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## OPINION Louise Marsh

“By turning your attention to the plants around you, you’re deepening your understanding of the ecosystems that birds depend on”



BTO members don't need a botanist to tell them that the natural world is facing many challenges. Our wildlife needs all the help it can get from recorders, monitors and conservation managers. By turning your attention to the plants around you, you're not just expanding your skill set – you're deepening your understanding of the ecosystems that birds depend on.

This was brought into sharp relief by the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI)'s *Plant Atlas 2020* – the most comprehensive survey of vascular plants ever undertaken in Britain and Ireland, based on over 30 million records collected by thousands of volunteer recorders. Some of the *Plant Atlas 2020* findings make depressing reading for anyone concerned with the state of nature conservation on these islands. All bird recorders will already be only too well aware of the drivers of change: habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation; intensive farming leading to nitrogen enrichment; pollution of waterways and of course the effects of climate change. Many of the habitats our wild plants depend on have been affected by these changes and 53% of our native plants are estimated to have declined in Britain due to human impacts. Changes in grazing pressure have led to the decline of once-familiar native species such as Heather and Harebell; damp meadows have been drained, leading to substantial declines in plants such as Devil's-bit Scabious which in turn impacts butterflies such as the Marsh Fritillary; traditional grasslands have been reseeded or over-fertilised, and consequently 62% of our ancient arable wildflowers such as Corn Marigold have declined.

But it's not all doom and gloom! The good news is that there are still lots of plants out there for you to record and enjoy – and you don't need to invest in expensive equipment to make a start. A basic x10 hand lens cost about £5, and will go a long way towards helping you see diagnostic characters. There are some great ID guides around – the BSBI website talks you through the pros and cons of each one, and has links to cribsheets, ID videos, free training webinars and lots of other resources to help you get started. One obvious but helpful advantage to botanical recording is that plants, unlike birds, stay put while you peer at them and get the ID book out – they never fly off, peck at you or poop on your hand!

### DELVING INTO PLANT RECORDING

Wondering if plant recording is right for you? Why not start by looking for a plant with a name that will already be familiar: *Prunella*. To birders it's a Dunnock but to botanists it's Selfheal, an attractive purple native plant traditionally used for staunching wounds, and treating a range of ailments from mouth ulcers to colds to piles. Selfheal's nutlets, which contain the seeds, can pass through a bird's alimentary canal unharmed, so bird poop has probably played a large part in the dispersal of this species. Seeds of other wild plants are transported on birds' feet: for example, a rare hybrid flower, the Loch Leven Spearwort, *Ranunculus x levenensis*, found only on the shores of a few northern lakes, is believed to have reached these islands on the feet of waterfowl migrating from Iceland and Scandinavia.

Another good reason for birders to have a go at plant recording is that there are lots of



plants around in high summer when there are fewer birds to enjoy. Our most dramatic recent find – the first sighting in 15 years of the elusive Ghost Orchid – was made in August 2024. July and August is also a great time to spot some of the alien species that turn up in urban settings – garden escapes that ‘jumped the garden fence’ to become established in the wild – alongside native ‘weeds’ that persist on road verges and in carparks. A special mention here for birdseed aliens such as Niger, Cockspur, Millet and Buckwheat; they often turn up on lists of species recorded outside gardens, presumably having originated in somebody’s bird feeder. Urban botany groups regularly notch up more than 100 different plant species during a half-day survey, so any birders branching out into plant recording are likely to find that their end-of-year list of species recorded is much longer. There’s a growing network of botany groups across Britain and Ireland, running annual

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programmes of excursions and recording days – full details on BSBI’s website. Most of these outings are absolutely free, the groups are full of friendly botanists keen to share ID tips and they’ll be delighted to benefit from your birding expertise.

In midwinter, when you’re in suburban parks looking out for that flock of Waxwings, or heading to a local lake to

observe waterfowl, why not see what you can find in flower? You thought wild plants only bloomed in the summer? During last year’s New Year Plant Hunt – the BSBI’s annual citizen science event, run along similar lines to the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch – more than 600 different species of plant were recorded across Britain and Ireland. You’ll already know the most frequently recorded species like Daisy, Dandelion, Gorse, Groundsel and, for the rest, we provide spotter sheets and a recording app so you can upload a photo and our team of experts will identify it for you.

### LOOKING DOWN AND UP

Taking part in the New Year Plant Hunt is a great way to try out plant recording, but there are lots of free identification resources available all year round from the Botanical Society’s website. You might also check out the National Plant Monitoring Scheme and benefit from training events, webinars and a free plant ID book, and if you use social media you’ll find a community of friendly botanists interested to hear about your finds and keen to help with identification – take a look at #WildFlowerHour which runs every Sunday evening. So next time you’re out birding, why not look down as well as up, and see what you can find? ■

**Louise Marsh** is Communications Officer at the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland, with a particular passion for helping people get started with wildflower identification.

**Find out more** [www.bsbi.org/new-year-plant-hunt](http://www.bsbi.org/new-year-plant-hunt)

[www.bsbi.org/get-involved](http://www.bsbi.org/get-involved)

[www.bsbi.org/plant-id-getting-started](http://www.bsbi.org/plant-id-getting-started)