

Orchids of the Gargano Peninsula

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

16th-23rd April 2025



Tour leaders Jon Dunn & David Gibbs

Trip report by Jon Dunn

(Images, clockwise from top left: *Orchis italica* © Janice; *Ophrys biscutella* © Kate;

Ophrys neglecta © Roger; *Ophrys minipassionis* © Doug)



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[Please note – while some of the orchids encountered in the Gargano 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 bertolonii x sipontensis*]

Day 1, 16th April, Arrivals day

Our group arrived in two waves, with those who'd elected to fly to Bari the day before assembling bright and early at the airport arrivals hall at 10am, in time for a coffee before heading north towards the Gargano Peninsula with Jon. The remainder of the group were filtering in during the day, and were met at the airport by David.

The early birds' reward was the opportunity to enjoy some early orchid-hunting before the main event of the week itself got underway. As regular guests with Mariposa know, we're not in the habit of 'winging it' on our orchid tours, so David had been present in the area for some days beforehand, meaning we had a good idea of what to expect, and a couple of early targets to look for at a lowland site approximately halfway to Monte Sant'Angelo, our base for the first few days of the tour.

We made a brief stop en route to admire the waterbirds of the lagoons at Ippocampo seeing many Greater Flamingo, passage Green Sandpiper, and enjoying particularly close views of Black-winged Stilt and a showy Pygmy Cormorant that fed actively just offshore. Three Spoonbill provided some entertainment as they dashed in fits and starts in shallow water, feeding urgently beside our vehicle.



At an area of limestone pavement near Mattinata, we stopped to stretch our legs for a couple of hours, to explore, and to enjoy our picnic lunch. We were no sooner out of the vehicle than Bill had spotted the first of our targets, a single spike of *Ophrys apulica*, a dramatically large and colourful-flowered bee orchid named after the region in which we found ourselves this week. Puglia also lends its name to the second of our principal targets, one that was found by Doug and Beth within moments of *Ophrys apulica* – a stand of *Serapias apulica* nearby. They were a little weathered and crisped by the sun of previous days, but we need not have worried, for we soon discovered more, fresher examples tucked into the lea of small bushes in the more verdant areas between the limestone slabs.

These were not the only *Serapias* present here. Most ubiquitous were a great many Small-flowered Tongue-orchid *Serapias parviflora*, some forming sturdy clumps of flowerspikes; a

few *Serapias bergonii* were present; and, shortly before we left the site, Jon found Ploughshare Tongue-orchid *Serapias vomeracea* a little way down the road from our parking spot. We ate our lunch surrounded by *Ophrys apulica*, in the midst of a loose colony of at least 40 flowering plants at the peak of condition. A nearby patch of depauperate *Ophrys* with small dark flowers caused some debate – they'd also mostly finished flowering, so their identity was hard to pin down. We eventually assigned them to being probable *Ophrys garganica*, a common species in the area, and one we knew we would soon be seeing in better condition at higher elevations. Less troublesome was a fine *Ophrys incubacea* near to the road, and our first Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica*, albeit this too was rather elderly and wizened... better would surely come soon enough.



Ambling slowly through the landscape always means we bump into other wildlife, and so it was to prove – while the wind was a little stiff, steadfast butterflies were on the wing regardless. We noted Clouded Yellow, Bath White, Chapman's Blue, Brown Argus, and Small Heath, while a Forester moth was much admired.



We decided to head up the road to our hotel, to check in during the late afternoon, and then to head out orchid-hunting locally again before dinner. This plan was quickly interrupted by an unscheduled stop... Jon had spotted a stand of large and unusual-looking *Serapias* tongue orchids as he drove along a narrow lane. We couldn't possibly ignore those! They proved to be fascinating and beautiful plants, the largest some 30cm tall, with bi-coloured flowers, their tongues a rich yellow, and the rest of the flowers the more conventional *Serapias* pink. Ascribing a firm identity to them was a challenge – they didn't fit neatly into any species. *Serapias* hybridise readily with one another and, having seen several species already in the area, we wondered if this might explain their unusual features.

In due course we made it to the hotel, where check-in was swift and efficient. Half an hour later, we reconvened for a short drive to a site 10 minutes out of town that would provide ample scope to enjoy new orchids before the end of the day. We spent the next hour in something approaching orchid nirvana, exploring a small area of fields that was dripping with flowers. Even at our parking spot we swiftly found *Ophrys neglecta*, the lysergically colourful local sawfly orchid; more *Ophrys garganica* and Naked Man Orchid; and Green-winged Orchid *Anacamptis morio* and Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea*. All this within three or four metres of our vehicle!

Needless to say, the fields around us were also highly productive. Enormous spikes of Green-winged and Pink Butterfly Orchid carpeted areas of them and, among such an abundance of both closely-related species, we began to find hybrids between both parents, *Anacamptis x gennarii*. Doug and Beth found our first Burnt Orchid *Neotinea ustulata*, while Bill found a lovely, almost pure white Green-winged Orchid. This latter, gorgeous plant was attracting much attention, but it was Kirsty's sharp eyes that picked out a new *Ophrys* for us all nestling in the vegetation nearby – a newly opened *Ophrys biscutella*.



Neotinea ustulata © Doug

To say that this afternoon's introduction to the orchid riches of the Gargano had been emphatic would be something of an understatement! We returned to the hotel at the very moment the later arrivals, with David, were checking in, so we were all able to convene for a pre-tour chat before dinner. We'd got plenty to look forward to in the days to come.

Day 2, 17th April

After a long travel day we like to keep things local, and with our hotel right in the heart of orchid country, this was not hard. We spent the day exploring sites along the minor road that leads to the monastery at St Maria di Pulsano, the first of which was all of a 10 minute drive from the hotel.

Even at the side of the road here we were straight into fine orchids, with the first of many *Ophrys garganica* and *Ophrys bertolonii* to be seen and, nearby, our first hybrid of the day, the offspring of the aforementioned duo. Nearby were plenty of *Anacamptis morio* and *Anacamptis papilionacea*, and once again, several examples of their hybrid offspring.



