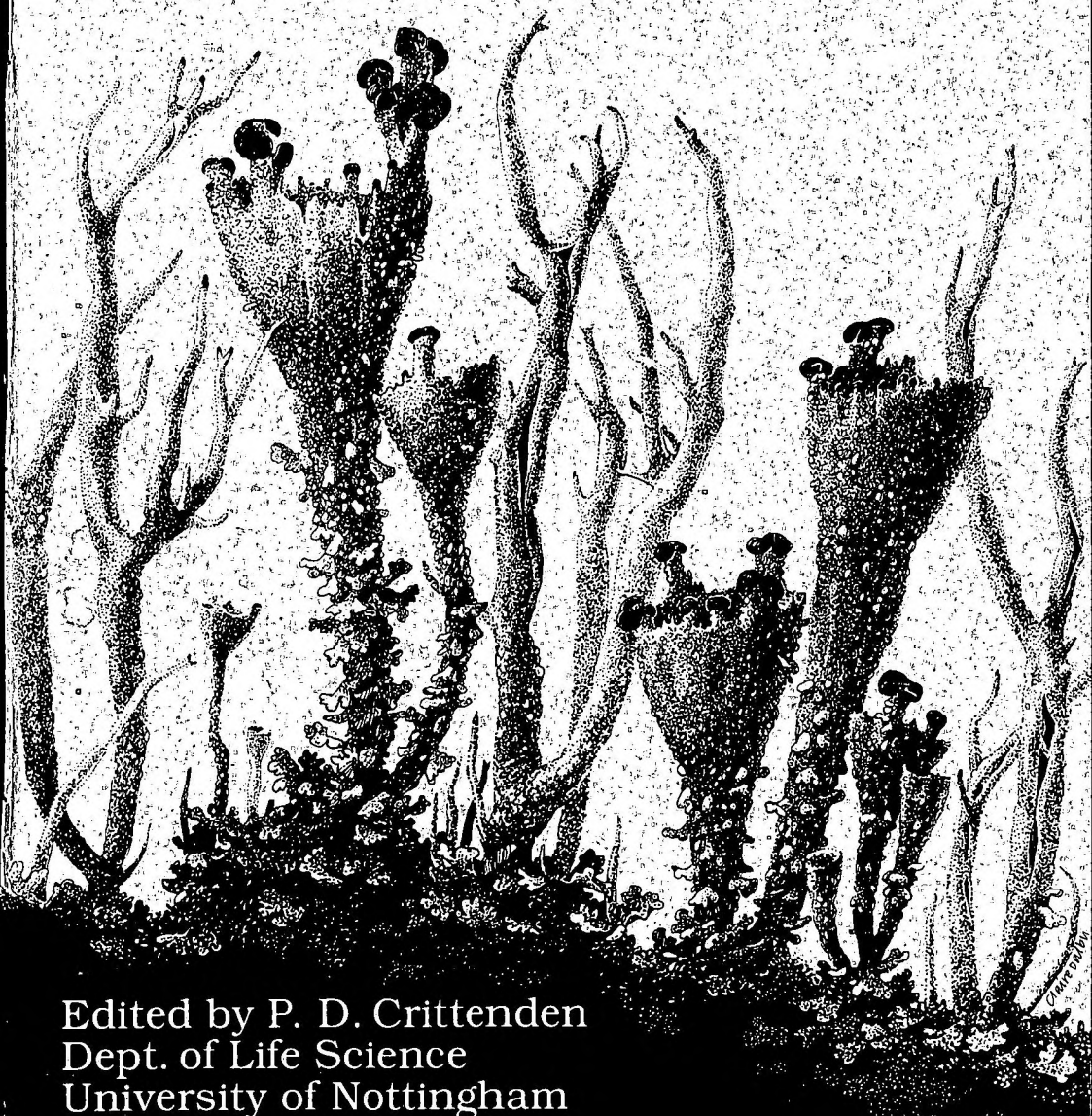


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NIGHT ON A BARE MOUNTAIN

A problem with studying the lichen flora of late snow-beds is that it is under snow for much of the year. Even in the best years a proper survey of the most persistent Scottish snow-beds is only possible from mid-July until the snow falls around the second half of September and when, as in 1994, conditions conspire to delay significant melting well into the summer there is no option but to head for the hills in mid-September and hope for the best.

