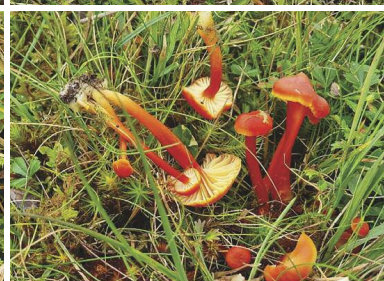
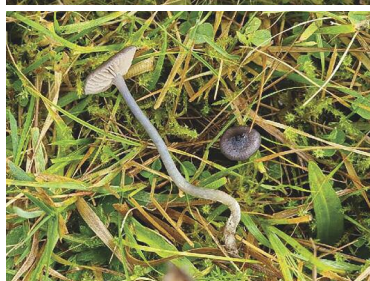
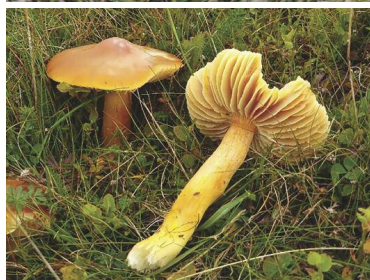
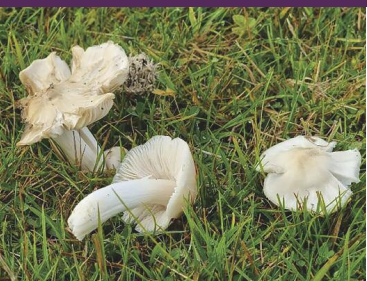


BSS News

Botanical Society of Scotland



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Editorial

Jonathan Silvertown & Chris Jeffree

Whoever it was (we are not telling) who decided BSS News should be in full colour and would be designed by the talented Emma Quinn, handed the editors (us) the keys to a sweetshop. And have we got goodies for you! James Callaghan's *Mushroom Hunting from Space* is packed with brilliant photos of waxcaps; Richard Milne vividly previews his now complete set of photographs of every plant species in Britain; In David Burslem's gripping article about how he identified the real source of fraudulent Scottish tea, the *BSS News* publishes its first Crime Report; The BSS' own tea sommelier, Celia Aceae, tastes some of the authentic teas now being grown in Scotland and looks forward to the day when we will have our own distinctive tea terroir, and that's just for starters.

Among the many richly illustrated field trip reports in this issue you will see fossil finds, fungal forays, botanical bonanzas and memorable mosses. All this, and our events calendar on the back cover, will mean that you'll want to hang on to this issue for all the exciting months to come.

We thank all the contributors to this issue of BSS News. It is written largely by and entirely for members, so why not contribute yourself? If you would like to write or submit photographs for *BSS News*, please drop us a line at **BSS-contact@botsoc.scot**. Anything of botanical interest will be considered. The deadline for copy for the September 2026 issue is July 15th, but you needn't leave it till then to write.



Notice of the Annual General Meeting 2026

The BSS Annual General Meeting will be held on Thursday 21st May 2025 at 7pm, immediately after the final spring lecture at the Edinburgh Royal Botanic Gardens (RBGE).

Further information about the AGM will be sent out by email by 7th May 2025. If you have an email address and are not currently receiving emails from the BSS then please log in at botsoc.scot and update your details or contact the membership secretary at membership@botsoc.scot.

At the AGM we will report on our activities over the last 12 months, present our draft financial accounts, elect members to our governing body (BSS Council) and answer your questions about the BSS. If you have any other business that you would like to add to the agenda, then please inform the BSS general secretary at BSS-Contact@botsoc.scot



Jonathan Silvertown

From the President's podium

When I became BSS President 3 years ago, a question that I asked myself and anyone who would listen was "What does BSS do that is unique among our sister organisations like BSBI, RBGE, Plant Life and Scottish Wildlife?" The answer is that we uniquely embrace the purview of all those organisations by providing a social and intellectual hub for anyone interested in plants and fungi. Our terrific lecture series illustrates this role well. It brings together our own members, Friends of the Botanics, university students and staff and many others. Our field trips are mainly held jointly with sister organisations, as you will see when you read the accounts in this issue of *BSS News*.

The link that I think is most valuable and that BSS is especially well-placed to provide is between the generations. A quarter of our members are students and they play a full role in all our activities, from field trips to the Plant Pub, naturally. There is probably nowhere else in Scotland where 19-year-olds are to be found regularly in conversation with veteran botanists with 50 and 60 years of experience. This is how the baton is passed and new botanists are made. Young people today are more interested in plants and fungi than I can remember and they are doing exciting things. In this issue, read James Callaghan's summary of his prize-winning research *Mushroom Hunting from Space*, Toby Cullen's account of BSS Student events, and let's all celebrate with the team from Aberdeen University who won the 2025 Botanical University Challenge in Cambridge.

As ever, do say hello at lectures and the Plant Pub, or drop me a line at bss-contact@botsoc.scot

From Rich Wilson's Publicity Desk...

Just a quick update on the socials that we use to publicise events, in addition to the email notifications sent to members. Our followers continue to grow and as of January 2026 we have, in round numbers, nearly 3,000 on Bluesky; 2,000 on Facebook; >250 on our student Instagram account and >100 on the general one. Nearly 500 subscribe to our YouTube channel and 68 people connect on LinkedIn.



If you follow us only on X, please switch to Bluesky now since we no longer use X. Find us @botsocscot.bsky.social

Our membership secretary Fiona Maguire writes...

It's a frosty morning, spring is in the air, snowdrops are flowering, the Field Meetings will be underway shortly, so it's a quiet time to catch up.

I am relatively new to the membership post, and I'm happy to say how welcoming the Council has been – not least helping me with the quirks of the admin system. have enjoyed meeting members and I look forward to getting to know more of you.

Though I'm one of the least plant knowledgeable members of BotSoc, I've had wonderful, patient encouragement from everyone – the breadth of knowledge being shared with enthusiasm is phenomenal. And if you are new to BotSoc, I warn you: it's infectious! The present BotSoc membership sits healthily at around 280, but growth is good, as the plants know, so encourage your friends to join. It's a bargain!

If you have any questions regarding membership, do email me at membership@botsocscot



The Urban Flora of Scotland project

John Grace reports

Our Urban Flora team has been working hard to complete the book (provisional title: *The Urban Flora of Scotland*). The section I'm working on at present is an attempt to identify the species that are on the increase, and the ones that are declining. This turns out to be a challenging task.

We would be glad to receive suggestions of species you think are increasing or declining. I can make a statistical test to see whether they really are changing (email me: jgrace@ed.ac.uk). We are also compiling brief descriptions of about 1,200 species, with maps and photos of many of them.

Here is an outline of the book's content (we do not have a publication date yet):

Chapter 1 | Introduction | 37 pages

1.1 Brief history of botanical recording, 1.2 Scotland's changing climate, 1.3 Processes of urbanisation, 1.4 Air pollution and contamination, 1.5 Microclimates and urban heat island, 1.6 Weeds and their attributes, 1.7 Herbicides, 1.8 Pollinators.

Chapter 2 | Habitats and their biodiversity 24 pages

2.1 Habitats concept, 2.2 Buildings and walls, 2.3 Roads, railways and footpaths, 2.4 Aquatic habitats, 2.5 Parklands.

Chapter 3 | Exploration of the records 44 pages

3.1 Regional differences and their relation to east-west and north-south, 3.2 Towns versus cities, 3.3 Traits of urban species, 3.4 Distribution of alien versus native.



Erophila verna, Common Whitlowgrass an early-flowering denizen of road verges and pavement cracks. © Chris Jeffree

Chapter 4 | Records of the vascular plants 180 pages

We will list about 1,200 species and for 400 of them we will have descriptions, often with photo and map of their distribution. (large task, mapping format perfected now).

Chapter 5 | Records of the bryophytes 64 pages

We will list about 400 of them, and for the more interesting ones we'll have full descriptions, often with photo.

Chapter 6 | The changing flora | 44 pages

Review of 'new arrivals' and 'decliners' and the causal agents of change.

Chapter 7 | Urban Tales | 20 pages

Invited articles consisting of dialogues and events during our years of survey.

Meanwhile, I'm glad to announce that the Special Issue of our science journal *Plant Ecology and Diversity* is finally published online. We call it *Urban Floras – a contribution to biodiversity and ecosystem services*. There are nine articles and you might be especially interested in several of them – go to pages 221–348 of the 2025 issue and have a look. Members who have opted to subscribe to the journal (cost £10) can access it by logging in at botsoc.scot. Some of the articles are open access and available to all.





Botanical Society for Students

Toby Cullen, student rep on BSS Council



Student group at Glasgow Botanic Gardens

The academic year so far has been great for the student subgroup of the BSS! We have built on last year's strong student presence and are firmly established in the University of Edinburgh's society sphere. We have had a number of student events and there are plenty more to come over the year, and BSS lectures and socials have had a great turnout so far.

Professor Dave Wilkinson's fantastic lecture in September on mycorrhizal fungi and pop science attracted a lot of attention from EUSA's Fungi Society, who decided to make attending the

lecture an event and brought around 15 people! Many student members also attended Professor Sandy Hetherington's fossil field trip in East Wemyss, and we were well represented at the University of Edinburgh's IMPS Day in December despite it being near exam season. We had a number of volunteers for the Scottish Botanist's Conference, where a number of us helped with the book stall set up, as well as RGBE's Taxonomy Day, where we got to inspire secondary school students from around Edinburgh with the joys of botany (and had a blast seeing the greenhouses). As for subgroup-specific events, we have had Dr Richard Milne give us readings from his new book, *The Glories*, as well as his older titles such as *Misjudgement Day*. We also had an absolutely lovely tour of the Glasgow Botanic Gardens with the incredible Christine Nicholson and Stevie Jacusz who shared their wisdom with us on their stunning orchid, fern, and begonia collections. In future, in line with my earlier goals, I am going to try build stronger relationships with societies in other universities both in and outside of Edinburgh by doing more joint events.

