

Late Spring Orchids of Sicily

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

1st-8th May 2026



Tour leaders Jon Dunn & Andrea Corso

Trip report by Jon Dunn

(Images (clockwise from top left) *Ophrys biancae* x *lacaitae* © Jackie; *Ophrys grandiflora* © Roger;

Ophrys laurensis © Elise; *Neotinea tridentata* © Elizabeth)



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[Please note – while some of the orchids encountered in Sicily have common, vernacular English names, many do not. Rather than impose our own clumsy vernacular names upon the latter, we've stuck with the scientific names in the interests of accuracy and clarity. However, where a widely-used vernacular name exists, it's used (suffixed with its scientific name) in the text that follows, e.g. Giant Orchid *Himantoglossum robertianum*. Similarly, where hybrids have known formal names, they are used – e.g. *Anacamptis x gennarii* to describe *Anacamptis morio x papilionacea* – but where no such formal name could be found, we have simply described the presumed parents in question, e.g. *Ophrys biancae x lacaitae*].

Day 1, Arrivals day

Catania airport was its usual bustling, slightly overwhelming self, but mercifully those who'd arrived in the preceding days to enjoy some sightseeing in the city all made their way without incident back to the airport where Andrea and Jon were waiting for them, and those who flew in this morning all arrived on time and without any drama.

The drama, such as it was, was reserved for our journey from the airport to our lovely first agriturismo of the week, on the northern slopes of Etna, for it seemed like the entire population of Catania had decided to go out for the day onto the motorway which, with some inevitability, was now a massive traffic jam. Andrea, looking at his sat-nav, could see there had been six accidents in a stretch of congestion that had joined up to form a traffic jam over 20 miles long! Happily his local knowledge paid off, so we left the benighted motorway and took the back roads to our accommodation. It may have added half an hour to the journey time, but it ensured we still had some time this afternoon to go orchid-hunting!

Our agriturismo was a haven after all of that, an old estate farmhouse set within vineyards at the edge of Etna's ancient lava fields. The buildings in which we would stay ooze character and charm, and the welcome here was warm. The weather, however, was a little on the cool side, with the sky overcast. We ate a late lunch sat in the courtyard before setting off five minutes up the road, at the first of two roadside stops we'd make on Etna's lower slopes this afternoon.



Our principal target here was the chance of a late flowering example of *Ophrys grassoana*, a Sicilian endemic that flowers in April but, with luck, we might find one or two still in decent and recognisable order. The first *Ophrys* we saw on the roadside verge were already long-finished, but there were some distractions to be had – first *Serapias vomeracea* and, soon after, *Serapias bergonii*, allowing for comparisons between the morphology of these two tongue-orchid species. Our orchid account was officially open!

We walked further up the road and, in a small field on the left, Jon spotted more tongue-orchids, but strikingly different ones – these were pale rose-pink, with heart-shaped lips – and, on closer inspection, proved to be perfect examples of *Serapias neglecta*. This little field was a joy, with hundreds of tongue-orchids amidst the grass and small olive trees – more of both *S. bergonii* and *S. vomeracea* and, inevitably, plants that were surely hybrids for their morphology conformed precisely to none of the three species present. Ascertaining their parentage would have been a massive leap of faith, under the circumstances... Our first Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea* was also found in here, while the field also held some lovely butterflies, with Common and Green-underside Blue both present, and Small Copper too.

While Andrea and Jon went back downhill to retrieve the vehicles, the group walked on up the road, and into a large flowery area where the guides found them a few minutes later. From their absorbed poses it was clear they'd found something interesting... and so it proved. A small patch of *Ophrys*, their flowers not totally crisped by the ravages of time. Among them was a smart *Ophrys incubacea*, with its dark hairy lip and white stigmatic cavity walls; and then Elise found something different – an *Ophrys grassoana* with a flower still in recognisable and reasonable condition! What a bonus this was – a species we did not, at this late juncture in the spring, necessarily expect to see.



Ophrys incubacea © Elise

All around this lovely field were further orchids – some Giant Orchid *Himantoglossum robertianum* long-finished for the season and well on the way to forming seeds; Lizard Orchid *Himantoglossum hircinum* in bud as yet; a handful more Pink Butterfly Orchid and Green-winged Orchid *Anacamptis morio*; Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica*; and a pleasant surprise – our first *Neotinea* of the week, *Neotinea tridentata*. We were doing really well by now, and the sun was threatening to break through the clouds too overhead.



Orchis italica © Elizabeth

Back to the vehicles, we drove 10 minutes further uphill to a set of long-abandoned terraces, their walls formed from blocks of lava built centuries ago. Here, having stepped back a little in orchid-time, we found a great many Pink Butterfly Orchid in pristine condition – always a popular species this, and no wonder, for many of them had strongly-marked and particularly attractive lips. Nearby were more Green-winged Orchid too. Andrea's keen eyes found first a Milky Orchid *Neotinea lactea* and then, shortly afterwards, our first examples of the delicate, cerise pink, near endemic, *Orchis brancifortii*. The latter were particularly admired, though we were somewhat distracted by Christina noticing a small but

perfectly formed example of Dense-flowered Orchid *Neotinea maculata* growing from a crevice in the lava above them!

