

MOUNTAIN FLOWERS IN THE CAIRNGORMS – SOME ADDITIONS

ERIC JENSEN

In 1956 an article by J. Grant Roger entitled 'Flowering Plants of the Cairngorms' appeared in this *Journal*. Roger grouped the plants according to their geographical relationships and gave short notes on habitat and frequency of occurrence. Since then several mountain flowers not listed by Roger have either been discovered or re-found in the area and it seems appropriate to publish them here.

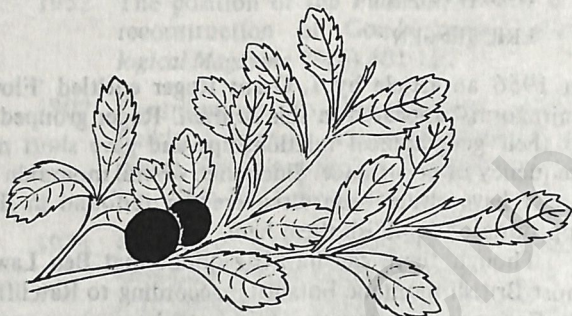
Though there can be little doubt that Ben Lawers is the Mecca of most British montane botanists, according to Ratcliffe (1974) there are in the Cairngorms "treasures which botanists make a special pilgrimage . . . to see". It took me eight long visits to a particular remote locality before I found the tufted saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*) said by Ratcliffe to be "one of the very rarest British montane plants". On the penultimate visit which involved more than twelve hours of intensive searching on steep rocks I found a rush not previously recorded from the area.

Most of the Cairngorms consist of granite and give rise to poor acid soil. The floristically rich localities are mainly associated with strongly calcareous schistose rocks at Glen Feshie and Creag an Dail Bheag. In writing about the Cairngorms, Walters (Raven and Walters, 1956) said that "scenically and floristically this great mountain mass is apt to be somewhat disappointing, at least on a first unguided visit". However, within the main Cairngorms mass there occur in some corries floristically rich sites associated with local faulting and crushing of the granite. (Ferreira, 1958). Minerals such as calcite and epidote weathering at such sites provide rich pockets for calcicolous plants. At one such spot in 1982 I found two-flowered rush (*Juncus biglumis*). This 'arctic' species is an "exacting calcicole". For the soil preferences of our Scottish mountain flora, readers should consult McVean and Ratcliffe, 1962. Mountain flowers with similar soil requirements are black sedge (*Carex atrata*) and mountain avens (*Dryas octopetala*) both of which are very local 'arctic-alpines' in the Cairngorms.

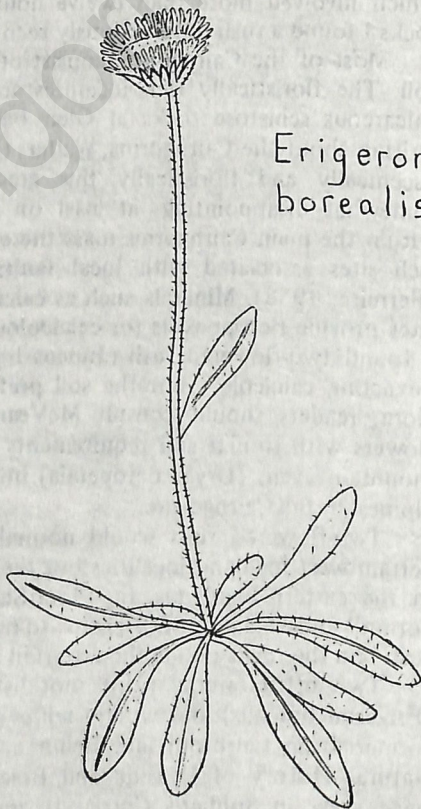
Two-flowered rush would normally be sought in Breadalbane and certain west highland localities but there are very old records of the plant in the eastern highlands. In 'Flora Scotica' Hooker (1821) lists "Cairngorum" and Dickie (1860) claims to have gathered a few specimens of the rush "on the rocks beside the waterfall at the head of Glen Callater".

