

Orchids of Sicily

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

11th-18th April 2024



Tour leaders Jon Dunn & Andrea Corso

Trip report by Jon Dunn

Images kindly shared by our guests

(Images above © Jon Dunn)



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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. Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica*].

Thursday 11th April



Ophrys grassoana © Jon Dunn

All of our guests arrived safely and on time at Catania airport, joining Jon and Andrea in the arrivals hall as planned, so with no further ado we loaded our luggage into our spacious vehicles for the week, and set off for our initial base on the northern flanks of Etna. This agriturismo was to prove to be a wonderful introduction to the extent of Sicilian hospitality, though quite how warm and generous that would prove to be was only to be discovered later, at dinner time...

For now, after a late lunch, we headed just a few minutes up the road and uphill into the ancient lava fields on the side of Etna. An initial roadside stop, prompted by the sight of a stand of *Serapias* tongue orchids, yielded several *Serapias*

bergonii and our first *Ophrys* bee orchids – conveniently side by side, we had *Ophrys incubacea* and Sicilian endemic *Ophrys grassoana*. The latter is a lava field specialist, favouring the slopes of Etna in particular, and was a particular target for the afternoon.

Further uphill, at a gorgeous and extensive area of abandoned terraces amidst the lava fields, we found more *Ophrys grassoana*, and more orchids besides. First up was *Neotinea tridentata*, followed shortly by *Anacamptis morio*. Jon then found the first of a dozen or so freshly emerged *Orchis brancifortii* – this tiny-flowered pink *Orchis* is a near-endemic on Sicily, and was our other major target for today's initial Sicilian orchid hunting.



Orchis brancifortii © Jon Dunn

Nearby, Graham found our first Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea* in flower, which was duly admired by all. Some short distance away, beside a Bronze Age tomb constructed beautifully from blocks of lava, Jon found a tiny Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica*. Some good-natured ribaldry ensued amongst the group, and we learned a new Italian word – piccolo – to describe such a petite orchid.



Pink Butterfly Orchid (*Anacamptis papilionacea*) © Pete

A more magnificent specimen was found nearby, rather appositely beside a large patch of birthwort *Aristolochia sp.*, the larval foodplant of Italian Festoon butterflies. Several of the group saw these in flight amongst the many asphodels here; additional butterfly sightings were more familiar – Small Copper, Small Heath, and Orange-tip.

Birds weren't neglected either – Andrea, being one of the top birders in Europe, let alone Italy, was pointing out birds of interest whenever they were seen or heard. Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Cirl Bunting, a singing Moltoni's Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper... all were duly noted.

We retired to our accommodation with eight species of orchid under our belts. Belts which, once we'd enjoyed a spectacular five course dinner, needed to be let out a notch!

Friday 12th April

We knew that today would be a long day, and had braced ourselves as such. An early breakfast saw us departing in good time for the cross country journey to the limestone massif of Bosco della Ficuzza. The outward journey was hindered somewhat by a navigational error on the part of Andrea's satnav that added an hour to the drive, and some grey hairs to Jon who was following in our second vehicle. Suffice to say that Zappa is definitely off the beaten track and a truly rural part of Sicily that most Sicilians, let alone orchid-hunting visitors from elsewhere in the world, have never seen!

Joking aside, it was fascinating to travel through an area of the countryside north of Etna that felt as if time had passed it by. The road may have been questionable and better suited to a Fiat Panda 4x4 or a nimble mule, but the landscapes it threaded its way through were beautiful, the villages we passed through were sleepy and untouched, and we met shepherds and cowherds who steered us in the right direction and ultimately to the dual carriageway that sent us flying towards Palermo and on towards Ficuzza.

