



# THE ALPINE GARDEN SOCIETY CENTRAL SUSSEX GROUP



NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2006

## BRENDA AND TONY HOLCOMBE ISLANDS APART - PLANTS AT EXTREME LATITUDES

Brenda and Tony's past 20 or so years have been spent travelling the world's seven continents - a yellow field in a glaciated Pyrenees valley, Mt. Olympus in Washington State, a magenta flowered *Castilleja* in the Cascades, the altiplana of northern Chile with snow-capped volcanoes as a background, at 10,000ft. On Mt. Kenya in Africa a giant "heather" *Senecio brassica* and the Himalayas in Asia all in some measure accessible by road. But the remaining two continents need ships.

So first to north east Russia and at 70°N in north-east Russia the port of Providentia with factories and bleak looking housing. From here it was intended to sail north to Wrangel Island with a mix of international travellers on the Feodor Matesen. There were ice floes, one occupied by a polar bear, another by a stuck ship!. What to do? Call in the navy and await a helicopter which had to land on a large enough piece of ice some way from the ship, to which the passengers made their way on foot on a route marked out by splashes of red pain on selected ice floes. And so to the barren looking 3,000 sq mile island where there is a very spartan settlement. Among the low hills, broken rusting vehicles and on misty unstable slopes, polar bears, musk ox and walrus, a skeleton of which was bleached white. The vegetation is very dry and stony, but there are patches of green and colour from the 200 species of flowering plants - yellow Arctic Poppy, prostrate Polar Willow *Salix polaris*, white *Erigeron grandiflorum* with large flowers, purple *Astragalus alpinus articus*, *Myosotis alpestris asiaticus*, a yellow *Arnica* and *Saxifraga nivalis* with digitate rosette foliage, *Saxifraga* in icy streams, bulbiferous *S. cernua*, *S. flagellaris* ssp. *platysepala* (285/393) with large, buttercup-yellow flowers and red runners at the ends of which new rosettes develop and root, yellow poppies on a raised beach, a *Melandrium* or *Silene*, a fluffy *Saussurea*, being pollinated by a bumble bee, butterflies including an Arctic form of a Small Copper, a deep red form of *Rhodiola rosea*, *Valerian*, cotton grass, lichens and Reindeer Moss.

Following a brief interlude in Moscow with its golden basilicas and a Lenin statue, off north again to Spitsbergen on Norway's Svalbard touching 80° (285/388). Its west coast ice free for most of the year, glaciers emerging from low mountains but ending in very high cliffs. On ice floes, black-legged Kittiwakes and Bearded Seals. A look-out has to be kept for polar bears who can turn up anywhere – in any confrontation the bears come first (completely protected since 1973,) humans second. Rain and snow are unpredictable with frequent Arctic fog in summer. Although there are only 173 plants species, they are very special plants which are threatened by climate change. On the sides of Isfjorden, tall-stemmed *Saxifraga furcata*, the Svalbard Poppy, *Papaver dahlianum*, white in its lowland form (285/395), occasionally yellow in upland gravels and moraines. Among large clumps of *Dryas octopetala* and *Salix polaris* which carries red flowers, *Saxifragas*, *Silene furcata*, *S. uralensis* and the Woolly Lousewort *Pedicularis lanata* ssp. *dasyantha* with large red flowers.

*Pedicularis lanata*



*Cochlearia groenlandica*



*Silene acaulis* and in very dry areas *Cassiope tetragona*. There is Polar Scurvy Grass *Cochlearia groenlandica* and the Arctic Mouse-Ear *Cerastium arcticum*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and twelve species of *Draba*. The bulbils of Alpine Bistort *Bistorta vivipara* are eaten by ptarmigan and reindeer. Further north in August, a very heavy snow storm completely covered the ground. Among the birds, the pure white Ivory Gull and vast colonies of Black Headed Little Auks, nesting among 3" cobbles, almost impossible to find their nests in snow cover. With lots of foliage *Pedicularis hirsuta* and tiny *Polygonum vivipara*. There are acres and acres of Cotton Grass and the Fringed Sandwort *Arenaria ciliata*.

Off to the other side of the world and two island groups south of New Zealand's South Island at just over 50°S (the equivalent of Sussex, but in the sub-Antarctic!). But first on South Island, *Celmisia*, yellow flowered *Aciphylla* and *Ranunculus lyallii* (171/back cover) and in the Southern Ocean the Southern Royal Albatross and on Antarctica itself Captain Scott's base camp at Cape Evans on New Zealand's Ross Dependency.

First to the unglaciated, volcanic Auckland Islands 350 miles south of South Island. They are a wildlife refuge requiring permission to land. Cold, wet and windy with mist and low cloud, the islands are no longer inhabited, but introduced cats, mice and goats are being exterminated. The islands are the home of the most Wandering and Shy Albatross., while 95% of the world's Hooker's (New Zealand) Sea Lion population breed there – these are aggressive and will come after any visitor, enormous teeth at the ready! Enderley Island just off the north tip of the main island is



*Metrosideros umbellata*



*Bulbinella rossii*

covered by the Southern Ruta Tree *Metrosideros umbellata* which has a peeling bark and carries crimson flowers, a very dense almost impenetrable scrub among much tussock grass in which skeletons of cattle has resulted in the leaching of phosphate and more vigorous growth. Patches of



*Bulbinella rossii* dominates one area among quite thick grass and there is the handsome tufted umbellifer *Aristome latifolia*, small blobs of endemic *Gentian cerina*, white flowers suffused red and purple in loose corymbs above fleshy foliage, clumps of the yellow scurvy plant *Stilbocarpa polaris*, lichens and willow herbs. Of the birds we saw Banded Dotterels and a red headed Parakeet. On Auk Island, a Shag carrying a mouthful of grass, a Northern Giant Petrel chick, and the yellow-eyed Shy Penguin which lives in burrows and tree roots.