Two other 'arctic' plants not listed by Roger are boreal fleabane (*Erigeron borealis*) and woolly willow (*Salix lanata*). Dickie records the former from Cairntoul and Beinn a 'Bhuird and we know from 'The Natural History of Deeside and Braemar' (MacGillivray, 1955) that it once grew in Soldier's Corrie. It appears that the fleabane was again located on Cairntoul in 1965 but details of the find are scant. Firm records

Arctous
alpinus



Juncus
biglumis



Erigeron
borealis

of this elusive plant in the Cairngorms would be welcomed by the Nature Conservancy Council (N.C.C.). Webster (1978) records that the woolly willow was found in 1967 in the hanging gardens of Coire Garbhlach in Glen Feshie by Grant Roger and others.

Additional 'arctic-alpines' in the Cairngorms are alpine bearberry (*Arctous alpinus*), reticulate willow (*Salix reticulata*), plum-leaved willow (*Salix arbuscula*), highland cudweed (*Gnaphalium norvegicum*) and hoary whitflow grass (*Draba incana*).

Webster records that the bearberry was found on the "lower slopes of Braeriach" in 1966. Ratcliffe provides a further clue to the locality – "the western slopes"! The plant is also believed to grow somewhere on Beinn Bhrotain. In writing about this plant in its north-west highlands setting, Holden (1952) charmingly said, "If the time be autumn when the first powdery snows have fallen and whitened the summits, we shall find large areas of the mountain sides a blaze of red. These bright flaming patches are formed by the dying leaves of the alpine bearberry which are shed each year and beautify the mountain sides for a brief spell before their final extinction".

According to Webster the reticulate willow was found in Coire Garbhlach by R. McBeath in 1972 and this is believed to be its only Cairngorms station. Ratcliffe stated that there was an unconfirmed record of plum-leaved willow from Glen Feshie. However, this willow was found in 1979 on Cairntoul by Dave and Pat Batty. Dave who was formerly National Trust for Scotland ranger at Ben Lawers is meantime N.C.C. warden on the Dee side of the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve (N.N.R.). He would have seen much more plum-leaved willow in Breadalbane.

In his concluding remarks Ratcliffe said, "It is strange that no one has ever found the blue sow thistle (*Cicerbita alpina*) and Norwegian (= highland) cudweed in the Cairngorms. Even now may they be tucked away in some high ledges or face of the fierce cliffs above Loch Avon? Possibly not, but the thought is enough to inspire a search of these and other likely spots". Sandy Payne having seen the cudweed on Lochnagar was inspired and in 1979 he found it in the central Cairngorms massif. It is interesting that Perring and Walters (1976) show pre-1930 records for highland cudweed at three different localities in the Cairngorms. In the Herbarium of Aberdeen University there are some splendid specimens of highland cudweed gathered on Lochnagar many years ago. Sandy tells me that the ones remaining on our beloved Lochnagar are not nearly so lush and grand as the ones that were picked and mounted on cardboard!

In writing about the flora of the Cairngorms, Ratcliffe included hoary whitflow grass as one of the "rare alpine herbs of these high basic crags", though it is not clear whether he was referring to Glen Feshie or Creag an Dail Bheag. However, Perring and Walters record this crucifer from the ten

kilometre squares covering Glen Feshie and Ben Avon, the latter excluding Creag an Dail Bheag.

Two mountain grasses must be added to Roger's list. In 1974 Don's twitch grass (*Agropyron donianum*) was found on calcareous rock south-east of Ben Avon and also in Glen Builg. Webster records the glaucous meadow-grass (*Poa glauca*) from Coire Garbhach, Coire an t-Sneachda of Cairngorm and the cliffs of Glen Einich.

