

Field Botany in Renfrewshire

Newsletter - Spring 2022

Breaking News!

Such has been the level of recording activity in our Renfrewshire Botany network in its first year, that we submitted the third-highest number of plant records in Scotland in 2021! (over 15,000 records in total).

This is a brilliant achievement, especially since Renfrewshire is a relatively small vice-county.

Well done to everyone who has taken part in this effort and CONGRATULATIONS!



The 2022 season will shortly begin in earnest and it will be great to get together in fieldwork in lots of interesting places in the coming months. We can promise all sorts of terrain, including fairly remote and challenging hill country and parts of the Clyde estuary shoreline.



The Clyde estuary at Parklea, near Port Glasgow

This year will be a final opportunity to gather data for the Botanical Society of Scotland's 'Urban Flora Project', so our programme includes a variety of urban areas. Following urban recording last year in Greenock, Paisley, Renfrew and Neilston we will be adding a day in Gourrock and Wednesday evening visits to Erskine, Johnstone, Linwood and Glenburn.

Finally, as we emerge from the shadow of COVID-19, the BSBI is resuming its normal programme of Field Meetings and Workshops. So do check our programme for details of these and consider booking yourself onto something - whether a specialist Workshop on Grasses, or Sedges, or Yellow Composites or one of the Field Meetings - to deepen your knowledge of plant identification.

We'll also be hosting a brand new "Introduction to Bramble Identification" workshop in Renfrewshire!

Saxifraga tridactylites

Malcolm Macneill has made a personal study of this species in greater Glasgow over recent years.

It is uncommon elsewhere in Scotland, and confined mainly to coasts, but it has been found to be locally profuse on waste ground sites and places such as the mossy corners of carparks and industrial estates.

The advent of our network, and that in neighbouring Dunbartonshire, has prompted Malcolm to extend his search area westwards to see if the plant is present.

As a result, he has now recorded it in Darnley, Hillington, Paisley, Johnstone and Greenock (and in various locations on the north side of the Clyde from Drumchapel to Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven).

Saxifraga tridactylites starts out as a tiny rosette and soon develops its distinctive three-pronged leaves. Later in the year there will be a flowering stem a few inches high with small white flowers. The whole plant is often reddish. In urban places it can form huge colonies of hundreds of plants. This is quite different from its typical behaviour on the coast, where it is much more scattered.

So do look out for it, and report any finds!



Saxifraga tridactylites (Rue-leaved Saxifrage)

If you'd like to get to know the plant at first hand, Malcolm has provided these locations:

NS4906 6585 - 130+ plants, over 26 yards, brick wall base/pavement, Sandyford Road, Paisley.

NS4837 6544 - 280+ plants, moss on waste tarmac, near car park of Motel Air, off Inchinnan Road.

NS4248 6292 - 16+ plants, on gravels, waste ground, off Floors Street, Johnstone.

NS4830 6477 - 1100+ plants, moss on gravels and tarmac, derelict parking area beside Scotia Airport Hotel, New Sneddon Street.

Nasties

Nature can be a danger to us, and we can be a danger to nature. Here's some important advice:

Ticks

In our area, ticks may be encountered. They are small, spider-like creatures that sometimes get brushed onto clothing as we walk through long grass or overhanging branches. They rapidly seek an area of skin to burrow into and feed on our blood. They can carry Lyme Disease.

Here are some counter-measures you can take:

- wear light-coloured clothing and brush ticks off when seen
- tuck socks over trousers
- cover all skin with 'Smidge' (or similar) before getting dressed
- use a deterrent chemical as a 'wash-in' or spray for outdoor clothing
- inspect yourself thoroughly when you get home
- remove ticks with tweezers or a tick removal tool
- https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/85189/PHE_Tick_Leaflet.pdf

Boot hygiene

Pathogens can be collected on our boots, or on plant material we gather, and carried unknowingly to the next location we visit.

Thus plant diseases present in soil, mud or water can reach new areas and have devastating effects.

Please be aware of this, and **clean your boots** thoroughly after every walk!

Botany by Bike

A bicycle is a great piece of equipment for botany in more remote areas.

