

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE GHOST HUNTER

Once Scotland had announced that from 15th July it would be opening its doors once more to Sassenachs, we were up there like a ferret up a drain-pipe! With all WFS events cancelled for the year, we decided to condense our botanical efforts into a single grand tour, using five different bases to seek out five particular plants, Peter Marren-style, though without the glamorous assistants. We set our sights high, knowing that all but one of them revelled in growing at altitude miles from anywhere, but kept our expectations low, not least because of the outside possibility of inclement weather (we did have one nice day) and the distinct possibility of being ordered, mid-trip, to go home, stay home and save lives.

First up, where else, Ben Lawers, and the plant in question, Scorched Alpine-sedge *Carex atrofusca*! “You must have been within about three feet of it” Dan Watson, one of the Ben Lawers rangers, told us after we had failed to find it a couple of years previously. “Past the enclosure and in the flush just on the other side of the wall at the top”. So once again we made our way through the woods, admiring several clumps of Wood Fescue *Drymochloa sylvatica* en route, up the Lawers Burn and on up to the enclosure. There we found vast numbers of Bristle Sedge *Carex microglochin*, a classic case of an extremely rare plant being locally extremely common. Then onwards and upwards to the wall, the flush and...Scorched Alpine-sedge! We were left wondering why it hadn't occurred to us to look on the far side of the wall first time round. It would have only taken thirty seconds and saved us a lot of bother, but today at least the weather gods had been kind...



Next, Cairngorms! Target species, another sedge, Hare's-foot Sedge *Carex lachenalii*. This was our one truly nice day and we were determined to make the most of it. We set off from the Ski Centre up

the track towards the summit of Ben Macdhui (Britain's second-highest mountain at 1,309m, since you ask) in bright, warm sunshine and after a minor diversion from the path found quite a bit of Curved Woodrush *Luzula arcuata* in a gravelly flush. The illustration in the *Collins Flower Guide* makes this species look very neat and elegant. In reality, it was rather straggly and underwhelming, but you have to admire its fortitude and hardiness growing where it does; we found some more later on not far below the summit.

To find the Hare's-foot Sedge, we needed to go off piste and that is when we had our encounter with the Reindeer of Doom. From afar we'd spotted it shambling silently towards us. Ill and mangy-looking, it stopped in front of us, gave us a rather baleful once-over and then headed off into the distance, disappearing over the lip of the valley beyond. It was rather unnerving and we wondered if it had been trying to tell us something. Something like, "Don't bother going down there, mate. Your plant's still under three feet of snow." Which is what happened when we got to the first of our possible Hare's-foot Sedge sites.



Undeterred, we made our way back up the valley keeping our eyes peeled for a plant that is neither large nor conspicuous. Suddenly there it was, flattened almost into a ring in the rocky grassland as though struck by a mini meteorite. We sat and communed with it for a while, contemplating its lonely existence high up on that windswept mountainside. As we were so near, we decided to carry on to the summit, where we were greeted by a lone Snow Bunting eager for cake, crisps or whatever else we could offer it. We then started the long trek down, briefly sticking our noses into the top of Coire an t-Sneachda to check up on the wellbeing of some Starwort Mouse-ear *Cerastium cerastoides* that we'd found on our previous visit. It looked as well as this species ever seems to; again, Collins does a good job of beautifying it far beyond the rather unprepossessing reality. We eventually got back to the car knackered but exhilarated.

Species number three and some respite from the mountains: Dwarf Spike-rush *Eleocharis parvula*. This turned out to be by far the easiest of our plants to find, just a short walk up a creek from the edge of Dingwall. There was lots of it, forming a sort of sward on exposed tidal mud. Although it was a bit early in the season, we soon found ourselves absorbed in trying to find one in flower, so much so that, with our backs to it, we didn't notice the incoming tide until it was lapping round our feet. We sprang up and splashed across the narrow channel that we'd crossed to get to the plants and then watched as the whole lot were swiftly engulfed by swirling water. We couldn't believe our luck; minutes later and we would never have known that they were there (but probably always best to check tide-times before you set off!).

The north coast was a revelation: a rugged, rocky coastline interspersed with pristine sandy beaches and an abundance of wild flowers. A speculative foray onto clifftop grassland at Melvich yielded Scottish Primrose *Primula scotica* in flower and Purple Oxytropis *Oxytropis halleri* just gone over, as well as myriad eyebrights. Forewarned is forearmed as they say and we whisked out our spanking new BSBI guide. We quickly put it away again, totally overwhelmed by the sheer number and variation of the plants that we were looking at. Coming at it cold doesn't work; you need to do a bit of advance swotting to have any hope of accurate or, we thought, any sort of identification. We will do better next time and hats off to Messrs. Metherell and Rumsey.

From there, we headed to Ullapool along the North Coast 500 tourist-route. Much of the journey consisted of dealing with a succession of oncoming Winnebagos on single-track roads, with boggy road-edges and sheer drops adding just the right note of unease. Our reversing skills improved considerably. However, nothing was going to keep us from our next plant: Norwegian Mugwort *Artemisia norvegica*.

Faced with weather-forecasts of unremitting gloom, we chose the morning that looked least bad. The other Assynt peaks all had their heads out of the clouds; Cul Mor didn't. The first bit is easy enough, along a well-established track with lots of Dwarf Juniper *Juniperus communis* ssp. *nana* and the dwarf form of Goldenrod *Solidago virgaurea* ssp. *minuta*, but eventually that runs out and the last bit is a slog up a steep, boggy hillside. As we approached the top, the cloud closed in and we both agreed that we had never felt so cold on a July day in the British Isles; whose idea had it been to take up botany? With our teeth chattering, we scoured the bare gravel near the top and after what seemed like an age, spotted a small yellow disc standing out against its monochrome background. There it was, just in flower, and once we had got our eye in, there was more. We would have died of hypothermia if we'd stayed and communed with this one so we took its picture as a memento and quickly headed back down, feeling frozen on the outside, but warm, fuzzy and slightly sentimental on the inside. To be revisited, but on a better day.

Fort William is not known as the wettest town in Britain for nothing so we resigned ourselves to getting up practically in the middle of the night to avail ourselves of a morning weather-window to look for our last plant, Wavy Meadow-grass *Poa flexuosa*. This is a rare plant, with only a few hundred specimens known, and Coire Leis, on Ben Nevis, is its main stronghold. Again, we had luck on our side as, at the stone bothy that stands at the mouth of Coire Leis, we met a mountain-guide who had been involved in a recent survey of the species and who gave us some useful pointers as to its whereabouts. Then came the tricky bit: not for the first time, mobile scree – lots of it! There was also a fair bit of snow, but it somehow still didn't contrive to be quite as cold as Cul Mor had been. Finally, after much two steps forward, one back and vice versa, we got to the Wavy Meadow-grass slope and rounded off what had been an unexpectedly good trip with this unassuming and elusive species. We enjoyed it so much that we're planning something similar this year, but please, please could we have just a bit more sunshine?

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