

Orchid Garden of England
18th & 19th May 2019
Led by Jon Dunn



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The Orchid Garden of Kent

18th & 19th May 2019

Greenwings day tours, led by Jon Dunn

[Author's note – as both days happily went according to plan, and ran smoothly with the same orchids seen by all participants, for the purposes of our trip report I will cover the weekend as a whole in the following account]

After an early start to the flowering season that saw reports of Early Purple Orchid *Orchis mascula*, Green-winged Orchids *Anacamptis morio* and Early Spider Orchids *Ophrys sphegodes* appearing in the news earlier than is perhaps usual, the weeks that preceded our mid-May weekend Orchid Garden of Kent day trips had significantly slowed down the flowering season in Kent. Several weeks of cold easterly winds and little rainfall had helped, if help is the right word, to delay the flowering of some orchid species, and prolong that of others.

It was, then, with some trepidation that our guide Jon Dunn, author of the critically acclaimed botanical best-seller *Orchid Summer*, arrived in Kent for the reconnaissance for the big days of the Greenwings Orchid Garden of Kent days that were to follow. In the event, he need not have worried!

Our rendezvous point was outside the church in the picturesque east Kent village of Wye, set at the foot of the chalk downs that bisect Kent and provide pockets of ideal conditions in which some of Britain and Ireland's rarest and most beautiful orchids can flourish.

By 9am we had made our introductions, and were already under way on the short drive from the bustling village to arguably the finest site at which one can see Lady Orchids *Orchis purpurea* anywhere in the UK – a woodland, managed by the Woodland Trust, that contains a gem hidden deep within it – an area renowned amongst orchid-hunters for its remarkable colony of Lady Orchids, a species that is almost entirely restricted to Kent in a British context.

On the near continent it may be found, in places, growing with vigorous abandon in swathes on roadside verges but here, in England, it is on the edge of its European range and is altogether rarer. Our roadside verges are a shade of what they once were where biodiversity is concerned and, while the odd Lady Orchid may still be found, unexpectedly, growing at the side of a lane deep in the Kentish countryside, it is rare colonies such as that we were visiting this morning that hold the bulk of the British population,

We walked along a pleasant undulating track flanked by tall stands of beech trees into the



heart of Denge Woods, chattering amongst ourselves, renewing old acquaintances and forging new friendships as we went. Distractions en route included numerous Glow-worm larvae wandering across the paths, seething wood ant nests at the trackside, a constant soundtrack of Chiffchaffs singing, and the sporadic distant drumming of Great Spotted Woodpeckers.

We soon arrived at the edge of the area we sought – a sloping shallow hillside studded with small trees and shrubs that forms a large

general clearing in the midst of the surrounding dense woodland. One or two Lady Orchids outside the clearing hinted at what lay within, but could ill-prepare our guests for the treat in store – many hundreds of Lady Orchids grew in tremendous profusion throughout the site.

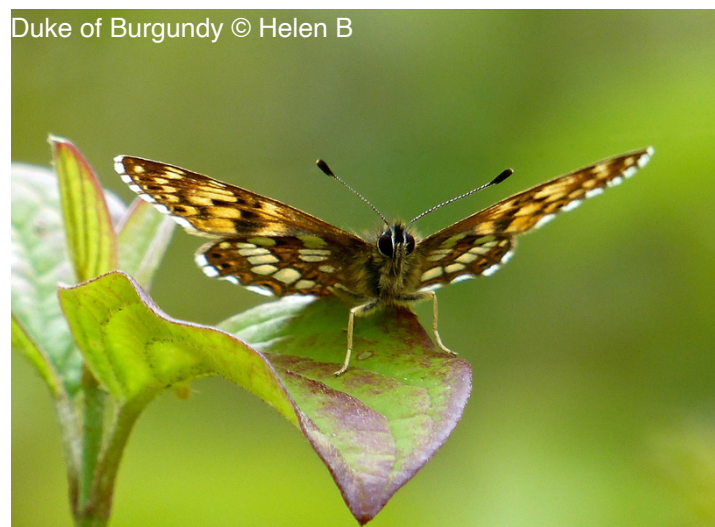
We spent a leisurely hour and a half wandering amongst them, marvelling at their varied colours – while many sported the usual white and burgundy flowers, others had blooms the colour of pink lemonade; some were such a deep purple they appeared almost black from afar; and amongst all this variety we even found one of the rare, wraithlike, pure white examples. This was an intoxicating start to our day of orchid-hunting.

