

## Book reviews

Akeroyd, John. *A beginner's guide to Ireland's wild flowers*. Sherkin Island Marine Station, Co. Cork, 2008. €7.50. ISBN 972-1-870492-23-2 p/b.

*Multum in parvo!* Here is a palm-sized, pocket guide with 162 different flowering plants, representing 49 families, illustrated with colour photographs by Robbie Murphy. There is an imaginative key at the start, and an illustrated glossary at the end. Common English names are used as the main headings, with Latin and Irish names beneath. A brief description is placed above a photograph of the plant and the species' habitat is illustrated by a sketch (explained at the front). This is certainly not intended for people who already have a

modicum of botanical knowledge, yet for a beginner or a casual visitor in the Irish countryside, it is portable and can only make any ramble more rewarding. Its design, shape and size are the same as the earlier *A beginner's guide to Ireland's seashore* (ISBN 1 87 049296 X) which contains seaweeds and coastal lichens as well as marine creatures. The two books are ideal as holiday 'companions' on any Irish beach.

E. CHARLES NELSON

Butler, Ken and Crossan, Ken. *Wild flowers of the North Highlands of Scotland*. Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2009. £14.99. ISBN 978-1-84158-832-2 p/b.

A collaboration between two Caithness residents, one the B.S.B.I. recorder for East Sutherland and Caithness, the other a talented photographer, this book presents the flora of northernmost mainland Scotland through a narrative of the different habitat types. These range from sea coasts through peatlands and 'other wet places', woodlands, grasslands and uplands to waysides and farmland. In terms of historic counties, the book covers Sutherland and Caithness plus part of Easter Ross. It is a brave undertaking to encompass an area extending from Lochinver in the west to Wick in the east and from Dingwall to Cape Wrath. A comparable area in the north of England would extend from the Mersey to Hadrian's Wall.

Each chapter is subdivided into further habitat sections such as 'dune links and machair', and the most conspicuous flowering plant species in each section are described and illustrated. There is a mixture of habitat photographs, whole plant views and close-ups of flowers and fruits; there are also one or two drawings, perhaps the least effective part of the

book. The standard of photography is high, and the printers have achieved a good level of consistency of colour reproduction. The final chapter provides an overview of 'The context' and deals with such factors as climate, geology and agricultural practices.

By revealing much of the undisturbed natural beauty of the region, the book makes a strong case for the conservation of its habitats, though I would have liked to see a little more discussion of vegetational changes. The book is designed in landscape format with three columns of text per page, and has a good index containing grid references to the principal sites mentioned. It is unusual for a well-illustrated wild flower book to have a regional focus, but this work is aimed at a more general reader than is the case with vice-county floras. Given the remoteness of the region from centres of population the market for this book is not as clear-cut as would be the case for a vice-county Flora, but it will be appreciated by local residents, visitors and armchair naturalists alike.

JOHN EDMONDSON

Harrap, Anne & Simon. *Orchids of Britain and Ireland – a field and site guide*. A. & C. Black, London, 2009. 2nd edition. £24.99. ISBN 978-1-408-10571-9 p/b.

Wild orchids are renowned worldwide for exciting passionate interest and also some of the worst traits of human behaviour, so that the production of this highly attractive book could be seen as encouraging both camps.

The writing style is easy to absorb, the layout pleasing, and the quality of the photographs is consistently superb. The authors have garnered a wealth of exotic information, with fascinating new data on the relationship of the various

species to mycorrhizal activity. The notes on growth and reproduction are excellent, clarifying life histories which can guide our efforts at conservation. Particularly interesting were the observations on the longevity of *Anacamptis morio*, although the tracking year by year of individual plants within huge colonies is fraught with difficulty. Similar studies of presumed monocarpic *Ophrys apifera* have found individuals flowering for seven consecutive years.

I particularly enjoyed the historical notes on first occurrences of species, where the authors have discovered some fascinating early records and other notes, such as the introduction and spread of *Epipactis helleborine* in North America. Recent work on *Spiranthes romanzoffiana* has shown that its seeds possess adhesive coats, which revives the possibility that they reached the U.K. on the plumage of migrating birds.