We have been invited by the Editors to create a Student Special Issue of the *BSS News* for September 2026. This is of course when new students arrive, so if you'd like to share your botanical enthusiasm and knowledge with them, get in touch. We are looking for short articles about anything botanical. Do reach out to me if you have something to offer! The copy date is July 15th.

How to get in touch



Learn more about the student group at botsoc.scot/students/



Our Instagram page is at [instagram.com/botsocscot/](https://www.instagram.com/botsocscot/)

Find us at <https://botsoc.scot/about/contact-us/>

Max Fontaine, a member of the winning Aberdeen team at the Botanical University Challenge, shares the excitement of the event



The Aberdeen team of Max Fontaine, Amy Beach, Justin Saddler, Taran Murphy and Santiago Castano Siroso. Photo courtesy of BUC

Botanical University Challenge (BUC) is an annual inter-institutional botany themed competition in which teams of five undergraduate and postgraduate students from higher education institutions compete against each other through answering questions on themes across botany. In light of the decreasing cultural awareness of plants, BUC was launched in 2016 to cultivate a network of plant-aware students and address feelings of isolation in the botanical community.

Our University of Aberdeen team, formed of 3 undergraduate students (Justin Saddler, Amy Beach, Taran Murphy) and two PhD students (Max Fontaine and Santiago Castaño Siroso) competed in 5 rounds with successively harder questions, each time teams being eliminated. Of 31 teams competing initially online, Aberdeen made it into the last 4 in the semi-finals and finals that were held in person in Cambridge Botanic Gardens. After a victory against The Eden Project in the semis, we were up against Plymouth University. The final was nail-bitingly close, and Plymouth's performance was incredible; however, I am proud to say team Aberdeen came out triumphant. Search Botanical University Challenge 2025 to watch the finals on YouTube.

The fun didn't end at the quiz, after the finals the BUC team and Cambridge Botanic Gardens put on a two-day botany festival full of talks, workshops, and social events such as making vegetable instruments and guided tours of the tropical nursery. Some highlights included a talk given by Ruth Davis OBE, UK Special Representative for Nature, who gave reflections on her time working in policy. There were also workshops such as an Introduction to Orchids, Tropical Plant Identification, as well as a mini FISC run by BSBI representatives.

Team member, Amy Beach adds *"BUC2025 was a fantastic experience! The two-day botany festival after was filled with fellow plant enthusiasts, easy to spot by their botanical themed fashion! There were nights out, games, workshops and plenty of networking opportunities. The quiz itself is just a fraction of a much greater event, bringing together a nationwide botanical community."*

In a time when botanists are becoming almost as rare as some of the plants they study, the sense of community and connection fostered by BUC is incredibly valuable. Although the BUC 2026 finals and festival will be hosted by the University of Reading, it would be great to see a Scottish institution host the festival in coming years.

Editors' Note: The BSS supported the BUC with significant donations in 2024 & 2025 and looks forward to seeing this event in Scotland.

Field Excursion Reports



Carnoustie golf courses, 20th May 2025

Anne Reid reports



Astragalus danicus (Purple Milk-vetch)

This joint meeting between Dundee Nats and the Botanical Society of Scotland had the main aim to record plants, and anything else of interest, on the west end of the golf courses at Carnoustie, which has ponds, woodland and heath. There is an ongoing interest in the biodiversity of the golf course, led by the course itself, and all the records will be fed into their database.

We started with Viper's Bugloss (*Echium vulgare*), Long-headed Poppy (*Papaver dubium*) and White Campion (*Silene latifolia*) near the entrance and then followed the main track down towards the ponds recording the edges as we went. A Blackcap and Willow Warblers were singing here and Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) were in full flower and grow in colourful profusion at this, wilder, end of the golf courses.

The pond in the south west corner of the site had a number of interesting sightings. In the damp ground at the pond edge a flowering spike of Cuckoo Flower (*Cardamine pratensis*) had a single Orange Tip Butterfly egg on the fading flower head. The shiny, round leaves of Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) were also found here, possibly suffering from the low water level in the pond, and also Marsh Lousewort (*Pedicularis palustris*) and Amphibious Bistort (*Persicaria amphibia*).

Field Excursion Reports

Perhaps the most interesting area was the hard-standing left after recent cable installation works from an offshore windfarm, on an area which was previously heathland. This was ideal for ephemeral plants like Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*), but also for Bird's Foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and Storksbill (*Erodium cicutarium*). We were slightly surprised to find several small clumps of Purple Milk Vetch (*Astragalus danicus*) here and wondered how it had got there, though common on the coast nearby. Buck's Horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) was also seen here and it was suggested that the earth-moving machinery used for cable installation had possibly introduced both as the work progressed inland from the dune edge.

We then worked round to the far side of the largest pond where there is some flower-rich grassland at the margin, but not easy to record in the now failing light. Two damselfly species were found roosting on grass stems which were identified as Blue-tailed Damselfly and Common Blue Damselfly, both cool enough at this stage of the evening to allow close examination. The seed heads of Northern Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza purpurella*) were prominent here, but the recent very hot dry conditions had apparently restricted the growth this year and fresh plants were not seen. The edge of this pond had some lush Gypsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*) and Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) in the muddy margin. After this we made our way back to the cars after a very successful outing on a glorious sunny evening.

The plant list was a modest 72 species, but this was partly due to the very mixed interests of the participants.



Full species list at
www.tinyurl.com/SppLists

Kinghorn Loch Bioblitz, 12th July 2025, led by Robert Mill

Saturday 12th July was dry, sunny and very warm, although it cooled a bit in the afternoon. Experts in identifying birds, flowering plants, ferns, moths, bees, wasps and their allies, hoverflies, other flies, and molluscs, as well as others with interests in general natural history, all took part – about a dozen in all. Two Ecology Centre (TEC) staff also ran sessions on pond dipping in the small pond near the path that connects TEC's land with what is now Fife's first ecocemetery, and 'kick-sampling' the Mill Burn that flows out of the Loch's sluice and into Kinghorn.



Robert Mill



Carex muricata

© Michael Kurz cc-by-sa 3

There were a few botanical surprises, such as 12 additional flowering plants, 22 additional bryophytes and four additional species of fungi. The most notable flowering plant was probably *Carex muricata*, the Small-fruited Prickly-sedge, found in the marsh at the Loch's western end. Also new for the site were American Willowherb (*Epilobium ciliatum*) and *E. x novae-civitat*is, its hybrid with Great Willowherb (*E. hirsutum*). The Alder-Wrinkle fungal gall (*Taphrina tosquinetii*) was a new record but may previously have been overlooked.



Taphrina tosquinetii

© Robert Mill

Field Excursion Reports

The most exciting finds came from the bryologists, David Chamberlain and Elizabeth Kungu of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. They had done a survey here before, in 2011. Yet on this visit they found 22 additional species, including three new to Fife: *Hennediella macrophylla* (Short Pottia), *Racomitrium heterostichum* s.str. (Bristly Fringe-moss; its taxonomic split, *R. obtusum* or Variable Fringe-moss, was also found), and



Racomitrium heterostichum
© CE Jeffree

Ulota intermedia which is another recent taxonomic split (from Crisped Pincushion, *Ulota crispa*) that so far still lacks an English common name of its own. These three mosses plus four wasps and one bug have all since been confirmed as new vice county records for Fife.



Group of recorders © Maria Chamberlain

2025's BioBlitz at Kinghorn Loch was a great success. In a single day it yielded 619 species of which 139 were new records, raising the site total from 1,807 to 1,946. Further recording since the BioBlitz has increased the total even more: the 2,000 barrier was passed in October 2025 and at the time of writing in early January 2026 the figure stood at 2,013.

This is an abridged version of the report by Robert Mill that appeared in Kinghorn Chronicle at the end of August 2025.



Field Excursion Reports

Evanton Field Meeting, Easter Ross (v.c.106) 12 July 2025

Kiltearn Beach. Photo by Becky Middleton

Mary Dean organised a joint meeting with BSBI and Inverness Botany Group

Clear blue skies, temperatures rising to the high twenties, could this really be northern Scotland? Thirteen botanists gathered by Kiltearn Beach to explore the saltmarsh, coastal grasslands, and riverside. Kiltearn Beach lies on the north bank of the Cromarty Firth, within the tidal zone, close to the small town of Evanton. The area is popular with local walkers.

We started by walking down onto the saltmarsh and soon saw several patches of *Spergularia* (Sea-spurrey) in flower. Examination of the tiny seeds and flowers showed that we had both *S. media* (Greater Sea-spurrey) and *S. marina* (Lesser Sea-spurrey). Enjoying the sunshine we identified common saltmarsh plants such as *Lysimachia maritima* (Sea-milkwort), *Silene uniflora* (Sea Champion) and *Atriplex littoralis* (Grass-leaved Orache) before we headed eastwards and walked across the footbridge over River Sgitheach.

Taking the riverside path inland we potted *Cruciata laevipes* (Crosswort), a rare plant in the county, intertwined with the trackside flora such as *Vicia cracca* (Tufted Vetch), *Veronica chamaedrys* (Germander Speedwell) and *S. dioica* (Red Champion). Further on, a patch of riverside gravel provided a few species including a Monkeyflower, keyed out as *Erythranthe x robertsii* (Hybrid Monkeyflower), the most common Monkeyflower taxon in Easter Ross. It is the hybrid between *E. guttata*

(Monkeyflower) and *E. lutea* (Blood-drop-emlets). Continuing along the path we came across a large patch of *Petasites japonicus* (Giant Butterbur), dominating the riverbank and its large leaves spreading over the footpath and marking the turning point of our riverside route.

