

Flowers and wildlife in the Picos de Europa

by Ian Taylor



Vega de Uriello Refuge (1953m) with Naranjo de Bulnes rearing above it - Photo Ian Taylor

If your journey to the Picos starts by ferry, then the wildlife experience can start the moment you board the ferry to the northern Spanish port of Santander. It is normal to have volunteers on board to survey cetaceans for the Orca conservation group, and they welcome company at their top deck look-out. They briefed us superbly and pointed out porpoises, two different types of dolphins, beaked whales and even (fleetingly) a sperm whale poking its nose above water to look around - a habit they called 'spyhopping'. The Portsmouth-Santander route is good for deep-diving cetaceans like sperm and beaked whales (the deepest diving whales known) because it crosses the edge of the continental shelf into waters several thousand metres deep in the Bay of Biscay. Apart from the wildlife enjoyment, it felt satisfyingly time-efficient to cover so much of the distance asleep and know we were not damaging the environment so much as flying. If you travel by this ferry, a light-weight pair of binoculars is a worthwhile 'luxury' item.

Our group of four set out on 13th June, hoping that would be a good time for the best floral show in the Picos, which none of us had visited before. This timing turned out to be ideal. We had left slack in our walking schedule to be able to dawdle to identify flowers, although we find it works best to alternate between stretches where we focus on making the necessary distance and stretches where we take time out to enjoy the flora. Another 'luxury' item we include in our rucksack is one of the flower books wonderfully illustrated by the prolific flower painter Marjorie Blamey. We have yet to find a mobile phone app that comes close. Blamey's book specific to alpins is now old and out of print, but we managed to acquire a copy second-hand via the web.

We avoided starting our walking circuit using the fastest but most popular route via Potes and the Fuente Dé cable car. Instead we contrived a bus and taxi journey via Las Arenas to stay at a pleasant auberge at Puente Poncebos, which would also be our exit point after a 10-day auberge and mountain hut circuit around and through the central massif of the Picos. This starting point gave us an opportunity for a misty pre-dawn departure, carrying a packed breakfast up the famous Cares Gorge before any coach-loads of crowds could arrive, accompanied for much of the way by the dawn chorus of black redstarts disputing their territories.

The floral treat of this section was bee orchids thriving on the limestone substrate. We were not previously aware how much bee orchids can vary (and hybridise). We did however, after some debate, manage to confidently distinguish a fly orchid. None of us are botanically expert, but finding and identifying flowers gives us great pleasure. My sister and her boyfriend were relatively new to this pleasure, but their work in film and design has equipped them with sharp observation skills and, once they had got their eye in for a flower, they proved far better at spotting them than Lynn or me.

So, a couple of days later, following a fine high level traverse of the central massif of the Picos via the scenically perched and friendly Jermoso refuge (2064m) and Aliva Refuge-Hotel (1650m), it was Adam that spotted our first lizard orchids. To our surprise the best specimens turned up in a desolate-looking pasture that had been razed more than grazed, by a triply destructive combination of sheep plus horses plus cows! Although some orchids had been trodden underhoof, they had not been eaten,

so presumably they make unpleasant eating.

A large majority of the flowers of the Picos also occur in the Alps. However, we were surprised to learn how many flowers are endemic to the Picos, or the Cantabrian Mountains of which the Picos (and the Pyrenees) are part. The information available told us this was due to repeated isolation from other parts of Europe during periods of glacial advance. For example, we noticed that there is a specifically Cantabrian bell heather (*Daboecia cantabrica*), with flowers larger than any heather seen in the UK or the Alps, and a variety of foxglove distinct from both the yellow variety common in the Alps or purple variety seen in the UK.

Our final days were spent in the habitat of true alpine plants, having diverted higher into the central massif due to a wrong booking at Terenosa Refuge. The error turned out to be a blessing, giving us a couple of days of 'stratospheric walking' above a layer of clouds, for which the Picos is renowned. We stayed at the splendidly situated Refuges at Vega de Uriello (1953m) and Jou de Cabrones (2040m).



Bee Orchid (Ophrys apifera) ; Photo Ian Taylor



Lizard Orchid (Himantoglossum hircinum) - Ian Taylor

The tiny crew of staff at Jou de Cabrones, our last refuge, provided a send-off from the Picos. They coped with an overflow that required them to empty everyone outdoors from the refuge's one-and-only non-dormitory room to run a second sitting of dinner, and then cleared out that same room and laid down mattresses to accommodate us four unexpected arrivals in surprising comfort. Starting very early the next morning for the long walk down to our bus, via the gorge below Bulnes, we were treated to a sunrise over the cloud layer below our packed breakfast spot, with chamois silhouetted on the skyline.



Dusky Foxglove (Digitalis obscura) (possibly a local subspecies)