



Our Abney Clough Visit

By Alec Rapkin

Our DNHS party set out on the 22nd June 2013 in unpromising rain, but it soon cleared unexpectedly into one of the few fine days at that stage of the summer.

We descended by field and wood, where the most striking flowers were yellow pimpernel, yellow archangel, bugle and lesser stitchwort, into Abney Clough itself, a base-rich limestone valley, amid the surrounding gritstone moorland. In the steep, tall woods above the stream, there were a number of large wood ant heaps. John Bland put a bluebell in their midst, which led to increased activity and the turning pink of the bluebell, due to formic acid.

We reached the orchid fields, just off the main track, easily missed if you don't know about them. The fields are owned by a local farmer, but managed by Natural England, with both of whom I had cleared our visit. I had met the Natural England man here by chance last year.



Because of the unusual coldness of the spring and early summer, the timing of plants had been wayward but the greater butterfly orchids were in their prime time, in cream-coloured bud and flower, magnificent specimens spread over four fields. I counted 160, so many you had to watch your step. When the DNHS last visited here (perhaps ten years ago) there were only 20+, but this was the only poor year. There are usually 150-200. There are now only two other places in the Peak District that I know that you can find greater butterfly orchids: Parsley Hay where there are usually a handful (6 this year) and Ecton, where some time ago there used to be many (50-100), dwindling this year to only 3. There are no lesser butterfly orchids in our region.

The slopes of the orchid fields, where we ate our lunch in close proximity to the butterfly orchids, were also awash with other flowers, particularly large numbers of common spotted orchids, lovely enough to excite, if they had not been overshadowed by their more exotic

cousins. Yellow common cats-ear and pignut were everywhere (not the more expected rough hawkbit), betony in bud and in wetter areas the colourful monkey-flower. There was ox-eye daisy, vetches, mouse-ear hawkweed and tormentil, this last also to be found on acid moorland.

Butterflies were few: speckled wood, small copper, small heath and chimney-sweeper moth.

We walked on up to Abney village, and back to the cars in a loop by a lane and public footpath through moorland, where flowers were sparse. Around the village - one field had a couple of foals - were sweet cicely, comfrey, meadow vetchling and heath bedstraw. Rosemary Key, who compiled and sent me a flower list, noted heath speedwell and marsh hawksbeard. Through the heather and bracken, relieved by tormentil, we came across some points of interest - badger setts, a stone shooting butt - and saw meadow pipit and a swift. Back at the clough one redstart had been in evidence.

With the weather holding, we had had a good day. I have never found a better butterfly orchid site than Abney Clough, and believe there can't be many in the whole country.

KEY TO COLLAGE ON PAGE 16

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| 1. European Larch cone | 11. Bracken |
| 2. Common Cat's Ear | 12. Bluebell - inset showing affect of bluebell flowers being placed on wood ants nest |
| 3. Heath Bedstraw | |
| 4. Cow Parsley | |
| 5. Marsh Thistle | |
| 6. Greater Butterfly Orchid | 13. Speckled wood Butterfly |
| 7. Common spotted Orchid | |
| 8. Ox-eye Daisy | Photos are by Stephen Ford |
| 9. Red Campion | |
| 10. Yellow Rattle | |



Oak woodland in Abney Clough, July 2005 - Bill Grange



Abney Clough

