



Orchids of the Emerald Isle
16th - 20th May 2026

Led by Sean Cole & Mike Waller



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Itinerary:

Saturday 16th: Airport meet-up, Keash Mountain, Navar Forest Park

Sunday 17th: Sheskinmore and St. John's Point

Monday 18th: Atlantic Rainforest

Tuesday 19th: County Mayo, Mullet Peninsula

Wednesday 20th: Final farewells for journeys home

Day 1

The tour began at Knock Airport, where Sean and Mike were ready and waiting to welcome the eager group of orchid and wildlife enthusiasts. The weather being very typically Irish, we piled into cars before stopping for breakfast.

The first half of the day was spent exploring the imposing limestone hill of Keash Mountain, home to a colony of Dense-flowered Orchids. In light rain, we picked our way up the boggy hillside, serenaded by an elusive Cuckoo while taking time to examine freshly emerging examples of Heath Spotted Orchid, Heath Dog-violet and Mossy Saxifrage, which together created beautiful natural rock gardens.

We searched in vain for Dense-flowered Orchids but consoled ourselves with numerous colour forms of Early Purple Orchid on the steeper slopes, alongside Mountain Everlasting, Water Avens and Hairy Rock-cress.



Before long it was time to return to the airport to collect our final tranche of guests before heading out to our second site of the day to the sprawling mixed upland plantation of Navar Forest Park 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, we stopped to enjoy the panoramic views and abundance of Green-veined White and Orange-tip butterflies.



Parking right next to the small Lodgepole Pine copse, we made our way along the track searching for the tell-tale sight of two tiny, paired leaves perched amongst the mosses. We quickly found many fine plants between the trees, including some rather large specimens incongruously mixed with a 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.

After a long first day, we made our way to Donegal for a well-earned meal.

Day 2

Waking up in Donegal, we gathered our cameras and binoculars and set out north along the coast for the first full day of the trip.

After a winding, bumpy ride, we arrived at the vast dune system of Sheskinmore, which is famous for its unique dune-dwelling population of Dense-flowered Orchids. Here we met up with local ecologist Tom Garner, keen to share with guests sites he had visited elsewhere in Ireland. Under threatening skies we made our way through the Bluebell-clad dunes to find several gone-over

examples of Dense-flowered Orchid, initially raising fears that no fresh flowering plants were left. Our fears didn't, however, last long and a lovely fresh plant was found hiding in plain sight!

After a few spots of rain, we continued our circular walk around the wild dunes, taking in some nice examples of Early Purple Orchid and early emerging Common Twayblade before visiting a second site for Dense-flowered Orchid, curiously dotted around a heavily grazed zone of heathland clinging to exposed bedrock and glacial erratic boulders. Having discussed the unusual geology, we continued into some wetter slacks to find freshly emerging examples of Early Marsh Orchid var. *coccinea* alongside a few examples of Northern Marsh Orchid before stepping out onto the wild windy beach to observe Ringed Plovers and Common Gulls.

Now very hungry, we made our way to the fishing town of Killybegs to have lunch and look for the ever-faithful Black Guillemots in the harbour, which we spotted bobbing around the giant deep-sea fishing ships.

After lunch, we carried on to the stunning Hebridean-style St. John's Point. This long peninsula also provides excellent opportunities for sea-watching alongside some fantastic limestone pavement and fen habitats.

As is typical for this site, a stunning full summer plumage Great Northern Diver was in the bay, providing lovely views. 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.

After getting our fill of the orchids, we were treated to relatively close views of a sizeable flock of Whimbrel, briefly stopping on their way to their northern breeding grounds.

Eventually the rain became too persistent, and we limped back to Donegal for our final night in the town.

Day 3

We began the first half of the day with a short drive to visit a beautiful ancient woodland site adjacent to a gorgeous lough.



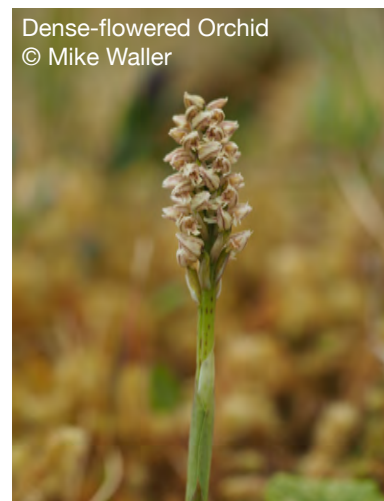
Sword-leaved Helleborine
© Mike Waller

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.

It wasn't long before we came across our first population of beautiful Sword-leaved Helleborines hidden amongst the boggy alder trees with Common Cow-wheat and Hard Fern. We enjoyed knarled Sessile Oak trees, festooned in beard lichens with a woodland floor carpeted in Great Woodrush and Bluebells.

