

Books for aspiring bryologists

In response to a number of members' requests for a dedicated column for beginners, the editor invited **Sharon Pilkington** to bring this new regular feature to life. In this first instalment, Sharon looks at some of the books available to help get you started.

As any bryologist knows, starting out in the study of mosses and liverworts can be daunting. Wise early investment in a few good books can smooth the path considerably and is pivotal to the progressive acquisition of knowledge. However, books are expensive, and even in a specialized field like bryology the choice can be confusing. So how do you make sure you buy the right books to meet your needs?

Introductory volumes

Many of today's bryologists have started out with a copy of E.V. Watson's classic *British Mosses and Liverworts* (£45–55). It's been around a long time, and the nomenclature is rather dated, but it's still eminently suitable as an introductory identification manual. Over 200 of the commonest species of British mosses and liverworts are described by means of straightforward

accounts and simple illustrations, and its low-jargon key applies to all but the rarest of British taxa. Equally useful carried in a rucksack or used with a microscope, this book will certainly help you to become familiar with many 'must-know' species, such as *Brachythecium rutabulum* and *Frullania dilatata*. It can, however, be frustrating to find many other widespread taxa, like *Sphagnum capillifolium* and *Plagiochila asplenioides*, covered only by a short footnote. Some bryologists in northern regions of Britain have also pointed out that *Watson* has a southern bias as the author was based in Reading. However, most novices are unlikely to be troubled by such matters for the first year or two, and this book still offers good value for money.

In the field, you will probably want to check your finds, and the recently published BBS *Mosses and Liverworts of Britain and Ireland: a field guide* (£25 directly from the BBS) has been designed for that purpose. Aimed squarely at non-experts,

this volume has more than 800 pages of easy-to-consult species accounts, colour photographs and illustrations. The nomenclature and taxonomy are up-to-date, and useful galleries illustrate different growth forms. Novel keys designed to be used with a hand lens enable identification of many species through plant appearance, habit and habitat. Like *Watson*, it includes handy lists of species likely to be encountered in various habitats.

Two other books are definitely worth a place in any fledgling bryological library. The sumptuously illustrated *Mosses and other Bryophytes – an Illustrated Glossary* by Bill and Nancy Malcolm is rather pricey (around £75), but it is invaluable to anybody seeking a sound understanding of descriptive terms. It has more than 1,400 stunningly clear photographs and illustrations, so if you want to see what cell papillae, serrate leaf margins, lamellae, trigones, auricles or elaters look like, this is the book to buy.

And, for a good introduction to the habitats and ecology of the British bryoflora, *Mosses and Liverworts (New Naturalist series)* by Ron Porley and Nick Hodgetts (around £55) is well worth considering. Clearly and passionately written, this book brings to life the bryophytes of British habitats as different as lowland heath, woodland, mountains and urban environments. Fascinating accounts of many different bryophyte communities and species will enable you to visit many places where you can see them for yourself.

Novices could also benefit from reading June Chatfield's *How to Begin the Study of Mosses and Liverworts*, a short guide published by the British Naturalists Association. It was reviewed in 2009 in *Field Bryology* vol. 97, p. 59.

All of these books are still in print, but two much older introductory volumes that you might occasionally see for sale secondhand and that are well worth having include *The Student's*

Handbook of British Mosses by H.N. Dixon and *The Student's Handbook of British Hepatics* by S.M. Macvicar.

Books for improvers

Once you have got to grips with the commoner species and invested in a good microscope, you will definitely need to refer to more advanced volumes to develop a deeper knowledge of British bryophytes. Tony Smith's *The Moss Flora of Britain and Ireland* (£65–70) describes all British species recognized in 2004; it is a comprehensive but rather technical flora that is nonetheless an essential companion to microscope work. For liverworts, Jean Paton's masterful *The Liverwort Flora of the British Isles* (£60–80) contains more than 600 pages and thousands of painstakingly drawn illustrations. Her book is an outstanding account of all British liverworts and is an essential reference for anyone wishing to get to know British hepatics well.

Of course many other good bryological atlases, regional floras, habitat-specific booklets and overseas publications are also available. Needless to say, there are always opportunities to acquire more books, depending on how your interests develop and of course how deep your pockets are.

Independent booksellers which stock a good range of bryological publications include Summerfield Books (www.summerfieldbooks.com), NHBS (www.nhbs.com) and Broadleaf Books (contact Roy Perry at broadleafbooks1@aol.com).

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