



Burnt-tip Orchids

by Alec Rapkin

On 5th June 2010 a DNHS party, led by myself, went to the only two known sites for burnt-tip orchids in the region, both in Derbyshire, within a few miles of each other. They are quite a rare flower, and most people present, including some long experienced members, had never seen them.

On a fine sunny day, we parked beyond Brassington opposite Rainster Rocks, where all the fields were spectacular with hawthorn blossom. The substrate here is dolomitic limestone so that, although the fields we passed through were well grazed by sheep, there was a scattering of limestone flora. Besides the main crop of buttercups, both bulbous and meadow, there was fairy flax, hoary plantain, the lemon yellow mouse-eared hawkweed, meadow saxifrage and blue and pink milkwort.

As we walked up and then back down these fields, we saw a buzzard, some insects such as red-headed cardinal beetle and turquoise weevil, a few wall-brown butterflies and, extraordinarily, the largest number of small copper butterflies I have ever seen within a relatively restricted area, about a dozen.

We turned off the footpath, near a patch of yellow mountain pansies, for the hummocks of old lead workings with their short grass, where the lowly but delightful burnt-tip orchids grow. It was a good to average year for them here, 41 in number, dotted around singly or in small groups. They are generally 3 inches or so high, with a frothy white flowerhead of tiny orchid-typical petals, tipped at the top with dark-red petals. We also found eight thriving frog orchids. The whole area was asprawl with bodies, of people taking close-up photographs.

At lunchtime, we drove the few miles and walked to our high second site at Middleton Moor where, as we ate, we had fine views towards Carsington Reservoir. The very large field is owned by a local farmer, from whom we had permission to visit and is managed by Natural England. They recently, a year ago, enclosed it with wire fencing to keep out rabbits, of which there used to be many hundreds. This may or may not have been a good idea: the field was somewhat overgrown, and there were not many burnt-tip orchids - in fact the same number as at the much smaller Brassington site. It varies however tremendously from year to year. The most I counted many years ago was 700, and more recently about 300, including last year, but I have also counted less than 20.

From this field we made for a public footpath to bring us back to the cars by a circular route. We found one precocious common spotted orchid, and soon after a field of late early purple orchids (plus cowslips), many of which were still in their prime. There were plenty of remains of early purples as well as other limestone flora again, such as quaking grass. We saw a circle of St George's mushrooms, and heard more

than saw birds (meadow pipit, buzzard, skylark). Green hairstreak butterflies were sighted.

Once onto the public footpath and through old lead workings again, we came across prolific red campion and bluebells and, among humps and scree spring sandwort, hairy rockcress and limestone bedstraw, a sighting of a dingy skipper. Back along the path were tormentil, twayblade and some young leaves of broad-leaved helleborine.

The last treats of the afternoon were at the edge of a wooded area where in grass we discovered 20 very flourishing frog orchids (I knew they were there but had thought them about half a dozen), and then, on a hidden stretch of scree, a large gathering of herb paris – a quite rare plant that likes limestone woods. I know of two other places for it in the county: one only a mile or so away on the Via Gellia, up behind the Peak District sign of a large millstone, the other in Monk's Dale. The Latin name is *Paris quadrifolia*. The first word means equal, the second four-leaved: besides four leaves, it generally has four petals, four sepals and eight stamens in the green-gold flower, fruiting in a single black berry with four purple styles. It had just reached the fruiting stage when we saw it on the day of the meeting.

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*on limestone's sheep-bitten turf, standing rare,
a-quiver on pale-leafed stem
that's all of three inches,*

*the frizzed-out froh, the frisson
of white tiny person-shaped petals,
each stained by a spot
from the flowerhead's wine-dark topknot
packed like grapes to a point,*

*uplifts in singularity,
in small but perfect orgasm*



Burnt-tip Orchid Walk Collage



Red-headed Cardinal Beetle

Common Milkwort - two colour varieties

Broad -leaved Helleborine

Early Purple Orchid

Burnt - tip Orchid

Herb Paris

Hoary Plantain

Yellow Archangel

Lady's Bedstraw

Common Rock rose



The photographs are by Bill Grange