

Welcome to NATURESCENE'S BOTANY ARTICLES of the CÉVENNES

A selection of articles in French and English by David Dickenson of Naturescene, written for the official ALEPE site

ALEPE (Association Lozérienne pour l'Etude et la Protection de l'Environnement) is the principal naturalist group of Lozère in France.



An Englishman in the Cévennes 1: Chemin des Vignes (Vineyard Lane)

Text and photos: DAVID DICKENSON

Date: 31/05/2010

As the central mountainous plateau of France drops down to the Rhone valley, the Cévennes are born. For an English botanist, the flowers of this region are pure magic. All you need to discover these flowers is a pair of legs and at least one eye. In addition, of course, it is always more agreeable to supplement this with a two-legged and a four-legged companion.

I would like to introduce you to a close friend, the 'Chemin des Vignes' ('Vineyard Lane') of our little village of La Salle Prunet, which lies 2 km from Florac, in the department of Lozère. This friend expresses all the contrasts of this fascinating region, and we get together each morning before breakfast.



This 'chemin', or lane, formerly constructed to give access to the 'bancels' (terraces) of orchards and vineyards, gently climbs the hillside for about 500 metres. Bordered by dry-stone walls and shrub-strewn rocks, this path lays between the Mediterranean climate and the Atlantic/Continental climate.

The rocks themselves are schist, but the water that runs over them is alkaline, coming from a limestone cap 200m above the acidic schist. There is a contrast of some very shady spots, but also many patches of bright sunshine.

Apart from myself, there is not normally a soul around, but 60 years ago, it was buzzing with people tending the bancels, and as recently as 2002, a small flock of sheep passed by every day, cropping the vegetation as they went. Nowadays, it is the council workman who crops the vegetation, without needing to use his teeth.

These many contrasts ensure this track is a little bit special, and I have identified and photographed more than 230 species of plant here, out of the thousand or so photographed by me overall in the Cévennes. Straddling these two climates, two soil-types, and two time-periods, some rather special plants can be seen.

At the moment, for example, I can admire a perfumed carpet of **Pyrenean Yellowcress** (*Rorippa stylosa*) (photos 1 & 2), which was to be found exclusively at this spot 10 years ago, but



Photo 1

is becoming more and more common in the locality.



Photo 2



Photo 3

There is also a growing colony of **Long-lipped Serapias** (*Serapias lingua*) (photo 3), an orchid which is very rare on the Atlantic side of the weather divide.



Photo 4

The Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*) (photo 4) is abundant, but the occasional **Holm Oak** (*Quercus ilex*) (photo 5), which marks the line between the Mediterranean and Atlantic/Continental climates, finds it pretty difficult to flower, awaiting a touch more global warming.



Photo 5

For those living in England, many species of flowers have disappeared for ever, because of the 'enriched' fields, lanes covered in tarmac, and housing estates encrusting the landscape.

Value them whilst you can.

An Englishman in the Cévennes 2: The Footpath of Le Mazel

Text and photos: DAVID DICKENSON
Date: 07/06/2010

Throughout the world, trees and grasses are the kings and queens of the plant kingdom. However, they have failed to conquer the rocky and arid zones. These habitats require plants to have a few tricks up their sleeves to survive in such hostile conditions.

To take a closer look at this crafty and courageous vegetation, I decided to tackle the steep path from Le Mazel (St. Laurent de Trèves) to the limestone plateau of the Causse Méjean, this sunny weekend. I had for company my wife and dog. The last time that we had puffed up this path, we were 7 years younger, in better physical, if not mental, state, and the dog had been left in the UK.

The village of Le Mazel is situated at 660M altitude, and we often wander along the path that runs horizontally through the hay meadows, being fairly lazy about life.

At this height, the limestone sits on the schist as a cap, with an abundance of springs. There is therefore a wealth of interesting plants.

But this time, we paused just a few moments to admire the blue heads of **Meadow Clary** (*Salvia pratensis*) and **Tassel Hyacinth** (*Muscari comosum*) (photo 1), the latter named by the French after the shock of blue hair standing on end.



Photo 1



Photo 2

My grandfather would have given his life to have a rockery in his garden like that.

