

The path to bryological recording

Before my move to Ireland 18 months ago, I spent several years being a fairly passive bryological recorder. The move gave me a gentle push from being passive towards being an active recorder. Now, 18 months on, I find myself with a bryophyte recording project in the Wicklow Mountains National Park, and devising ways to encourage other members of the newly formed Dublin BBS regional group to participate in this recording effort. And whilst I devise my ways, I inevitably end up pondering how I was encouraged down the path to bryological recording.

Training seems an essential first step on the path to becoming a recorder, and I have certainly learnt much from attending field meetings and courses. Courses on a specific aspect of bryology have been particularly helpful in developing not only my knowledge, but also my self-confidence. The first vice-county record I ever submitted was *Sphagnum pulchrum* for County Sligo. I am sure that the seeds of my familiarity with this group were planted by Martha Newton when I attended one of her courses. For the Wicklow project I decided to hold recording weekends, with visiting bryophyte experts to assist with recording and learning. I hope that repeating field meetings in similar habitats (mainly upland heath and bog in this case) will help new bryologists to become familiar with a range of typical species.

Lack of confidence may also play a large role in why many people do not record bryophytes. When surrounded by experts on field meetings it can be easy to believe that you have nothing to contribute. The first field meeting I attended in Ireland was a bryophyte meeting organized by the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club. Armed with the new *Field Guide* I was pleasantly surprised to find myself helping Daniel Kelly teach bryophytes to beginners. I realized that teaching is a great way to develop confidence in your own ability, as well as to share knowledge with others. On field meetings for the Wicklow project I have been pleased to see people with slightly more experience share their knowledge with those new to bryology.

Throughout my first year in Ireland, the new *Field Guide* has been my faithful companion on all the surveys I have undertaken as an ecological consultant. I soon noticed that the maps therein show a lot of empty space in Ireland, even for species that should be relatively common. This has made me see that I can easily make important contributions to species distributions (also mentioned by Sam Bosanquet in a previous *Opinion* article). It's important that beginners see that even recording common species is a useful contribution. I have tried to communicate this to the group involved in my Wicklow recording project. Outside of 'hot spot' areas, many of the tetrads within the survey area have never been visited by a bryologist. So, all records from these areas are valuable additions to our knowledge.

New bryologists are often confused by the world of referees, recording cards, 'wanted' lists, vice-county records, voucher specimens, and tetrads and hectads. I found it particularly useful when I was encouraged on field meetings to complete the recording card for the day. This not only helped me to find my way around the names on the card, but also to understand the area being mapped and how to document rarer species. For the Wicklow project, I organized an initial indoor meeting to discuss recording. I also try to offer support (usually by email) when required. I have found that it is only by 'doing' that I learn, and so I feel that encouraging beginners to take part in recording, with support, is essential to develop the next generation of recorders.

By walking this path over the last 18 months, I have gained self-confidence and learnt that my records can be useful. For me, a final step was becoming Regional Recorder for County Wicklow, because I felt that I had some ownership and responsibility for the area, so I make sure that the participants in my Wicklow project are each assigned a specific tetrad for which they have responsibility. I hope that this small project will give the participants the skills, knowledge and confidence to record more widely in Ireland.

Jo Denyer (e joanne@denyerecology.com)