

Bryophytes and lichens of Letterewe. Oliver Moore. 2019.

Letterewe Estate, Ross-shire. ISBN 978-90-824953-1-7.

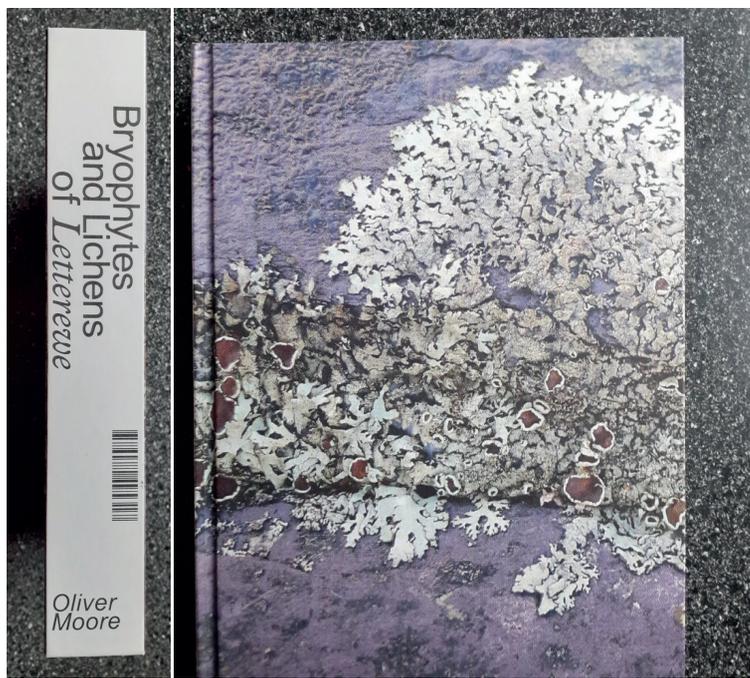
This book is unique. Don't get me wrong, I love it, but it's certainly a bit ... different. It is a very personal, yet hugely informative, treatise on the bryophytes and lichens of a special part of the West Highlands, and especially on their response to deer.

Letterewe is a large estate in north-western Scotland, idyllically situated on the northern shores of Loch Maree and encompassing woodland, bog, wet heath, rivers, ravines and of course the estate buildings and associated lowland habitats. There are no metalled roads, and the estate is justly proud of its ethos of being true to the local landscape and nature. Oliver's book is the third in a Letterewe trilogy, the first dealing with deer, the second with invertebrates. The theme of managing the deer runs through all three books. I have not seen the first two, but I imagine they are designed in the same way as this one; which is to say, strangely.

For a start, it is hardcover, chunky, with thick, rough-cut paper, yet not particularly long. It has

a distinctive smell. The text margins undulate unpredictably throughout – I have no idea why; maybe to look as if the pages have been nibbled by deer? The many colour photos look as if they are good ones, with lots of splendid landscapes and plant shots, but unfortunately the coarsely grained paper does them no favours. If the whole thing is the result of a 'green' production process then I have no qualms, but be aware that it is not like other books. Other slight oddities include the over-use of hyphens and having all the references in a small typeface, even at the beginning of sentences. A useful feature is the highlighting in green of everything that is illustrated in a photograph, with page numbers inserted for cross-referencing.

There are five chapters on bryophyte and lichen habitats, one on the impact of red deer management on the bryophytes and lichens (although this is a theme also touched upon in the other chapters), and finally a checklist of bryophyte and lichen species, which is essentially a Flora of the estate. Oliver was lucky enough to live at Letterewe for some years pursuing his PhD studies, and thoroughly immersed himself in the local cryptogamic flora. It shows. His book is very engagingly written. Each chapter is a beautifully evocative pen-portrait of what he observed, and immediately transports the reader to the wild north-west Highlands. As a bryologist based just a few miles away in Skye, I found myself nodding in recognition and pleasure at Oliver's enthusiastic descriptions of what he found. As well as lots of information about species, habitats and communities, there is a good explanation of how *Sphagnum* influences its habitat, and lots of unexpected snippets. I'll provide a couple of examples. “[*Lasallia pustulata* is] thought to be slightly more nutritional compared to the same quantity of cornflakes but the resultant irritation caused to the bowels may act as a deterrent.” Or



“...[the] inflated kidneys [of *Scapania uliginosa*] actually resemble the floats of the siphonophore known as the Portugese Man-of-war.” Yes, they do – but I would never have thought of that! And who would have guessed that one of the Letterewe guests expressed an interest in having a pair of trousers made out of *Campylopus atrovirens*? There is also an entertaining diversion on field toilet habits and the use of bryophytes; apparently *Sphagnum compactum* “readily crumbles in your hands”, and *Racomitrium lanuginosum* can feel ‘rather gritty’. Who am I kidding? We’ve all tried it!

There are some serious, and even philosophical points here too. I loved Oliver’s description of how he feels so at home in the hills among the beautiful mosses and lichens, yet lost in a shopping mall among the useless tat. No doubt many of us with a love of the natural world feel much the same. There is a short meditation on where the baseline should be in habitat restoration. He returns again and again to the idea of ‘rewilding’, pointing out that any natural or semi-natural environment with the top predators taken out is more or less dysfunctional. The notion of reintroducing wolves comes up in several places; the difficulties are acknowledged, but clearly there is some enthusiasm for such a

project – and why not? There is a lot on deer management, and discussion of techniques such as small scale exclosures to promote woodland regeneration without detriment to the bryophytes and lichens. I was a bit surprised not to find reference to the Glenfeshie estate in the Cairngorms, which has adopted a fairly radical (and controversial in some quarters) ‘zero tolerance’ approach to deer, all without deer-fencing, and the resultant recovery has been both rapid and spectacular. Could something similar be tried in the West Highlands?

The Flora section gives the records of each species on the estate by tetrad, with a short note on the habitat. The arrangement is alphabetical within each major group, and the information presented clearly and concisely.

The list price of £50 plus postage and packing seems a bit steep (it is available from Mariska Kamstra at MKamstra@ubmc.nl). Then again, it is unique. There will be nothing else quite like it on your bookshelves (unless, perhaps, you have the other two parts of the trilogy). If you know the area you will enjoy the familiarity; if not, your appetite will be whetted for a visit. Oliver is to be congratulated on adding such an idiosyncratic delight to our literature.

Nick Hodgetts