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The plateau of orchids

Gordon James takes us month by month through a French summer.

Fig. 1 Stipa grassland in June

We have a house in the south of France, a small 'two up, two down' with metre-thick stone walls, in a tiny village whose main and declining industry is the production of sheep's milk to make the local Roquefort cheese. The village is nearly 700m above sea level, so the summers are generally warm, while the winters can be very

cold and any plants that grow here are most certainly 'hardy'.

The village sits on a limestone ledge and is overlooked to the north by the dolomitic-limestone Plateau de Guilhaumard (fig. 1), itself an off-shoot of the much larger Causse du Larzac. Two hundred years ago the plateau was covered

in a dense beech forest which was cleared to feed the iron industry which briefly flourished in the valley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Today the plateau provides a mosaic of mixed woodland, open limestone grassland and rocky gullies, and from late March until July or later it is carpeted with a bewildering range of flowers, notable amongst them fifty-odd species of orchids.



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Fig. 2 The Early Purple Orchid flowers from late March, here in early April.

We measure the developing season from the expectation of seeing the first Early Purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*) (fig. 2) flower in late March to the time when we walk through swathes of Man Orchids (*O. anthropophora*) or Monkey Orchids (*O. simia*) with hardly a sideways glance.



Figs 3a & b Lady Orchid in April.

After taking slightly early retirement, we moved here for a year and followed the sequence of flowers through a whole season.

In late March and early April, while Perennial Candytuft (*Iberis saxatilis*) carpets the stonier areas of the plateau with white, and the large green lizards are waking up in the sunshine, spikes of Early Spider Orchid (*Ophrys sphegodes*) start to appear along the roadsides

around the village and the Early Purple Orchids are scattered across the plateau. At the same time many hundreds of thousands of plump rosettes of the Lady Orchid (*Orchis purpurea*) (figs 3a & b) are beginning to bud up and after two weeks open into flower spikes. As the Lady Orchids reach their peak, the much paler spikes of the Military Orchid (*O. militaris*) (fig. 4) appear, especially against the limestone rocks on the edges of the grasslands, along with spikes of the Green-winged Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*) and Burnt Orchid (*Neotinea ustulata*) (fig. 5). The Monkey Orchid (fig. 6) was first pointed out to us in late April, as we were being driven along the road that skirts the plateau by a couple of German friends, amateur botanists who also have a house in the village. The orchids formed a small colony

Fig. 4 Military Orchid.

amongst some rocks; we stopped for a photo opportunity and its strange, dancing flowers soon became a favourite. Like most orchid species in this area, soon after spotting your first you start to notice them everywhere. This was also true a couple of weeks later as the small, thin spikes of the Man Orchid started to form large swathes amongst short grassland. Orchids being orchids, there is a degree of blurring between species, and individuals are not always that easy to identify; we presumed many to be hybrids. In April the orchids share the ground with innumerable flowers including dwarf narcissus, Grape Hyacinths (*Muscari atlanticum*), Pasque Flowers (*Pulsatilla vulgaris* and *P. rubra*), *Daphne cneorum* shrublets, fritillaries (*Fritillaria pyrenaica*), *Helianthemum apenninum* and *Tulipa sylvestris*.



Fig. 5 Burnt Orchid.

Throughout May the other promiscuous orchid group, the Bee Orchids, proliferate. And if the *Orchis* species can be difficult to identify, the *Ophrys* can be nearly impossible. The most spectacular of these is *Ophrys aveyronensis* (fig. 7) which is endemic to this region and has an unmistakable large round labellum or lip, with pink sepals and darker pink petals; we first saw it in early May while walking in one of the less-visited sections of the plateau. Throughout the month, *Ophrys scolopax* (fig. 8), *O. insectifera* (fig. 9), *O. apifera* and *O. fusca* appeared here and there, as well as the much less common Yellow Bee Orchid (*O. lutea*), which we had seen in some abundance much earlier in the year, nearer the coast where the seasons start earlier.

Between the plateau and the village runs a track with limestone to the south and a thick bed of Jurassic clay to the north, and beside this track lies a low hill with springs running down from where the clay and limestone meet. Lining each side of these damp flushes can be found small spikes of the Tongue Orchid (*Serapias lingua*) (fig. 10), and not far away in a damp meadow the even smaller green spikes of the Frog Orchid (*Dactylorhiza viride*). In mid-May both the Lesser and the Greater Butterfly Orchids could be

found across the plateau: *Platanthera bifolia* (fig. 11) and *P. chlorantha*. At the same time, in the shadier hollows were the first of the Helleborines, the Sword-leaved Helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*) (fig. 12). We would have to wait till early June for the rest of this fascinating group.

