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# Wild Orchids of SICILY

ROBERT THOMPSON

# Wild orchids of Sicily

The Mediterranean is the perfect spring destination for making macro studies of flowers and insects, says **Robert Thompson**. He reveals why he never tires of returning to Sicily to photograph the island's abundant and beautiful wild orchids

**A**pril is that time of the year when spring has not quite kicked in and winter can still make its presence felt. It is around this time of year that I head off to the Mediterranean, either to run a workshop on flowers and early insects, or pursue my interest in wild orchids, which has been a personal passion over the past 20 years. I think it would be fair to say that most photographers have a project of their own running in the background on top of their normal photographic commitments.

My interest and desire to capture photographically the numerous species and variations of these charismatic plants has taken me to numerous locations throughout Europe, including the many of the well-known islands in the Mediterranean. Spring comes early to this region and the islands explode with colour in late March and throughout

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April. At this time of the year the whole region is a popular destination for many botanists – and photographers especially – when things are still relatively quiet at home.

## Sicilian delights

Sicily is one of those places when you experience it for the first time remains with you for years to come. It is the largest of the Mediterranean islands, steeped in archaeological history and separated from mainland Italy by the Straits of Messina. The ruins and temple relics that were once part of the Greek empire are now home to a wide variety of flowers and orchids, which bring colour to these historical sites and surrounding landscapes in early spring. The island also has a diverse range of scenery from an impressive coastline to high mountains, and of course Mount Etna. The people are warm, friendly and passionate about their island. The cuisine is excellent and with a good bottle of wine at the end of a day's fieldwork, what more could a photographer want?

**Right: *Ophrys calliantha*** This family of orchids resemble a bumble bee in shape and structure. The patterns on the lip of the flower vary between species and even among the same kind. A 200mm macro is ideal for isolating the individual flower while keeping the background well diffused

*Nikon D3X, Nikkor 200mm f/4 macro, ISO 100, @ f/11, fill-in flash*

**Left: *Ophrys Lacaitae*** This is one of the prettiest species in this genus and a rarity on Sicily. I used a beanbag here to get down to ground level and shot through the vegetation to create a soft, diffused look to the photo. I was able to keep the camera parallel to the plant to maximise on the depth of field throughout the plant for the chosen aperture

*Nikon D3X, Nikkor 200mm f/4 macro, ISO 100, f/8*





**Left: *Ophrys oxorrhynchos*** Selecting plants that grown in habitats where the vegetation is short stand out much better against their backgrounds as in this case where the bark give an even and less cluttered appearance to the photo.  
**Nikon D3X, Nikkor 200mm f/4 macro, ISO 100, f/8**

Flowers abound in Sicily so you won't need to travel far to find orchids. Once inland, the small side roads often flourish with all manner of flowers, and insect life. The areas around the Ficuzza Forest and Ferla in the southeast of the island are particularly attractive and contain many interesting flowers, including orchids and insects. There is no shortage of suitable material in this area to photograph; you can easily spend a day in just a single location without having to travel anywhere else.

### Photographic considerations

Working abroad brings its own challenges. Airline restrictions on what you can take onboard means you often have to compromise on your choice of equipment. Travelling frequently as I do means I have a checklist of what I need to take with me. What I can't take onboard goes in a protective case, but I always ensure that my hand luggage has all my valuable equipment and that I can function in the event that my protective case gets mislaid or lost, which has happened in the past. It is also important for me to be able to achieve consistency in my images irrespective of what the elements or lighting conditions are at the time.

*“Orchids often grow in well-vegetated areas and isolating a single plant can be difficult”*

You simply can't confine yourself to working in early morning and late evening. Flowers and intense sunlight don't work that well together, unless it is very early in the morning or in the warm evening light. The harsh light produced during the day is generally counter-productive for macro work. Diffusers are an essential part of my kit when photographing abroad and often the

**Right: Milky Orchid *Neotinea lactea*** This is one of Sicily's most attractive orchids. The colour varies greatly between individuals. It is generally accepted that you need two photos to illustrate most orchids correctly and to aid identification in some cases; one of the plant in-situ, and a close-up of the individual flowers.