Returning to the shore we continued eastwards towards the lunch stop, planned to be at a wooden picnic table and bench. Such was the heat that we sat on rocks by the edge of the Firth, welcoming the cooling, coastal breeze and taking in the views across the river. After lunch we ambled over the coastal grasslands, recording *Koeleria macrantha* (Crested Hair-grass), *Pilosella officinarum* (Mouse-ear-hawkweed) and *Linum catharticum* (Fairy Flax) as we made our way towards Balconie Point. Turning inland along the edge of the saltmarsh, now partially covered by the incoming tide, we found plentiful *Armeria maritima* (Thrift), now passed its main flowering, and *Juncus gerardii* (Saltmarsh Rush). In the edges of a brackish stream, we identified several large tussocks as *Carex otrubae* (False Fox-sedge), a sedge that is not common in the vice county.

It was on our way back that the find of the meeting was made. Tom Dargie fished out an aquatic plant from a brackish stream and we identified it as *Zannichellia palustris* (Horned-pondweed). This is a new site for this plant, which is rare in Easter Ross and made a good finishing point to an enjoyable meeting.

Selm Muir Wood, 20th September 2025

Heather Forbes reports on a fungal foray: images from Nikolaos Maragkos

There were about 12 people on the joint BSS/ELFE foray comprising a good mix of members from both plus a few university students. There was a good energy to the group and we set off in the light rain past the worst of the dog poo, getting sidetracked a number of times by fungi in the first patch stretch of trees. A cluster of *Amanita muscaria* (Fly Agaric) posed like a tableau amongst the vegetation and someone somehow spotted on dead *Urtica dioica* (Stinging Nettle) stems the delightful *Cyathicula coronata*. This tiny Ascomycete has little stalked, fringed cups that make them look like jellyfish medusae. We got two *Calocera*, several highly branched *C. viscosa* (Yellow Stagshorn) on conifer wood and the more diminutive *C. cornea* (Small Stagshorn) on deciduous wood. A pale-coloured *Hebeloma* caused some debate and was later confirmed to be *Hebeloma crustuliniforme* (Poisonpie), with droplets on its gills.



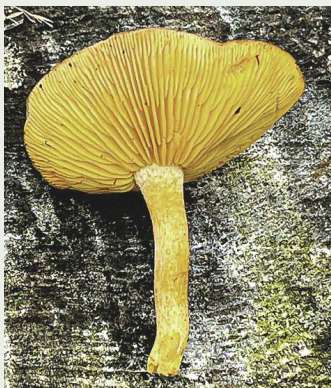
Left: *Amanita muscaria* (Fly Agaric). Right *Calocera viscosa* (Yellow Stagshorn)

We debated whether to walk up the path side of the long, tall *Fagus sylvatica* (Beech) hedge as the area behind had been felled, with several fallen *Pinus sylvestris* (Scots Pine) that had to be climbed over. People were up for trying the alternative route, though, and I'm glad we went that way because it was absolutely heaving with fungi! We spent the bulk of the foray making our way up this section, stopping for long periods in one place because there was so much to look at. Most of what we found were mushrooms, the moisture level from the recent rain having finally reached a threshold to entice the fungi to put forth fruiting bodies.

Field Excursion Reports

The habitat was a mix of Beech, dead Scots pine, young *Betula pendula* (birch), *Calluna vulgaris* (Heather), some ground flora and leaf mould, which provided a good variety of substrates for a greater variety of fungi. There were *Laccaria amethystina* (Amethyst Deceiver) and *Laccaria laccata* (The Deceiver) everywhere, with *Gymnopilus penetrans* (Common Rustgill) also plentiful and *Hygrophoropsis aurantiaca* (False Chanterelle) frequent.

A *Neoboletus luridiformis* (Scarletina Bolete) provided a diversion, where we all stood around and watched it being cut so we could see the swift change of flesh colour from yellow to blue – as you do (I also took some home so my partner and I could be entertained by doing the same thing). In the vicinity of one of the fallen Scots Pines were gathered and identified three different *Hypholoma*: *H. capnoides* (Conifer Tuft), *H. elongatum* (Sphagnum Brownie) and the common *H. fasciculare* (Sulphur Tuft), which let us compare these related species side-by-side.



Left to right: *Neoboletus luridiformis*, *Tricholomopsis decora* and *Laccaria amethystina*

One of the highlights for me was when one of the students present, Dylan, found a medium-sized yellow mushroom amongst the felled conifer stumps, which Vladimir identified as *Tricholomopsis decora* (Decorated Mop). This species is normally found further north and there are no records on NBN for the Lothian area, which is pretty cool. The whole mushroom was a rich yellow.

The weird-looking *Thelephora terrestris* (Earthfan) was growing next to some shrooms we were examining and almost got missed – it was quite a small one, but interesting. A *Scutellinia* (Eyelash fungus) species (probably *S. scutellata*) on a conifer stump was exclaimed upon, as always.

Field Excursion Reports

Once we got past the end of the hedge and back on the path we went only a bit further up and into the trees before heading back down the other side of the hedge, encountering a patch of large *Paxillus involutus* (Brown Roll-rim) emerging from the gravel at the edge; this species was also about in a few other places throughout the day. A couple of members ventured over the drainage ditch into the cattle pasture on the other side and discovered some *Psilocybe semilanceolata* (Magic Mushroom) which were brought back to the group for discussion.

Although it was past the main season for rusts, we still saw a few, including finding a *Tussilago farfara* (Coltsfoot) that had both the common rusts found on this species on the same leaf: *Puccinia poarum* and *Coleosporium tussilaginis*. *Melampsorium betulinum* covered the leaves of the young Birches.



Rather than go straight back to the car park, we looped through the woodland to see some different habitat, which gave a whole new suite of species. We had a fallen deciduous tree trunk covered in *Daedaleopsis confragosa* (Blushing Bracket), which blushed perfectly when prompted. A couple of very rotten stumps just before the car park hosted two nice Last Finds of the Day: *Tubifera ferruginosa* (Red Raspberry Slime Mould), brightly coloured and eye-catching, and *Psathyrella microrrhiza* (Rootlet Brittlestem), a mushroom with a strange, long stipe that ran deeply into the wood. Across the foray (mostly behind the hedge), we found five species of *Mycena*, including *M. polygramma* (Grooved Bonnet); four species of *Lactarius*,

including *L. deliciosus* (Saffron Milkcap) (photo above) and *L. glyciosmus* (Coconut Milkcap); four *Russula*, including *R. sardonia* (Primula Brittlestem) with its pale yellow gills; three *Amanita*, including *A. rubescens* (The Blusher); three *Coprinus*, two *Leccinum*, *L. scabrum* (Birch Bolete) and *L. variicolor* (Mottled Bolete); and two *Collybiopsis*, *C. confluens* (Clustered Toughshank) and the distinctive fluffy-based *C. peronata* (Wood Woolly-foot). Total species count: 71. **Not bad!**

East Wemyss, 28th September 2025: Fossil field meeting led by Sandy Hetherington

Nikolaos Maragkos documents a memorable fossil hunting trip

A glorious, warm and exceptionally sunny Scottish day provided ideal conditions for our annual fossil excursion. Around twelve of us, the great majority students, set off from the Ashworth Labs at King's Buildings and, travelling by car-share, crossed the Forth Bridge to the coastal exposures at East Wemyss. Upon arrival, we were greeted by an impressive number of new members joining the field team, including our youngest naturalist at just seven years of age – an inspiring sight that set the tone for the day. We made our way down to the seafront, set up base camp, and, after a hearty lunch, began our exploration of the Carboniferous rocks of Fife.

The search yielded impressive specimens of the usual taxonomic suspects of the Wemyss: *Lepidodendron*, *Calamites*, *Annularia*, and *Neuropteris*, preserved within Upper Carboniferous rocks of the Scottish Coal Measures, including shales and associated red sandstones. Amidst our palaeobotanical finds were also occasional *Unio* bivalves, embedded within their characteristic reddish-brown mudstone matrix. Before long, we were working our way along the shore, pondering that much of what is now Fife was once covered by low-lying, waterlogged forests dominated by early vascular plants.



Left: a shoot tip of *Calamites* (upside-down).
Right: extended axis of *Calamites*, with a few leaves

We collected several well-preserved fragments of *Lepidodendron*, easily recognised by the distinctive diamond-shaped leaf cushions covering the stem surface in a regular, helical pattern. These tree-sized club mosses were a key component of the swamp forests that later gave rise to much of the coal of Fife. in the broader evolution of seed-bearing plants.

Field Excursion Reports

We also found specimens of the subterranean rooting structures of these plants, identified as *Stigmaria*, with characteristic cylindrical axes and regularly spaced root appendages, well suited to a waterlogged environment some 300 million years ago. In contrast to the rocky coastline of Fife today, these plants were likely adapted to standing water and unstable substrates.

We also discovered an impressive specimen of *Calamites*, complete with a ribbed stem surface and distinct nodal architecture. These giant relatives of modern horsetails could reach tree-like proportions, clearly reflected in the size of our find. We expected that *Annularia*, the distinctive whorled leaf form associated with *Calamites*, would also be present, and soon recognised it by the radial arrangement of narrow leaves forming rings around the stem nodes. As our eyes adjusted to the finer details of the exposures, we began to spot more delicate fossil foliage assigned to *Neuropteris*. Preserved as finely veined leaflets, these seed fern remains were easy to overlook and even more difficult to recover intact, prompting reflection on the significance Left: part of a seed-fern frond of seed ferns as an important step in the broader evolution of seed-bearing plants.