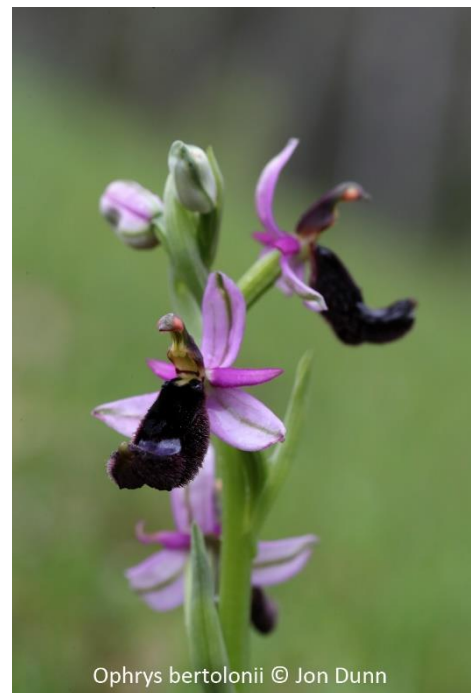


Anacamptis longicornu © Jon Dunn

Once there, Jon was in familiar territory, having led a successful orchid tour on Sicily in 2023 for the Orchid Conservation Alliance. Mariposa Nature Tours isn't in the habit of 'winging it', and we knew to within metres where we should find the first of our main targets for the day, *Dactylorhiza markusii*. The walk to its favoured station began to yield further orchids – Michael found our first strongly marked purple and white *Anacamptis longicornu*, while the first *Ophrys* of the day were also spotted – a handful of *Ophrys lutea* and *sicula*, and predominantly *Ophrys bertolonii*, with their strangely contorted lips. We made sure to check each closely to ensure we didn't miss a cryptic *Ophrys explanata* in their midst. Speaking of cryptic *Ophrys*, we needed to be on top of our game examining the *fusca*-types we were to see. Undoubtedly there's hybrid shenanigans

going on amongst them in such an orchid-rich environment, so rather than attempting to shoehorn a perplexing individual orchid into a convenient species box, we concentrated on finding classic examples of the parent species present.

This, however, was going to prove a little challenging, as it was immediately apparent that there was a general paucity of orchids in what, in the previous year, had been an environment awash with them. The preceding months of winter and early spring had been abnormally hot and dry, with no rain of any significance falling upon Sicily since December. We had all seen, as our planes came in to land in Catania, how brown and parched the island below us appeared to be, and had seen Etna shrouded in Saharan dust that turned the sky above us a milky opal white. Here, in Bosco della Ficuzza, normally a lush woodland habitat, the ground was parched and dusty instead of soft and yielding, the streambeds lay dry and filled with the previous autumn's oak leaves, and there were cracks in the forest floor as wide as a finger-width. This was ominous stuff.



Ophrys bertolonii © Jon Dunn

At first glance, there was no sign of *Dactylorhiza markusii*. An early flowering species, had it already been and gone? Maybe, in this poor season, it had not flowered at all? Thanks to Cheryl's sharp eyes, we were destined to not miss out, though the plant in question that she found was not, with respect to this beautiful species, the best example we might have hoped to see. At the very end of flowering, the top pale primrose yellow floret on its spike was just clinging on and had not turned to a crispy brown like its fellows beneath it. The

morphology of the plant, notably its erect bracts above the uppermost flower, was sufficient to allow a positive identification.

Nearby, an *Ophrys* in good condition gave us a chance to delve into the intricacies of lip morphology and markings. After careful consideration, we were happy that this was *Ophrys caesiella*, providing a useful contrast to *Ophrys calocaerina* seen earlier on. Further distractions in this stretch of woodland were an abundance of hot pink cyclamen and some snow white peony, the latter looking rather stunted and sorry for themselves on the baked forest floor.



Ophrys pallida © Jon Dunn

We moved downhill, walking the verges of a hitherto productive forest track. Again, compared to the previous year there was a distinct lack of volume of orchids, but at least here and there we were able to find small patches that hinted at the site's potential, particularly downhill from a series of large, overflowing animal troughs that gave areas of the woodland floor and its grassy boundary a welcome source of seeping water. More *Ophrys bertolonii* were seen at regular intervals – this *Ophrys* didn't seem unduly concerned by the dry conditions that were hindering flowering elsewhere.

Jon and Andrea found our first examples of the day's other main target, *Ophrys pallida*, a North African species found only in this area of Sicily and nowhere else in Europe. But these poor, impoverished plants

spoke of the immense stress the orchids here were under – each sported one desiccated flower, the buds above it aborting and blackened. Mercifully, Andrea then discovered an immaculate plant, with unblemished white sepals and a fine, white hair dusted lip. The pale wraith of the Sicilian woods was ours!