Ophrys neglecta © Kirsty

Less subtle were the first of a great many colourful *Ophrys neglecta*. These jewels were universally popular, with their delicate rose-pink sepals, and lips of chestnut and primrose yellow – colours that, on paper, may not sound like they work together but, in practice, complemented one another perfectly. We walked along a narrow side road, making forays into the open fields on either side of the road. Every step seemed to yield a new orchid. David found the first of what would prove to be good numbers of *Ophrys promontorii* seen during the day, while yellow *Ophrys pseudomelena* were proving common at every turn.

Before too long we began to see the first *Ophrys bertoloniformis*, recognisably different in structure and form to its close relative, *O. bertolonii*. The latter species had been getting up to mischief – we found a lovely hybrid between *Ophrys bertolonii* and *Ophrys incubacea*, growing amidst a patch of both parents. Some hybrids this week might elude certain identification, but this was not to be one such!

Nearby were *Ophrys apulica* hiding, as best such large bee orchids can, in the short grass. With the day being overcast and cool, many of the orchids we saw this morning had passengers roosting upon them – Chapman’s Blue butterflies proved rather numerous. A dense stand of *Ophrys neglecta* on the roadside proved to be a distraction from our first vibrant magenta Four-spotted Orchid *Orchis quadripunctata*, while in the field beyond Jon found a small colony of Bumblebee Orchid *Ophrys bombyliflora*.

A mere two minute drive away was a small hillside that filled the rest of the morning – a small area of gently sloping meadow, absolutely rammed with orchids. As we stepped onto the base of the slope we could see many Green-winged Orchid above us, and these were just a taster of what was to follow – scattered among them were Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica*, more *Ophrys neglecta* and *O. garganica*, and some scattered examples of Four-spotted Orchid too. Jon found half a dozen Milky Orchid *Neotinea lactea* still in reasonable condition and then, further uphill, a real prize – the hybrid between Naked Man and Man Orchid *Orchis anthropophora*, *Orchis x bivonae*. This intense pink, humanoid orchid was a popular one with the photographers, and pleasingly both parents were once again to be found with a metre of their offspring.



Serapias vomeracea were coming into flower here, and we also enjoyed a Burnt Orchid *Neotinea ustulata* on the higher elevations of the meadow. It was hard to tear ourselves away from this morning’s excellent sites but, as lunchtime drew near, we needed to be firm with ourselves. A further 10 minute drive brought us to the environs of St Maria di Pulsano, where we ate our picnic and indulged in a wander around the monastery surroundings. Orchids were, of course, on our minds – Christina found some Giant Orchid *Himantoglossum robertianum* with a few flowers still in decent condition; while Kirsty hit the hybrid jackpot with a fine *Ophrys bombyliflora x neglecta*. Near to the latter was a particularly magnificent example of *Ophrys sipontensis*, our first of the week – over a dozen were to be seen in an adjacent field, along with still more large and colourful *Ophrys apulica*.

We had two more sites with which to fill the afternoon, both hillside areas above the small road that returned to our hotel. The first had seen some grazing pressure recently, with evidence of cattle having moved through the landscape. Not that this had dampened the orchid activity much – we found plenty of *Ophrys biscutella* here, often tucked into the base of small bushes that sheltered them from the grazing. David found a real treasure beside a small patch of their kind – our first *Ophrys paolina*! While admiring this, news came from

others in the group that they'd found something new – *Ophrys sulcata*. The finds were coming thick and fast now.

We elected to squeeze in one more site before calling it a day – another hillside, this one steeper and scattered with many shattered limestone blocks. This was a more challenging area to explore than any hitherto, but the rewards were there for the determined to find – and we were very determined! Greater Tongue-orchid *Serapias lingua* was present here, as was much more Four-spotted Orchid and *Ophrys neglecta* among other things we'd seen already. However, the final prize for the day came courtesy of Spiro, just before we were due to head for the hotel – two examples of hybrid *Ophrys bertolonii* x *Ophrys neglecta*. We could hardly walk away from those... and of course, we didn't!



At the end of the day we'd amassed 26 species recorded, and half a dozen hybrid combinations. Not a bad introduction at all to the wonderful orchids of the Gargano Peninsula...

Day 3, April 18th



Having enjoyed a very local day yesterday making the most of the bounty of orchids to be seen on our very doorstep – and this was no exaggeration, as there was a stand of fine *Ophrys garganica* growing on the verge beneath the hotel in Monte Sant'Angelo! – we spread our wings a little further afield today, and headed to Monte Sacro, a justly renowned orchid-hunting area of the Gargano.

We had the benefit of excellent site information for the entire week thanks to Jon's generous and kind network of European orchid-hunting friends, and also thanks to David's pre-tour recce work. Today featured sites on Monte Sacro where David had already

located individual special orchids we would be targeting during the course of the day.

Our first stop, on Monte Sacro's eastern flank, encompassed a woodland growing from shattered limestone on the cusp of a valley that fell away from the minor road that ascended the mountain. While this area was clearly browsed by cattle – and indeed, we were treated to the sight and sound of the local cattle slowly passing by, herded uphill with cowbells chiming by some boisterous but dedicated dogs – the orchids



flourish in between the limestone shards and in the shelter of thorny shrubs. A closer glance soon revealed plenty of plants in flower. Both *Ophrys bertolonii* and *bertoloniformis* were numerous, with some plants appearing to show characters of both, being intermediate in form. Among the ubiquitous *Ophrys garganica* were some *Ophrys incubacea*, while both Small-flowered Tongue-orchid *Serapias parviflora* and Greater Tongue-orchid *Serapias lingua* were seen in good numbers too.



Ophrys biscutella © Kate

Our first *Ophrys archipelagi* had, sadly, gone over in the days since David last saw it, but we were unperturbed by that – we were confident of more, further uphill, as the day progressed. After a pleasant hour exploring this roadside site we moved uphill and a little north, entering a patch of deciduous woodland that promised, and delivered, plenty of delights. The roadside verge alone was sporting Man Orchid *Orchis anthropophora* and vivid magenta Four-spotted Orchid *Orchis quadripunctata* and, once beneath the trees, we found ourselves surrounded by myriad *Ophrys biscutella*. These came in three pleasing colour forms – mainly with pink sepals, but a handful with white sepals, and one striking plant with beautiful apple-green sepals. All were greatly admired.

