

## The Special Plants of Holy Island

28th & 29th June 2025  
Led by James Common



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## Day 1

Having collected our guests from Alnmouth Train Station and made the half-hour drive to Holy Island, we were greeted by a welcoming party of Grey Seals, Little Egrets and Sandwich Terns. We reached our first stop at the Snook on the remote, seldom visited Northern tip of the island at 9.00 am sharp and setting off, it wasn't long before some interesting plants came to light.

Exploring the large dune slack adjacent to the car park, we quickly found a good selection of Northumberland's rarer, though somewhat more unassuming, plants including Black Bog-rush *Schoenus nigricans* and Seaside Centaury *Centaureum littorale*. Here too, we found our first orchids: several nice patches of Northern Marsh-orchid *Dactylorhiza purpurella*, their hybrid with Common Spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza* × *venusta*, and several Marsh Helleborines *Epipactis palustris*. A good range of more commonplace species were also present, including Hop Trefoil *Trifolium campestre*, Sand Sedge *Carex arenaria* and Common Restharrow *Ononis repens*.



Marsh Helleborine © James Common

Before reaching Snook House, a short detour into the drier grey dunes provided our first Pyramidal Orchids *Anacamptis pyramidalis* of the trip, alongside Viper's-bugloss *Echium vulgare* and the notorious Piri-piri-bur *Acaena novae-zelandiae* – a non-native species that unfortunately blights the Snook and has the unsavoury habit of snagging the socks of passersby. Here, the first of many Dark Green Fritillaries *Speyeria aglaja* noted during the morning passed by, and several Common Spotted-orchids *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* were observed. A solitary Lindisfarne Helleborine *Epipactis sancta*, nestled in a depression, was not yet in flower.

At Snook House, Purple Milk-vetch *Astragalus danicus* was in bloom across areas of short turf. A



Purple Milk-vetch © James Common

nationally rare species, this small but attractive plant is at its most plentiful in northern parts of the UK. Close by, we visited a well-hidden population of Lindisfarne Helleborine. Thankfully, three sizeable individuals were found in flower. Once thought to be a Northumbrian endemic, this rare little plant has since been unceremoniously demoted (again) to a subspecies of Dune Helleborine. Some of us in the area, however, still stick to its former name and it may well change back.

Moving into the large slacks to the west of Snook House, orchids began to appear thick and fast. By far the most plentiful were Northern Marsh-orchid and Common Spotted-orchid, though their hybrid *D.* × *venusta* was widespread too. Marsh Helleborines were numerous, and one member of the group was quick to spot a perky, salmon-pink specimen of Early Marsh-orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnata* still in flower. This species can be numerous here, but this late in the season, we did well to find any still going strong.

Much of the interest in Holy Island's dune slacks is diminutive in nature, and between orchids, we spent time admiring a host of tiny species including Bog Pimpernel *Lysimachia tenella*, Brookweed *Samolus valerandi*, Flea Sedge *Carex pulicaris*, Variegated Horsetail *Equisetum variegatum* and several bonny Eyebrights, one of which was tentatively identified as Western Eyebright *Euphrasia tetraquetra*. More Dark Green Fritillaries were seen, alongside Small Heath

*Coenonympha pamphilus* and Green-veined White *Pieris napi* and in one particularly rich slack, we encountered a substantial population of carnivorous Common Butterwort *Pinguicula vulgaris*.

The walk back to the car park via the saltmarsh was less eventful, but there was still interest to be had. Some of the group enjoyed nibbling on the fleshy leaves of Sea Purslane *Atriplex portulacoides*, and several coastal specialities including Sea Aster *Tripolium pannonicum*, Sea-milkwort *Lysimachia maritima* and Lesser Sea-spurrey *Spergularia marina* were in flower. A striking-looking sedge turned out to be the uncommon Long-bracted Sedge *Carex extensa*.



