



Small Adder's-tongue discovered in Kincardineshire.

The elusive Small Adder's-tongue, *Ophioglossum azoricum*, a rare fern species with an otherworldly appearance, has been discovered for the first time in Kincardineshire thanks to the keen observations of David Elston, the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI)¹ County Recorder for Kincardineshire.

The discovery was made at St Cyrus National Nature Reserve² on 5th July and was originally thought to be the Common Adder's-tongue which, despite the name, had not been seen in the county since the 1850s. However, BSBI's national fern expert Dr Fred Rumsey, former Senior Curator at the Natural History Museum in London, confirmed that these plants were the even rarer Small Adder's-tongue, a species never before recorded in the county.

Of the two species of Adder's-tongue fern found on mainland Britain, Small Adder's-tongue³ is typically found in frost-free coastal locations – grasslands, cliff tops and sand dunes – mostly on the north and west coasts of Britain. This Kincardineshire find is valuable because it fills a gap on Scotland's eastern coast – the nearest populations are 40 miles to the north of Aberdeen and 80 miles south to the island of Lindisfarne.

David Elston said "It was a bit like finding gold at the end of a rainbow! This was a chance discovery, made whilst I had my nose to the ground marking out something else that I thought would be of interest to the Reserve staff. As Kincardineshire has few active plant recorders and an area of about 1000 km² there must be many more botanical discoveries and rediscoveries waiting to be made."

Adder's-tongue ferns have a single leaf-like frond and a narrow spore-bearing frond that resembles a snake's tongue which gives the plant its name. Although the Small Adder's-tongue boasts distinctive features, its diminutive size, rarely exceeding 10cm tall, and its green coloration make it inconspicuous amidst other vegetation, typically requiring sharp eyes and a hands-and-knees position to find it successfully.

Matt Harding⁴, BSBI Scotland Officer, said "This just goes to show that despite 20 years of intensive botanical recording across Scotland for our recently published Plant Atlas⁵, there are still significant and exciting discoveries to be made, even at well-visited sites! Anyone can get involved with botany, explore their local environment, and make a real contribution to our scientific understanding of nature in Scotland. Find out how by visiting the [BSBI website](#)."

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Editors' notes

1. The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) is the leading charitable organisation promoting the enjoyment, study and conservation of wild plants in Britain and Ireland. We aim to build a diverse community of skilled and enthused botanists; provide data and science to help address biodiversity loss and climate change; and disseminate information to drive a passion for plants. We provide opportunities for involvement through a range of participation projects, surveys, events, training opportunities and the production of books and other resources. Our Distribution Database holds over 50 million plant records, making it one of the world's largest biological recording databases. www.bsbi.org
2. St. Cyrus NNR is a NatureScot reserve. www.nature.scot/enjoying-outdoors/visit-our-nature-reserves/st-cyrus-national-nature-reserve
3. More information about Small Adder's-tongue: <https://plantatlas2020.org/atlas/2cd4p9h.es9>
4. For more information or to arrange an interview with either David Elston or Matt Harding, please contact Matt Harding: E matt.harding@bsbi.org T 07814 727231.
5. BSBI's [online Plant Atlas](#), launched in March 2023, features interactive distribution maps, text and graphics displaying the phenology, altitudinal range, and time-series trends for 3,495 plant species recorded across Britain and Ireland since the 1950's. This is the best way to find out if a species is declining or increasing – and why.
6. Photographs of the Small Adder's-tongue to support this release can be downloaded here: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/dxej7156dafzexmjajqdc/h?rlkey=u4jk9kzxcg925mchxrd5chtodo&dl=0>