Notable Plants of the Raasay SSSI

Raasay Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) covers 742 hectares on the eastern side of the island, running from Eyre to South Screapadal and is so designated for both geological and biological reasons. It was first designated under the 1949 Act that created SSSIs for the first time. There is much more detail at https://gateway.snh.gov.uk/sitelink/siteinfo.jsp?pa_code=1324

The presence of limestone means that it is home to many plants that are not found on the generally acidic soils so frequent elsewhere on the island. Every six years I am asked to assess the condition of the site in terms of its vascular plants by monitoring populations of six Nationally Scarce plant species (i.e. species occurring in between 16 and 100 10 km squares in Britain):

Northern Rock-cress (*Arabidopsis petraea*) was recorded in the 1930s as “On the cliffs east of Dun Caan” but not again until 2004 when I discovered two populations in a location that sort of fits that description. The known Raasay population is about 150 – though inaccessible cliffs may conceal more.

Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*) forms mats over the rocks and as the scientific name suggests usually has flowers with eight petals. The feathery hairs of the seed head are initially twisted together then spread out to be dispersed by the wind.

Dark-red Helleborine (*Epipactis atrorubens*) is an orchid that flowers later than many on Raasay. The known Raasay population is about 150 – though inaccessible cliffs may conceal more.

Thyme Broomrape (*Orobanche alba*) is a dark red plant that parasitizes Wild Thyme (*Thymus polytrichus*) and is found scattered in small numbers especially in the southern part of the SSSI.

Slender-leaved Pondweed (*Potamogeton filiformis*) is plentiful in Loch a’ Chadachàrnaich and is present in small numbers in Loch na Meilich.

Round-leaved Wintergreen (*Pyrola rotundifolia*) has its only known location in Skye, Raasay and the Small Isles on a cliff near Druim an Aonaich where I first found it in 1991. It doesn’t flower every year and, growing on a potentially crumbling cliff edge, it is vulnerable to local extinction.

Rock Whitebeam (*Sorbus rupicola*) is a small tree of cliffs and rock outcrops. About twenty are known on Raasay, centred on Leac. Those on Rubha na’ Leac are easily accessible; those on Gualann na Leac are not.

This year is a monitoring year.

Stephen is Vice-county Recorder for the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland for Skye, Raasay and the Small Isles. His website, including Flora of Raasay, can be found at tinyurl.com/Raasayflora OR bit.ly/Raasay, and his botanical blog can be found at skyeraasayplants.wordpress.com