

Bee Orchid

Ophrys apifera

IDENTIFICATION

This is probably our best known and well-loved orchid. There are five or six grey-green, strap-shaped basal leaves, often scorched at the tips by flowering time, two stem leaves and long, leaf-like bracts. The stem, 15–50 cm tall, bears two to seven (rarely ten) flowers. The flowers, which resemble a fat bumblebee, have three erect pink sepals, each marked with three green veins. The upper petals are brown with inrolled margins, so that they appear cylindrical. The three-lobed lip is a rich red-brown, the central lobe round and convex, velvety in texture with 'U'-shaped bands of dark brown and gold at the base. The side lobes form rounded, furry humps. The yellow apex of the lip is folded back. The column is prominent and beaked, with a fanciful resemblance to a duck's head. In this lie the two large pollinia, their caudicles running in deep grooves. There are eight distinct forms, other than the normal form, which are shown on the following two pages. Although normally monocarpic, plants have been known to flower for eight successive seasons.

CONFUSING SPECIES

Confusion with Late Spider-orchid (*page 154*), which grows only in east Kent, is unlikely, as that species has bigger flowers with triangular, orange-pink upper petals, and a square lip.

HYBRIDS

The hybrid with Fly Orchid (see *page 16*) was recorded for the first time in the wild near Bristol, where it flowered from 1968–1985. It was found for the second time in Sussex in 1998. The hybrid with the Late Spider-orchid was dubiously recorded in Kent in 1926 but may have occurred since.

HABITAT

Grows in a wide range of habitat on chalk, clay and calcareous sand, in grassland, scrub, sand dunes, limestone pavement, roadside verges, abandoned quarries and industrial waste ground where weathering has produced a base-rich substrate. Although most sites are well-drained, it can also flourish in damp areas. It is an active coloniser, sometimes appearing in large numbers on newly graded and sown road margins.

POLLINATION

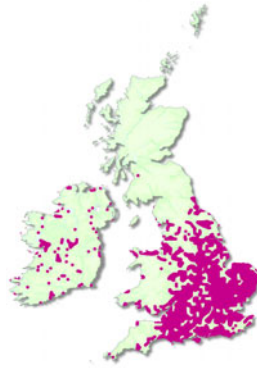
Although nearly always self-pollinated, pollination by bees of the genera *Andrena* and *Eucera* may occur rarely.

Widespread, not uncommon

Height: 15–50 cm
No. of flowers: usually 2–7

FLOWERING PERIOD

June to mid July



DISTRIBUTION

Well-represented in England, especially in the south and east, north to Cumbria and Durham, but less common in the south-west. In Wales it is more often found on the coast in both the south and the north, where there is evidence that it is extending its range. In Ireland it grows mainly in central counties and the limestone country of Clare and Galway. It was believed to be extinct in Scotland, but was re-found in Ayrshire in 2003.

CONSERVATION

Habitat destruction and picking still present problems.

W(NI) Order Schedule 8