So it was that Oliver Gilbert and I found ourselves, with some trepidation, heading for the central highlands on the 12 September last year. Our destination was Craeg Meagaidh a National Nature Reserve owned by Scottish Natural Heritage with Aberader Farm House, at its foot, serving as both offices and accommodation for volunteers and visiting scientists. I had fond memories of Aberader having stayed there in the days of the Nature Conservancy Council when it was very spartan with stone floors, ancient furniture and a huge open fire. All gone! Central heating, fitted kitchens and carpets have given it all the atmosphere of a modern community centre.

However, it served our purposes in providing a base and the following morning we headed up the mountain with two SNH volunteers helping to carry our tents and provisions. The plan was to camp at the head of Coire Ardair, at around 600m, and make daily excursions to our selected snow bed, another two hours away, at 1100m. Our camp site seemed idyllic, a small patch of green beside a coire lochan completely surrounded by towering cliffs. After we had set up camp Oliver decided he'd done enough for a while but I set off to recce the snow-bed, heading for the nick in the sky-line known as 'the window' which is the only way out of the coire onto the higher ground.

I soon noted the bright blue discoloration of some *Cladonia squamules* which indicated the presence of the recently described, *Arthrorhaphis aeruginosa*, and just before reaching 'the window' I saw the small yellow thallus of *Lecanora leptacina* - the first snow-bed specialist. Pressing on I reached 'the window' and passed through into a different world. Stretched out before me was a high-level dissected plateau of rocky crags and peaks, snow beds, lochs, grass and boulders. The cloud was swirling around the summit of Craeg Meagaidh so, taking a bearing on the snow-bed, I set off. The next hour was magical; one

moment I could see half way across Scotland (or so it seemed) the next I was in a world only a few metres in diameter as the clouds engulfed me; ptarmigan, red deer and mountain hare all passed close by. The lichens were not outstanding but *Lecidea paupercula*, *Micarea paratropa* (syn. *M. subviolascens*), *Miriquidica griseoatra*, *Ochrolechia inaequatula* and *Solorina crocea* (with its parasite *Rhagodostoma lichenicola*) kept me interested.

The snow-bed I was heading for had been recommended to us by a bryologist as one of the richest in Scotland: I can report that it is also excellent for lichens. Whole boulders were covered with a community dominated by *Euopsis pulvinata*, *Lecanora leptacina*, *Lecidea caesiopatra*, *Lecidella bullata*, *Lepraria neglecta*, *Micarea paratropa*, *Miriquidica griseoatra*, *Stereocaulon tornense*, *Toninia squalescens* and the strange 'little brown job' which occurs beside virtually every snow-bed in Scotland but the identity of which, even to genus, is a complete mystery. Suitably encouraged I returned to our camp site and joined Oliver on a tour of the loch. Together we produced a respectable list which included *Lecanactis abscondita*, *Rhizocarpon copelandii* and *Sporastatia polyspora*. Congratulating ourselves on a successful first day and with high expectations we dined on pasta and soup and as it got dark at about 8pm returned to our tents with the soothing sound of water lapping against the shore of the loch and the less reassuring sound of rain pattering on nylon.

Next morning the rain had stopped, but there was cloud in 'the window' and it was very cold. Reluctant to venture from our sleeping bags we ate our breakfast of muesli and tea while still inside them before setting off in full winter clothing of five or six layers plus hats and gloves. 'The window' was thick with cloud and I was glad I had taken a bearing on the snow-bed the day before. However, the clouds soon rolled back and Oliver was as impressed by the landscape as I had been and immediately christened the area 'the arctic slope'. We reached the snow-bed and set to work on a transect from its upper edge into the surrounding *Nardus* grassland. This was slow work and, in a temperature marginally above freezing and a fresh wind, not particularly pleasant but we just managed to keep warm and the lichens were interesting enough to take our minds off the worst of the weather. The dominant species were *Porpidia crustulata* (or was it *P. thompsonii*?), *Rhizocarpon 'colludens'* (usually considered a synonym of *R. hochstetteri*) and *Stereocaulon tornense* along with frequent

Micarea paratropa and *M. turfosa*. A small pyrenocarp overgrowing bryophytes was later identified as *Polyblastia gothica* (second modern British record) and a *Micarea* on small pebbles as the rare *M. marginata*. By 4 o'clock we had completed ten quadrats and decided to call it a day. Back at the tents we had an excellent meal of soup and pasta and stripped down to three layers of clothing for the night.

