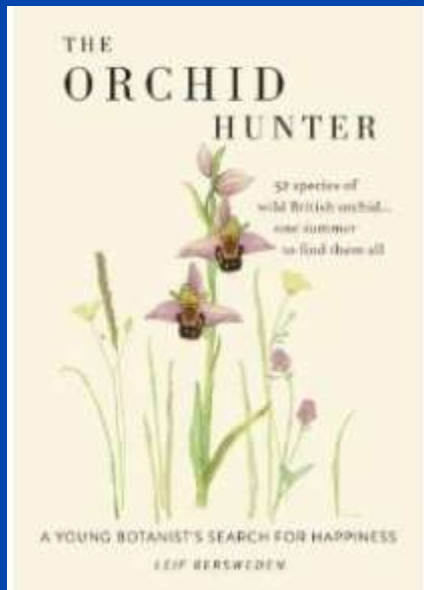


BOOK REVIEW

HOW A CHARMING OXFORD REJECT BECAME THE FIRST BOTANIST TO HUNT DOWN EVERY ONE OF BRITAIN'S 52 WILD ORCHIDS

The Orchid Hunter: A Young Botanist's Search For Happiness



Running up the drive of our family home, straightening my jacket as I went, I prayed that I could glide seamlessly back into my mother's 50th birthday party without anyone realising I had slipped out for an hour or so.

The several glasses of champagne I'd plied Mum with would surely make her less observant.

And although Dad's texts had been increasingly suspicious — 'Where are you?' quickly followed by 'Seriously, where are you?' — he might assume that I had just been mingling with other guests elsewhere in the house.

Unfortunately, there was a flaw in my plan. They spotted my dishevelled tie, crumpled trousers and mud-scuffed shoes.

The truth was that I'd nipped out to scramble around a nearby nature reserve in search of an elusive plant known as the Burnt Orchid.

I was soon forgiven. My parents are both vicars, stoic by nature and surprised by few things. They're also used to my peculiarities.

But even they were taken aback by the botanical challenge I'd embarked upon shortly before Mum's party in June 2013.

Then 18, I had failed to secure a place at Oxford University. When I opened the rejection letter I knew I could reapply for the following year and decided immediately what I wanted to do with the time in between.

No botanist had ever seen every species of orchid native to the British Isles in one season and I intended to be the first.

When friends asked about my plans for my gap year I lied. Botany is not considered cool by teenagers and to admit you like it is to surrender to merciless teasing.

Part of my embarrassment was that, while others enjoyed hedonistic trips to Thailand or did charitable work in Africa, I would be travelling around Britain. But I felt this might finally satisfy my nerdy obsession with orchids.

The Heath Fragrant Orchid (right) is one of 52 species of wild orchids found in the UK

Adding these to the ones still taunting me from the pages of my wildlife guides, I had 52 species to see in one summer.

It would be a superhuman endeavour because, although the orchid flowering season stretches from April to late



September, different species bloom at different times, some for only two or three days, others for a week. Miss just one window of opportunity and I might never see a particular orchid in flower that summer.

I hated the idea of failing but I was excited beyond belief at the prospect of my orchid summer and got a job at Waitrose to help fund it. Stacking shelves as I waited for the season to begin, my daydreams of wild-flowers in the sun soon became hidden behind the rain-lashed windows of a never-ending winter.

Finally a string of fine days in early May brought the year's first butterflies. Orange-tips and brimstones danced around the garden and internet botany forums exploded with reports of Early Spider Orchids at Durlston Country Park, near Swanage in Dorset.



Lizard Orchid

The problem was how to get there since my second-hand Vauxhall, was back in the garage for the umpteenth time and it wasn't until mid-May that I could finally set off on the 60-mile drive.

I had only passed my test four months previously. And, since I had yet to undertake a long-distance journey, repeated concerns about my safety, whether the sat-nav would work and what would happen if I put the wrong fuel in my car, had been expressed in the Bersweden household.

Somehow I arrived unscathed and strode out onto the hillside at Durlston. The wonderful melody of a skylark floated down from above as my eyes settled on the yellow sea of cowslips stretching all the way up the meadow and it was like a switch was thrown somewhere deep inside me.

I was in plant-hunting mode. Before long, I found the exquisite little plants I sought, with the large, brown, chocolatey lip which resembles the legless body of a spider.

I lay on my stomach, eyes and camera lens focused on their tiny forms as, with each gust of wind, they shivered and seemed to draw their spiders closer, clustering for warmth.

Grinning from ear to ear at seeing such a rare specimen, I continued walking. As I reached Dancing Ledge, a disused limestone quarry at the base of the cliffs, a spike of pink caught my eye. Nestled in the grass were three green-winged orchids.

