

BEE ORCHID

COMMON NAME:	Bee Orchid
SCIENTIFIC NAME:	<i>Ophrys apifera</i>
IRISH NAME:	<i>Magairlín na mbeach</i>

This magnificent wildflower is such a delight to find. It shows its superb design and colours on dry, sandy soil, dunes and limestone pastures, in June and July. There is no problem identifying a Bee Orchid from all other orchids – its lovely gold and brown velvety lower lip is patterned to resemble the back-end of a visiting bumblebee, this in order to attract a similar insect and thereby assist in pollinating the plant. A perennial, this orchid grows to about 30–40 cm high with an erect stem which is clasped by two oblong, lanceolate leaves. Several other leaves form a basal rosette.

The amazing, unmistakable flowers are borne in spikes and have three spreading pink sepals, two short green upper petals and a large round lower petal which is deep brown and has gold markings. Two bright-yellow ‘pollinia’ can be seen above the opening of the flower. These two pollen masses have sticky pads which can adhere to visiting insects’ heads thereby causing pollen to be transferred to the next flower the bee visits. This pretence whereby the bee is attracted to the flower by its impersonation of another bee is termed ‘pseudocopulation’.

This flower cries out for a down-on-the-knees examination by hand lens and you will be well-rewarded by the stunning detail. It is a native plant and it belongs to the Orchidaceae family. Occasionally a white variety of this species, *Ophrys apifera* var. *chlorantha*, may be found. Without the colourful pink sepals, it still retains the bee-like furry pouch.

I first saw and photographed this wonderful plant near Arklow, County Wicklow in June 2009.

All wild plants are given some measure of protection in Northern Ireland under the Wildlife (NI) Order, 1985. The Bee Orchid, listed in Schedule 8, parts 1 and 2, is given special protection. ■

Zoë Devlin is a regular columnist on wild Irish orchids.

Zoë’s website is “Wildflowers of Ireland”
<http://www.wildflowersofireland.net/>

Her book ‘Wildflowers of Ireland - A personal Record’ is published by the Collins Press, Cork.



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