Just a few minutes from here a gently sloping valley with rocky promontories was our theatre of operation before lunch. Many more Man Orchid were growing here, particularly on the higher ground. Lower down, in the more verdant valley floor, was our first Roman Orchid *Dactylorhiza romana*, a beautiful primrose yellow flower accentuated by glimpses of its jade green bracts. Many *Ophrys neglecta* were in bloom here too, and more Green-winged and Pink Butterfly Orchid for good measure.

A grassy knoll yielded our first *Ophrys archipelagi* in good condition, much to our collective satisfaction. We took our time to appreciate its complex speculum markings, green shoulders and greenish pseudo-eyes, and its fine appendage. More time still was dedicated to a much smaller orchid that Jon found nearby – David took the care to measure the flowers of this one and, in conjunction with the plant's diminutive stature and greenish-gold fringed lip, we had *Ophrys minipassionis* to savour before our picnic lunch.



Ophrys minipassionis © Doug

Lunch was taken on a vantage point that afforded fine views across the surrounding countryside. The day was a sunny one, a pleasant contrast to the overcast conditions of the preceding day, and we savoured lunch, warmth and, naturally, orchids – there were a number of fine *Ophrys sipontensis* to be seen here, including a *lusus* form with two conjoined lips that Spiro noticed. A couple of plants beside these seemed like good candidates for hybrid offspring produced with *Ophrys incubacea*.



The afternoon was to involve three sites that carried us over the mountain and in the direction of home. The first, a small meadow encompassed by a switchback in the country lane upon which we were driving, was very orchidaceous indeed – many Green-winged and Naked Man Orchid studded the meadow and its margins. One particularly large Naked Man Orchid found itself being sniffed with gusto by many of us, to appreciate its pleasant, faintly vanilla scent. Closer inspection of the meadow yielded good numbers of further *Ophrys archipelagi*, *biscutella*, and *neglecta*, and some lush *Ophrys bombyliflora* too.

The next site was a mosaic of small meadows and open oak woodland, threaded by ancient drystone walls. The most prominent feature here were considerably more primrose-yellow *Dactylorhiza romana*, much to our collective delight, and still more of the regular orchids that we were becoming accustomed to seeing.

We spent an hour at our final site before heading homeward bound. A large open area of grassland, encircled by drystone walls, this productive site harboured many more lovely *Ophrys archipelagi* and *biscutella*. Jon, wandering a little further afield, found a small patch of shattered limestone that held more still – a very photogenic clump, almost a shrub, of *Ophrys neglecta*; and, nearby, an intriguing *chlorantha* form of what appeared to be *Ophrys archipelagi*, albeit the lateral petals did not seem quite hairy enough for that species. Without any colour but green on the lip to go by, we didn't have much else to go on by way of securing an identification – but were content to appreciate the orchid's beauty in its own right.

The drive home took us through woodland with *Narcissus poeticus* growing by the roadside and, a little further on, through fields hazed purple by thousands upon thousands of Green-winged Orchid. What a day this had been!



Day 4, 19th April

We headed north today into woodland areas for the morning, giving ourselves some time in a different habitat type to hitherto. We explored a wooded hillside threaded with access tracks and small grassy clearings, the latter studded with orchids and irises.

Our constant companions this week, Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea* and Green-winged Orchid *Anacamptis morio* were, as ever, much in evidence, as were reasonable numbers of Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica*. Here and there we found *Ophrys*, predominantly *Ophrys biscutella*, but smaller numbers of *Ophrys neglecta* also, and a single hybrid between the two was picked out by David nestling in the short grass. Here and there were more yellow *Dactylorhiza romana*, providing variety.

Beneath the deciduous trees we found Violet Limodore *Limodorum abortivum* spikes thrusting their way up through the leaf litter, like spikes of asparagus; while one or two were of fair size, most were at least a fortnight away from approaching flowering. Similarly,



we found a number of *Platanthera* butterfly orchid sp., with emergent flower spikes just starting to rise above their leaves. Walking slowly back down towards our vehicles, we came across our first Sparse-flowered Orchid *Orchis pauciflora*, a gorgeous confection of pale primrose and rich lemon yellows. This plant, growing singly on the top of a low, shady bank, was greatly admired.

A little way down the minor road towards the valley bottom we stopped again for Sparse-flowered Orchid, at a roadside site that harboured plants on the banks at eye level. Here too was a lovely dense stand of Four-spotted Orchid *Orchis quadripunctata*, and a hyperchromic, deep-purple example of Green-winged Orchid for good measure.

Once down at the valley floor we stopped once more before lunch to admire some Lady Orchid *Orchis purpurea* growing in a hedge at the edge of a small field with some beautiful Wild Peony *Paeonia mascula* nearby for company. Both were popular subjects for our cameras and, in the case of the peonies, for our noses too, for their perfume was rich and intoxicating.



Lunch was taken just a few miles down the road at crossroads where open fields smothered with orchids surrounded us. The day was a warm and sunny one, so it was most agreeable to sit outside to enjoy our picnic. Some of us wandered down the road to make the acquaintance of a small family party of donkeys. Those orchid-filled fields were begging to be explored thoroughly after lunch, so we ambled leisurely through them. In places Naked



Man Orchid painted patches of the fields bright pink, so numerous and densely packed were the flowers, while patches of Green-winged Orchid provided darker purple counterparts.

Nightingales were singing in the bushes nearby, our soundtrack while we sifted through the many *Ophrys gargarica* in search of different bee orchids. We quickly began finding *Ophrys incubacea* too and, in due course, *Ophrys minipassionis* also put in an appearance. Bill's white Green-winged Orchid from arrivals day was still in flower, as were several *Anacamptis x gennarii* hybrids in the vicinity. *Ophrys sipontensis* was flowering on the floor of an old,

abandoned quarry, while many fresh Chapman's Blue and Wall Brown butterflies were on the wing and extremely active in the reflected heat of this stony area.

