



## Sibillini: An Apennine Paradise

18th - 25th May 2024

Led by Paul Harcourt Davies & Lois Ferguson



**Greenwings Wildlife Holidays**

Tel: 01473 254658

Web: [www.greenwings.co.uk](http://www.greenwings.co.uk)

Email: [enquiries@greenwings.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@greenwings.co.uk)

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## Day 1

Our group assembled at Fiumicino airport and we set off for our first base via the 'Raccordo' from the airport to the A1 autostrada, exiting at Orte towards Terni and thence east and eventually into the lovely Nera valley, with its woods, cliffs and fast flowing river.



Ophrys x hybrida © PHD

Our pick-up from the Rome flight was later than usual but we still managed to take in some stops on the way. We took a diversion across country to reach our first base on roads that meander through plant-rich limestone terrain and spectacular montane scenery. The first roadside stop produced orchids in abundance... there were innumerable man orchids (*Orchis anthroporum*) and tall spikes of Fly Orchid (*Ophrys insectifera*) growing with Early spider orchid (*Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *classica*). As a bonus we also spotted two hybrids between these taxa *Ophrys x hybrida*.

Further along, we reached a favourite roadside stop of Paul & Lois, bare and uninviting at first sight, with sparse vegetation but always with a plethora of orchid species, a wonderful introduction to the Sibillini and its riches. This allowed the first encounter with the striking local race of Late Spider Orchid (*Ophrys fuciflora* subsp. *dinarica*) with a highly variable, strongly-patterned lip and distinct side 'horns'. Again, there were Early Spider and Fly Orchid and a

few flowers of Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) just opening.

Difficult to find, were the insignificant Dense-flowered Orchids (*Neotinea maculata*) but flowering was almost over. A reliable colony of Few-flowered Orchid (*Orchis pauciflora*) with Toothed Orchid (*Neotinea tridentata*) and Green-winged Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*) flourishes here and further along the road. Other notable plants included large white Star of Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum*) and Summer Forget-me-not (*Anchusa azurea*).



Limodorum abortivum © PHD

There were a few Gladiolus (*Gladiolus italicus*) at the edges of some cultivated fields with both Goat's Beard (*Tragopogon pratensis*) and purple Salsify (*Tragopogon porrifolius*) as roadside plants. Frequent on roadside banks, were tall stems of Fibigia (*Fibigia clypeata*) which has small rather insignificant yellow flowers but boasts distinct, silver-haired elliptical seed pods.



Gladiolus italicus ©

There were plants of Violet Limodore (*Limodorum abortivum*) with flowers not far off opening. We then headed onward to settle into our agriturismo where we were to stay for the first three nights.



## Day 2

Morning skies looked far from promising, with light rain falling, so we held back our departure. Fortunately, things improved as the forecast promised and we visited a site a short distance away to begin a lane walk with fields on either side and intermittent patches of downy oak (*Quercus pubescens*) woodland. It always provides a marvellous introduction to the floral riches of the Sibillini and this time was no exception.



Man x Monkey hybrid © PHD

*Ophrys* spikes were in abundance...The Late Spider, Early Spider, Fly and Dull *Ophrys* (*Ophrys fusca*) with Bee Orchids (*O. apifera*) just coming out. Then there were Monkey (*Orchis simia*), Man, Green-winged (*Anacamptis morio*), Toothed (*Neotinea tridentata*) with Pyramidal orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) just beginning to flower and the first flowers of the imposing Adriatic Lizard orchid (*Himantoglossum adriaticum*) just unfurling. There is not the variety of species that there is in S. Italy but specimens were superb, abundant and highly accessible for the photographers. Some of us caught a glimpse of the tiny and very active Strawberry Spider (*Eresus kollari*).

We stopped at a favourite picnic spot, well off the beaten track, where there is a little used table, with spikes of Violet Limodore (*Limodorum abortivum*) growing close by and almost flowering. In the field beyond we found an abundance of those orchids already mentioned plus Burnt tip (*Neotinea ustulata*) and some hybrids between those and Toothed orchid (*Neotinea x dietrichiana*).



