

The Sibillini: an Italian Treasure House



Paul Harcourt Davies

We first produced a PDF as an introduction to the *Sibillini* back in 2011 and now feel it high time to revise the text, refresh some images and add many more, choosing from the many thousands we have obtained in the interim. One of the great joys for us, living where we do in Umbria, is that we can get to the *Sibillini* in a matter of a few hours, explore new places and enjoy the familiar ones.

The region is as wonderful as ever and although parts were hit hard by earthquakes in 2016 and preceding years, wild nature carries on. The beauty above ground, the displays of flowers, birds, animals...seem disconnected from the rumblings six and more kilometres below ground where the tectonic plates move apart at about 3mm per year. That might seem insignificant but the masses moved are unimaginable.

In places, the earthquake wrought incredible damage to wonderful old churches but the spirit of people locally is indomitable.

Italy is our (*Paul Harcourt Davies & Lois Ferguson*) adopted home and we are happy to share what we discover with others of similar disposition - a love of nature, lovely places, good food, and wine for after all this is *La Bell'Italia*.

The Sibillini and the trips we run there are highlights of each year for us

The *Sibillini* does a definite 'something' for all who go there and those who hold political power need to realise that such areas are a draw for responsible tourism. If places cannot be valued for their intrinsic worth and some fiscal value must be found then responsible tourism can help.

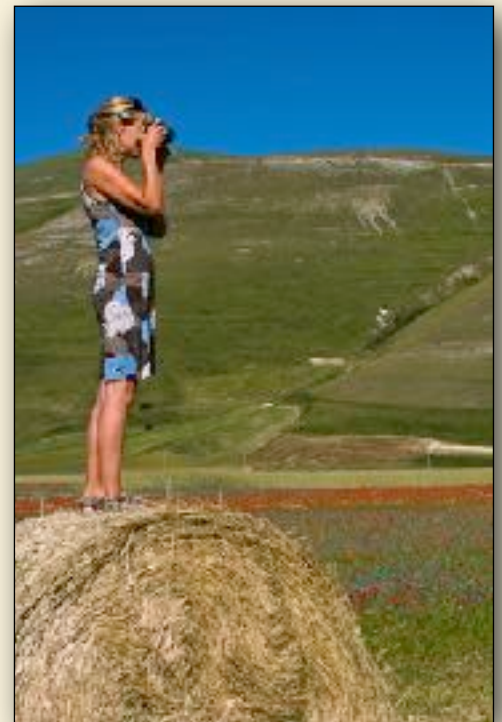
- Details of all our tours are on the sites:
- www.hiddenworlds.co.uk
- www.paulharcourtdavies.com

We are also on facebook, as Hidden Worlds too.

So, enjoy *The Sibillini* at a distance via these pages...better still come and join us on an advertised tour or as private groups/individuals.

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a



b



c



d

a. Lago di Pilate

c. View on the ascent of Vettore from Castelluccio

b. Ridge view towards Mt Vettore

d. Rock faces on Mtt Vettore

Paul Harcourt Davies

The Sibillini – a land where witches & necromancers once ruled...

Many people have never considered, let alone seen, the natural history wealth of Italy for it is the human history that is best known.

Italy holds a high proportion of the art treasures of Christendom, superb examples of historic architecture and walled hill-top towns set in photogenic locations.

Some of our favourite places on the parts of this planet we have explored are to be found in Italy, a factor that has strong links to why we live here now. This long country with a wealth of habitats from Mediterranean coasts to high mountains offers a lot that is easily reachable with an amazing diversity of life-forms. It is sad that there is no culture of deep interest in the environment but, for those that love these things, Italy is a well-kept secret and one in which we feel we have been included. The variety of habitats in this long thin country, from Mediterranean coasts up to hills, meadows, forest and alpine regions is astonishing.

For years we have led visits to Italian places that we know people will appreciate for the sheer variety of what can be included in a week's stay. *The Sibillini* is high on our list. It is not the best known of the mountain areas in the Italian Apennines but that is one of its charms for those of us whose prime objective is to get away from the crowds.

By Alpine standards, these are not 'high' mountains, though by British, measure with 11 summits over 2000m (6.500ft +) and *Mt Vettore* at 2476m (8123ft) they certainly are.

