



Orchids of The Emerald Isle

19th - 23rd May 2024
Led by Sean Cole & Mike Waller



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Day 1 – Journey to Sligo

The tour began at Knock (Ireland West) airport where Sean was ready and waiting to welcome the eager group of orchid and wildlife enthusiasts. Mike joined shortly after and - under clear blue skies and warm sunshine - we piled into the spacious and comfortable cars to the sound of singing Willow Warblers before setting off to our first site en route to Sligo.

We stopped at an imposing limestone hill looming over a popular seaside village and offering breath-taking views across the vast estuary beneath. Parking at the base of the hill, we gradually made our way up through the steep cattle fields where we were surprised to encounter several Cryptic Wood White butterflies along the hedge line, including a mating pair posing well for photographs. As we climbed, the vegetation gave way to heathy grassland mixed with limestone specialists, giving botanists a chance to enjoy fine examples of Common Lousewort, Heath Milkwort, Tormential, Yellow Rattle, Quaking Grass and our first orchid – Heath Spotted Orchid – albeit still in tight bud. Here we were also treated to several Small Blue butterflies.



Early Purple Orchid © Jillian M.



Cryptic Wood Whites © Sean Cole

Looking out to the estuary we spotted our first mammal of the trip – a group of Harbour Seals resting on a distant sand bank, enjoying the warm weather.

Higher we climbed through a gateway and on to the steep slopes carpeted in closely cropped limestone grassland. Here we enjoyed healthy examples of both male and female Mountain Everlasting alongside a scattering of Early Purple Orchids. But it wasn't long before we found our first target orchid species – a single flowering spike of Dense-flowered Orchid. After a longer search, no further plants could be found but we were pleased to find two budding Lesser Butterfly Orchids in the lower pastures on our way back down.

After a pitstop, we made our way over to the hotel in Sligo for a well-earned Guinness and evening meal, happy to have found a target species at our first stop.

Day 2 – Surf and Turf - Dunes and limestone pavement

It was an early start for our busiest day of the trip but fortunately the weather was on our side again. Suitably filled with coffee and pastries from the nice hotel breakfast selection, we set off for some dunes north of Sligo.

This large expanse of damp slacks, fen, rolling dune grassland and shallow lakes is always buzzing with wildlife and today did not disappoint. Immediately the group was busy photographing Common Blue, Blue-tailed and Azure Damselflies along the hedges and admiring the swathes of Bogbean which flower here in their thousands around the lake.

After climbing through a stile in the low stone wall we were treated to picture-perfect examples of the brick-red variety of Early Marsh Orchid var. *coccinea* which occurs in dunes. Plants were scattered here and there along the path taking us out on to a large flat slack dominated by short rabbit-grazed turf to the sound of Lapwings, Skylarks and Meadow Pipits. It was here that we found more orchids and scarce plants – initially an unusual purple form of Early Marsh Orchid and Marsh Lousewort but then also diminutive examples of Common Twayblade, Heath Spotted Orchid, Lesser Butterfly Orchid and Butterwort alongside emergent rosettes of Marsh Helleborine and Grass-of-Parnassus.



Marsh Fritillary © Sean Cole

Then came calls of excitement from further ahead as a Marsh Fritillary was located, helpfully encouraged to rest by passing clouds, giving photographers an excellent chance to capture this rare beauty.

It wasn't long before tricky marsh orchid hybrids were found – initially a small example of Early Marsh x Common Spotted Orchid but then a much larger example hiding in the higher, drier dunes. This provided a great opportunity to discuss the finer details of marsh orchid hybrid identification. Pictures taken, we headed back to the car for our next site.

After a winding, bumpy ride, we arrived at a stunning Hebridean-style beach. Under blue skies and distant thunder clouds, we stopped to have lunch and gaze across the unusually calm waters to spot distant Black Guillemots, Great Northern Diver and a group of basking Harbour Seals.

The long peninsula also provides excellent opportunities for cetacean spotting and sure enough, on our walk along the lane to the orchids, we were treated to relatively close views of hunting Minke Whale, Common Dolphin, Gannet and rafts of Manx Shearwater out to sea. A Cuckoo calling nearby was an added bonus, treating us to a fly-by later on.

But our main target lay beyond - scattered across the numerous fens nestled between higher ridges of limestone pavement is the enigmatic Pugsley's Marsh Orchid. Despite difficult terrain, we were treated to numerous examples of the species, providing a chance to discuss the subtle combination of features which characterise this taxon. As always with marsh orchids, the hybridisation question looms large with several robust plants exhibiting some heath spotted orchid influence.