Nearby further new *Ophrys* were seen – some fine *Ophrys archimedeae*, and a handful of Bumblebee Orchid *Ophrys bombyliflora*. The latter, again, told a mute tale – where in 2023 they had thrived in their hundreds in damp hollows beside the track, this year they were to be seen in ones and twos. Similarly, we found just a few *Neotinea lactea* today when we might have expected many hundreds had the spring weather been normal. Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica* seemed fairly undaunted by the conditions, and were seen in their dozens. Our final orchid of the day was a



Ophrys bombyliflora © Jon Dunn

depauparate example of *Ophrys grandiflora*, a normally extravagant and showy species reduced, in the heat, to a small and sad version of what might have been.

All in all, this had been a rather tough day. Positively, we'd seen both of our target species, *Dactylorhiza markusii* and *Ophrys pallida*, and some good examples of further *Ophrys* species besides, but the effects of the dry, hot winter and spring were stark to see in the general lack of orchids as a whole. The longest day had, ultimately, been worth the effort, but how we wished we'd had volume as well as variety of orchids. Our drive back to our comfortable agriturismo accommodation was smooth and uneventful, and we found another fine dinner awaiting us when we arrived.

Saturday 13th April



Dactylorhiza romana © Pete

Today was our transfer day to our principle agriturismo accommodation for the coming week, in the southeast of the island near to Siracusa. Our first agriturismo, on the other hand, had been carefully selected for its location on the lower north-easterly slopes of Etna, giving us the opportunity to make the most of proximity to this magnificent area of unique habitat.

We spent the morning exploring the lower elevations of the slumbering volcano, spending some happy time on a series of old terraces planted with sweet chestnut. Beneath the trees, in dappled shade, were large numbers of *Dactylorhiza romana* in perfect condition. This gorgeous orchid comes in two main colour forms, a deep, rich purple, and pale primrose yellow, and both were well represented here. We also found a number of delightful flowers that

represented an intermediate form between the two, and these were greatly admired and appreciated.

Moving higher uphill, we began to encounter some of the other wildflowers for which Etna is so renowned at this time of year, not least large drifts of Etna Violet *Viola aetnensis*, also appearing in two colour forms, purple and pale yellow. From the sublime to the ridiculously large, we also admired large stands of Etna Birch *Betula aetnensis*, their white trunks pocked with exaggerated 'eyes'.



Viola aetnensis © Jon Dunn

Keen eyes also picked out a pair of mating Emperor Moth, happily so preoccupied with one another that photographers could make a responsibly close approach.

After this, we gradually descended Etna's eastern flank and worked our way south towards our agriturismo. What awaited us was an absolute delight – a beautiful old country house, architecturally stunning, and a warm welcome. And in the countryside immediately around the grounds, Hoopoe and Collared Flycatcher – a propitious omen!



Ophrys lucifera © Jon Dunn

We made a foray to a site ten minutes from our new base before dinner, and here found a lovely selection of *Ophrys lutea*, Pink Butterfly Orchid *Anacamptis papilionacea*, *Neotinea tridentata*, Small-flowered Tongue-orchid *Serapias parviflora* and, in pride of place, *Ophrys lucifera*. The latter, a scarce and usually isolated species, was a particular prize and one Jon was particularly delighted to have found for the group. Maybe not the most visually striking of the *Ophrys* orchids, but surely one we would be unlikely to encounter again this week.

Sunday 14th April – Monte Lauro

Our first full day in the south of the island was devoted to a locus classicus for orchids on Sicily, Monte Lauro. Not only home to an endemic orchid named after the type location at which it was first described, *Ophrys laurensis*, but also a wide variety of further orchid species. We arrived here with high hopes, albeit hopes tempered by our experience of the effects of the dire weather of the preceding months.

We'd seen a couple of withered *Ophrys grandiflora*, both found by Wendy, in the past couple of days, but Monte Lauro finally delivered in some style, with some fine *grandiflora* soon forthcoming close to where we'd parked. There was, however, no sign of the *Orchis pauciflora* that we had dared to hope to re-find here again after Jon had seen them here the prior year; and, indeed, those *Anacamptis longicornu* that had managed to flower this year were, for the most part, well past their best, and nowhere near as numerous as they would be in a normal year.



Ophrys grandiflora © Sue



Ophrys laurensis © Jon Dunn

Nonetheless, we persevered – this was a special site, and as such it demanded our full attention. As the morning progressed towards lunchtime the finds gradually accumulated, not least thanks to Cheryl's sharp eyes – an orchid she found proved, on closer inspection, to be our first *Ophrys laurensis*. It took just a little relocating but, once re-found, was well appreciated by all. Nearby we found fine stands of *Orchis provincialis*, some *Anacamptis longicornu* still hanging on, and our first Greater Tongue-orchid *Serapias lingua* too.