Liza Downie is a devotee, so we asked her about it:

Q. Are botany and cycling compatible activities? (or does one spoil the other?)

A. Botany and cycling are complementary activities. Botany and cycling come in two flavours, firstly 'bicycling with botany'. This is a very much slower version of 'botany at 30 mph'. When cycling along quiet roads it is interesting to peruse the hedgerows and ditches. Secondly there is 'bicycling for botany', when we use our bikes to access some of the more remote areas, avoiding a long trudge on foot. Of course, one form often morphs into the other.

Our bicycling for botany trips are quite short cycle rides – just a few miles usually. Anyone could do it - it's nothing technical or heroic.

Q. Has a cycling trip ever been hijacked by the need to stop for a plant?

A. Yes, often and very enjoyably so. For example, seeing lots of Spignel growing along the A74 cycle path in Lanarkshire, or clumps of parsley fern intertwined with oak fern in the Mennock Pass. Perhaps also the sheer delight of the acres of Lemon-scented Fern in the ditches of the road to Otter Ferry as I struggled uphill at almost falling off speed.

Q. Why do you enjoy 'botany by bike'?

A. Well you suddenly discover that you have a whole new set of cycling chums, you get to places that might otherwise be hard to access and you see plants you might not see elsewhere, so what's not to like?

Q. What are the advantages of using a bike to do botany?

A. The bicycle can go where cars aren't allowed or can't reach. For example, along gated forest roads (so long as you can lift the bike over the gate of course). It allows you do more and go further than on foot. You can also sometimes outrun the midgies!

Q. Is it something you do very often?

A. Well it would be great to do more, certainly, though we have managed at least one bicycling for botany excursion each year for the last few years. Bicycling with botany is of course something that can be done anywhere at any time.

Q. Where have you done 'botany by bike'?

A. In Argyll, Lanarkshire, Dunbartonshire and Dumfries & Galloway.

We've had some wonderful experiences over the years – stumbling across a carpet of cranberries at Auchrobert in Lanarkshire, finding bladderworts in flower next to a wind turbine in Argyll, standing on a beach full of Eelgrass on the Dumbarton shore. We also spent a day up at the Whitelee windfarm looking for a tiny area of heathland to complete a square for Atlas 2020!

Cyclists who botanise?
... or botanists who cycle?



Liza Downie (in the pink cap) with Peter Wiggins and Dorothy Moodie all set for a bicycle botany day at Glen Douglas.

Two of the finds mentioned by Liza in the foregoing article:



Gymnocarpium dryopteris (Oak Fern)
with
Cryptogramma crista (Parsley Fern)



Urticularia (Bladderwort)

QUIZ! (just for fun - please don't send your answers in!)

Here are some examples of the TLA* relevant to our botanical activities. It is unlikely that anyone will be able to translate them all (even using Google), but you may pick up clues from each other.

NVC	SWT	AEM	RPR	RLS	VCR	UFP
WOB	SVG	GPS	PSW	WSG	BSS	BFT
LNR	SBC	NBN	SNH	BRC	DDb	NTS

Hint: some of these are official, but some are unique to our networks. Listen out on our outings . . . Be patient! The answers will be revealed in the Summer edition of the Newsletter.

* TLA is itself a TLA: a Three-Letter Acronym

Winter Study Groups (Peter Wiggins)

As the end of the botany season approaches, I always have a list of things I want to learn, which usually remains untouched over the winter. So, this winter I wondered if others fancied keeping the botanical brain ticking over. We are all (too) familiar with Zoom which makes 'meeting' much easier, and so after a few conversations with Michael and others, I sent out an email asking if anyone was interested. I was delighted to have a dozen or so replies, enough for a couple of groups.

Everyone was asked for topics and, combined with my own list, we had ample ideas. We agree the topics for the meeting, and everyone prepares one or two species. We then all meet on Zoom and everyone talks about their species in turn. We have had some amazing presentations and everyone contributes and learns. We are now building up a resource of stuff we have discussed online to look back on in the coming season when I think we'll be a little bit more informed.