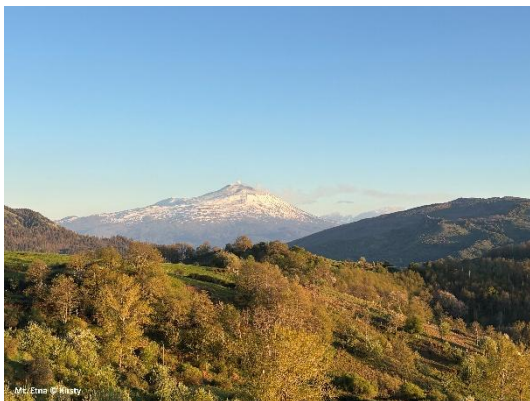
Christina was on a bit of a roll, for shortly afterwards she also found a second good example of *Ophrys grassoana* nearby. Jon, ranging widely, located a fine patch of dozens more *Orchis brancifortii* which we all took our time to enjoy and photograph. We were surrounded by wildflowers here, with the landscape punctuated by tall, architectural forms of Giant Fennel *Ferula communis* and Branched Asphodel *Asphodelus ramosus* and, at our feet, occasional *Iris pseudopumilla* too, their blooms a deep rich purple.



Nearby, a couple of Man Orchid *Orchis anthropophora* were discovered, and *Neotinea commutata* too – this was a very orchid-rich site indeed. Among the many Green-winged Orchid were our first *Anacamptis longicornu*, recognisable at a glance with their distinctively marked flowers. We anticipated seeing much more of this lovely species in the coming days.

Greatly satisfied with our afternoon's haul, we headed the short drive back to our agriturismo, meeting an hour later there for a short account of the history of Sicily delivered by Andrea, our brilliant local leader, and the orchid checklist – 15 flowering species had already been seen by us, a great start to the week. Dinner followed shortly afterwards, four delicious courses long, and with some delightful Etna red wine from the agriturismo's own vineyards.

Day 2, 2nd May



We braced ourselves for what we knew would be our longest day, our expedition across the north of the island to the national park of Bosco della Ficuzza in the northwest. This verdant green area of Sicily is home to some particularly special orchids, not least *Ophrys pallida*, found here and nowhere else in Europe. It was with this, and other orchids in mind that we took an early breakfast before hitting the road at 7:30am.

A brief pitstop to collect our picnic lunch en route went smoothly, before we paused one more time to stop to take images of snow-clad Etna, smoking quietly on the horizon in the clear, sunny morning light. From here, it was onwards towards Palermo. The first leg of the journey was across typical Sicilian roads, which is to say extremely winding and rather unevenly surfaced – those who complain about potholes at home in Britain would do well to look to Sicily! In due course we reached the autostrada which greatly hastened our progress across the island and, by late morning, we found ourselves in the lush green surroundings of Bosco della Ficuzza.

Just a step or two from the road brought us our first orchids – Small-flowered Tongue-orchid *Serapias parviflora* in small numbers, surrounded by swathes of Greater Tongue-orchid *Serapias lingua*. It was not, therefore, surprising to find hybrid flowers of intermediate form between the two species. Nearby were many more, larger and more flamboyant orchids – Naked Man Orchid was prolific here. However, we had our eyes and hearts set on a smaller, more subtle prize – *Ophrys pallida*. Andrea found our first example of it and, once we'd got our eyes attuned to its small form, we all began to find further plants lurking nearby. It's not a flamboyant member of the *Ophrys* bee orchids, but it rewards a closer look, for the lip of *O. pallida* is dusted with white hairs which, in conjunction with its white sepals, lends it an appropriately pallid and rather elegant appearance.



Our wandering and searching for *pallida* soon began to yield a great many further *Ophrys* hiding nearby. *Ophrys numida* was an early prize, the brown of its lip bleeding into the yellow edges around the lip margins, making it look characteristically orange-bordered. Christina, challenged to find an *Ophrys* with clear-cut and differentiated yellow borders promptly obliged, with our first *Ophrys archimedeae*.

Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera* proved to be numerous in the long grass and, pleasingly, there were other similarly colourful prizes to be found – a late example of *Ophrys biancae* and then several *Ophrys oxyrrhynchos*, their large brown lips all sporting the protruberant 'beak' after which they were named.

Much less obvious, but found right beside the latter species, were small and unobtrusive Bumblebee Orchid *Ophrys bombyliflora*. Again, like *Ophrys pallida*, once we'd got our eyes in, we began to find many more of them hiding in plain sight before us. A handful of *Ophrys exaltata* were hanging on this late in the season and, not far from them, we found several pristine examples of the large-flowered *Ophrys sabulosa*.

This was a marvellous first site, and one that was hard to tear ourselves away from. We opted to drive a few minutes deeper into the park, and had our picnic lunch beside a track where, at the woodland borders, we encountered our first *Ophrys bertolonii*, and more *Ophrys archimedeae*, *Anacamptis longicornu* and *Neotinea lactea*. Bright pink cyclamen were to be seen in the woodland too, proving distracting for some of us.





After lunch we walked along the track, meandering into the small meadows and woodland fringes in search of more orchids. We'd already seen our first Provence Orchid *Orchis provincialis* earlier in the morning but here, at a somewhat higher elevation, those we saw were both in pristine condition and somewhat larger and more impressive, their primrose-yellow and cerise-speckled flowers much admired by all.

Kinya and Emiko found and photographed a fine example of *Ophrys flammeola* which, happily, they were able to relocate a little later for us all to enjoy. Alas, though not totally surprisingly, our speculative search for a late *Dactylorhiza markusii* was fruitless. This species flowers much earlier in the spring, so it was not with high hopes that we'd looked for it – but, having coming all this way, there was no way we *wouldn't* look for it at its known station!

From here, Andrea's knowledge of his home island was to come to the fore, as we headed back towards home and stopped after an hour at a site at which he and fellow Mariposa leader Michele Vigano had discovered a colony of the rare Sicilian endemic *Ophrys mirabilis* in 2025. This late-flowering species was one of the two major targets of this inaugural Late Spring Orchids of Sicily tour, so we were sure to stop at this site to try our luck for the first time this week.