Returning to the vehicles to collect our picnic lunches, Jon and Andrea had some surprises in store for the group – a dense colony of *Ophrys archimedia* and, amongst them, *Ophrys lupercalis* and *Ophrys flammeola*. The opportunity to compare these subtle species side by side was much appreciated, though the taxonomic shades of *Ophrys* grey were definitely up for good-natured discussion!

After lunch we moved downhill to a nearby roadside site that, while at first glance wasn't particularly promising, proved in time to be something of a gem. A hillside that extended above our parking place at the side of the road, to begin with we weren't seeing much – a few *Ophrys bombyliflora* being about the best of it. Sue broke our duck with the first *Ophrys oxyrrhynchos* of the week, albeit rather a small-flowered specimen. News then filtered down from further uphill that Graham and others had found an orchid-rich area of grassland... so we soldiered still higher on the hillside.

This was to prove enormously worthwhile. What we found was like an area of the English South Downs, but with a very different orchid flora. *Ophrys incubacea* replaced Early Spider Orchid *Ophrys sphegodes*... but there were many more orchids besides. *Ophrys bertolonii* was abundant here, with its strangely contorted flowers. We also saw many *Ophrys bombyliflora*, *Ophrys biancae*, and our first flowering *Anacamptis pyramidalis*. The latter, a late flowering species, again told us plenty about how advanced the flowering season was here in Sicily this year.



Ophrys incubacea © Pete



(left to right)
Orchis italica
Orchis anthropophora
Orchis x bivonae
 © Jon Dunn

Our return home was via a roadside site Jon knew well from the previous year – a site rich with Naked Man Orchid *Orchis italica*, Man Orchid *Orchis anthropophora*, and their unusual hybrid, *Orchis x bivonae*. We found two of the latter plants, one of which was delightfully photogenic, sitting beside both of its parent plants.

Monday 15th April – Pantani Wetlands

Given both the consequences of the months of heat and drought in Sicily that had preceded our arrival, manifesting themselves in a reduced volume of orchids to be seen, and the success of the previous days in terms of the number of species seen, we decided to try something different today, using Andrea's experience and contacts to arrange access to a private nature reserve down on the southern coast of the island. Here, we hoped, we might



Ophrys calliantha © Jon Dunn

encounter some orchids flourishing on the margins of this wetland habitat, and perhaps in better numbers than we'd seen hitherto.

On the one hand, the story of the previous days was to be repeated – the volume and spectacle of orchids was again found to be diminished compared with what we might have hoped to see. However, we did well insofar as we added new species to our mounting weekly tally, which by the end of the day had risen to 39 species recorded.

The story of the reserve is an inspiring one. Founded by a German philanthropist, the land the reserve encompasses was formerly owned by almost 100 individuals, and was largely degraded agricultural land, being used for illegal waste disposal and horse-racing.

Recognising the intrinsic biodiversity value of the area, over time the Stiftung Pro Artenvielfalt conservation foundation acquired the land and set about restoring it to a fine natural state – removing tons of asbestos and plastic, removing adventive alien plant species and planting native shrubs and trees, and implementing sustainable grazing practices. Inevitably, orchids would thrive here given sympathetic land management, and so it proved.

We had no sooner begun walking into the reserve than Esther noticed a colourful orchid in the flower-rich meadows – our first *Ophrys calliantha*, a well-marked, large-flowered and late-blooming species. This was duly admired and, nearby, we found the first of several *Ophrys biancae*, an early-blooming species that still had some plants in good order here. One curiously shaped and marked plant caused some debate – could this be a hybrid? Certainly it had some *biancae* influences, but the narrow lip shape and markings didn't feel quite right. Then again, *biancae* is a notoriously variable creature, so this plant was best attributed as an unknown, probably *biancae*, and certainly a beautiful thing.