Much of the *Sibillini* area is designated as national park but in Italy, funding is poor and they are maintained thanks to the dedication of comparatively few people. Norcia, the birthplace of St Benedict and his sister Santa Scholastica is a popular pilgrim destination though few explore beyond the town walls and the numerous delicatessens.



a



b



c



d

a. Castelluccio di Norcia in early July
c. Piano Grande - early morning mist - June

b. Castelluccio di Norcia in mid March
d. Piano Grande 'fioritura' - June/July

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We began exploring the *Sibillini* in 1995 and realised, from the first, that the walking they offered was some of the best we had ever experienced. Every year people who travel with us say the same. There is always that feeling of being up on high, walking on springy turf dotted with alpine flowers with incredible open vistas – especially after frequent overnight storms have cleared the air. Walking here is pure escapism with no need for excuses - this is one of those places we need to go back to time and again for the range of wild nature it offers from river valleys to high mountains.

Italian maps are not the finest: there is an excellent series of military maps (IGM) but many have not been updated since the 1960's and they are not easy to follow. However, in the *Sibillini*, as in the Dolomites, the maps are good (*Kompass* 1:30,000 and *Tabacco*

1:25,000) detailed with paths and walking routes marked. Several illustrated guide books are available.

The region was once famed for its witchcraft and necromancy so it is appropriate that the *Kompass* map for the area carries the number 666 – the “Number of the Beast” in the Book of Revelations.

In ancient Greek mythology the *Sibyls* were prophetesses at various oracle sites throughout the classical world. Many of them sat deep in caves near volcanic vents where, it might be imagined, that the cocktail of narcotic gases from the bowels of the earth (rather than divine intervention) could have had a part to play in the visions experienced by these ladies. The name *Sibillini* derives from a tale that the Apennine Sibyl, a later addition to the Sybilline gang, had been banished to a cave there.



a



b



c



d

a. Wild tulips looking towards Castelluccio -May
c. Peonies in May

b. Tulips and narcissus on the Piano Grande - May
d. Trumpet gentians on Mt Vettore - May

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Castelluccio di Norcia - and the Piano Grande

In Mediaeval times, the tiny hamlet of *Castelluccio di Norcia* - a contender for Italy's highest settlement inhabited all the year round - was also famed for necromancy.

After all, when people are cut off for month after bitter month in winter there is not a lot else to do for conversation other than chatting to relatives... whether living or deceased. Isolation might also explain the graffiti in dialect adorning walls that reveals who did what when and with whose sheep and other assorted beasts....

Perhaps we should be a bit more adventurous, but we keep going back to the *Piano Grande*, that remarkable high-level plane, once a glacier lake ringed by high mountains. Although wet areas are left after the snows melt, it is one vast flower meadow, grazed and cut

traditionally for hay. As a result it boasts an incredibly rich flora and fauna. The procession of species begins as the snows melt and acres of crocus appear followed swiftly by a mix of white narcissus and yellow tulips that are almost invisible from above but as you descend to the plane, the angle of the light changes and you see vast spreads of colour. The nature of these changes from week to week until they are cut for hay.

What appeals to us in taking our parties of photographers and naturalists walking in the region is the astonishing diversity of habitats and inhabitants. For example, a warm, humid river valley cut by the fast flowing river *Nera* is the place to find uncommon butterflies such as the Camberwell beauty (*Nymphalis antiopa*) and the nettle tree butterfly (*Celtis libythia*) as well as a wide range of Mediterranean orchids such as violet limodore and red helleborine...).

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The limestone-strewn hillsides at higher levels host numerous, colourful rock plants such as drifts of vetches, white rockroses and blue globularias as well as abundant orchids and insects.

You can then head upwards on good paths for a gain in altitude of a couple of hundred metres to a realm of true alpines with several gentian species, alpine pasque flowers and a local edelweiss. We have seen mountain clouded yellows, various 'browns' and a few fast flying Apollos (*Parnassius apollo*).

Every year we have found something different: for example, in July 2010, visiting and walking with friends at a slightly different time we happened across a colony of clouded Apollos (*Parnassius mnemosyne*) fluttering around as part of the afternoon mating ritual. They were on the wing in a restricted area but in appreciable numbers near the larval food plant *Corydalis bulbosa* that grows in the woodlands of hornbeam that dot the slopes. In these same woods you can find Mezereon (*Daphne*

mezereon) in flower early in the year and with scarlet berries later on.

