

PLANT OBSERVATIONS FROM MULTI-DAY CAMPING TRIPS

DEBBIE FIELDING

The multi-day trips described in Guy Bromby's article on Multi-Day Trips in this issue provided an ideal opportunity to witness the vast array of plants found in the Scottish uplands. The routes took us from the lower ground, in woodlands and alongside rivers, up beside burns on to the open plateau. This provided opportunities to experience a range of habitats on our journeys. Partaking in trips both within the Cairngorms and the Northwest Highlands highlighted the influence of geology and climate on the landscape and the resident plant life we encountered.

Trees and scrub

The Scottish uplands are often considered an impoverished environment due to over grazing by deer and domestic stock and intense management for red grouse shooting. However, we came across some nice finds on our trips. The efforts from the Mar lodge estate to reduce deer numbers and thus lower grazing pressure appear to be paying off with patches of dwarf birch *Betula nana* present on the slopes of Sgor Mor and Creagan nan Gabhar (see below). This species forms a component of our montane scrub.

We were further rewarded with the sight of regenerating pine trees in Glen Luibeg as we descended from Carn a' Mhaim to avoid the worst of the weather. On another leg of our journey, we encountered 'blue tipped' pines in Glen Quoich (see following page). Blue plastic bud caps had been placed on young trees to discourage browsing by deer. Apparently, this has led to a 50 % reduction in browsing of young trees and helps in more remote areas where it is difficult to control deer numbers.



Dwarf Birch Photo credit Debbie Fielding



Pines with bud caps in Glen Quoich

Photo credit Debbie Fielding

In the Northwest Highlands the trees were not faring as well, although we found a heavily browsed Rowan *sorbus acuparia* clinging on to the Arkle ridge. Lack of soil may have also been an issue here in this rocky environment as well as hungry animals. Prostrate growth forms of juniper were occasionally found on exposed ground and dwarf willow *salix herbacea* was seen growing on the slopes of Cranstackie. (See below)



Dwarf Willow on Cranstackie

Photo credit Debbie Fielding

Not much time was spent observing this as we could hear rumbles of thunder in the distance and wanted to bag Beinn Spionnaidh before heading home.

Dry heath, grassy slopes and exposed summits

We travelled across vast areas of exposed mountain plateau where the vegetation remains short due to the harsh weather conditions. Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, just a few centimetres tall, interspersed with patches of lichen and tussocks of deer grass *Tricophorum germanicum* were seen on Sgòr Dubh in the Cairngorms as well as in many other areas. In the Northwest Highlands, Thrift *Armeria maritima* filled the gaps between rocks on Sàbhal Beag and was displaying its pale pink flowers when we passed by in June (see below) On closer inspection we also found moss campion *Silene acaulis*, another cushion forming plant with pink flowers also sharing the rocky summits. Mountain everlasting with its hairy leaves and tightly clustered flowers was present on the Southwest ridge of Sàbhal Beag . While Woolly fringe-moss *Racomitrium lanuginosum* also adorned the high mountain tops. Dwarf cornel *Cornus suecica* with its delicate white flowers was found growing through the *Racomitrium* on the ridge descending from Ben Hee. While a pair of Heath spotted orchids *Dactylorhiza maculate* emerged through the moss on Arkle (see next page). The lower, more grassy slopes displayed the yellow flowers of



Thrift on the L and Moss Campion on the R Photo credit Debbie Fielding

Tormentil *potentilla erecta* and milkwort *Polygala serpyllifolia* with its small blue flowers wound between the grasses. Taller heather was common on the lower slopes in the Cairngorms mixed with Blaeberry.



Heath spotted orchids Photo credit Debbie Fielding

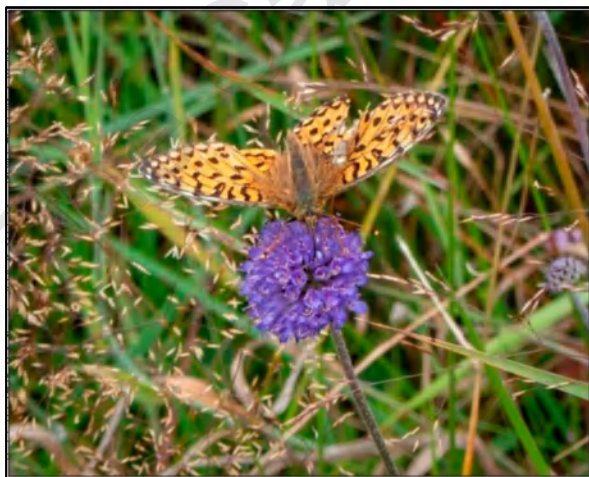
Wet ground, springs and flushes

Our trips also took us across large expanses of wet ground where we saw swathes of yellow Bog asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum* brightening up the ground (see next page).



Bog Asphodel

Photo credit Mike Duguid



Devil's bit scabious

Photo credit Mike Duguid

The purple pom pom flowers of Devil's bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* were seen in the wet grassland beside the Lui water providing an important nectar source for the Fritillary butterflies (see left). While higher up the hill the springs and wet flushes on Ben Avon gave rise to bright green patches, surrounded by darker red

and black hummocks, comprising a range of mosses and liverworts (see below). Carnivorous plants such as Common Butterwort *Pinguicula vulgaris* and Sundews *Drosera spp.* (see following page) frequented the wet patches. Although attractive, crossing these areas without getting wet feet was a challenge!

Our trip to the Northwest Highlands was super-hot and even the wet ground was dry. The sphagnum moss was crisp and pale, and we happily pitched our tents amongst the Cotton grass *Eriophorum vaginatum* without any encroaching dampness. However, the north facing slopes on approach to Cranstackie were still moist and Opposite-leaved Golden saxifrage and Starry saxifrage were found near wet flushes on our ascent (see following page).



Bryophyte rich spring/wet flush

Photo credit Debbie Fielding



Sundew

Photo credit Mike Duguid



Opposite-leaved Golden saxifrage; R: Starry saxifrage

Photo credit Debbie Fielding

Foraging

Some members of the party did a bit of foraging to supplement meals. Blaeberrries *Vaccinium myrtillus* were abundant, and a localised supply of wild strawberries were found surrounding an old ruin in Gleann an Slugain. Leaves of Cloudberrries *Rubus chamaemorus* were common, but fruit was only found in abundance on Carn na Criche where we stopped for a feast. Crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* and Cowberry *Vaccinium vitis-idea* were also found, but less desirable (see below).



a) Strawberry, b) Crowberry, c) Blaeberry, d) Cowberry, e) Cloudberry Photo credits Mike Duguid

On the whole, multiday trips provide an ideal opportunity to explore the mountains. Enabling coverage of wider areas than would be possible on single day trips, and greater time flexibility allows for unplanned stops to look at whatever takes you interest. I would highly recommend taking a few days to get deep into the mountains and see what lies under our feet.