

Late autumn flowers

Saturday, 1st September 2007 and wild late summer weather. At least the rain relented before 1000 h when 9 hardy souls from four households gathered at Schoolton. Prior to setting off on a flower hunt, the group paused to view and release the moths caught in the Schoolton moth trap overnight. Ingrailed clay *Diarsia mendica*, square-spot rustic *Xestia xanthographa*, dark arches *Apamea monoglypha* and large yellow underwing *Noctua pronuba* were well represented, along with a rosy rustic *Hydraecia micacea*, a dung beetle *Aphodius rufipes* and two species of caddis, *Stenophylax permistus* and *Limnephilus sparsus*.

The first flower we looked at was autumnal hawkbit *Leontodon autumnalis*, one of the classic flowers of late summer. This more or less replaces the very similar common cat's-ear *Hypochoeris radicata* from early August and, along with devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* which begins to flower at the same time, is to me a constant reminder that the short Fair Isle summer will soon be spent.

There followed a steep learning process for the participants, particularly those more familiar with American biomes. They were introduced immediately to marsh willow-herb *Epilobium palustre*, water mint *Mentha aquatica*, marsh ragwort *Senecio aquaticus*, tufted forgetmenot *Myosotis caespitosa*, wild angelica *Angelica sylvestris* and ragged robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*. Nearer Aesterhoull, a patch of tormentil *Potentilla erecta* hinted at a pocket of acid soil. Some sturdy white-flowered eyebrights *Euphrasia* were flowering strongly on verge of the road but most of the self-heal *Prunella vulgaris* alongside was over.

Our next stop was at Houll Cuppas. Here the interest was the arable weeds. Corn spurrey *Spergula arvensis* – an abundant weed in all Fair Isle rigs, but becoming a rarity elsewhere because of herbicides; sea mayweed *Matricaria maritima* – providing a spectacular splash of white to the entire crop; northern knotgrass *Polygonum boreale* – a regional speciality, as the name suggests, much appreciated by botanists from down south; common hemp-nettle *Galeopsis tetrahit*; chickweed *Stellaria media* – a good salad stand-by, probably more frequently used in the past. At the southern end of the rig was abundant canary grass *Phalaris canariensis* and sunflowers *Helianthus annuus*, their origin traced to spring when bird seed was apparently scattered to attract a bunting. The sunflowers are in bud. Will they flower before the autumn gales get them?

Next stop was to admire the sneezewort *Achillea ptarmica* at the eastern end of Boini Mire. The colony is as strong as it has been and was in full flower. The rare lichen *Cladonia arbuscula*, freshened by the rain, looked magnificent at the edge of Boini and again at Da Water, where the lichen heath was likened to a thick pile carpet. At the other end of Da Water, the marsh cinquefoil *Potentilla palustris* had finished flowering, but the colony is in very good shape judging from the number of leaves.

The grassland east of the school was our final stop and looked superb. Dense patches of devil's-bit scabious gave way to swathes of meadow vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis* and, crowning glory, a forest of stately corn sow-thistles *Sonchus arvensis*, their huge yellow flowers nodding in the persistent wind. This population is a genetic curiosity,

being a glabrous variant of the subspecies *arvensis* – at least unusual, and possibly a form unique to Fair Isle.

The flowering season is over for many species. Nevertheless, we were not short of flowers to look at. Others seen, offered as an *aide memoire* for Liz, Matí and others less familiar with our plants, included common mouse-ear *Cerastium holosteoides* meadow buttercup *Ranunculus acris*, pineapple weed *Matricaria matricariodes*, spear thistle *Cirsium vulgare*, plantains *Plantago* and dandelions *Taraxacum*.

Nick Riddiford, 1st September 2007