We then started to climb, and by 720M, the path became gradually steeper and rockier. We had now reached the dry pasture zone, and in theory, we should have expected to see a wealth of orchids.

We were there 10 days previously, and it was very promising. But the cows, cows the lot of them, had eaten every flower spike. However, they had left untouched the **Common Thyme** (*Thymus vulgaris*) (photo 2), in all its matching colours, which made a beautiful display.

I am leaving it to you to spot in the photo the **Montpellier Soapwort** (*Saponaria ocymoides*), and the Rockroses, such as the white **Appenine Rockrose** (*Helianthemum apenninum*) and the yellow **Common Rockrose** (*Helianthemum nummularium*).

With the dog leading the way (she was searching for a stick in amongst the box shrubs), we continued our climb to 960M; on the way a beautiful patch of the curiously named **Bastard balm** (*Melittis melissophyllum*) (Photo 3) struck our eyes.



Photo 3



Photo 4

The path took a hair-pin bend, and the chaotic dolomitic rocks began to dominate us all around (photo 4), with the Tarnon valley below just a little speck.

Let the marvels begin.

The **Alpine Mezereon** (*Daphne alpina*) (photo 5) is a very attractive bush that is found only in the most panoramic situations, and here was no exception.

As many as 30 of these plants lined the path for the last 200m, leading up to the cause (a limestone plateau).



Photo 5



Photo 6

The dog was thirsty. Was she hallucinating, with visions of white frothy waterfalls tumbling down these dry rocky slopes? No, it was cushions of **Large-fruited Alison** (*Hormathophylla macrocarpa*) (photo 6), forming a tapestry of interlacing branches, protected somewhat by tiny little spines.

This made a pleasing contrast with the lilac of the little **Aster of the Causse des Cévennes** (*Aster alpinus subsp. cebennensis*) (photo 7)



Photo 7

We also spotted some *Leucanthemum graminifolium* (photo 8). As its Latin name suggests, this is the **Grass-leaved Ox-eye Daisy**. Lots of rock plants reduce the surface area of their leaves to protect against drought.



Photo 8



Photo 9

The dog sniffed out a group of broomrapes, with a very spicy scent. There are thirteen species of these parasitic plants in the Cévennes, and it's not easy to tell the difference between them. However, each species has its preference for its lunch. The idea popped into my head to identify the plants parasitised around this broomrape, and bingo!

This could be confirmed as the **Graceful Broomrape** (*Orobanche gracilis*) (photo 9), with its red throat, which loves to suck on the sap of the Fabaceae family.

This time, its food was the unfortunate **Mountain Kidney-vetch** (*Anthyllis montana*) (photo 10), which carpeted the path.



Photo 10

Ten minutes later, and we had finally reached 1050M; everything was very flat, and across the valley we could see streaks of snow on Mont Lozère.

The first stalks of **Angel hair** (*Stipa pennata*) (photo 11) had begun to tremble in a warm current of air. We had arrived at the Causse Méjean.

There was scarcely a tree to be seen. Other dogs had pinched all the sticks.

Upset, Growler faced around, and began her descent.



Photo 11

An Englishman in the Cévennes

3. Aubrac in the Ice Age

Text and photos: DAVID DICKENSON

Date: 24/06/2010

We proposed a botanic outing to take a look at some relics of the Ice-Age. We were a brave foursome in the snow, with a 100% glacial wind. This was 'botanic reality'. It was the last day of Spring, 2010, but the weather was winter. One more contradiction, we were actually in the Aubrac, not the Cévennes.

Here, the soil is volcanic, not seen in the Cévennes for several hundred of millions of years. The flowers promised to bring us a lot of surprises.

We parked at the Col de Bonnecombe, to whet our botanic appetites. Here, around a lake carved out during the Ice Age, almost all the orchids to be seen were the **Heath Spotted Orchid** (*Dactylorhiza maculata*), with little risk of contradiction. They were, however, a little difficult to verify, because of a horizontal snowstorm (photo 1).



Photo 1

A wind of just 3 °C, with gusts of 100km/hr, this last day of Spring was to be our 'bontanic reality'. If we had spotted a mammoth, we would not have been surprised.