Left: part of a seed-fern frond.
Right: Sketches of the three main plant groups that can be found as fossils at East and West Wemyss



The day ended with a BBQ, watching the tide drawing in, and pondering next year's fossil trip along the Fife Coastal Path. As evening fell, we returned to Edinburgh, some of us still animated in conversation about palaeobotany, others fast asleep, wilted by the richness of the day, but all carrying home the quiet satisfaction and pleasant fatigue of a remarkable field meeting. We extend our thanks to Sandy Hetherington for leading the meeting, and to all those who contributed to a rewarding day exploring the fossils of Fife.

Cramond Island, November 2025

Autumn Thomas and a group of students accompanied David Chamberlain on another bryological adventure



Crossing the causeway

Our time was limited at Cramond. The narrow causeway connecting the tidal island to the coast is submerged entirely at high tide. The coastguard is called out regularly to rescue hapless tourists who find themselves cut off by the waves. It gave our trip an extra sense of urgency: in and out in three hours, don't linger too long! No matter how fascinating the mosses may be.

The causeway itself is lined with tall stone monoliths so triangular in shape a member of our party dubbed them "the Toblerone". These structures are a boom; a military construction built during WWII to prevent hostile ships from attacking. Cramond itself

was a military outpost – complete with gun turrets – during the war. Already, as we crossed the sandy flats to the island, there was a sense of the sea bringing danger, the coast as a frontier.

Certainly, for plants, the sea brings many dangers. Salt, cold, exposure, the violence of waves, wind and storms prevent most plants from even taking hold. The coast is a place of transitions: an ecological niche formed by the confluence between two worlds.

Maritime plants exist in these in-between places. They thrive in a thin range of conditions just beyond the intertidal zone: between sea and shore, salt, sand and soil. The uniquely halophytic *Schistidium maritimum* (shown, right) is a classic example of a maritime moss found in thick clumps on the most exposed rocks, its tolerance for salt allows it to colonise substrate without competition. It is a common site on Scottish shores, but no less exciting for that.



Not all mosses found on sea cliffs are maritime; we found several common bryophytes including *Rosulabryum capillare* and *Grimmia pulvinata*. Cramond is a mosaic: acidic diabase soils sprayed with basic, salty seawater creates a mixture of acid- and base-indicating plants. The sea cliffs were peppered with acid-preferring *Grimmia trichophylla* and limestone-loving *Hypnum lacunosum* and *H. resupinatum*.



“This is the beauty of coastal ecosystems; they are places of change.”

Further inland we found more forest and grassland species, including the golden *Hylocomium splendens* and several epiphytes growing on the scraggly elders that dominate the island's centre. We recorded a few liverworts too: *Ptilidium ciliare*, which looks like heathland in miniature, and *Lophocolea bidentata*, two-toothed, watery and beautiful.

The history of Cramond Island is set out in layers. To the north, the WWII barracks and gun turrets are striking abandoned structures; concrete shells now doused in vibrant graffiti. Before the war, the island was used for sheep farming; today, the stones of a crumbling, roofless farmhouse are all that remain. Archaeologists have speculated the island was home to the Romans, the Celts, and the Anglo-Saxons, but evidence is fragmentary: a handful of coins, stories of a cist (an ancient grave, discovered – and then lost – during the war), and a nearby Roman fort across the causeway. The coast is not kind to human remains; it wears us away. So much more amazing, then, that the coastal flora, species older than the oldest cist, remain, year on year.

Coasts are temporary places. The only constant is the border itself; the line between sea and land, forever fluctuating back and forth. This is the beauty of coastal ecosystems; they are places of change. Ancient fort to sheep pasture to military outpost: people have come and gone on Cramond, but the plants remain because they change. They have adapted to the borderlands.



Clara Courtney surveyed machair grasslands, assisted by a BSS Student Fieldwork Grant



Machair, the calcareous and flower-rich grasslands unique to the west coasts of Scotland and Ireland, is a fascinating habitat. With the help of the BSS student fieldwork grant, this summer I was lucky enough to survey machair locations across 10 Hebridean Islands. This work was compared with two earlier surveys: first, the Scottish Coastal Survey (1983), a comprehensive study of many coastal sites in Scotland conducted around 1976, which established a baseline for machair plant composition at that time. Second, resurveys of the machair sites, conducted between 2009 and 2014 by Robin Pakeman and colleagues at the James Hutton Institute. A shift in functional diversity was seen between the two surveys, which was attributed to changes in climate and land use (Lewis et al., 2014; Pakeman et al., 2015, 2017). Using the same methodology, I resurveyed a selected subset of these sites to investigate temporal shifts in diversity 10–15 years after the previous resurveys and nearly 50 years after the original baseline studies. I joined Johanna Yourstone, Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Aberdeen, on her HebriBees research project, which is investigating the effects of honeybee competition on bumblebees across the islands.

Reports from grant recipients

I greatly enjoyed the experience and learnt a lot throughout it. Having not seen many calcareous grasslands before, I was constantly amazed by the floral diversity and abundance, especially of orchids. Lesser meadow rue (*Thalictrum minus*) (below left) was in flower throughout the trip and became a personal favourite. A great deal of time was spent staring at *Carex* species and I like to think my identification abilities have improved as a result. Being part of a larger research effort was very insightful, and I gained a much deeper appreciation for the complexities and limitations of fieldwork. We met many wonderful people throughout, including those who helped and accommodated us; it was incredible to hear their thoughts on the research and their connection to the land.



Left: White-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus lucorum*) on lesser meadow rue (*Thalictrum minus*)

Right: Sand sedge, *Carex arenaria*

In total, 71 5x5m quadrats were performed. Data analysis is ongoing, but I hope to have presentable results in the near future. In the meantime, I wish to thank the BSS, without whom I would not have been able to conduct this fieldwork, and, of course, I'm grateful to Johanna Yourstone and to Celia Bell, who joined us for the trip. I would also like to thank Robin Pakeman for all his assistance.

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James Scott used a BSS grant to attend a training course



Examining a Martagon Lily

A student grant from the Botanical Society of Scotland enabled me to begin developing botanical skills and kick start my future career in ecology. I attended a course held by The BSBI held in Perth that was focused on plant identification to family level, which was a fantastic starting point for a newbie such as me. Members of the BSBI talked groups of students through various plant parts and vocabulary, using resources prepared by Faith Anstey. My background in biology helped, but most terminology was new to me so the support from others in my group, especially Liz, was helpful. After time in the classroom, we went to a local park to ID plants. Learning from a number of experienced botanists, I could ask questions about difficult taxa and receive feedback on my identifications in real time. The grant directly supported

hands-on learning which has greatly increased my confidence in independently identifying common and indicator species.

An additional benefit of the grant was the opportunity to meet other students and early-career botanists. Informal discussions in the field and in the evenings helped me learn about different pathways into ecological work, such as consultancy and conservation. I have stayed in contact with some of these people, and opportunities for volunteering and further training have been shared, which I hope will develop into longer-term professional networks. The benefits of this funding have extended beyond the duration of the course. I attended another ID course later in the summer on Aquatic Plants, which built on the knowledge I gained at the funded trip to Perth. I have already applied these skills in my undergraduate research, assessing habitats prior to completing bird surveys. Being able to reliably identify British flora has improved the quality of the data I collect and strengthens my CV for future ecological roles.

Editors' note to Students: check out the BSS website to see how you can apply for a grant. The deadline is April 30th, 2026



Mushroom hunting from space

James Callaghan won the 2025 BSS thesis prize with his project using remote sensing to map waxcap grassland in Scotland

Natural and semi-natural grasslands are among the most biodiverse habitats in Europe and provide important ecosystem services for climate resilience and water quality. Unfortunately, grasslands in Britain have historically been interpreted as artificial since they eventually succeed to woodland if not maintained by grazing or mowing, and conservation has mostly focused on specific types known to host rare plants. The vast majority of permanent grassland was converted to arable land after the Second World War, and the remaining fragments are now urgently threatened by tree-planting and abandonment.

CHEGD (**Fig. 1**) is a non-taxonomic group of biotrophic fungi which have been recognised as indicators of ancient grassland in the same way that lichens and bryophytes indicate ancient woodland. Old pastures and lawns that have been maintained for generations can be botanically unremarkable but extremely fungus-rich, whilst ploughing and fertiliser cause immediate damage lasting for decades.

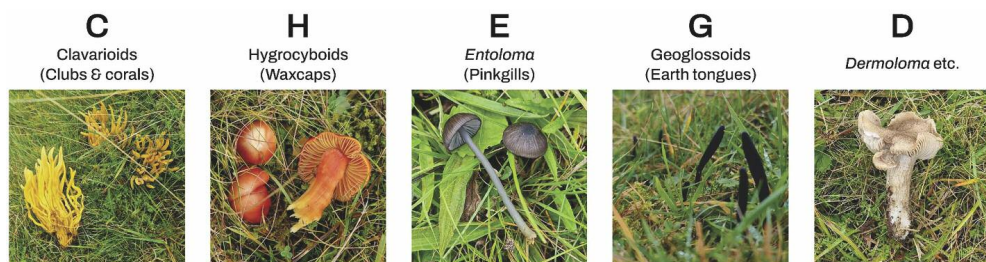


Fig. 1 Examples of species in each CHEGD group. C: *Clavulinopsis fusiformis*. H: *Hygrocybe splendidissima*. E: *Entoloma exile*. G: *Geoglossum fallax*. D: *Pseudotracholoma metapodium*.

Fungi are inconvenient as indicators, however. Fruiting bodies are unpredictable and fungi do not fruit every year, so assessing a site's importance via field surveying requires multiple visits through the fruiting season for many years. Additionally, very few people in Scotland have the knowledge and skill to survey for grassland fungi, which severely limits the number of new sites that can potentially be found each year, and days spent surveying sites that turn out to be degraded detracts time and resources from other sites with greater need of protection.



Fig. 2 A field boundary in Bathgate Hills, West Lothian, with fungus-rich grassland on the left, improved pasture on the right.

