

Thurs 19 Nov 2015

Bedfordshire's big Orchid hunt - Richard Revels

Abstract:

The talk chronicled the Bedfordshire wild orchid survey which developed from discussions between three Beds Natural History Society members in the summer of 2012. As many as 250 people sent in around 2,500 orchid records during the 2013 and 2014 survey. The book 'Wild Orchids of Bedfordshire' contains the results of the survey set against historical records going back to the 1790's, totalling around 8,000 orchid records.

Richard started the talk by giving a background on the diverse geology in Bedfordshire – as well as chalk areas in the south, there is band of Greensand from Biggleswade through to Leighton Buzzard in the west with mainly clay above Ampthill and in the upper half of the county. Gravel deposits can be found along the riverbed area from the north-west down to Bedford. This is one of the reasons that there is a good diversity of orchids found in the county. Historically, twenty seven orchid species have been recorded in the county. During this survey, twenty five of these were recorded, which is a good showing.

In the chalk areas, species such as the Autumn Lady's-tresses are locally abundant – characteristic with their spiral flower spikes and a favourite with the rabbits. Also Burnt-tipped Orchids are found in the chalk areas as well as the locally common Fragrant Orchid and the Chalk Fragrant Orchid. Frog Orchids can be found in a few places and the Common Twayblade is locally abundant in some chalk areas. Pyramidal Orchids are very common and are well liked by sheep which seem to go round eating off their flower spikes. Sometimes Pyramidal Orchids can be found on road verges, such as on the A507.

Richard found his first orchid (a Bee Orchid) when he was cycling as a twelve year old on what is now the south carriage of the A1. This was the start of his love for this fascinating and diverse group of plants. The Bee Orchid is in fact widespread in Bedfordshire and has been adopted as the "county flower". In one graveyard in the county, a thousand Bee Orchids can be found and some areas are roped off so that they are not mown off and can flower. Two less common species were found during the survey. The Lesser Butterfly Orchid was found in woodland in the south east of the county and the Broad-leaved Helleborine was found in several new locations. They are loved by wasps; who get drunk on the nectar! Other helleborines recorded are the Green-flowered Helleborine and the Violet Helleborine, which can be found in good numbers in a private wood. The Marsh Helleborine was not found during this survey, although it should be present in the county. The Fly Orchid was only found in one place during this survey; however there are pollinators around such as the Tree Bumblebee, which arrived in the county in 2002; so the population may increase in the future.

In terms of numbers, the Common Spotted Orchid is the most common orchid species in the county with as many as two hundred being found in a private garden in Bedford. The Bee Orchid is the second most common species.

Of the marsh orchids, the Southern Marsh Orchid can be found and often hybridises with the Common Spotted Orchid, and can occasionally create the "Leopard" form with its hollow spots on the leaves.

Early Purple Orchids are found in woodland in the county, whilst it is only known to be found in one place in meadowland where it was once much more common. Another early flowering species, which is well associated with meadowland, is the Green-winged Orchid, but it was only recorded in small numbers during the survey.

Overall this was a very successful survey and one of the challenges now is to keep the momentum up and use the interest from the orchid hunt to get people interested, more generally, in botany and other plant species.