

ARABLE BRYOPHYTES. A Field Guide to the Mosses, Liverworts and Hornworts of Cultivated Land in Britain and Ireland

Ron Porley

Published by WILDGuides (2008)

£17.95 (available to BBS members at a discounted price – see enclosed advert)

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Ron Porley's *Arable Bryophytes* is attractively produced and contains illustrated descriptions of 47 species (including a few rarities), together with brief notes describing more than 30 other species known to occur in British and Irish arable fields.

The guide's best features are its illustrations – both colour photographs and black and white line drawings. Jonathan Graham's drawings and nearly all the photographs are of excellent quality, and give a very good impression of what the species look like and how to distinguish each of them. The guide therefore fulfils its primary function of enabling botanists to identify arable bryophytes in the field, and goes a long way towards taking the mystery out of identifying arable bryophytes.

In addition to photographs of whole plants, the guide also contains many excellent photo-

micrographs of small features such as rhizoidal tubers. Although some species have tubers that can be seen with a hand lens, others have tiny tubers that are well camouflaged, and it rather stretches the bounds of credibility to expect to discern them in the field. Even so, bryologists will welcome their inclusion in the book because most other identification manuals do not illustrate tubers well or comprehensively.

The guide is relatively free of typographical and similar errors, although on page 23 it does state that 'one micron = one tenth of a millimetre'.

What should the buyer beware of?

The book's subtitle states that it is a guide to the bryophytes of cultivated land. Yet there is no discussion of how and why the bryofloras of gardens, parks, etc., differ from those of arable fields. Although differences between the bryofloras of arable fields and other kinds of cultivated land may not be crucial to identifying which species are present in such habitats, the differing conditions affect which species occur there.

There is no key to identifying species. Instead, 18 pages are given over to tables that summarize the most distinctive features, habitats and distributions of 86 species, and half of this space merely gives the Latin and English names, a stylized representation of the plant's form, and the pages on which the main accounts can be found. Most botanists trying to learn how to identify arable bryophytes will not want to trawl through a list of 86 species, and would have found a key with thumbnail drawings beside the couplets a quicker and more effective means of identifying plants.

Sizes of plants are indicated by the use of images of ladybirds at various magnifications. I found this confusing and ambiguous, and would have much preferred scale bars in each photograph. The justification given for using images of ladybirds (that individual plants vary in size) is unconvincing, as intraspecific variation in size can be (and indeed, often is) mentioned in the accompanying text.

'Scientific names for mosses follow Smith (2004)' (p. 22). But not all do: *Phascum cuspidatum* is treated as *Tortula acaulon*, *Pottia davalliana* as *Microbryum davallianum*, *Oxyrrhynchium hians* as *Eurhynchium hians*, *Kindbergia praelonga* as *Eurhynchium praelongum*, and *Pseudoscleropodium purum* as *Scleropodium purum*.

The guide comes in a plastic jacket in order to afford some protection in the field. However, the jacket on my copy began to disintegrate within 48 hours of arrival.

The recommended retail price is quite high for a fairly slim volume, and one wonders how many botanists will feel inclined to buy a guide that only helps them to identify bryophytes in arable fields. Moreover, other habitats have a higher perceived conservation status than arable fields, and if (as the back cover indicates) this guide has been produced to highlight the

conservation importance of arable bryophytes, will a comparatively expensive book of such limited use achieve its aim? I hope it will, but also wonder. However, that is more a problem of merchandizing than a criticism of the guide's efficacy in helping people to identify arable bryophytes.

Mark Lawley (e m.lawley@virgin.net)

An extended version of this review will be available in *Journal of Bryology*, vol. 31, part 1.

HOW TO BEGIN THE STUDY OF MOSSES AND LIVERWORTS

June Chatfield

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Recent bryological literature aimed specifically at the complete novice has been pretty thin on the ground. The Society is addressing the identification issue with its forthcoming *Field Guide*, so this short booklet by June Chatfield on studying bryophytes is very timely. But how does it measure up?

It is quite clearly aimed at the absolute beginner, and both tone and content attempt to make the study of bryophytes interesting and non-intimidating, even to the extent of a consistent use of common names as well as latin. Introductory pages on what bryophytes are and the habitats in which you can expect to find them are followed by more detailed accounts of the structures of both mosses and liverworts, with perhaps more emphasis on the former, covering both general morphology and more detailed accounts of leaf and sporophyte structure. Life cycles, naming and even growing bryophytes are also briefly covered, and the whole book is fully illustrated by both colour photographs and excellent line drawings; you also get a decent set of references.

On the minus side there is no real coverage of the need for a lens and its use, and where a beginner might get one. Lens use is mentioned a couple of times in passing, but surely this tool is essential to the whole business of bryology? Oddly enough, despite this, there is a short account of microscopy and even a very brief mention of section-cutting which I suspect might put the beginner off. The one important item I feel is missing is a glossary – everything else is covered well, so this tends to stick out a bit. My final moan is aesthetic – the sections of the work are somewhat oddly placed, with general and introductory material at both the beginning and the end, and the environmental information in three separate places which, for me at least, breaks up the narrative.

There are always things which one might put in or leave out of a book of this kind, and there is some inevitable simplification, but overall June has produced a very useful short guide from which the absolute novice could only benefit.

Martin Godfrey (e martinandrosie@aol.com)