Our final stop for the day was a short drive away, exploring the roadside verges and a small adjacent field where we knew we stood a good chance of encountering a special hybrid. The verges contained many fine examples of *Ophrys incubacea* and *Ophrys bertolonii*, and smaller numbers of *Ophrys bertoloniformis* and *promontorii*. At the field entrance we found our main target, a single example of *Ophrys bertolonii* x *sipontensis*, a truly striking plant exhibiting characteristics of both parents in its flowers, while nearby Spiro found a potential *Ophrys bertoloniformis* x *neglecta*. Within the field was more *Ophrys sipontensis*, including one particularly large and floriferous example of its kind. Less obvious altogether than this majestic plant were some fresh but diminutive Bumblebee Orchid *Ophrys bombyliflora*.



Pres. *Ophrys bertoloniformis* x *neglecta* © Spiro

We had decided to return to Monte Sant'Angelo a little earlier this afternoon to allow those who so wished some time to explore the town. They returned to our hotel in time for checklist with tales of beautiful architecture and churches and, in the case of Kenda, with some of the delicious *pane di Monte Sant'Angelo*, the bread for which the town is renowned – we enjoyed some of this with some local olive oil while we ran through the day's orchid sightings!

Day 5, 20th April

Today was the day we shifted our base of operation from Monte Sant'Angelo up to the pretty, small fishing town of Peschici on the northern coast of Gargano. We loaded our vehicles after breakfast and set off, with a route in mind that should deliver some orchids, new faces and now familiar stalwarts alike.



Orchis pauciflora © Doug

Heading up into the hills to begin with, we made our first stop in deciduous woodland, walking a pleasant trail up on to a hilltop clearing within the woods. They may not have been orchids, but the rich yellow flowers of Leopard's Bane were greatly admired, David dryly noting that their presence was why we'd not seen any leopards yet this week! These, however, were not the yellow flowers we really hoped to see in this location...

Beneath the trees near the clearing's edge were a number of primrose-yellow Roman Orchid *Dactylorhiza romana* and, in the open as we walked into the clearing, more beautifully two-toned yellow Sparse-flowered Orchid *Orchis pauciflora*. Still not the yellow target we had in mind though... But sure enough, a little while later David announced he'd found what

we were looking for – Elder-flowered Orchid *Dactylorhiza sambucina*. This plant could not have been more helpful – a large-flowered example of its kind, it was just a foot away from a Roman Orchid, allowing us to make a useful comparison between the two, noting the field characteristics that helped to differentiate one from the other.

Up on the hilltop, the clearing itself had more treats in store for us. Man Orchid *Orchis anthropophora* were numerous here, with some dense stands of tall flowerspikes in places. *Ophrys biscutella* was also present in good numbers, with scattered examples of *Ophrys*



Orchis anthropophora © Christina

neglecta and *Ophrys archipelagi* also found. Stealing the show, however, were the flowers of Sparse-flowered Orchid, with some fine clumps of this attractive species to be seen.



Shepherd's mule © Kathy

Midway through our explorations here we had a visitor – a shepherd appeared from the woods, leading a mule bearing his itinerant belongings slung around an elaborate saddle, followed by a calm and faithful herd-dog. This small party walked through the sunlit clearing, greeting us cheerfully, and vanished into the woods beyond as silently as they came.

We tore ourselves away from this delightful site, and pressed on northwest, passing through the town of San Marco in Lamis. Climbing the western slopes of the Gargano massif we stopped briefly to explore a roadside field, which proved to be modest gem, home to some lovely examples of *Ophrys garganica*, *incubacea*, and *minipassionis*, and some very fine Four-spotted Orchid *Orchis quadripunctata*.

A picnic area a short drive away gave us some benches upon which to sit to eat our lunch, and some more treats besides – good views of hilltopping Scarce Swallowtail, and yet more *Ophrys incubacea* and *garganica*. We had another *Ophrys* in mind here, and it was Bill who spotted our first example of *Ophrys parvimaculata*. Nearby we found four more of this subtly attractive, large-flowered *Ophrys* and our first Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, albeit the latter only just coming into bloom.

Further towards Peschici we made a final stop to explore another area of dense woodland for second-helpings of *Ophrys parvimaculata*. While the woodland was dense, pushing into it was amply rewarded in no time at all, for



Ophrys parvimaculata © Jon

Christina found our next *parvimaculata*, and this one was surely the best example any of us would ever enjoy of this statuesque and imposing species. Coincidentally, it was where Nell had chosen to sit, happily missing the plant!



Was an orchid ever photographed so lovingly?! Potentially yes, for nearby David found more *parvimaculata* and a fine hybrid, *Ophrys biscutella x parvimaculata*. Needless to say these were paid their due attention.

From here we continued east, reaching Peschici in the late afternoon, and checking in to our lovely new seaside hotel, our home for the remainder of the tour.

Day 6, 21st April

We began our day with a very short drive indeed to the outskirts of the beautiful fishing town in which we were staying for the latter half of the week. Here, on a lightly wooded hillside, we began searching for our main target today, the bee orchid named eponymously after Gargano itself – *Ophrys montis-gargani*. This is a small-flowered orchid, but a spectacularly formed one, sporting large ‘horns’ that protrude far from the lip.

We were less than 10 minutes into our search before Kathy quietly announced that she’d found one – and what a plant she’d found, for it was a tall and beautiful example of its kind, with white-sepalled flowers. Almost at the same moment, news came from a little further around the hillside that David, Doug and Beth were looking at a pink-sepalled example! This too was a large and impressive flowerspike.

Nearby Christina and Jon found more flowering plants, surrounded by a number of fully open Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*. Further exploration of the site as a whole was to reveal more of both species, and a few Greater Tongue-orchid *Serapias vomeracea* and Small-flowered Tongue-orchid *S. parviflora*. Little did we know what awaited us later in the day on the tongue-orchid front...



