

St Helena Bryophytes study finds species new to science

In October and November 2005, a field study of the bryophytes in the Peaks area of St Helena was carried out by Martin Wigginton, the resulting data to contribute to an ongoing major project, implemented by the St Helena National Trust and supported by OTEP to develop a protected area management plan for the Peaks area (see *Forum News* 25).

Little was known about the bryophytes (mosses, liverworts and hornworts) of St Helena. Most of the information came from nineteenth century collections, during which time about 50 species were recorded. Unfortunately, many collections are without any details of where they were found on the island. In the next hundred years or so the bryology was neglected, and only six species were added to the known flora, four of which resulted from a brief visit by a non-bryologist in 1995. Thus, a detailed study was long overdue.

The primary aim of the 2005 survey was to gather information in the Peaks area (especially in the native Tree-fern - Cabbage-tree communities), but also to set its bryoflora in context by carrying out more limited surveys in other parts of the island. A large number of collections were made on the island (mostly small, but sufficient for identification), and most are yet to be



The endemic liverwort, Dendroceros adglutinatus on a branch of the endemic black cabbage tree Melanodendron integrifolium ©

studied. The survey has shown that the bryoflora is more diverse than previously thought, though not notably rich (which is hardly to be expected on such a remote island). The present survey has so far added nearly 70 species to the flora, at least four of which are new to science. The collections may well reveal more.

The bryophyte flora of St Helena is of considerable interest and, apart from a number of species with sub-cosmopolitan ranges, includes species with African, American and subantarctic affinities. Its importance is emphasised by the high number of endemics - about 25 species, with another two also occurring on Ascension but not elsewhere. About 20 of the endemics are found in the Peaks National Park. Though several were found to be quite widespread and common on the peaks, others are rare and threatened. In particular, the survey has shown that one endemic, *Sphagnum helenicum*, is now confined to a tiny area of wet rushy

grassland near the top of one of the peaks, and is critically endangered. A recovery programme will be needed for this, and perhaps other indigenous

species that appear to be extremely localised and/or threatened.

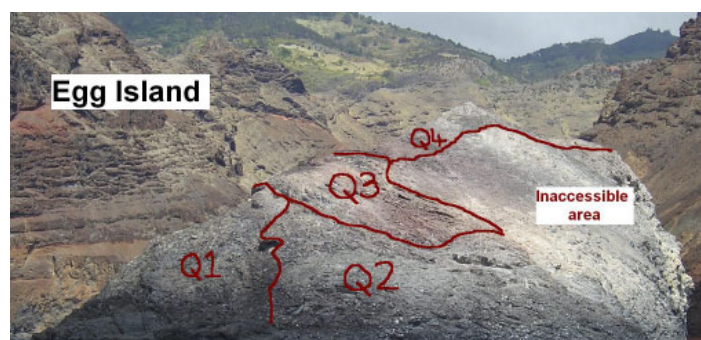
Another feature of the bryoflora is the relatively large number of probable (or certain) non-indigenous immigrants - about 24 species - introduced to the island through man's activities. Fortunately, most seem to be benign, but some are invasive. One alien species, in particular (the predominantly holarctic moss *Scleropodium purum* - which is common in UK, for example) is rampant in many of the higher parts of the island, indeed right up to the summits. At least along the highest ridge, it is threatening one indigenous species, *Marchantia berteriana*, which has greatly declined and now occurs in only one place just below Diana's Peak. Control of the invasive *S. purum* will need to be considered in this and other sensitive areas of the Peaks.

The 2005 survey has provided baseline data to feed into the Peaks project, and also data on selected areas elsewhere on the island. Finally, the intention is to publish an illustrated/photographic *Field Guide* to the mosses and liverworts of the island. It is hoped that this help to will raise awareness of this group of lower plants, and to stimulate interest in their further study.

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The establishment of a monitoring scheme and awareness programme for seabirds and turtles at St Helena

The purpose behind this project was to establish information of the breeding season of the seabirds around the island, along with the population status. Running parallel with this



Egg Island one of the offshore islands monitored on a monthly basis by boat, with some counting areas marked

was the establishment of a sightings scheme for all marine life around the island, focusing mainly on the turtles.

The start of the project involved Tara Pelembe, the Ascension Conservation Officer coming to the island to set up the monitoring scheme. This was completed early in November 2004. Seabird breeding sites are now monitored on a monthly basis. This includes a walk to Gill Point to look down on Shore Island (which is currently home to the Black Noddy, Brown Noddy, Masked Booby, Brown Booby, Sooty Tern and Red-