We shared this great photo of Peter hosting one of the Study Groups in the Autumn Newsletter

Here are some comments from those who have taken part:

“The study group has been helpful and enjoyable. It’s a great way to keep the botanical brain from going into total hibernation over the winter months.” (Dorothy)

“Part-refresher and part some new learning for me. Easy for anyone to attend regardless of where they are geographically.” (Janey)

“The best thing is that it keeps me thinking about IDs over the winter, so with a bit of luck I won't have to start all over again in the summer. Also, it makes me sit down and really study the plant (i.e. look at books and stuff): makes a change from just dumping my notebook until next time!” (Grace)

“I wanted to get involved in the study group to improve my identification skills. It can be daunting on your own and there's a lot to learn. I had only met one person in the group before, so it was lovely to meet other people with the same interest and the group has been very supportive and friendly. What is really good about the group is hearing other people's experiences of particular plants in the field: the ID books list lots of features that point to an identification, but the group helps you pick out the character that is actually going to help. I can't wait to try out what I've learned in the growing season.” (Lisa)

“The group has looked at subjects such as Bedstraws, Speedwells, Ferns and some Grasses with each person given a set couple of plants to research well before the meeting in order to make a short contribution. This structure has worked well for all the levels of knowledge in the group and each contribution is valued and expanded upon with discussion.” (Pauline)

“Apart from doing a beginner's course and 1 field meeting in 2018 I had only been looking at plants on my own until joining the VC76 network in 2021 and knew I had a lot to learn. I had not met 3 of the people in my group before. I have really enjoyed the sessions and they have challenged me to take notice of plants that I would have considered too difficult to identify before and would have just walked past.” (Alison)

“The groups have been challenging and the format of giving 'homework' is excellent as we get a lot more out of the meetings by having to present to the other participants. Great having active ecologists on the meets which gives a deeper insight into plant communities. The small size of the group allows good participation: it feels a very safe environment so no worries about making a fool of oneself!” (Jan)

“I decided to take part to boost my limited botany knowledge, and to stay in touch with the nice people I had met at the outings. Some of the species studied were challenging, but I am very proud of coming out of my comfort zone and diving straight into the challenge. It has been a fabulous way of learning! One of the most valuable lessons I have learnt is that even very experienced botanists still struggle with some species ID, and that helped me realise that no-one is born knowing, and that botany is a continuous (and very enjoyable) mix of studying, asking questions, despairing, making friends, learning, going out, getting stuck, and many other things that I still have to discover!” (Paola)

Information

Please join in our activities whenever you can. Some people may fear that recording plants will require expertise they don't possess: however the very opposite is true! It's fine just to tag along and be a 'silent' member of the party. You can watch, listen and ask lots of questions - how do you think everyone else acquired whatever knowledge they have?

Peter is the person to send plant lists to. These are welcome from anyone, anytime. Do get out and record plants on your own - if you'd like some guidance on the best way to do recording, please get in touch. Records can be in the form of scanned lists or Recording Cards, spreadsheets or Word documents - or even paper lists by post or photos of the scribbles in your notebook!

Photographs, especially views of the Renfrewshire landscape or stunning pictures of plants, are always welcome. Any (but not all!) photos you submit may appear in Newsletters, the webpage or other literature.

You are welcome to email Keith, Peter or Michael at any time. They are also willing to have a go at identifying plants from photographs if you get stuck!

And please visit the Renfrewshire page on the BSBI website: <https://bsbi.org/renfrewshire>

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Photo credits:

Clyde Estuary	Kirsty Menzies, Parklea, near Port Glasgow, 31st July 2021
<i>Saxifraga tridactylites</i>	Fiona Merrilees, Dumbarton, 27th January 2022
Bicycle botanists	Pam Murdoch, Glen Douglas, 28th July 2021
<i>Gymnocarpium dryopteris</i> and <i>Cryptogramma crispera</i>	Liza Downie, Mennock Pass, May 2018
<i>Urticularia</i>	Peter Wiggins, above Inveraray, 11th June 2018
Study Group	Laura Wiggins, at home, 22nd November 2021

* Remember you're always welcome to send in photos, either for potential inclusion in the Newsletter or the webpage, or to request help in identifying a plant.