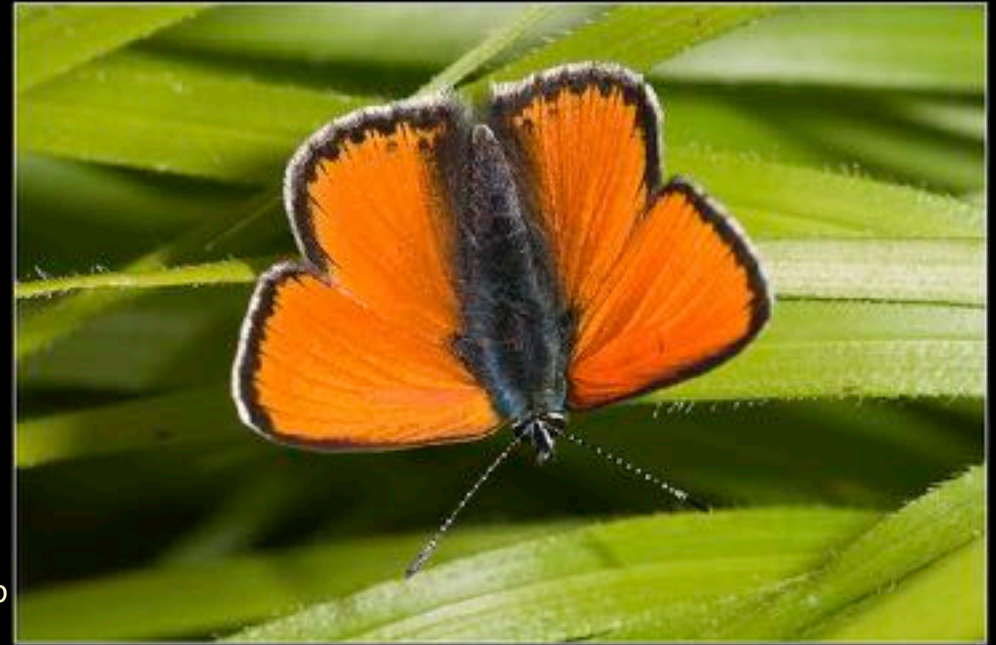
In the optimal season for orchids (monkey, late and early spider, violet limodore and numerous others) there are great drifts of elderflower orchid (*Dactylorhiza sambucina*) in yellow, magenta and intermediate pink forms. Nearby lie rocky screes where it is possible to find true alpines such as trumpet gentians and rock jasmines at a comparatively low altitude.

From late June through July *Castelluccio di Norcia*, becomes a place of pilgrimage at weekends. The village that sits imposingly on its distant knoll at the end of the plain is invaded by people wanting to see the floral display in the fields. Here they grow lentils - famed throughout Italy, on stony ground watered by the snow melt. The fields are transformed into acres of yellow mustard, densely packed scarlet poppies and blue cornflowers to create a patchwork quilt of colour that is barely credible.

Butterflies of the Sibillini 1



a



b



c



d

a. Clouded Apollo (*Parnassius mnemosyne*)

c. Little Blues (*Cupido minimus*)

b. Scarce Copper (*Lycaena virgaurae*)

d. Southern white admiral (*Limenitis reducta*)

