



INTRODUCING MY VICE-COUNTY

Outer Hebrides (v.c. 110)

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Watery view of the south of North Uist. Photographs by the author.

The Outer Hebrides is the 15th largest vice-county by land area, but it represents some unique challenges. The islands are in three main inhabited groups (Lewis and Harris, which are a single land mass; the Uists; Barra and Vatersay), which therefore have transport links (ferries and planes) to the mainland. But there are so many outlying islands, island groups and fragments of the main islands that it has the most hectads of any vice-county: 89; and 20 of these are not accessible from the inhabited islands without a further boat trip. So spare a thought for the recorders trying to get some records from all the hectads during a 10-year date class – that’s not likely to be feasible.

However, it is undeniable that islands have a particular draw and that people want to remember and record their experiences when they do reach them. So there are many articles describing trips to such places and giving species lists (often very short for small islands well offshore, so that a day trip costs many £ per species!). Indeed St Kilda is so much an attraction that it must have more pages written

about it than any comparably-sized area of Britain and Ireland, but with a rather short species list (see Crawley, 2017). So the least well-known parts of v.c. 110 are in fact the parts of the main, inhabited islands which are a long walk from the nearest access – particularly the central Lewis peatlands which do not even have the attraction of a hill to walk up or a coastline to visit.

I got hooked by the Outer Hebrides (as other people have before me – there are lots of examples of repeat visitors) following a BSBI field meeting in 1994, and after several years of regular holiday visits generating records I was invited to become joint Vice-county Recorder with Richard Pankhurst, later becoming sole recorder when he passed away in 2013. So for many years I have made solo trips and family holidays. It’s a *long* way from Southampton – usually overnight with two drivers, though it takes two days to drive on your own. But I find the arrangement works well for me – I focus on recording full-time when I am there, and deal with specimens and records in my spare time when I’m

not. There is not the same pressure to go out each weekend, as it's not possible to visit for the weekend (even flying in and out, because the flights don't line up). It does make some things challenging – checking up on a strange record relies on being in the right island group at the right time of year, and it may take several years for that to be worked out. Not great for casual records! And I was horrified when the first target site in the Threatened Plants Project was Gaskeir, an uninhabited island 5 miles off the coast – though I did eventually get there. But I have been ably assisted by botanists who have joined house-parties to do recording, a network of helpful residents who will look at things, and many visitors who send me records. Please make sure you do too if you visit my vice-county!

The Outer Hebrides are very varied, but in specific ways – there is almost no semi-natural woodland (only fragments in places inaccessible to grazing animals); cultivation is largely restricted to the machair (sandy areas) and reducing even there. There are almost no real soils – everything is either sand or peat, or a mixture, which can be



Dactylorhiza incarnata subsp. *coccinea* (Early Marsh-orchid), Beirigh machair.



Floriferous machair, Eriskay.

very interesting. Here are some suggestions for what to see.

The habitat for which the Outer Hebrides are most known is *machair* – places near the sea where there is calcareous sand on the shore. The machair is regularly used for cultivation, traditionally after fertilising with seaweed, and on a rotation so that areas are fallow for two years between crops. This means that there are many interesting arable weeds in the fallow areas, and often also in the crops, since the land is marginal and not worth the use of chemicals. Most of the western coast of the Uists is machair, but Loch Hallan SSSI (NF 7321) is a good area, where you could expect to encounter *Glebionis segetum* (Corn Marigold), *Sherardia arvensis* (Field Madder), *Avena strigosa* (Bristle Oat), *Viola tricolor* subsp. *curtisii* (Wild Pansy) and other nice weeds in the cultivated areas, and *Ranunculus trichophyllus* (Thread-leaved Water-crowfoot), *Juncus balticus* (Baltic Rush), *Cerastium semidecandrum* (Little Mouse-ear) and a range of *Dactylorhiza* (Marsh-orchid) species in the uncultivated parts. Loch Hallan is the only extant site in the vice-county for *Cicuta virosa* (Cowbane). *Carex diandra* (Lesser Tussock-sedge) is also here in the marshy areas.

Baleshare, an island connected to North Uist by a causeway is another interesting, and extensive area of machair. There is a car park by the sea at NF 779613, and walking to the south will take you past some flowery machair. Some of the bare sandy areas towards the south have *Mibora minima* (Early Sand-grass), discovered in 2015. The damp machair at the south end of the island has *Equisetum variegatum* (Variegated Horsetail), but you have to bend down to see it – it is essentially invisible from a standing height!

The Outer Hebrides are also well known for their range and quantity of lochs. It often seems that half of the land surface is blue on maps (only a small exaggeration in the case of North Uist!), and there are places where it's necessary to wind a route between lochs to record a defined area. The hydrology is also very varied, with lochs situated on the machair or affected by blown sand having a high pH (sometimes only locally or varying within a loch). Many lochs are affected by salt spray too, and the Outer Hebrides is a hotspot for lagoon habitats with brackish waters affected by tidal inflows. This means that there are many interesting aquatics, including *Najas flexilis* (Slender Naiad) (particularly widespread at the south end of South Uist), and *Lamprothamnium papulosum* (Foxtail Stonewort) (can



Hierochloa odorata (Holy-grass), Loch Torcusay, Benbecula.

be seen at Aileodair [NF 8872] in North Uist) – both of these are protected species which should not be disturbed.