Access to the site was not easy, for it involved walking down a zigzagging gravel path that descended a steep slope. The inaccessibility of the site, and careful management of news of its whereabouts, may be crucial in the continued presence of *Ophrys mirabilis* here, for it has been lost at former sites on the island, apparently dug up and stolen by orchid thieves. At first, it looked like we might not be in luck, for at a bare patch of hillside upon which Andrea and Miki had seen a dozen plants last year, all we could find were 'gone-over' *Ophrys*. This seemed strange, for the plants had been flowering 10 days later in 2025.

Happily, Andrea's persistence paid off, for lower downhill and in even steeper and more overgrown terrain, he found three flowering plants. Our careful examination of the immediate area around here yielded over a dozen further examples, all in pristine condition, their dark, almost black, and profusely hairy lips a delight to behold. We'd snatched victory from the jaws of defeat thanks to Andrea.

The two hour drive home seemed to fly by, buoyed by today's orchid-hunting success. It had been a long day, so we went straight to dinner safe in the knowledge that tomorrow we'd take things a lot easier and more locally but, of course, with orchids very much in mind!



Day 3, 3rd May

Taking advantage of our location in the vicinity of Etna, and with Andrea's local knowledge very much to the fore, we set off into the Parco dei Nebrodi national park this morning, after a somewhat later than usual breakfast and a leisurely start to the day that allowed us to catch up with the burgeoning checklist from the previous day – we found ourselves with 33 species of orchid to our credit, and in the perhaps almost unique position of having seen both *Ophrys pallida* and *Ophrys mirabilis* in the same day – two of Europe's most range-restricted and rarest orchids. Very few, if any, orchid-hunters will have done so before us.



The drive into the national park was taken slowly, as befitted the roads, which were of a distinctly rural nature – very winding and of varying quality, the surface being very degraded in places. We aimed to make the best of the conditions to ensure the drive wasn't uncomfortable and, at this pace, had plenty of opportunity to enjoy the spectacular, flower-filled views that unfolded. The day was clear and sunny, and snow-clad Etna was looking majestic on the horizon.

The final stretch of the drive into the hills of the National Park was on an unmade track for a few kilometres, ascending higher still. Our vehicles made light work of the climb and, before too long, we parked up at the side of the track with a commanding view across rural Sicily stretching below us. Andrea suggested we try the lower side of the track in the first instance as our theatre of orchid-hunting operations, this being the area in which he'd found the greatest concentration of *Ophrys lacaitae*, our principal target this morning, in the past.

We spread out into the field – there was the feeling of English downland here, for the turf was short and cropped, and studded with wildflowers, albeit not those we'd be familiar with back home! Blue spikes of *Bellevia dubia* were commonplace and immediately striking, but looking more closely revealed many brown flowered *Ophrys* which, on closer inspection, proved to be *Ophrys gackiae*, many of which were in fresh and perfect condition. This, on the one hand, was marvellous, as this is an earlier flowering species and one we might not have anticipated seeing in such good order in early May. On the other hand, did it bode well for our chances of finding *Ophrys lacaitae* in bloom? *Lacaitae* is a late-flowering *Ophrys*, after all...

We spread out across the hillside and before long a shout from Christina alerted us all to the good news that she'd found *Ophrys lacaitae*! We made our way towards her and, sure enough, there was the object of our desires – a small plant with two large, primrose yellow flowers in immaculate, fresh condition. *Ophrys lacaitae* was, at this elevation,



apparently just getting under way. Christina's plant received its due attention from us all before we scattered once more, Elise and Olivia being the first to find more newly emerged *Ophrys lacaitae*. In the meantime, we were all enjoying more *Neotinea lactea* in great condition, and some newly emerged *Neotinea tridentata* too.



Another call went up, and this time it was Jackie upon whom the orchid gods had smiled – she had found a truly magnificent example of *Ophrys lacaitae* close to the vehicles, on the higher side of the track. Two flowerspikes stood there side by side, the taller of which already had three large and perfect flowers fully open upon it. These plants attracted a great deal of attention and admiration and, in a marvellous wildlife-watching moment, the sky above us suddenly filled with birds, as at least 35 Honey Buzzard swirled low overhead. These were migrants, heading north from their African wintering grounds to their breeding stations in northern Europe. They passed low overhead, circling a little to gain height on updrafts from the hilltop, their shadows flashing across the ground at our feet.

The grassland here above the track was unfenced, appeared to have been more lightly grazed than that below the track, and proved to be a richer hunting ground for us all. Nel found our next prize, a beautiful example of *Ophrys grandiflora*, Sicily's representative of the colourful 'sawfly orchid' *tenthredinifera* group of *Ophrys* bee orchids. Many more *Ophrys gackiae* were present here, but Elise and Olivia discerned some brown *Ophrys* that looked different – these were our first *Ophrys passionis* var. *garganica*. (Were we in the Gargano on the Italian mainland we might reasonably call this taxon *Ophrys garganica*, and the Sicilian plants at the very least appear identical to *O. garganica*, if they are not in fact actually one and the same thing). This is another earlier-flowering *Ophrys*, so most of the plants present here had already finished for the season, but several were to be seen with fresh flowers in good order upon them.



Further uphill we found a great many *Orchis provincialis* growing in swathes with *Anacamptis longicornu* for company, a very pleasing combination of primrose yellow and royal purple flowerspikes. Elise, on a roll this morning, spotted something different – some gone-over flowerspikes whose blade-like bracts revealed they were *Dactylorhiza* of some description. In the shade of a tree nearby Jon found a plant still in bloom – our first Roman Orchid *Dactylorhiza romana*. Yet more Naked Man Orchid were also flowering on this section of hillside.

Working our way slowly back downhill we came across a widely scattered outpost of *Ophrys bertolonii*, with some *Ophrys passionis* var. *garganica* in their midst. Jon pointed out two

plants to Andrea that had atypically green sepals, and rather more rounded lips than usual – the guides discussed the possibility of these being hybrids between the two *Ophrys* species present, but erred on the side of caution – they didn't appear, apart from the sepal colour, to be intermediate enough in form to make that call with confidence. Jon said that, were we in the Gargano, we might easily attribute these plants to *Ophrys bertoloniformis*...