Butterflies of the Sibillini 2



a



b



c



d

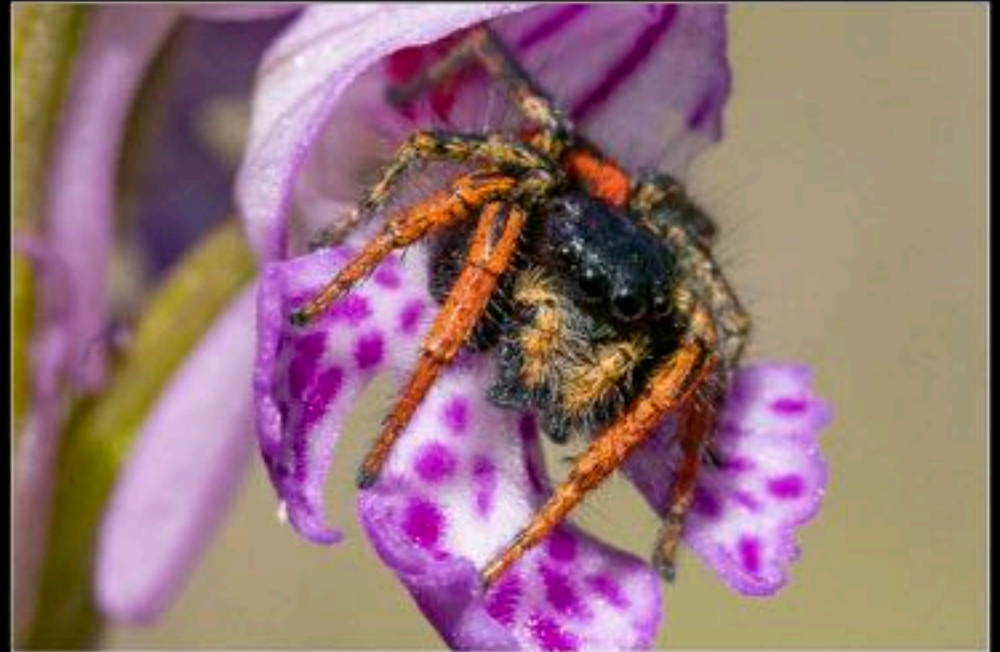
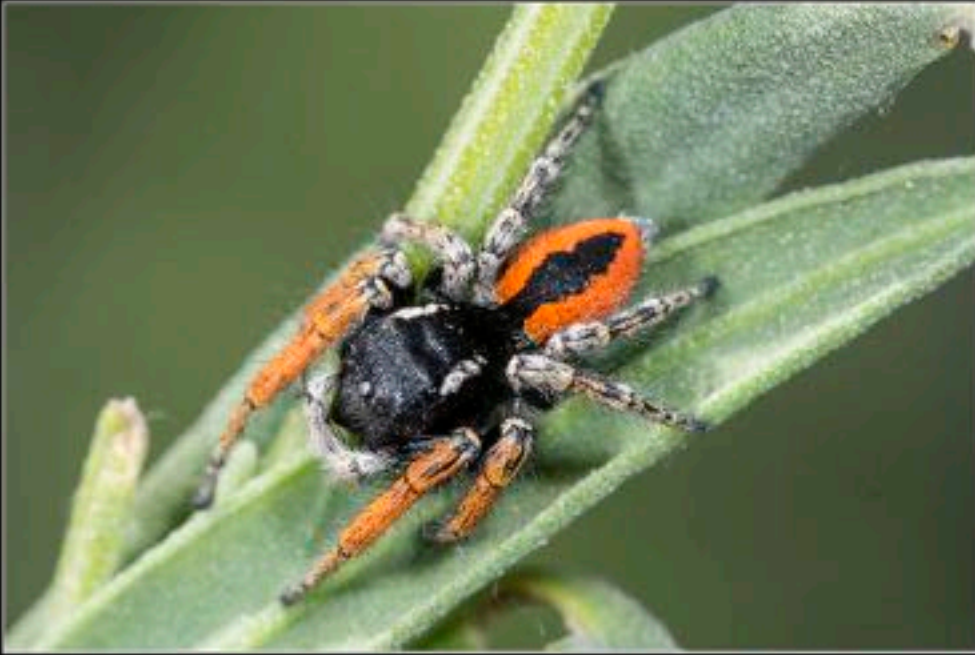
a. Purple-shot copper (*Lycaena alciphron*)

c. Common blues (*Polyommatus icarus*)

b. Scarce coppers butterflies mating (*Lycaena virgaureae*)

d. Silver-washed fritillary (*Argynnis paphia*)

Spiders of the Sibillini



Jumping Spider (*Philaeus chrysops*)
Ladybird spider (*Eresus cinnaberinus*)

Crab Spider (*Thomisus onustus*)
Jumping Spider (*Philaeus chrysops*)

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The Piano Grande

There is an intriguing optical effect at work from the end of the plain, when you first arrive from Norcia in late June and July. Strips of blue, and red are barely discernible miles away at the other end but when viewed from the village of *Castelluccio di Norcia* at the far end it seems as if the patchwork quilt goes on forever.

The springy mountain turf that covers hills around the plain is wonderful to walk on and rich in flowers... tulips, Arnica, Peonies, Narcissus.

The great bulk of *Monte Vettore* dominates the plain, once a glacial lake which floods as snow melts and then drains. There are several routes up Vettore itself but ease of access (if you can use that word when burdened with too much camera gear) depends on the season. For company there are the choughs with several colonies on the high cliffs. Up on the heights you get into the realm of the true alpes - gentians, alpine pasque flowers, saxifrages and many others.

What you cannot see from below is that what seems to be one great whale back of a mountain is, in fact, two forming a giant 'V' and between them lies a glacial lake, the *Lago di Pilate*.

In summer this can experience a 'bloom' of a small crustacean, a fairy shrimp (*Chirocephalus marchesonii*) that turns the waters red. This has given rise to a legend. It seems that the body of *Pontius Pilate* was being borne on an ox cart across these mountains (why you may well ask?) and, when a wheel broke, the corpse tumbled into the lake and turned it red with the blood. A reasonable explanation in this land of innumerable and impenetrable Catholic miracles.

In the *Sibillini*, there is time to sit and ponder while the ambient light changes dramatically with clouds scudding across skies to create rapidly changing shadows on the plain. Early mornings can be wonderful when the bowl encircled by the mountains becomes filled with mist. As the air warms and reaches the inversion temperature it disappears as if by magic.

Piano Grande - the Fioritura in June and July



The brilliant colouring from poppies (scarlet), cornflowers (blue and mustard (yellow) is known as the *Fioritura*...the flowering . These species are used as indicator plants at the edges of the plain to show when the tiny lentil seedpods are ready

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The Sibillini

There is a feeling of wildness though it is not a huge distance from 'civilization' – even if that word in this part of Italy is relative.