Better yet, the ladies of Kent were not alone – they shared their secluded clearing with countless Common Twayblades *Neottia ovata*, a subtle green orchid that rewarded a closer look, for each individual flower resembled a small green angel. Jon explained the unusual, explosive mechanism by which they achieve pollination and then, for good measure, the sexy, duplicitous techniques favoured by our first *Ophrys* orchid of the day, Fly Orchid *Ophrys insectifera* – for we soon found a small swathe of them beside the path, the first of several we were to find at this site during the morning. Each sported individual flowers with a long, brown, furry body replete with reflective bluish wing-patch, glossy black eyes, and thin filiform antennae. As if all this visual deception weren't enough to lure a passing digger wasp to attempt to mate with the flower and, inadvertently, pollinate it, they even emit a scent that mimics the pheromones released by female digger wasps. We might not be able to smell that, but we could certainly admire their insectiferous forms.



Ophrys insectifera © Helen B

Common Spotted *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and Greater Butterfly Orchids *Platanthera chlorantha* were also present scattered around the site, but all were still in bud – though the latter would surely have been open had the weather only been a little warmer in the preceding days. As if this profusion of species weren't enough, we also found several flowering White Helleborines *Cephalanthera damasonium*, and some good patches of Early Purple Orchids still in excellent condition.



Duke of Burgundy © Helen B

This wonderful site is not all about the orchids, for there were other distractions for our attentions while we wandered amongst the flowers – Garden Warblers were singing in the scrubby bushes, and Goldcrests could be heard too, but it was the Duke of Burgundy butterflies that really stole the show – freshly emerged and in excellent condition, we watched them basking in the sun on warm patches of ground and, occasionally, duelling in courtship flights around us. Further butterfly highlights included pristine Green Hairstreaks and Dingy Skippers.

We headed back towards Wye but, before we could enjoy a tasty lunch in one of the village's charming pubs, we had further orchids on our minds. Having seen the Lady Orchids it seemed only fitting that we should see their 'male' counterparts – a small colony of Man Orchids *Orchis anthropophora* nestling at the foot of the Wye Downs. Far less obvious than their statuesque 'female' equivalents with their white Regency dresses and burgundy bonnets, the Man Orchids took a practised eye to spot them in the surrounding sward of grass and fragrant Crosswort – the latter's sweet, honeyed scent reminded Jon of Musk Orchids *Herminium monorchis*...

Most of the Man Orchid flower-spikes were a slender chartreuse spire edged with garnet tracery, each individual flower forming a slim human-like figure with trailing arms and legs, befitting their common English name. We found more extreme examples too – one pure yellow flower-spike, and another almost entirely suffused with deep, ruby red. While Brimstone butterflies zipped by our heads, Jon explained that their name on the continent was altogether darker – in Spain, for example, they are known as “flor del hombre ahorcado”, or the hanging man flower... We also found Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis* and Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera* plants here, both in bud and a few weeks away from flowering.



Orchis anthropophora © Helen B

Lunch was a relaxed affair in the pleasant surroundings of the Tickled Trout pub – over our food we swapped wildlife tales and anticipated what was to follow in the coming afternoon. Our first stop was to a secret site high on the top of the downs. Here we met Alfie Gay, the conservationist to whom many of Britain's extraordinarily rare Late Spider Orchids *Ophrys fuciflora* owe their continuing existence and prospects for the future. Alfie is responsible for managing the sites on which some of the very few Late Spider Orchids found in Britain prosper and, in the absence of the bees that pollinate Late Spider Orchids on the continent, he is also the main pollinator of late spider orchids in Britain!



Ophrys fuciflora © Helen B

We would see the result of his painstaking care and attention in the form of one of the very first late spider orchids to flower in Britain in 2019 – an impossibly exotic flower that looks too extravagant to possibly be a British wildflower. In Britain they're found only in Kent, and only a few hundred plants exist in the county. Theirs is a precarious existence and, shocked to learn that these precious plants are still illegally dug up by shameless plant thieves, we were all grateful for both Alfie's dedication to his beloved orchids and his generous explanation of

their status and conservation in Britain. For good measure, we also spotted a few more Man Orchids hiding in the grass here.