Experienced waxcap hunters describe being able to tell whether a field will be good for fungi before they start searching, since nutrient-poor species-rich grassland looks distinctly less green and rougher than agriculturally improved grassland (**Fig. 2**). Waxcap grassland is often herb-rich and mossy, but not always, and the composition of the sward varies (**Fig. 3**), so although several plant species are very often present, none seem to be more reliable indicators than general impressions from a distance.

Fig. 3 see cover image: Grassland fungi accompanied by a variety of grasses, herbs and bryophytes, found in pastures, lawns, riverbanks, sand dunes and coal spoil. Common neighbours include ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), white clover (*Trifolium repens*) and springy turf-moss (*Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*).

Multi-spectral aerial images can be used to detect such properties of vegetation as nutrient deficiency and dead foliage, and phenological changes. Habitat suitability can be modelled using climate, topography, and other ecologically relevant variables. I explored the use of remote sensing and species distribution modelling to predict waxcap grasslands across Scotland, with the aim of making it quicker and easier to find sites likely to be mycologically important.

To summarise the results, the most influential predictors of waxcap grassland were remote sensing (particularly Normalised Difference Moisture Index (NDMI) in summer and autumn; grassland that dries out in summer and never becomes waterlogged seems to be good for fungi), nitrogen deposition, elevation, and ruggedness. Remote sensing variables consistently outperformed most bioclimatic and topographic variables, though nitrogen deposition was one of the top predictors in nearly a quarter of all models.

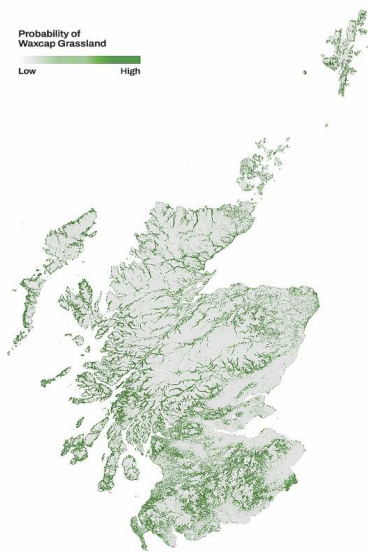


Fig. 4 Final model of waxcap grassland across Scotland, trained to predict the high-diversity indicator species *Hygrocybe punicea*. Green locations are more likely to be waxcap grassland than other habitats or other types of grassland.

Of the 12 high-diversity indicator species that were modelled, *Hygrocybe punicea* produced the most accurate map overall (**Fig. 4**). 70% of CHEGD samples (n=7,790, 122 species) were predicted with higher confidence than 80% of random background samples and 95% of pseudo-absences, and rare species were likely to be predicted with higher confidence than common species. The full map (**Fig. 4**) shows the distribution and prevalence of waxcap grassland across Scotland. Known sites are accurately predicted (**Fig. 5**), and many fragments are highlighted that may never have been surveyed (**Fig. 6**).

In October 2025, after the project was complete, the Cairngorms National Park Authority provided funding to conduct a field-based accuracy assessment. I surveyed 80 randomly selected sites predicted to be waxcap grassland around the Cairngorms National Park, assisted by grassland fungi expert E.M. Holden. 60 sites were good predictions of grassland that should be surveyed for fungi if land use change was considered, and only 4 sites proved entirely incorrect.

The map's most impressive prediction was farmland on a river terrace in the middle of a large plantation forest where most of the flat ground had been recently ploughed and sown with a cover crop, which was all that could be seen from the path. The steep terrace walls facing away from the path and a patch beside a stream hidden from view by the farmed upper terrace were covered with ancient herb-rich waxcap grassland, where I recorded *Hygrocybe punicea* (Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List) and four other species. Unfortunately, a much larger area of unimproved grassland immediately to the west had been planted with common native broadleaf trees, a deer fence had been erected, and succession to scrub was well underway. This was disappointing but not surprising since tree-planting and abandonment are currently the main threats to the habitat, and I am hopeful the waxcap map will help more good sites be discovered before they are lost.

James is currently planning his future studies but would be glad to hear from anyone interested in surveying grassland fungi or using remote sensing in similar projects. james@waxcaps.com

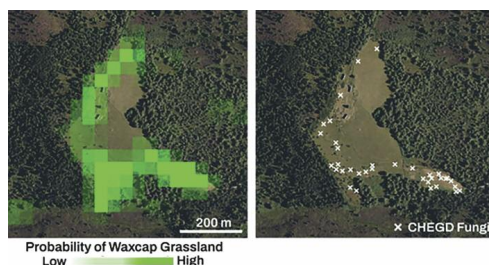


Fig. 5 Aerial view of Rynettin in Abernethy Forest, Cairngorms National Park, a well-known waxcap grassland site. Satellite imagery © Vexcel Imaging 2026, via Bing Maps © Microsoft 2026

The special plants of Perthshire

Martin Robinson spoke to a joint meeting with Dundee Naturalists' Society

Martin Robinson is the Botanical Recorder for East Perthshire for the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland. Martin began by describing his early life in Sussex where his father farmed and where his interest in wildlife was aroused. He went on to work for the RSPB in Scotland in several places where he recorded the local flora and fauna.

In 2002 he became the vice-county recorder for East Perthshire and has studied the flora there ever since. This vice-county has got a variety of habitats including some base-rich mountain areas, encouraging the development of a special flora. A flora for Perthshire had been published by White in 1898 and the Perthshire botanical recorders published a checklist in 1991. Martin has recently published an account of the special plants of the area. Martin went on to describe some of the special plants of the area beginning with Whorled Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum verticillatum*) which is mainly confined to steep dens in 12 places.

The rare Blue Heath (*Phyllodoce caerulea*) has a well-known site on the Sow of Atholl, where it was first located in 1810 and where it was nearly destroyed by collecting by nurserymen. The Brown Bog Rush (*Schoenus ferrugineus*) lost its site by Loch Tummel with hydro-electric developments, but an unofficial transfer to a site by Ben Vrackie survives to this day.

The remote Loch has a good population of the rare Yellow Oxytropis (*Oxytropis campestris*) which is rather white in this location. Explorations in the remote Fealar estate led to the exciting discovery of the first Perthshire location for Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus*).

Workshops devoted to Lady's-mantles (*Alchemilla*) and Dandelions (*Taraxacum*) led to more widespread recording of these microspecies in the county and 124 Dandelion species have now been found.

The water plant courses run by Nick Stewart showed some of us the Lochs by Blairgowrie which feature such species as Six-stamened Waterwort (*Elatine hexandra*) and Slender Naiad (*Najas flexilis*).

Nearer to Perth, there is a good population of Yellow Star-of-Bethlehem (*Gagea lutea*) near the Tay. Closer to Dundee the Sidlaw Hills have an interesting flora, including good sites for orchids. East Perthshire is a special place with a special flora.



Yer'll have had yer tea!

David Burslem analysed samples of tea sold as Scottish-grown and discovered it was not grown here and tea sommelier Celia Aceae tastes the genuine article

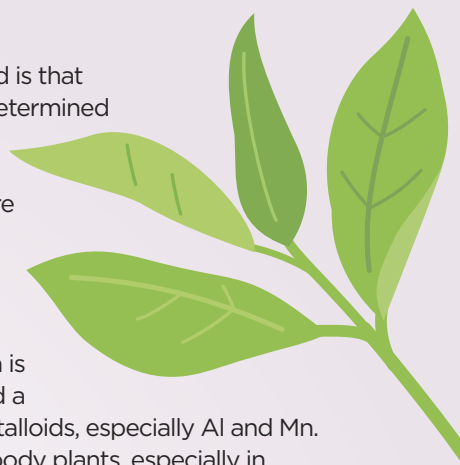
Some readers may be surprised to learn that tea is grown commercially in Scotland. However, tea plantations exist here, extending from Orkney in the north to Dumfries and Galloway in the south with a concentration in Perthshire and Fife. Scottish tea is a niche high-value product, and part of that value derives from its unique geographical origin, reputed to result in a distinctive flavour. Therefore, growers of authentic Scottish tea require protection against fraudsters who might try to re-label and market cheaper imported teas as having been grown in Scotland. This vulnerability was brought to life by the recent high-profile prosecution of Thomas Robinson in the Scottish courts, detailed in extensive media coverage.¹⁻³

Part of the evidence against Robinson was obtained from a collaboration between Scottish tea growers and my research group at the University of Aberdeen. We developed a method of geographical authentication for their genuine Scottish-grown tea using an analytical approach that measures the concentrations of multiple elements in the processed tea leaves. The method exploits the principle that the concentrations of trace elements in plant tissues are determined by the soils in which they are growing. Any natural variation in the underlying geology and hydrological conditions between estates that drives spatial variation in soil properties, may result in a change in elemental chemistry within plant tissues that is a unique indicator of geographical location.



Left: Packaging of authentic Scottish White Tea. Right: Samples of Scottish tea leaves and brews

The physiological principle underpinning this method is that elemental concentrations in a crop such as tea are determined by the concentrations in the soils they are growing in, rather than management by the grower. For this reason, the focus has to be on trace elements that are taken up passively by plants, often with no known metabolic function, rather than macro-nutrient elements such as N, P and K that are managed and manipulated by growers to maximise productivity. I first became interested in this question because tea is representative of a group of plants that have evolved a capacity to hyperaccumulate certain metals and metalloids, especially Al and Mn. This trait has evolved in many lineages of tropical woody plants, especially in species-rich families such as *Melastomataceae* and *Rubiaceae* that are abundant in the lowland forests of Southeast Asia where I conduct most of my research.



