

Things Bright and Beautiful

Judith Allinson, our GC website officer, is a botanist with a PhD in grassland ecology. She runs wildflower and grass identification courses in Yorkshire at Malham Tarn Field Centre, carries out botanical surveys and teaches in schools. *Green Christian* Magazine asked her about her lifelong interest in plants and wildlife.



What sparked your interest in flowers and the natural world?

My mother encouraged me to learn wildflowers and start a wildflower diary each spring – this would peter out by May but I would take in flowers for “First Finds” competitions held at school. The road in Ripon where I was born rapidly became suburbia, but as a child, it was still possible to go for walks to the countryside from home.

Aged 11, I was a proud member of “Ripon Young Naturalists” run by a boy in the year above me. I don’t remember much: moth trapping, a walk to the gypsum beds by the River Ure – but it felt very grown up. In my teens I remember looking out of the window in a physics lesson and thinking, “Science is OK, but I’d much rather be outdoors.”

So you ended up studying science, but still got out of doors?

Yes, I studied botany at University and then spent two years teaching in Sierra Leone through VSO: sunny weather, sunny people, bright colours, new plants and animals. I encouraged my pupils to bring in wild flowers and attempted a “First Finds” competition. With several different languages being spoken by the girls, and only one simple black and white guide to flora written for neighbouring Ghana, I just had to accept whatever name they told me for the plants. Plants in the tropics are completely different to British ones!

In a long holiday, I travelled by lorry through several countries ending up near the Sahara. In that very dry Sahel region, I could see the plants’ adaptations for saving water. The ecological principles I had learned at school and university were there in front of me!

You’re very adventurous - tell me about some other botanical adventures?

There was not much tropical rainforest to visit in Sierra Leone – much of it has been cut down, though there is lots of secondary forest and “bush”. 13 years later I spent a month in Cameroon visiting botanist friends working in the Korup Forest Reserve on the border with Nigeria. We spent three nights camping in Korup. I am happy to have camped in a habitat that could be 60 million years old. It was fairly easy walking in the forest; because it is dark there is not much growth at ground level but you do need a compass. Each night we heard shooting – poachers were out with lamps, shooting monkeys to sell as bush meat.

What fascinates you most about the plants you study?

Just look under a hand lens at flowers or mosses or lichens, and you will see beautiful shapes and colours. If you go out with a group – a local natural history society or on a field course, then it is much more fun and other people will help you. In these last three years I have been getting to grips



Judith on left showing plants at Malham Tarn Inflow stream and Fen

with lichens. It is very satisfying to be able to give names to some of the colourful patches I see on the trees and walls, and look out for special ones.

What do you love most about the Yorkshire Dales?

The views, especially from high up on the hills, and being able to see the stars at night and of course, the wild and natural habitats. As a botanist I am aware which combinations of species are “rare” and “natural” and which are the results of recent interference by humans.

What changes have you noticed?

Many years ago I saw a field with beautiful bird’s-eye primroses being drained, probably with subsidies to increase the grass yield. The pink primroses stopped growing there, ryegrass grew instead. Fortunately, that is much less likely to happen now; the Yorkshire Dales National Park and Natural England work to protect the best sites. I saw another wildflower-rich grassy field being ploughed up and planted with a root crop for a year and then reseeded with ryegrass. Now the same fields may be getting

subsidies to make them more “natural” – but the original plants are often lost.

What can lichens, grasses and mosses tell us about the health of the ecosystem as a whole?

I could spend many hours answering that question! Lichen changes are the most striking. 30 years ago many tree trunks in cities and the nearby countryside had a greeny grey crustose lichen called *Lecanora conizaeoides*. It grows well in areas of high sulphur dioxide pollution, where other sensitive lichens (such as bushy lichens) cannot grow. Now it is rare and lichenologists get excited when they find it. Sulphur dioxide sensitive bushy lichens are now turning up in cities. On the other hand, each year I notice more and more of a velvety filamentous green alga called *Klebsormidium crenulatum* growing on exposed walls made of acid rocks on the hills, and on some trunks and wooden posts. This alga was not around 30 years ago. It grows well because there is a blanket cover of nitrogen compounds (NO_x and NH₃) in the air which acts like a fertilizer, partly from car and

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industry fumes, but mostly from ammonia in cattle slurry and intensive pig and chicken farms.

Does being outdoors deep in nature affect your faith?

I found being a Christian easier in rural Africa, because all life was closer to nature – and lived more simply. I felt my trip round West Africa was a type of pilgrimage. Here near Settle, I am lucky to be able to go outside for a walk at night, or in daytime climb the steep slope behind my house; it does make me feel good, and closer to God. Psychologists are now showing that just having a view of trees outside a window can make ill patients get better quicker.

Tell me something about the 100 Churches Rainforest Fund project you set up?

This Rainforest Project asks Churches to raise just £100 and send this to an established habitat conservation charity, such as A Rocha Ghana, Cool Earth or World Land Trust (see footnote 2 below). These charities can preserve about one acre of rainforest for each £100 sent. Of course Churches can send more, but even a small contribution is important. Doing this, a Church community might start to reflect about how our actions can make a tangible difference to the world, caring for Creation and our neighbours, now and in the

future, around the world. I grew up thinking that everywhere in England would become suburbia. Only later did I realise that many nature reserves in this country exist because people in the past have worked hard to save them. It is really important for us to work on a worldwide scale now to save reserves for the future.

What other steps could each of us take to preserve biodiversity and protect habitats?

1. **Encourage Church services that** celebrate biodiversity and pray for organisations and people (farmers, lawyers, NGOs, politicians, nature reserve wardens and guards) working to protect it.
2. **Actively support the campaigns of conservation charities** locally, nationally and internationally. Encourage your Church to have a fund-raising event for a habitat conservation charity in Green Christian's 100 Churches Rainforest Fund Project to show that respect for Creation is part of our faith.
3. **Ensure any savings** are ethically invested and not invested in firms contributing to destruction of wildlife.³
4. **Buy food** that is "wildlife friendly" and eat less meat and dairy.
5. **Learn to identify** and appreciate **local wildlife** and encourage others in this. Come on a field course! Get outside; investigate the natural world with games in Sunday School or Messy Church. The more people appreciate wildlife, the more they will want to save it.

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1. 100 Churches Rainforest project: <http://www.greenchristian.org.uk/100churches/>
 2. for more suggestions, see <http://ejffoundation.org/all-campaigns>
 3. <https://secure.greenpeace.org.uk/page/content/forest-expose-petition/>