Ophrys biancae © Jon Dunn



Ophrys apifera © Sue

Tracey spotted another new orchid for us in the same stretch of meadow – a pair of Fragrant Orchid *Anacamptis fragrans*. These shortly preceded the first of a great many Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera* we were to encounter, though how many more we would have seen had the conditions not been so dry we could only wonder at. One small, four metre square area contained over 50 sun-blackened and non-flowering Bee Orchid rosettes, and just one flowering plant. This ratio went some way to mutely demonstrating why orchids generally had been seen in the previous days in such reduced numbers.

It was impossible to ignore the birds we were seeing and hearing as we walked around the lakeside margins here – a constant soundtrack of Zitting Cisticola in the shrubby margins, and Yellow Wagtail pouring overhead. Migration from Africa was well underway in perfect conditions for it. A fine male Collared Flycatcher put on a close range feeding display for us shortly before lunch, which was eaten after we'd enjoyed a particularly lush display of Bee Orchids near to the visitor centre.

After lunch, Andrea suggested we might like to see another area of the reserve where the greatest concentration of breeding Greater Flamingo were to be found. We moved our vehicles into this area, and proceeded on foot thereafter. Wood Sandpiper were ubiquitous in the small ponds that bordered the raised track, and then we found ourselves viewing a large area of open water studded with islands and spits of land... and flamingos, hundreds of them. The spectacle was marvellous, and we were thoroughly enjoying our views through binoculars, cameras, and Andrea's telescope.

After a little while, all hell broke loose when Esther calmly pointed out one particular bird she and Cheryl had been looking at. Darker than the others, with a black bill, and maybe a little smaller? Andrea quickly got the bird in question in the scope. Certainly darker and richer-coloured plumage, definitely smaller, but the bird had annoyingly gone to sleep with its head tucked out of sight. We waited until it awoke, cameras poised... and then secured images. Pete's photos, using a long lens, proved conclusive – we had a Lesser Flamingo on our hands! One that was unringed, and fully-winged... and had arrived in Sicily at the same time as a number of other African migrant birds, including Rufous Bush Robin, African Desert Warbler, Moussier's



Lesser Flamingo (righthand bird) © Pete

Redstart, and White-crowned Black Wheatear. A fine supporting cast, and the provenance for our flamingo, a bird at home in sub-Saharan Africa, couldn't have been better. This bird, should it be accepted by the Italian rare birds committee, would be the first record of its kind for Italy!

Success like this needed celebrating. We headed into the beautiful nearby fishing village of Marzamemi and, in the square, sat down at an outdoors café to enjoy refreshing fruit granites and a cool drink or two. Andrea and Jon, clearly suffering from some sort of bird-induced euphoria, were even seen to dance!

Tuesday 16th April



Ophrys oxyrrhynchos © Jon Dunn

Thanks to Sue's sharp eyes, we'd already enjoyed one *Ophrys oxyrrhynchos*, but that solitary flowering plant was set to be significantly augmented today as we headed down into the Dirillo river valley to a site well-known to Jon where, in 2023, he'd enjoyed encountering many of their kind with his guests, including some spectacular and unusually yellow-fringed flowers. Our journey across the isle was uneventful and smooth, the only fly in the ointment being the weather forecast – after months of unseasonably high temperatures and no rainfall whatsoever, the threat of heavy rain was upon us, as evidenced by an overcast grey sky and gathering rainclouds.

The air temperature was noticeably cooler too when we arrived on site, at a hillside that boasted a truly impressive series of terraces rising high above us, all long-since abandoned and left for nature to reclaim as her own. The condition of the numerous Naked Man Orchid we encountered as we began to systematically comb the terraces spoke volumes of how advanced the orchid season was this year – many were well past their best, already getting down to the serious business of forming swollen seed capsules. The first *Ophrys oxyrrhynchos* were soon found, single plants here and there on the lips of the terraces and, with them, further *Ophrys* orchids besides – Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera*, and *Ophrys lutea*, *speculum*, and *incubacea*. We also found a new tongue-orchid for the week, *Serapias vomeracea*.

What was lacking, however, were the high numbers of *oxyrrhynchos* we were expecting and, in particular, the distinctive yellow-fringed flowers that the site was particularly good for in the past. Maybe this was a consequence of the dry winter and spring? Having spent some time surveying the site the previous year, Jon had come armed with lat/long coordinates for specific plants, and anticipated at least some flowering plants at the lowest of these previously identified hotspots. What he found, however, was deeply unsettling...