Tea hyperaccumulates Al and Mn in its leaves and the concentrations of these elements vary locally based on soil conditions. The first step in our development of the method was to determine whether the concentrations of these elements and others vary consistently between tea samples sourced from different Scottish tea growers, and whether Scottish tea in general could be differentiated from imported teas based on their elemental concentrations. When we started this work, in early 2018, there was emerging evidence from China that elemental analysis could be used to distinguish the geographical origin of tea at even very local scales,⁴ which encouraged us to trial the approach here using a similar instrument to the Chinese researchers. We quickly obtained a similar result: tea samples from different Scottish growers were statistically distinct from each other when analysed for ten elements, and Scottish teas as a group clustered separately when compared to a reference collection of about 80 tea samples donated by a company specialising in importing teas of known origin from overseas.

As these results were emerging from our work, tea growers across Scotland were expressing concerns about the quantity of tea labelled as grown in Scotland that was being sold by a single grower in Perthshire Thomas Robinson. Robinson had gained notoriety as a supplier of tea supposedly grown on his Wee Tea plantation located on the Amulree Estate. His customers included premium department stores and hotels across the UK and overseas, but the large quantity of tea being supplied by Robinson to these outlets appeared unfeasible to genuine tea growers based on their knowledge of the production capacity from their own plantations. Samples of Robinson's tea were acquired indirectly from these sources and analysed in our lab using identical methods to those we used for the previous analyses of tea samples of known origin.



We were intrigued to discover that their chemical fingerprints based on elemental analysis consistently placed these suspect samples among the reference set of overseas tea and not with the genuine Scottish tea samples. These results fuelled suspicions of fraud and helped to trigger an investigation involving the Food Crime team within Food Standards Scotland. The investigation of this case eventually took several years to complete and even longer to come to trial. All the chemical analyses had to be

replicated on samples that been seized using protocols that would fulfil the requirements for legal evidence, but the results were essentially identical. Ultimately this represented a minor component of the evidence that was presented at the three-week trial, but it supported the guilty verdict.

We have learned a great deal from participating in this case. It has prompted my interest in the physiology and nutritional characteristics of tea, leading to new projects with growers and a new PhD student in our group, Celia Aceae, who joined us after several years working in the tea industry and a short spell at RBGE. The strength of the spatial signal of elemental chemistry encourages us that multi-elemental analysis may have potential for geographical authentication of both tea and other crops, and recent research by other teams supports that conclusion⁵. For me, the mystery of why and how plants hyperaccumulate metals with no known metabolic function remains a key motivator of my interest in tea. For the last few years, it has been fascinating to discover that this apparently esoteric topic has some practical application beyond our fundamental interest in plant science.

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A taste for Scottish Tea?

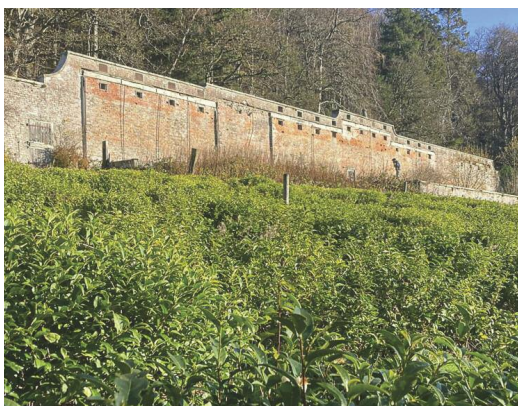
Celia Aceae shares her professional opinion



Just like wine, the flavour of tea is influenced by the soil it is grown in, the microclimates of the region, the cultivation methods, the season of harvest, the pluck, the processing technique used, and the manner in which it has been stored. And then of course, tea has the additional complexity of being influenced by the manner in which it is infused by the consumer – ratio of leaf to water, water type and temperature, and infusion time. This means that there are a lot of permutations through which to experience tea grown in Scotland. It will take a long time and a lot of tea consumption to determine

what is the unique note that Scotland has to offer a cup. It's still early to determine what exactly Scotland's tea terroir tastes like.

As a tea sommelier who has worked in the tea industry since 2013, I have had the opportunity to visit many tea gardens and to taste many unique teas, but I am always especially curious to taste teas from new production regions. So of course, I jumped at the opportunity to visit Kinnettles farm in Angus and to see the tea plants first hand. After visiting the tea gardens on her property, Susie Walker-Munro kindly made me a cup of her 2020 Kinnettles Gold – a single estate black tea made exclusively from the *Camellia sinensis* plants that we had just visited. This started off with a strong plum-like flavour and ended with an earthy minerality. A starchy note of sweet potatoes and a vanilla-like aroma accompanied the experience. We took a break to visit the production space and then sat down to enjoy a second black tea – Five Gold Rings.





Above and on p.31 – views of the tea gardens of Kinnettles Farm, Angus

This tea was a blend from five different tea gardens located across the east coast of Scotland but processed at the Kinnettles Estate. This time the tea had a distinct aroma of sweet vanilla cake and the flavours were more toasted and malty. I didn't notice much fruitiness until the second infusion, where there was a light note of apricot. The following day I made the 2024 Kinnettles Gold from Susie's estate. This time the aroma was almost like pumpkin muffins – light warm spices combined with that distinctly starchy note I had noticed the day before. Upon tasting, the spiced pumpkin flavour was predominant, with the supporting notes of sweet potato and vanilla cake I had noticed in the previous cups. A light astringency and pleasant umami note lingered and once the cup had almost completely cooled, I found a sudden lilac aroma.

Of course, these cups capture a snapshot of the black tea produced at Kinnettles, but they do not represent all Scottish grown tea. While they are certainly unique to anything I have tasted elsewhere, they are the early infusions of a very new tea terroir and are distinctly influenced by Susie and her personal tea production style. An iconic Scottish tea flavour will likely take many years to become apparent to consumers. For now, it is simply exciting to see Scotland beginning to produce tea. By continuing to taste the tea grown in our own country, and becoming familiar with this unique product, we can encourage the development of a recognisable Scottish tea.

Having worked in the tea industry for 9 years before moving to Scotland for an MSc in the Biodiversity and Taxonomy in Plants, Celia is a tea sommelier, consultant and educator. Celia's current PhD research, entitled Tea and People, focuses on the genetic and chemical identity of botanicals sold as tea, and seeks to explore the influences that affect flavour in new tea producing regions.

The West Central Scotland Botany Network

Michael Philip on how a coalition that runs dozens of trips a year was built

My predecessor as the BSBI Vice-County Recorder (VCR) for Lanarkshire, the late Dr. Peter Macpherson, had been in post for 35 years. During that time he had done the majority of botanical recording himself, assembling the data for his 'Flora of Lanarkshire' (Pisces Publications, 2016) and compiling an extensive personal herbarium. The question which caused me some hesitation in taking up the post in 2016 was, "How do you follow that?" This is always the wrong question for anyone succeeding to a post: much wiser rather to assess where the predecessor was in their personal development back when they began, not when they finished.

Clearly a big learning curve would be involved – with the support and mentorship of the BSBI community, that was actually an incentive – and the main challenge was to ensure that plant recording across Lanarkshire continued and that all records gathered were accurate.

Lacking both depth of botanical experience (though noting wild plants had been a lifelong hobby) and available time (I was still working full-time), I chose to prioritise building a network of interested people. The calculation was: more people, more expertise, more activity, more records.

A programme of outings was devised, and a newsletter to keep everyone informed. Over the ensuing few years, this network grew rapidly and by 2020 there were several dozen people on the contacts list – many of whom had taken part in fieldwork.

Awaiting transport across to the island of Inchtavannach, Loch Lomond (May 2025)





2020, the year of COVID-19 and its lockdowns, didn't prevent individuals from doing solo recording in their local areas. My own project was a study of the Parish of Dalserf, all within walking distance of the house – a study which produced 4,500 records from the 25 1km map squares which comprise the Parish. Malcolm Macneill, the award-winning urban recorder, gathered over 5,000 records within the City of Glasgow in the same period. Digital communication, sharing of photos and processing of data enabled the network to prosper despite the exigencies to which we were all subjected.

The eventual post-COVID recovery phase offered a natural opportunity for fresh impetus. Jim McIntosh (then BSBI Scottish Officer) asked, "This botany network in Lanarkshire... do you think it could work in other places?" Renfrewshire and Dunbartonshire needed a boost in botanical activity. My reply was, "Well, there's one way to find out."

On 21st May 2021, the brand-new Dunbartonshire botany network was launched with an outing in Balloch Castle Country Park, and the following day, 22nd May 2021, the Renfrewshire botany network was launched with an outing in Pollok Park. In all three vice-counties, the contacts list grew exponentially from that point. Between 40 and 50 outings per year took place, each network with its own priorities and its own newsletter. Eventually, at a Zoom meeting between some of the most active people across the three networks, the decision was made to combine our efforts: a single, wide-ranging outings programme offering loads of choice regarding dates and venues across the nearly 4,000 sq. km. of our combined territory, and a single newsletter to hold it all together. At the time of writing, the contacts list stands at over 220 people.

The concept of the 'local group' has long been familiar, but what has developed in West Central Scotland is different. The 'loose network model' (as it has come to be known) is experimental in structure but highly successful in outcome.

It is a true network: there is no membership, no committee (no office-bearers, no minute-taking, no elections, no procedures), no subscription, no attendance record...

Just an outings programme and a newsletter, a loose structure in which anyone can turn up when they like and engage with others in learning, recording, sending photos of plants for identification, etc. The explosion of learning, in particular, has been marvellous to witness and many individuals have gained the confidence to do some plant recording on their own.

The resulting community of botany enthusiasts has brought a wide range of individual skills into play: people have stepped up to offer to lead outings, to train others, to design and edit the new newsletter, to run Winter Study Groups, to develop workshops, to give Zoom talks, and so on. New local partnerships have been formed with South Lanarkshire Council, West Dunbartonshire Council, The Scottish Wildlife Trust, RSPB, various Wind Farms and many individual and corporate landowners across the region. Tens of thousands of records are being uploaded each year to the BSBI's National Plant Distribution Database. At the recent Scottish Botanists' Conference (1st November 2025 at RBGE), 14% of the attendees were part of the West Central Scotland Botany Network.

