

Stirlingshire Botany Group: 2024-25 New Year Plant Hunts

Stirling, 31st December 2024

Seven hardy souls braved the biblical forecast, and after a grotty first hour were rewarded with blue skies, flowers galore and a wind that nearly blew us off the top of the Stirling volcanic plug!

We started off at Stirling Railway Station, and soon picked up our first species growing in the planters outside the entrance: *Poa annua* (Annual Meadow-grass), *Stellaria media* (Common Chickweed), *Arabidopsis thaliana* (Thale Cress) and *Cerastium glomeratum* (Sticky Mouse-ear) – all stalwarts of the New Year Plant Hunt (NYPH).

A little wasteland corner overlooking the A9 provided some more expected species: *Cardamine hirsuta* (Hairy Bitter-cress), *Senecio vulgaris* (Groundsel), *Matricaria discoidea* (Pineappleweed), *Bellis perennis* (Daisy), *Veronica persica* (Common Field-speedwell) and *Erophila verna* (Common Whitlowgrass). This is an interesting spot in summer, with *Papaver dubium* (Long-headed Poppy) and *Vulpia myuros* (Rat's-tail Fescue) both frequent and still identifiable on our Hunt, although long past flowering. More unexpected was *Fumaria muralis* (Common Ramping-fumitory) with one flower on it, and *Arrhenatherum elatius* (False Oat-grass) flowering and just about checkable through the fence line.

We continued to the Rainbow Slides car park area – another interesting site with *Chaenorhinum minus* (Small Toadflax) common but in fruit now. Flowering were *Capsella bursa-pastoris* (Shepherd's-purse) and *Taraxacum* agg. (Dandelion), with *Ulex europaeus* (Gorse) flowering in a nearby ornamental planting bed (the Gorse was doubtless self-seeded or introduced accidentally with soil). Kirstie's sharp eyes spotted *Myosotis arvensis* (Field Forget-me-not) flowering here too.



Starting out at Stirling Railway Station, and checking the wall line nearby

Crossing the road to check the old wall, a surprise find was *Potentilla sterilis* (Barren Strawberry) in flower a metre up the wall, found by Steven! More expected was *Poa nemoralis* (Wood Meadow-grass) and *Tanacetum parthenium* (Feverfew) flowering on the wall, and *Galium aparine* (Cleavers) with a solitary flower at the base of the wall. The large hummocks of *Parietaria judaica* (Pellitory-of-the-wall) growing on the wall here had mostly died back in the recent frosts, but the fresh growth was scoured for flowering and eventually one shoot with enough of its tiny red flower was discovered. Leaving the wall, a *Senecio viscosus* (Sticky Groundsel) plant with a single flower still hanging on was spotted – a surprise as all other plants of this species were in full necro-botany mode, still identifiable by their open, flattened star-like bracts.

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The reliable *Cymbalaria muralis* (Ivy-leaved Toadflax) was spotted flowering in another wasteground corner, and one *Sonchus oleraceus* (Smooth Sow-thistle) with a flower still present was found. The frosts in early December had knocked back a lot of broader leaved species, and so this was the only example of *S. oleraceus* with a flower we found (normally a frequent winter flowerer in Stirling).



Potentilla sterilis (Barren Strawberry) on the wall, and the group spotting lots of flowers on the Back Walk – Marieke pointing out *Pentaglottis viridis* (Green Alkanet)



Matt pointing out the inaccessible *Trifolium arvense* (Hare's-foot Clover) © Tracy Rich, and *Hedera helix* (Common Ivy) basking in the winter sun on the Back Walk

Starting up the Back Walk, an excellent south-west facing sun trap ideal for prolonging flowering into winter, I spotted *Sagina procumbens* (Procumbent Pearlwort) at the base of a monument, and Steven noticed *Trifolium pratense* (Red Clover) still flowering at the base of the crags. *Euphorbia peplus* (Petty Spurge), *Lapsana communis* (Nipplewort), *Pentaglottis sempervirens*

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(Green Alkanet) and *Geranium robertianum* (Herb-Robert) were all added to the list here, and the local speciality *Trifolium arvense* (Hare's-foot Clover) was spotted flowering 15 feet up the crags. After climbing up to point it out, we subsequently found lots of plants flowering at a more friendly height! Also notable here was *Malva sylvestris* (Common Mallow), not in flower but a locally scarce species with two plants on the wall now added to by a third growing at ground level. *Vinca major* (Greater Periwinkle) was deemed to be naturalised here, and with one flower present was added to the list.

