Getting to know our local Eucalypts ... Gail Slykhuis



Flowers with both stamens and staminodes and deciduous operculum, Red Ironbark



Club shaped buds with short points on operculum, glaucous branchlets and lengthwise veins on leaves, Snow Gum

Our flora-rich region has14 species of eucalypts, including several subspecies of Blue Gum. What is not so well understood is the structure of the eucalyptus flower and the deciduous nature of certain floral parts. Identification of the species relies on access to flower buds and fruits. Growth habit, bark characteristics, leaf shape and the arrangement of veins, are very useful but not as essential to identification as are the reproductive parts.

You could not have missed the flowers of Red Ironbark, *Eucalyptus tricarpa*, this season. As Ellinor has mentioned in her Bird Group notes, areas of The Great Otway National Park have been carpeted with these beautiful flowers. If you were to examine them with a hand lens you would notice that the dominant feature is not the sepals or petals but what appear to be the male reproductive parts or stamens. Close observation will also reveal that not all of these stamens have anthers, resulting in staminodes, or sterile stamens.

Do eucalyptus flowers have the sepals and petals common to many flowers? Look at the buds that are opening and you will notice a cap or operculum being shed as the stamens and staminodes emerge. These protective caps are formed from sepals and petals fused into one structure or fused into separate structures. Some eucalypt buds have two opercula to shed. All are said to be deciduous as they fall on bud opening. As well as providing amusement for children, opercula can be a useful identification tool, particularly when found at the base of a tall tree.

Did you know that *Angophora* species, often confused with Eucalypts, do not have an operculum? Instead, its flower buds are protected by recognisable sepals and petals.

A little known and relatively rare eucalypt in our area is Snow Gum, *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *pauciflora*. It grows in the Great Otway National Park but can also be found in Snow Gum Nature Reserve, on the corner of Gundrys and Vickerys

Rd, Bellbrae.

Its identifying characteristics are as follows:

- Growth habit spreading small tree to 20m, branchlets may be glaucous (coated with a bluish bloom)
- Bark smooth and white with grey patches
- Adult leaves generally to 16cm in length, lanceolate in shape, thick and leathery with conspicuous veins running lengthwise
- Flower buds club-shaped in clusters of 7–12, operculum with a short point
- Flowering time spring to summer (may flower out of season)
- Fruit/Capsules cup-shaped with short stems, 8-11 mm in diameter. 3 or 4 valves at the rim of the fruit (seed is released through the valves).



Cup shaped fruits with 4 valves, Snow Gum

References:

Leon Costermans, 2002. *Native Trees and Shrubs of South-East Australia*, Reed New Holland, Frenchs Forest, NSW

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