Taxonomy tends to be a contentious subject, but the authors have adopted a rational approach. They deal clearly with the three forms of the Fragrant Orchid and also the Spotted and Marsh Orchids, although they incline to split the latter into too many varieties. Similarly, they subdivide *Epipactis phyllanthes*, while at the same time noting that “between the two extremes the range of variation is almost continuous” and “variation seems to be determined by the local environment”. The placing of Frog Orchid among the *Dactylorhiza* satisfies many criteria, although it

may not satisfy all minds. Likewise the placing of Burnt Orchid within the genus *Neotinea* may in time become acceptable, although many of us have reservations at present. The later-flowering form in this country should not have the varietal name var. *aestivalis*, which applies correctly to plants of Continental origin. Both European forms have been found existing side by side on the same flowering spike in Sussex. The name var. *serotina* is preferable, although subspecific rank may be merited.

Throughout the book the authors lament the persecution that orchids have suffered in Britain in the past, both at the hands of collectors and at the feet of visitors to their sensitive habitats; see for example p. 39 *Cephalanthera rubra*. Most of us are aware of the increase of ‘botanical twitchers’ on a par with their bird-watching counterparts, and in both cases the ‘twitchers’ exhibit scant interest in the subject except to tick it off on a list. For this reason the detailed description of sites, with map references, seems perverse in the extreme. One can imagine the howl of protest from the R.S.P.B. if a book on raptors listed their nesting sites in similar detail. During this year in Sussex we have seen newly discovered rarities vanish within days of their discovery being made public. It could be argued that the data in this book is already publicly available somewhere, but to set it out in this fashion – as the book’s subtitle implies – verges on the reprehensible.

DAVID C. LANG

O’Mahony, Tony. *Wildflowers of Cork City and County*. Pp. 456. The Collins Press, Cork. 2009. £26.99, €29.99. ISBN 978-1-84889-020-6, h/b.

County Cork has received considerably less botanical study than it deserves. This large county, which takes in the Republic of Ireland’s second city, an East and West Riding and three Watsonian vice-counties, has never had a proper County Flora. As well as being large (c. 750,000 ha), Cork possesses a wealth of mountain and moorland, numerous small lakes and associated habitats, rivers and wooded river-valleys, 18th-century hedgerows, and indented coastlines, peninsulas and islands. Allin’s *The Flowering Plants and Ferns of County Cork* (1883), although most useful and packed with plant records made by himself and the best botanists of the day, is but a slim annotated checklist. Thus Tony O’Mahony’s substantial, informative and handsomely

produced book is a welcome documentation of what botanists have achieved in Co. Cork over the last three centuries. It is to the great credit of Cork City Council and Cork County Council that they have supported its publication. That is a real service to biodiversity, a precious resource in a region so economically dependent upon tourism and farming, rather than the production of some vague conservation strategy. They, author and publisher should be proud of what they have achieved. Credit is also due to Matt Murphy of Sherkin Island Marine Station, who initiated the idea and pressed hard for it to become reality.

Here is a book that not only summarizes available information on the Cork flora – a checklist at the end includes some 1200 native,

naturalized and casual taxa of flowering plants, conifers and ferns recorded since 1745 – but also takes the county and Cork City's wealth of wild plants to a wider readership, showing why they are important and need to be conserved. Co. Cork, especially its south-western peninsulas and islands, holds a substantial component of Atlantic and amphi-Atlantic, Cantabrian and Mediterranean floristic elements. The text is steeped in O'Mahony's knowledge, passion and enthusiasm, and lavishly illustrated with evocative photographs of plants and often wild and spectacular scenery. He is the ideal guide, and his most readable descriptive prose, freed from the conventions of a County Flora or field guide, brings common and rare wildflowers and their habitats to life. He weaves his own 40-year botanical contribution into the story, and includes enough detail to satisfy the botanist while presenting the information that familiarizes readers with species in an accessible manner. There is plenty of valuable up-to-date information on grasses, sedges and hybrids, many interesting references to medicinal and other plant uses, and he describes the flora throughout the year.

O'Mahony is ever conscious of the fascinating historical legacy he has inherited. He loves an old record, but is never quite satisfied unless somebody has followed it up, more than once, and he can be sure the plant is still there today. He always gives credit to those who have gone before, including sporadic visitors from the UK, and it was good to read his tributes to former county recorder Maura Scannell, with whom he collaborated closely, and to the young botanists with whom I have worked for so many years – the team that gave us *The Wild Plants of Sherkin, Cape Clear and adjacent Islands of West Cork* (1996), much cited here – on the islands and coasts of West Cork. By remarkable serendipity, the recent publication in English (edited by Denis C. O'Sullivan, Cork University Press, 2009) of *The Natural History of Ireland* by 16th century scholar Philip O'Sullivan Beare, a West Cork chieftain's son exiled to Spain, takes the first Cork plant records back to the early 17th century.

