

Gang-gang. Male Bathing Beauty Contest "excites interest"

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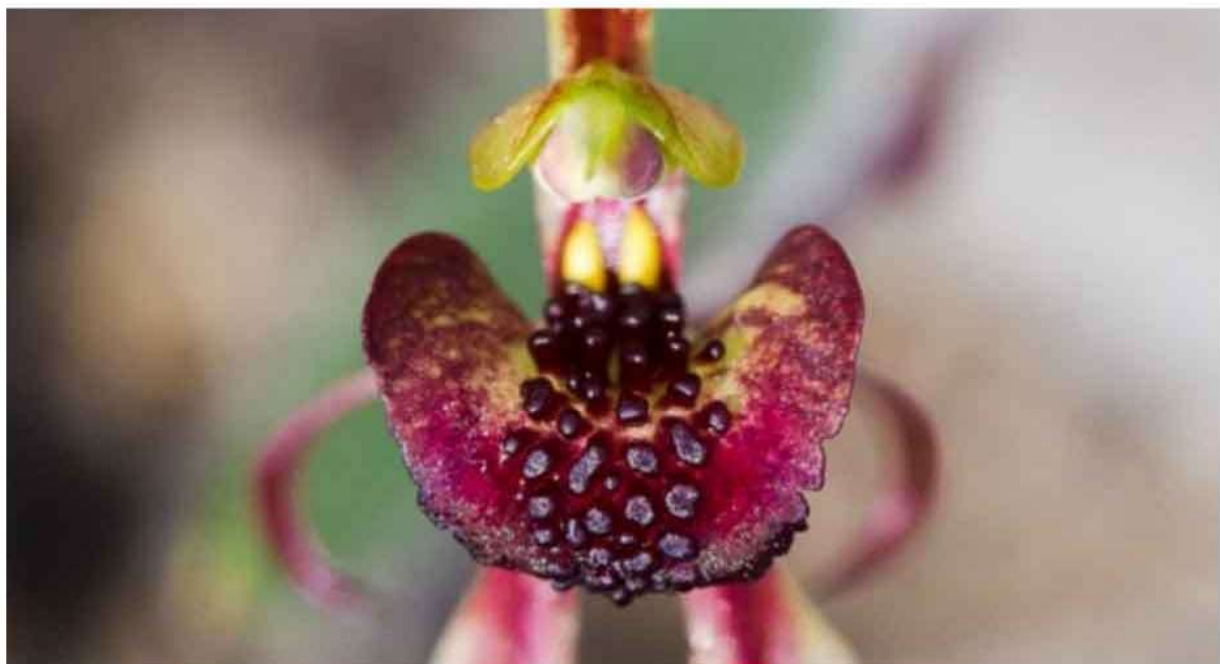
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The Canberra Spider Orchid at Mount Majura. *Photo: Tobias Hayashi*

Readers, you'll need your (virtual) sturdy hiking boots and your knapsacks for today's column as, boycotting the cultivated horror of Floriade, we venture out into the ACT's bushy places. We are going to ogle *native* flowers, and native creatures too.

First, the breeze tousling my flaxen locks, we go out to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve where John Bundock has just seen and photographed characterful Cunningham's skinks (pictured). Their baskings are a proof of the arrival of warmer weather. The chunky species (burly for a skink) *Egernia cunninghami* takes its name from the explorer and botanist Allan Cunningham (1791-1839) who, surely delighted, first saw them in the Blue Mountains.

And while we're at Tidbinbilla ... the event-packed annual Tidbinbilla Extravaganza will soon be upon us* and is promising us lots of "interactive educational experiences". But this year's event is bound to lack two of the extravagant events, two of the interactive educational experiences, that the extravaganza boasted in 1952.





Cunningham's skinks bask at Tidbinbilla heralding the arrival of warmer weather. *Photo: John Bundock*

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there. And a blush comes to your columnist's boyish and politically correct cheek to have to report that the Tidbinbilla Show of 1952 featured (blush) an Ideal Outdoor Girl Quest and (an even deeper blush) a Male Bathing Beauty Contest.

