

Antrim Field Trips of 2018

As the cars eventually came into view, five bedraggled figures descended wearily from the edge of the wet but wonderful Garron Plateau. The final pilgrimage of 2018 was drawing to a close and we had just shared the privilege of counting the seed-heads of the last surviving patch of Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus*) in County Antrim. It was time to disperse, to sink into hibernation and gather our energy for the challenges of another year.

With the enthusiastic support of Maria Long, we have recently formed an Ulster BSBI Group to encourage an interest in field botany in Ireland's northern counties. In 2018, I led members of this group on 6 major fields trips in County Antrim – one each month between April and September.

A beautiful spring day in April saw us gathered at the Mill Race Trail in the valley of the Six Mile Water. Beside the car park we saw Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) and in the woods there was lots of Wild Garlic (*Allium ursinum*) and a mystery *Allium* which is quite common along the Six Mile Water, but stubbornly refuses to flower. We explored the riverside paths as far upstream as Muckamore, stopping to admire a treecreeper and then a dipper.

A royal gun salute meant that Clotworthy House was closed to the public until early afternoon, so we had lunch at Antrim Loughshore Park. Common Whitlow Grass (*Erophila verna*) was pointed out on bare ground here, and both Few-Flowered Leek (*Allium paradoxum*) and Cowslip (*Primula veris*) were seen beside the river. We meandered slowly towards Antrim Castle Gardens, picking up Wall Lettuce (*Mycelis muralis*) and Box (*Buxus sempervirens*) near the footbridge. The gardens have a beautiful combination of formal beds and semi-natural areas. The best plants were Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*) in abundance and Rigid Hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) in some of the ponds.

Once Clotworthy House re-opened, we were able to visit the exhibition of botanical art by Ulster BSBI Group member Alison Walker. Everyone was able to admire her work and I enjoyed an ice-cream.

Cushendun was our venue in May. We spent the morning around the village, naming quite a few species on a wall beside the car park, before crossing the road to a strip of grassland behind the beach. This was more species-rich than expected, partly thanks to local conservation efforts. The most eye-catching species was Wood Cranesbill (*Geranium sylvaticum*), a rare native of the county, but which had been introduced at this site. We also saw Pignut (*Conopodium majus*), Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*) and Ragged Robin (*Silene flos-cuculi*).

A new riverside path gave us access to the banks of the Glendun River and, in particular, to a new site for Heath Groundsel (*Senecio sylvaticus*) – the only post-2000 record for the north of the county. Completing a loop around the village, we found a fine stand of Wood Meadow-Grass (*Poa nemoralis*) and a rare county record for the bulbil-producing form of Lesser Celandine (*Ficaria verna* ssp. *verna*).

After lunch, we moved inland to visit Craigagh Wood. This beautiful site, set on a steep slope above the Glendun River, is famed for its red squirrels, but is also County Antrim's only site for Tunbridge Filmy Fern (*Hymenophyllum tunbrigense*). Although the upper parts of the woodland are dominated by planted beech, the lower rocky ground retains a more natural feel, and it was here that we headed in search of our prize. There were many rocks to look under and many boulders to trip over. So many, in fact, that we had to return to the path for our own safety, picking up Wood Melick (*Melica uniflora*) on the way.

We climbed to the top of the wood and then returned via the road, recording as we went. After re-uniting a distraught child with his mother, we entered the wood by another gate and a few brave souls battled into the undergrowth again. We were called off the scent by the rest of the group, although we saw Wood Goldilocks (*Ranunculus auricomus*) for our pains.

From the cars, we passed through a quiet churchyard and over a footbridge to join a picturesque riverside path. The best plant on this stretch was Wood Fescue (*Festuca altissima*). After the last car had pulled away from the car park, Craighagh Wood pulled me back. If only the others had been with me to admire the shimmering cascades of blue-green filmy fern. I was thrilled to learn that another group member returned to see it for himself in August.

In June, we paid a visit to Montiaghs Moss in the south of the county. This ASSI is home to a number of plants which are locally rare. Access to the site required completion of a very strict health and safety form and the threats of sunstroke and tick bites loomed over us. Also looming over us was the vegetation, which had responded enthusiastically to the removal of grazing. As a result, the meadow habitat was almost impossible to penetrate. The better ground was the lowland bog.

Despite our disappointment at the site condition, we came away with a nice list of plants. Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) was everywhere. In the pools we saw White Beak-Sedge (*Rhynchospora alba*), Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*), Many-Stalked Spike-Rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*) and Cowbane (*Cicuta virosa*). One particularly rich area yielded Lesser Butterfly Orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*), Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*) and Red Rattle (*Pedicularis palustris*). Our best find was Least Bur-Reed (*Sparganium natans*) in its only modern county site.

After lunch, we moved to Bartin's Bay on the shores of Lough Neagh and walked from there to a small nature reserve at Tolan's Point. We passed Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) growing in a piece of waste ground and saw some of the typical Lough Neagh flora in the nature reserve, including Flowering Rush (*Butomus umbellatus*), Yellow Loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) and Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*). Maybe I should have carried out a more thorough health and safety assessment for Tolan's Point as, further into the reserve, we had an unexpected encounter with a couple of horses and were swarmed by Lough Neagh flies.

Undeterred, we embarked on a long weekend of botany in July. This event was advertised in the main BSBI field trip programme, so we had quite a few extra pairs of eyes, including those of the Rough Crew's intrepid Rory Hodd, who was keen to join us for the Friday outing to Fair Head. In the morning we scrambled down at the west end of the cliffs and saw Aspen (*Populus tremula*) nearby. However, the weather was soon to deteriorate, and the ground conditions became treacherous. Ciaran Kinney was our local guide, and his experience and patience was vital in getting us out safely. Plant-spotting was far from easy, but we saw Roseroot (*Sedum rosea*) on the cliffs below Lough Doo where we ascended again.