The section on Cork City (Chapter 2) is particularly significant, for a surprising number of fragmented native habitats survive within the city limits. Some 570 plant taxa have been recorded and there are some ecologically important sites such as the city's many old walls and Mount Desert Wood on an Old Red

Sandstone escarpment above the River Lee. The Cork City plant *par excellence* is Little Robin (*Geranium purpureum*), rediscovered by O'Mahony in 1969 well over a century since it had last been recorded and which doggedly persists on walls and waysides. The largely built-up areas of the great inlet of Cork Harbour (Chapter 3), are also plant-rich, especially on limestone outcrops, including Little Island, where another of O'Mahony's major discoveries, Dense-flowered Orchid (*Neotinea maculata*), occurs far south of its Burren heartland.

Other chapters include accounts of the floral riches of the far south-west, the coasts, the rivers, the still relatively unexplored mountains, the famous Mediterranean-Atlantic floristic elements, and the ferns, aliens and orchids. Chapter 15 presents the conservation challenge for botanists and decision-makers in the county. This includes a plea to control Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites fragrans*), which has spread with the building boom and now threatens stands of rare ferns and other plant communities. The book ends with a glossary, full references and general and botanical indices. Several notable rarities and phytogeographical curiosities are profiled, such as Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*), Spotted Rockrose (*Tuberaria guttata*) and Pale Dog-violet (*Viola lactea*). The heart of the work is where O'Mahony guides us around the wide variety of botanical sites on his patch. Some of these are pleasant public amenity walks such as along the riverside track bed of the old Carrigaline – Crosshaven railway. Others are small wetlands or sand or shingle strands on the coast, and a good many are unique and astonishing. One such, the Gearagh on the River Lee near Macroom, is an almost inaccessible area of woodland-covered islands in a complex of braided channels (apparently once a haunt of *potteen* makers!). It was largely submerged when the river was dammed in the 1950s, but a portion somehow has survived; as does another alluvial woodland near Dunmanway. The author repeatedly draws attention to areas and places that are little known and would repay investigation. I have no doubt that this most stimulating and inspiring book will be followed by a new wave of discovery.

It is difficult to find fault with this book. The maps at the beginning could have had more detail, with more place names, but writers of local and county Floras do tend to assume the

reader is no stranger to their patch! My only botanical quibble is that O'Mahony, in company with some other Irish botanists, disputes the native status of *Dianthus armeria* on Horse Island near Schull. Not only does this rarest of Irish plants persist there in somewhat disturbed grassland, as it does, for example, on a large scale in southern Transylvania, but also in the 19th century it was collected near The Ovens, just west of Cork City. It certainly needs legal protection in Ireland, as do Irish Spleenwort (*Asplenium onopteris*), Little Robin (*Geranium purpureum*) and other rarities for which O'Mahony rightly draws attention to a lack of official recognition.

Irish field botany is apparently thriving, although perhaps not to the same degree as in the latter part of the 19th century when the Rev. Thomas Allin published his little Flora. In 2008 we saw the publication of an exemplary Irish County Flora, *Flora of County Waterford* by Paul Green, and now Tony O'Mahony has presented us with an elegant account, a repository of riches, of the results of four busy decades of field botany in his native city and county. Cork keeps yielding new botanical surprises, not least a regular trickle of taxa new to Ireland, and this largest and most botanically fascinating of Ireland's counties now has a solid foundation for future studies.

JOHN AKEROYD

Sell, Peter & Murrell, Gina. *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol 4., Campanulaceae – Asteraceae. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006. £146. ISBN 978 0 521 55338 4 h/b.

This exceptionally detailed tome was published in 2006, since when I have found it an invaluable work of reference. However, its origins go further back. Volume 5, the first of the series to be published, appeared as long ago as 1997. Volumes 4 and 3 have awaited publication for some years (the foreword to the present volume by the late Max Walters is dated 1996), and I believe that the volumes that still await publication were largely completed some time ago. This has not helped to give this massive work a modern feel. The classification and arrangement of higher taxa predates even 'APG I' (APG III appeared in 2009), although it does harmonise with 'Stace', as the reviewer of volume 5 noted (*Watsonia* 22: 122-3).

