

Soldier's Orchid *Zeuxine strateumatica* marches on

by Simon Aspinall



Figure 1: Soldier's orchid *Zeuxine strateumatica*.
Picture: Dave Clark



Figure 2: Close-up of the flower.
Picture: John Stewart

A group of birdwatchers looking for migrant birds at the newly-laid golf course at Al Maqam, near Al Ain, suspended their search, temporarily, when an orchid was found on one of the fairways in February 2006. The UAE only has one native species of orchid, the helleborine *Epipactis veratrifolia*, and this was not it. A leisurely stroll around the course soon found there to be many hundreds, if not thousands, of specimens present. The newcomer has since been confidently identified as the Soldier's Orchid *Zeuxine strateumatica* (Linnaeus) Schlechter, a species which originates from Asia and which, over the past seventy years, has managed to colonise various far-flung corners of the globe. Botanists in the UAE are used to finding accidentally introduced species, so-called 'aliens'. This one appears likely to have come in with imported grass seed.

This small orchid is now described as being widespread in the Old World, although, in Arabia, it has, hitherto, apparently only been recorded in Saudi Arabia (Thomas 1998). It occurs in open (mainly tropical) grassland and lawns, often in some numbers. With an inflorescence shaped like a pixie's cap, densely flowered, and most often less than 5cm high, it is not the most conspicuous of orchids, but it does possess a beautifully fragrant scent. The flowers are tiny (c3mm), white with a green lip, somewhat like the snowdrop *Galanthus nivalis* or ladies tresses *Goodyera/Spiranthes* spp. in appearance. The flower spike is rather concealed by the long, pointed, erect leaves.

The soldier's orchid *Zeuxine strateumatica* (Linnaeus) Schlechter, is native to Asia, from China to the tip of India including south-east Asia and adjacent islands. Linnaeus originally named the plant *Orchis strateumatica* in 1753, taken from the Greek *strateuma* meaning a band, company, or army. Schlechter moved it to the genus *Zeuxine* in 1911. It goes by other common names, including Indian Orchid and Field Zeuxine, and has also acquired several scientific names as synonyms involving both its genus and specific species names.

Oakes Ames (*Botanical Museum Leaflets*, Harvard University, 1938) reported the appearance of soldier's orchid in 1936 in Indian River County, Florida, USA. The tiny orchid is believed to have been imported with seeds of "centipede

grass". Since that time, soldier's orchid has spread across Florida to Georgia, Texas, and Louisiana. In the U.S., soldier's orchid has been described as "a 'here-now, gone-tomorrow' orchid - emerging in winter and blooming in late December and January. The following year, they may return; then again, they may not". The species has also now been found in Mexico.

For those interested, some useful weblinks, from which much of the above is culled, are:

<http://www.killerplants.com/plant-of-the-week/20030310.asp>
<http://www.orchidspecies.com/zuexstrateumatica.htm>
http://www.hear.org/starr/hiplants/images/hires/html/starr_020102_9001_zeuxine_strateumatica.htm

Reference

Thomas, S. 1998. "The advance of *Zeuxine strateumatica*, a new record for Saudi Arabia." **Orchid Rev**, **106**. (1221): 153-154 (1998).

Acknowledgement

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