We admired our first carnivorous plant, the **Round-leaved Sundew** (*Drosera rotundifolia*) (photo 2), and looked forward to seeing our second carnivorous species. At the extremity of this lake, we had been told, were a group of butterworts. However, we searched and searched without success, and were very happy to return to the car.



Photo 2



Photo 3

Imagine our surprise when we stopped at the Negro Bridge, several kilometres further on, to take a look at the 'organ pipes' (photo 3), these octagonal-shaped basalt rocks bearing the stigmata of the Ice Age, forming the bed of the river.

There was an abundance of **Large-flowered Butterwort** (*Pinguicula grandiflora*) (photo 4) draping the rocks. These differ from the Butterworts of the Causses, mentioned in my blog of the Roc des Hourtous, by their large deep blue flowers.



Photo 4

Just to the side, we noticed the red heads of the **Marsh Cinqfoil** (*Potentilla palustris*) (photo 5), a frequent companion in marshland. Here, if in doubt, one simply precedes a plant name with 'Marsh' (Marsh Forget-me-not, Marsh Thistle, Marsh Buttercup, Marsh Orchid (for all the unknown Dactylorhizas)

If you want to be a snob, you can use the Latin '*palustris*' instead of 'Marsh'. Its not difficult, and it works, for example *Potentilla palustris*, *Botaniste palustris*

The only thing to complicate matters is the modern fashion to call a marsh or bog by its European approved name 'mire'.



Photo 5

We are on the slopes of the Lac de Souveyrol, the remains of an Ice Age lake and marsh. This left-over from the Ice Age is special.



It plays host to one of the rare colonies of **Ligularia** (*Ligularia siberica*) (photo 6) in Lozère. We were too early to see the imposing tall flower spikes of this plant, resembling a giant ragwort, so I have included a photo taken a previous year.

Photo 6

Scattered on the slope are pockets of marsh, rich in both numbers of plants and species of *Dactylorhiza*, and above all, the yellow heads of two large members of the Buttercup family found in marshland, namely the **Kingcup** or **Marsh Marigold** (*Caltha palustris*) (photo 7) and the **Globe Flower** (*Trollius europaeus*) (photo 8)



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9

Two stalks of *Dactylorhiza* orchids attracted me. With their lax stems, and sparse flowers, they

In the surrounding dryish pastureland, we found ourselves examining two different species of rampion. A mixture of the normal Spiked Rampion, common in Lozère, and the **Round-headed Rampion** (*Phyteuma orbiculare*) (photo 9). With its rounded head, and pistil with three lobes, we could easily see the difference.

appeared rather different, and I snapped their photos (photo 10). Later, looking through the books,

I became quite excited, thinking I had found *Dactylorhiza traunsteineri*, a species that had been reported only twice before in Lozère. But my hopes were dashed by Alain Jacquet, who has distinct reservations from my photos.

A botanist's life is not a happy one.



Photo 10



Photo 11

But not before paying a visit to the Botanical Garden at Aubrac, to see a collection of all the flowers to be found in the region that we had not seen to date.

We stopped briefly to milk the cow (photo 11), then, without wasting time, we made a bee-line for the Aubrac café, and packed down some enormous cakes, essential eating for the pilgrims doing the St. Jaques route, often soaked and exhausted like us. Photo 11



Photo 12

At last! We spotted our aim for the day. 90 minutes driving, icy showers, wet and muddy footwear, and there we were! Two little red lollipops.

This is the only spot in all Lozère where the **Austrian Nigretella orchid** (*Nigretella austriaca*) (photo 11) can be found, and it is always like looking for a needle in a haystack.

But, we got there. It was enough to take two photos and turn our back on the wind.

And during this punishing day, where was our dog?

She had remained curled up beside the fireplace at home.

Having some beautiful dreams.

What a lucky dog!

An Englishman in the Cévennes 4: A Warm Glow to the Start of Summer

Text and photos: DAVID DICKENSON

Date: 07/07/2010

In the Cévennes, we pass quickly from bitter cold to heatwave conditions. The spring-flowering orchids can take a bit of snow, just, but not those of summer. And it was summer orchids that we, optimistic botanists as we were, had decided to track down the first Saturday of July.