A diversion from the Back Walk route produced three species found here in flower in 2023-24 on the NYPH as well: *Aethusa cynapium* (Fool's Parsley), *Pseudofumaria lutea* (Yellow Corydalis), and naturalised *Leycesteria formosa* (Himalayan Honeysuckle). Back on the main path, we finally found *Hedera helix* (Common Ivy) in profuse flower, and after a long hard look one flower of *Ilex aquifolium* (Holly) just about open amongst the flower buds! *Arum maculatum* (Lord's-and-Ladies) and *Galanthus nivalis* (Snowdrop) were coming up but not yet in flower, and leaves of two unusual Apiaceae species were noted as well: *Chaerophyllum temulum* (Rough Chervil) and *Conium maculatum* (Hemlock).

As we entered the Church of the Holy Rude churchyard, Jan picked up *Jacobaea vulgaris* (Common Ragwort) with a few florets still active, and we discovered *Galanthus nivalis* in flower between the gravestones. An interesting plant by the summit knoll was *Verbascum lychnitis* (White Mullein), found earlier in the year by Luke Gaskell and now in seed, but the first record for Stirlingshire since at least the last century, and possibly since 1883! Another locally interesting plant, *Chelidonium majus* (Greater Celandine) was discovered on the churchyard wall, just its leaves showing at this point.



Admiring *Trifolium arvense* (Hare's-foot Clover) in a more accessible location, and *Lamium amplexicaule* (Henbit Dead-nettle) in the pavement outside the Church of the Holy Rude

Leaving the churchyard, we took a route on Jan's recommendation and struck NYPH gold with a new site for the locally scarce *Lamium amplexicaule* (Henbit Dead-nettle), growing in the pavement and with tiny but open flowers visible. *Cardamine flexuosa* (Wavy Bitter-cress) was added from this pavement as well, before we said goodbye to some of the team.

Jan led the remainder of us down some steep steps, passing big plants of *Rubus armeniacus* (Giant Blackberry) – a first record from Stirling itself since 1981. At the bottom of the steps, Jan spotted *Geum urbanum* (Wood Avens) in flower, and we also found *Erigeron canadensis* (Canadian Fleabane) in flower above head height on a wall – a recent colonist in Stirlingshire.

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Final additions were *Achillea millefolium* (Yarrow) and *Mycelis muralis* (Wall Lettuce) – both with flowers just about hanging on.

In total, we managed to search out a whopping 45 species in flower, beating our 2023-24 total by three species! This was the second highest total in Scotland this year, with a phenomenal 53 species from Coldingham in Berwickshire found by Robin Cowe taking the top spot.



Jan examining *Erigeron canadensis* (Canadian Fleabane) growing on a wall in Stirling, and *Arabis collina* (Rosy Cress) flowering on the King's Park wall, Stirling

King's Park, Stirling, 31st December 2024

After saying goodbye to the Stirling NYPH team, I drove across Stirling to check on the state of an unusual introduced species growing on the King's Park wall: *Arabis collina* (Rosy Cress). I had noticed this attractive little crucifer in bud early in December, and wondered if it might be flowering for the NYPH. Sure enough, one plant had some lovely pink flowers on it!

Also surprising to find, albeit a far more common plant, was *Veronica serpyllifolia* (Thyme-leaved Speedwell) in flower under trees by the wall. *Lamium album* (White Dead-nettle) was just about hanging on, and *Cardamine flexuosa* (Wavy Bitter-cress) and *Hedera helix* (Common Ivy) were also flowering here, although the *Corylus avellana* (Hazel) catkins were resolutely closed.

Outside the King's Park wall, a quick hunt around the pavements and walls added *Cymbalaria muralis* (Ivy-leaved Toadflax), *Poa annua* (Annual Meadow-grass), *Arabidopsis thaliana* (Thale Cress), *Senecio vulgaris* (Groundsel), *Cardamine hirsuta* (Hairy Bitter-cress) and *Taraxacum* agg. (Dandelion). No doubt a more thorough hunt would have revealed more than the 11 species I found in flower, but this wasn't bad for a quick 15-minute hit!

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Thornhill, near Callander, 1st January 2025

We welcomed in the New Year with a Plant Hunt in Thornhill, just south of Callander. Jane and I were joined by Julie and Liz, complete with families along for an intergenerational hunt making eight of us, aged 2 years old and upwards.

Unfortunately the weather was miserable at first, but the kids did really well for nearly an hour before escaping indoors for a playdate. Theo (aged 4) was particularly proud of his *Bellis perennis* (Daisy) find, and ran around checking the new flowers as they were discovered until a more interesting distraction in the form of Julie's kids arrived!