*Eresus kollari* © PHD

We then made our way onto higher ground on a forest road bordered by banks with colourful Rock Soapwort (*Saponaria ocymoides*) to where orchids grew in true abundance on open ground with magnificent long views. Notable, were numerous, robust spikes of Lady orchid (*Orchis purpurea*), thousands of the cream and yellow Few-flowered orchid (*Orchis pauciflora*) and a rich selection of natural hybrids (*Orchis x colemanii*) with Early Purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*) ranging through pinks to white and including some bicoloured forms.



*Orchis x colemanii* © PHD

In the open, and under low pines, there were also plants of the lesser butterfly orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*) just coming into flower. The floral spectacle here was of veritable drifts of the white Apennine Rockrose (*Helianthemum appeninum*) which was even colouring some of the hillside in the distance together with blue Apennine Globularia (*Globularia meridionalis*) .. Paul said that, in all the years he and Lois have been visiting this place, they have never encountered anyone else there...which is the case for so much of the undiscovered Sibillini.



*Neotinea x dietrichiana* © PHD

## Day 3



*Orchis x bergonii* © PHD

Today, under grey skies we set off to explore country roads on the opposite side of the Campi Valley where our first stop was to visit and photograph some tall Naked Man Orchids (*Orchis italica*), Monkey Orchids and Man Orchids. A short way further on, grew several spikes of the spectacular hybrid between man and monkey (*Orchis x bergonii*), showing varied colouration along with numerous examples of both parents. Along the roadsides grew some lovely pink clumps of Rock Soapwort so characteristic of this area and a lemon-yellow Golden Drop (*Onosma echiodides*).

We explored small roads with regular stops for flowers until we reached our picnic destination in a ridge-top pine wood where there was a rich ground flora including several orchid species such as both the White and Sword-leaved Helleborines (*Cephalanthera damasonium* and *C. longifolia*) Bird's Nest orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*) and some spikes of Greater Butterfly Orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*) with slightly greenish flowers.



*Onosma echiodides* © PHD

After lunch, we headed down to the Pian di Santa Scholastica (the sister of St Benedict) where the walled town of Norcia sits and then beyond, keeping the proverbial weather eye open. We explored fields with cornfield weeds finding Corncockle (*Agrostemma githago*), Cornflowers (*Centaurea cyanea*) and Poppies...and also, on close scrutiny, some tiny flowers of the Corn Buttercup (*Ranunculus arvensis*) with distinctive seed heads and now a great rarity in the UK. The omnipresent and ominous dark clouds 'forced' us back to Norcia in search of ice creams by way of recompense.

## Day 4



*Agrostemma githago* © PHD

This was the transfer day to our next base in Castelluccio di Norcia with stops en route. The first of these was a flowery roadside field in the Campi valley where, again, we found the characteristic cornfield weeds mentioned along with countless thousands of poppies and Venus's looking glass (*Illegousia speculum-veneris*) growing amongst the blue-green stems of Spelt, a primitive wheat.

This valley was hit by the most recent earthquake and hilltop towns with wonderful old churches crumbled after surviving numerous earthquakes over hundreds of years. Rain again stopped play so the sensible thing to do was to get to our accommodation and fuel up on some excellent, revitalising lentil soup...This area is famed for the lentils that are grown



Rock Soapwort after fire © PHD



*Ranunculus arvensis* © PHD





Tulipa sylvestris ssp australis © PHD

in the fields fed by snow melt from Mt Vettore.

In late June / July there is a riotous display of cornflowers and poppies used as indicator plants for lentil ripeness. Weather improved slightly and we visited a site for Peonies (*Peonia officinalis*) and the extremely local Mountain fritillary (*Fritillaria montana*), which can be unpredictable in numbers and flowering time. White Asphodel (*Asphodelus albus*) was just coming into flower.