From here we struck west, and explored a new habitat type for the week on the northern side of Lake Varano. This was an arid site, albeit of course not without orchids – we found *Ophrys lutea*, *garganica*, and *incubacea* here, and a few more *Serapias vomeracea* and *S. parviflora*. The main attraction here though were the birds – we enjoyed close views of two Hoopoe feeding on the grass beside the sandy entrance track, while Bee-eater frequently fed high overhead. For a little while it seemed like we weren’t the only orchid-hunters here, for several folk were wandering around with heads bowed, and expressions of intense

concentration on their faces. In time it dawned upon us that they had a different plant target in mind – wild asparagus to pick for the table!



We headed inland for our lunch to a minor road, a dead end with no traffic, which would be our centre of operation for the hours after we'd eaten. On either side of the road were lightly grazed enclaves surrounded by trees in which we were to find many orchids. Principle amongst them – though there were plenty of *Ophrys neglecta* and *incubacea* to distract us – were the *Serapias* tongue-orchids.

We found ourselves in a large open field that was literally carpeted with them – three species, *Serapias vomeracea*, *Serapias parviflora*, and *Serapias lingua*. Patches of each species ran into the hundreds of flowering plants and, across the field as a whole, there must have been at least 5,000

plants in bloom. Inevitably, we found some good candidates for hybrids between them in such a melting pot of orchids – in particular, one plant found by Doug, Beth and Jan seemed like a nailed-on *Serapias lingua* x *vomeracea*, displaying characteristics intermediate between the nearby parents.

Serapias lingua was displaying impressive variation here too – in addition to large numbers of plants with conventionally coloured flowers, we found high numbers of pale rose-pink plants and, here and there, some plants with almost white lips. Roger discovered a particularly photogenic patch of these while, nearby, Jon found three hyperchromic plants with deep burgundy, almost black, lips. Not far away from these distractions Bill found a bicoloured plant, with a white lip fringed with cherry red. This was truly a field of dreams.

Speaking of dreamy things, on our return to Peschici we headed on foot from our hotel up into the old town, climbing stone steps through cobbled streets to the town square. Here Jon treated us all to delicious gelatos to bring the afternoon to a delicious conclusion.



Day 7, 22nd April

Today found us working our way down the eastern seaboard of the Gargano Peninsula, starting on a headland a little way outside Vieste, where with the Adriatic sparkling cerulean blue in the morning sunshine as a backdrop, we found our first orchids of the day – more Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis* in full exuberant bloom, Small-flowered Tongue-orchid *Serapias parviflora* struggling to hold a candle to them, and some more of the large and impressive flowers of *Ophrys apulica*, including one example with a marvellously elaborate and complex lip pattern.



Ophrys apulica © Roger

We bore south then, passing through the Foresta Umbra towards Mattinata. The drive was, of course, not without its orchids, not least the enormous spike of *Ophrys biscutella* that Jon, driving the lead vehicle, saw at the side of the road. It was hard to miss – knee high, and with eight blooms open on it. This singular orchid deserved a stop all of its own, and it got it!

From here we dropped down a little closer to the sea, to spend the remainder of the morning and the afternoon exploring a ridge of land that jutted out from the forest towards the coast. At first sight, we might have been forgiven for thinking the horse had already bolted, or rather, the cattle had already spoiled the party. There was plenty of evidence of the very recent presence of the beautiful limestone grey Podolica cows having passed through the area...

Their grazing is, of course, integral to making the Gargano the orchid hotspot that it is, ensuring vegetation doesn't become rank and smothering to the detriment of orchids, and providing broken ground that's conducive to colonisation by opportunistic orchid seeds. We couldn't be angry with them for having crossed our site so recently, not least because there were still orchids here to be found – we simply needed to look in the right places across the site, and look a little harder than hitherto. Until now we'd been spoiled rotten by sites that were smothered with flowering plants!



Ophrys biscutella appreciation © Christina



Serapias cordigera © Jon

It wasn't long before Jon called the group over to see our first new orchid of the day – a fine, garnet-red Heart-flowered Tongue-orchid *Serapias cordigera*. This was followed a little while later by the discovery of a lone *fusca*-type *Ophrys* on the very edge of a rather precipitous roadside bank. David, scrutinising and assessing it carefully, announced we had *Ophrys lojaconoi* on our hands – a really excellent find. Presumably its inaccessible location had spared it the attentions of the recent cows. While we carefully took our turn, one by one, to admire it, this was rendered happily moot by the discovery, nearer to the roadside and in a far more accessible location (albeit not one for the cows!) of several more examples of its kind.

Our needle soon hit the orchid-hunting groove, with our focus tightening on places where the cows either hadn't reached or had clearly grazed less assiduously. The orchids began to flow once more... Some really fine *Ophrys bertolonii* sparkled in the sunshine like diamonds,

the shiny mirrors on their lips reflecting the sun in piercing white flashes; Pyramidal Orchid were more numerous than hitherto; still more magnificent *Ophrys apulica* were found on lower terraces beneath the road; and amidst many Small-flowered Tongue-orchid, we encountered a handful more Heart-flowered Tongue-orchid for good measure.

Today's discoveries carried our final tally of flowering orchid species to a very respectable 39, with a further dozen hybrids we could be reasonably confident to ascribe likely parents to, on the basis of demonstrated parental characteristics and/or proximity of parents – and, inevitably in such a glorious melting pot of orchid species, some hybrid flowers that had defied our best efforts to pin them down! All part of the fun and the learning curve for all of us and, ultimately, when the hybrid flowers are simply beautiful, did it really matter if we couldn't pigeonhole them? We could all head for home having enjoyed their beauty alone for what it was.



Anacamptis pyramidalis © Kenda

Day 8, Departures day

Speaking of heading for home, alas all good things have to come to an end. With our departure times being as staggered as those of arrivals day, we would head for the airport in two tranches, with David taking the earlier departures, and Jon the later departures. Those leaving later would have the benefit of some additional orchid-hunting time en route, a



Ophrys apulica © Kate

luxury not enjoyed by all who'd arrived in Bari on the later flights a week ago. Kenda, meanwhile, was staying on in Italy, so we bid our first sad goodbyes to her before hitting the road.