Soon enough though, we found three more plants that brooked no dispute – these were clearly hybrids between *Ophrys bertolonii* and *Ophrys passionis* var. *garganica*, with flowers that bore features of both parents in form, colour and markings. Were those first two plants back-crosses with *Ophrys bertolonii*, reverting back towards that parent? All three of these definite hybrids were different from one another in appearance in small ways – demonstrating how the genes of the two parents can represent themselves in different ways from individual to individual.

This had all been marvellous fun and extremely distracting, but it was time to have our picnic lunch, which we enjoyed sat in the sun on the short turf beside the vehicles, with a

soundtrack of small parties of Bee-eater passing overhead, their fruity whistling calls announcing their presence every time before they were seen. Eyes cast to the sky revealed something every bit as colourful as them – a semi-circular rainbow emanating from a wispy, high altitude cloud – a rarely seen sun-dog, or parhelia.

If it felt like the natural history gods loved us today, confirmation came on the drive down out of the National Park, for a fine, large male European Wildcat loped diagonally across the road in front of us – an extremely rare daylight sighting of this elusive predator. Comparing notes, the guides could both count on the fingers of one hand the times they'd seen a wildcat in the daytime, Andrea on five occasions, and Jon just twice.

All of this deserved some celebration, so we made a stop in a small town where a café served us ice-creams and coffees – the pistachio ice-cream, made of course with locally-grown pistachio, warranting particularly high praise. Was it as good as *Ophrys lacaitae*? Well, maybe not quite, but it was right up there as a sensory experience!



The remainder of the journey home passed smoothly, with one more brief roadside stop made to enjoy the views and photo opportunities afforded by mighty Etna set behind a sea of Giant Fennel in the foreground. This magnificent yellow-flowered plant was enjoying a bumper flowering period during the time of our visit to Sicily.

We reached our agriturismo in the late afternoon, allowing everyone some restful time before checklist and dinner in the evening. We discovered we'd seen six new orchid species today, taking our tally for the week to a very pleasing 39 species in total.

Day 4, transfer day, 4th May

Today saw us move down into Sicily's southeastern corner, to base ourselves for the rest of the week in the altogether less green and verdant, but renowned orchid-hunting territory of that area of the island. (Our two-base approach to our orchid tours on Sicily maximises our ability to cover the island and see as many of its myriad orchid species as are feasible within a given week in time).



Before we abandoned Etna, we spend a final morning exploring the terraces of its northeastern flanks, spending some time wandering beneath newly-leaved Sweet Chestnut trees. Here, as expected given our later timing of this year's tour, we found Roman Orchid *Dactylorhiza romana* had largely finished flowering but, in damper and more heavily shaded areas, we nonetheless saw some examples of both the deep purple and ivory flowered forms of this statuesque orchid.

Open areas boasted both *Anacamptis longicornu* and rather more Green-winged Orchid *Anacamptis morio*, and a few examples of Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea*. It was not, therefore, completely surprising that we bumped into two hybrid examples of Green-winged and Pink Butterfly

Orchid shenanigans – it was Elise who found a plant that took more after Pink Butterfly Orchid, and Roger who spotted two plants that took more after Green-winged Orchid. In both cases, these hybrids displayed features consistent with the other respective parent, showing how the genes were mixing and displaying characteristics in different ways.

Moving uphill into the Black Pine forest, a stop for a walk beneath the pines proved to be highly serendipitous, with a small colony of Elder-flowered Orchid *Dactylorhiza sambucina* in excellent, peak condition – with red-flowered, yellow-flowered, and the much rarer intermediate forms all there for us to enjoy.

We moved yet further up the volcano, into the lava fields on the edge of the tree line, and had our picnic lunch sat upon warm black lava gravel surrounded by watchful eyes... not as creepy as that sounds, for these were the 'eyes' on the trunks of the endemic Etna Birch *Betula etnensis*. Roger spotted a mystery – extremely large, albeit dead and gone-over, spikes of a broomrape *Orobanche* sp. These were growing in the middle of the gravel, with no obvious host-





plant nearby to support their parasitic ways. Jon promised to speak to Chris Thorogood, a leading global expert in parasitic plants, to see if the mystery could be resolved.

After lunch, and more photos of snow-clad Etna looming above us, we set off downhill to skirt bustling Catania and then head down the autostrada towards Syracuse. The traffic was pretty tiresome for the first half of the journey, but eased the further south we went. We finally arrived at the truly stunning agriturismo that would be our base for the

remainder of the week in the late afternoon, and relaxed a little while before checklist and dinner. Elder-flowered Orchid was our 40th species of the week, and Jon had good news by the evening – he'd popped out for a little recce, and had found several new species for us nearby... and perhaps a surprise too...

Day 5, 5th May

After breakfast in the magnificent vaulted dining room of our agriturismo, we gathered for a drive of all of five minutes to our first site of the day, a large network of ruderal fields. Just how set in orchid country our agriturismo was became swiftly apparent for, no sooner had we walked onto the site, than we found ourselves admiring a small colony of *Ophrys lacaitae*, one of the foremost stars of this late spring orchid tour. And among them, a surprise – a plant with pale yellow flowers that were not the usual fan-shape of *lacaitae*, that sported a more extensive chestnut speculum in the centre of their lip, and had cinnamon-coloured 'shoulders' on their square-shaped lips. With green-flushed white sepals and coral-pink lateral petals, this was an extremely pretty orchid - a hybrid between earlier-flowering *Ophrys biancae* and later-flowering *Ophrys lacaitae*. The odds against such a lovechild were long, but here it was.