Instead of dozens of flowering plants, there were dozens of neat holes. Worse still, at the back of many of the holes were clearly defined tool marks, symmetrical, straight-edged lines



pressed clearly into the soil. In some, the imprint of the heel of the bladed implement, apparently some form of mattock, that had been used to excise a deep, neat sod of soil was also visible. Here and there, in the scatters of soil left on the surface between the holes, were boot marks. This, evidently, was not the work of Wild Boar. A more sinister activity appeared to have taken place here very recently indeed – ignoring the common Naked Man Orchid, something (or rather, *someone*) had systematically stripped the terrace of all the *Ophrys oxyrrhynchos* that had prospered there in prior years. This appeared to be a targeted and focused theft that, counting the holes visible on this and adjoining terraces, involved well over 100 stolen plants.

It was a sickening discovery. We took photos and location grid references that Andrea could pass to the relevant authorities, but there was nothing else to be done but continue to look for orchids that had gone overlooked by the thieves. Higher on the hillside, Esther found a handful of yellow-fringed flowers that drew some of us uphill – while later, it transpired that Sue's sharp eyes had found a yellow flower at a lower elevation earlier in the morning. We could only hope that those remnant plants would be the basis for a recovery of the site, in time, to its former orchid glory.

We returned to our vehicles for lunch just as the weather broke – rain, at last, was falling on the parched island. After lunch, we decided to head back towards our hotel, stopping first for a coffee, and then at a promising orchid site ten minutes from the hotel. The coffee stop proved to be a chimaera, as apparently all bars and coffee locations en route were, inexplicably, closed for business... happily, however, our orchid site was very much open and rather more productive.

We drove past the orchid site, heading to the hotel to drop off a couple of guests who had opted for an early finish today. Jon noted, in passing, that a white car that had been parked there when we drove past in the morning was still present there many hours later. Perhaps this was another dedicated orchid-hunter?

By the time we returned, some quarter of an hour later, the car had gone. What remained, however, was evidence of another wildlife crime, and this one executed that very day. This time, orchids weren't the target – hundreds of overturned stones, their earthy undersides left staring skywards, spoke eloquently of something Andrea had told us about earlier in the day – Sicily has become a target for reptile hunters seeking species to remove from the island and sell on the black





Serapias lingua © Pete

market elsewhere in Europe. Where the car had been parked were a pair of carelessly discarded gardening gloves. Someone had been very busy here all day long. Again, we took details and photos of what we'd found, for Andrea to also pass on to the authorities.

And, undaunted, we looked for orchids. These, at least, were untouched by man here, and the site proved to be a fruitful hunting ground for us, with *Serapias* tongue-orchids in particular abundant and varied across the site. New for us here was *Serapias hyblaea*, a newly described species formed from a stabilised hybrid between *S. vomeracea* and *S. lingua* – but we also found *S. lingua*, *parviflora*, and *bergonii*. One plant in particular caught our eye – a truly hypochromic plant, with not a trace of the usual pink or red tones one associates with *Serapias*. The flowers on this pale

beauty were a creamy ivory. A true stunner with which to finish a day of mixed and heightened emotions.

Wednesday 17th April

We had deliberately left our concerted visit to the legendary Sicilian orchid-hunting venue of Ferla until our final day in the field. Our logic was impeccable – while we knew that the timing of our tour was on the early side for traditionally late-flowering *Ophrys lacaitae* (but spot on to maximise our return on overall species and spectacle overall), and had not promised it was on the cards, we nonetheless wanted to maximise our outside chance of finding one. Moreover, this was an advanced flowering season, running ahead of the usual timings, as evidenced by the species we'd seen (and not seen) in the previous days... and, incredibly, Andrea had found a flowering *lacaitae* a full fortnight ago. We knew it was a longshot, but one worth taking – just maybe we'd get lucky.

Then again, Andrea had warned us that the numbers of orchids around Ferla were dramatically reduced on previous years due to the abnormally dry and hot winter. We expected this as, after all, this had been our experience all week. *Lacaitae* probably would, after all, elude us on this occasion – and, as proved to be the case, that's what happened.



Ophrys lunulata © Jon Dunn

However, the morning's orchid-hunting was still exceptionally good – despite the best efforts of the numerous hungry Wild Boar that had grubbed up and eaten the tubers of



Ophrys speculum © Jon Dunn

many orchids. Their untidy foraging damage was a stark contrast to the human-digging we had borne witness to the previous day – it was very clear indeed that the hand of man had been at play then, unless Wild Boar had started to use tools...