Claude Vincent wanted to show off the rare Summer Lady's Tresses on the banks of the Tarn to the guys of the Société Française d'Orchidophilie (French Orchid Society) and the members of ALEPE (Lozère Nature Society). Like an idiot, I had boasted that the Lady's Tresses on the banks of the Mimente, almost next door to me, were not only more plentiful, but more attractive.

To add to this stupidity, to fill in a bit of time for these orchid lovers, I had offered to show them a few species of Helliborine (Epipactis) orchids, also fairly rare. Luckily, today, virtually everything was out in flower just in time, and the river was perfect to cool off under a scorching sun.



Photo 1

There are seven species of Epipactis in Lozère. At Hospitalet, on the Corniche des Cévennes road, we found five of them. Two years ago, I had come across a colony of **Cotton Grass** (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) (Photo1) just off the road, and told myself, super, a limestone marsh, which promises some very special plants.

Nothing could be more special than the **Marsh Helleborine** (*Epipactis palustris*) (Photo 2) which is to be found here, with its large flowers of shades of brown. Its speciality is a hinged lip, which is always a surprise for every insect which lands on the epichile, the name for the extremity of the lip. Uniquely in this orchid, it acts as a swing.



Photo 2

We are very close to the dinosaurs' footprints of St Laurent de Trèves, and it was perhaps in a swampy area like this that they roamed about several million years ago.

We moved on to the woodland above, centred around the little dolomitic chaos that makes up Hospitalet.

Within several minutes, we see our first **Tiny-leaved Epipactis** (*Epipactis microphylla*) (Photo 3). What a contrast! As small as the Marsh Helleborine is large, growing in a spot as shady as the other is bright, soil as dry as the other is soaking, and an epichile boasting a double chin



Photo 3

We came across other species of Epipactis, somewhat more common, but hardly 10-a-penny either. At this point, our problems began. How does one identify Epipactis species when only in bud? It is not possible! Or perhaps yes it is

I took several leaf margins, ready to examine them under the microscope. Would it be possible to identify them that evening under the microscope? (Photo 4). Reply in several weeks time

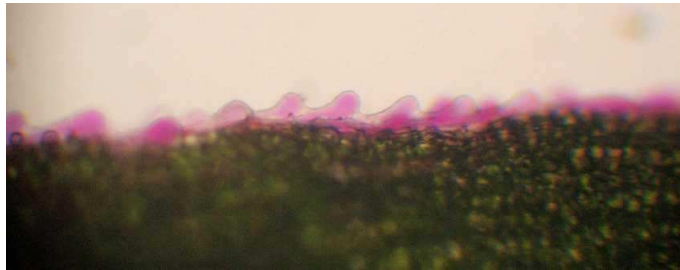


Photo 4

In past years, I have seen in this area *E. muelleri*, *E. atrorubens*, and *E. helliborine*, and those on this outing resembled these three species (and all too often, characteristics of all three on the same plant).

There were other plants of particular interest around these dolomitic rocks. Surrounded as I was by orchid lovers, I didn't want to spend too long on these. However, to the pleasure of all, I was able to show them a circle of rocks draped by overhanging greenery, resembling a moss. This appearance gave the name to the **Mossy Sandwort** (*Moehringia muscosa*) (Photo 5). The tiny flowers, only 5mm across, are scattered like stars throughout the plants. It wasn't the last time I needed a hand-lens today.



Photo 5

We were a select group of 12 for the morning, but were joined by two others for the picnic and swimming at mid-day (nature was not our sole interest) (Photo 6), and our numbers exploded for the afternoon. It was time to visit the **Summer Lady's Tresses**, and our party was large and varied.



The president of the regional (SFO) French Orchid Society; an author of orchid books; several orchid photographers; a few 'train spotters' keen to tick the box for this rare species of orchid; general botanists experienced in a wide range of species; and beginners finding magic in all things. Each to his own taste, and making a very friendly and welcoming group

Photo 6

The **Summer Lady's Tresses** (*Spiranthes aestivalis*) (Photo 7) is rare because of its capricious needs. It insists on an acid terrain, humid in springtime, and above all, clear of other vegetation, because it is unable to compete with aggressive competition. With a gentle rocky slope, scoured free in winter of other vegetation, the banks of the Tarn and the Mimente are ideal, and both play host to over 100 plants each.



