

Plectrelminthus caudatus (Lindley) Summerhayes The long-sepaled *Plectrelminthus*

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Plectrelminthus caudatus was described by John Lindley as *Angraecum caudatum* in 1836.

Miss Drake's beautiful illustration of the species that accompanied the description appeared in *Edwards's Botanical Register* 22 of 1836 as plate 1844. It shows the very long spur that is a distinctive feature of this orchid, but most importantly it shows the large column with prominent anther cap and correct rostellum. These features indicate that the species indeed belongs to the subtribe Aerangidinae and not to the genus *Angraecum* at all.

Victor S. Summerhayes rectified this problem when he published *Plectrelminthus caudatus* in 1949 by combining the specific epithet given by Lindley and the generic name given by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, who had described this species in 1838 as *Plectrelminthus bicolor* (the specific epithet used by Rafinesque could not be retained because Lindley had already described the species two years earlier). The generic name is derived from *plektron* and *helminthion*, the Greek words for spur and worm, referring to the long, thick and curved spur of the flower.

Two varieties of *Plectrelminthus caudatus* are recognised by Stewart, J. *et al.* in *Angraecoid Orchids, Species from the African Region*, namely variety *caudatus* which is widespread in West Africa and variety *trilobatus* from Cameroon and



Plectrelminthus caudatus.

Photographer: N. Cilliers



Central African Republic. The variety *trilobatus* apparently differs from the type in having two extra lobes on the lip, on either side of the apex below the acumen.

Plectrelminthus caudatus is an epiphyte on large trunks and thick branches in very bright light, but is also found

growing on rocks. It only occurs in areas of heavy rainfall alternating with a definite dry period, and flowers in late autumn to early spring.

Plantae Orchids acquired several seedlings from Europe in 2008. These were planted in small pots using medium size coconut chips and stones. They

grew very rapidly and were transferred to hanging baskets six months ago, using only coconut chips as a medium. Although this species has the reputation of being difficult to flower, a few plants started to produce inflorescences in March 2010. The inflorescence grew very slowly, and when they appeared, they looked very desiccated. Only about 3 weeks before flowering do they increase in size and look more like flower buds. The inflorescence has a characteristic zigzag growth habit. One of these plants was judged in July 2010 and received a HCC/SAOC. Having seen the overall quality of the first few plants flowering, we are very positive that a few more awards might be granted to this group of plants.

The plants send out very thick roots and it is best not to disturb these when repotting. It is essential to grow the plants in warm humid conditions with very good air movement and bright light. Brown spots, indicating a fungal infection, will appear on the leaves when plants are subjected to temperatures below 15°C for extended periods.

This species is still rare in cultivation but is surely one of the most spectacular African orchids, and more hobbyists must strive to grow it as outside pressure on its natural habitat is becoming a bigger threat by the day. *

Bibliography:

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