Norcia is the best known centre in the region – a lovely old walled town dating from Roman times and now famed as a gastronomic centre. Truffles are found in the scrubby oak woodlands nearby and you sample them in numerous local dishes and even find a truffle 'amaro'.

And, for the adventurous there is always truffle ice-cream, arguably a terrible thing to do to both truffles and to ice-cream. The best way to sample truffles for the first time (and ever after...) is grated over pasta. The taste, it must be said, is one to acquire and the smell when left in a fridge is reminiscent of a gas leak.

The truffles were once 'hunted' using sows to detect them but apparently the odour emitted by the subterranean fungus has some of the components of the chemical cocktail that constitutes a 'piggy' pheromone. The difficulty of controlling an amorous sow has led to the use of dogs for the job... introduced to the fungus early when it is grated into their mamma's milk.

Trained truffle dogs are extremely valuable and every year there are cases in Italy of canines being 'dognapped' or, worse still, poisoned thanks to fierce rivalries between competing truffle hunters. The price obtainable for a large truffle is considerable.

Everywhere you will see notices saying "Truffle Reserve". Plant photographers are regarded with suspicion by locals - after all, why would anyone be interested in plants that do not serve the stomach. However, when you explain they could not be more friendly, just bit puzzled that you are not 'on their patch' stealing their black gold.

The Apennines form the backbone of peninsular Italy and, in geological terms, are 'young mountains' beginning to grow - the orogenesis - around 65 million years ago.

The chain extends for around 1200 km on peninsular Italy and then from Reggio Calabria in the toes of Italy's boot through the Aeolian Islands and into Sicily in a great arc...a total of about 1500km

Alpine flowers of of the Sibillini



Alpines on Mt Vettore: rock jasmine (*Androsace villosa*) and Trumpet gentian (*Gentiana dinarica*)



Yellow whitlow grass (*Draba aizoides*) with alpine forget-me-nots (*Myosotis alpestris*)



Spring crocus (*Crocus vernus*) appear just as the snow melts



Natural roadside rockery above the Piano Grande with forget-me-nots (*Myosotis alpestris*) and purple Basil-Thyme (*Acinos arvensis*)



Basil thyme, forget-me-not and mountain mustard (*Erysimum pseudorhaeticum*)



Catch it right and the display of tulips (*Tulipa sylvestris*) and narcissus (*Narcissus poeticus*) is wonderful ...

The Mountains

Geology changes considerably from north to south and they are formed mainly of marine sedimentary rocks. In the part we visit (the central Apennines) there are large calcareous outcrops with the lower areas of shale and sandstone that separate them. This allows a great range of limestone loving (calcicole) plants from coast to sea, through meadows and woodlands.

When we first brought parties to the Sibillini we contented ourselves with the richness of terrain up to around 1600m or so. Later, for more active clients we included an optional day where we climbed Monte Vettore to find true alpine plants and the most spectacular views. This option depended upon season and some years, when snow persisted, there were deep drifts along mountain paths making them dangerous, if not impassable.

Earthquakes. In 2016, some three earthquakes over magnitude 6 hit central Italy. In the one that hit Norcia on October 30 at 06:40 no-one was killed...people were alert. Unfortunately, numerous wonderful buildings there, and along the Campi Valley, were razed to the ground. Ironically, many of these had survived earlier quakes and several villages such as Collescille and Preci had only recently been restructured.

The village of Castelluccio di Norcia was devastated and the Piano Grande was rendered inaccessible when all roads leading to it were blocked - either by rockfalls or because they had tumbled down the mountainside.

Monte Terminillo. We have a deep love of the area and have made many friends who were severely hit by the consequences of such an earthquake. We vowed to continue taking parties there but had to find some new elements to add to our week-long stays. Monte Terminillo not far away seemed obvious for a good road takes one up to true alpine regions (1890m) where, as the snows melt there are thousands of crocus, pasque flowers, pansies and orchids...with a mountain backdrop (up to 2,217m) and choughs wheeling overhead.

The crags of this mountain are reminiscent of a mini dolomite region and the flora and fauna can be photographed with the mountain backdrop. Each year, we make a pilgrimage in July to see a colony of Apollo butterflies we discovered some years ago. There is a very good network of paths of varying degrees of difficulty on both sides of the road from Leonessa over the ridge and down to Rieti

Flowers in the Mountains



Wonderful displays of spring crocus (*Crocus vernus*) occurs as the snow melts on Terminillo and other high mountains in the Apennines



On the mountains surrounding the Piano Grande there is a succession of flowers as the snow melts...never easy to predict, the wild tulips are particularly stunning.



