

Orchid blooms

If you love orchids, June is the month when you can see 100,000 of them blooming on the Isle of Man's Close Sartfield Nature Reserve. Meadows are awash with colour, from heath spotted pinks to the twayblade orchid (Britain's most common type), with its unusual cluster of green flowers.

There are around 20,000 species of orchid in the world and 49 of these can be found in Britain. Close Sartfield has the highest density of orchids in Europe. Their distinctive shapes often resemble animals, which makes identifying varieties such as the fly or monkey orchid quite easy—even for the amateur.

Orchids mainly grow in wetlands. Sadly, the decline of such habitats is beginning to threaten the survival of certain species, as is the lucrative business of selling orchids.

Close Sartfield is run by the Manx Nature Conservation Trust. For more information call 01624-801985.



Bee orchid.

PHOTO: THE WILDLIFE TRUST

ALMANACK

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Still of the night

When Scotland's leading natural history photographer, Laurie Campbell, invited me to join him badger-watching in Berwickshire last June, I jumped at the chance. Badgers have been living in Britain for around 250,000 years. Although their numbers were badly hit by the electrification of railways in the '70s, today the figures are increasing. The latest surveys show there are around a quarter of a million badgers in the UK. However, urbanisation, intensive farming and badger-baiting has meant that in certain areas, whole populations have disappeared.

Badgers live in groups of up to 14 adults. Their homes, built into the sloping grounds of woodlands, are a maze of underground tunnels and chambers, known as a sett. Laurie took me to one he'd been watching for some time.

In the cool of the night we sat and waited. After two hours, a crunching sound at the entrance signalled that we were

about to be rewarded with our first glimpse. Warily, the badger emerged, its distinctive white streak glowing in the moonlight.

This was the mother of the sett. A few minutes later she was followed by five cubs,



about two years old. Laurie told me that last summer he'd found all five cubs asleep in the same tent as his four-year-old son, Ben. It's rare for badgers to become so accepting of a human's presence, but Laurie has become a welcome, if silent, visitor. Badgers have acute hearing, to compensate for their poor eyesight, so the slightest rustle can quickly bring a night's watch to an end.

Slowly, as the cubs devoured the food Laurie had brought, he began to take his pictures. Remarkably, the flash was ignored as the youngsters finished their supper and got down to a spot of play.

It was Dad who first tired of the games; slowly he ambled off down the slope, intent on finding more food. Soon the rest of the family dissolved into the wood on the same mission.

That was our final sighting for the night. But the memory of those beautiful creatures, and the privilege of being allowed into their world, if only for a few hours, will remain for a long time. **Nikky Armstrong**

For more information about badger-watching write to The Wildlife Trust, The Green, Witham Park, Waterside South, Lincoln LN5 7JF.

PHOTO: LAURIE CAMPBELL