Both vehicles enjoyed uneventful, smooth passages down to Bari – though strictly speaking, those in Jon's vehicle didn't have an entirely uneventful journey, for it was interrupted not only with the opportunity for final helpings of the region's eponymous *Ophrys apulica* and *Serapias apulica*, but also close views of a territorial Stone Curlew, a glorious feeding flock of Bee-eater, and some confiding Pygmy Cormorant! To the very last, we were keeping our eyes peeled for wildlife.

Epilogue

Jon and David would particularly like to thank all of our group for joining us this year in Gargano – we made a terrific team, and all of us came away with some wonderful wildlife memories to cherish and, in particular, some very special orchid encounters indeed. Everybody found plants that contributed to the overall success of the week and the pleasure and enjoyment of the group as a whole. Moreover, the good humour, kindness, and thoughtfulness of the group was exceptional – the camaraderie and team spirit was a daily

joy, and we found ourselves sharing way more than simply the peninsula's orchids, wonderful though the latter of course were. We couldn't have wished for a finer orchid-hunting team – thank you, one and all! We really look forward to seeing you again soon.



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Orchids of the Gargano Peninsula 16th-23rd April 2025

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...

Some 90 orchid taxa have been recorded on the Gargano over the full extent of the flowering season. In the interests of economy of space and user-friendliness of this checklist, taxa included on the list are those recorded flowering on the Gargano Peninsula in the months of March, April and May – while we certainly will not see all the taxa on the checklist, we may find late-flowering examples of early taxa, or conversely early examples of later-flowering taxa, depending on the conditions of the year in question.

Where common, vernacular English names exist for taxa, these are also included in the checklist alongside the binomial scientific name.

	Taxa	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	GENUS ANACAMPTIS								
1	Fan-lipped Orchid <i>Anacamptis collina</i>	Nf							nf
2	Fragrant Orchid <i>Anacamptis fragrans</i>								
3	Green-winged Orchid <i>Anacamptis morio</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
4	<i>Anacamptis palustris</i>								
5	Pink Butterfly Orchid <i>Anacamptis papilionacea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Pyramidal Orchid <i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>					✓	✓	✓	
	GENUS CEPHALANTHERA								
7	White Helleborine <i>Cephalanthera damasonium</i>								
8	Sword-leaved Helleborine <i>Cephalanthera longifolium</i>								
9	Red Helleborine <i>Cephalanthera rubra</i>								
	GENUS DACTYLORHIZA								
10	Common Spotted Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>								
11	Roman Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza romana</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	
12	Elder-flowered Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza sambucina</i>					✓			
13	Frog Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza viridis</i>								
	GENUS EPIPACTIS								
14	Small-leaved Helleborine <i>Epipactis microphylla</i>								
	GENUS GYMADENIA								
15	Chalk Fragrant Orchid <i>Gymnadenia conopsea</i>								
	GENUS HIMANTOGLOSSUM								
16	Lizard Orchid <i>Himantoglossum hircinum</i>				nf				
17	Giant Orchid <i>Himantoglossum robertianum</i>	Nf	✓	nf	nf		nf	nf	nf
	GENUS LIMODORUM								
18	Violet Limodore <i>Limodorum abortivum</i>				nf				

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	GENUS NEOTINEA								
19	Milky Orchid <i>Neotinea lactea</i>		✓						
20	Dense-flowered Orchid <i>Neotinea maculata</i>								
21	Three-toothed Orchid <i>Neotinea tridentata</i>								
22	Burnt Orchid <i>Neotinea ustulata</i>	✓	✓		✓				
	GENUS NEOTTIA								
23	Bird's-nest Orchid <i>Neottia nidus-avis</i>								
24	Common Twayblade <i>Neottia ovata</i>								
	GENUS OPHRYS								
	Ophrys fusca group								
25	<i>Ophrys lojaconoi</i>							✓	
26	<i>Ophrys lucifera</i>								
27	<i>Ophrys lupercalis</i>								
	Ophrys obaesa group								
28	<i>Ophrys sulcata</i>		✓						
	Ophrys lutea group								
29	Yellow Bee Orchid <i>Ophrys lutea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
30	<i>Ophrys phryganae</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
31	<i>Ophrys pseudomelena</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
	Ophrys speculum group								
32	Mirror Orchid <i>Ophrys speculum</i>								
	Ophrys tenthredinifera group								
33	Bumblebee Orchid <i>Ophrys bombyliflora</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
34	<i>Ophrys neglecta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	Ophrys apifera group								
35	Bee Orchid <i>Ophrys apifera</i>								
	Ophrys bornmuelleri group								
36	<i>Ophrys parvimaculata</i>					✓			
	Ophrys tetraloniae group								
37	<i>Ophrys conradiae</i>								
	Ophrys fuciflora group ('Late Spider-types')								
38	<i>Ophrys apulica</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
39	<i>Ophrys celiensis</i>								
40	<i>Ophrys cinnabarina</i>								
41	<i>Ophrys paolina</i>		✓						
42	<i>Ophrys gracilis</i>								
43	<i>Ophrys lacaitae</i>								
	Ophrys oestriifera group								
44	<i>Ophrys montis-gargani</i>						✓		
45	<i>Ophrys mattinatae</i>								
	Ophrys argolica group								
46	<i>Ophrys biscutella</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	Ophrys exaltata group								
47	<i>Ophrys archipelagi</i>			✓		✓			
48	<i>Ophrys classica</i>								
49	<i>Ophrys tarquinia</i>								
	Ophrys sphegodes group ('Early Spider-types')								
50	<i>Ophrys brutia</i>								
51	<i>Ophrys liburnica</i>								
	Ophrys incubacea group								
52	<i>Ophrys incubacea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	<i>Ophrys minipassionis</i>			✓	✓	✓			
54	<i>Ophrys garganica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
55	<i>Ophrys sipontensis</i>		✓	✓	✓				
	Ophrys lunulata group								
56	<i>Ophrys promontorii</i>		✓	✓	✓				
	Ophrys bertolonii group								
57	<i>Ophrys bertolonii</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
58	<i>Ophrys bertoloniformis</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
	GENUS ORCHIS								
59	Man Orchid <i>Orchis anthropophora</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
60	Naked Man Orchid <i>Orchis italica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Sparse-flowered Orchid <i>Orchis pauciflora</i>				✓	✓			
62	Provence Orchid <i>Orchis provincialis</i>								
63	Lady Orchid <i>Orchis purpurea</i>				✓	✓			
64	Four-spotted Orchid <i>Orchis quadripunctata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
	GENUS PLATANThERA								
65	Lesser Butterfly Orchid <i>Platanthera bifolia</i>								
66	Greater Butterfly Orchid <i>Platanthera chlorantha</i>								
	GENUS SERAPIAS								
67	<i>Serapias bergonii</i>	✓	✓						
68	Heart-flowered Tongue-orchid <i>Serapias cordigera</i>							✓	✓
69	Greater Tongue-orchid <i>Serapias lingua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
70	<i>Serapias apulica</i>	✓							✓
71	Small-flowered Tongue-orchid <i>Serapias parviflora</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
72	Ploughshare Tongue-orchid <i>Serapias vomeracea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	NB to above: 'nf' = 'non-flowering'								
	Daily (in flower) total:	16	26	23	24	22	12	15	11
	Running (in flower) total:	16	28	31	33	36	37	39	39