Dark Green Fritillaries © James Common

Back at the car park, a short detour into the yellow dunes brought us in search of Scots Lovage *Ligusticum scoticum* – a very rare plant in Eastern England with just a handful of records this century from North Northumberland and Cumberland. This took longer than expected, though we did eventually find it. Nearby, a solitary, white-flowered Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis* f. *albiflora* was notable.



White Pyramidal Orchid © James Common

After a spot of lunch at the Snook, we travelled together to the now bustling village for a shorter walk exploring the Heugh and castle area. Meandering through the streets, a few interesting plants were found including Small Nettle *Urtica urens*, Dwarf Mallow *Malva neglecta* and Biting Stonecrop *Sedum acre*. Some tall and impressive examples of Milk-thistle *Silybum marianum* were growing at the bottom of the vicar's garden, in close association with a stand of Hemlock *Conium maculatum*. The shoreline near the lifeboat station produced a colourful mix of Common Poppy *Papaver rhoeas*, Sea Mayweed *Tripleurospermum maritimum* and Slender Thistle *Carduus tenuiflorus*.

We crossed to the small St Cuthbert's Isle, only accessible at low tide, just as the wind began to build – well done to all for remaining upright throughout! This little tidal island is the only Northumberland site for Common Sea-lavender *Limonium vulgare*, and while we were a tad early, we managed to find a few intrepid flowers. Back on the mainland, clambering up the nearby Whin Sill outcrop provided Hare's-foot Clover *Trifolium arvense*, Sea Campion *Silene uniflora* and other species of dry, inaccessible places. The nearby harbour held naturalised Tree Lupin *Lupinus arboreus*, a somewhat out-of-place import from elsewhere.

Concluding our walk with a visit to Lindisfarne Castle, the tiny Rough Clover *Trifolium scabrum* was a notable yet typically underwhelming find.

## Day 2

The second day of the trip began at the village, where we set off for the remote southern portion of the island via the Straight Lonnen. Along the way, it was interesting to note Tree-mallow *Malva arborea* – a Mediterranean species seemingly thriving here – and a wide range of common butterflies. In just fifteen minutes, species seen included Dark Green Fritillary, Small Heath, Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*, Green-veined White, Small Skipper *Thymelicus sylvestris* and Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae*. Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet *Zygaena lonicerae* had seen a mass emergence overnight, and several hundred were observed feeding on Marsh Thistle and Creeping Thistle. A small example of Hound's-tongue *Cynoglossum officinale*, a Rare Plant Register species in Northumberland, was also found beside the path.

Soon thereafter, we entered the Links, where time was spent exploring the first of the day's dune slacks for Marsh Helleborine, Common Spotted-orchid and more Northern Marsh-orchid. A range of more familiar species were also enjoyed, including Carline Thistle *Carlina vulgaris* and Bog Pimpernel, though the Grass-of-Parnassus *Parnassia palustris* that usually adorns this area was not yet in flower – a shame. The area did, however, hold several examples of Common Twayblade *Neottia ovata*, another new orchid for the trip.



Northern Marsh Orchid © James Common

After this, a short detour took us to a seldom-visited slack known to host the island's – and indeed Northumberland's – only population of the very rare Small Adder's-tongue. While they took some finding, nestled among the Quaking-grass and assorted small herbs, we located several examples within a relatively short time. This plant is confined elsewhere to the southern and western coasts of Britain and is a very rare sight in the east.



Frog Orchid © James Common

Having optimistically promised Frog Orchids *Dactylorhiza viridis* when promoting the trip, I had grown increasingly pessimistic over the weekend and during several recce visits. It seems to be a genuinely bad year for orchids on the island, and after checking no fewer than six previous grid references to no avail, it looked like we might miss out entirely. Mercifully, this changed when we visited the nearby quarry. After a spot of lunch, Rebecca spotted several Frog Orchids on

a well-vegetated slope that had clearly escaped the rigours of the recent drought. In total, seven orchids were found in the area, and our collective shouts of delight were clearly louder than expected, drawing the attention of two passing walkers who quickly descended to see what all the fuss was about.