The Late Spiders' counterpart, Early Spider Orchid *Ophrys sphegodes*, is somewhat commoner, though this is relative – they are still a scarce orchid in Britain, found only in a few colonies strung along the south coast between Dorset and Kent. We next made our way to one of the most easterly of its stations on the downs above Dover at Temple Ewell. As the name suggests, they flower before Late Spider Orchids and, had the spring been a little warmer, would probably have finished flowering by the time of our orchid tour in Kent – but Jon's preparatory explorations of the county in the preceding days had paid off for us, as there were still some examples with flowers to be seen here. Much less colourful than the late spider orchids, each flower bears a striking resemblance to an insect, complete with furry brown body and glossy black pseudo-eyes.

Ophrys sphegodes © Helen B



Heading inland, we came to a special reserve hidden deep in the heart of the Kentish countryside, accessed via a maze of narrow, twisting country lanes. Boasting a chain of meadows carpeted with Cowslips, many thousands of Common Twayblades and, amongst them, the orchid that we were all hoping to see - Monkey Orchid *Orchis simia*. This site is one of only three locations in Britain at which this rare orchid may be found. Jon shared the tale of their decline as a British species from the 18th century, their discovery as a precarious inhabitant of east Kent in the early 20th century, and the efforts made to save them thereafter. This was a story of high drama, great threat, good intentions, and a hungry horse...



Anacamptis morio © Helen B

While the afternoon was slipping away from us, Jon had one grand finale up his sleeve – a sloping hillside meadow that he had spotted the previous year and, thinking it “looked promising”, had taken a moment to explore. It had yielded a colony of over 100 Green-winged Orchids! We made a brief stop here on our way back to Wye to add one last, beautiful, orchid to our day's already burgeoning tally.

Time, sadly, then ran out upon us, and by 6pm we had returned to Wye for our guests to begin to make their way home after a most successful day of orchid-hunting in East Kent. We had seen fifteen species of orchid, 10 of which were in bloom, on days of generally fine weather and certainly in great company. We are already looking forward to seeing you in Kent again next year!

Orchids seen (not yet flowering in parantheses)

Monkey Orchid - *Orchis simia*

Lady Orchid - *Orchis purpurea*

Man Orchid - *Orchis anthropophora*

Early Purple Orchid - *Orchis mascula*

(Greater Butterfly Orchid) - *Platanthera chlorantha*

Common Twayblade - *Listera ovata*

White Helleborine - *Cephalanthera damasonium*

(Chalk Fragrant Orchid) - *Gymnadenia conopsea*

(Common Spotted Orchid) - *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*

Early Spider Orchid - *Ophrys sphegodes*

Late Spider Orchid - *Ophrys fuciflora*

Fly Orchid - *Ophrys insectifera*

(Bee Orchid) - *Ophrys apifera*

Green-winged Orchid - *Anacamptis morio*

(Pyramidal Orchid) - *Anacamptis pyramidalis*

Orchis mascula © Helen B



Orchis purpurea © Helen B



© Helen B

Dingy Skipper © Greenwings





Cowslips © Helen B



Orchis simia © Helen B



Orchis anthropophora © Helen B



Orchis purpurea © Helen B



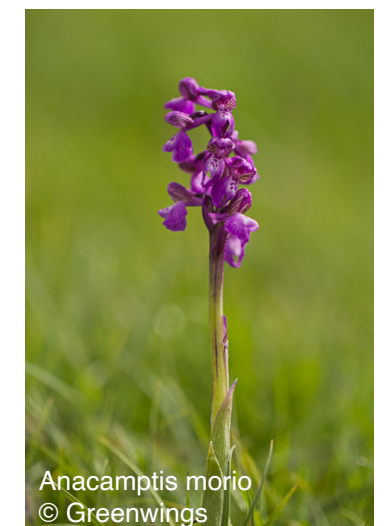
Cephalanthera damasonia
© Helen B



Orchis purpurea © Helen B



Orchis purpurea © Helen B



Anacamptis morio
© Greenwings



Ophrys fuciflora © Greenwings