

FLIES, BEES AND HELLEBORINES - IRISH ORCHIDS IN THE BURREN AND BEYOND

On Thursday 25th May, IOS Chairperson Brendan Sayers spoke on the above topic at the Education and Visitor Centre at the National Botanic Gardens. This was one of a series of lectures given on Wednesday or Thursday afternoons throughout the year aimed at the public and, of course, free. It was well-attended.

Brendan began by pointing out some of the botanical features specific to orchids e.g. simple flower structure, mycorrhizal association, grainy masses of pollen collected into pollinaria, and the ability of some pollinaria to bend to facilitate the pollinator and increase the chances of cross-pollination. However, some Irish orchids self-pollinate, some doing so before the flower actually opens!

All 30 Irish orchids are terrestrial but most exotic orchids are epiphytic, i.e. they live on the branches of rainforest trees. The fascinating feature about all orchids is that their structures and reproductive systems are so similar that plants are easily recognised wherever they grow.

Brendan moved his presentation from Mullagh Mór in the Burren and showed us the 25 native species that grow there. He pointed out the frequency and habitats of each species on the Burren and elsewhere and the diversity to be found within some species. Remarkable photographs included an example of a white and yellow Bee Orchid and a magnificent image of the Bird's Nest Orchid - (*Neottia nidus-avis*) which is so difficult to find and photograph because of its lack of chlorophyll. Jackie O'Connell took this photograph.

Finally, Brendan dealt with the myriad of hybrids to be found within the *Dactylorhiza* genus renewing enthusiasm for our July 6th Field Trip to North Bull Island (*Oileán an Tairbh Thuaidh*.)



MARY BRADSHAW

The Bird's Nest Orchid is a terrestrial leafless species that lacks green chlorophyll and has a relationship with a fungus which enables it to obtain nutrition.. *Neottia* lives in symbiosis with the fungus *Rhizoctonia*. The fungus/orchid combination is effectively a perennial saprophyte feeding on decomposing leaf litter, or possibly the mycorrhiza may be shared with nearby tree species. The plants do not appear every year.

Neottia nidus-avis Not all images used to illustrate the presentation were taken from the Burren. The *Ophrys apfera* var. *flavescens* was from the Burren but the Bird's Nest location is in Co. Waterford.

