

Plants and their Habitats

On 12th November Berwick Wildlife Group were indeed fortunate to have Dr Fiona Aungier as their chairman. The scheduled speaker was unable to be present, since his car had broken down in Stirling, and Fiona bravely filled the gap with slides of mountain flowers she had compiled over many years. As the slides followed on, she described the habitat each plant required and its adaptations to its situation.

The sequence progressed upwards, from this year's survey of (double) creeping buttercups in Tommy the Miller's field to the tops of the Cairngorms and beyond.

Low hills in most of Britain, although once forested, are now (because of burning and grazing) dominated by moorland plants like common heather (ling). This is, incidentally, the food plant not only of grouse but of other creatures including a solitary bee, *Colletes succinctus*, which was recently discovered at Holburn Moss. These bees spend most of their lives as larvae in underground burrows, the adults emerging in August to feed on and collect pollen and nectar from the heather. This is stored in the burrows and fuels the next generation until the following year.

Some moorland plants, like sundew, grow in areas so lacking in nutrients that their sticky leaves catch insects to provide the chemicals necessary for life. Higher in the hills the plants must cope with more extreme weather conditions, and are often short and cushiony with an extensive root system, although the summer flowering shoots can be amazingly delicate. Examples from the Cheviots are fir club-moss, roseroot and starry saxifrage.

However, it is not only the height above sea level that determines the nature of the vegetation: on the island of Rum (and many parts of north-west Scotland) the sea-level flora shows montane features as the climate is so extreme. There is anyway considerable overlap between coastal and montane weather conditions and the plants that can survive them, as demonstrated by a slide of thrift, familiar to us as a seaside plant, growing at about 1,800m (6,000ft) in the Pyrenees.

Fiona then showed slides of the Canadian Rockies, with alpine poppies, bright blue skunkweed and miniature sweet-flowered androsace. Finally a slide of the Mt Edith Cavell glacier, taken in 1979, appeared. There was a striking contrast between this and the view of the same, much shrunken, glacier taken by a BWG member in 2008. As the climate warms, it is not only glaciers which disappear. Populations of plants which prefer cooler, mountainous conditions are forced to colonise new ground uphill. If there is a barrier to this upward progress, or if they reach the summit without finding the right climatic conditions for a stable population, they will inevitably become extinct.