

Woodland Wild Orchids 15 in the Dover Area

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Britain has nothing to rival the displays which delight spring-time visitors to Crete, the South of France and Italy. *Orchidaceæ* is the second largest family of plants in the vegetable kingdom, numbering between 15,000 and 35,000 species depending on which authority is consulted, yet the British Isles has only just over fifty. Even so one would have to be extremely persistent to track them all down since some are elusive, like the SPURRED CORAL-ROOT which pops up mysteriously in one place and then disappears for years, and the LADY'S SLIPPER ORCHID which has been reduced to just one closely-guarded plant in the north-west Pennines after years of collection by plant hunters.

However, residents in this area are fortunate in that a remarkable number of plants and a good variety of species grow locally on the chalk which most orchids prefer. No doubt many readers know of sites they have personally discovered so this list is not intended to be comprehensive but more of an encouragement to country walkers to keep their eyes open (though taking home nothing but photographs, of course). One interesting point to help orchid spotters is that they are more abundant on north-facing slopes.

The most abundant orchid is the COMMON TWAYBLADE (*Listera ovata*) found in the majority of local woods but particularly fine specimens up to two feet high in woods along the Alkham Valley. It escapes human depredations because its yellowish green or bronze flowers merge into the woodland vegetation, yet its lax flower spikes like little hanging dolls are very beautiful. It is just as well it escapes attention since it takes up to 14 years to flower from seed.

The most well-known orchid is the EARLY PURPLE (*Orchis mascula*) because its bold reddish-purple spikes and spotted leaves stand out in contrast to bluebells which flower simultaneously. Nearly all the local woods support a few plants but the outstanding local wood is between Denton and Wootton, conveniently bisected by a recently cleared public footpath. There is a great variation in colour from white to deep purple and the flowers smell strongly of cats' urine.

Less common but widespread are GREATER BUTTERFLY ORCHIDS (*Platanthera chlorantha*) which can be found in many local woods, Frandham Wood, River, being usually home to a few dozen. It is a tall beautiful flower glistening white with a greenish tinge with a strong perfume, more pronounced at night since it is pollinated by moths.

LESSER BUTTERFLY ORCHIDS (*Platanthera bifolia*) are far less common but grow in a wood near Martin. As their name suggests they are small and more dainty and have

16 differences in the reproductive organs. One wonders why they are so restricted in distribution when the more flamboyant Greater Butterfly is quite widely distributed.

FLY ORCHIDS (*Ophrys insectifera*) are also found in Frandham Wood and also in various places around Barfreston. They are difficult to spot being rather weedy in habit and, as their name suggests, have a strong resemblance to flies with a rectangular blue patch on the brown lip. It is fertilized by a small burrowing wasp which mistakes the flower for a female and thus pollinates it. The BIRD'S NEST ORCHID (*Neottia nidus-avis*) derives its realistic name from its tangled mass of roots. Being almost devoid of chlorophyll its stems and flowers are uniformly light brown so it is quite possible to walk right through plants especially as they seem to prefer undergrowth – free beech woods whose leaf litter is an almost exact match. Picnicking families in Barfreston Woods have possibly never noticed the good colonies of these orchids almost under their car wheels.

Also in Barfreston Woods, Lousyberry Wood, Kearsney, Waldershare Park and in fact in any beech woods, are LARGE WHITE HELLEBORINES (*Cephalanthera damasonium*) whose name is rather grander than the reality. The off-white flowers never open wide and the broad leaves are frequently brown and chewed round the edge giving the whole plant a tatty appearance but if the flowers are examined closely the florists' orchid in miniature springs to view.

The LADY ORCHID (*Orchis purpurea*) is the most famous and spectacular, rarely found in Britain out of Kent. Many people go to Yockletts Bank, Petham, to the K.T.N.C. reserve which is renowned for these lovely plants with maroon hood and pale pink lip but once I started searching, I found isolated plants in woods on each side of the Alkham Valley, Barfreston, Martin, Acrise, and Lydden, so they must be widespread in the area.

"WILD ORCHIDS OF BRITAIN" by V.S. Summerhayes in the Collins New Naturalist Series is the most comprehensive book on native species but for anyone travelling on holiday "WILD ORCHIDS OF BRITAIN AND EUROPE" by Davies and Huxley, Hogarth Press, is unrivalled for clarity of text and the beautiful photographs which simplify identification enormously.

Deadline

for CONTRIBUTIONS

The Editor welcomes contributions suitable for the *Newsletter*. Illustrations to articles, and other appropriate visual material are particularly appreciated..

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