Photo 7

Like all these special spots, there is a typical surrounding vegetation. In my opinion, the key indicators were:-

the '**Seaside**' **Centuary** (*Centaurium littorale*) (Photo 8) (take care not to confuse with the **Common Centuary** (*Centaurium erythrea*), which is widespread in the region, including this spot),



Photo 8

the depressing **Small cudweed** (*Logfia minima*) (photo 9),



Photo 9

the tasty **Chives** (*Allium schoenoprasum*) (photo 10),

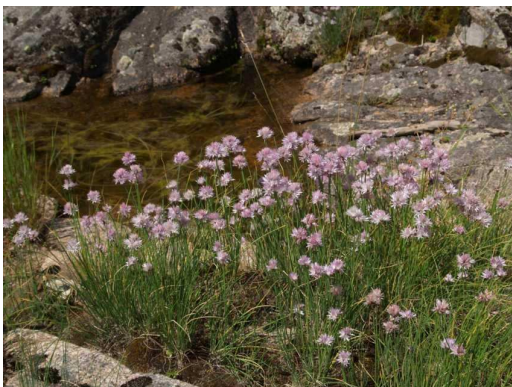


Photo 10

the tiny **Procumbent Pearlwort** (*Sagina procumbens*) (photo 11),



Photo 11

the amusing **Toad Rush**

and the **Common Yellow sedge**

(*Juncus
bufonius*)
(photo 12),



Photo 12

(*Carex viridula*
subsp.
oedocarpa)(Photo
13).



Photo 13

Above all, we must include the **All-seed** (*Radiola linoides*) (Photo 14) . Several days later, I was exploring the banks of the Mimente for other specimens of the Summer Lady's Tresses, and became very interested to find, for the very first time, one of the smallest flowers in all Europe, perched on the rocks several centimetres from the water's edge.

Imagine my surprise when I was checking through the photos of Summer Lady's Tresses I had taken over the past few years. There, just beside these orchids, were some beautiful colonies of All-seed, previously overlooked! There are none so blind as those who cannot see.



Photo 14

In short, all these indicator species belong to a group that are very rare, or extinct in England. They are pathetic little plants, on the margins of society, which are to be found in patches of disturbed ground, often puddles in winter, muddy in spring, well trodden-down by livestock throughout the year, often beside gates and farmyard paths. In 2010, all has become very tidy, the paths are covered in tarmac, the small herds of yesteryear have disappeared.

Fortunately, in France, along basins of the Tarn and Mimente, the river banks fit the bill, because the Summer Lady's Tresses and its companions are in a flood zone, and under a torrent of water almost every year.

As for the Summer Lady's Tresses itself, there was once a famous colony in England, just 2 miles from my home in the New Forest. But in 1850, the bogs were drained, with the aim of 'improving' the pasture. It took a century for them to completely disappear, but their end was inevitable. One year ago, with the benefit of EU money, the canal (Warwickslade Cutting) was filled in, and the original curves of the river re-instated.

Will the Lady's Tresses return? Who knows? For me, I now have the good luck to live just 2 miles from a colony in France, and my English friends may drool with envy.

An Englishman in the Cévennes

5. Goodbye summer, hello autumn

Text and photos: DAVID DICKENSON

Date: 29/09/2010

We were a group of seven to welcome in the autumn this Sunday, with a programme to really whet the appetite. We wanted to see the very last orchids of the year, and after that, to punish ourselves by climbing the steep footpath of the Mazel to the limestone plateau of the Causse Méjean, in order to delight ourselves with the autumn colours.

**Chemin
des
Vignes
(Vinyard
Lane)**

What better spot to see the **Autumn Lady's Tresses** (*Spiranthes spiralis*) (Photo 1) than my Chemin des Vignes at La Salle Prunet? This year, the path is scattered with 160 white spikes of flowers, all arranged in spirals, each with a fringed lip and green throat.