Readers are warmly invited to visit our webpage, read our recent newsletters 'Trifoliolate', and have a look at our outings programme. Why not turn up at one of our outings? All are welcome. <https://bsbi.org/west-central-scotland-botany-network>

Contacts:

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Peter Wiggins (Joint VCR Lanarkshire) pswiggins@gmail.com

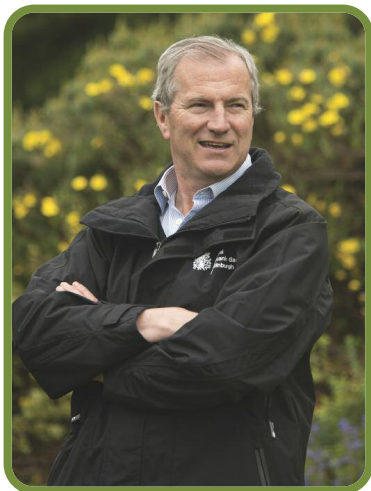
Keith Watson (VCR Renfrewshire) keithjwatson76@gmail.com



The "End of Season Get-Together" (our only indoor meeting of the year), October 2025

How a soldier became Chief of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

John Grace interviews Sir Simon Milne



By the time you read this, Simon Milne will have stepped down from his role as Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE), the post he has held for 11 years. Simon differs from all the 15 previous Keepers in having had a distinguished military career (1976–2000). He was a Royal Marines Commando, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He later became a member of His Majesty's Body Guard of the Honourable Corps of Gentlemen at Arms. Throughout history, a few notable botanists, often physician-botanists, had military backgrounds but this is rare in modern times (I can think of only one other).

The challenges of the last decade at the RBGE have been unprecedented, included Covid, massive refurbishment of glasshouses (Edinburgh

Biomes project), an acceleration in international projects and education programmes and dealing with complex funding issues whilst keeping staff happy and highly motivated. Perhaps the military experience of strategic planning, diplomacy, managing change and decision-making was a good preparation.

I met Simon in his office at the RBGE in early December. No-one would ever guess – given his relaxed manner – that Simon had been a military man. Intrigued to learn about his career, I had a few questions.

JG: You were in the Royal Marines from 1976–2000 and you rose to be a lieutenant colonel. What made you change your career to become a conservationist?

SM: I graduated from the University of St Andrews, where I studied Geography and Botany. Plants have always been part of my life: I come from a family of horticulturalists and plant scientists spanning three generations, and my grandfather was the plant hunter and writer Euan Cox. After graduating, I joined the Royal Marines in search of adventure. Following that chapter, it felt like a natural progression to plants and conservation, first as Director of the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum in Hampshire, then with the Scottish Wildlife Trust, and finally here at the RBGE.



“It has been a real joy to lead the fabulous RBGE team.”

JG: As director of the Scottish Wildlife Trust what do you think were your proudest achievements?

SM: I helped place the Scottish Wildlife Trust on a financially sustainable footing and introduced the Living Landscape approach, which focused on managing land at an ecosystem scale. This provided a powerful framework for bringing people and nature together. A major milestone during this period was the Scottish Beaver Trial, which saw beavers released under licence in Argyll in May 2009 after a 400-year absence. One of the most rewarding aspects of my work throughout was strengthening public engagement.

JG: In your present post as Regius Keeper of the RBGE, what have been your proudest achievements?

SM: Increasing community, national and global collaboration, and recognising the shared purpose of conservation pursued by people around the world, has been central to my work. Here at the RBGE, our contribution to nature conservation has been significant, particularly through the application of taxonomy and genomics as part of our evidence-based approach. Over 40% of plant species are threatened with extinction and the need for botanic gardens has never been greater. At a local level, work with our volunteers and the expansion of community engagement – especially involving disadvantaged people – has also been vitally important. It has been a real joy to lead the fabulous RBGE team.

As I put final touches to this article I have learned that Simon has been awarded a Knighthood in the New Years Honours list. Simon, hearty congratulations from all at the Botanical Society of Scotland.

A new online resource for plant identification

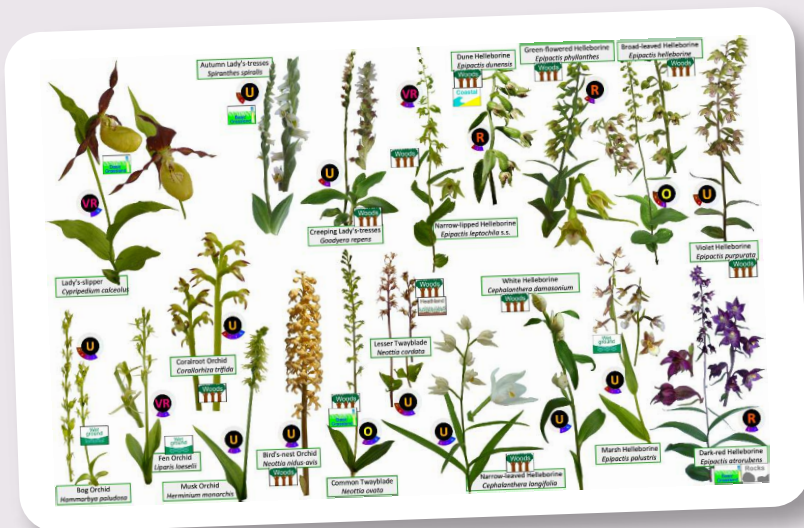
Richard Milne has just finished photographing the entire UK flora for his new ID guide

For the past 15 years or so, I have been teaching plant identification to beginners, conveying to them a simple method I invented that rapidly narrows down which family a plant might belong to. The users then simply look through the colour images in one of three books (*Keble Martin*, *Rose's Wild Flower Key*, or the *Collins Wild Flower Guide*) and try to match their plant with an image. This has the extra benefit of familiarising them with families as they go along, and we gently introduce them to dichotomous keys when they find a case of several images that look very similar (e.g. *Myosotis*, *Ranunculus*, etc). This class ran three times a year for students and members of the public, in person, and was always well received. Then came the lockdown.

In 2021, colleagues and I found ourselves needing to run a field course remotely, so in desperation I invented an online version of this method, by scanning all 100 plates of *Keble Martin* and adding information to each image; these were built into an interactive website by David Barrass at the University of Edinburgh. Feedback on this was extremely positive, but with the images under copyright, it could not be opened up to anyone outside of the University. I wrestled with how to sidestep this problem until a solution presented itself: I would have to photograph the entire UK flora myself.

So began four years of manic plant photography. I immediately decided that each species image should be background-free, so that subtle stem and leaf characters would be clearly visible, and images could ultimately be assembled into plates a la *Keble Martin*. To achieve this, I carried around laminated sheets of plain A3 paper everywhere I went, photographing each species with this as a screen behind it, and then digitally cleaning up each image. Often multiple raw images were assembled into one.

During the first year, I photographed hundreds of species in my local area, adding a few dozen on trips south, reaching 1,000 in under a calendar year. From there of course things got tougher and tougher as the lower hanging fruit was all plucked. In 2022, I visited various botanical hotspots, and added 100 species on a trip to Estonia, where many extreme British rarities are relatively common, including many boreal woodland plants and the Lady's Slipper, Military and Fen Orchids. I made use of botanic gardens, and the project at RBG Edinburgh to propagate extreme Scottish rarities was especially useful. In 2023 and 2024 I made use of the BSBI database to track down real rarities much faster than would otherwise be possible but also scooped up loads of species from trips to Jersey and Corfu. My goal was to include as many British aliens as possible, and Corfu supplied plenty – plus difficult natives like *Ranunculus ophioglossifolius*.



Generally, species photographed abroad look similar to UK material but there have been two very notable exceptions from Estonia: *Gentiana pneumonanthe* and *Cuscuta europaea*, both of which had to be photographed again in England. By May 2025 I had enough images to produce the new website, now available at **namethatplant.org**. The site was built for me by an enterprising and very talented second year student, Ayaan Decosta.

The method used is identical to the live classes – a few questions about flower arrangement, symmetry and petal number narrow things down to a list of families, then the user clicks a button and a series of plates are presented, built from my now large (c. 2,700 species) image library. Uniquely, each image is accompanied by icons indicating habitat, flowering time, and how common it is. The last is especially important – beginners will frequently decide their specimen looks most like Species A, only to find that this is an extreme rarity only found in one remote locality, forcing them to start again. The rarity and habitat icons will hopefully avoid this. The sheer numbers of possible species can also be overwhelming, so we've uploaded three versions of the plates: Expert plates have every image we have, Intermediate plates exclude rare aliens, and Beginner plates exclude anything rare or uncommon. Users can toggle between them.

Because the Expert plates typically include more than 12 species per plate, the website works much better on a computer than a phone; however, beginner plates usually have 3 or 4, making use with a phone more doable. I'd welcome feedback on how people get on with this – and the site more generally. It is a new resource and can doubtless be improved.

Although initially designed for beginners, this website should also serve as a resource for even the most experienced botanists, if only because it supplies images of rare alien species for which colour images are often very difficult to find. I believe that this is by some margin the most comprehensive image library of the British flora that exists anywhere online. So, please check out namethatplant.org and especially share it with any beginners you may know – as the ultimate goal is to get more people into wild flowers.