We drove round to the eastern end of the cliffs for a much-needed lunch break. Thankfully, the weather improved. The clouds lifted and so did our spirits. Botanising was much easier in the afternoon, although the steep wooded slopes were often tricky to traverse. In the woods, we saw quite a bit of Hay-Scented Buckler Fern (*Dryopteris aemula*) and luxuriant Wilson's Filmy Fern (*Hymenophyllum wilsonii*). Rory searched diligently for the gametophyte of Killarney Fern (*Trichomanes speciosum*) which we knew to be in the vicinity. Eventually, he emerged triumphant from the darkness and everyone took turns to crawl in and see the plant for themselves. On the lower slopes, we came across Grass of Parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*) and an abundance of Agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*). We had an enjoyable meal in Bushmills to round off a rewarding day.

On Saturday, we met at Dunseverick Castle and were joined by Ruth Linton of the National Trust, which looks after some of the spectacular coastal sites which we hoped to explore. Our aim was to walk fairly quickly along the cliffs to the Giant's Causeway, seeing Zigzag Clover (*Trifolium medium*) on the way, have lunch at the stones, and then spend the afternoon at Aird. However, I had totally underestimated how long the cliff-top walk would take us. Reluctantly, I decided that most of the group would not have time to visit the Causeway. Ruth took everyone else directly onto the Aird heathland whilst I led the two visiting Rough Crew members on a forced march down to the shore to see Oysterplant (*Mertensia maritima*). As we sped along, we also spotted Parsley Water-Dropwort (*Oenanthe lachenalii*), the pink-flowered Hedge Bindweed (*Calystegia sepium ssp. roseata*) and Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*), the latter a first post-2000 county record. Gasping for breath, we rejoined the others

.....who were wading in a wonderland of lace. Aird was awash with the beautiful blooms of Whorled Caraway (*Carum verticillatum*). The mixture of dry and wet heath was home to Mountain Everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*), Fir Clubmoss (*Huperzia selago*), Pale Butterwort (*Pinguicula lusitanica*) and Lesser Tussock Sedge (*Carex diandra*) amongst many others. But no sign of our main target species. Ruth had brought an old photograph of Irish Lady's Tresses (*Spiranthes romanzoffiana*) on her phone. The background in the photograph reduced the search area but it seemed that we were maybe a week early. Finally, there was a shout and the photographers fell to their knees.

A few members visited a lovely site at Dunseverick before meandering home. Here we picked up Saltmarsh Flat-Sedge (*Blysmus rufus*), Hard-Grass (*Parapholis strigosa*) and Common Saltmarsh-Grass (*Puccinellia maritima*). Only the first of these had been seen anywhere in the county since 2000.

Sunday was a quieter day, spent around Portrush. A small group of us visited the White Rocks in the morning and Ramore Head in the afternoon. At the White Rocks, we saw Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*) on the shore, Twayblade (*Neottia ovata*) on the sea slopes and a profusion of Field Scabious (*Knautia arvensis*) on the wall of a chalk quarry beside the coast road. The last of these is the only post-2000 record for the north of the county and we can say from first-hand experience that the site is extremely well protected by brambles. At Ramore Head, records included Spring Squill (*Scilla verna*) and Heath Pearlwort (*Sagina subulata*) on the cliffs, and Tree Mallow (*Malva arborea*) and Seaside Daisy (*Erigeron glauca*) naturalised nearby.

We made another visit to Lough Neagh in August - a much more enjoyable experience than the previous one. We parked at the edge of Randalstown Forest and walked on the forest roads to the edge of the nature reserve at the lough shore. On the way we came across Broad-Leaved Helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*) but much better was to come.

A narrow path led to the bird hide overlooking Farr's Bay. Beside the path there was Orpine (*Sedum telephium*) and in the adjoining wet woodland we saw Wood Club-Rush (*Scirpus sylvaticus*) and Thin-Spiked Wood Sedge (*Carex strigosa*). Beyond the bird hide, the shoreline was more open with reed beds and shallow lagoons. We paddled around here for ages. Our plant-list included clumps of Hemp Agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum*) a little of both Nodding and Trifid Bur-Marigolds (*Bidens cernua* and *Bidens tripartita*), one flowering plant of Narrow-Leaved Water-Plantain (*Alisma lanceolatum*), scattered plants of Gipsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*) and an intense blue bed of Skullcap (*Scutellaria galericulata*). Our afternoon stop at Cranfield Old Church couldn't dim the memories of the morning.

And so it was that, in September, we gathered beside the Inver River upstream from where it tumbles down into Glenariff. The wellingtons which we were going to need for the plateau made the

rocks in the Inver River gorge very slippery. Here, we saw Golden Rod (*Solidago virgaurea*) and Northern Bedstraw (*Galium boreale*). A few aspen trees found shelter at the top of the gorge, but climbing further led us out onto the vast and treeless wilderness of the Garron.

We trudged to an upland lough with little other than Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*). Then across another tract of bog to a reported site for Bog Orchid (*Hammarbya paludosa*). More interest here, including Cranberry (*Vaccinium oxycoccus*) and Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*) but no orchid. Then on to an un-named lough with Slender Sedge (*Carex lasiocarpa*) and Bog Sedge (*Carex limosa*) at the margins.

We were beginning to lose count of loughs, beginning to question our sanity, as we hopscotched crazily across a maze of glistening bog-pools. Barely afloat, we finally reached the fenced-off, but otherwise unremarkable, wet piece of ground where the marsh saxifrage was first reported in 1920. Almost exactly 100 years later, and exhausted by our efforts, we could only admire its resilience.