The Arctic-Alpines of Ward Hill, 15th July 2007

A dozen islanders and visitors set off on the long trek to Lower Station, arriving there shortly after 1530 h. The arctic skuas *Stercorarius parasticus* and bonxies *S. skua* had given us free passage, perhaps overwhelmed by our number. It was not until we tackled the steep slope between Lower Station and the summit of Ward Hill that we saw our first arctic-alpine: the stiff sedge *Carex bigelowii*. There was plenty of it most of the way up the south-east facing slope, growing amongst the heather. Little of it was in "flower" but there was enough for us to feel the rigid stems which give it its common name.

The other highlights of the climb were stunted broad buckler fern *Dryopteris dilatata* in the rabbit holes and increasing numbers of greater wood-rush *Luzula sylvatica* as we approached the summit. A rather more unexpected denizen of one rabbit burrow was a potato plant!

Ward Hill, at 217 m, is the highest point on the island. Anything living on the summit has to cope with all that the north Atlantic can throw at it. The most extreme part of all is the northern edge of the summit and the adjacent ground as it falls away towards Dronger and the north cliffs. Here the soil is shallow and vegetation sparse. Only the hardy survive, and that includes Britain's smallest "tree", least willow *Salix herbacea*. Tiny leaves less than the size of a little fingernail poked through the tight sward at the summit. Where turf gave way to gravelly, rocky slope least willow was virtually the only vascular plant, groves of it sharing the space with ample crottle *Parmelia saxatilis* and other lichens. Here and there were the sharp, dagger-like leaves of alpine bistort *Polygonum alpinum* but only a small proportion had flowered. Close perusal of the spikes showed that the plants had gone to seed, though one last flower was found on one. The least willow, too, was in fruit: flask-shaped capsules – red in most cases, but a pale yellow on some.

It is hard to think of this area as forest, but the toadstools which occur here are very much woodland fungi. Dark red and black swellings were frequent on some of the willow leaves. These, too, were formed by a fungus, in this case the tarspot *Rhytisma salicinum*.

The other "special" plant of the northern flank of Ward Hill is Wilson's filmy fern *Hymenophyllum wilsoni*. This is another major component of the barren-looking stony ground just below the summit, but was more difficult to find than usual. Eventually some green fronds were found amongst mats of dead material – perhaps killed off by the long, dry period during a major part of the spring.

The IVS workcampers joined us just as I located the filmy fern, bringing the total number of participants at one stage or another to 22 – a good turn out. Apart from the stiff sedge, our target species had all been tiny, so it was very much a hands and knees afternoon. Returning to Lower Station noses were pressed to the ground again as Pat Thomson discovered one and then a couple more Azores adderstongue *Ophioglossum azoricum* just outside the fenced off area – the first time I had seen the species at this site.

Though the trip focused on plants we saw, and failed miserably to catch, a small iridescent green ground beetle on the way up and another of the same on the summit. This was almost certainly *Notiophilus biguttatus*. Also on the summit, I spotted a micro moth, the stunning tortricid *Epinotia mercuriana*. With its colourful stripes, it was beautifully camouflaged against a lichen background. Another tortricid, the dull and unspectacular bilberry tortrix *Aphelia viburnana* was frequent on the heather.

It was a most satisfactory expedition. We had seen all our target species and the halo of fog which adorned the top of Ward Hill as we set out melted away before we reached the top allowing us fine views of the isle in warm sunshine; and the stunning landscape of the west cliffs looked even better for the thin wisps of mist drifting up each geo.

Ward Hill is a special place. Because of its exposed position, it is subjected to extreme weather, as are all the plants and animals living there. The conditions are likely to be as severe at the summit as on the tops of the Cairngorms and indeed Ward Hill shares some of the hardy species which are found there. The expression “Arctic-Alpine” is a most appropriate label.