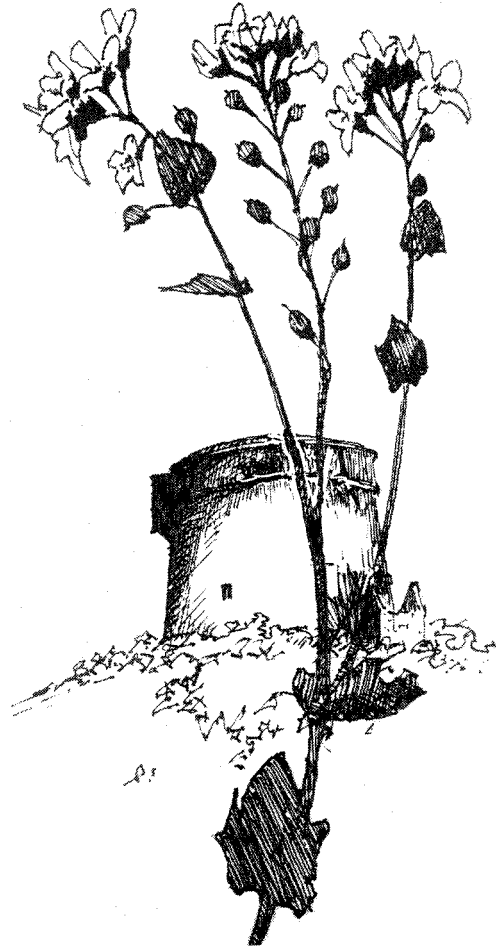


The Flora of Shenick Island

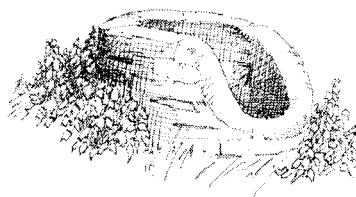
BY DECLAN DOOGUE



IRISH WILDBIRD CONSERVANCY

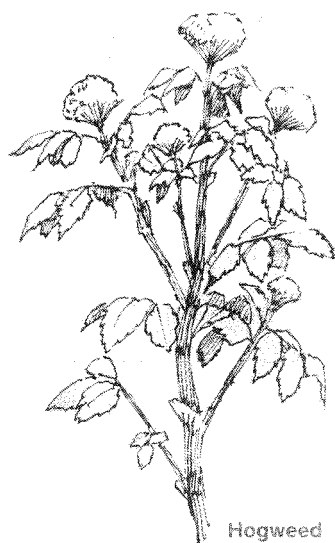


The flora of Shenick Island comprises an interesting admixture of native and introduced species. The natural elements are well-represented in the shoreline flora while a number of weeds and other plants testify to man's former presence on the island. The ridges of shingle and coarse sand that fringe the island are too unstable a habitat for most flowering plants. Any species that becomes briefly established will almost certainly be eradicated by the next severe storm. It is only where the sand and small boulders are sufficiently remote from the influence of most high tides that plant life can enjoy any hope of permanency. Here and there, in tiny bays around the island these conditions exist. Mixtures of sand and small stones are colonised by the Sea Sandwort (*Honkenya peploides*), Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* ssp. *maritima*) and a variety of the Curled Dock, (*Rumex crispus* var. *triangulatus*). These in



Well surrounded by nettles.

contain stems, leaves and seeds of flowering plants, as well as various seaweeds, and form temporary habitats in which certain fast-growing species such as Orache (*Atriplex hastata*) are able to germinate and mature. These mats appear to be completely isolated from the humic material and moisture beneath the shingle although in the course of time with storms, rain and disturbance they themselves will eventually become part of that material. (Seaweed has of course long been recognised as a useful natural manure).



Hogweed

turn are laced together by the runners of Silverweed, (*Potentilla anserina*) a member of a genus of plants that includes the Strawberry. These plants have quite well-developed root structures and are able to penetrate well below the humus-poor shingle/sand matrix. Being perennial, they are able to withstand a considerable degree of buffeting by the elements once they have become established.