### Day 5



Clouded Apollo © PHD

From our base in Castelluccio we set out to explore various tracks, including one leading to a water trough, well hidden from view, where there are often several species of blue and skipper butterflies 'puddling' where the animals come to drink and they inevitably defecate: butterflies love this 'mineral rich' soup. However, today there were very few because it was both cloudy and cold. By following another track, we reached a small wooded valley where there is one of the colonies of Clouded Apollos (*Apollo mnemosyne*) Paul has discovered here along with its food plant Hollowroot (*Corydalis cava*)...



Piano Grande in spring © PHD  
Narcissus, Buttercup, Tulip

In a rare shaft of sunlight, we noticed one on the wing and some careful stalking enabled good pictures even though it was settling down in the dry grass.

Rather than risk getting soaked because of the darkening sky (becoming a pattern) we returned towards our base but then, optimistically, before finally calling it a day, we wandered onto the Piano Grande and very wet, boggy ground to find numerous white Pheasant's Eye Narcissus (*Narcissus poeticus*) growing with yellow tulips (*Tulipa sylvestris* subsp *australis*)

### Day 6



Fritillaria montana © PHD

At last, a sunny morning and the weather had improved dramatically. With this being partly a transfer day we made a detour back to the Peony site. It is a magical experience to view these superb flowers with wonderful mountain vistas. They did not disappoint and there were also good numbers of Mountain Fritillaries (*Fritillaria montana*).

The final stage of our varied trip involved being able to get up to true alpine regions.

We made the transfer via a



Paeonia officinalis © PHD





Neotinea tridentata © PHD

slightly roundabout route which had the advantage of taking us to a small lake and also explored the surrounding wet meadows which are rich in both flowers and butterflies with innumerable spikes of Meadow Clary (*Salvia pratensis*) creating deep blue patches.

Close by, under surrounding trees, we found Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum odoratum*), Yellow Birthwort (*Aristolochia lutea*) with Brooklime (*Veronica beccabunga*) and Ragged Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) in a drainage ditch.

After our picnic, we continued towards Monteleone di Spoleto with some particularly good orchid stops en route where there were several orchids we had seen before, including the Fly and both Greater and Lesser Butterfly orchids (plus their hybrid: *Platanthera x hybrida*) plus both Sword-leaved and White Helleborines



Species-rich flower meadow © PHD

We were also able to find and photograph quite a few Marsh Fritillary butterflies en route including several mating pairs.

As we reached higher, open ground with scattered bushes we first heard and then spotted Red-backed Shrike in the same area as the butterflies. Golden Eagles are sometimes seen in this area but with low cloud and cold they were not in evidence.

## Day 7

Our final full day involved an exploration of mountain pastures up to 2000m on Mte Terminillo almost like a miniature Dolomite with its craggy peaks. Getting up above the snow line by road in the Apennines is not always easy but fortunately, there are a couple of roads that cross passes and provide access to a rich Alpine flora.



Marsh Fritillaries mating © PHD

The trip was changed some years ago to incorporate this area and thus provide an even greater variety of habitats with many plants endemic to the area. One of these we found quickly - the multicoloured local wild pansy (*Viola eugeniae*) in blues, purple, yellow and a mix.

Most of the snow had gone but there were a few crocuses (*Crocus neapolitanus*) flowering at the edges of melting snow patches along with blue Alpine squill (*Scilla bifolia*). Paul took us into a small woodland area with gnarled alpine willows and Whitebeam (*Sorbus* sp.) where there were a few low bushes of Mezereon (*Daphne mezereon*) with a few flowers remaining and several plants of Hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis*) well hidden beneath bushes.



Dryas octopetala © PHD

Many of the rocks were draped with Mountain Avenas (*Dryas octopetala*) growing in a spectacular open landscape with far reaching mountain views....

In fact, there was little snow left compared with previous years at this time.



Elder flower orchids (*Dactylorhiza sambucina*), in both yellow and magenta forms, were in evidence and some of us climbed a fairly steep slope to what we thought might be yellow Elderflower Orchids which turned out to be the Pale Orchid (*Orchis pallens*).

