

OBITUARIES

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DONALD (DON) CHARLES FRANCIS COTTON (1950–2022)



Donald Cotton, the BSBI Vice-county Recorder for Co. Sligo (v.c. H28), died peacefully at home in Sligo on 13 January 2022, after a long illness.

Don was born in Carlisle on 19 November 1950; he started his secondary education in London but spent his sixth form years at Tiverton Grammar School in Devon before spending a short time in nature conservation in Scotland. He then went to Reading University where he undertook a first degree followed by a PhD on the insects colonising cattle slurry. In 1976, after his time in Reading, Don came to Ireland to do postdoctoral research at University College, Dublin on the impact of new farming practices on the ecology of soil invertebrates, especially earthworms. In the late 1970s he moved to Sligo to lecture in ecology and geology at the Regional Technical College where he taught undergraduates and supervised higher degrees. From the day of his arrival in Sligo Don got

involved in recording the natural history of this part of the north-west of Ireland.

In the most general terms Don was a naturalist, an ecologist and a conservationist, but more particularly he was an ornithologist, an entomologist, an odonatist and a botanist; he also studied whales, earthworms, hoverflies, spiders, snails, ladybirds, jellyfish and marine debris, though this list is not exhaustive. He added significantly to the knowledge of the distribution of many species in these groups in Ireland. The only validated record of Gervais Beaked

Whale in Ireland was due to Don's curiosity and attention to detail; he had a whale exhumed by Sligo County Council on 26 January 1989, and transported to the Ulster Museum, Belfast where it was identified as a species new to Ireland. In 1981 Don discovered a damselfly, *Coenagrion lunulatum*, which was new to Britain and Ireland; the species is now known as the Irish Bluet, and is quite widespread in the northern part of Ireland but it has yet to be found in Britain.

Don's records were submitted to the relevant recording groups and he published over 30 articles in the *Irish Naturalists' Journal* and many others in the *Sligo Field Club Journal*. His most recent article, published jointly with Micheline Sheehy Skeffington just before his death, was on the Strawberry Tree *Arbutus unedo* in County Sligo. In 2012 Don was awarded the Distinguished Recorder Award from the National Biodiversity and Data Centre for his life-long commitment to conservation.

Sligo and Leitrim, where Don did most of his recording, are both counties famous for their

Photo: Don Cotton on a family outing to the top of the Ben Bulbin range, Co. Sligo, 1986. Elaine Cotton

arctic-alpine plant species at well-known sites such as Glenade, Glencar, the Horseshoe and Ben Bulbin. Mullaghmore, a site with well-developed machair and numerous orchid species, is also in Sligo. When Dr Daniel Kelly retired as Vice-county Recorder for Leitrim in 1995, Don was appointed in his place as he had started recording in the county soon after his arrival in Ireland. The *New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora* (2002) contains over 16,000 of Don's records from the county. Don's meticulous recording skills added many new vice-county records to what was already a relatively well-recorded county, amongst the most notable species being *Blackstonia perfoliata*, *Carex lasiocarpa*, *Echium vulgare*, *Equisetum pratense*, *E. × trachyodon*, *Hammarbya paludosa*, *Limosella aquatica*, *Milium effusum* and *Oenanthe fluviatilis*. Even after his appointment as VCR for Sligo in 2006, Don continued his interest in Leitrim's plants until shortly before his death.

Don's first botanical records from Sligo date from 1981, soon after his arrival, and by the time that the *New Atlas* was published Don had collected over 11,000 plant records for the county. On Dr Sharon Parr's retirement from the position of VCR for Sligo in 2006, Don took over her position to officially record in his home county where he had been living and recording for the previous quarter of a century. As in Leitrim, Don's keen eye, methodical quartering of the ground and accurate identification skills added many new first county records for

Sligo. Some of the more interesting were *Eleocharis acicularis*, *Fumaria purpurea*, *Hieracium umbellatum*, *Lathraea squamaria*, *Luzula pilosa* and most notably *Viola persicifolia* at Lough Gowra in 2006.

The yet to be published *Plant Atlas 2020* will contain some 100,000 of Don's records for Sligo and Leitrim and they will be a fitting tribute to his years of exploring these two counties.

Don was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in 2014 and from then until late 2021 he received many different courses of treatment. Each would be effective in suppressing the myeloma for a period but eventually the markers for the disease would increase again, necessitating a change to a different treatment. By late 2021 there were no new treatments left to give him and through December he deteriorated quite quickly, finally succumbing to the disease in January 2022. Don continued to botanise during his illness, spending many days in the field exploring Counties Leitrim and Sligo.

Don will be sadly missed by all those in Ireland interested in conservation and natural history, but he will be especially missed by his friends in the BSBI. Don is survived by his wife Elaine and his daughters Róisín and Aisling; he was predeceased by his son Martin.

Robert Northridge