Moving further into the fields we were stopped time and again by orchids in the grass at our feet, flowers being seen with every step – tongue-orchids were numerous, and comprised mostly *Serapias siciliensis*, a new species for the week, but included in their number also Small-flowered Tongue-orchid *Serapias parviflora* and Greater Tongue-orchid *Serapias lingua*; and there were masses of *Ophrys* too. *Ophrys lutea* and *Ophrys*

sicula put in an appearance, allowing side by side comparisons of their differences in morphology; and new *Ophrys* were found too – Mirror Orchid *Ophrys speculum* was still in bloom, with some plants sporting several flowers still in great condition; and there was a new fuciflorid *Ophrys* to enjoy, and in great numbers... *Ophrys calliantha* is a variable orchid insofar as the lip pattern is rarely the same on any two flowers, even on the same plant, but

it has some generally consistent features that, with time and experience, allow one to be confident about the species identification, not least the presence of pale ivory or straw coloured areas on the flowers' lips. We found hundreds of these charming *Ophrys* across the site.

Also proving a significant crowd-pleaser were Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea* which were very much living up to their *grandiflora* subspecies status, boasting large and richly coloured flowers.

Eventually, in the mid-morning, we moved on from here towards our second principal site for the day, Monte Lauro. The main reason for coming here is the mountain's endemic *Ophrys*, found on this outpost and nowhere else in the world – the eponymous *Ophrys laurensis*. It's a species that, on our usual Orchids of Sicily tour in mid-April we might hope to see a dozen or so flowering examples, but its later-flowering habits were to be amply demonstrated to us today with perhaps as many as 100 flowering plants seen, all tucked into the base of the many bramble bushes scattered around the pastures on the mountain top. We might have seen thousands, were it not for a herd of cows that had recently passed through the pastures, leaving open areas denuded of flowers. Still, *Ophrys laurensis* was very much present here, and much to be admired.



We spent some time with a small colony of brown *fusca*-type *Ophrys*, comprising two new species for us, and what presumably were their hybrids, with intermediate forms that matched neither – *Ophrys caesiella*, and *Ophrys lupercalis*. Adding to the day's roster of *Ophrys*, Roger found *Ophrys archimedeae*, and Kirsty and Nel a couple of fresh examples of *Ophrys incubacea*. Provence Orchid *Ophrys provincialis* was still to be seen here, albeit starting to come to the end of its flowering period, as was *Anacamptis longicornu* and Milky Orchid *Neotinea lactea*. The advanced season meant that *Orchis pauciflora* was to elude us, with just a crispy plant seen that, in all conscience, one could not enjoy as representative of this species!

The day held a final site for us, a rural outpost where we hoped for another encounter with *Ophrys mirabilis*. Andrea had been here only the week before, so it was with some dismay that we arrived to find the hillside in question had been enclosed in the intervening period with a new barbed wire fence and, with some inevitability, some cows installed. Andrea and Jon went up onto the hill, to see if any *Ophrys mirabilis* remained to be found, and to assess the cows' compliance. They were docile creatures, moving away from the guides and out of sight, so the coast was soon clear for the group. Alas, of *mirabilis* there was no sign – this really is an enigmatic species, and we were fortunate to have seen it earlier in the week.

However, another new *Ophrys* was there – *Ophrys obaesa* was there to be enjoyed by those who'd come up onto the steep slopes.

The drive home would take a little over an hour, so we broke it up by enjoying ice creams and coffees sat outside a little café in a small, quiet town midway back to our agriturismo. Pistachio ice cream was, once again, proving popular with us all...

Before dinner that evening we worked through a much busier checklist than that of our transfer day the day before, and found we'd seen into the mid-twenties of species today alone and, for the week, we were now knocking on the door of 50 species, having added six new species to our account today.



Ophrys obaesa © Elizabeth

Day 6, 6th May

Our opening site today was the magnificent surroundings of the Cava Grande del Cassibile-Carrubella, an impressive limestone gorge that ploughs through the landscape towards the lowlands and the sea in the distance. Our initial view encompassed the large cave, far below us, in which the remains of Bronze Age homes remained clearly visible. Before we would go on to enjoy further panoramic views of the gorge, we had orchids on our minds, and began to scour the grasslands set back from the gorge's lip.

The site supports a fine array of earlier-flowering species and, with the past few weeks having been rather warm on Sicily, we weren't too surprised to find many of those were far gone over. Nonetheless, Andrea's keen eyes and determination to closely examine *Serapias* tongue-orchids paid off handsomely, with the discovery of our first *Serapias nurrica*. A



Ophrys lutea © Elizabeth

subtle one this, it demanded close scrutiny and comparisons with keys – but sure enough, Andrea had called it correctly.

We took the vehicles along a bumpy stone track to a small parking area that commanded the most impressive views of the gorge, and took a while to enjoy those and, naturally, to look for wildlife. Many freshly emerged and very large Meadow Brown butterflies spoke volumes about how green and lush the grass must have been earlier in the spring. Andrea surprised us all with a pair of Occellated Skink, a male and a female, that he found in the rockier areas – handled respectfully and gently by him, these charming reptiles were greatly admired before being replaced where they'd been found.

We then drove to the small town of Palazzolo, renowned in Sicily and beyond for two things – the quality of its Baroque architecture, and for being home to officially the best arancini in Italy and, hence, the world. We enjoyed a walk through the town's streets with Andrea as

our guide explaining the symbolism of many of the Baroque sculptures that adorned former wealthy families' houses, before sitting down for lunch at a lovely arancini bar which, in a happy coincidence, also baked fabulous cakes and made what, on reflection, was the best pistachio ice cream we'd sampled to date.