We found the local Trumpet Gentian (*Gentiana dinarica*) and a few remnant spring gentians (*G. vernus*) though there were a lot more of the similar bladder gentians (*G. utriculosa*).

One intriguing plant was the Apennine Houndstongue (*Cynoglossum magellense*), with its almost ball-shaped head of deep maroon flowers and leaves with silver grey hairs. By searching amongst some very large boulders we soon found the delightful Bear's Ear Primula (*Primula auricula*) in considerable numbers with its yellow flowers and glaucous green leaves.



There were no butterflies to be seen because it was too cold, grey and certainly too early for the Apollo that occurs here in July.

However, the members of the local colony of Choughs were in vocal attendance with their calls echoing around the cliffs and there were both snow finches and snow buntings flitting around and calling.

The local refuge was closed to visitors but we had permission to use the tables outside for our picnic lunch and then continued with a post-prandial exploration, finding many of the same plants but in spectacular locations for the photographer. Paul spent time helping people get the kind of trade-mark images he creates with wide-angle views that depict the plant close and set in the natural habitat... this is a wonderful area for for this wide angle 'macro' because of the spectacular backdrops with wide, long views along the Apennine chain.

We returned to our agriturismo where our host, a truly superb cook, kept bringing all sorts of local specialities to the table and finally her selection of home-made liqueurs to round everything off.

## Day 8.

Today involved a departure for Rome and Fiumicino airport. People caught their respective flights and Paul and Lois drove back to Umbria.



## Plant list

Acinos arvensis	Basil Thyme
Aquilegia vulgaris	Common Columbine
Agrostemma githago	Corncockle
Ajuga reptans	Common Bugle
Ajuga genevensis	Geneva Bugle
Ajuga chamaepitys	Ground Pine
Alyssum montanum	Mountain Madwort
Amelanchier ovalis	Amelanchier
Anchusa azure	Summer Forget-me-not
Anemone apennina	Apennine Anemone
Anemone hortensis	Garden Anemone
Anemone nemorosa	Wood Anemone
Anemone ranunculoides	Yellow Anemone
Anthyllis montana	Mountain Kidney-vetch
Anthyllis vulneraria ssp praeprope	Kidney-vetch
Androsace villosa	Rock Jasmine
Anthericum liliago	St Bernard's Lily
Arnica montana	Arnica
Aristolochia lutea	Yellow Birthwort
Aristolochia clematitis	Birthwort
Asphodelus albus	White Asphodel
Astragalus monspessulanus	Montpelier Milk Vetch
Bellis perennis	Common Daisy
Bellis sylvestris	Wood Daisy
Cardamine bulbifera	Coralroot
Cardamine enneaphyllos	Drooping Bittercress
Centaurea cyanea	Cornflower
Centaurea montana	Mountain Cornflower
Coronilla varia	Crown Vetch
Corydalis cava	Hollowroot
Crocus neapolitanus (syn. verna)	Spring Crocus
Cynoglossum magellense	Apennine Houndstongue
Cynoglossum officinale	Houndstongue
Cytisus hirsutus	Hairy Broom
Daphne laureola	Spurge Laurel
Daphne mezereon	Mezereon
Draba aizoides	Yellow Whitlow-grass
Dryas octopetala	Mountain Avens
Erysimum pseudorhaeticum	Mountain Mustard



Fibigia clypea  
Fritillaria montana  
Fumaria officinalis

Fibigia  
Mountain Fritillary  
Common Fumitory

Gagea montana  
Gentiana dinarica  
Gentiana utricularia  
Gentiana verna  
Globularia meridionalis

Yellow Star of Bethlehem  
Apennine Trumpet Gentian  
Bladder Gentian  
Sporting Gentian  
Globularia

Helianthemum apenninum  
Helianthemum oelandicum  
Hepatica nobilis  
Hesperis laciniata