On the walk back to the car we were treated to close views of a Whimbrel which posed for photos on the rocky shoreline and some fine stands of Early Purple Orchid on the cliff top grassland. Several Small Blue butterflies were present here on the limestone pavement, too.

Our final stop of the stop of the day took us north to another vast dune system which is famous for its unique dune-dwelling population of Dense-flowered Orchids. With the afternoon moving into early evening, we made our way through the Bluebell-clad dunes to find several examples of Dense-flowered orchid, with everyone engaging in some light competition to find their own plant!

A quick dash further into the dunes led us to a large colony of Early Purple Orchids where eagle-eyed Paul found another single Dense-flowered Orchid well away from the main colony.

Now rather weary after a full day of excitement, we made our way to the fishing town of Killybegs for dinner, rather later than planned, meaning a change of plan from the standard fish and chip shop to the nearby Fleet Inn which turned out to be a resounding success with excellent fish and chips and Guinness on offer!



Pugsley's Marsh Orchid © Mike Waller

Day 3 – To the Woods – Atlantic Rainforest

After high temperatures and humidity for the first two days, the weather had now broken, bringing relief with more typical conditions for NW Ireland.

We began the first half of the day with a drive across the border to a sprawling mixed upland plantation in County Fermanagh – home to a very large population of Lesser Twayblade. Winding our way up the long road through dense Fir plantation, boggy Willow woodland and clear fell, it was plain to see the effect of storms earlier in the year with many trees toppled near the road.

Parking right next to the small Sitka Spruce copse, we carefully made our way into woodland edges, searching for the tell-tale sight of two tiny, paired leaves (showing the origins of the name Twayblade) perched on the damp pillows of Sphagnum. We quickly found many hundreds of plants including some rather large specimens, camouflaged amongst the Bilberry and Heather.



Common (left) and Lesser Twayblades © Mike Waller

A little further down the track we examined a curiously incongruous population of Common Twayblade and Common Spotted Orchid – present only in this otherwise unsuitable area by the liming effects of the path, providing a very localised strip of alkaline substrate. This provided us with an unexpected context with several Lesser Twayblade growing alongside Common Twayblade. As far as we're aware, one of only a few times this situation has been recorded in Britain and Ireland and certainly a first for us!

Again, the midges were relentless and so we made tracks for our second site of the day.

Having just exited the forest, only a few hundred metres down the road the outline of an unfortunate mammal killed on the road caught our eye. As we passed, it was quickly identifiable as a Pine Marten. Screeching to halt, we piled out of the car and walked back to inspect the animal before the rest of the group joined us. Although sad to see, this demonstrates the gradual return of this elusive predator to northwest Ireland.

Having picked up lunch in Fermanagh we hopped back across the border into County Donegal and drove a short distance to visit a beautiful ancient woodland site adjacent to a gorgeous lough.

This woodland is a fragment of the vast ancient oak woods which covered most of Ireland. In recent years, western oak woods of this type have been rebranded as the evocative 'Atlantic rainforest', characterised by high rainfall and mild temperatures supporting a rich ecosystem dominated by numerous species of ferns, mosses and especially lichens.

Taking a slightly different route to normal, we found four spikes of Bird's-nest Orchid in perfect condition beside the path. We enjoyed gnarled sessile oak trees, festooned in beard lichens with a woodland floor carpeted in Great Wood-rush and Bluebells.

A little further on and we came across a colony of Sword-leaved Helleborines hiding in a boggy area where we've not seen them before. Fortunately, a perfect flowering plant was near the edge of the path, offering a great opportunity for photographs without disturbing the fragile habitat.

We eventually made our way to the 'main' colony but having already satisfied ourselves with a good plant further back, we simply peered through the trees to enjoy these plants from afar.

Moving to a viewing point on the shore of the Lough we gazed across water to a distant pine tree within which is concealed the large nest of a very rare bird species, found by us the previous year. With scope pictures taken, we left the birds in peace just as the heavens opened - rather fittingly like a tropical rainforest! We took a moment on the walk back to enjoy a robust specimen of Common Twayblade alongside numerous Water Avens, Sanicle and some impressive specimens of Tree Lungwort – a large seaweed-like lichen which is a speciality of western Oak woods.

By now the rain had ramped up to Biblical level so it was a wet march back to the car before a damp drive back to the hotel. Our evening meal was at a Korean restaurant in Sligo, enjoyed by all.



Sword-leaved Helleborine
© Jillian M

Day 4 – The Machair

We were up early again for our final full day of the tour which required a two-hour drive over to a long peninsula in County Mayo, famed for its rolling machair, hay meadows and wide sandy beaches.



