Willows

In the twelfth of a series of articles on Raasay’s flora, botanist STEPHEN BUNGARD takes a look at Willows

Excluding hybrids and planted trees, there are five types of willow on Raasay. The commonest is Eared Willow (*Salix aurita*) which has wrinkled leaves and retains small “stipules”, little ear-shaped extensions at the base of the leaves, all season, giving rise to the common name. This plant is very widespread as a shrub, often kept quite low by grazing and wind, but can just about form a small tree in more sheltered situations.

Rusty Sallow (*S. cinerea subsp. oleifolia*) is also quite common. The leaves have a glossy upper surface and usually some rusty coloured hairs on the underside. It is usually a large shrub or small tree. Less common, but quite widespread, is Goat Willow (*S. caprea*) which has broad leaves and is most commonly found as a tree. There are some excellent large specimens along the east coast.

Osier (*S. viminalis*) is present in a few locations but usually as a single plant and always near habitation, looking very much as though it has been planted, albeit long ago in some cases. Osier is one of the willows with long thin leaves and it is thought to have been brought westwards by early man for basket-making from its native range in modern-day Russia.

Two low-lying shrubs remain to be described: Creeping Willow (*S. repens*) and Dwarf Willow (*S. herbacea*). The former is quite common especially around the coast on cliffs and rocks, but also inland. The leaves have silky white hairs on the underside. Dwarf Willow is restricted to rock crevices on higher land – Dun Caan and several tops around Beinn a’ Chapuill. It really is VERY short.

As well as hybridising frequently, giving endless fun to field botanists, the *Salix* genus supports more galls than any other in Britain. Most are caused by gall midges and sawflies and some can be found on Raasay, most noticeably as red swellings on leaves. Willow leaves and bark are the source of salicylic acid, a plant hormone used as a medicine for at least 2,400 years. A simple chemical reaction leads to aspirin and that is how aspirin was synthesised for many a year, though today the starting material is phenol from oil.

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