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	PRESUMED HYBRIDS								
	<i>Anacamptis x gennarii</i>	✓	✓		✓				
	<i>Serapias lingua x vomeracea</i>	✓					✓		
	<i>Orchis x bivonae</i>		✓						
	<i>Ophrys bertolonii x garganica</i>		✓						
	<i>Ophrys bertolonii x incubacea</i>		✓						
	<i>Ophrys bombyliflora x neglecta</i>		✓						
	<i>Ophrys bertolonii x neglecta</i>		✓						
	<i>Ophrys incubacea x sipontensis</i>			✓					
	<i>Ophrys garganica x incubacea</i>			✓	✓				
	<i>Ophrys biscutella x neglecta</i>				✓				
	<i>Ophrys bertolonii x sipontensis</i>				✓				
	<i>Ophrys bertoloniformis x neglecta</i>				✓				
	<i>Ophrys biscutella x parvimaculata</i>					✓			

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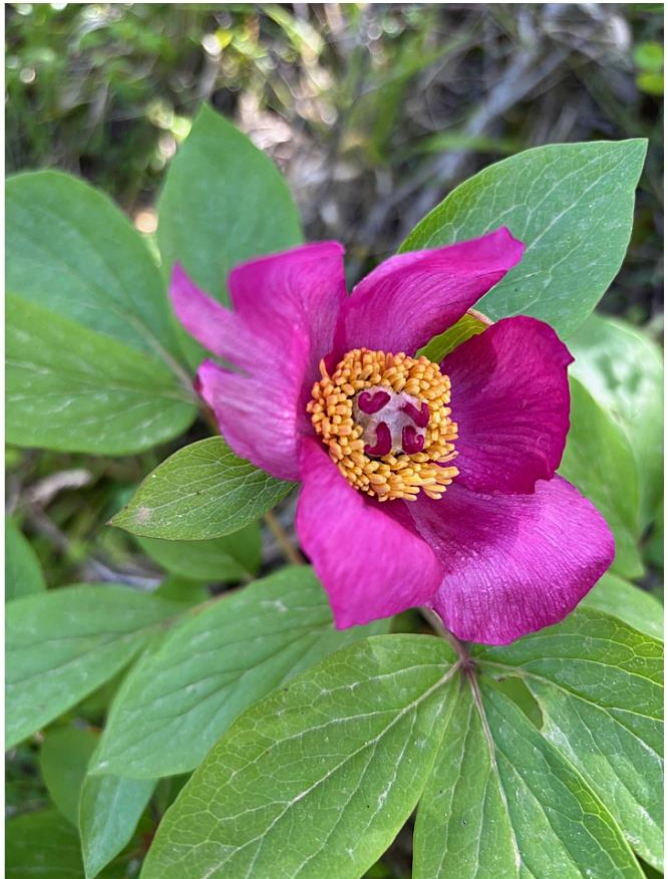