My only experience of these was when I was 15 and my father presided over the funeral of a man who had devoted his life to nurturing a colony on his lawn. His



The Lady Orchid is one of the many flowers that inspired Mr Bersweden.

widow offered them to me. They were, she said, his legacy.

Dad suggested we transfer them to the churchyard and it was twilight by the time we arrived with a groundsheet laden with soil full of orchids.

Imagine the gossip had anyone been passing the church at this late hour and seen the vicar and his son lift a heavy tarpaulin out of the car before digging in a discreet corner of the graveyard and carefully lowering the contents into the ground.

Those orchids have since dwindled in number, too disturbed by the change in conditions. But it was worth trying to save them because the green-winged orchid is declining with dramatic speed with the disappearance of the hay meadows in which it once thrived.

I was delighted with my finds that first afternoon but longed to share my travels with someone. Ironically, orchids have symbolised romance, sex and seduction throughout history and for centuries were believed to have aphrodisiac properties.

But attractive, orchid-inclined females are hard to come by and I worried that girls would ridicule me if they found out about my botanising. Instead of the terrifying prospect of talking to them, I spent my adolescent years combing fields and woods for plants.

Consequently I was about as close to having a girlfriend as I was to finding a Summer Lady's-tresses orchid, last seen in 1959 and now extinct because of over-enthusiastic collectors.

My love-life was a subject soon to be broached by my godfather Michael, a kind-hearted Geordie who was a Catholic priest in Yorkshire.

Over the winter, I'd spent a long time discussing my plans with him and he joined me on my next trip, a week in the west of Ireland, to track down Dense-flowered and Irish Marsh Orchids.

I could find neither and frustration flooded through me until the very last evening when we strolled along the cliffs near the small seaside town of Ballybunion.

'So, do your girlfriends know about this orchid thing?' he asked, eyes twinkling mischievously. I sighed and, spying a promising area of reeds in an adjacent field, took advantage of a broken wire fence to escape the uncomfortable conversation.

I ambled around in a nearby field for a while and then, halfway back to the car, I stopped and smiled.



*Fly Orchid otherwise known as an
Ophrys insectifera*

There, in a sheltered hollow, was the glorious pink flower of an Irish Marsh Orchid. I had only found it thanks to Michael's prying and a beam spread across his face as I shared my joy with him.

I treasure that memory because it was the last time I saw Michael. He passed away the following year and I'm so grateful for that week we had together.

Eight years previously, he had given me a gift which changed the way I observed the natural world — the camera was now forever in my hands. For the first time, he had got to see me using it and in my element.

Searching for orchids has always brought me closer to who I really am and melted away the strains of everyday life.

But in the following months there were many stresses as I tried to keep up with the flowering periods of the different species up and down the country.

The furthest I travelled south was Jersey, home to the strutting super-models which are the tall, pink Loose-flowered Orchids.

In the far northern reaches of Scotland, I ticked off the dumpy purple Hebridean Marsh Orchid. I drove nearly 10,000 miles, taking more than 50,000 photos and passing through 48 counties.

Along the way I hunted for the orchidophiles' Holy Grail — a species known as Lady's Slipper. Declared extinct in Britain in 1917, it was rediscovered in 1930 by two cotton-weaver brothers from Silsden in Yorkshire.

This single plant remains the only one in the wild, its stunning spirals of claret and bubbles of yellow a feast for the senses, but it is under round-the-clock surveillance at a secret location, protected by a committee including representatives from Kew, Natural England and the National Trust. A warden lives in a hut nearby and monitors trip-wires surrounding the caged flower.

There are rum-ours he carries a shotgun and he turns all inquisitive orchid lovers away, even though the most desperate have been known to offer bribes: money, whisky, Wimbledon tickets.

All I knew was that the Lady Slipper was hidden somewhere in the Yorkshire Dales. For days I searched to no avail, then, lost in an old and sombre wood, I chanced across a fence with a gate and 'No Entry' daubed on a wooden sign slung over the barbed wire.

The nearest public footpath was miles away. It made no sense to have a gate here unless . . . suddenly I spotted a dark-green cabin, as camouflaged as a chameleon, and then a flash of gold in the ferns.

I'd found the Lady Slipper's quiet sanctuary. My stomach lurched. It was like nothing I had ever experienced.



The warden strode purposefully towards me. I noted with relief that he didn't seem to be carrying a shotgun but, even after half an hour of pleading, he refused to let me get close enough to photograph the orchid.

Although I felt defeated, I knew that so many people had tried and failed to find this plant but I, at least, had sneaked a look.

That was a highlight of my travels but there were also lows, most notably when I sought the Fen Orchids of Kenfig National Nature Reserve in Glamorgan, South Wales.