Advertisements in *The Canberra Times* for 1952's looming show made much of these two tournaments, these two crowd-magnets. The *Times* was sure that the Male Bathing Beauty Contest was "the first of its kind to be held in the ACT".

Perhaps, too, it was the *last* of those contests held in the ACT. Unless of course there has been one at *every* Floriade (for it does seem a vulgarly Floriadey sort of thing the Floriade-going classes would love) and we, making a point of boycotting the gaudy horticultural kitsch of Floriade, have been missing it.

In 1952 the Ideal Outdoor Girl was Miss Valerie Adams, of Canberra, one of 21 outdoor girls to compete. Miss Patricia Munns of Queanbeyan and Miss Ettie West of Tharwa, neither of them thought quite so ideal as Miss Adams, were respectively second and third.

The Male Bathing Beauty Contest (it attracted 12 swimsuited Adonises and the *Times* reported it "excited interest" among the 600 attendees at Tidbinbilla) was won by the beauteous Mr Stan Blakemore of Canberra. Mr Bert Corsini, not quite so beautiful, came second. One shudders to think what budgie-smuggling qualities the judges looked for in entrants in this, 1952's rough equivalent of today's inexplicably popular *Bachelorette* TV series. What a shame that male bathing beauty contests have fallen from popularity when, held today, they would give combative Tony Abbott something competitive to do in his now copious spare time.

It is nice to imagine that spectators at 1952's extravaganza included some bewildered Cunningham's skinks, not used to crowds.

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It is a green, heart-warming thing to be reminded that Tidbinbilla is blessed with Cunningham's skinks but the really exciting natural history news of the moment concerns flora. Off we ramble, in our sturdy hiking boots, to under-appreciated Mount Majura. It is a place, as previously reported here, proving to be a hotter and hotter botanical hotspot than we had imagined.

Aaron Clausen, inventor of the Canberra Nature Map, contacts us with excitement to report that "Local nature lover and Environmental Science student Matthew Mullaney has just made a brilliant discovery."

"He's found a colony of approximately 100 *Corysanthes incurva* (the Slaty Helmet Orchid) on Mount Majura." This species is extremely rare in the entire ACT and was previously only known to exist at Black Mountain and out in the middle of Namadgi close to NSW! It is amazing news for the mountain and for ACT nature lovers."

Meanwhile, Clausen testifies, although the Slaty Helmet Orchid (indescribable, its flowers seem to wear a helmet made of slate) has just finished flowering, Mount Majura is presently festooned with subtle swathes of the Canberra Spider Orchid (pictured).

"It's an amazing time. Mount Majura now has close to 30 orchid species and is becoming an ACT orchid hotspot," Clausen rejoices.

Mount Ainslie, too, is as we write blessed with Spider Orchids in full flower.

Tobias Hayashi's dramatic photograph of the Spider Orchid makes it look, enlarged, as big and gaudy as one of Floriade's most Technicolour tulips. In fact, though, they are tiny, and exquisite and blend with the woodland floor and need searching for. If Floriade's flowers holler and shrill at us (and they do) then the ACT's native orchids only do a little whispering.

Kindred spirits, Clausen and this columnist nattered together about how for some of us the planned, contrived displays of Floriade cannot compare with the natural eventfulness of what goes on in our bushland ("So many surprises" Clausen enthuses) at the very time that the sheep-like masses are flocking to Floriade.

Where will Floriade go? This is its last occupation of Commonwealth Park. The Park's bunyips, dancing for joy (albeit at night when no one can see them) confide to me that they cannot wait to be free of its tyranny. This columnist, having recently seen downtown, Springtime Oslo decorated with umpteen big beds of flowers in many public places, including around great and important buildings, thinks this is the sophisticated and citizen-uplifting way to go.

*This year's Tidbinbilla Extravaganza (perhaps temporarily unnerving the skinks and platypuses) will be held on Sunday 11 October 2015, from 10 am to 4 pm. Tidbinbilla Area Manager, Kieran Lawton promises it "will be packed with fun things to see and do".