Waterlevel DATA: ***Spiranthes romanzoffiana* in Co. Mayo, Ireland re. flooding in the area!** Flooding is now declining but too late for a recovery of Irish Lady's Tresses. (**7th September 2023**)

WildWest.ie

White *ORCHID* group: 2023

HOME CONTACT SITE MAP

CLICK IMAGE *where you see this Icon.*

This is the start of a new Series allowing update of Numbers and Distribution on a yearly basis. i.e. Survey Counts and/or Maps...

The first group Page includes a selection of rare/uncommon/local orchids and plants found in the WildWest.ie area. The **WhiteOrchidGroup** focuses on a surprisingly large and diverse series of orchids found around our Home place i.e Roscommon, Sligo, Donegal, Leitrim and Mayo. It is a coincidence — or maybe it isn't — that these rare and remote orchids are all coloured white. They also, along with a wider range of orchids, are mainly lime loving and occur mainly on karst limestone topography either exposed or under shallow soil or peat.

Each year we will (we hope) report on the distribution, abundance, safety and success of these rather unusual Orchids which happen to grow around us. By and large, they are well protected; their habitats are undisturbed, we know where to find them and how to monitor and protect them with the help of local landowners who are supportive and protective of these rarer parts of our Biodiversity. Why are they white? Maybe because they generally are found in remote locations. Their colour will attract fertilising insect species and plants are less likely to be damaged or collected in areas of low population or difficult access.

Other orchids with brightly coloured flowers tend to occur in among other species such as the Bee Orchid, Marsh Orchids and Early Purple Orchids. Fragrant Orchids also, are brightly coloured and have a very strong smell immediately detected when you are close by. This distinguishes them from Common Orchids and they also can be shorter and only emerge from grasses, rushes, bushes etc. That leaves this bunch of very white species which one might think to be vulnerable. The most vulnerable species in the collection is the Greater Butterfly Orchid — which has evidently declined in traditional locations following further grazing on lowland hills. Once eaten, this species may not regrow again!

White Orchid Group

Why white?

We have gathered a closely related group of rare plants found in a particular part of North West Ireland. These are all Orchids and happen to be white flowering plants. WHY do all these rare orchids happen to be WHITE! Also, apart from the Greater Butterfly Orchid, they are mostly small.

Occur in rough high ground!

These plants occur in the Bricklieves, Kesh Mountain, Killeglan in S. Roscommon, Mountains and other undisturbed areas. They can be seen flowering abundantly. Some, like the Greater Butterfly Orchid are spectacular but may disappear suddenly when active grazers are introduced to their traditional wild habitat. But, many people also guard them.

But may become extinct if more high ground is lost?

Management & Conservation: To secure these sites they need to be watched during the growing season, seed production, and as flowers are dying back. This yearly cycle will repeat as long as the flowering and seed production process is undisturbed. If the land is tilled or cut too early these biodiverse plants will quickly die. Orchids produce just 1 flower each year unlike most shore plants which will produce many!

Dense-flowered Orchid *Neotinea maculata*

2021 Seen by Roadside sump. 19 May **1 plant!**
2022 Killeglan site explored. 10th May :**61**
2023 17th & 21st May TOTAL = **60**
2024 May (limited survey, hot weather: **14**
2025 No survey done

Images from south Roscommon, grazed in Winter but protected from Spring onwards for this and other species.

Hard site to survey with very small initial buds and flowers often sheltered by rocks or thorn bushes on the edge of water or dried up drains.

ABOVE: *Pinkish form of species.*

RIGHT: *Standard white form with hints of cream but no clear markings*

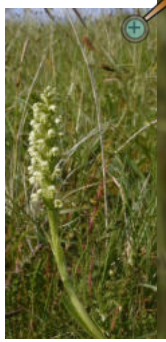
At the Killeglan SAC both forms are present and we can see no clear habitat selection

Small-white Orchid *Pseudorchis albida*

2021 KeshCarrowkeelMainand subSite **171**
2022 Kesh SE 11/18th June. S facing slopes. **148**
2023 Kesh SE slopes JUNE = **211**
2024 Kesh SE slopes June = **73**
2025 Kesh sample site June = **52**

A plant of windy hills often hidden in high grass but having impressive short-lived spikes and curved stem as it searches light.

Loves these gentle foothills of northwest Ireland. A rare plant that comes and goes quickly.



Greater Butterfly Orchid *Platanthera chlorantha*

2022 Doon Shore (private site) 3rd July **142**
2023 Doon Shore 17/28 June **101** (dry conditions)
2023 Kesh (SE slopes) JUNE = **1267**
2024 Doon Shore, June = **102**
2025 Doon Shore =200+ (reported to us)

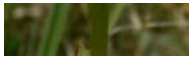
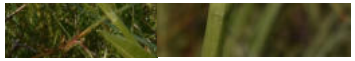
Irish Lady's Tresses *Spiranthes romanzoffiana*

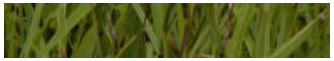
2021 all sites surveyed **775**
2022 long dry Summer with no flooding **666**
2023 3 weeks from 11th July then flooded **371**
2024 July/August (flooding late Aug) **534**
2025 Late July/August Partial Survey **151**

Autumn Lady's Tresses *Spiranthes spiralis*

2021 many in dunes at Strandhill and Belmullet
2022 numerous over Strandhill *300-400 est.*
2023 Strandhill c. **176**
2024 Strandhill c. 100
2025 Strandhill **c.160,** West Mayo NONE**

between them. More obs. needed!




The Dense-flowered Orchid is the earliest flowering orchid of this bunch of White Flowered Orchids. We were happy to find and record this species in an SAC in south Roscommon.