Theo with his Daisy

We started by the old telephone booth on the Main Street (now a community book exchange), and soon picked up *Poa annua* (Annual Meadow-grass), *Euphorbia peplus* (Petty Spurge) and *Capsella bursa-pastoris* (Shepherd's-purse). A close look at a flowering Whitlowgrass revealed it to be *Erophila glabrescens* (Glabrous Whitlowgrass), with long spatulate leaves and hairs only present on the leaf margins. Theo then found his Daisy, and we added *Taraxacum* agg. (Dandelion), *Cardamine flexuosa* (Wavy Bitter-cress) and *Senecio vulgaris* (Groundsel) at the same spot. *Hedera helix* (Common Ivy) was also flowering at the edge of the car park nearby.

A diversion across the South Common via a *Corylus avellana* (Hazel) hedgerow failed to find any open catkins, and the muddy path proved a challenge to triking for our 2-year-old hunter. Julie managed to spot *Ranunculus acris* (Meadow Buttercup) just about hanging on, which was a surprise. Back in the urban habitat of Low Town, the species came quicker, with *Crepis capillaris* (Smooth Hawk's-beard), *Sagina procumbens* (Procumbent Pearlwort), *Cardamine*

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hirsuta (Hairy Bitter-cress) and *Arabidopsis thaliana* (Thale Cress) all added along the pavement edges and road verges. Theo and Liz managed to spot *Galanthus nivalis* (Snowdrop) in bud, before the kids retired to the warmth to munch on some chocolate Santas!

Jane and I continued on, recording *Erica carnea* (Winter Heath) escaped from a garden, and noting the non-flowering remains of *Pulicaria dysenterica* (Common Fleabane) and *Melilotus officinalis* (Ribbed Melilot) growing by the edge of the industrial yard. Plenty of *Ulex europaeus* (Gorse) was in flower on the North Common, but a long, painstaking hunt for flowering *Ilex aquifolium* (Holly) failed miserably, with nothing breaking bud.



Senecio vulgaris (Groundsel) and *Galanthus nivalis* (Snowdrop) flowering

However, we were well rewarded with *Valerianella carinata* (Keeled-fruited Cornsalad), a recent coloniser of this area, and *Veronica persica* (Common Field-speedwell) flowering in the Lion and Unicorn pub car park. Jane said goodbye, so for the last half hour or so I continued the Hunt alone, adding very bedraggled *Antirrhinum majus* (Snapdragon) in the wall of the churchyard, and the surprise of the day – *Veronica peregrina* (American Speedwell) in flower just inside the churchyard.

At the edge of the village, a *Leucanthemum vulgare* (Oxeye Daisy) plant had just enough of new ray florets open to count, with the tubular florets all tightly shut. By contrast, *Achillea millefolium* (Yarrow) was just about hanging on, with the ray florets turned to mush but one or two tubular florets still open. Leaving the village, I checked some field edges to look for arable weeds, with no success this year, although some *Cruciata laevipes* (Crosswort) in fruit was tantalising. *Galanthus nivalis* (Snowdrop) in proper flower was added, and both *Cerastium fontanum* (Common Mouse-ear) and *C. glomeratum* (Sticky Mouse-ear) were found just about in flower. Back in the village, a *Lamium purpureum* (Red Dead-nettle) flowering by the playground was a pleasant find, whilst *Stellaria media* (Common Chickweed) was a long time coming.

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The final plant was *Cymbalaria muralis* (Ivy-leaved Toadflax), with all the plants on the wall out of flower except one, where some missing stonework had provided a niche with every so slightly more shelter and a single flower sat resplendent inside! In total, 28 species were found in flower – an increase of two species on my list from the previous year.



Veronica peregrina (American Speedwell) in flower in Thornhill churchyard, and the view looking south towards a snowy Gargunnocks (complete with photo-bombing Jackdaw with leucistic inner primaries)

As ever, my excitement at finding so many flowering plants in mid-winter on these Hunts was tempered by concern over the changing climate that seems likely to be contributing to their prolonged flowering season.

The NYPH, now in its fourteenth year, is one way in which we can build up a record of changing flowering patterns, and BSBI are looking to develop more targeted surveys that aim to chart the change in flowering behaviour and plant distribution with our changing climate.

You can find out more about the NYPH at [BSBI New Year Plant Hunt](#), and if you fancy doing your own hunt why not read my top tips for successful NYPHing, plus lots of other NYPH adventures, on the BSBI [News & Views](#) blog (see post on 31st December 2024). And do join us next year for more flower-hunting fun!