An interesting feature of the shingle banks is the mats of vegetation that are deposited on them by the spring tides. These layers of vegetable matter

At various points around the shore, rock exposures support their own distinctive flora. A number of species are able to tolerate sea-spray and form a very well-defined community. The most easily recognised of these is Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), the plant that was depicted on the old English threepenny piece. It forms cushions on the rocks and produces masses of bright pink flowers in early summer. In slightly wetter places Scurvy Grass (*Cochlearia officinalis*) grows in quantity, and on the earth banks below the Martello Tower a third spray-zone species, Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) occurs in small numbers. Many flowering plants experience difficulty surviving on rocks. The soil is shallow and has little water-retaining potential. Two different species of Stonecrop live on the island and both are equipped with stubby fleshy leaves adapted to retain moisture whenever it rains. These are Wall-pepper (*Sedum acre*) and English Stonecrop (*S. anglicum*). Wall-pepper produces masses of yellow flowers in summer and its leaves if chewed for some time

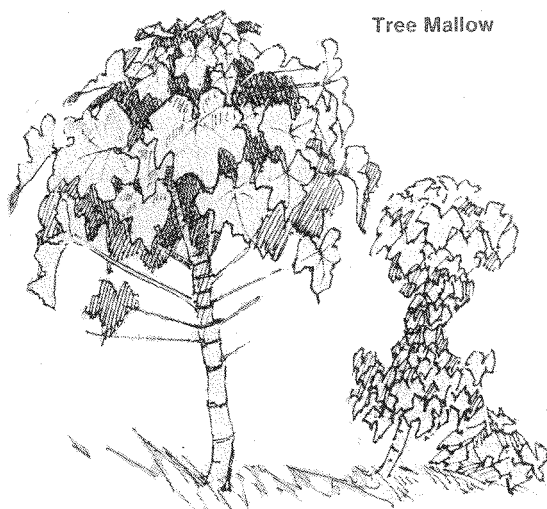


Brambles

produce a biting taste. The English Stonecrop is a smaller pink-flowered species and is quite rare on the island. Strangely this species is quite common on St. Patrick's Island while Wall-pepper is either very rare or unknown.

At the highest points on the shore Sea Beet (*Beta maritima*), Scutch (*Elymus repens*) and Creeping Bent Grass (*Agrostis stolonifera*) are established on more consolidated sandy ground. This area is certainly subject to tidal and spray influence as can be seen by the amount of drift material washed up. Growing in among these plants however are a number of species which in the East of Ireland are more characteristic of sand dune habitats. Most obvious of these are Common Storksbill (*Erodium cicutarium*) and Sand Couch (*Elymus farctus*). This zone, along with the rock outcrops and shingle areas exhibit the most natural aspects of the island's flora. There are very few, if any, species growing here that are considered to have been introduced by man. Ironically, certain weed species such as groundsel that have become such a nuisance nowadays may have gained their initial footholds in these semi-open habitats prior to the arrival of man in Ireland.

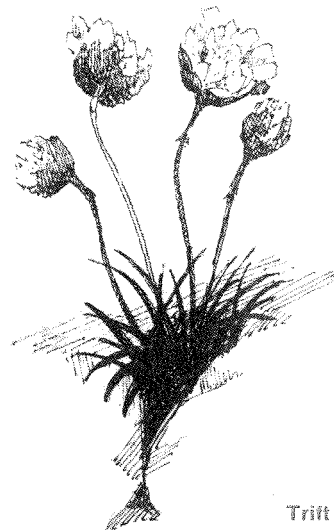
The most spectacular flowering plant on the island is Tree Mallow (*Lavatera arborea*). It is a tall shrub with vivid pink flowers with a dark centre. It is tempting to think that it may be native on the island, but the probabilities are against it. Tree Mallow is certainly indigenous on certain sea cliffs on the East of Ireland, where it grows remote from habitation. Anyone who