We made a further orchid-hunting stop on our way back towards our agriturismo, two hours that passed all too quickly as we wandered first a small triangle of land girdled by two quiet roads and, latterly, an extensive gentle hillside that combined grassland and garrigue-type habitats in a very enticing mosaic. To begin with the orchids were thin on the ground, with a few *Serapias bergonii*, *Ophrys lutea*, and *Ophrys speculum* found... but once we got onto the hillside, we found ourselves back in orchid-hunting heaven, with a great many *Ophrys calliantha* the most evident species, exhibiting a huge variety of lip pattern variations and, most pleasingly, some also sporting snow white sepals too. Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea* were also numerous, but once again it was the tongue-orchids that delivered the goods for us – first of all via Andrea, who discerned *Serapias hyblaea* in our midst, and then thanks to Kirsty who had photographed Heart-flowered Tongue-orchid *Serapias cordigera*. We would return here tomorrow to ensure everyone had seen the latter species.



Ophrys speculum © Elise

At the end of the day, after some had enjoyed a swim in our agriturismo's delightful outdoor pool, we now found ourselves resting on 49 species for the week. Would we eclipse 50 tomorrow?

Day 7, 7th May

This morning dawned rather gray and overcast, conditions that were to gradually make their mind up as the day wore on and, by the time we drove back to our agriturismo in the late afternoon, we were driving through low cloud! Most unexpected, but the main thing was that Sicily didn't rain upon our parade literally or metaphorically during the day that unfolded – and the overcast conditions were, of course, conducive to photography.

Our first port of call was to revisit the hillside meadow in which Kirsty and Mel had found *Serapias cordigera* the previous afternoon. We'd no sooner set foot in the meadow than Sharon spotted a particularly lovely example of Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera*, with pale rose-pink sepals, which stopped us in our tracks before we moved on uphill. We passed through the *Ophrys calliantha* and *Serapias hyblaea* zone and onto the hill's higher reaches, where we saw non-flowering, spent examples of *Anacamptis collina* and, after a short search, we tracked down some examples of Heart-flowered Tongue-orchid.

Our meandering path back down the hill was frequently interrupted by *Ophrys calliantha*, with some lovely white-sepalled examples to be seen, making a change from their usual

candy pink-sepalled brethren. Among them we found a fine hybrid, *Ophrys biancae* x *calliantha*. Someone was heard to remark that *Ophrys biancae* made lovely babies!



Ophrys panormitana © Roger

We checked a nearby area of garrigue for any further hybrids, this being an area in which Andrea had enjoyed good fortune in our earlier-timed Orchids of Sicily tour in 2025, but the season was sufficiently advanced that most *Ophrys* in this arid environment had finished already this year, not unexpectedly of course.

However, the orchid gods were set to smile on us in this regard, for further down the road we stopped at a north-facing, shady roadside site where Jon and Andrea had found late examples of *Ophrys panormitana* in the past. This species usually flowers in February-March, so while we might hope for one still flowering in April, we were maybe being a little over-optimistic if we hoped to find one a week into May...

but no! Jon spotted an orchid flowering above head-height that proved, on closer inspection, to be *Ophrys panormitana*, and a fresh flower at that! It involved a little agility and dexterity to photograph it, but we all managed just fine.

Another roadside bank revealed a swathe of Man Orchid *Orchis anthropophora*, with some Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica* in their midst. We hoped to find *Orchis x bivonae*, their hybrid offspring, in their midst, and they didn't disappoint – three dark cerise examples of the hybrid were present among them. Jon then spotted another plant, with curiously pale rose-pink flowers, that clearly was intermediate in morphology between the two species – but this wasn't how *Orchis x bivonae* usually looked. We posited that perhaps the parents were swapped around in this instance, creating a non-conventional hybrid.

Elise then made an absolutely massive find high overhead on a road embankment – *Ophrys lunulata* still in flower! This beautiful endemic is a major prize for orchid-hunters on Sicily, and while this tour was not timed for its peak flowering period, we had been hopeful we might see one eventually. And here it was. This was one for the camera zooms and telephotos, for the orchid was perched safely on a steep incline that loomed over the road below – the guides sensibly judged this would not be a safe place to attempt to access on foot.

We walked along both banks of the river at the valley bottom next, searching for Bird's-nest Orchid *Neottia nidus-avis*, and the endemic Mediterranean Trout *Salmo cettii*. The former was nowhere to be seen, but many small trout were gliding calmly in the shallows. All forms of wildlife are grist to our mill on a Mariposa tour!



Ophrys lunulata © Elise



Lunch was taken at the visitor centre at Ferla before we headed up the road to have one last concerted search for *Ophrys lunulata*. The amount of Wild Boar damage in this area was sobering, but there were orchids still to be found – *Ophrys calliantha*, *Ophrys oxorrhynchos*, and a small colony of *Ophrys lacaitae*. No complaints from any of us for that particular trio...

We paid a visit to the evocative necropolis at Pantalica for a final dose of Sicilian history and superb landscape, before heading into Ferla where we found a small café that served some excellent coffee before making the short drive back to our agriturismo, with the prospect of one final delicious dinner ahead of us. Our evening checklist revealed that in *Ophrys panormitana* and *Ophrys lunulata* we'd not only hit the heights of 50 species for the week, but surpassed it – we finished on a highly creditable 51 species. Of course, numbers are far from everything (though they are arguably a good way of measuring if your guides know where to find the special things!), and the main thing was that this week had been immense fun, with a group of like-minded and friendly guests who all found wonderful orchids for everyone else to enjoy. The social side of the week had been super, with much laughter and stories shared, and firm plans laid for future orchid-hunting adventures together.

Newsletter – if you'd like to join our mailing list and be the first to hear of new tours and special offers, you can join the Mariposa Nature Tours family on www.mariposanature.com

Social media - For the most up to the minute news of what we're seeing, give us a follow on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube, and see live sightings from the field, photos and videos, and all the very latest Mariposa Nature Tours news.