A little further on we came across three perfectly flowering Bird's-nest Orchids hidden amongst the vegetation before arriving at the 'main' Sword-leaved Helleborine colony. But having already satisfied ourselves with a few good plants 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 the water to a distant pine tree within which is concealed the large nest of a very rare bird species, found by us two years



Dense-flowered Orchid
© Mike Waller

previously. But no birds were to be seen! It turns out they have moved to a different tree elsewhere on the lough, which we located later on that afternoon.

The walk back gifted us with numerous Water Avenas, Common Spotted Orchid, a single giant Common Twayblade, Sanicle and some impressive specimens of Tree Lungwort – a large seaweed-like lichen which is a speciality of western oak woods.

A final treat for some of the group was a sneak peek at a small colony of Killarney Fern, the fragile fronds clinging to a wet cliff deep in the woods. Understated but very exciting to see!

We made tracks across the border and on to County Mayo for the final leg of the trip. We knew we were in for an excellent couple of days when we noted the amount of Irish Marsh Orchids along the road verges on the way to our hotel, but we didn't stop too long as we knew we were going to be seeing a lot more of these tomorrow. Still, our other main target safely recorded.



Tree Lungwort © Janet H

Day 4

We woke up fresh for another bracing day in the wind, this time in County Mayo on The Mullet – a long peninsula famed for its rolling machair, hay meadows and wide sandy beaches.

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



Irish Marsh Orchids © David P

On approach, it was immediately apparent why our first stop was a winner – the large front lawn of a local factory covered in hundreds of large Irish Marsh Orchids. No walking required for this one, with approximately 300 plants growing all around the car park.

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.

Then it was on to lunch at another well-served deli bar before heading on to Cross Lough. En route, we paused beside a wide bay to enjoy distant views of two Great Northern Divers and six Black Guillemots out to sea, with a flock of Sanderling feeding on the beach.

Finally, the rain abated, and we ventured out of the cars to take in more Irish Marsh Orchids along the shore at Cross Lough with a single example of Early Marsh Orchid. Unlike the previous colony, these plants were much smaller and more variable, with some heavily pigmented specimens verging on hyperchromatic.

Then it was on to a series of beautiful hay meadows for Corncrake, of which we heard several but, as always, they remained invisible! We were, however, treated to some beautiful views of Irish Hare gambolling through the meadows.

But the main event of the day was a visit to a wetland which holds a small breeding population of Red-necked Phalarope - the only one in Ireland. We had arranged to meet the Project Lead for the Phalaropes, and the Reserve, who works for Birdwatch Ireland. Dave gave us a short talk on the history of the site and how the fortunes of the phalaropes have changed significantly since he first settled here in 2003. Unfortunately, the Phalaropes had yet to return from their wintering grounds off the Galapagos, but we did get superb views of 'drumming' Snipe overhead alongside Lapwings, Redshank, Shoveler and Skylarks. Within the fenced enclosure (built to keep out

predators for ground-nesting birds) many duneland-type Pugsley's Marsh Orchids could be seen, and our guide kindly let us in the enclosure to see these up close, since there were no Phalaropes to disturb. Our guide also treated us to a close-up view of a Lapwing chick, which was safely returned to the grassland after a few photographs.

We then moved on to the nearby dunes to hunt out the Irish Click Beetle, of which we eventually found several specimens between the Marram Grass. This species occurs only at this particular site on the Mullet, with the nearest continental colony being in the Pyrenees! Our guide also kindly captured us a Red-shanked Carder Bumblebee for close inspection of the diagnostic red hairs on the legs while an unexpected Arctic Skua breezed past overhead.



Red-shanked Carder Bee © David P

With an hour or two to spare before dinner, we headed north with instructions to find Twite on the coastal cliffs. It didn't take long for a lone bird to zip past, alighting on the grass and wire fences, offering perfect views. But the bird excitement kept coming with a large flock of Whimbrel landing right in front of us before being joined by several Wheatear and our first Chough of the trip. Out to sea, Fulmars, Gannets, Kittiwakes and Manx Shearwaters wheeled past against the rugged coastline. This final 30 minutes was a fitting crescendo to a fantastic trip.

Day 5

Our final morning was reserved for final farewells as we returned to the airport in time for flights back home. Greenwings would like to thank the group for a great trip, and we hope to see you again soon!

Species Lists

Notable Plants

* denotes endemic or near-endemic species or subspecies.