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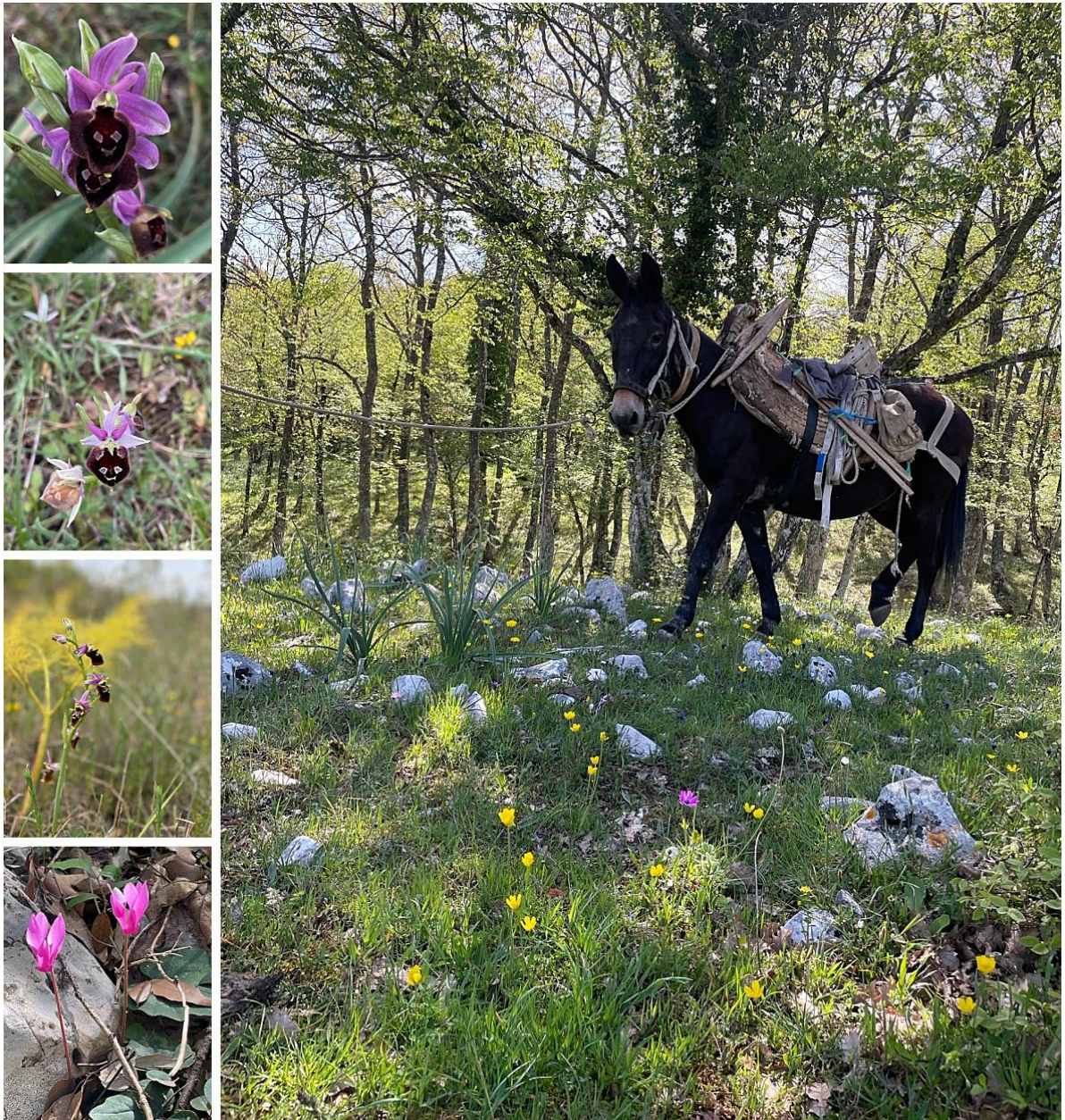
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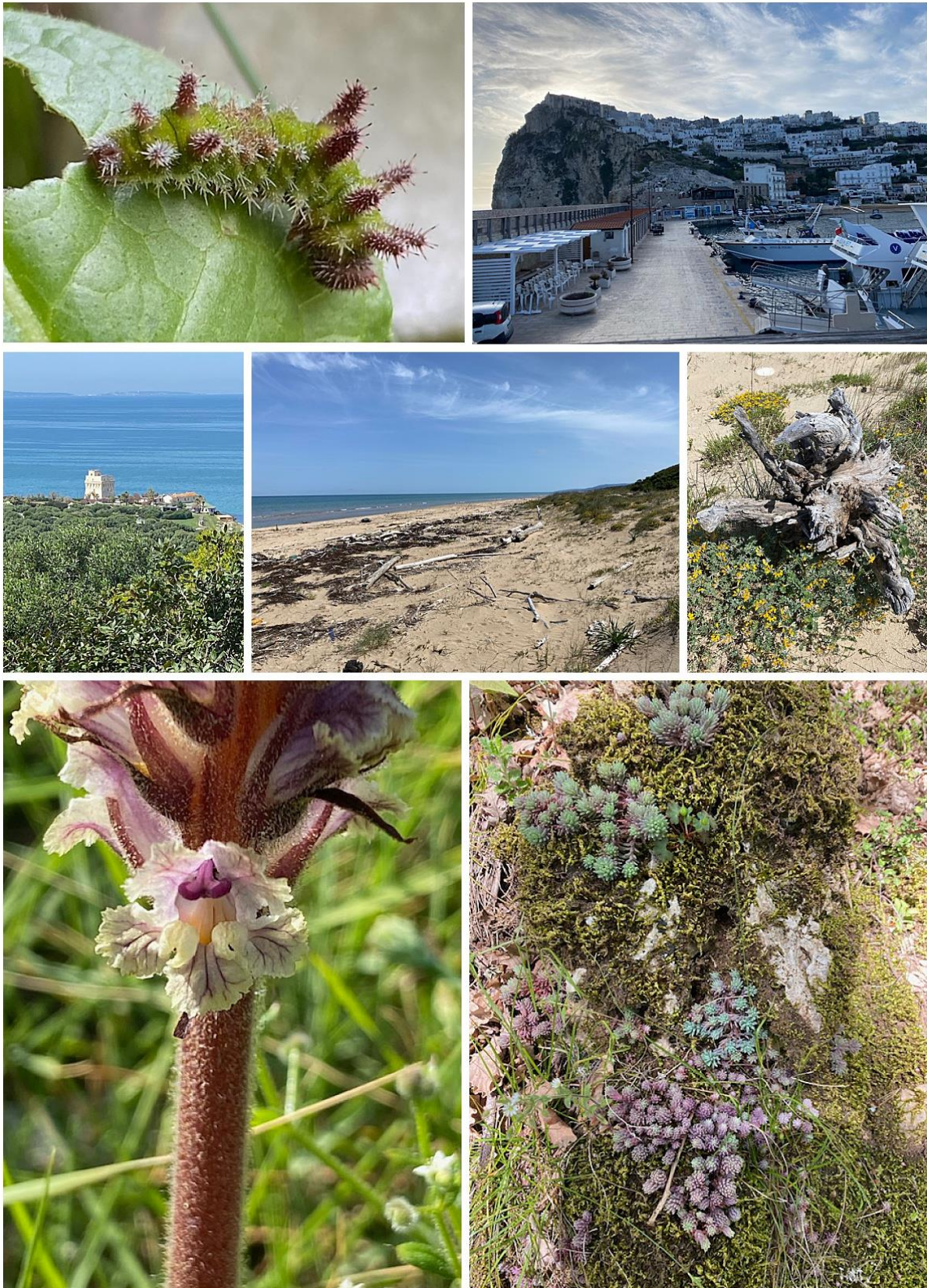
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And finally... Our Orchids of the Gargano Peninsula tour for 2026 is already fully booked – we're not too surprised, as we set the bar high in 2025! We've other orchid tours in 2026 visiting other species-rich areas of Europe with places still available to join us (see below), and have some further exciting orchid tours in the pipeline for 2026 and 2027 – watch this space!

[Orchids of Cyprus 2nd-9th March 2026](#)

[Late Spring Orchids of Sicily 1st-8th May 2026](#)