

In praise of Ophrys orchids

Tom Sampliner

Thomas Sampliner, from Ohio, USA, is an enthusiast for orchids in the genus Ophrys. He was president of the local Native Plant Society of NE Ohio for more than a decade and editor/writer of its quarterly journal for much of that time. He teaches senior citizens about plants at a local community college and volunteers to help groups at the Cleveland Botanical Garden.

Photos in this article were taken by Tom on visits to Crete. Views on orchid taxonomy vary, and opinions here are the author's. Tom has a blog-style Facebook page with lots about bee orchids / the genus Ophrys on <https://www.facebook.com/messages/#!/groups/354310848029819/>

Atop the coastal escarpment with a prime view of the historic harbour at Elounda, a rugged, windswept exposure provides outstanding views of the sea, coastline and often the snow-capped Mt. Dikti. The rocky ground, dominated by shrubby, spiny members of the rose and euphorbia families, hold the hidden treasures we know as orchids. This mostly treeless land – referred to as either garrigue or phrygana – offers protection to the young orchid plants in the guise of spiny nurse plant parents that shield the young from hungry herbivores.

My visits here – the exact site we keep unpublished, to protect its orchids – were in March 2010 and 2011 under the guidance of Julia Jones, alter ego of Flowers of Crete. Julia spends part of each year in Elounda, so this area was a convenient spot for return visits.

My major interest is native orchids. Among the more common species getting my attention were the tall stately butterfly orchids, taxonomically known as either *Anacamptis papilionacea*, or *Orchis papilionacea*. These are readily seen in the more open grassy areas in both the pink and all white colour forms. We concluded we were seeing subspecies “heroica” and “alibertis”, following Horst and Gisela Kretzschmar’s “Orchids of Crete & Dodecanese”. Obviously the conservative viewpoints as expressed in the Kew Garden publications or the most liberal splitting of species as set forth by Pierre Delforge, in “Orchids of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East” each classify differently. We also saw the robust stalks of the equally prominent but no less handsome *Barlia robertiana* in all pink or white forms.



Bumblebee orchid *Ophrys bombyliflora*, *Ophrys cretica*, *Ophrys heldreichii*, *Ophrys herae*¹.

¹ Probably! We debated *O. mammosa*, too, and like many, a tricky group.

Near the road, there are some cistern and other masonry remnants in very sparsely vegetated area. Here clusters of the Bumblebee orchid, *Ophrys bombylifera* gave us a wonderful palette of the different colour schemes within the species. I certainly learned this species well after countless specimens, tiny as they were; perhaps the substrate was not ideal as all appeared quite dwarf and stressed.

I looked forward to these visits not only because of a fascination with the intricate colours and patterns of the bee orchids as a group, but to see how in real life they take on all aspects of the female of the insect species they passed themselves off as. Furthermore, a well-populated orchid site often provides a panorama of the possible varieties, colour forms, hybrids and swarms for our photographic pleasure.

Some writers place the orchids in groupings. This is especially true in the *Ophrys* or bee orchids. Since this was my first exposure in the field to the *Ophrys*, I was anxious to see what the printed page cannot convey.

If one looked down very carefully at the base of the spiny nurse shrubs, I frequently saw *Ophrys* orchids. Quite a number had the dark markings including both the lip and the speculum and small flower dimensions of the various members in the *Ophrys fusca* group.

An interesting way to view these bee orchids with often very subtle differences among them is to take along the Kretschmar book marked at page 75 where a coloured plate displays the hypothetical species radiation within this group. We believed we were seeing each of the following at some point during one of our visits: *Ophrys cinerophila*, *mesaritica*, *iricolor*, *fusca* subsp *creticola*, *fusca* subsp *creberrima* and three others within the closely related *Ophrys omegaifera* group; namely *omegaifera*, *basilissa* and *Ophrys fleischmannii*.



Three from the *Ophrys fusca* group: *Ophrys cinerophila*, *Ophrys basilissa* and *Ophrys omegaifera*

Seeing these is one thing, bending down or trying to sprawl to take pictures is quite another. Thorns and spines riddled my body. I thought I had sprung some leaks from all the punctures. You emerge feeling like a pincushion.



This *fusca* group can be quite fuscstrating (ok, frustrating). *Ophrys cinerophila*, is one we believed we were seeing, the very early small flowered brown bee orchid. Early phenology and strong downward bending lip from the midpoint with dark bluish blazon and yellow edge to the lip and a basal groove are the more important traits along with oversized fruit.

We also saw group mates *Ophrys iricolor* and *Ophrys mesaritica*, though not always at this site. The former is larger flowered and immediately distinctive if one looks beneath the lip for a tell-tale red-purple colour (left; some dispute if

size is a reliable characteristic to use in the field). The latter is, on average also early to flower. The underside of the lip and perhaps a darker blazon easily distinguish this species.

Ophrys fusca subsps *creticola*, *cressa* and *creberrima* (using Kretzschmar taxonomy) are tricky requiring some observational experience. The first is very early, quite large (only slightly less than *iricolor*) and no fold in the lip as well as weak lateral lip lobes. The second is arched in lip, deeply grooved base, margins of the lip well marked with a yellow border. The third is distinctively down-turned at the lip and lateral lip lobes and has a prominent omega pattern to the blazon. There is a lot of hybridization within the entire grouping and with others.

We found specimens belonging to a host of other groups too; one example being the *Ophrys sphegodes* group. Clearly the site is worthy of some effort to achieve a minimal amount of protection and preservation for the orchid display. In the meantime, go, see, explore, photograph and do what you can to gain protection.



Identification can be a challenge: the side lobes on this orchid suggest Ophrys spruneri, the Cretan spider orchid, but the lip pattern is untypical.