

After weeks of ice and snow, what a pleasure it was to botanize once again on a mild, sunny winter's day in late January, as Jonathan Sleath led us to explore Coed y Geifr Wood (SO3827), near Ewyas Harold in south Herefordshire.

We followed the course of a small stream through the deciduous woodland, which evidently overlay a rather calcareous sandstone. The bedrock exposed itself to view in one place beside a small waterfall, but otherwise we surmised the land's calcareous character from the flora it supported. The base-rich bark of frequent ash trees and hazel and elder bushes enhanced bryodiversity: *Cryphaea heteromalla*, *Neckera complanata*, *Orthotrichum pulchellum* and *O. stramineum*, *Ulota bruchii* and *U. phyllantha*, *Zygodon viridissimus* and *Z. conoideus*, together with the liverworts *Lejeunea cavifolia*, *Metzgeria violacea*, *Microlejeunea ulicina* and *Radula complanata*. Tufa in and beside the stream encouraged *Eucladium verticillatum* and *Palustriella commutata*, and the floor of the wood held *Cirriphyllum crassinervium* and *C. piliferum*, *Isothecium alopecuroides*, *Rhynchostegiella pumila*, *Anomodon viticulosus*, fruiting *Homalia trichomanoides*, and *Porella platyphylla* draped the bases of tree trunks near the stream.

Soil and rock by abandoned lime-kilns at the bottom of the wood supported *Ctenidium molluscum*, *Mnium stellare* and *Rhynchostegiella tenella*, and close inspection of disturbed soil on the path yielded *Archidium alternifolium*, *Ephemerum serratum* s.s. (which seems to prefer woodland to arable fields, at least in the Welsh Marches) and *Fossombronina pusilla*.

We chose a very pleasant day for our ramble in February too, when the cemetery at Bridgnorth (SO7293) kept us busy during the morning. This was our first opportunity to test the first edition of the new *Field Guide*, and it passed its examination with honours.

Much of the substrate in the cemetery proved acidic – at least, that's what the bryophytes seemed to think. Only one or two of the gravestones were

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of imported, more base-rich material. An outcrop of natural sandstone bore *Cynodontium bruntonii* and *Racomitrium heterostichum*, and a nearby gravestone supported a colony of *Syntrichia virescens* at its third known locality in Shropshire. This little moss is more frequently recorded in the East Midlands than the West, but perhaps we've been overlooking it. On the other hand, *Cynodontium bruntonii* was very much to the east of its heartland in Wales.

After lunch we walked up to the sandstone cliffs of High Rock behind the cemetery, where some of the strata bore unmistakable bryological evidence of base-enrichment, with colonies of *Anomodon viticulosus*, *Eucladium verticillatum*, *Mnium stellare* and the liverwort *Porella platyphylla*. We searched in vain for *Tritomaria exsecta*, found by Eustace Jones in 1942 – the only record of this uncommon liverwort in Shropshire – but consoled ourselves with a puzzling form of *Barbilophozia attenuata* that lacked all sign of attenuated shoots, and more *Cynodontium bruntonii* as well as *Zygodon stirtonii*. The view of the town far below us and the River Severn, silvery in the late afternoon sunshine was as worth our climb to the rocks as were the bryophytes we found.

Another brilliantly sunny day dawned for our excursion in March to Clunton Coppice (SO 3380/3480), a reserve belonging to the Shropshire Wildlife Trust in the Clun Valley west of Craven Arms. Members of the Clun valley branch of the Trust met us to learn about their reserve's bryoflora; in all, 20 souls were present as a Red Kite sailed overhead,

wondering what the excitement was all about. The wood is accurately named, being coppiced oak on the south (north-facing) side of the valley, and most of the species we noted are common and widespread, making a suitably limited selection for the numerous bryological beginners present who were trying out their new field guides.

The lane-side banks showed us many of the usual suspects found on acidic soil banks under trees – *Calypogeia fissa*, *Diplophyllum albicans*, *Dicranella heteromalla*, *Mnium hornum*, etc., and a patch of *Cephalozia lunulifolia* was also present. Brian Burnett found *Platyhypnidium riparioides* on the lane's tarmac, which was ecologically disorientating to those who know it as a common moss of water courses; perhaps the lane is wetter than we know after rain.

Despite the history of coppicing, colonies of *Dicranum majus* were luxuriant and profuse, and rotting stumps and logs grew *Aulacomnium androgynum*, *Tetraphis pellucida* (another good pair for beginners to see and distinguish) and *Lepidozia reptans*. Tony Cooper, the local warden kindly showed us around the reserve, and took us to his cottage nearby for refreshments (including a 'wee nip' to keep out the cold). Suitably rehydrated, Tony led us down to the bottom of the wood, where a small stream with elder and willows nearby provided sufficiently humid conditions for *Orthotrichum pulchellum*, *O. stramineum*, fruiting *Zygodon conoideus* and *Metzgeria violacea* to thrive.

After a long summer's recess, we met the recently formed Non-Flowering Plant Group of North Wales on another fine day in October at Llanymynech Rocks (SJ2621/2622) near Oswestry on Shropshire's north-west border with Montgomeryshire, where limestone rock and soil provided a good grounding in calcicoles for several bryological beginners: the liverworts *Porella platyphylla* and *Scapania aspera*, alongside mosses such as *Aloina aloides*, *Bryum radiculosum*, *Campyllum protensum*, *Ctenidium molluscum*, *Didymodon acutus* and *D. ferrugineus*, *Ditrichum gracile*, *Encalypta streptocarpa* and *E. vulgaris*, *Fissidens*

incurvus, *Homalothecium lutescens*, *Neckera complanata* and *N. crispa*, *Palustriella falcata*, *Tortella tortuosa*, *Trichostomum brachydontium* and *T. crispulum*, and *Weissia controversa*.

Despite a poor forecast, the weather stayed fine for our last meeting of the year in November at Pole Gutter (SO5784/5884) on the western flank of Brown Clee Hill in south Shropshire. Several bryologists have explored Brown Clee in the past, but seldom reported uncommon species – in contrast to Titterstone Clee's more illustrious bryological pedigree. So it was intriguing to find that although the valley of Pole Gutter is mainly unshaded sheepwalk with much bracken, it also has several small exposures of calcareous sandstone along the southern side of the valley, with quarried spoil at one spot. This ground carries an interesting range of calcicoles, amongst which we noted *Aloina aloides*, *Campyloadelphus chrysophyllus*, *Campyllum protensum*, *Ditrichum gracile*, *Encalypta streptocarpa*, *Fissidens incurvus*, *Gyroweisia tenuis*, *Orthotrichum cupulatum*, *Rhynchostegium murale* and *Seligeria recurvata*. Further up the valley, the same geological stratum supports *Ditrichum flexicaule*, *Seligeria donniana* and *S. pusilla*, and several flushes have very fine stands of the calcicolous *Philonotis calcarea*.

A small stream further widened the bryodiversity we encountered, with plentiful *Brachythecium plumosum* and *Hygrohypnum luridum* on stones, together with much less *Sanionia uncinata*, and the base-rich bark of ash trees on the bank sported *Frullania dilatata*, *Orthotrichum pulchellum*, *Ulota bruchii*, *U. phyllantha* and *Zygodon viridissimus*.

Walking back over the common past the prehistoric hillfort of Nordy Bank, the sinking sun cast long shadows from a myriad of hedgerows in the valley below, across to the Long Mynd and beyond to a skyline of Welsh hills propping the precipitous heavens. How delightful it is to botanize at leisure on a fine day in the midst of such magnificent scenery.

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