

The Hills are Alive

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The Belfast Hills stretch for almost 10 miles in a southwesterly direction from Carnmoney Hill in Newtownabbey to White Mountain overlooking Lisburn. The southern and eastern edges of the range terminate in impressive scarps, which tower over North and West Belfast. The North Belfast skyline is dominated by Cavehill (368m), the West Belfast skyline by Divis (478m) together with Black Mountain, and the Lisburn skyline by the sharp peak of Collin Mountain (328m).

Cavehill has long been a popular playground for the citizens of Belfast. The scarp slopes are heavily wooded and Cavehill Country Park provides a range of amenities including a network of paths. Access to Divis and Black Mountain has recently been opened up due to acquisition by the National Trust. Other public areas include the Woodland Trust property at Carnmoney Hill, Belfast City Council's Colin Glen Forest Park and the Ulster Wildlife Trust's Slievenacloy nature reserve. The Belfast Hills Partnership has been formed to work towards improved management of the area.

Many parts of the Belfast Hills have a rich and colourful flora. For example, wonderful displays of orchids can be seen at Slievenacloy and on Collinward above Belfast Zoo. *Adoxa moschatellina* (Moschatel) remains in its single station on the wooded slopes of Cavehill. This article will focus on three other rare species first found in the area by the great Belfast botanist John Templeton in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Saxifraga hypnoides (Mossy Saxifrage) is a declining species of the Antrim basaltic scarp. The joint first county record was made from Cavehill by John Templeton in 1797. However, apart from two anonymous pre-1969 records from Whitewell Quarry (on the slopes of Collinward) and from Black Mountain, there have been no further reported sightings from anywhere in the Belfast Hills. Then in May 2012 the Belfast Hills Partnership organised a Bioblitz on Cavehill. Whilst surveying low cliffs north of McArt's Fort, I was surprised to spot two flowering clumps of *Saxifraga hypnoides* (see accompanying photograph), accompanied by *Populus tremula* (Aspen) and *Orobanche alba* (Thyme Broomrape). It was fortunate that the Bioblitz coincided with the flowering period of the saxifrage, but could this possibly have been where Templeton had stood more than 200 years earlier? Incidentally, the very first record of *Orobanche alba* from Britain or Ireland was from Cavehill by John Templeton prior to 1793.

Lycopodium clavatum (Stag's-Horn Clubmoss) is a rapidly declining species of the Antrim hills. It was first recorded in the county by John Templeton in 1798 on Black Mountain. There are several subsequent records from Divis and Black Mountain, but none later than 1914. WJC Tomlinson discovered a new site above Ligoniel in North Belfast in 1907 and further sightings were made on Wolf Hill (in the same vicinity) in 1955 and in the 1960s. The plant has not been reported from any of these various sites since and indeed there has been no record for the whole county since 1975. However, in 2011 I received a report of *Lycopodium clavatum* from Collin Mountain at the southern end of the Belfast Hills. This had been noted during a Northern Ireland Environment Heritage Service survey of the Slievenacloy nature reserve. In summer 2012 I visited the site. Only a solitary stem could be found at the grid reference I had been given. Thankfully, however, two large healthy populations were found nearby on the dry northern slopes of Collin, some distance from the summit. It seems that this plant continues to have a foothold in the Belfast Hills, helped presumably by the sympathetic cattle-grazing on the site.

Vaccinium vitis-idaea (Cowberry) is a local species of bogs and upland areas in Antrim. First recorded from the county by John Templeton from the summit of Divis some time prior to 1825, the only subsequent sighting from the Belfast Hills was when Miss Kertland found it on Cavehill in 1946. In September 2012, whilst ascending Divis from the north-west, I stumbled on a colony of *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* amongst rocks on the brow of the flat summit area. Had this inconspicuous little shrub remained undetected in this spot for approximately 200 years?

So 2012 brought much cause for celebration. Celebration of the pioneering work of a great Belfast naturalist. Celebration of the survival locally of some of our rare and fascinating mountain plants. And celebration of the Belfast Hills' continuing attraction as a haven of peace and a sanctuary for wildlife. I hope that the naturalists of tomorrow will have as much pleasure in walking these hills as I have had over the past number of years. Perhaps one of them will have the good fortune to relocate *Juniperus communis* (Juniper) recorded by W Millen above the Windy Gap on Black Mountain before 1863, or meet with *Pseudorchis albida* (Small White Orchid) seen as recently as 1988 on the slopes of Collinward above Belfast Zoo, or rediscover Miss Kertland's 1946 Cavehill site for *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*. Others will count themselves fortunate simply to be able to tramp in the hills with the skylark's song ringing all around.