

Orchid Safari to Sardinia Spring 2015 Hilary Pickersgill

In April 2015 Graham Giles, Steve and I travelled to Sardinia for a two week orchid safari. Armed with plenty of site information from HOS members and other friends, we planned our stay based at three centres, Sassari, Dorgali and Gonnessa. April can be very wet in Sardinia but we were lucky and enjoyed good weather most of the time.

Journeying north from the airport we detoured to a woodland site where we hoped to see *Gennaria diphylla*. The state of the flowers would give some idea how the season was progressing. Unfortunately, the flowers were mostly over but some spikes had a few good flowers at the stem tip. We explored many similar sites near the coast in the north west and the pattern was generally the same, a good number of species were present but often the number of plants of each type was small, sometimes only one or two. One site was significantly different from the rest and will stay in our memories. There we saw enormous numbers of *G. diphylla* which had mostly gone to seed but formed artistically arranged groups under the trees. There were huge groups of the Sardinian endemic *Ophrys subfusca* ssp. *liveranii*, a striking plant, usually very tall with brown and yellow flowers with the lip at approximately 90° to the stem. A large population of *Himantoglossum robertianum* had gone over, as we expected in April, but *Neotinea maculata* were in good flower. We were struck by the pale colour of most of the flowers. We found just two *Ophrys neglecta* plants, one standing completely alone, a very striking plant already nearly 40cm with more flowers to come. The flowers are very similar to *Ophrys tenthredinifera* but the hairiness of the lip margin and the tuft of hair just above the appendage are different and striking. We continued to find this species in northern and central Sardinia, usually just a few plants at a site.

Road side banks proved to be rich orchid territory, for the number of plants or the number of species or both. One bank deserved star quality status for its population of *Ophrys eleonorae*. This orchid, named after the Sardinian princess Eleonora, ruler of Arborea, is a slender version of *Ophrys iricolor*. A handsome plant, the group on the bank was an impressive sight.

Old olive groves were rich orchid areas. Two that we explored yielded thirteen species between them. It was the first place we found *Neotinea lactea*. *Orchis anthropophora*, clearly at home in this environment, were present in enormous numbers in full flower.

Fig. 1: *Gennaria diphylla* Fig. 2: *Ophrys subfusca* ssp. *liveranii*
Fig. 3: *Ophrys eleonorae* Fig. 4: *Ophrys panormitana* ssp. *praecox*
Photos by Hilary Pickersgill (1 & 3) and Steve Pickersgill (2 & 4)

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Fig. 5: *Ophrys annae*
Photo by Steve Pickersgill

We found many *Ophrys* species including *Op. annae*, *Op. apifera*, *Op. bombyliflora*, *Op. panormitana* ssp. *praecox*, *Op. corsica*, and *Op. speculum*. *Op. annae* is endemic to Sardinia and Corsica. It looks like *Op. fuciflora* but is thinner with smaller flowers. The sepals are white, pink or green with a green vein. The lip has a densely hairy margin and a prominent appendage. *Op. corsica* has characteristics somewhere between *Ophrys lutea* and *Ophrys phryganae*. We were pleased to find *Op. panormitana* ssp. *praecox*. This endemic of Sardinia and Corsica is local and rare and we were at the end of its flowering time. The plants we found were mostly over but two had one reasonably fresh flower at the top of the stem which we could identify with a degree of confidence. One of the olive groves supported a colony of *Anacamptis pyramidalis* which were just coming into flower and this was the only place we saw them.

There were two specimens of *Orchis purpurea* in good flower and we found more at one other site. There were many *Serapias parviflora* at both sites.

Our last full day in the north west ended with a visit to a grassy hillside above Lake Bidighinzu, a wonderful site for *Orchis provincialis* which stood out as they were backlit by the low evening sunshine. In other areas the field was bright with *A. papilionacea*, *Op. corsica* and *N. lactea* with the Sardinian and Corsican endemic *Ophrys zonata* hiding in the grass. *Op. zonata* is similar to *Ophrys sulcata* but the colour in the lip is divided into more distinct zones as the name suggests.



Fig. 6: *Ophrys zonata*
Photo by Hilary Pickersgill