Apennine Rockrose  
Alpine Rockrose  
Hepatica  
**Cut**-leaved Dame's Violet

Helleborus foetidus  
Helleborus viridis  
Hippocrepis commas

Stinking Hellebore  
Green Hellebore  
Horseshoe Vetch

Isatis tinctoria

Woad

Lamium garganicum  
Legousia speculum-veneris  
Lychnis flos-cuculi

Large Red Deadnettle  
Venus' Looking Glass  
Ragged Robin

Malva sylvestris  
Melampyrum arvense  
Melitis melissophyllum  
Myosotis alpestris

Common Mallow  
Field Cowheat  
Bastard Balm  
Alpine Forget-me-not

Narcissus poeticus  
Nigella damascena

Pheasant's-eye Narcissus  
Love-in-a Mist

Ornithogalum pyrenaicum  
Ornithogalum umbellatum  
Orobanche gracilis

Bath Asparagus  
Star of Bethlehem  
Slender Broomrape

Papaver rhoeas  
Paronychia kapela  
Pisum sativum  
Polygala flavescens  
Polygala major

Field Poppy  
Paronychia  
Wild Pea  
Yellow Milkwort  
Greater Milkwort

Polygala nicaensis	Nice Milkwort
Polygala vulgaris	Common Milkwort
Polygonatum odoratum	Solomon's Seal
Potentilla micrantha	Pink Barren Strawberry
Prunella laciniata	Cut-leaved Self-heal
Prunella vulgaris	Self-heal
Pulsatilla alpina	Alpine Pasqueflower
Ranunculus arvensis	Corn Buttercup
Ranuncula montanus	Mountain Buttercup
Ranunculus ficaria	Celandine
Salvia pratense	Meadow Clary
Saponaria officinalis	Soapwort
Saponaria ocymoides	Rock Soapwort
Saxifraga granulata	Meadow Saxifrage
Saxifraga tridactylites	Rue-leaved Saxifrage
Scilla bifolia	Alpine Squill
Silene dioica	Red Campion
Silene nutans	Nottingham Catchfly
Silene vulgaris	Bladder Campion
Smyrniurn olusatrum	Alexanders
Smyrniurn perfoliatum	Perfoliate Alexanders
Thymus vulgaris	Thyme
Tragopogon porrifolius	Salsify
Tragopogon pratensis	Goat's Beard
Tulipa sylvestris ssp australis	Yellow Tulip
Vicia onobrychioides	False Sainfoin
Veronica beccabunga	Brooklime
Veronica prostrata	Rock Speedwell
Viola eugenia	Eugenia's Pansy
Viola odorata	Sweet Violet
Viola reichenbachiana	Wood Violet



## ORCHIDS

Anacamptis morio	Green-winged Orchid
Anacamptis pyramidalis	Pyramidal Orchid
Cephalanthera damasonium	White Helleborine
Cephalanthera longifolia	Sword-leaved Helleborine
Dactylorhiza romana	Roman Orchid
Dactylorhiza sambucina	Elderflower Orchid
Himantoglossum adriaticum	Adriatic Lizard Orchid
Limodorum abortivum	Violet Limodore
Neotinea x dietrichiana	Toothed x Burnt Tip Hybrid
Neotinea maculata	Dense-flowered Orchid
Neotinea tridentata	Toothed Orchid
Neotinea ustulata	Burnt Tip Orchid
Orchis anthropora	Man Orchid
Orchis mascula	Early Purple Orchid
Orchis pauciflora	Few-flowered Orchid
Orchis purpurea	Lady Orchid
Orchis simia	Monkey Orchid
Orchis x bergonii	Man x Monkey Hybrid
Orchis x colemanni	Early Purple x Few-flowered Hybrid
Ophrys apifera	Bee Orchid
Ophrys bertolonii	Bertoloni's Ophrys
Ophrys fusca	Dull Ophrys
Ophrys insectifera	Fly Orchid
Ophrys sphegodes subs classica	Earl Spider Orchid
Ophrys x hybrida	Early spider x Fly Hybrid
Platanthera bifolia	Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Platanthera chlorantha	Greater Butterfly Orchid
Platanthera x hybrid	Greater x Lesser Butterfly Hybrid