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Ophrys lacaitae Lojac., a new record for the Maltese islands

Abstract

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Ophrys lacaitae, long believed to be endemic to Sicily but recently found elsewhere in southern Italy, was discovered in a locality in SW Malta, where a single plant has been seen. Some earlier Maltese records of *O. oxyrrhinchos* (formerly present on Malta but now apparently extinct) and *O. holoserica* (doubtfully) might perhaps refer to *O. lacaitae* instead.

Ophrys lacaitae Lojacono was first described from Sicily (Lojacono Pojero 1909) where it is fairly widespread. Until recently this species was believed to be endemic to Sicily but in the last two decades it has turned up in other areas as well, mainly in southern Italy (O. Danesch & E. Danesch 1972, Rossi & Minutillo 1981, Büel 1982, Gözl & Reinhard 1982, Lorenz & Gemhardt 1987). In 1989, a single specimen was found in a locality in SW Malta further extending its range. The area in question is an Upper coralline limestone (late Miocene) plateau at an altitude of about 250 m. The karstic landscape is dominated by a low garigue vegetation where individual shrubs are no higher than 20 cm. The dominant species are *Thymus capitatus*, *Brachypodium retusum*, *Urginea pancration* and the lichen *Cladonia convoluta*. Other species with a significant presence are *Teucrium flavum*, *Carlina involucrata*, *Reichardia picroides*, *Asperula aristata* subsp. *scabra*, *Leontodon tuberosus*, *Chiliadenus bocconei*, *Plantago serraria*, *Daucus carota*, *Lotus ornithopodioides*, *Asphodelus aestivus*, *Narcissus serotinus*, *Scilla autumnalis*, the lichens *Psora decipiens* and *Squamarina crassa*, and a moss (*Barbula* sp.).

Orchidaceae occurring in close proximity include *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, *Ophrys lutea*, *Ophrys fusca*, *Ophrys* cf. *spegodes*, *Orchis coriophora* subsp. *fragrans*, *Serapias parviflora* and *Spiranthes spiralis*.

Literature records point to the existence in Malta of the closely related *Ophrys holoserica* and *Ophrys oxyrrhinchos*. The last authenticated specimen of *O. oxyrrhinchos* was seen at Wied Filep in Central Malta in 1966 (G. Lanfranco 1967), a site since destroyed by quarrying (E. Lanfranco 1989). Earlier records for these two taxa refer to the localities of Buskett, Faqqanija and Ghar il-Kbir (Sommer & Caruana Gatto 1915, Borg 1927, Haslam & al. 1979), all in SW Malta, but the exact identity of the plants recorded cannot be verified due to the absence of well-preserved herbarium material. It cannot therefore be excluded that the corresponding plants were in fact *O. lacaitae*.

(The exact locality is being withheld in order to safeguard the species).

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