	Angiosperms	
	Monocotyledons	
	Amaryllidaceae	
1	Wild Garlic	<i>Allium ursinum</i>
	Asparagaceae	
2	Bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta</i>
	Juncaceae	
3	Great Wood-rush	<i>Luzula sylvatica</i>
	Orchidaceae	
4	Pyramidal Orchid (in leaf)	<i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>
5	Sword-leaved Helleborine	<i>Cephalanthera longifolia</i>
6	Early Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza incarnata</i> var. <i>coccinea</i>
7	Common Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>

Notable Plants

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8	Irish Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza kerryensis</i>
9	Heath Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>
10	Northern Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>
11	Pugsley's Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza traunsteinerioides</i>
12	Marsh Helleborine (in leaf)	<i>Epipactis palustris</i>
13	Marsh Fragrant Orchid (in leaf)	<i>Gymnadenia densiflora</i>
14	Dense-flowered Orchid	<i>Neottia maculata</i>
15	Lesser Twayblade	<i>Neottia cordata</i>
16	Bird's Nest Orchid	<i>Neottia nidus-avis</i>
17	Common Twayblade	<i>Neottia ovata</i>
18	Early Purple Orchid	<i>Orchis mascula</i>
19	<i>Dactylorhiza x jenensis</i>	<i>D. traunsteinerioides</i> x <i>D. maculata</i>
Dicotyledons		
Apiaceae		
20	Pignut	<i>Conopodium majus</i>
21	Sanicle	<i>Sanicula europaea</i>
Asteraceae		
22	Mountain Everlasting	<i>Antennaria dioica</i>
23	Meadow Thistle	<i>Cirsium dissectum</i>
Brassicaceae		
24	Hairy Rock-cress	<i>Arabis hirsuta</i>
Caryophyllaceae		
25	Ragged Robin	<i>Silene flos-cuculi</i>
Celastraceae		
26	Grass-of-Parnassus	<i>Parnassia palustris</i>
Lamiaceae		
27	Bugle	<i>Ajuga reptans</i>
Lentabulariaceae		
28	Common Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Menyanthaceae		
29	Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>

Notable Plants

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	Orobanchaceae	
30	Common Cow-wheat	<i>Melampyrum pratense</i>
31	Marsh Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis palustris</i>
32	Common Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>
33	Yellow Rattle	<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>
	Plantaginaceae	
34	Wood Speedwell	<i>Veronica montana</i>
	Plumbaginaceae	
35	Thrift	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
	Polygalaceae	
36	Heath Milkwort	<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>
	Primulaceae	
37	Yellow Pimpernel	<i>Lysimachia nemorum</i>
38	Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>
	Ranunculaceae	
39	Marsh Marigold / Kingcup	<i>Caltha palustris</i>
	Rosaceae	
40	Lady's Mantle	<i>Alchemilla</i> sp.
41	Marsh Cinquefoil	<i>Comarum palustre</i>
42	Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>
43	Burnet Rose	<i>Rosa pimpinellifolia</i>
	Rubiaceae	
44	Sweet Woodruff	<i>Galium odoratum</i>
	Saxifragaceae	
45	Mossy Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga hypnoides</i>
	Violaceae	
46	Heath Dog-violet	<i>Viola canina</i>
47	Seaside Pansy	<i>Viola tricolor</i> ssp. <i>curtisii</i>
	Pteridophytes	
	Equisetaceae	
48	Wood Horsetail	<i>Equisetum sylvaticum</i>

Notable Plants

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	Pteridaceae	
49	Hard Fern	<i>Blechnum spicant</i>
50	Royal Fern	<i>Osmunda regalis</i>
51	Killarney Fern	<i>Trichomanes speciosum</i>
	Bryophytes	
	Peltigeraceae	
52	Tree Lungwort	<i>Lobaria pulmonaria</i>

Birds

Species heard but not seen are marked with 🎵.

1	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
3	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
4	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
5	Corncrake 🎵	<i>Crex crex</i>
6	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
7	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
8	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
9	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
10	Curlew 🎵	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
11	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
12	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
13	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
14	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
15	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
16	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
17	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
18	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
19	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
20	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>

Birds

Species heard but not seen are marked with 🎵.

21	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
22	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
23	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>
24	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
25	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
26	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
27	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
29	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
30	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
31	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
32	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
33	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>
34	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
35	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
36	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
37	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
38	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
39	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
40	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
41	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
42	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
43	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
44	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
45	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>
46	Linnet	<i>Linnaria cannabina</i>
47	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>
48	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>

Other Taxa		
	Butterflies	
1	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>
2	Orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>
	Other Invertebrates	
3	Red-shanked Carder Bumblebee	<i>Bombus ruderarius</i>
4	Irish Click Beetle	<i>Selatosomus melancholicus</i>
	Mammals	
5	Irish Hare	<i>Lepus timidus ssp. hibernicus</i>

Photo Gallery





Common Twayblade © Janet H



© Mike Waller



Early Marsh Orchid © Janet H



Hairy Rock-ress © Janet H



Early Purple Orchid © Mike Waller



© Janet H



Marsh Marigold © Janet H



Mossy Saxifrage © Mike Waller



© Mike Waller



© Janet H



Fossils © Janet H



Water Avens © Janet H



Tree Lungwort © Mike Waller



Pugsley's Marsh Orchid © Mike Waller



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