Publishers), which she co-authored with Larry W. Richardson. Now she focuses, in both words and pictures, on one element of those beloved swamps – the orchids that make their home there.

The result is *Wild Love Affair: Essence of Florida's Native Orchids*. The first part of the title captures the romantic ardor with which Bransilver approaches her subject in this coffee table-style book of 128 pages featuring 148 of her photographs of mostly native orchids and their habitats. These photographs are the book's major reason for existence. They are its strength – or its weakness, depending on your point of view.

The book's large 9 x 12 inch format allows the photographs of the flowers to be presented larger than life, and the pictures are printed on high-quality glossy paper, giving them a wonderful richness of tone. And some of the photographs are quite beautiful, from the Ghost Orchid (*Dendrophyllax lindenii*) facing the contents page (a different, less successful shot appears on the cover on the dust jacket) to the portrait of the Clamshell Orchid (*Prosthechea cochleata* var. *triandra*) on page 104 toward the end of the book. And Bransilver's page 102 photograph of the tiny flower of *Prosthechea pygmaea* is an amazing close-up. (A caption on an earlier photo of the same species calls it "the smallest of Florida's orchids," which is not correct. That distinction more properly belongs to *Harrisella porrecta* or the elusive *Lepanthopsis melanantha*.)

Despite the handsome photographic reproduction and the occasional winners among the pictures, many of the photos are presented in a gauzy, super-soft focus that would make a field photographer cringe. Close-up photography of flowers in the wild is always a chancy endeavor, affected by such variables as sunlight and wind – not to mention deep swamp water and alligators. But many field photographers, who generally aim for crisp focus, might be reluctant to show photographs like some of Bransilver's in public.

Orchid enthusiasts accustomed to sharply focused photos showing as much botanical detail as possible will have to look elsewhere. This book is not intended as a field guide. Instead, Bransilver's



impressionistic approach serves Art, sometimes at the expense of showing off the subject of the photo in its best light.

Bransilver explains her approach in a note at the beginning of the text: "In my photographs and in my writing, I try to move beyond the confines of perfect focus and into the realm of the spirit, for in life things are never completely clear. Realists may not like my photos. Dreamers will."

The text of five short chapters also reflects this approach, jumping from fact and description to personal impressions and insights to interviews and anecdotes. Some might call it kaleidoscopic in its method. Others might consider it a shotgun approach.

The book features a forward by Eric Hansen, author of *Orchid Fever*, a preface by ecologist Stuart Pimm, and short essays of varying usefulness from orchid specialists Paul Martin Brown, author of *Wild Orchids of Florida*, and John Beckner of the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida.

The back of the book offers a useful list of South Florida's native and naturalized orchids compiled by Brown and a one-page bibliography. Noticeably missing is an index, which would have made the book more user-friendly.

The book, as passionate and inspiring as it may be, is not without its gaffes. Two of the three photos on pages 44 and 45 appear to be misidentified. A caption talking about epiphytic orchids in Madagascar shows what looks for all the world like a terrestrial *Spathoglottis* species from Southeast Asia. And above the facing caption, which talks about orchids native to the montane forests of Sulawesi in Indonesia, there is a photograph of what appears to be a New World reed-stemmed *Epidendrum* of the *Epidendrum secundum* type.

Rather than preaching to the choir, that is, to those people who already know and understand the beauty and ecological importance of Southwest Florida's swamps and their orchids, Bransilver is trying to reach an entirely different audience, mainly the uninitiated. This book is aimed at them, and with luck, the author's romantic zeal and artistic rather than realistic photographs will imbue them with a better understanding or appreciation of these mysterious, beautiful places.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Chuck McCartney is one of our favorite orchidophiles and a recognized expert on the genus in Florida. A fine photographer, wildflower hunter, eminent qualified guide, and highly entertaining dinner companion.