Springs and Sumps:

A specific niche of springs (circular cones of rock and grassland) and sumps in limestone keeps this species happy. These sites can be very exposed, hot, and full of sharp-edged fractured limestone upland. Take care!

Typically this SAC site can yield varying results (from 1 - 62) The first time we met them was as we were leaving the site via a dried up flood-way heading into an underground sump. This was in 2021when we were completing a detailed search for **Green-winged Orchids**. (abundant that year) but we had finished our search and were heading away when in the middle of the dry channel heading under-ground we spotted this plant we hadn't realised occurred there!

They also occur in Fermanagh, Donegal, west Galway and Roscommon. Their numbers vary dramatically depending on weather and water features. The roadside site that yielded our first Dense-flowered only had 1 specimen and we had to wait another year for more...

Regretfully, due to unforseen circumstances this year (2025), we couldn't travel to Killeglan to survey the Dense flowered orchid...

The Small White Orchid is threatened and every year we see many open pastures that are grazed right at the start of the grazing season. It is a beautiful small orchid, very thin and upright, which can survive in small herbage or stand tall in open fields where they are more at risk to stock release onto the hills in May.

A secure Habitat:

Fortunately, these orchids have some friends in the Bricklieve Mountains where every year cattle are withdrawn and allow this species to flourish, set seed, and fade away undamaged. The numbers at this site, consequently, are steady or increasing — as are the Greater Butterfly Orchids at the same site.

This species can flower abundantly in mild weather but the hot early Summer of 2023 dried up many specimens — though some did recover with later cooler damper weather. The population should recover as they are undisturbed, abundant, and seen to produce much seed over many years. Thus, they can easily repopulate other upland sites in Roscommon and other areas.

Like other orchids this species will spend some years developing underground before they are able to produce a flower.

In 2025 our 'sample site' contained c.52 specimens, compared with 31 in this same area in 2024. A full survey was not done but in comparison, the numbers were very good.

There are two species, of Butterfly Orchid; the Lesser and the Greater Butterfly Orchid —which is the one we study here. Some are found on a distinct promontory pointing south about 1km. SE of Kesh Corran peak.

This Greater Butterfly Orchid is, however, influenced by grazing in 3 different locations, the area (above) being secure and stable at present. 5km SE of Kesh Corran there is a Water Storage facility at Ballinafad (54.0355, -8.3599) There is a large green sloping strip here where large numbers of *Platanthera chlorantha* occurred before a few horses took over the area. Now none survive! This species is so vulnerable because of its size, so attractive to grazing animals, and very easily detected.

At low-level between L. Key and the Sligo Road (N4) a dedicated farmer has set her land aside for several months in the Spring/Summer to protect the species. This has yielded contin-uous high count numbers in a small area.

The Greater Butterfly can occur in great numbers and provides a magnificent display. The larger species opens earlier and lasts longer than the Lesser Butterfly Orchid and a good specimen can be recognised from 0.25km across the hills.

This year's numbers (at the Doon site) were exceptionally good; thanks to the landowner who manages the site carefully for this orchid and let us know the results.

This species is a Special One for Ireland being found in North America, Ireland and Scotland only. It is widespread in US and Canada; this is their native territory with, certainly, some of the Irish population being established from seeds blown across the Atlantic by upper level winds.

It is a beautiful plant with a long flowering season (normally) from July to September. This can be thwarted by early Summer flooding as, for all practical purposes, this is a lake shore plant typically occurring within 10 - 30cm in vertical range above the local lake.

2025

In April of this year, on a visit to the Mayo lakes, (particularly at L. Cullin) there were huge deposits of 'Moss balls' along the shoreline. Some of this deposit, presumably from the winter's major storms, were up to 50 cm deep.

When we visited again (a late, partial survey) , it was evident that *S. romanzoffiana* had in some places been prevented from appearing by these Moss Balls.This was particularly evident at the 'Nursery' where normally we would find 70+ plants; In August we found only 5!

Two sites on L. Conn were good, one on the East shore (Cloghans) and one on the west (Cuillkillew). A few orchids were found at L. Levally, and a small number on L. Cullin NE shore A total of 151— though we did not get around to surveying some of the less accessible sites. There were signs of possible seed production on a few plants, but many were starting to wither at the start of August. It's probable that they ererged much earlier than usual due to the hot weather in late Spring and early summer?

The West Mayo site studied in 2021 had a huge number of *S.spiralis;* a visit in late August 2025 to the same site yielded none. The site appears to have been re-seeded and improved, with strip grazing all around. A sad sight.

The cluster of orchids seen above were recorded from Strandhill, Co. Sligo in August 2025. This easily recognised clump appears every year, but has increased from 10 specimens in 2024 to 13 this year. This clump may have been produced by vegetative budding, but we have seen research which suggests the seeds do not travel far from 'home'?

At Strandhill, we counted approximately 160 specimens of *S. spiralis.* Many of these were growing on the low slopes above the valley bottoms on the dune area, where vegetstion is low. When they first appeared in early August, they were badly affected by the hot weather and drought. However, many of the specimens seen in late August were pretty fresh ones.

This species has a patchy distribution in Ireland and otherwise occurs in England and Wales. It is a very similar plant to *romanzoffiana* but has a different and amazing distribution.

We have only recently become aware that this plant has a semi-global distribution occurring from the west of Ireland to the higher Himalayas and is found through southern Europe, the Middle East, India and Pakistan.

How they establish themselves in such remote, cold and barren areas, relates to similarity of the species with other *Spiranthes* genus. Both 'Irish' species rely on wind dispersal, one from America to Ireland and the other from Ireland to Asia! Ireland is the sole location where both occur together.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