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Late Spring Orchids of Sicily 1 st – 8 th May 2026								
Notes to the list: the taxonomy of European orchids is in a state of considerable flux, with extreme positions adopted (and emotions engendered) by adherents of splitting into many species (i.e. Delforge, Kreutz), or of lumping into few species (i.e. Kühn, Pedersen, Cribb). What constitutes a species is a moot point – for the purposes of recording what we find in granular detail, the latter lumping approach is unhelpful, so this checklist follows the approach of Delforge et al. ‘Taxa’ is a useful umbrella term for what may, or may not, depending on one’s taxonomic position, be a valid species... Where common, vernacular English names exist for taxa, these are also included in the checklist alongside the binomial scientific name. ‘nf’ = not flowering								
Species name	Months	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
GENUS OPHRYS								
Ophrys iricolor group								
Ophrys iricolor	III-IV							
Ophrys fusca group								
Ophrys caesiella	II-III					✓		
Ophrys lucifera	III-IV							
Ophrys lupercalis	II-III					✓		
Ophrys mirabilis	IV-VI		✓					
Ophrys funerea group								
Ophrys calocaerina	IV-V							
Ophrys gackiae	II-IV			✓				
Ophrys attaviria group								
Ophrys sabulosa	III-IV		✓					
Ophrys obaeasa group								
Ophrys obaeasa	III-V					✓		
Ophrys pallida	III-IV		✓					
Ophrys subfusca group								
Ophrys archimedeia	IV-V		✓			✓		
Ophrys flammeola	IV-V		✓					
Ophrys laurensis	IV-V					✓		
Ophrys numida	III-V		✓					
Ophrys lutea group								
Ophrys lutea	III-V		✓			✓	✓	✓
Ophrys sicula	I-V			✓		✓	✓	✓
Ophrys speculum group								
Ophrys speculum	III-V					✓	✓	✓
Ophrys tenthredinifera group								
Ophrys bombyliflora	II-V		✓					
Ophrys grandiflora	II-IV			✓				
Ophrys apifera group								
Ophrys apifera	IV-VII		✓			✓		
Ophrys bornmuelleri group								
Ophrys biancae	III-IV		✓					
Ophrys fuciflora group								
Ophrys calliantha	IV-V					✓	✓	✓
Ophrys lacaitae	III-VI			✓		✓		✓
Ophrys oxyrrhynchos	III-V		✓					✓
Ophrys scolopax group								

Species name	Months	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Ophrys scolopax	III-VI							
Ophrys exaltata group								
Ophrys exaltata	III-IV		✓					
Ophrys panormitana	II-III							✓
Ophrys sphegodes group								
Ophrys grassoana	III-IV	✓						
Ophrys incubacea group								
Ophrys incubacea	III-V	✓				✓		
Ophrys passionis var garganica	IV-VI			✓				
Ophrys lunulata group								
Ophrys lunulata	III-IV							✓
Ophrys bertolonii group								
Ophrys bertolonii	IV-VI		✓	✓				
Ophrys explanata	III-IV		✓					
GENUS EPIPACTIS								
Epipactis helleborine	VI-VIII							
Epipactis microphylla	V-VIII							
Epipactis palustris	VI-VIII							
Epipactis placentina	VI-VIII							
GENUS CEPHALANTHERA								
Cephalanthera damasonium	V-VII							
Cephalanthera longifolia	IV-VII							
Cephalanthera rubra	V-VII							
GENUS LIMODORUM								
Limodorum abortivum	IV-VII				nf			
GENUS SPIRANTHES								
Spiranthes spiralis	VII-X							
GENUS SERAPIAS								
Serapias bergonii	III-V	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Serapias cordigera	IV-VI						✓	✓
Serapias lingua	III-VI		✓			✓		
Serapias hyblaea	III-VI						✓	✓
Serapias neglecta	III-V	✓						
Serapias nurrica	IV-V						✓	
Serapias parviflora	IV-V		✓	✓		✓		✓
Serapias vomeracea	IV-VI	✓	✓			✓		✓
Serapias siciliensis	IV-VI					✓	✓	
GENUS ANACAMPTIS								
Anacamptis collina	I-IV					nf		Nf
Anacamptis coriophora	IV-VII							
Anacamptis laxiflora	IV-VII							
Anacamptis longicornu	II-V	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Anacamptis morio	III-VI	✓		✓	✓	nf		
Anacamptis papilionacea	II-V	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Anacamptis picta	III-V							
Anacamptis pyramidalis	IV-VII		✓	✓				

Species name	Months	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
GENUS NEOTINEA								
Neotinea conica	II-VI							
Neotinea commutata	III-V	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Neotinea lactea	II-IV	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Neotinea maculata	III-V	✓						
Neotinea tridentata	III-VI	✓		✓	✓	✓		
GENUS ORCHIS								
Orchis anthropophora	IV-VI	✓						✓
Orchis brancifortii	IV-VI	✓						
Orchis italica	II-V	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Orchis mascula	IV-VI							
Orchis pauciflora	III-IV							
Orchis provincialis	IV-V		✓	✓		✓		
Orchis purpurea	IV-VI							
Orchis simia	III-VI							
GENUS DACTYLORHIZA								
Dactylorhiza elata	IV-VII							
Dactylorhiza markusii	III-VI							
Dactylorhiza romana	III-VI			✓	✓			
Dactylorhiza sambucina	IV-VII				✓			
Dactylorhiza viridis	V-VIII							
GENUS HIMANTOGLOSSUM								
Himantoglossum hircinum	V-VII	nf	nf	nf				
Himantoglossum robertianum	I-IV	nf					nf	Nf
GENUS GYMNADENIA								
Gymnadenia conopsea	V-VIII							
GENUS NEOTTIA								
Neottia nivus-avis	V-VII							
Neottia ovata	V-VII							
GENUS PLATANThERA								
Platanthera bifolia	V-VIII							
Platanthera chlorantha	V-VIII							
Daily total:		15	23	17	8	21	11	16
Running total:		15	33	39	40	46	49	51
HYBRIDS...								
Serapias lingua x parviflora			✓					
Ophrys bertolonii x passionis				✓				
Anacamptis papilionacea x morio					✓			
Anacamptis morio x papilionacea					✓			
Ophrys biancae x lacaitae						✓		
Ophrys biancae x calliantha							✓	✓
Orchis x bivonae (anthropophora x italica)								✓

Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants



Images © Elise



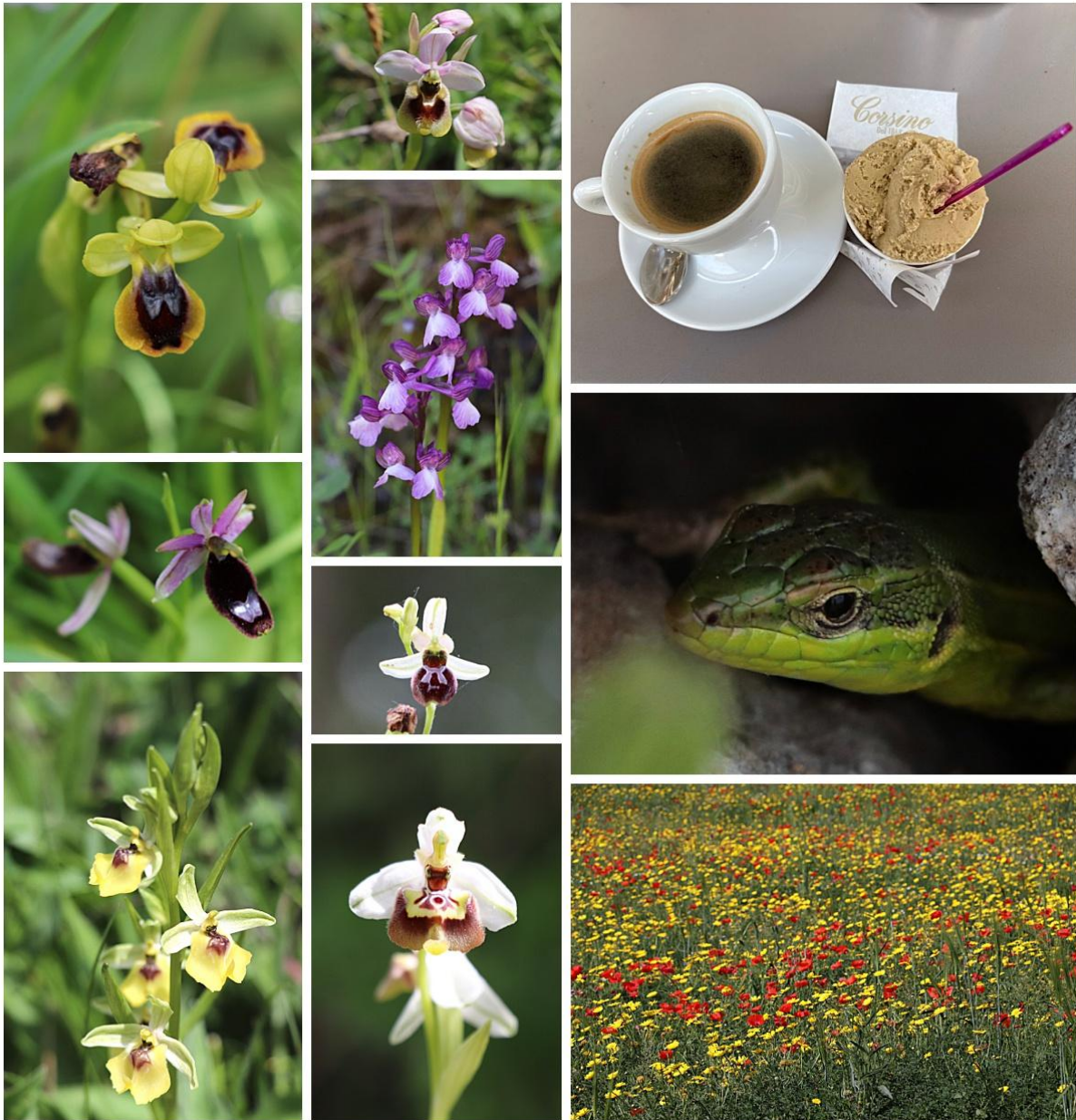
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Images © Roger



Images © Kirsty



Images © Jackie



Images © Christina



Images © Elizabeth



Images © Elizabeth



Images © Elizabeth

And finally...

Our [Orchids of Sicily](#) tour for 2027 is available to book now. We can't wait to return to this orchid wonderland next year. And in the meantime, while they're filling up quickly, we've other orchid tours in 2027 visiting other species-rich areas of Europe with places still available to join us (see below), and have some further exciting orchid tours in the pipeline for 2028 – watch this space!

[Orchids of Tenerife](#)

[Orchids of Cyprus](#)

[Orchids of the Gargano Peninsula](#)

[Orchids of Crete](#)

Last but not least, our flagship Orchids of Rhodes tour continues to prove the most popular of all – the 2027 tour is fully booked, as is the 2028 tour – the latter was fully booked two years in advance of its running date! To meet popular demand, we're operating a second week in 2028, and at the time of writing that has just 2 places left available to book upon it... If you'd like to join *Orchid Summer* author Jon Dunn, and the finder of the last Ghost Orchid in Britain, Dr Richard Bate, for the ultimate Rhodes orchid tour, they'd love to see you there. Nobody knows the orchids of Rhodes better than them - [Orchids of Rhodes](#).