

Visiting the islands in the Sound of Barra

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In late July 2003, the authors and Jane & Eric Twelves spent several days visiting various islands in the Sound of Barra, to undertake botanical surveys. There are no previous data for most of these islands, although there is a fairly comprehensive list for Fuday, and a rather short one for Fiaray. J. W. Heslop Harrison visited many of these islands while undertaking botanical surveys, and he published several articles (for example Harrison *et al.* 1939), but these are mostly not specific about which plants are found on which islands. We hoped to update these and to add to the botanical knowledge of these areas. The islands we visited are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Islands visited 25-27 July 2003

Island	Observed grazing intensity	Number of species found in July 2003	Total number of species previously known
Fuday	ungrazed	97	206
Fiaray	grazed	112	22
Gighay	grazed	126	0
Hellisay	grazed	117	0
Orosay	grazed	82	0
Lingay-fhada	grazed	67	0
Fuiay	grazed	122	0
Flodday	grazed	106	0
Garbh Lingay	ungrazed	79	0

Fuday

Fuday is the best known botanically of the uninhabited islands in the Sound of Barra, particularly for its variety of orchids (eight species and four hybrids amongst the 206 known species), and had been visited by RJP twice before (once as part of a Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) field meeting, see Pankhurst 1999). The island consists of large areas of machair running up to rocky outcrops, with some marshy areas on top, and there are dunes on the west side. There are two burns, but no lochs so aquatic plants are rather restricted. Some low sea cliffs and one inland cliff complete the range of habitats.

The island is remarkable for its large population of pyramidal orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) and fragrant orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*), both of which were seen, along with Hebridean spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), twayblade (*Listera ovata*) and frog orchid (*Coeloglossum viride*). Some hybrids between the marsh-orchids and other species have also been recorded from Fuday, but we did not see them this time. There were specimens of the other 'famous' species from Fuday, thyme broomrape (*Orobanche alba*), which is a parasitic plant, completely without chlorophyll, which gets its nutrients directly from the thyme on which it grows. Its scientific name means "white broomrape", but in the Outer Isles it is a bright red colour.

There is no grazing on Fuday at the moment, and much of the vegetation has become very rank and tall – even the little adder’s-tongue fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*), normally just an inch or two high was eight or ten inches tall, just to get through the vegetation.

Among the commoner species in the Hebrides which was found on Fuday was cat’s-foot (also called mountain everlasting) (*Antennaria dioica*), a plant with little silvery leaves and furry flowers (the male and female on separate plants). It is not so often an island plant as it likes rocky areas away from the salt, but Fuday is big enough for it to be found in the barer areas on top.

Fiaray

Fiaray, just off the north tip of Barra, is smaller than Fuday, but has an interesting range of habitats. It is made up of machair and dunes at the eastern end, but becomes rocky in the west with some exposed sea cliffs. It also has two marshes, which appear as lochans on the Landranger map, but which do not have much open water in reality. They included marsh cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*) and some reed (*Phragmites australis*) beds. Although the machair looks similar to Fuday, there is no variety of orchids (just the Hebridean spotted orchid), and no broomrape. Most of the classic machair species such as kidney vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) and yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) were present, and also a pink-flowered form of yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*).

Gighay

Gighay is one of a pair of islands off the east coast of Barra, which have a calm lagoon of water between them, and we surprised an otter in this area as we nosed our way in. Gighay is mostly rocky moorland, but also has an extensive cliff set back from the sea on its south shore, which meant that we found a variety of cliff plants which we didn’t see on any of the other islands. These included shrubs and trees such as aspen (*Populus tremula*), juniper (*Juniperus communis*), blackberries (*Rubus* sp.), a rose (*Rosa* sp.) and mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*). There was also ivy (*Hedera helix*), which is not that common in the Outer Isles in contrast to the rest of Britain, honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*), false brome (*Brachypodium sylvaticum*) and bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scriptus*), all of which seem to be more or less exclusively cliff plants in the islands.

Below the cliff were dense areas of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), and also meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and upright hedge-parsley (*Torilis japonica*). In one area right below the cliff was perhaps the most interesting find – some non-flowering rosettes of pyramidal bugle (*Ajuga pyramidalis*), a scarce plant in Britain with its stronghold in the NW of Scotland. There are quite a lot of old records for it, but not many recent ones, so this was a very welcome record.

The island also boasted a few scraps of saltmarsh, which contained the saltmarsh flat-sedge (*Blysmus rufus*), another species with a north-western distribution in the British Isles.