But back to the orchids that had survived the predations of hungry pigs. We'd no sooner started walking near Ferla than we found the first of many *Ophrys lunulata*, a charming local speciality that's one of the most beautiful *Ophrys* of all. They were far from alone, for in their immediate vicinity were many more *Ophrys lutea*, *speculum*, *biancae*, *oxyrrynchos*, and *incubacea*; and, of course, the ubiquitous Naked Man Orchid.

We ambled slowly through this orchid wonderland, taking our time to enjoy a last immersion into the joys of Sicilian bee orchids. We were not, however, completely immune to the cultural heritage of our surroundings and, with Andrea's seemingly inexhaustible local knowledge at our disposal, a visit to the nearby Necropolis of Pantalica was essential. Here we marvelled at the myriad tombs cut into the sheer faces of the living rock all around us, and learned more of the turbulent human history of this fascinating island.



Lunch today was also a celebration of another of Sicily's finer non-orchid attributes – we dined upon a sumptuous selection of arancini in Palazzolo Acreide, enjoying the hustle and bustle of a thriving backstreet café. A brief interlude after lunch saw us admiring the magnificent baroque



architecture of the town, with Andrea explaining some of the finer subtleties and politics that underscored the centuries-old designs in question.

Our final destination of the day swapped manmade stonework for some of the most dramatic natural architecture on the island – the awesome heights of the Alcantara Gorge. Here we wandered the meadows that line the clifftops – an arid landscape, this parched Sicilian spring, but one that

nonetheless supported some hardy orchids – chiefly still more *Serapias*, notably amongst them more *S. siciliensis*.

We returned to our lovely hotel one final time, for one final five course feast of a dinner, and a final chance to reminisce over a week that, despite the best efforts of a wickedly hot and dry preceding winter, had delivered several dozen species of orchids for our enjoyment, some stupendous other wildlife including a potential first record of Lesser Flamingo for Italy, and thanks to the kindness and generosity of Andrea, an unparalleled insight into Sicily's culture and history.

Thursday 18th April

An early breakfast, at 7am, saw us with the vehicles packed and ready to head to the airport by 8am. A number of us rather wistfully noted that breakfasts back home in the UK would seem a poor affair after the amazing quantity and quality of food we'd enjoyed in recent days!

The journey to Catania airport was smooth and uneventful, and we all said our respective goodbyes to one another. The week had been a great success, despite the best efforts of the preceding months' hot and dry weather to torpedo the orchid flowering season. While we hadn't seen the sheer numbers of flowering orchids that we would have hoped to encounter in a normal Sicilian spring, our careful preparation, local site knowledge, and above all the collaborative team effort of all of the group had combined to great effect to ensure we had found 42 species of orchid in flower – a highly satisfying tally, including some extremely desirable species. The birding had been good too, albeit this was not the focus of the tour – and the discovery of a first for Italy, in the form of the Lesser Flamingo, was a notable triumph.

Andrea and Jon would particularly like to thank all of the group for their sharp-eyes, great company throughout the week, and great humour. Our days were filled with laughter and orchids, and we made a terrific team.



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(Images above © Jon Dunn)

Orchids of Sicily 11 th -18 th April 2024								
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 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 phryganae	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 apulica	IV-V							
Ophrys calliantha	IV-V					✓		✓
Ophrys lacaitae	III-VI							
Ophrys oxyrrhynchos	III-V				✓		✓	✓
Ophrys scolopax group								
Ophrys scolopax	III-VI							
Ophrys exaltata group								
Ophrys exaltata	III-IV							
Ophrys panormitana	II-III				✓			

Species name	Months	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
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				
Anacamptis coriophora	IV-VII					✓		
Anacamptis laxiflora	IV-VII							
Anacamptis longicornu	II-V		✓		✓		nf	✓
Anacamptis morio	III-VI	✓						
Anacamptis papilionacea	II-V	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
Anacamptis picta	III-V							
Anacamptis pyramidalis	IV-VII				✓		✓	
GENUS NEOTINEA								
Neotinea conica	II-VI							
Neotinea commutata	III-V							
Neotinea lactea	II-IV		✓					

[illegible]

Guests' Galleries

All images that follow were kindly shared by tour participants.



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And finally...

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