Next morning we woke to the sound of rain on our tents and looking out saw heavy drizzle and cloud well down the cliffs. Ever optimistic we decided to review the situation at half hourly intervals but at 12.30, with no improvement, the wind having strengthened to gale force and still in our sleeping bags we had to admit defeat. My tent was reasonably waterproof so I was just frustrated with our inactivity but Oliver's leaked quite badly and he was kept busy bailing-out water and trying to keep things dry. He reports that each strong gust of wind buffeted his tent and produced a fine aerosol which made everything damp. Fortunately the gale was blowing up the coire so the sheets of spray coming off the loch were heading away from us.

At 3.30 pm it stopped raining so, eager for some exercise, I decided to climb on to a nearby ridge. Going up with the gale behind me I had to hold on to rocks to stop my ascent if I wanted to inspect a lichen, while on the ridge the wind was so strong that I was knocked off my feet several times and had to fling myself to the ground to avoid being blown away. The lichens were typical for an exposed ridge but I collected a *Lecidea* with heavily pruinose apothecia and a K+red thallus which I had seen before in a number of places and provisionally identified as *L. lithophiloides* and an apparently undescribed *Rhizocarpon* with a scurfy brown thallus which is only known from the tops of Scottish mountains and on disused metal-mines in Wales. After ten minutes I decided it was time to head back down. Easier said than done. I couldn't get near the edge of the ridge as the wind blew me back; even on hands and knees! The only way I could get down was to crawl backwards on my stomach towards the edge, lower myself over and hope I was in the right place for a safe descent. Fortunately, I was close and with a bit of slipping and sliding I regained more sheltered ground. Returning to our camp site I discovered that Oliver had also had an exciting time. He had been for a walk around the loch and was watching the wind whip up plumes of water 'several 100ft high' when he noticed that both our tents had blown down. It wasn't a serious problem, however, and they were soon

re-erected although their already suspect waterproofness was further compromised.

That night we only dozed as violently flapping tents, heavy rain and enormous rushes of wind sweeping up the coire prevented deep sleep. In the early hours, the wind changed direction and I could hear huge waves breaking on the shore beside my tent. Convinced that I was about to be swept away I peered out with a torch but the edge of the loch was still several feet away and I was in no danger.

We woke to similar conditions as the day before but with the added distraction of fresh snow on the crags above us. At 11.30 the weather brightened enough for us to set off but before we reached 'the window' we were engulfed in a blizzard. Aware that this was probably our last chance of visiting the snow-bed that year we pressed on and as we reached 'the arctic slope' the weather cleared. Although our snow-bed was free of fresh snow the gale-force wind and extreme cold made detailed work impossible so Oliver prepared a vegetation map of the area and I made relevés of the snow-bed community on the adjacent boulder-field. After three hours we were uncomfortably cold and with more snow falling decided to head back. Coming down from 'the window' we could only see one tent and on approaching closer realised that Oliver's had been flattened again. We feared broken poles, which would have meant a hazardous retreat back to Aberader by head-torch, but managed to repair everything and although Oliver bailed-out several pints of water he had taken the precaution of stowing everything in plastic bags so his clothes and sleeping bag were still dry. Soon we were cooking soup and pasta and feeling relatively comfortable.

Another restless night followed and as the morning showed no improvement it was obviously time to break camp and head home. With the occasional look back and the thought that I, at least, would have to return next year to finish the work we trekked back down the coire. Aberader seemed like heaven; we learnt that the winds there had been measured at 40 mph so must have been at least double that where we were! Clean clothes and hot water made us feel human again so we headed for Dalwhinnie and my traditional post-expedition meal at the Ben Alder Cafe. An hour later we were on the road south and with blue skies above us and a warm sun shining through the windows of the car we were soon talking about a return visit.

Alan Fryday