

Ayrshire BSBI trip to Ailsa Craig on 14 July 2018

Eleven botanists travelled to Ailsa Craig on Saturday 14 July. They were mostly from Ayrshire led by VC recorders Gill, Dave and Carol, plus Angus Hannah (VC recorder Clyde Islands), Michael Philip (VC recorder Lanarkshire) and members of his 'Team 77'. Michael also brought their photographer Suzie Miller.



Before leaving Girvan harbour – photo Suzie Miller Nearing Ailsa Craig: bracken, grass, heath, scree – photo Carol

During the 1.5 hour crossing from Girvan we considered how to tackle the island. Ailsa Craig has four monads/tetrads, within two hectads, and the division between NX and NS runs across the island. We decided to have three groups: one recording the smaller north NS squares; one on the low ground of the south NX squares; and the third going to high ground in the NX squares.

The north group: Gill, Carol, and Deidre (McKinnon) group walked about 200m from the jetty to reach their square, across chunky granite 'beach' to a good path through bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*. Here they found some woodland species such as common's dog violet *Viola riviniana*, red campion *Silene dioica* and bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, the last burnt dry. Much of the 'grassland' lower down was sunburnt. The yellow flowers in the bracken, so obvious as the boat neared, were ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* and we saw it being stripped by cinnabar moth caterpillars. Common coastal species included sea campion *Silene uniflora*, thrift *Armeria maritima*, English stonecrop *Sedum anglicum*, scurvy grass *Cochlearia officinalis* and the shore curled dock *Rumex crispus* ssp *littoreus*. There was some heath above the bracken with bell heather *Erica cinerea* and ling *Calluna vulgaris*.



The north group in bracken with heath above (left) and first damp ground (right). Photos Suzie Miller

The path became concrete with bridges crossing gullies. Below the first bridge we found damper ground with creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens*, short-fruited willowherb *Epilobium obscurum*, wild angelica *Angelica sylvestris* and the usual curled dock *R. crispus*. Ground higher up the gullies was relatively rich as were ledges on the cliff sides. We found common ferns and navelwort *Umbilicus rupestris* in the gullies and one of the nicest plants of the day, rock sea-spurrey *Spergularia rupicola*, on rock ledges. A yellow composite on ledges turned out to be common catsear *Hypochaeris radicata*. Some gullies had caves higher up, known as 'Swine Holes'. At only the second of these complexes the bridge was impassable. Getting down to the shore was tricky and the tide was coming in... Gill went on a bit further and added some other species notably sea spleenwort *Asplenium marinum*.



Spergularia rupicola (left) and a 'Swine Hole' cave with *Asplenium marinum* habitat (right) – photos Gill

On the way back we went higher up a gully and saw more species, e.g. sheep's bit *Jasione montana* with its beautiful blue flowers. The ground was riddled with rabbit holes making progress slow but Gill again went furthest and saw species such as greater woodrush *Luzula sylvatica* and more sea spleenwort. We recorded 50 species from the short stretch visited.

Back around the jetty we found the low south group, Angus, Michael, Alison Moss, Chris Calvey, and Fiona Macfarlane. Although they got to the southern end and had been round the buildings / gardens near the lighthouse, they did not have many more species. Angus attributed this more to the acid geology than sunburnt vegetation. They had similar habitats to us, but not the deeper gullies with *Angelica*, and had recorded a similar list including the rock spurrey and sea spleenwort. We gave them honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum* from the bracken crossed in their square on way back.

They were pleased to find common stork's-bill *Erodium cicutarium* and a patch of wild thyme *Thymus polytrichus*. They saw some elder *Sambucus nigra* and reformed tree mallow *Malva arborea* at the research cottage and near the foghorn at south end. Alison spotted two species which were new records for the island: lords-and-ladies *Arum maculatum* in the walled garden and musk mallow *Malva moschata* near the jetty. That group recorded 67 species in total.



Some of low south group (left) – photo Suzie Miller and *Malva arborea* at research cottage (right) – photo Carol

The high group was Dave, Hannah Williams and Mair Harvey. Dave writes: the hill was all heath on the steeper, early climb up towards the top – though dominated more by bell heather than *Calluna*. Once things levelled out towards the top of the rock it became grassier – with *Holcus* grasses being the most obviously dominant – but also with occasional patches of barely-vegetated broken rock and scree. Throughout all of this vegetation there was sea campion, wild sage *Teucrium scoridonia* and ragwort growing everywhere.

The diversity of species was generally fairly poor throughout. One of the few places that we managed to get our group's list up was around the ruined castle and its well. Here we found *Asplenium adiantum-nigrum* and other ferns on the walls, prickly sow-thistle *Sonchus asper* and a few common grassland species in the rabbit-clipped grassland round about it, and a starwort *Callitriche* sp. with bog stitchwort *Stellaria alsine* in the well.

Other than that our best hunting was in the very nearly dried out Garra Loch – where we found marsh pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris* and a few other common marsh species like marsh marigold *Caltha palustris*.

The most interesting thing we came across was probably a number of patches of navelwort – which I almost didn't recognise at first given that its flowers were passed and its leaves so scorched and shrivelled up.

The top was very windy, so we didn't stay for long before finding a sheltered spot lower down for lunch and then heading back to meet the others.

More diversity seems to have been found by other groups – particularly those botanising around the buildings lower down on the island. We did not manage to find the coastal rarities and unusual mallows that other groups found and recorded 50 species in total.

The total from the three cards was 95 species. Dave summarises: a relatively short list for an area of land that size, I think the two mallows were the finds of the day – tree mallow is very rare in Ayrshire generally, while musk mallow had never been recorded on Ailsa Craig before. But the rock sea-spurrey and sea spleenwort ran them close.



Cliffs and bird colonies at back of island (left), leaving island - castle midslope (right) – photos Carol

Back on the boat we were treated to circuit of the island, round to the cliffs and bird colonies: gannets, guillemots and a few puffins were among the birds spotted. Then back to Girvan and group photos.



L-R: Alison, Deidre, Fiona, Gill, Dave, Mair, Michael, Chris, Carol, Angus and Hannah.
Taken by Suzie with Gill's camera

Michael subsequently sent us comparative photos of near the lighthouse taken by Suzie on this visit and last July. He wondered how many more species we would find in a usual summer.



July 14 2018 – photo by Suzie Miller



2017 – photo by Suzie Miller

Carol Crawford 27 July 2018