The pass over Terminillo rises to 1890m at Sella di Leonessa, providing easy access to a rich alpine flora. The heights reach 2,217 metres (7,274 ft) with a number of ridge walks for the more adventurous later in the season



The bulk of Mt Vettore (2476m - 8123ft) dominates the Piano Grande, once a glacial lake, now a vast hay meadow. The colour derives from countless thousands of narcissus, tulips and buttercups.

Orchids and the Sibillini

There is a very wide variety of orchid species and numerous hybrids from several *Ophrys* (the insect mimics), familiar from Mediterranean regions, to orchids associated with Alpine pastures such as the elderflower orchid and the globe orchid. In between those extremes there are numerous species of grasslands, wetlands and woodlands of all sorts and often in considerable numbers. Here lies a veritable paradise for those interested in orchids and indeed for many plant rarities.

Woodlands are often quite open with moderately high light levels to encourage growth beneath trees of downy oak, various maples and other species. Red helleborine, Violet limodore and other treasures are found there.

Grasslands will often host numerous orchid plants and sometimes hybrids between them – such as those between the monkey and man orchids. Visitors on our holidays and workshops quickly get familiar with the kind of terrain that will prove productive for we take time to immerse ourselves in nature and to appreciate the interconnectivity that exists within these ecosystems.

Numbers of orchids vary from year to year and you never quite know how it is going to turn out but we have explored this region thoroughly (it is something that we do with all our trips such as those to the Gargano and the Dolomites).

Sometimes, a wonderfully productive orchid meadow will have disappeared under the plough – decades to evolve and a day to destroy. Each year we go several days in advance of picking up a group to check on the state of things and to find new places.

We always encourage our clients to let us know if there is something that they would particularly like to see and do the best we can to optimise the chances of doing so.

Natural History in general. Although flowers feature strongly in our trips, there is much more natural history on offer. Butterflies have always been a great love and in flower rich regions there is a corresponding diversity of butterflies (and other insects) to be found. We see a great variety of avian species, too and have a particular interest in birdsong which provides a musical backdrop to many of the places we visit.

Wild Orchids 1



Few-flowered orchid
Orchis pauciflora



Toothed orchid
Neotinea trientata



Large white helleborine
Cephalanthera damasonium



Few-flowered orchid
Orchis pauciflora



Burnt tip orchid
Neotinea ustulata



Late spider orchid
Ophrys holoserica (appennina)



Fly orchid
Ophrys insectifera



Sword-leaved helleborine
Cephalanthera longifolia

Wild Orchids 2



Red helleborine
(*Cephalanthera rubra*)



Violet limodore
(*Limodorum abortive*)



Bee Ophrys (bicoloured variety)
(*Ophrys apifera* var *bicolor*)



Lesser butterfly orchid (parallel pollinia)
(*Platanthera bifolia*)



Common spotted orchid
(*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*)



Sword-leaved helleborine
(*Cephalanthera longifolia*)

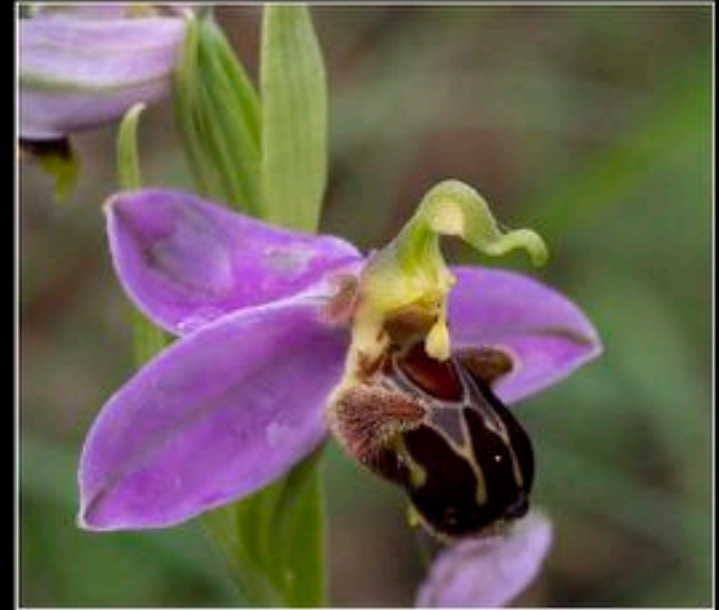
Wild Orchids 3



Greater butterfly orchid (pollinia diverge to base)
(*Platanthera chlorantha*)



Bird's nest orchid
(*Neottia nidus-avis*)



Bee Ophrys
(*Ophrys apifera*)



Orchis x colemannii - Hybrid
(*Orchis pauciflora* x *O. mascula*)