After four hours of searching in the sand dunes proved fruitless, despite detailed instructions from Suzie Lane, an internet contact who'd seen the plants two days previously, I was panicking. In my tightly-scheduled summer, this was my one opportunity to see these plants flowering.

When I finally found them, there were leaves but no flowers: they'd been a tasty snack for a passing rabbit.

Despair swept through me and I sank to my knees, unwilling to accept that I had failed as I contemplated the long disappointing drive home.

This wasn't fair I thought, searching my phone for the photo of the tiny plants Suzie had spotted, as if seeing them would magically bring them back. Suddenly hope returned.

The nibbled plants in front of me were alone in the sand but near the orchids in Suzie's photo were some Lesser Spearwort, a buttercup-yellow flower.

Using these as a guide, I quickly found the

right patch and standing proudly in the middle of it, were Suzie's two Fen Orchids, one in bud, the other in perfect flower.

This elicited a reaction one would normally associate with a last-minute title-winning goal: 'Yes, yes, yes, get in!' I whooped, my mad shouts whipped away by the wind as I danced with excitement.

I didn't know it then but Suzie was about to have a much bigger impact on my summer.

Five years older than me, she was an ornithologist who had discovered a passion for orchids and we struck up an online friendship, messaging to discuss which ones to see next.

Towards the end of July, I invited her to North Wales in search of the Dark-red Helleborine species.

We had never met and I was nervous as I arrived early to pick her up at Chester station. I'd tried not to build this up in my head as a big deal, but had.

Twenty agonising minutes later, I walked over to the entrance to wait. I checked my phone: no messages.

Then I felt a tap on my shoulder and there she was, tall with wavy auburn hair and a camera bag slung over her shoulder.

Five minutes into our journey, any initial tension had passed. Before long we were sharing our strangest orchid-hunting experiences and taking it in turns to photograph helleborines by the roadside.

This brought my number of species seen to 40, so we celebrated with ice creams and a round of mini-golf atop the Great Orme, a large limestone headland protruding into

the Irish Sea.

As July faded into August, Suzie accompanied me to Lough Cullin in the west of Ireland to see the orchid known as Irish Lady's-tresses.

Beautiful, entertaining and like-minded, she was the perfect orchid-hunting companion and when we returned to England I worked up the courage to ask her out. Her swift rejection was as painful as I had expected.

We wanted different things, she said. We were living halfway across the country. I was going to university. All logical arguments, but no less difficult to take.

With the rejection still raw, at the beginning of September I set out to find the one orchid still on my list: Autumn Lady's-tresses, one of the commoner British species.

It seemed satisfyingly symmetrical to finish my journey where it had started five months previously, at Durlston Country Park.

The end came very quickly. Walking down a precipitous gully, I saw a slender twirl of white.

There, poking out from behind a tuft of yellowing grass, was an Autumn Lady's-tresses. Its snowy flowers twisted skyward: a bride on her wedding day.

I had seen every last orchid on my list. Extraordinary. The following year, I finally made it to Oxford and, having spent three years studying biology, I have somewhat inevitably returned to orchids: my PhD thesis is on, among other things, how best to protect endangered populations.

Mine was a humble achievement but it was one I felt incredibly proud of and that summer is one I will remember for the rest of my life. ■

Adapted from **The Orchid Hunter: A Young Botanist's Search For Happiness** by Leif Bersweden, published by Short Books.



LEIF BERSWEDEN

Orchis apiphera



IOS columnist **Zoë Devlin** is passionate about wildflowers and the environment. She combined her interests in botany and photography by developing the website: www.wildflowersofireland.net

Zoë's new book, **Blooming Marvellous: A Wildflower Hunter's Year**, was published by The Collins Press on 18 September and is available in all good bookshops and online from: www.collinspress.ie

The book will be reviewed in the next issue of **Pollinia**. ISBN: 978-1848893276

Mozart's Starling – by Lyanda Lynn Haupt ISBN: 978-1472153050

On May 27th, 1784, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart met in a Viennese shop a little starling which sang an improvised version of the theme from his Piano Concerto no. 17 in G major. Mozart bought him and took him home to be a family pet. For three years, the starling lived with Mozart, influencing his work and serving as his companion, distraction, consolation, and muse. After rescuing a baby starling of her own, Haupt found herself enchanted by the same intelligence and playful spirit that had so charmed her favorite composer.

In **Mozart's Starling**, Haupt explores the unlikely and remarkable bond between one of history's most esteemed composers and one of earth's most common birds. The intertwined stories of Mozart's beloved pet Star and Haupt's own starling Carmen provide an unexpected window into human-animal friendships, music, the world of starlings, and the nature of creative inspiration. A blend of natural history, biography, and memoir, **Mozart's Starling** is a tour de force that awakens a surprising new awareness of our place in the world.