The quarry also proved good for more abundant orchid species, with plenty of Common Twayblade, Northern Marsh-orchid and Pyramidal Orchid. On our return route via Chare Ends, some members of the group were pleased to spot Blue Fleabane *Erigeron acris* growing on hummocks amid a pretty mix of Lady's-bedstraw *Galium verum* and Wild Thyme *Thymus drucei*.

Returning to the car park, we failed to find the island's newest orchid species, drawing a blank at the only known site for Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera*. However, the area held plenty of Marsh Helleborine and other common orchids, and several examples of Common Broomrape *Orobanche minor* were encountered parasitising stands of Red Clover.



Lindisfarne Helleborine © James Common

The afternoon leg of our second day saw us return to the Snook, keen to show newcomers to the group some of the special plants encountered the previous day. All were still present, with Seaside Centaury, Purple Milk-vetch and Marsh Helleborine spotted near Snook House. Yesterday's Lindisfarne Helleborines were relocated and counted, with nine plants found on a single dune. A good hour spent in one of the larger slacks yielded many hundreds of more common orchids, including Common Spotted-orchid, Northern Marsh-orchid and their hybrid *Dactylorhiza × venusta*.

Having walked our fair share over the weekend, we opted not to travel too far and instead spent most of our time soaking up the impressive spectacle on display. Returning to the vehicle, a repeat visit to yesterday's white Pyramidal Orchid was made, and the plant was quickly relocated by Yulia.

## Species List

### Orchids

Lindisfarne Helleborine	<i>Epipactis sancta</i>
Marsh Helleborine	<i>Epipactis palustris</i>
Pyramidal Orchid	<i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>
Common Spotted-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>
Common Spotted x Northern Marsh	<i>Dactylorhiza x venusta</i>
Northern Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>
Frog Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza viridis</i>
Early Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza incarnata subsp. incarnata</i>
Common Twayblade	<i>Neottia ovata</i>

### Other Noteworthy Plants

Variiegated Horsetail	<i>Equisetum variegatum</i>
Rough Clover	<i>Trifolium scabrum</i>
Hare's-foot Clover	<i>Trifolium arvense</i>
Bog Pimpernel	<i>Lysimachia tenella</i>
Common Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Scots Lovage	<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>
Black Bog-rush	<i>Schoenus nigricans</i>
Small Adder's-tongue	<i>Ophioglossum azoricum</i>
Purple Milk-vetch	<i>Astragalus danicus</i>
Hound's-tongue	<i>Cynoglossum officinale</i>
Seaside Centaury	<i>Centaurium littorale</i>
Round-leaved Wintergreen	<i>Pyrola rotundifolia</i>
Tree Lupin	<i>Lupinus arboreus</i>
Common Sea-lavender	<i>Limonium vulgare</i>
Blue Fleabane	<i>Erigeron acris</i>
Common Broomrape	<i>Orobanche minor</i>
Dwarf Mallow	<i>Malva neglecta</i>
Tree Mallow	<i>Malva arborea</i>
Small Nettle	<i>Urtica urens</i>
Long-bracted Sedge	<i>Carex extensa</i>
Flea Sedge	<i>Carex pulicaris</i>

## Photo Gallery



Seaside Centaury © James Common



White Pyramidal Orchid © James Common



Bog Pimpernel © James Common



Marsh Helleborine © James Common



Dark Green Fritillary on Viper's Bugloss © James Common



© James Common



Common Spotted Orchid © James Common



Early Marsh Orchid © James Common



Frog Orchid © James Common



White Common Spotted Orchid © James Common



Marsh Helleborine © James Common



Dark Green Fritillaries © James Common



Marsh Helleborine © James Common



Pyramidal Orchid © James Common