

Sussex: Early Spider Orchids (Day Trip)

Naturetrek Tour Report

29th April 2026



Emperor Moth



Dingy Skipper



Early Purple Orchid



Early Spider Orchid

Tour report by Bob Eade



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Tour participants: Bob Eade (leader) with four Naturetrek clients

Our group met at Castle Hill NNR on a sunny, but extremely windy morning. On leaving the car park, it was so windy that we couldn't hear each other speak! Despite this, we saw our first butterfly of the trip, a male Wall Brown trying to shelter on the edge of a chalky path. Thankfully, we soon dropped down into a valley sheltered from the worst of the wind, and we could start communicating.

We were soon treated to several sightings of Small Coppers and Stonechats. The further down the valley we went, the warmer it became, and more Small Coppers were seen. Just before going through a gate near the bottom, we decided to check the slope up the bank, as it was even more sheltered, with Hawthorn bushes. We were delighted to see four Green Hairstreaks battling with each other for the best territory. Each time one settled, we were allowed a very close approach.

A little further on, we skirted round a meadow to find some Early Purple Orchids. We also found the first of many Dingy Skippers, and yet more Small Coppers.

As we were now entering the area where the Wart-biter Bush-cricket might be found, we paused for a short while to search. Amazingly, after less than a minute, a Wart-biter nymph was found! With only six sites in the UK (this is the most important), it was unsurprisingly a UK tick for the whole group.

This rarity was quickly followed by another rare sight: an aberrant Grizzled Skipper. This was the *ab. intermedia*, which shows larger white markings than usual for the species. It is sort of halfway between 'normal' and the *ab. taras*. More Wall Browns were also seen here, while overhead Swallows and a couple of early Swifts were seen.

After a picnic lunch, during which we were able to watch Dingy Skippers and a Green Carpet moth, we approached the hillside where the Early Spider Orchids grow. On arrival, we were serenaded by a Corn Bunting high in a Hawthorn bush, affording us some great views.

We now had plenty of time to enjoy the orchids, with many spikes to see and photograph. After a long dry spell, several of them were a little past their best, but there were still many very fresh individuals, some with several flowers on the spikes. We also saw a small number of the small dark mining bee that helps to pollinate the plant: *Andrena nigroaena* is attracted to the fake pheromone the plant gives out, which encourages the bee to try to 'mate' with the flower. This results in the pollen sac being attached to the bee, to be passed on to another flower. Unfortunately, we didn't actually see this (rarely-witnessed) event; however, we did see a further three Wart-biter nymphs, one of which even posed for some photographs. As we left the orchid site we saw another Grizzled Skipper, this time a regular one, as well as an Emperor Moth.

After seeing more of the Early Spider Orchids on another part of the downland, we slowly returned to the car park. As we hit the top of the hillside, we again realised how windy the day really was. However, where we had been, in the sheltered valley, we had seen so many great things that we had not even thought about the wind for a few hours.

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