Where the south-west facing cliff trapped the sun there were a lot of butterflies too – common blue (*Polyommatus icarus*), green-veined white (*Pieris napi*), small tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*), red admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*), dark green fritillary (*Argynnis aglaja*) and painted lady (*Vanessa cardui*).

Hellisay

Hellisay is the island paired with Gighay, and bounds the south side of the lagoon. It is also mostly rocky moorland, with some tall sea cliffs in the south-west and lower ones in the

south-east. The north-facing (and hence colder and damper) cliffs had some of the same plants as Gighay (ivy, honeysuckle, and bluebell), but also some of the more classic inland damp cliff species, including Wilson's filmy fern (*Hymenophyllum wilsonii*) and great woodrush (*Luzula sylvatica*).

The sea cliffs have a different flora where they are affected by salt spray, and we found some of the typical species for this habitat too – Scots lovage (*Ligusticum, scoticum*) and roseroot (*Sedum rosea*). In the short maritime turf were adder's-tongue fern (this time at its more usual toe-nail height) and spring squill (*Scilla verna*), long over but still identifiable from its split seed pods.

On the north side facing the lagoon there is a burn which falls through some small valley mires, the lower one having a few interesting species – bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), lesser skullcap (*Scutellaria minor*) and floating club-rush (*Eleogiton fluitans*).

Orosay

Orosay is rather a common island name in the Outer Hebrides; this one is just off Eoligarry, and, naturally, accessible at low tide. It is dome-shaped, mostly covered with moorland, but with some machair and sandy bays in the west. This latter habitat had frog orchid and yellow rattle, and there was more cat's-foot in the turf on the top.

Lingay-fhada

Lingay-fhada is a long, thin island (and hence perfect for gathering sheep). It is only a small island, and so did not have a wide range of habitats. Much of it was covered in thick bracken, amongst which were wood sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*) and bush vetch (*Vicia sepium*). Around the shoreline there was some false fox-sedge (*Carex otrubae*), and also more spring squill seed pods. There were also signs of otter holts along the north shore.

Fuiay

Fuiay and Flodday form another island pair, but this time without a haven in between. Fuiay has the highest hill of any of the islands we visited, and we were fascinated by some grinding holes on the north shore where we landed. This turned out to be "fern island" with 11 species of ferns and fern allies – broad buckler fern (*Dryopteris dilatata*), hay-scented buckler fern (*Dryopteris aemula*), mountain fern (*Oreopteris limbosperma*), Wilson's filmy-fern, lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), hard fern (*Blechnum spicant*), polypody (*Polypodium vulgare*), bracken, black spleenwort (*Asplenium adiantum-nigrum*), sea spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) and upright clubmoss (*Huperzia selago*).

There were some low sea cliffs with yet more spring squill, and a little inland cliff with aspen and bluebell. An inlet on the north side formed a small lagoon rimmed with saltmarsh, amongst which was the tiny chaffweed (*Anagallis minima*).

Flodday

Flodday is the companion to Fuiay, lower and mostly rocky moorland, with a much smaller range of habitats. The most interesting area was in the south-west corner, with some ruins and a grassy area enriched by salt spray, where we found early orache (*Atriplex praecox*) and marsh foxtail (*Alopecurus geniculatus*).

Garbh Lingay

Garbh Lingay is close to Lingay-fhada, and although it has a rather different, domed shape, it had a very similar (short!) species list – including the dense bracken with wood sorrel and

bush vetch, and some bluebells on very low rocky bluffs. We also noted a couple of species of moth here – garden tiger moth (*Arctia caja*) and magpie moth (*Abraxas grossulariata*).

Conclusions

These islands were very varied, with quite a range of habitats and several interesting species. It was useful to have species lists from all of them as part of keeping in touch with the flora of the Outer Hebrides, and ensuring that it is possible to monitor changes (for example from the removal of grazing on Fuday). We would be interested in any further records of plants from these islands (or elsewhere in the Outer Hebrides), which should be sent to PAS.

References

- Harrison, JWH, Harrison, HH, Cooke, RB & Clark, WA (1939) Plants new to or rare in the Outer Hebrides I. From South Uist, Eriskay and Fuday. *Journal of Botany* **77** 1-4.
- Pankhurst, RJ (1999) Report of field meeting – Barra and other islands, Outer Hebrides (vc110) 30th July – 1 August. *BSBI News* **80** 74-75.