



Discovering Dorset's Orchids

Spider, bee and frog are just some of the orchids that can be found in Dorset. Susanne Masters looks forward to spotting these rare beauties

Orchids are the glamorous components of the exceptional plant diversity found in Dorset. The south coast location with its mild climate allows species rarely found in Britain, such as the early spider orchid (*Ophrys sphegodes*), to thrive. These exotic blooms grow in great numbers and in a range of forms around the county thanks to the wide range of habitats ranging from chalk grassland to sandy heathland. In fact half of the orchid species that grow in Britain can be found in Dorset and they span a flowering season from April to September.

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The earliest to flower is the early spider orchid, which is at its best in April. The Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT) chose this for its emblem as it is particularly indicative of Dorset with 75% of its British population growing in the county. Joy Wallis, People and Wildlife Co-ordinator for the DWT, recommends walking along the coast from Durlston Country Park to Dancing Ledge to see some of the best displays of this rare orchid.

May is the prime month for seeing the green-winged orchid (*Anacamptis morio*); its vibrant purple flowers are made more distinctive by the fine parallel lines on the side petals. They grow on unimproved grassland where the grass is kept short, but with the loss of old pasture land this species has declined. Corfe Mullen Meadow, managed by DWT, is the place to see hundreds of flowering purple spikes, a reminder of how our fields must once have looked.

June and July is when the greatest number of orchid species are flowering. An ideal way to see them is to visit Badbury Rings, twice. In June you will see the bee orchids (*Ophrys apifera*) around the rings, the white helleborines (*Cephalanthera damasonium*) and bird's-nest orchids (*Neottia nidus-avis*) that flower under the beech avenue. A second visit in July will reward you with the pyramidal orchids (*Anacamptis*



Above
Autumn
lady's-tresses
at Durdle Door

Below
Early spider
orchid



Corfe Mullen Meadow is the place to see hundreds of flowering purple spikes of the green-winged orchid

Six-spot burnet on a pyramidal orchid

pyramidalis) and frog orchids (*Dactylorhiza viridis*), which are at their prime.

Badbury Rings is a good example of the art of using grazing to conserve plant populations, as Peter Samson, Head Warden at the Kingston Lacy estate, which manages the site, explains. "We carefully time grazing in order to maintain the impressive array of 12 orchid species that grow there. Cattle wrap their tongue around the grass and rip it up, while sheep bite the grass off and crop it much closer to the ground." In the late autumn and early winter sheep cut the grass low, while cattle are used during the rest of the year to prevent scrub from developing as they eat some of the hedgerow and brambles. "Cattle may trample orchid flower spikes but generally do not eat the flowers and most of the orchids are on the ramparts, which the cattle do not go on as it is too steep for them," says Peter.

Last year, as part of a seven-year rotation, sheep were used to graze the grass during the summer, which meant visitors may have been disappointed to see few orchids in flower; however, summer grazing was essential to maintain the site as the sheep ate the invasive ragwort, which would otherwise dominate the pasture. Sheep won't be grazing the site this summer

Green-winged orchid



Pyramidal orchids



and a fine display of orchids is expected. "In the long term it is part of a cycle keeping Badbury Rings a prime location for orchid spotting," says Peter.

Orchids are particularly interesting in the context of biodiversity as they are known to depend on fungi. The fine seeds of orchids do not contain food reserves to enable growth into a plant and they require fungi to germinate and grow. Even fully grown, many continue to rely on fungi for nutrients. An extreme example of this is the bird's-nest orchid, which does not have any leaves and is entirely dependent on its fungal partners for sustenance.

At the days end you can sometimes catch the coconut scent of the autumn lady's-tresses

In August and early September, as the orchid season draws to a close, look out for species such as autumn lady's-tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*). Its diminutive flowers can be spotted if you keep an eye out for short grass stems which seem thick. In bright daylight with the help of a hand lens or magnifying glass you can observe the

succulent crystalline construction of the petals. At the day's end you can sometimes catch the coconut scent they give off.

Autumn lady's-tresses are confined to short turf, where grass is grazed or lightly mown. With this preference these orchids can be found in churchyards as well as out in the fields. Edward Pratt, author of *The Wild Flowers of the Isle of Purbeck, Brownsea and Sandbanks*, said that last year was not a good one for flowers at St Mary's Church and All Saints Church in Swanage, although some spikes were there. Who knows what this year may bring, though more might be seen in Durlston Country Park between the Mile Posts and west of the Lighthouse.

Dorset's fascinating array of orchid species demonstrates the complex relationships underpinning biodiversity and the importance of conserving the many varied habitats in which plants, animals and fungi co-exist. The exquisite flowers of the orchid draw attention not only to themselves but also to the whole environment in which they grow. □

Autumn
lady's-tresses



Get Involved

Orchid Survey on 19 June at Fontmell Down: participants will be taught orchid identification and help monitor the orchid population on the reserve. For more information and booking call 01305 264620.

Badbury Rings is part of the National Trust's Kingston Lacy estate near Wimborne. Call 01202 883402 or visit www.nationaltrust.org.uk for more details.

Dorset Wildlife Trust can provide more details about places to spot orchids; visit www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk or call 01305 264620.