A suggestion for an interesting location is Loch Torcusay and Loch na Liana Moire, Benbecula (NF 7653). Early in the year *Hierochloa odorata* (Holy-grass) makes a good show, as there is an extensive population next to Loch Torcusay, extending to the road verge. But later in the year it is a challenging plant to pick out, with the persistent glumes the best giveaway. *Potamogeton* × *billupsii* is in Loch na Liana Moire, together with its parents *P. coloratus* (Fen Pondweed) (rare in v.c. 110) and *P. gramineus* (Various-leaved Pondweed), (widespread, but only where there is some base richness). This used to be the only extant British locality for this hybrid, but it has since been found in Anglesey (Bonner, 2009).

A lot of the Outer Hebrides is peaty moorland, and I have certainly done my fair share of botanising in this sort of habitat. Not many people relish a long, rough walk to bash a tetrad that may have fewer than 70 species in a whole day of recording (they're not all so species-poor though). I will certainly take this chance to express my gratitude to those hardy few who have regularly put in these efforts! From this type of terrain comes one of my catchphrases – when asked ‘What shall I wear on my feet today?’, my stock phrase is ‘The answer’s always wellies!’, and indeed I use them everywhere (and go through a pair every year or two). But especially for soggy moorland with a scattering of lochs to paddle in, wellies are invaluable.

It is harder to select a characteristic moorland site, and the more interesting species tend to be in flushed areas where there is some extra base movement. One nice and accessible area is the Lundale River next to the road to Great Bernera (c. NB 189307), which has a fairly reliable population of *Hammarbya paludosa* (Bog Orchid) and a good selection of *Carex* spp. including *Carex pauciflora* (Few-flowered Sedge).

Some areas of the Outer Hebrides are quite mountainous, particularly North Harris which contains all the highest peaks, though South Harris, west Lewis and South Uist all contain ground above 400m. An Cliseam (‘The Clisham’) is the highest,



Hammarbya paludosa (Bog Orchid), Kinsoval, Lewis.



An Cliseam from one of the setting off points.



Micranthes [Saxifraga] stellaris (Starry Saxifrage) on Tomnabhal summit.



Members of the British Pteridological Society at a site for *Cryptogramma crispa* (Parsley Fern) near the summit of An Cliseam; the mouth of Loch Seaforth is in the distance.

at 799 m, and although not the most botanically interesting, it is relatively accessible with a straight up and down walk from the main road (starting at 150 m altitude). Look out for *Micranthes [Saxifraga] stellaris* (Starry Saxifrage) and *Salix herbacea* (Dwarf Willow) at the summit and also *Dryopteris expansa* (Northern

Buckler-fern) and *Cryptogramma crispa* (Parsley Fern). Hardy folks may want to continue to the west of the summit and look for *Luzula spicata* (Spiked Wood-rush), but this makes for a longer walk. On a good day the view from the top is wonderful.

Currag is the Outer Hebrides Natural History Society (www.currag.org.uk). It has a nice regional journal, *Hebridean Naturalist*, which contains interesting articles about all aspects of the natural history of the islands. It is connected with the local volunteer-run records centre, Outer Hebrides Biological Recording (OHBR: www.ohbr.org.uk). You can look at either site for details of events you might join (they are most active in the Uists). Please pass on records of vascular plants to me and everything else (bryophytes, beasties, fungi, etc.) to OHBR.

My site suggestions have been well scattered over the islands, so one last suggestion for a place to go with a bit of everything, which is Uig and the Beirigh peninsula. There are large and rich machair areas around Uig Bay and Traigh na Beirigh. Some alpiners get down to sea level here – *Silene acaulis*

(Moss Champion) can be seen next to the footbridge in Uig bay (NB 049334), but also in many places round the coast. *Saxifraga oppositifolia* (Purple Saxifrage) is in the extreme SW corner of Traigh na Clibhe (NB 079364). Both of these flower early in the botanical year, in May. Loch Sgailler (NB 0835) is influenced by sand and has *Potamogeton gramineus* (and an old record for *Potamogeton crispus* [Curled Pondweed], though this has not been seen for many years). For the hardier, the Uig hills can be approached along a track belonging to the estate (only for walkers), and there are interesting species scattered among the hills, including *Saussurea alpina* (Alpine Saw-wort) and *Rubus saxatilis* (Stone Bramble), though they are not always easy to find.

The Outer Hebrides is a fantastic, varied vice county, and when the sun shines and the sea is blue it is incomparable. Though I confess, it does rain every now and again... so do turn up with full waterproofing, and I hope that you won't need it.

References

- Bonner, I. 2009. Anglesey plants in 2009. *BSBI Welsh Bulletin* 85 14–17.
 Crawley, M.J. 2017. The Flora of St Kilda. *Hebridean Naturalist*, Supplement 1.

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Saussurea alpina (Alpine Saw-wort), *Rhodiola rosea* (Roseroot) and *Cystopteris fragilis* (Brittle Bladder-fern) on a ledge on Tahabhal, Uig.



Silene acaulis (Moss Champion), Timsgarry, Uig Bay.