Tree Mallow

walks off the main streets of either Skerries or Rush will realise at once however, that the same species was once extensively cultivated as a garden flower. In addition, at least some of the plants on the island grow in close proximity to the Martello Tower and may well have been planted there by some of its previous occupants. This may also have been the case with the small thicket of Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) which grows on the slope just east of the tower. Various superstitions are associated with Elder and in Ireland, it is seldom encountered far from old houses and ruins. Scattered throughout the island on the shallower soils where the vegetation is thinner are two other old-ruin specialists. Pyrenean Cranesbill (*Geranium pyrenaicum*) is a rare plant in Ireland, often associated with Norman settlements. Whether it was accidentally introduced at some stage in the past or just prefers the dry shallow soils associated with the rock outcrops upon which these castles and other structures were built remains to be clarified. Also scattered throughout the island are the purple-spotted stems of Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), a poisonous plant and one which though often found associated with man's ancient habitation is also quite common on islands and coastal habitats.

Doubt also attaches to the status of the species that have come to live on and around the concrete artifacts connected with the sewage outfall at the opposite end of the island. A number of lime-loving plants find here their only localities on the island. At



Trillium

when this matures, it will reduce the amount of available habitat but may permit the expansion of shade-tolerant species such as Ground Ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*) which is present on the island in small quantity. Against that we may well expect a falling-off in the frequency of other species that prefer more open conditions.

Chronicling these gradual changes is both feasible and worthwhile. At what rate does any particular species spread, and what are the consequences of that spatial expansion to other species? Base-line studies of this kind are rare in Ireland, but without them, habitat management predictions are largely a matter of inspired guesswork. The transitional nature of these post-agricultural habitats should not be taken as implying that they are less important than any other habitat. Rather that their interest is related to their transitory status. Once colonisation has proceeded beyond a certain point the amount of floristic change that takes place will lessen as the different potential habitats develop and stabilise. This, however, is a slow process but one that future naturalists will be enabled to analyse, provided that we do the initial groundwork now.

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Hawthorn



first glance species such as Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*) might easily be considered native to the island — in the sense that they have made their way unaided from other natural habitats and live in natural habitats in their new home. However the piles of sandy material upon which several of these species live which at first glance seem to be sand-dunes, may in fact be man-made features. Some coring should clear up the matter.

Because of its small size, limited range of habitats and proximity to the mainland, the flora of Shenick is both restricted and predictable. The total number of species living on the island is small and their relative proportions correspond closely to those of the mainland. Although it lacks the botanical individuality that one encounters on larger and more remote islands, its flora is by no means uninteresting. While every species at present known from the island can be located with far less difficulty on the shore at Skerries, it has one attribute that is of great interest to botanists — it is no longer farmed.

Pastoral and arable farming creates conditions where certain species thrive. Low-growing rosette-forming plants do well in grazed areas where most of the living parts of the plant are safe below the bite of the herbivore. Tillage prevents land from grassing over and allows annual weeds to grow, flower and shed their seeds. Following its abandonment, the island is now beginning to lose the weed species that would once have been such a nuisance to the farmer. Many of these however survive on the island as dormant seed and spring up again whenever the soil surface is disturbed. Red Deadnettle (*Lamium purpureum*) is a common weed throughout Co. Dublin. In the north of the county it is joined by the

closely-related Henbit (*L. hybridum*). Both grow together in two small patches on the island where the grass has for some reason broken down. Establishing how much Henbit (or any other species) survives on the island as dormant seed is a matter that would repay investigation by simple growth experiments. It would give us some indication of the composition of the weed flora of the island as it was prior to its abandonment and might throw some light on the way in which the flora of corresponding sections of the mainland has changed following the introduction of herbicides.



Curled Dock

The early stages of the reversion of the flora to a more natural state are already evident. Most of the rough grassland that now covers the centre of the island has developed where the soil is less shallow. This has enabled the coarser and deeper-rooting species such as Cock's Foot (*Dactylis glomerata*) to become established in large clumps, to the detriment of less aggressive species. Throughout the island the stems of Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*) also show up the deeper richer soil with much the same vigour and aggression as they exhibit on other islands such as Ireland's Eye. Most significantly, in terms of the long-term colonisation of the island, incipient scrub, composed of Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) is developing, particularly at the southern end of the island. If and