While many of the orchid species described here could be found in colonies covering large areas of a hillside, others tended to occur here and there in small groups. The most spectacular was the Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) (figs 13a & b), with its extraordinarily long spur which starts tightly curled and then gradually opens to hang down like a lolling tongue. We first saw it in the last week of May on a herb-rich bank on another part of the huge Larzac upland; then for the next month or so, every day we went out we encountered between one and a dozen plants here and there, including a few beside a path a few hundred metres from the house. The other notable 'loner' was the Violet Limodore (*Limodorum abortivum*) (fig. 14), a leafless saprophyte with bright violet flowers, which we saw on a regular basis on banksides throughout May and June. The Twayblade (*Neottia ovata*) can be found almost anywhere where there is a good woodland canopy,



Fig. 6 The Monkey Orchid.



Fig. 7 The most spectacular *Ophrys* orchid, *Ophrys aveyronensis*.



Fig. 8 *Ophrys scolopax*.

Fig. 9 *Ophrys insectifera*.

particularly beech woods, but never in very large numbers. The two local species of Fragrant Orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea* and *G. odoratissima*) (fig. 15) we found while exploring the steep meadows which overlay the clay deposits. Both species are fragrant and can easily be told apart by the length of their spurs.

During late May we found the parasitic Bird's Nest



Fig. 10 Tongue Orchid in damp areas.

Orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*) on the plateau in just two locations; it is probably more widespread but at a casual glance it can be mistaken for the much more common parasite, the Broomrape (*Orobanche* species), four species of which we found growing on the plateau. The Marsh Orchids (*Dactylorhiza maculata*, *D. fuchsii* and *D. elata*) began to flower during the last weeks of May



Fig. 11 Lesser Butterfly Orchids widespread across the plateau.

and through June, generally in damper ditches. *D. elata* (fig. 16) was particularly striking with its long bracts. In a different habitat the pale yellow Elder-flowered Orchid (*D. sambucina*) (fig. 17) grows out in the open in thin rocky grassland and appears to be restricted to one particular site on the edge of the plateau, just off the roadside near the small hamlet of Canals.

The really big May orchid show was provided by the Pyramidal Orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*)



Fig. 12 Sword-leaved Helleborine.



Figs. 13a & b Lizard Orchid first seen in the last week of May.





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Fig. 14 Violet Limodore.

(fig. 18) which appeared everywhere, carpeting the ground in many places together with blue Cupid's Dart (*Catananche caerulea*) and the Feather Grass (*Stipa pennata*). In that especially cool and damp summer, many of the orchid species flowered throughout June and some into July, but the particular interest in these later months was provided by various species of Helleborine. In early June, generally hiding in



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Fig. 15 Fragrant Orchid.

shadier areas either on steep north-facing slopes or under the dense shade of the ubiquitous Box shrubs, the first flowers of the two remaining *Cephalanthera* species start to appear: the Large White Helleborine (*C. damasonium*) and the Red Helleborine (*C. rubra*) (fig. 19). Because of their retiring habit and the fact that the flowers are somewhat devoid of any strong features, these plants proved difficult



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Fig. 16 *Dactylorhiza elata* began to flower during the last weeks of May and through June, generally in damper ditches.

to photograph well. The other genus of Helleborines, *Epipactis*, came and went during the later stages of June and into July, with *E. microphylla*, *E. helleborine* and *E. muelleri* growing shyly in the shade of the box and beech woods. In July that year, the last orchid species we saw was the beautiful



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Fig. 17 Elder-flowered Orchid.



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Fig. 18 Pyramidal Orchids make a spectacular show in May.



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Fig. 19 Red Helleborine generally hides in the shadier areas.

Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) (fig. 20) which grew abundantly in a large wet flush some distance west of the plateau, and again we owe thanks to our German friends for pointing out this site.

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Fig. 20 Marsh Helleborine.

Although we have concentrated on orchids here, they are found among a wide range of plants far too numerous to mention. And of course, in years with sufficient summer rain there are flowers galore way into autumn. 🌸

Gordon James took a degree in Botany a few moons ago and has maintained an active interest in wild plants, plant photography and conservation. Since 2007 he and his partner Jean have built a house and they're attempting to pacify a heavily wooded and overgrown two-acre plot on the Suffolk Coast. They are members of the Pulmonaria and Hardy Geranium Groups.

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