Remembering Mike Richardson

Jill Thompson recalls a long-time member of BSS & a friend to many

Michael John Richardson, known to most people as Mike, died in October 2025, a short time after a cancer diagnosis. Mike was a member of the BSS for over 60 years, a sometime Vice President and Council member, and regularly attended lectures and fungal forays. From 1964 until his retirement in 1993, Mike worked for the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland as a plant pathologist specialising in the fungi attacking seeds, cereals and potatoes. He really enjoyed the science and practical work combined with visits to farmers and growers, but as he gained promotion to senior roles, his research time necessarily diminished. After retirement in 1993, Mike was able to concentrate once more on practical scientific research and returned to his interest in dung fungi that started while doing his MSc. This required few scientific resources and encouraged travelling to interesting places to collect samples around Scotland and more exotic places such as Puerto Rico, Morocco and Iceland. The samples were incubated at home in small plastic pots, where they soon produced their fruiting bodies. The mycelium and fruiting bodies were observed under a microscope and their structure recorded and identifications made.

Mike and his long-time friend and colleague Roy Watling wrote the first key to dung fungi, with the final version published by the Mycological Society in 1997. A full list of Mike's 78 publications can be found at **Researchgate.net**. He acknowledged 70 collaborators who helped to provide samples for his research. In 2024 Mike donated his voluminous collection of samples and notes on dung fungi to the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh where they are freely available for further research.

Mike was active in the British Mycological Society (BMS), edited the *Transactions* and *Mycological Research*, was an elected council member and received the BMS benefactors medal in 1996 for his outstanding contributions. He was always enthusiastic in his help to others and he said that his proudest contribution to research was in introducing others to the beauty and fascination of dung fungi. He also developed a fascination with invertebrates and worked closely with his wife Barbara to study invertebrates in Bromeliads and leaf litter, particularly in the tropics. I first met Mike and Barbara in 1994 in Puerto Rico, when they were just starting their invertebrate research there.



Barbara and Mike at work in the field

This new tropical research led to more international collaborations with bromeliad and invertebrate ecologists, and fungi experts. Mike and Barbara are very well regarded by the many scientists that visited the Luquillo Long term Ecological research site in Puerto Rico, especially for their support and engagement with the students and scientists they met there, and their friendship and kindness to all.

Despite the pain and stiffness of osteoarthritis in his later years, Mike never gave up his interests and enthusiasm for getting out and about, continuing his hobby of driving to remote locations to take photographs for Geograph and to collect fungi. You can see the over 30,000 photographs Mike uploaded to the Geograph web site, which aims to provide a photographic record across the UK based upon 1 km squares. I see that Mike was still uploading photographs of Edinburgh taken in September 2025. I know that Mike would love you to look at his photographic collection online.

Mike Richardson is remembered as a meticulous scientist, a generous mentor, and a warm, inspiring presence in the lives of colleagues and friends. His contributions to mycology and plant pathology – and his enthusiasm for sharing knowledge – have left an enduring mark on the field.

References

www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Richardson-17

www.geograph.org.uk/profile/15498

Book Review



***Brambles of Scotland* by Angus Hannah**

BSBI Handbook No. 25. Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland. 220 pp, 2025

Author Angus Hannah is on a mission to raise the profile of brambles amongst Scottish botanists, aiming to improve identification skills and to increase knowledge of the distributions of the different (micro)species. Writing this book is one of four approaches taken, the others being: running annual identification and recording workshops in different parts of the country (organised and advertised through the BSBI field meetings programme); offering to receive and attempt to identify bramble species from photographs; and holding workshops at SBCs on photographing brambles to raise the quality of material received.

The book begins with a review of brambles, their ecology and importance for other taxonomic groups. Later sections describe the history and state of bramble recording in Scotland before equipping the reader with the morphological knowledge required to tackle bramble identification. The text supporting the main key (to 48 species) legitimises the approach of 'if unsure, explore both ways', and this key allows some species to be reached though more than one pathway. A multi-access key (to 51 species) is also provided, but needs converting into a spreadsheet for simple sifting of species sharing the combination of characters exhibited by a specimen.

A two-page spread is given to each of 56 species, plus one spread each to variants and putative hybrids. Text about the characteristics of each species, how to distinguish it from those most similar and a

distribution map appear on the left-hand page of each pair. The right-hand page is devoted colour photographs, mostly between 5 and 10 in number, depicting key features visually. Two groups of four species are contrasted in tabular layouts of their characteristics. Additional material in appendices includes paragraphs devoted to rarities which are unlikely to be encountered in Scotland.

The book is a 'must buy' for any botanist interested in getting to grips (identification-wise!) with Scottish brambles. The text is clear, the photographs excellent and well-reproduced. Keeping the book small (so good for field use) means few species are fully described and gives no help in picking out the rarities, for which access to either Edees & Newton (1988) *Brambles of the British Isles* or Sell & Murrell (2014) *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 2 is required. Regardless, users will find it makes the study of brambles accessible and I encourage readers to give it a go.

David Elston



Angus Hannah (foreground) and Michael Philip examining brambles on a disused railway line at Maud, North Aberdeenshire. © David Elston

BSS News is published by the Botanical Society of Scotland in March and September each year and is available exclusively to members.

The society welcomes all enthusiasts of plants and fungi.

- ✿ Join us at the society's website **www.botsoc.scot**
- ✿ Attend our free monthly lectures, held September – May – details overleaf and on our website
- ✿ Come along to field meetings, held May – September. see details overleaf and on our website
- ✿ Enjoy an evening with fellow botanists and plant scientists at the Plant Pub. See Events overleaf for dates and venue.
- ✿ Volunteer to help us run the society via **BSS-Contact@botsoc.scot**
- ✿ View videos of past lectures on our YouTube channel (Search Botanical Society of Scotland)
- ✿ Connect with us on our socials. We are on Facebook, LinkedIn, Bluesky and Instagram.
- ✿ Participate in student events – see **[@botsocscot](https://www.instagram.com/botsocscot)** on Instagram for the latest
- ✿ Contribute to BSS News – deadlines for copy are 15th January and 15th July.
- ✿ Contact us at **BSS-Contact@botsoc.scot**

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Botanical Society of Scotland

Lecture & Events Programme 2026

Last-minute changes sometimes occur for reasons beyond our control, so always check with our website before attending. Members receive updates via email with more details about each event. Please update your email if it changes by logging-in to the members area at www.botsoc.scot

Lectures are held jointly with the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. **They take place in the Lecture Theatre at 20A Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5LR, usually at 6pm.** Tea is available from 5.30pm. We endeavour to record the lectures and make them available on our YouTube channel soon after the live event.

Plant Pub is a free social event to which all botanists and plant scientists are invited. It is organised jointly with the Institute of Molecular Plant Sciences at University of Edinburgh, on the 2nd Thursday of the Month, February – June and September – November. Check our website before going. **Wash Bar, The Mound, Edinburgh EH1 2LP**

Field Meetings: All are welcome. It is essential you check the details and register at <https://botsoc.scot/events-2/field-meetings/> Joining instructions will be issued from there.

TUESDAY 10th MARCH, 7.30pm

Inverness Lecture. Ben Averis, Botanical Consultant, joint with the Inverness Botany Group

Scotland's western rainforests and increasing hints of it further east.

Smithton Free Church, 1 Murray Rd, Smithton, Inverness IV2 7YU

THURSDAY, 19th MARCH, 6pm

Lecture. Prof. Simon Hiscock, Oxford Botanic Garden

The Oxford Ragwort and the Bristol Whitebeam: tales of hybrid speciation

THURSDAY 9th APRIL, 6.30pm

Plant Pub. Wash Bar, The Mound, Edinburgh EH1 2LP

THURSDAY 16th APRIL, 6pm

Lecture. Prof Laura Carter, University of Leeds

Plants on prescription

THURSDAY 14th MAY, 6.30pm

Plant Pub. Wash Bar, The Mound, Edinburgh EH1 2LP

THURSDAY 21st MAY, 6pm

Lecture. Prof Enrico Coen, John Innes Institute

From genes to types: how species part and meet.
The lecture will be followed by the AGM

FRIDAY, 22nd MAY, 11am

Field meeting. Botanical walk in Gosford House grounds, Longniddry. Joint with the Lothians Botany Group.

Leader: Marion Moir

THURSDAY 28th MAY, 7pm – 9pm

Evening Crash Course.

Flowering plant ID for novice enthusiasts.

Leader: Richard Milne. Book early as this event sells-out.

SATURDAY, 30th MAY, 11am, ALL DAY

Field meeting. Useful plants and foraging walk and taster picnic, Gore Glen, Midlothian

Leaders: Ian Edwards and Julia Pennyquick

SUNDAY 7th JUNE, 11am, ALL DAY

Field Meeting. Carrifran, near Moffat

Leader: Crinan Alexander

SATURDAY 13th JUNE, 10am – 5pm

Field Meeting. Meall nan Tarmachan alpine field meeting (joint with bsbi)

Leader: Dan Watson

THURSDAY 2nd JULY, 11am

Field Meeting. Lesmahagow water meadows, Lanarkshire

Leader: Michael Philip

SUNDAY 19th JULY, 11am

Field Meeting. Blacklaw wind farm botanical walk

Leaders: Michael Philip and Peter Wiggins

SUNDAY 26th JULY, 11am

Field Meeting. Bryophytes of red moss, Pentlands near Edinburgh, part of International Bog Day 2026, Scottish Wildlife Trust

Leader: David Chamberlain

SATURDAY 15th AUGUST, 8am till 4.30pm

Field Meeting. Grasses, sedges, rushes workshop, Ben Lawers

Leader: Dan Watson

SUNDAY 23rd AUGUST, 11am

Field Meeting. Lichen walk, Dawyck Botanic Garden

Leader: Rebecca Yahr

SUNDAY 6th SEPTEMBER, 11am

Field Meeting. Tentsmuir Forest, East Fife: Fungus Foray, joint with ELFE

Leader: Heather Forbes

SUNDAY 27th SEPTEMBER, 11am

Field Meeting. Kingsbarns, Fife fossils

Leader: Nicolaos Maragkos