Irish Marsh Orchids © Ian H

This area is particularly good for Irish Marsh Orchid which can be abundant along the road verges and lawns of the area and it was this species that was our target for the day with the chance of some special birds.

On approach, it was immediately apparent why our first stop was a winner – the large lawn was covered in hundreds of large Irish Marsh Orchids. No walking required for this one with approximately 500 plants growing all around the car park alongside some pretty stands of Ragged Robin.

We enjoyed the variation of the plants, examining the blousy lip belying the Heath Spotted Orchid parentage of this tetraploid species, alongside variable leaf spotting. Overhead, a Peregrine fly-over was a welcome sight, battling its way into the wind.

A quick chat with the owners gave us an opportunity to impress the importance of the site and give tips on suitable ongoing management for the orchids. They were refreshingly keen to look after this special site and welcomed us back for future visits.

Then it was on to lunch at another well-serviced deli bar in a Eurospar before heading on to a new site for us which holds a small breeding population of Red-necked Phalarope - the only one in Ireland.

We tried in vain to spot the small birds on a distant pool but to no avail. The viewing conditions were tough especially as, by this point, the wind had really picked up and brought an unseasonal wind chill. The birds were freshly arrived, so in very small numbers too. Despite the conditions, we did get good views of breeding Lapwings, Redshank, Shoveler, Meadow Pipits and Skylarks. Within the fenced enclosure (built to keep out predators for ground nesting birds) many more Irish Marsh Orchids, and it turned out, Pugsley's Marsh Orchids, could be seen from distance!

Our next stop took us to a series of nearby hay meadows managed specifically and sympathetically by BirdWatch Ireland for Corncrakes. En route we came across yet another mammal for the trip – an Irish Hare, was briefly paused in a nearby gateway. Further on, we stopped and sat quietly in the car near a likely Corncrake meadow, windows open and sure enough, the diagnostic 'Crek! Crek! Crek!' of a singing male could be clearly heard seemingly metres from us but entirely concealed in the vegetation. We could hear when it was turning its head towards us, it was so close! Distant views of a family of Chough on a derelict building was an added bonus.

Finally we made our way over to a nearby Lough to enjoy more Irish Marsh Orchids along the shore with some nice examples of Early Marsh Orchid var. *coccinea*. Unlike the previous colony, these plants were much smaller and more variable with some heavily pigmented specimens verging on hyperchromatic.

Several potential hybrids between the two species were found but as always, they were very tricky to confidently identify and Mike and Sean could not easily agree on which were the best candidates.

With a long drive ahead of us, we decided to call it a day at 4pm and head back to Sligo in good time for dinner.

We finished the tour with an post-dinner stroll around Sligo, taking time to enjoy the numerous Pipistrelle Bats darting and diving along the river.

Thank you all for a fantastic trip and we hope to see you again soon!



Systematic Species lists

Orchids	
Scientific name	Common name
<i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i> (in leaf)	Pyramidal Orchid
<i>Cephalanthera longifolia</i>	Sword-leaved Helleborine
<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i> (in bud)	Common Spotted Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza incarnata</i> var. <i>coccinea</i>	Early Marsh Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza kerryensis</i>	Irish Marsh Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>	Heath Spotted Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i> (in leaf)	Northern Marsh Orchid
<i>Dactylorhiza traunsteinerioides</i>	Pugsley's Marsh Orchid
<i>Epipactis palustris</i> (in leaf)	Marsh Helleborine
<i>Gymnadenia densiflora</i> (in leaf)	Marsh Fragrant Orchid
<i>Neottia cordata</i>	Lesser Twayblade
<i>Neottia ovata</i>	Common Twayblade
<i>Neottia nidus-avis</i>	Bird's-nest Orchid
<i>Neotinea maculata</i>	Dense-flowered Orchid
<i>Orchis mascula</i>	Early Purple Orchid
<i>Platanthera bifolia</i> (in bud)	Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Orchid hybrids	
Scientific name	Parents
<i>x D. kernerorum</i>	<i>D. fuchsii x incarnata</i>
Unnamed	<i>D. kerryensis x incarnata</i>

