

THE MILITARY ORCHID IN SUFFOLK

ANONYMOUS

Orchis militaris L. is one of the rarest of British plants. Although the nineteenth century produced a good many scattered records for the orchid and in places it was 'seen in considerable numbers', it appears to have been unknown as a British plant from about 1914 until rediscovered by J. E. Lousley in May 1947. All the British records appear to be in the Chilterns and North Downs areas.

The discovery of a large population of the Military Orchid in Suffolk in June last year was therefore particularly surprising, not only because of the size and vigour of the population, but because the locality was more than 60 miles from any previous record.

The plant in its newly-discovered Suffolk locality is strictly confined to a calcareous, partly-shaded habitat not unlike that described for its other known British stations. The colony contained at least 500 plants in all stages of development from seedlings with single leaves to magnificent plants in full flower up to 18" tall with as many as 42 flowers per spike. On the 2nd June, when the colony was first discovered, only a few spikes had opened their lowest flowers. Well over 100 spikes were in flower or in bud. Extensive damage was caused by some animal which bit through the flower-stalk, mostly just beneath the inflorescence, and also caused leaf-damage (see plate 3). This may be slug-damage, but slugs have not been seen actually at work. The following data show the fate of the flowering spikes:—

5th June	Well over 100 flowering spikes developing. Some last year's dead fruiting stalks visible.
8th June	At least 10 spikes eaten off.
22nd June	Only 35 spikes flowering; remainder had been eaten off.
1st July	29 flowering spikes left. Nearly all flowers were now open, and some capsules were developing.
9th July	18 spikes left, with flowers and capsules.
18th July	16 fruiting spikes.
17th August	16 fruiting spikes (now brown) with 65 capsules.
20th Sept.	At least 21 ripe capsules containing dust-like seed. Basal leaves and fruiting stems were brown and withered, but young single-leaved plants were still green.

The age of the colony is of considerable interest. Various lines of evidence suggest that it could not be much less than 10 years, and probably not more than 50. About 20 years seems a reasonable estimate. Its discovery emphasises yet again that relatively well-known territory can yield, on careful scrutiny, botanical 'finds' of first-class importance. As a by-product of the Distribution Maps Scheme, *Orchis militaris* is very impressive!

PLATE 2



Flowering spikes of *Orchis militaris*.

PLATE 3



Group of flowering plants of *Orchis militaris*, showing animal damage.