Now that more than half of Sell & Murrell has been published, why do we not hear more of it? Why is it that British and Irish botanists still tend to consult, and quote, Stace (1999)? Why do most of us still maintain *Carex viridula*, *Zostera angustifolia* and *Dactylorhiza lapponica* 12 years after they were sunk by Sell & Murrell? Why do we usually consider that we have two species of native *Arctium*, not one as Sell & Murrell would have us believe? Why do we not maintain *Carduus acanthoides* separate from *C. crispus*, talk of *Scorzoneroides autumnalis* for Autumn Hawkbit or *Helminthotheca echoides* for Bristly Ox-tongue?

The reasons are complex, but the scholarship, dedication, industry and authority of the authors cannot be doubted. Partly, our disavowal reflects the expense of the volumes

(Volume 4 is now 2.4 times as expensive as the original price for Volume 5), and the fact that two volumes have yet to be published. But chiefly I think the reason is exactly that given as the avowed *raison d'être* of the work, the sheer thoroughness (and consequent indigestibility) of the descriptions. These are invaluable to the academic botanist, but make no concessions to those wishing to find the correct name for a plant, surely the primary purpose of a Flora.

The keys are mostly very successful, but there are no other clues as to which are the important characters or pitfalls in identification, so that it is very difficult to discern exactly how related species differ from one another. Compare the almost over-brief but succinct and non-repetitive diagnoses in Stace, miracles of relevance and brevity. There are few illustrations in Sell & Murrell, but those give little help, being without scale or any indications of comparative size and are crudely drawn. There are no series of microphotographs, which were so successfully employed by Stace.

Nevertheless, Sell & Murrell has become invaluable and even irreplaceable to the British and Irish botanist, particularly as it is by far the most complete and authoritative account of neophytes and aliens yet published. Where else will you find such a detailed and accurate account of our *Conyza*, alien *Senecio* or *Artemisia* for instance? Another special feature is the detailed subspecific treatments. Many of these minor taxa are trivial and some

are meaningless, but they are nevertheless a record of genetic biodiversity, mostly recognised by an earlier generation of taxonomists, which was in danger of becoming lost.

If you are not a fan of apomictic microspecies, you will wish to ignore considerably more than half of this volume, which is dedicated to 412 *Hieracium* species (55 of which are diagnosed *de novo* in an appendix, and are thus essentially non peer-reviewed) and 232 *Taraxacum*. It is especially valuable to have a modern version of Peter Sell's treatment of British hawkweeds all in one place, but faced with a ferocious key (I have no idea if it works, but the comparable *Taraxacum* key doesn't) and no illustrations, I pine for a more user-friendly version to ease me into hawkweeds, similar to Tennant & Rich (2008). As a taraxacologist, I am struck by how many of our hawkweeds have only a single locality. An informal *modus operandi* has long since been practised by batologists and taraxacologists, whereby a new entity must be known from a number of localities over a reasonable area before it rates diagnosis as a new 'species'. All the hawkweeds and dandelions have been given English names. Coming up with nearly 700 new 'handles' must have exercised the authors' ingenuity considerably.

It is inevitable that such a complex work will have its mistakes, but the proof reading seems to have been very thorough. Lead 42 of the Asteraceae key has *Crepis* without rhizomes, but three of the first four species are correctly stated to be rhizomatous. Humphrey Head is in Cumbria, but not in Cumberland, while *Linnaea borealis* still flourishes in England. Most Australian taxonomists (and the DNA) would have *Cassinia* included within *Ozothamnus*, while 'Ben Lawes' and 'Glen Dole' are recognisable typos.

I have left the best to last. Rather to my surprise, I found many of the habitat descriptions superlative. I have been chasing *Crepis mollis* recently, and was simply bowled over by the accuracy and artistry of the ecological treatment for this fugitive species. Many others are equally good. Truly, these are authors who really know their British and Irish flora, almost too well!

JOHN RICHARDS

#### REFERENCES

- Stace, C. A. (1999). *New Flora of the British Isles*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Tennant, D, & Rich, T. (2008). *British Alpine Hawkweeds*. BSBI, London.