

A Fly Orchid *Ophrys insectifera* colony nearly in Worcestershire.

Graham Martin

Wagtails, Broadway Road, Aston Somerville, Broadway WR12 7JF
 graham.martin8@btinternet.com

Fly Orchids *Ophrys insectifera* were described by Summerhayes (1968) as, “one of the most elusive of British plants”. He goes on to explain that this is because, “the coloration of the flowers produces a sort of natural camouflage, which, taken in conjunction with the normal habitat of the species (among mixed vegetation in open woods, or between bushes), makes the flower-spike almost invisible to a person when nearly treading on the plant”. My recent, and first, encounter with a Fly Orchid certainly reinforces this. In fact, I very nearly did tread on it.



01. Fly Orchid *Ophrys insectifera*. Graham Martin



02. Fly Orchid with an indication of the surrounding closed-canopy habitat produced by hazel coppice growth and taller Ash and Beech trees. Graham Martin

I was on a familiar woodland path, one that I have walked in all seasons for a number of years and on this date (May 20th 2022) my eye was taken by the many plants of Herb-Paris *Paris quadrifolia*, Greater Butterfly-orchids *Platanthera chlorantha*, Common Spotted-

orchids *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and Common Twayblades *Neottia ovata*, that make a good showing there. The Fly Orchid (01) was growing right by the path. A wider search of the surrounding area produced a further eight flower-spikes within a roughly 20m diameter circle. Apart from the one by the path edge all of the flower-spikes were hidden in rather deep shade among a ground flora dominated by Dog’s Mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and Woodruff *Galium odoratum*, under a rather mature Hazel *Corylus avellana* coppice with a small number of larger Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and Beech *Fagus sylvatica* trees (02). A couple of the flower spikes were about 300 mm tall (03).



03. One of the taller Fly Orchid flower-spikes. Graham Martin

Obviously, this was an exciting find but a little disappointing in that it is about 3 km outside the present county of Worcestershire. If the find had been made before 1931 the site would have been in the Cutsdean exclave of Worcestershire, since that date the parish has been part of Gloucestershire. The site is at an elevation of 280 m on the top of the Cotswold scarp, so the soil is calcareous and Summerhayes states that Fly Orchids occur “almost invariably on calcareous soils”.

I reported the finding to the Gloucestershire Environmental Records Centre who said they had no previous record of Fly Orchids for this site and said they would investigate the possibility of getting the site some level of protective listing. The Fly Orchid record has also been lodged with iRecord (record number 25438128). The abundance of other ancient woodland indicator plant species at this site suggest that the wood has a long history. I have also found a colony of about 20 Broad-leaved Helleborine *Epipactis helleborine* plants about 500m away in the same woodland. There could still be more uncommon plants to find.

The NBN Atlas does have records for Fly Orchid sites in Worcestershire. Grid square SO66 in the Teme Valley shows records dated 1821 and 1909 but no details are available on the website for these records. There is also a record in grid square SP13 dated 16 August 1977 attributed to “Gloucestershire Historic Wildlife Sightings prior to 1st Jan 2000”. The exact location is not given, and the record is not detailed. SP13 lies close to the site where I found the orchids this year. The 1977 record could be in Worcestershire since the grid square encompasses the top of Broadway Hill across which the county boundary runs, and there are Beech woods on the Worcestershire side of the scarp which could be a suitable habitat. The BSBI online atlas also indicates a record prior to 2000 in grid square SP03 which encompasses the site of my record and extends across the county boundaries of Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, but exact location is not given. Maskew (2014) also reports these old records, but adds another one, “an unlocalised record for the Evesham district” dated 1878.

Is the colony near Cutsdean a newly established one? That seems unlikely but it is a possibility given the way that colonies of other *Ophrys* species can pop up (Hutchings 1989). Although this colony may be known to other people it does not seem to have been entered into any open recording scheme, such as Gloucestershire Environmental Records, iRecord or NBN.

It could be that this year has been exceptional for the growth and flowering of the orchids in this location. Previous and subsequent years may not produce a significant or noticeable number of flowering plants. Recent evidence suggests that the monocarpic nature of *Ophrys* species, which has been considered a factor leading to their more enigmatic appearance (Summerhayes 1968), may not be accurate. Recent demographic studies demonstrated that *Ophrys* plants often have a period of dormancy during their lives, but that they can flower (and fruit) for several years in succession (Hutchings 1989; Wells and Cox 1991). It is estimated that approximately 50% of an *Ophrys* population could be dormant in any one year, and individuals could remain dormant for up to two years before re-emerging above ground (Hutchings 1987).

I shall keep visiting the site and next spring will look out for “one of the most elusive of British plants”. I hope I am lucky. I shall search more widely too, it is possible that there are other colonies in this locality, and there may even be some nearby, across the border in Worcestershire.

References

- Hutchings, M.J. 1989. Conservation and the British orchid flora. *Plants Today* 2:50–58.
- Maskew, R. 2014. *The Flora of Worcestershire*. Published by the author Roger Maskew, Worcestershire.
- Summerhayes, V. S. 1968. *Wild orchids of Britain* (Second Edition), Collins, London.
- Wells, T.C.E. & Cox, R. 1991. Demographic and biological studies on *Ophrys apifera*: some results from a 10 year study. In, *Population Ecology of Terrestrial Orchids* (eds T.C.E. Wells & J.H. Willems), pp. 47–61. SPB Publishing, The Hague, The Netherlands.
- NBN Atlas online. Available at: <https://species.nbnatlas.org/species/NBNSYS0000002318> [Accessed 29.11.22]
- BSBI Plant Atlas online: Available at: <https://plantatlas.brc.ac.uk/plant/ophrys-insectifera> [Accessed 29.11.22]

Images

01. Fly Orchid *Ophrys insectifera*. Graham Martin
02. Fly Orchid with an indication of the surrounding closed-canopy habitat produced by hazel coppice growth and taller Ash and Beech trees. Graham Martin
03. One of the taller Fly Orchid flower-spikes. Graham Martin