ON BEING BSBI RECORDER FOR VC 104: SKYE, RAAASAY & THE SMALL ISLES

It is my privilege to be the BSBI Recorder for Vice-county 104, North Eudes which covers Skye, Raasay and The Small Isles. At a little under 2000 km² it is a medium-sized vice-county with quite a few islands, quite a few mountains and quite a bit of land a long way from roads.

Daylight in midwinter lasts a little over 6.6 h but in midsummer exceeds 18 h, leading to a short season of rapid plant growth. The hills only begin to green in May, which marks the start of the serious field botany season.

Over the past five years an average of 13,000 vascular plant records have been made each year in VC104 (i.e. three for every hour of daylight!) and Nick Hodgetts, the county bryophyte recorder, tells me that there have been about 20,000 bryophyte records made in the last 5 years, the total boosted tremendously by a week-long BBS visit to Raasay.

Skye accounts for 86% of the land area but many islands have no ferry access e.g. the 5th, 7th & 8th largest: Scalpay, Soay and Rona.

Living on Raasay means that almost every botanical excursion starts with a ferry journey to Skye. To visit Canna, Rum, Eigg or Muck for a day takes three ferries and two nights away. Being of a certain age, a Highland Travelcard makes the ferries free for me, though not for my car.

As well as the usual walking boots, microscope etc., a small boat and a camper van have proved useful tools for an island-based Recorder.

This part of the world is one of high rainfall and has the added delights of midges and clegs during much of the field season. However, the views on fine days, the potential for solitude and, of course the plants make it all worthwhile.

There are 709 whole or partial tetrads (2 x 2 km squares) listed for VC104. A few of these are entirely below MHWS and thus unlikely to contain vascular plants, with the possible exceptions of Zostera spp. (Eelgrasses) and Ruppia cirrhosa (Spiral Tasselweed).

During 2016 I visited the last tetrad with 100% land that had no previous vascular plant records. However, there remain four tetrads with 20-80% land and no records, nine with 100% land but no records from the year 2000 onwards and quite a lot more with very few records. I intend to visit most of these before 2020 as part of the current effort towards the new Atlas 2020 of plant distributions across the British Isles.

Most years see additions to the flora of VC104 of which the majority are not native locally. One of the most unexpected in recent years was the blue, garden form of Phyteuma spicatum (Spiked Rampion) sometimes called subsp. coeruleum, in the middle of the main path to Coire Lagan.

In 2012 a single specimen of Heracleum mantegazzianum (Giant Hogweed) was found in Portree but comprehensively destroyed before shedding seeds. Senecio inaequidens (Narrow-leaved Ragwort) has appeared in the gravel around the Edinbane Wind Farm turbines; it is also known in Orkney from around wind farm turbines.
However, new natives do turn up, most commonly new hybrids or subspecies, but also things like *Saxifraga tridactylites* (Rue-leaved Saxifrage) in the Kilmore Dunes in 2015 and *Spiranthes romanzoffiana* (Irish Lady’s-tresses) at Kinloch in 2014, both on Rum. Since 2000 Gordon Rothero has found two exciting additions to the flora of VC104 on the Trotternish Ridge: *Woodsia alpina* (Alpine Woodsia) in 2001 and then, just round the corner, *Saxifraga cespitosa* (Tufted Saxifrage) in 2014. Both of these sites are new low altitude records for these plants in the British Isles.

Also new was *Ononis repens* (Restharrow), found beside the A863 in 2013. The single plant continues to flourish despite the best efforts of the verge cutters – it can perhaps do more than just wrest a harrow.

There is also fun to be had with plants that are not quite new to the vice-county: *Raphanus raphanistrum subsp. maritimus* (Sea Radish) was recorded from Eigg in the 1890s but not seen again until 2015 when I re-found it on Eigg and John Hawell made the first Skye record.

Over the past decade visits have been made to almost all the smaller islands in the vice-county excluding the very smallest: Eilean nan Each (Horse Island) off the northwest of Muck remains to be visited, but I hope to get there this year. Small islands can hold unexpected plant populations. For example, good populations of *Ophioglossum vulgatum* (Adder's-tongue) are to be found on Oigh-Sgeir (Hyskeir) which marks the southern end of the Minch and on Fladaigh Chuaín between Skye and Harris, despite being apparently absent from large areas of northern and western Skye.

The Skye Botany Group been running since 2013 and makes about five field excursions per year. Overall the vice-county is now quite well recorded but there is still plenty to do. Visitors have made important contributions in recent years and are always welcome. There are resources on my website, including distribution maps and a flora of Raasay and Rona (http://tinyurl.com/Raasayflora or http://bit.ly/Raasay), and you can follow local botanical activities on my blog at http://skyeraasayplants.wordpress.com/.

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