Other Noteworthy Plants	
Scientific name	Common name
<i>Armeria maritima</i>	Thrift
<i>Ajuga reptans</i>	Bugle
<i>Alchemilla sp.</i>	Lady's Mantle
<i>Antennaria dioica</i>	Mountain Everlasting
<i>Briza media</i>	Quaking Grass
<i>Geum rivale</i>	Water Avens
<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>	Bluebell
<i>Linum catharticum</i>	Fairy Flax
<i>Luzula sylvatica</i>	Great Wood-rush
<i>Melampyrum pratense</i>	Common Cow-wheat
<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	Bogbean
<i>Parnassia palustris</i>	Grass-of-Parnassus
<i>Pedicularis palustris</i>	Marsh Lousewort
<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>	Common Lousewort
<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	Butterwort
<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>	Heath Milkwort
<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	Tormentil
<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Yellow Rattle
<i>Rosa pimpinellifolia</i>	Burnet Rose
<i>Rumex hydrolapathum</i>	Water Dock
<i>Sanicula europaea</i>	Sanicle
<i>Silene flos-cuculi</i>	Ragged Robin
<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>	Bilberry
Noteworthy Birds	
<i>Gavia immer</i>	Great Northern Diver
<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Little Grebe
<i>Crex crex</i>	Corncrake (heard)
<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	Kittiwake
<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	Sandwich Tern
<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	Black Guillemot
<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	Puffin
<i>Uria aalge</i>	Guillemot
<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	Manx Shearwater
<i>Morus bassanus</i>	Gannet

<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Common Buzzard
<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	White-tailed Eagle
<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Peregrine
<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Kestrel
<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	Cuckoo
<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	Whimbrel
<i>Tringa totanus</i>	Redshank
<i>Himantopus ostralegus</i>	Oystercatcher
<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Lapwing
<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Snipe
<i>Corvus corax</i>	Raven
<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	Chough
<i>Linnaria cannabina</i>	Linnet
<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Meadow Pipit
<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Skylark

Insects	
<i>Cupido minimus</i>	Small Blue
<i>Euphedryas aurinia</i>	Marsh Fritillary
<i>Leptidea reali</i>	Cryptic Wood White
<i>Coenagrion puella</i>	Azure Damselfly
<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>	Common Blue Damselfly
<i>Ischnura elegans</i>	Blue-tailed Damselfly
<i>Libellula fulva</i>	Scarce Chaser
<i>Rhagium bifasciatum</i>	Two-banded Longhorn Beetle
Mammals	
<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	Minke Whale
<i>Delphinus Delphis</i>	Common Dolphin
<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	Grey Seal
<i>Lepus timidus</i>	Irish Hare
<i>Martes martes</i>	Pine Marten (dead)
<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	Harbour Seal
<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	Bottlenose Dolphin

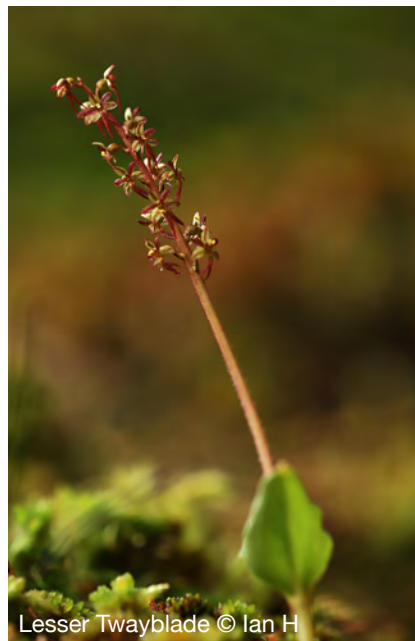
Photo Gallery



Two-banded Longhorn Beetle © Jillian M



Sword-leaved Helleborine
© Mike Waller



Lesser Twayblade © Ian H



© Mike Waller



© Jillian M

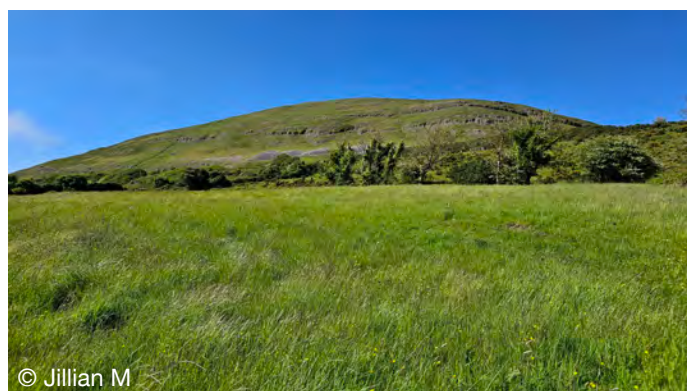


© Jillian M

Irish Marsh Orchid & Ragged Robin © Jillian M



© Mike Waller



© Jillian M



Tree Lungwort © Mike Waller



Irish Marsh Orchid © Mike Waller



Whimbrel © Sean Cole



Cryptic Wood Whites© Jillian M



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© Ian H



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