



Some hardy plants growing in Arctic Sweden

Ruth Baumberg

Fig. 1 Rain on the way

In July I had the chance to go on a botanical holiday 180km north of the Arctic Circle in Lappland, a province of Northern Sweden, close to the Abisko National Park and around 100km north-west of the iron-mining town of Kiruna.

As we drove north from Kiruna airport through the undulating countryside covered in green forest, gradually many lakes came into view, between mountains with patches of snow decorating their tops. We arrived at our hotel which overlooked Torne träsk, the sixth-largest lake in Sweden, on a hillside backed by the bare-topped Mount Njulla, over 1100m high.

Here we were to stay for the week among birch and willow woods carpeted by acid-loving plants, with bogs and lakes everywhere. There is plenty of bare rock, and near us a gorge out of which a river, heavy with

snow melt, discharges into the lake via a delta where there is a bird sanctuary. The woods are sparse, containing young birch trees and many species of willow, principally *Salix lanata* (which I grow in my garden), *S. reticulata* and *S. glauca*, and quite large sections are composed of dead and dying birch due to the depredations of the autumnal moth, *Epirrita autumnata*. Over time, the demise of the trees allows

more light to reach the ground, yielding a greater diversity of plants which, in turn, are grazed by the local (farmed) reindeer, and then new-growth birch progressively bring back the forest in a thirty-year cycle.

The ground cover comprises *Cornus suecica*, with four beautiful white bracts surrounding the purple-black flowers (fig. 2); chickweed wintergreen (*Trientalis europaea*);



Fig. 2 *Cornus suecica*



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Fig. 3 *Dryas octopetala*



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Fig. 4 *Campanula uniflora*

several forms of equisetum (that most maligned garden weed, horsetail), including *E. sylvaticum* and *E. pratense*; white-flowered mountain avens (*Dryas octopetala* – fig. 3); various forms of pinguicula (the purple *P. vulgaris* that used to seed into my pots at home, plus white *P. alpina* and a tiny purple *P. villosa*) in the damp patches; a ubiquitous yellow violet (*Viola biflora*); a blue astragalus; various species of heath, lingonberry, crowberry, cranberry, cloudberry, bilberry; oak fern (*Gymnocarpium dryopteris*); and many mosses and lichens. So quite an unfamiliar set of plants, though interspersed among them were some familiar friends: purple *Geranium sylvaticum*, yellow *Trollius europaeus*, red campion (*Silene dioica*), and herb paris (*Paris quadrifolia*) which I grow in my garden as a large patch under the shelter of a beech hedge.

On a trip into the

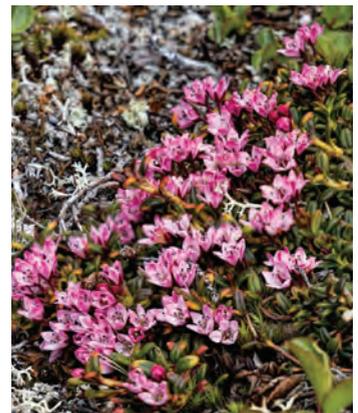
gorge, we saw more plants clinging to the rocks – again unfamiliar species, but from genera we knew: *Primula stricta*, a rather unkempt and weedy, pale-lilac primula; *Campanula uniflora*, elegant but not showy (fig. 4); several saxifrages, *S. caespitosa* and *S. nivalis*; and two unusual silenes, *S. wahlbergella* and *S. involucrata*. The silenes reminded me of a favourite of mine: a much taller garden plant that grows happily in dry shade in my garden, *Silene fimbriata*, which has the same swollen calyx but finely cut petals.

After the first day walking locally in the Abisko National Park, we took a bet on the weather (clouds were low but not atop Mount Njulla) and ascended the mountain on a very slow chairlift to beyond the tree line, where we found ground-hugging plants – too windy for trees, apart from a minuscule prostrate willow, *Salix herbacea*.



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Fig. 5 *Rhododendron lapponicum*



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Fig. 6 *Kalmia procumbens* (syn. *Loiseleuria procumbens*)

Fig. 7 *Pedicularis lapponica*Fig. 8 *Betula nana*

Fig. 9 Near the Arctic skua lake

Floating above the ground on our way up, we saw our only lemming, scurrying along a path and disappearing into a hole.

We saw big patches of pink *Silene acaulis* and a beautiful white mountain plant *Diapensia lapponica* on the rocks together with a very small purple rhododendron, *R. lapponicum* (fig. 5) and vivid-pink *Kalmia procumbens* (syn. *Loiseleuria procumbens* – fig. 6). There were heaths, pink

bog rosemary (*Andromeda polifolia*), and poking up through them, a pale-yellow lousewort (*Pedicularis lapponica* – fig. 7).