Early purple orchid
Orchis macula ssp *signifera*



Pale orchid
(*Orchis pallens*)

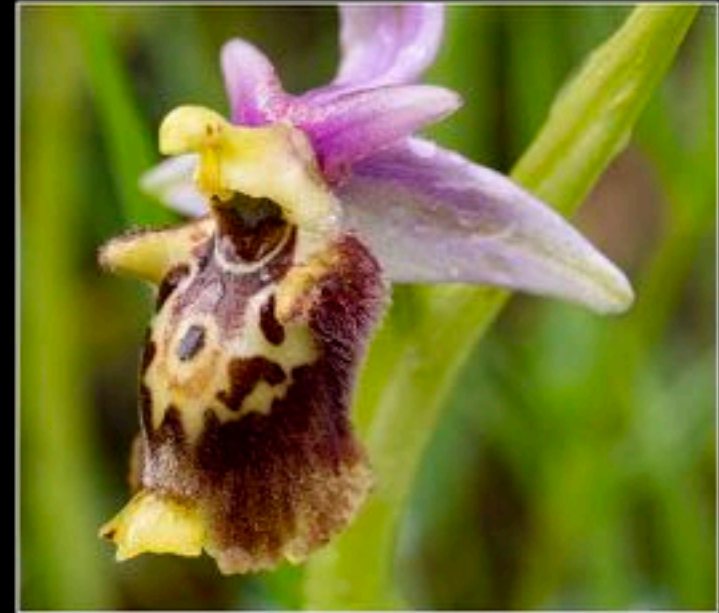
Wild Orchids 4



Widder's vanilla orchid
Gymnadenia conopsea (*Nigritella conopsea*)



Burnt-tip orchid
Neotinea ustulata



Late spider orchid
Ophrys holoserica (*appennina*)



Lady orchid
Orchis purpurea



man / monkey hybrid (*Orchis x bergonii*)
Orchis anthropophorum x *O. simia*



Dense-flowered orchid
Neotinea maculata

Wild Orchids 5



Few-flowered orchid
Orchis pauciflora



Dull Ophrys
Ophrys fusca



Monkey orchid
Orchis simia



Orchis x colemannii - Hybrid
(*Orchis pauciflora* x *O. mascula*)



Early spider orchid (colour variety)
Ophrys sphegodes



Fly orchid
Ophrys insectifera

Variety of Habitat



On the periphery of the Sibillini lie several rich wetlands - Colfiorito has a rich flora and is superb for birds



True alpine such as Mountain avens are easily reached on Mt Terminillo



A roadsides club of mountain valerian on the road to Castelluccio di Norcia



Well known for its reputed ability to cure bruising, Arnica occurs in large numbers in the mountains of the Sibillini



An orchid colony with hybrids between *Orchis mascula* and *O. Pauciflora* with a colourful bed of *Globularia*



Sibillini woodlands have a rich flora - one of the earliest plants flowering after the snow melts is the Alpine squill (*Scilla bifolia*)

Floral Splendour

Out of the thousands of images taken over the last 16 years of our living in Italy, what you will find in the following spreads is just a representative selection.

From the heights where true alpiners grow through meadows and woodlands to the river valley of the Nera, flowers abound in both variety of species and numbers of plants.



*Apollo (Parnassius apollo)...*a butterfly treasure of Mt Terminillo

Floral Diversity 1



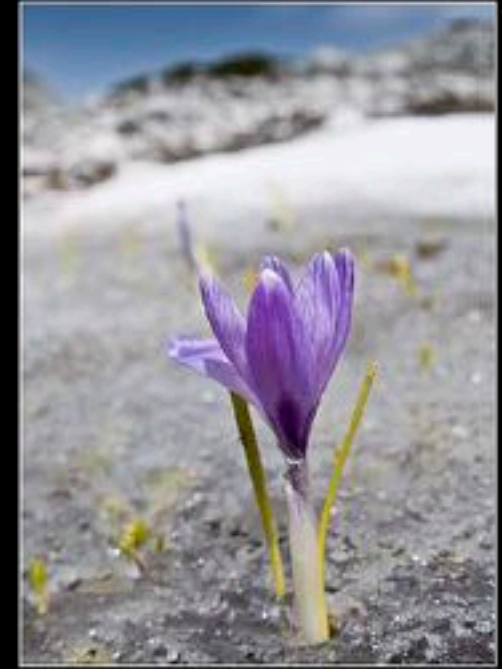
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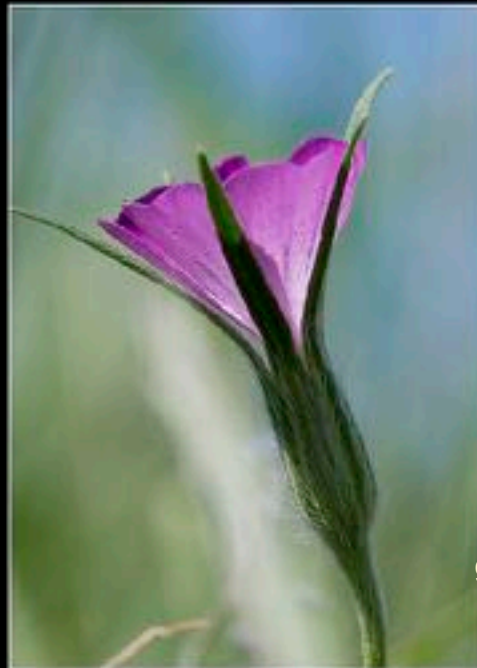
c



