



Media release - for immediate release

Orchid discovered new to Northern Ireland

The elegant and beautiful Autumn Lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, an exquisite orchid with a delicate spiral of flowers, has been discovered for the first time in Northern Ireland - by a young botanist out walking with his mum!

Jake Dalzell, a third-year plant ecology student at University of Cambridge, was out walking with his mum Judith at Killard National Nature Reserve² in County Down. They were hoping to spot some of the botanical specialities that the site is famous for. Jake, the botanist of the family and a member of the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI)¹, was searching for Frog Orchids, when Judith stumbled upon a plant she'd never seen before. Hurrying over, Jake was astounded to find the first Autumn Lady's-tresses ever seen in County Down, and a species he himself had only ever seen in photographs.

The Autumn Lady's-tresses³, or Cúilín Muire, is a more southerly species in Ireland that has never before been seen in Ulster, with Sligo, Dublin and the Isle of Man being the closest known sites. This elegant little orchid flowers in late summer and has delicate, pure-white flowers which spiral up the stem, reminiscent of how ladies used to braid their hair in Medieval times, hence the name. The blooms are sweetly-scented, with a fragrance likened to honey, almonds, coconut or vanilla.

Jake explained, "I knew I'd never seen this plant before, and that it had never been seen in this part of Ireland". As Jake and Judith searched excitedly, they found more and more of these dainty orchids, which grow no higher than 15 cm tall and are easily missed amongst the grass.

The BSBI Recorder for County Down, Graham Day, was thrilled to hear of the find. He said "This is a significant discovery - it's most unusual for a new native species to turn up in your patch. Especially an orchid! Perhaps there's a link to climate change - should we expect more northerly records in future? There is certainly good habitat for Autumn Lady's-tresses to the north in County Antrim."

Killard National Nature Reserve, the site of the discovery, is on the Killard Peninsula, where Strangford Lough meets the sea. It is a site well-known for its rich wildlife: its stunning array of wild flowers, and abundant insect life, seabirds and seals. It is a popular spot with local botanists, known for its wealth of orchid species and coastal plants.

Jake stresses that the site is extremely well-managed, with careful attention paid to grazing, and maybe that is the secret – proper management can allow new species to colonise, while

diversity can plummet if sites are not looked after. But Jake and Judith's experience just goes to show that, no matter where you are, there may be new treasures just waiting to be discovered.

BSBI's Ireland Officer, Bridget Keehan⁴, adds, "This proves that despite 20 years of intensive botanical recording across Ireland for our recently published Plant Atlas⁵, there are still exciting discoveries to be made, even at well-visited sites! Anyone can learn about plants, find out about their environment, and help us understand more about nature in Ireland - and there's lots of information and great resources to help you on 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 52 million plant records, making it one of the world's largest biological recording databases. www.bsbi.org
2. Killard National Nature Reserve information: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/killard-national-nature-reserve-strangford-lough>
3. More information about Autumn Lady's-tresses, and a map showing its distribution: <https://plantatlas2020.org/atlas/2cd4p9h.w2y>
4. For more information or to arrange an interview with Bridget Keehan or Jake Dalzell, please contact Bridget Keehan: bridget.keehan@bsbi.org T +353 (0) 86 3456228.
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 Autumn Lady's-tresses to support this release can be downloaded here: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/6e0r2eogamqjtxde7dwp/h?rlkey=mpq8t412klm981ttfifybma0t&dl=0>