Two days after this outing, a herd of sheep passed up this path, and significantly did no damage at all as they passed over the orchids. This orchid is found exclusively in those spots that are well trampled. It could resist the ox-carts used for the grape harvest, and today can resist the feet of eager botanists. The flower stalk is supple and very strong, and the rosette of leaves has scarcely left the soil. After flowering, the leaves will grow and persist just until the first period of drought in the summer of 2011.

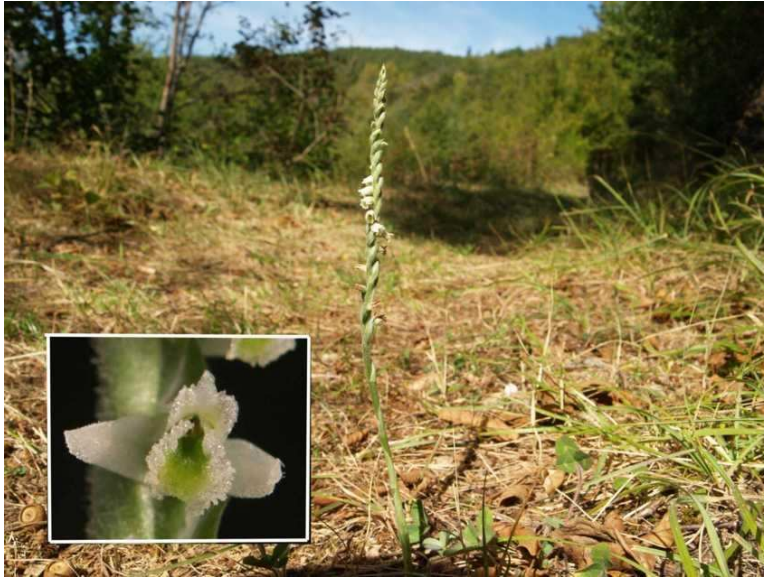


Photo 1

Somewhat suspiciously, we ate several bunches of **grapes** (*Vitis vinifera*) (photo 2,) perhaps Clinton variety, which was banned decades ago. These decorated the bancels (terraces), and were a relic from the former vinyards.



Photo 2

The most striking plant was the **Livelong Orpine** (*Sedum telephium*) (photo 4). This is the by far the largest of the stonecrops, and in our region, this subspecies 'maximum' typically has yellow flower heads.

A week previously, all the leaves really had the appearance of being completely dead, but 24 hours after the first rain, they had rapidly swollen up, and became as fleshy as any other stonecrop leaves. Within 3 days, the flower buds had burst open to decorate the path.

We came across some **Wild madder** (*Rubia peragrina*) (Photo 3). The French name it the Garance voyageuse, as the seeds stick to you and make their travels. I really enjoy the botanical revue named after this plant, which equally sticks to your mind after reading.



Photo 3



Photo 4

The Footpath of Le Mazel

After a break for tea and cakes (English, of course), we took the footpath from Le Mazel. We had a pleasant surprise. There are usually several Autumn Lady's Tresses on the horizontal path between the pastures, but I had not been expecting to see any on the path that climbed the cliff face. But they were everywhere!

Several hundred of these little orchids spotted the path and the surrounding pastures. We took our picnic encircled by several dozens. They were still growing up to 820m. Thirty paces on, and the limestone pasture changed to the dolomite rocks (a form of magnesium rich limestone)(photo 5). The slope became steeper. Was the climate too harsh above this, or was the terrain just not suitable? That is to find out.



Photo 5

The climb didn't seem as difficult as our last visit. The day was cool and distinctly autumnal. Amongst the most interesting fruits, we admired the **Large-fruited Alison** (*Horatophylla macrocarpa*) (photo 6), resembling the pods of Honesty, but smaller and heart-shaped, and the shiny white seeds of **Gromwell** (*Lithospermum officinale*) (photo 7). **Litho=rock, spermum=seed, and it was well named.**



Photo 6



Photo 7

And what about our dog on this walk? She had lapped up all the stroking she could whilst we puffed uphill, and spent the descent seeking out all the spots where her two-legged companions had previously spent their pennies.



Photo 8



Photo 9

Alas, the END for the BLOGS in English

Visit www.naturescene.net/barmies for accounts (in French) of many walks with our **Barmy Botanists**