

Some botanical highlights for Westernness (v.c. 97) in 2023

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KNOYDART

A Rough Crew meeting was held in Knoydart from 11-14 June with the Knoydart Foundation Ranger Service, following a brief visit in 2022, to cover more of this remote and under-recorded area. The weather was quite stunning, and we gathered 3,815 records from more than 40 monads (in hectads NG70, NG80 and NM79) over the four days.

These included 44 new hectad records for species such as *Eriophorum latifolium* (Broad-leaved Cottongrass), *Osmunda regalis* (Royal Fern) and a range of aquatics such as *Utricularia australis* (Bladderwort) in Lochanan a' Mhill Ghruamaich, a beautiful series of lochans near Mam Li. Another aquatic, *Subularia aquatica* (Awlwort), was recorded there for the first time since the 1950s.



We visited the 3,000 ha Black Hills Regeneration Project area, a range of low hills north-west of Inverie which have been fenced to encourage the development of native woodland and scrub. We also made a three-pronged assault on the 1020m Ladhar Bheinn, finding species such as *Athyrium distentifolium* (Alpine Lady-fern) and much *Cornus suecica* (Dwarf Cornel, above left, admired by Ro Scott) - but there is still plenty of this magnificent mountain to be explored.

BEN NEVIS & THE MAMORES

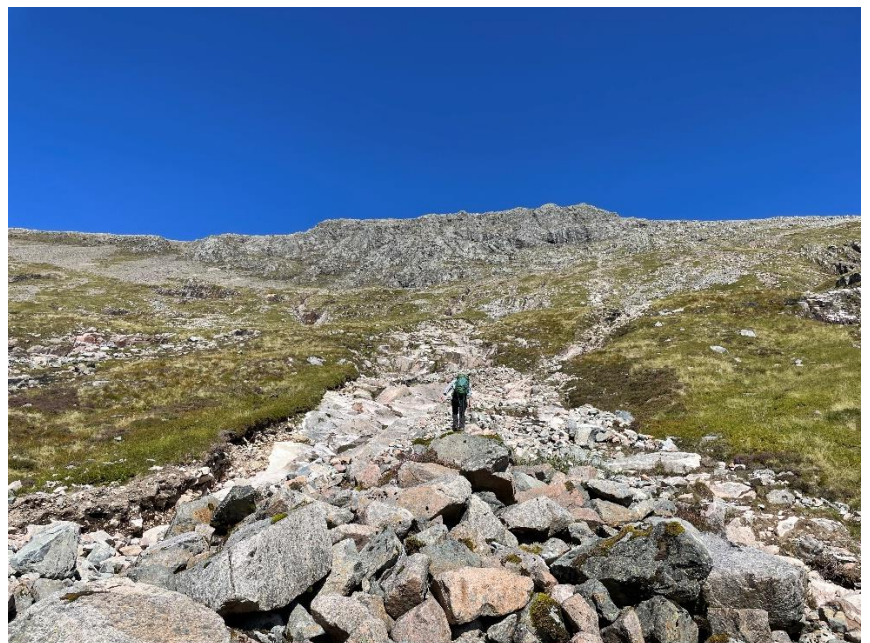
The north face of Ben Nevis has received considerable attention from botanists in the last decade, particularly during the 2014-16 North Face Survey; but the south side has been hardly visited since the 1980s. So, in early September Jim McIntosh and I began to address this by visiting **Coire Eoghainn**, high above Glen Nevis, in exceptionally hot weather.

The ground is remarkably steep and there was dramatic evidence of recent erosion from downpours earlier in the summer. We made plenty of new finds for this side of the Ben including ***Cerastium cerastoides*** (Starwort Mouse-ear), ***Sibbaldia procumbens*** (Sibbaldia), ***Carex saxatilis*** (Russet Sedge) and ***Alchemilla wichurae*** (Rock Ladies'-mantle).

But the most exciting discovery was on south-east facing cliffs beyond the eastern rim of the coire – a small population of the Nationally Rare ***Omalotheca norvegica*** (Highland Cudweed, previously *Gnaphalium norvegicum*). This is the first record for the Ben Nevis range and the second site in Westernness, the other being over 20 miles away on Creag Meagaidh.



Omalotheca norvegica



The dramatic landscape of Coire Eoghainn

Undoubtedly the highlight of the year though, was a discovery made just four miles to the south-west in the Mamores, where Gus Routledge found ***Carex norvegica*** (Close-headed Alpine Sedge). He was carrying out survey for Glen Nevis Estate in Coire Dearg, between Mullach nan Coirean and Stob Ban.



Carex norvegica in Coire Dearg (Gus Routledge)

With subsequent visits by Jim McIntosh, several populations have now been located with good numbers of plants. This Nationally Rare species was previously known from only a few mountains in the central and eastern Highlands. This is the first record for Westernness and is 40km north-west of the nearest site, on Beinn Heasgarnich. It is also further west than the site on Ben Lui, making it the most westerly location in Britain (early records from the Hebrides have been discounted).

Other notable new finds in Coire Dearg included ***Salix myrsinites*** (Whortle-leaved Willow), ***Arabidopsis petraea*** (Northern Rock-cress) and ***Equisetum pratense*** (Shady Horsetail), the latter not seen in the Mamores for more than 50 years.

LOCH A' BHEALACH LEAMHAIN, ARDVERIKIE ESTATE

Wedged between Geal Charn and Beinn a' Chlachair on Ardverikie Estate, to the north of Ben Alder and Aonach Beag, **Loch a' Bhealach Leamhain** is a beautiful mountain lake at 640m altitude. Unfortunately, the loch and its surroundings are seriously threatened by a proposed pump-storage scheme (the Earba Storage project), which would involve the construction of a 60m-high dam at the eastern end. It would be linked to Lochan na h-Earba below, which would be raised by 20m by another huge dam.

In July I visited the almost pristine Loch a' Bhealach Leamhain and its surroundings, which are largely unexplored. There are extensive calcareous crags and slopes with much botanical interest, including the Nationally Scarce species ***Potentilla crantzii*** (Alpine Cinquefoil) and ***Galium sternerii*** (Limestone Bedstraw), both rare in the VC. ***Trollius europaeus*** (Globeflower), ***Geranium sylvaticum*** (Wood Cranesbill) and ***Saussurea alpina*** (Alpine Saw-wort) are frequent and species-rich flushes are plentiful with ***Equisetum hyemale*** (Rough Horsetail).



Salix lapponum (Downy Willow, foreground) is locally abundant on crags, but also occurs on the loch margins, a feature rare in Scotland but typical of Scandinavia. ***Subularia aquatica*** (Awlwort) was a notable find in the loch. The records have been provided to Gilkes Energy, who are developing the scheme, in the hope that they will be taken into account.