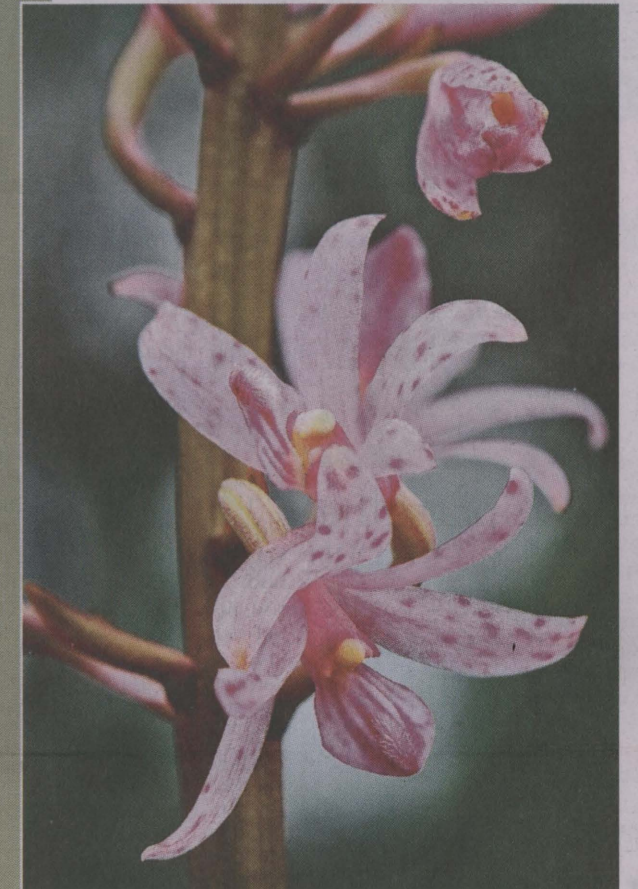


# EXTRA



Clockwise from top left: a tiny carnivorous sundew; a mottled cup moth caterpillar eating bark (the "eyes" and "horns" on top are actually fake and designed to scare off predators); the leafless hyacinth orchid, which grows in dry sand; a spotted pardalote; a New Holland honeyeater.

PICTURES: MICK CONNOLLY



AirLink Web iPad  
Using AirLink, focus your iPhone app on the honeyeater (far left) to see more pictures. See page 2 for AirLink details.



**T**HERE is a secret place in Melbourne that is known around the world. Search the internet for the Grange Reserve in Clayton South and you can find

stories of a UFO and government conspiracy. Two hundred people saw an apparent flying saucer buzz West-all primary and secondary schools. It hovered, hung, circled, posed for photographs and, after 20 minutes, rocketed off a few hundred metres to land in a paddock at the Grange.

Police came and confiscated a camera; nothing to see here. The army cordoned off a neat circle of burnt and flattened ground at the reserve. Teachers warned students to say nothing of what had happened.

This was 1966.

*Westall '66: A Suburban UFO Mystery* is the documentary that exposed the tale on our televisions.

Whether you believe in UFOs or not, incredible events still happen at the Grange. The truth is stranger than science fiction.

A caterpillar entrusts its life to an imaginary friend; a diamond bird flies out of the ground; fungus glows in the dark; a beautiful, fleshy pink orchid grows like a mushroom in hot, dry sand without need of leaves. Shy birds evaporate into undergrowth and a goshawk patrols to keep order.

The Grange Heathland Reserve is 6½ hectares of original bush that has survived the assault of suburban sprawl. It is extraordinary because it was once commonplace. Alien and indigenous.

"She's like a mini Wilsons Prom and we love her," says Tony Collins, parks team leader at the City of Kingston. He keeps a copy of the 1980 Melway in his office. In it the Grange heathland is mapped as a housing estate, complete with roads named and dotted in place.

Locals objected, campaigned, and the bush block was bought by the then Oakleigh council and Tony became the first ranger on site.

He looks at the floor, shakes his head and with obvious emotion says:

# Weird science

At this suburban reserve, where locals swear they saw a UFO land in the 1960s, the strangest encounters are actually with nature, writes **Mick Connolly**.



**Nature's guardian: Thelma Spice, president of Friends of the Grange Heathland Reserve, is a walking encyclopaedia of the reserve's fauna and flora.**

PICTURE: MICK CONNOLLY

"We came that close to losing her." And then jokes that those street names should be given to walking tracks at the Grange.

This is sandbelt country and the Grange perches on the side of an ancient dune. At the highest point to the west, on tens of metres of pure

sand, tree cover is sparse and bracken dominates. Epacris, the heath that is our state floral emblem, and hyacinth orchids grow here.

Low in the swale, the hollow between dunes, is swamp scrub dominated by the paperbarks, *Melaluca ericifolia*. Between the two, up and

down the hill, different plant communities appear and disappear with changes in moisture levels. Egg and bacon-coloured pea flowers, radiant white milkmaids, yellow hibbertia, blue sun orchids. Each stakes a claim. There have been 230 species of plants and 48 species of birds recorded here.

Thelma Spice is president of the Friends of the Grange. She remembers where orchids last bloomed a decade ago, where tubers are lying dormant underground, can name hidden birds by their songs, knows when flowers are due to bud. Stories are passed to novice council rangers.

Thelma came to Clayton as a bride in the 1950s. George was a plumber. They camped in the backyard and built a brick veneer house. Clayton, in Melbourne's south-west, is about as suburban and working class, despite the presence of sprawling Monash University, as it gets.

Thelma leads the way to a particular tree and turns in a track and we share another of the exchanges we have enjoyed over the years.

She pokes her walking stick to indicate a tiny gnat orchid.

"There," she says.

"Where?"

"There."

"Where?"

"There."

"Where?"

And then my eyes adjust and I see a patch of dozens of the orchids near my feet. Sometimes seeing is a matter of time and patience. (Also, in this case the orchid leaves at the base may be bigger than the flowers.)

Another exquisite encounter comes in spring. Wedding bush, *Ricinocarpos pinifolius*, puts on the most spectacular show of wildflowers in the Melbourne region.

Masses of honey-scented, six-pointed, starry white flowers are flung across thickets as tall as a best man.

They jostle for attention. Waltz across the landscape. All around, tea-tree maids wave their own white blossom. Lovely and surprising.

Wedding bush is so named because it was the bouquet of choice in the early days. It would have been simple for a colonial beau to head his horse into the sandbelt heath and pick up armfuls of favour-winning blooms.

The plant is forgotten now because it refuses to be propagated. It didn't transplant when the city bulldozed the bush. Seed pods are most likely to yield well-fed insects, cuttings fail and like many indigenous plants, *Ricinocarpos* is dependent on a sympathetic mycorrhizal fungus.

Wedding bush is flowering now in remnant patches across the sandbelt. A few at George Street in Sandringham, swaths at Braeside Park, in the Frankston area, Cranbourne Botanic Garden heathland and others in surprising small patches.

The Grange heathland is unique. There are bigger and more important reserves. These are little fragmented scraps of our original country. Walk to one today.