



## IX. Notes on the Alpine Flora of Ben Nevis, Inverness-shire

John Sadler F.R.P.S.

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IX. *Notes on the Alpine Flora of Ben Nevis, Inverness-shire.* By JOHN SADLER, F.R.P.S.

(Read 11th January 1877.)

[The plants marked by an asterisk are not recorded in Mr H. C. Watson's "Topographical Botany" for his division of "Westernness."]

The Scottish Alpine Botanical Club met at Fort William on the evening of 24th July 1876, and took up their quarters in the Chevalier Hotel. Next morning our party, in number thirteen, including Colin Cameron, the guide, started for the summit of Ben Nevis, Inverness-shire. The distance from the village to the summit by the usual way of ascent is about 5 miles. At the height of 1000 feet our course was southward along a stream, which issues from a small lake at 1840 feet above the sea, called Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe.

On our way we noted the ordinary vegetation met with on similar mountain slopes in Scotland, along with *Rhynchospora alba*, *Polygonum viviparum*, *Plantago maritima*, and other subalpine species. At the north end of the lake there was abundance of the alpine aquatic form of *Carex vulgaris*, and at a considerable distance from the shore *Isoetes lacustris*,\* *Subularia aquatica*,\* and *Lobelia Dortmanna*\* were obtained by wading. On the north side there are patches of beautiful strand composed of disintegrated granite and porphyry, with which the mountain abounds. We failed to find *Arctostaphylos alpina*, which has been reported as occurring in the neighbourhood of the lake. Leaving the lake we continued the ascent till we reached a point about 2700 feet, where there is a rocky ravine or gorge called Coire na h-Urchaire, through which a small stream runs. This stream has its source in the last spring met with before reaching the summit. It flows westwards, and has an abrupt and precipitous course. In the ascent from the loch to this point we gathered *Saxifraga aizoides*, *S. hypnoides*, *Gnaphalium supinum*, *Alchemilla alpina*, *Silene maritima*, *S. acaulis*, *Luzula spicata*, *Poa alpina* and *Cryptogramme crispa*. The ravine is only 200 or 300 feet in length, and is certainly the best botanising spot on this side of the mountain. Here we met with

*Thalictrum alpinum*, *Sagina saxatilis*,\* *Rhodiola rosea*, *Epilobium alsinifolium*, *E. alpinum*, *Armeria maritima*, *Cochlearia officinalis*, *Polypodium alpestre*, beautiful specimens of *Cerastium Smithii*, and *C. trigynum*, the last being in great abundance near the upper part of the ravine, and for 200 feet above it. The most remarkable plant of all was a form of *Saxifraga stellaris*, which grew in large mossy-looking patches, resembling *Montia fontana*, the leaves being as small, the branches as delicate, and the flowers nearly as minute. Several *Hepaticæ* were also collected, including *Jungermannia cochleariformis* and two varieties of *Scapania undulata*. Between the upper end of the ravine and the spring, 3363 feet above the sea, we gathered fine specimens of *Sibbaldia procumbens*, *Aira alpina*, *Ranunculus acris*, alpine form; *Veronica humifusa*, *Salix herbacea*, *Cerastium pubescens*, and *C. compactum*, the last in considerable quantity and in fine flower. At a short distance above the spring, or about 3500 feet, Phanerogamic vegetation and soil almost wholly disappear, only lichens and a few mosses are seen on the large blocks of porphyry with which the upper part of the mountain is covered. At 3900 feet we reached the verge of the precipices immediately overlooking Coire na Ciste, where there is a cairn. From this we proceeded along the top of these precipices, which face north-east, and form the back of the mountain. All the corries were filled with snow. The summit was reached amidst sleet and rain, thick mist, and a fierce cold wind, which unfortunately prevented us from seeing one of the most extensive prospects in Scotland.

On a clear day are seen mountain ranges in all directions, intermingled with extensive water surfaces; the view ranges from the Moray Firth and the mountains of Ross and Sutherland in the north and north-east to Ben Lomond and the island of Colonsay in the south and south-west, comprehending a distance of about 180 miles. The scene can scarcely be equalled, or at least surpassed, in the diversity of magnificence and striking objects, and in majesty and grandeur.

On looking beneath us, a few paces from the summit, we see the edge of a frightful precipice, which cannot be approached without caution, and from which the boldest

must shrink. The edge is wholly composed of loose fragments, which a little pressure is often sufficient to displace, when they roll down the precipice with a rushing noise and tremendous crash. The sound produced by the rattling of the stone, as it impinges successively on projecting points of the perpendicular rock, is reverberated among the surrounding cliffs, and thunders along the valley below. The effect on the ear is grand and impressive, and has occasioned the dangerous amusement of heaving stones from the top of the precipice into the dreadful abyss.

The summit of the mountain, which is 4406 feet above the sea, is crowned by a cairn about 6 feet high. Close by the cairn a single very small plant of the starry Saxifrage (*Saxifraga stellaris*) was picked, thus being the highest flowering plant in Britain. A few feet below the summit, and on the verge of the precipice, we met with *Andreæa nivalis*, in great cushion-like masses, a moss confined to the summits of a few of our highest mountains.