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e



f



g



h

a. Purple saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*)

e. Meadow clary (*Salvia pratense*).

b. Narrow-leaved fritillary (*Fritillaria tenuifolia*)

f. Corncockle (*Agrostemma githago*).

c. Larkspur (*Consolida ambigua*).

g. Field Poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*)

d. Spring Crocus (*Crocus vernus*)

h. Bladder gentian (*Gentiana utricularia*)

Floral Diversity 2



Birthwort (*Aristolochia clematitis*.)
Mountain houndstongue (*Cynoglossum montanum*)

Field cow-wheat (*Melampyrum arvensis*)
Coralroot (*Cardamine bulbosa*)

Floral Diversity 3



Meadow clary (*Salvia pratensis*)
Perennial flax (*Linum perenne*)

Beautiful flax (*Linum narbonense*)
Black henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*)

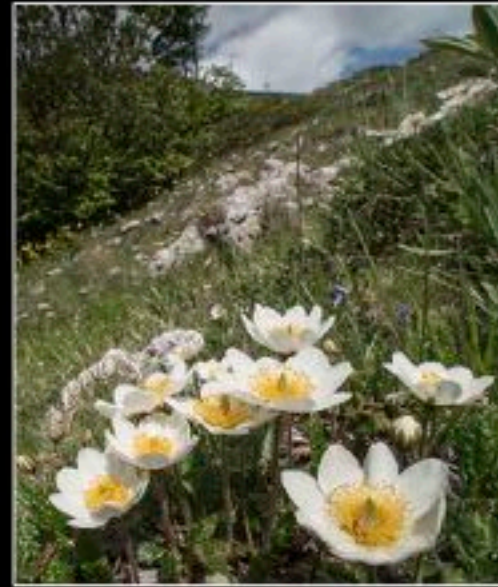
High Mountain Flora



Eugenia's pansy
(*Viola eugeniae*)



Mezereon
(*Daphne mezereon*)



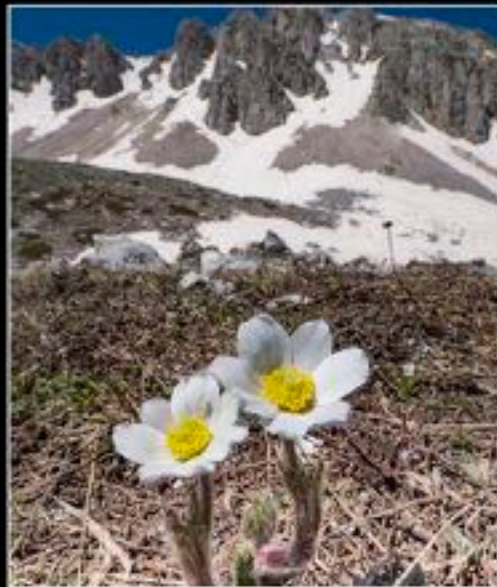
Mountain avens
(*Dryas octopetala*)



Elderflower orchid with pansies
(*Dactylorhiza sambucina*)



White asphodel
(*Asphodelus albus*)



Alpine pasque flower
(*Pulsatilla alpina*)



Roman shields
(*Fibigia clypeata*)



Mountain fritillary
(*Fritillaria montana*)

Weeds of Cultivation



Larkspur
(*Consolida regalis*)



Corn marigold
(*Chrysanthemum segetum*)



Cornflower
(*Centaurea cyanus*)



Field poppy
(*Papaver rhoeas*)



Venus' looking-glass
(*Legousia speculum-veneris*)



Corn chamomile
(*Anthemis arvensis*)



Corncockle
(*Agrostemma githago*)



Corn buttercup
(*Ranunculus arvensis*)

Weeds of Cultivation in Fallow Fields



Cornflowers with field chamomile.

Chamomile with clover

Poppies, cornflowers and wild coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*)

Fodder vetch (*Pisum sativum*)

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