[Top right] Nikon D3X, Nikkor 200mm f/4 macro, ISO 100, f/8  
[Bottom right] Nikon D3X, Nikkor 200mm f/4 macro, ISO 100, f/16



key to achieving a successful result in the field, which would otherwise fail in the glaring light in the middle of the day.

It has often been said that photographing static subjects presents little in the way of effort on the photographer's part. This is a misconception; in my opinion this is precisely what makes it more challenging in terms of trying to create something that is beyond a mere record shot. Dealing with the elements and conditions at the time can also add to the frustration. Orchids often grow in well-vegetated areas and isolating a single plant can be difficult. It pays to take a little time and look carefully at the choice of specimens available and where they are situated. Check the overall condition and structure of the plant and its position in relation to the background. This is one important factor that is frequently overlooked; yet it has the ability to make or break a shot.

### Focal length choices

Sometimes a slight shift in camera position will make a difference, or a change in focal length. Switching to a longer focal length macro or telephoto with extension tubes to reduce the angle of view can produce a more pleasing outcome. Occasionally, it is just not possible and compromise prevails. I always use the depth of field button to view the subject at the taking aperture and to scan the image for any obtrusive bits of foliage or vegetation.

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Learning to see creatively takes time, but with practice it becomes instinctive as to what works and what doesn't. I like to spend 15 to 20 minutes evaluating a site and the quality of the material before I pick up a camera; by then, I have articulated some thoughts and ideas in my mind. One other important point, be mindful of other plants when working at ground level. I have often seen the aftermath left by over enthusiastic photographers when they get excited about their quarry. The surrounding vegetation is easily damaged and often gets trampled on during the photographic process.

### Disappearing vistas

Orchids have played an important part in the development of my photographic career. In the early

**Right: Praying Mantis *Empusa pennata* nymph** Sometimes the best images happen by chance and often when you least expect them. We were heading back to our hotel when a member of the group spotted a large bank of naked man orchids. All of them expressed an interest in stopping to take some quick photos. As it was late on in the evening I presumed they had seen and photographed enough of this species during the day. I decided to take a casual stroll glancing at the occasional plant when I spotted this young mantis at rest on an orchid head and how its colouring blended beautifully with the flower. I carefully marked the position and returned back at speed to the vehicle, grabbed my camera and 200mm macro. I slowly worked my way in being absolutely careful not to spook it, as its elegant posture would be lost. It was just a question then of waiting until it turned its head in my direction.

*Nikon D3X, Nikkor 200mm f/4 macro, ISO 200, f/8*

days I spent a considerable amount of time on insect and orchid photography. Back then many areas around the Mediterranean were not well set up for tourism. Accommodation was not abundant and getting to some destinations frequently involved more than one flight. However, the experience of seeing fields and roadsides abundant with flowers and insects makes you quickly forget the journey and the hassle. Unfortunately, change does eventually catch up and tourism is now the business of the day: many areas that were once flower-rich dwindle with each passing year.

It is often been said that you should never go back to a place that holds pleasant memories of time spent there. I have found this to be true on a number of occasions when I have returned to places several years later only to find sites destroyed, or greatly diminished. The vistas of wildflowers and orchids that once carpeted the roadsides and meadows are in decline everywhere. These unfortunately are the times we live in. I'm so glad that I had the opportunity to experience it first hand, and through photography capture places and plants as I remember them and not have to rely on my memory in the years to come. ○

#### Useful link

There is an amazing network of enthusiasts and societies with lots of information on sites and locations for many different species. The Hardy Orchid Society has information on orchids both in the UK and abroad. The society produces a journal and runs field trips for orchids throughout the UK.  
<http://www.hardyorchidsociety.org.uk>