There remains a small group of plants all placed by Raven and Walters in the category 'mountain flowers'. (their Appendix 1). One of these – thrift (*Armeria maritima*) – is obviously an inadvertent omission from the 1956 list. It is found sparingly throughout the Cairngorms in corries and on the high plateau in gravel or along with three-leaved rush (*Juncus trifidus*). Another, the mountain pansy (*Viola lutea*) – one of the few British 'alpines', like mossy cyphel (*Cherleria sedoides*) – may have been omitted intentionally depending upon Roger's delineation of the area. The pansy is fairly plentiful on better soils in localities adjoining the main Cairngorms massif such as Glen Feshie (Webster) and Glen Builg. Lastly, the hairy stonecrop (*Sedum villosum*) has been found recently by Sandy Payne just to the north of Ben Avon.

In addition to the mountain flowers I have mentioned, numerous other flowers occurring at lower levels in the Cairngorms could be added to the 1956 list. A good number of these have been detailed by Ratcliffe in his excellent chapter on vegetation. Dave Batty is compiling a new list of plants growing within the Cairngorms N.N.R. and would welcome any records from Club members or anyone else interested in helping. His address is 'Lilybank', Braemar.

In my experience there is something intensely satisfying about the study of the Scottish mountain flora and fauna. Besides the obvious attraction of wandering in magnificent surroundings (and, of course, one can still botanise when visibility is a mere ten feet!) there is considerable benefit and enjoyment to be gained by a careful search of the old literature, a task that can be accomplished on those grey, snell days of winter. There develops a sense of doing real detective work – one little snippet of information sheds light on another. The pen scribbles more quickly and the heart beats somewhat faster. Soon the day comes when the results of the library search can be put to the test in the field. And, of course, when the ultimate goal has been achieved – and the rare plant has been found or nest located – there is the inevitable talking in whispers!

APPENDIX

Mountain flowers referred to in the text are listed here alphabetically for convenience.

(1) Additions to Roger's 1956 list —

Agropyron donianum	Don's twitch grass
Arctous alpinus	Alpine or black bearberry
Armeria maritima	Thrift or sea pink
Draba incana	Hoary whitlow grass
Erigeron borealis	Boreal fleabane
Gnaphalium norvegicum	Highland or Norwegian cudweed
Juncus biglumis	Two-flowered rush
Poa glauca	Glaucous meadow-grass
Salix arbuscula	Plum-leaved willow
Salix lanata	Woolly willow
Salix reticulata	Reticulate willow
Sedum villosum	Hairy stonecrop
Viola lutea	Mountain pansy

(2) Included in the 1956 list —

Carex atrata	Black sedge
Cherleria sedoides	Mossy cyphel
Dryas octopetala	Mountain avens
Juncus trifidus	Three-leaved rush
Saxifraga cespitosa	Tufted saxifrage

(3) Others

Cicerbita alpina	Blue sow-thistle (very rare; found on Lochnagar, and in the glens of Caenlochan, Callater and Clova)
------------------	---



REFERENCES

- Dickie, G. (1860). *The Botanist's Guide to the Counties of Aberdeen, Banff and Kincardine.*
- Ferreira, R.E.C. (1958). *A comparative ecological and floristic study of the vegetation of Ben Hope, Ben Loyal, Ben Lui and Glas Maol in relation to the geology.* Unpublished thesis, Aberdeen University.
- Holden, A.E. (1952). *Plant Life in the Scottish Highlands.*
- Hooker, W.J. (1821). *Flora Scotica.*
- MacGillivray, W. (1855). *The Natural History of Deeside and Braemar.*
- McVean, D.N. and Ratcliffe, D.A. (1962). *Plant Communities of the Scottish Highlands.*
- Perring, F.H. and Walters, S.M. (1976). Editors of the *Atlas of the British Flora* – 2nd edition.
- Ratcliffe, D.A. (1974). Chapter on vegetation in *The Cairngorms, Their Natural History and Scenery*, by Desmond Nethersole-Thomson and Adam Watson.
- Raven, J. and Walters, M. (1956). *Mountain Flowers.*
- Roger, J.G. (1956). Flowering Plants of the Cairngorms. *Cairngorm Club Journal*, Vol. 17, 57-72.
- Webster, M. McC. (1978). *Flora of Moray, Nairn and East Inverness.*