The next day (26th) we visited the precipices or "snow corries" on the north-east side of Ben Nevis. Our course was along the Stone Burn, or, in Gaelic, Allt a Mhuilinn, which takes its rise in Coire Leas, a little to the south of the snow corries. In the ascent we again observed many species common to similar moorish and subalpine situations in the North of Scotland. Several mosses and lichens were collected, including *Mnium subglobosum*, *Dicranum falcatum*, magnificent specimens of *Sphagnum compactum*, and *Cladonia deformis*. At about 2000 feet above the sea we noted in one or two spots abundance of *Cornus suecica*, in flower and fruit, along with *Lycopodium alpinum*, *Empetrum nigrum*, *Rubus Chamæmorus*, and *Hookeria lucens*, a moss not usually found at such an elevation. On the northmost rocks, nearest the point of ascent, little of interest was met with.

Proceeding southward, and climbing into all accessible places, we met with *Vaccinium uliginosum*, *Thalictrum alpinum*, *Silene acaulis*, *Potentilla alpestris*,\* *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *S. nivalis*,\* *Cherleria sedoides*,\* *Salix reticulata*,\* *Oxyria reniformis*, *Veronica humifusa*, *Silene maritima*, *Armeria maritima*, and *Carex atrata*\* sparingly. *C. rigida* was more plentiful, and very large, but most of the

specimens had their fruit affected by *Ustilago urceolorum*, a fungus almost peculiar to Cyperaceæ. *Saussurea alpina*, *Draba incana*,\* *Juncus trifidus*, and *J. triglumis*\* were noticed. The only species of *Hieracium* were *H. anglicum* and a single specimen of *H. chrysanthum*. *Veronica saxatilis*\* was seen in one spot in flower. This removes the query put after the plant in Watson's "Topographical Botany." Few Ferns were observed, the only species worthy of note being *Aspidium Lonchitis* and *Hymenophyllum unilaterale*. The two best plants collected were *Saxifraga rivularis* and *Juncus castaneus*.\* The former was found in the first snow corrie, and the latter by the marshy sides of a small stream proceeding from the second snow corrie. This is a new county for the *Juncus*, so far as botanical works have recorded it. It is noted, however, in a guide-book to the district, as being found on the mountain. Below the upper snow corrie *Carex pulla* was abundant and in fine flower, and some large blocks of stone were covered with patches of *Andræa rupestris* and *A. alpina* in fruit.

The snow corries and precipices are very grand, and at some points overwhelming when viewed from below. Imagine a precipitous front of rock, at least 1500 feet high, bending forwards at many points with a threatening aspect, and extending to a distance of more than a mile and a half, with enormous projecting masses or abutments, which fill the great re-entering angle of the mountain, and divide it into vast recesses or aisles of the wildest aspect. Of this stupendous and impressive object the grand and singularly picturesque feature is the angularity of its appearance, both as a whole and in its subordinate parts. The face of the rock, in the progress of waste and disintegration, is everywhere furrowed or fretted by lines, which at a distance seem to shape it into innumerable fasciculi of small columns or fluted pillars, resembling distinct columnar concretions. These again are joined together in an endless variety of groups, ascending into pointed summits and serrated ridges, which form the most elegant mountain lines, and which accumulate in the projections and recesses, towering successively behind each other, till the whole terminate at the summit of the mountain. But

these rocks are not rich in alpine vegetation, either in the number of species or number of individuals of a species.

Several Diatomaceous gatherings were made both on this and the previous day above 2000 feet. These were transmitted for examination to the Rev. Eugene O'Meara, of Hazlehead, and the following is a list of the species which he detected:—*Coscinodiscus Smithii*, *Eunotia Camelus*, *E. diodon*, *E. triodon*, *E. tetraodon*, *Himantidium bidens*, *H. majus*, *H. Soleirolii*, *Navicula angustata*, *N. alpina*, *N. crassinervia*, *N. cocconeiformis*, *N. gibba*, *N. limosa*, *N. icos-tauron*, *N. rhomboides*, *N. serians*, *N. viridis*, and *Surirella linearis*.

On the morning of the 27th the Club separated. One party proceeded by an early boat to Ballahulish or Ferrytown, and thence by coach through Glencoe, with its amazing scenery, and Inverornan to Tyndrum, and then by rail to Killin, and conveyance to Bridge of Lochy, in Perthshire. In several places by the roadsides about Inverornan *Drosera obovata* was observed. On the 28th, Chamaeaghl, or the Crooked Rock, on the Breadalbane mountains, was visited, where *Woodsia hyperborea*, *Myosotis alpestris*, *Hieracium pallidum*, *Gentiana nivalis*, *Hypnum Halleri*, and other alpine plants were gathered.

The other party left Fort William later in the day on the 27th, and proceeded by Corranferry and Ardgour to Strontian, at the head of Loch Sunart, in Argyllshire. They ascended Ben Resipole, a mountain 2800 feet above the sea, but found it very unproductive. By the sides of the loch, however, a few good plants were collected, including, *Malaxis paludosa*,\* *Pinguicula lusitanica*, *Utricularia minor*,\* *Osmunda regalis*, *Lythrum Salicaria*\* (this plant was also observed in several spots by the sides of the Crinan Canal on our way to Fort William), *Drosera anglica*, *Jasione montana*\* abundant, *Scutellaria galericulata*, *Nephrodium æmulum*,\* and *Sedum anglicum*. This party also returned by Ballahulish and Glencoe, and so ended a very pleasant week's botanical excursion.