

# A 20-year resurvey of the nationally rare *Ononis reclinata* (Small Restharrow) at Port Kemin, Wigtownshire (VC74): Matt Harding, Michael Jeeves & Jim McCleary

*Ononis reclinata* (Small Restharrow) was first discovered on the Mull of Galloway in 1835, representing a significant range extension northwards from its nearest population on the south coast of Pembrokeshire (VC45).

It is a small, annual herb of shallow calcareous soils with low organic content, especially on south- or south-west-facing coastal cliffs on limestone and, in Wigtownshire, greywacke. Populations often fluctuate in size, sometimes very markedly, and its overall 10 km square distribution has not changed significantly since the 1960s. New sites have been discovered near to known colonies, but the species was lost in Guernsey in 1956 through the growth of rank vegetation (Stroh *et al.*, 2023).

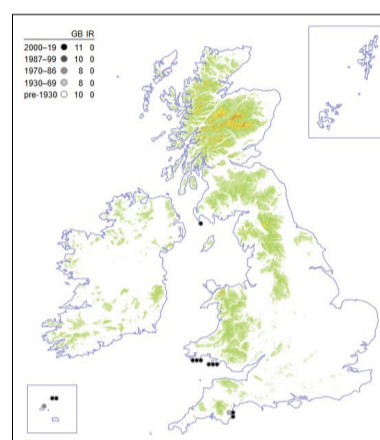
On the Mull of Galloway, *Ononis reclinata* is known from sea cliffs at Port Kemin, which remains its only Scottish site. It had been 20 years since the plant was last seen, by local botanist Jim McCleary in 2004, with the access gully now choked with *Ulex europaeus* (Gorse), *Prunus spinosa* (Blackthorn) and *Rubus fruticosus* agg. (Bramble), and impassable.



*Ononis reclinata* (Small Restharrow) flowering at Port Kemin in July 1996. Photo: Jim McCleary

## *Ononis reclinata* records at Port Kemin, held by the BSBI Distribution Database

Year	Number	Recorder	Details
2024	16	Harding, M.	2 sub-pops of 8 plants each
2004	Present	McCleary, J.	
1996	350	Lusby, P.	Seed sampled for Millenium Seed Bank
1996	10	Muscott, J. & Lang, H.A.	
1993	282	Lusby, P.	4 areas, sub-pops of 113, 80 and 89
1978	Present	Silverside, A.J.	
1977	Present	Lang, H.A.	'In sufficient quantity to make its future survival probable'
1835	Present	Graham, R.D.	



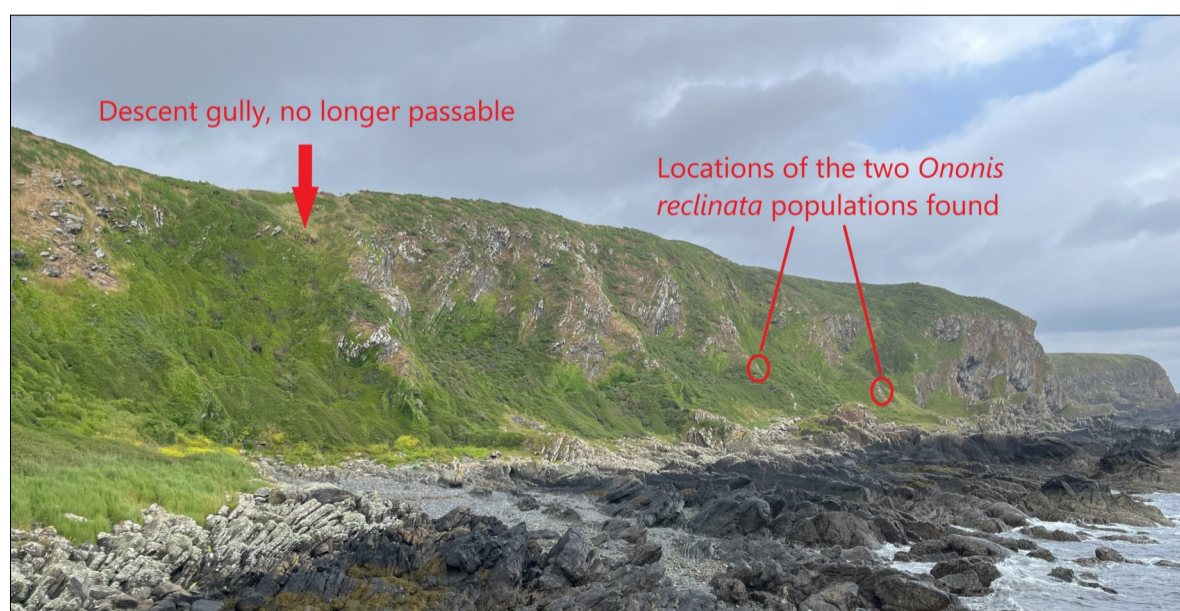
*Ononis reclinata* distribution, above (Stroh *et al.* 2023)



Jackie Muscott and the late Hugh Lang descending the now overgrown gully to reach the bay in July 1996 (right, photo Jim McCleary). Matt setting off on abseil in 2024 (left, photo Michael Jeeves), and a fruiting plant in 2024 (bottom left)



Michael Jeeves, vice-county recorder for Wigtownshire, Jim McCleary and Matt Harding (BSBI Scotland Officer) set out to rectify this, with Matt approaching the base of the sea cliffs by abseil and Michael and Jim providing a safety back-up from the cliff top and directing Matt towards the location of the colonies. Four potentially suitable rocky ribs were checked, with a fifth inaccessible due to scrub encroachment. Fruiting plants were found on two of the ribs, each with eight plants in a small area, growing on very thin, eroding soils in an open sward. Associates included *Jasione montana* (Sheep's-bit), *Thymus drucei* (Wild Thyme), *Koeleria macrantha* (Crested Hair-grass), *Anthyllis vulneraria* (Kidney Vetch) and *Geranium sanguineum* (Bloody Crane's-bill).



Although *Ononis reclinata* populations can fluctuate markedly year on year, the current state of the population at Port Kemin is concerning. Scrub encroachment has significantly reduced the area of suitable open habitat, with plants restricted to extremely steep, unstable ground, under which low but dense scrub will prevent successful regeneration from fallen seeds. Further survey work, complicated by the need for rope access down loose rock to check suitable habitat higher up the cliff face, is required to ascertain the true extent of the population, and assess the long-term survival of one of Scotland's rarest plants.