It was interesting to see miniature species of birch (*Betula nana* – fig. 8) and willow, which were both very prostrate, but thriving despite the strong winds and months of snow cover they experience. But the general aspect was of wind, bare rock, patches of snow and views of the lake below; a very harsh

climate. Hardy plants indeed and a world away from the relatively lush climate of our gardens at home; yet here too we found thriving plants, which shows that there are all kinds of ecological niches, and we shouldn't give up on planting difficult areas.

After getting cold up on the heights and eating our picnic in the café at the top of the chairlift, we descended to the lake level where we examined plants along the roadside (a surprisingly good habitat) before retreating to our warm hotel. The following day was mostly given over to observing birdlife from boardwalk paths through marshes, and a climb up to a lake where we saw red-throated divers and Arctic skuas, and views of reedy lakes, damp bogs and heath flowers; though the outing was curtailed by heavy rain (fig. 9).

Another long day trip to Trollsjön valley followed; about 15 km further on from the previous day. The surrounding mountains were covered with overnight falls of fresh snow (it snowed as we were leaving our hotel). As usual, the lower slopes were covered with relatively sparse willow and birch woods, but strewn through them were many lush and interesting lichens. After we crossed the railway line (mostly used for transporting iron ore from Kiruna to the port of Narvik in Norway) we climbed above the tree

line and the path seemed to be coterminous with a descending stream, so it was hard work wading and jumping from rock to rock. There was a frog orchid (*Dactylorhiza viridis*); coralroot orchid (*Corallorhiza trifida*); cotton-grass; lots of blue heath (*Phyllodoce caerulea*); clumps of *Pyrola rotundifolia*; alpine pinguicula; and the usual low-growing acid-lovers: cranberry, bilberry and cloudberry. After a late lunch, some of us returned the same way while others continued onward, but none reached the fabled lake at the end of the valley. This was the coldest day – down to 2°C – and we were all dressed up like the Michelin Man in layers of warm clothing, hats and sheepskin gloves, only removing them to take photos or eat our lunch.

The next day, with rain forecast, we travelled furthest afield into Norway, stopping at the seaside (Ofotfjord) to see various beach plants including *Mertensia maritima* (fig. 10) (synonym of *M. m.* subsp. *asiatica* that many of us grow in our gardens); pink valerian (*Centranthus ruber*); Scots lovage (*Ligusticum scoticum*); and a rare treat in a Scots pine wood by the beach, lots of *Moneses*

uniflora (fig. 11), the one-flowered wintergreen. We spent time in the rain at the Polar Park, looking at animals we had not previously seen, and we made roadside stops to see large clumps of mauve orchids, *Dactylorhiza maculata* (fig. 12), and blue *Polemonium caeruleum*, and one last seaside stop to look at more plants including the moonwort, *Botrychium lunaria*.

Our last full day in Lapland was finally sunny and warmer. We spent it exploring more of the Abisko National Park, wandering further up the river gorge, back through woods and next to lakes, watching birds. We finally got a feel for the different types of habitat including large sparse, flat, rocky areas (one area full of fragrant orchids, *Gymnadenia conopsea*) and wetlands, as well as the lush woods carpeted with cornus and wintergreen. All in all, an interesting experience of plants flourishing in the far arctic north despite the harsh conditions.

With thanks to Bob Gibbons of Natural History Travel and his two other guides who ran the trip and identified all the plants and birds for us. 🌸

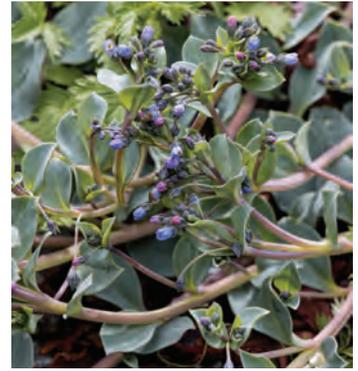


Fig. 10 *Mertensia maritima*



Fig. 11 *Moneses uniflora*



Fig. 12 *Dactylorhiza maculata*

Ruth Baumberg has been a member of the HPS for over 30 years, and has been a post-holder at national and local (West Yorkshire) levels. She has also written the Plant of the Month blog. Now happily retired, Ruth likes seeing plants in the wild to compare them with our garden plants. She is a keen photographer, and has been one of the judges for the Society's Photographic Competition.