The Campbell Islands consist of one large island, one smaller one and several islets. Today, human presence is limited to periodical visits of research and conservation expeditions (and the odd visitor). Pastoral land use commenced 1895, but grazing finally ceased with the elimination of the last of the feral sheep and cattle at the end of the 1980s. and in 2003 was declared rat free. Like the Auckland Islands they have a Scottish appearance, with wind and pouring rain the norm, but Brenda and Tony struck lucky with blue skies. Again tussock grass is ubiquitous, but there are some unusual plants: *Damnamesia vericosas* a monotypic genus related to *Celmisia*, *Pleurophyllum hookeri* (261/290) with silvery-felted foliage, dark flower heads pointing up and the bigger and larger leaved

*Pleurophyllum speciosum*

Southern Royal Albatross



*P. criniferum* with nodding brownish flowers. Higher up *Phyllachne clavigena* and the spectacular *Pleurophyllum speciosum* with ridged foliage and pink-mauve daisy flowers of which Sir Joseph Hooker wrote '...the most extraordinary is the *Pleurophyllum* meadow, a community dominated by the large-leaved herbaceous composite, producing a floral display second to none outside the tropics'. And another view of the Southern Royal Albatross.

A final call to Tierra Fuego and around the Martial Glacier in Argentina with its Southern Beech forest, Darwin's Orange Ball Fungus, white Dog Orchid and *Fuschia magellanica*. Among rocks a pale yellow flowered *Caltha* with arrow-shaped leaves, white *Primula magellanica*, hummocks of rock hard ...with yellow flowers at Cerro Martial, *Perezia magellanica*, the composite *Naussauvia magellanica* (278/413) with a globose spike of usually white flowers. In Chile, Punta Arenas and further north Chiloe Island, clumps of *Calceolaria* and *Chiliotrichum diffusum* scrub.

I doubt very much whether any other UK alpine gardener has ventured either to Wrangel or the Auckland/Campbell Islands, so this talk will long remain in our memories for its content and photographs that few others will have seen. Not only plants and animal life at extreme latitudes, but the extreme hardiness and determination of both Brenda and Tony! Remarkable travellers and a fascinating story.

<http://www.70south.com/resources/antarctic-environment>

<http://www.ouareau.com/auckland/>

<http://www.wild-russia.org/bioregion1/1-wrangel/wr-pinkflower.htm>

<http://www.murihiku.com/Maps.htm>

<http://www.murihiku.com/Maps.htm>

<http://www.murihiku.com/IslandsMain.htm>

[www.milnesplantlink.co.nz/](http://www.milnesplantlink.co.nz/) Report on the visit to the Sub Antarctic Islands

[www.qsl.net/zl9ci/zl9info.htm](http://www.qsl.net/zl9ci/zl9info.htm) Cambell Info.

[www.plantexplorers.com/explorers/biographies/hooker/megaherbs.htm](http://www.plantexplorers.com/explorers/biographies/hooker/megaherbs.htm)

[www.qsl.net/zl9ci/zl9info.html](http://www.qsl.net/zl9ci/zl9info.html)

[www.technobeat.com/NONSENSE/Subantarctic.html](http://www.technobeat.com/NONSENSE/Subantarctic.html)

Apologies for misleading you about this talk last month – failure to look at the updated programme! Ian Rumley-Dawson's 'Wildflowers of the Pacific' will be on November 18. I also missed in last month's newsletter, Roger Facer's article on his trip up Mt. Galen in search of *Primula tschuktschorum* in 267/94 (March 1997).

**RM**

### Chairman's News – March 2006.

Spring seems a long time in coming this year but it will when we are least expecting it. Members of the Committee met on the 4th March and reviewed the forthcoming events.

The next meeting is on **Saturday the 18th of March** when due to programme changes beyond our control, **Roy Metcalfe will be our speaker on 'Plants and their Alpine Environment.'** Roy has travelled widely in different mountain ranges and has a wealth of experience and knowledge gained from travel in his earlier capacity of Assistant Director of Tours for the AGS. This led him to a study of plants in the wild.

The subject is important to all of us who try to grow alpine and rock garden plants in order that we attempt to provide them with the conditions they crave. We can't simulate the weather at high altitudes, of snow, ice and desiccating winds, but providing we are aware of their needs for drainage, sun or shade, acid or alkaline growing medium, and degree of humus and moisture levels, our losses in our gardens will be reduced considerably. I am grateful to Roy for volunteering to tackle this vital subject from which we shall benefit enormously. Roy can't be expected to both give the lecture and write it up afterwards. Have we any volunteers for this little Task? *Already written unless you want a shortened version! RM*

The **April lecture is on the second Saturday which is the 8th of April.** Our usual 3rd Saturday would be Easter weekend. We are fortunate in having secured **David Lang** from Barcombe. David is a retired veterinary surgeon and will be well known to many for his books on the Orchids of Sussex and Orchids of Britain. He is a very keen botanist and ornithologist and has just returned from a fascinating journey in Chile. The title of his talk will be **'Chile –A long thin Journey'**. This is an area we have not visited recently and is one most of us will never ever get to. I suggest this is a lecture not to be missed. **We shall also be holding our spring members plant sale on that night.** Please bring what ever you can spare for this worthwhile cause. The income will all accrue to the Group Funds and helps to keep the subscriptions down and contributes toward the cost of speakers and hiring the Hall.

Two weeks later on **Saturday the 22nd of April is our Local Group Show** in the Adastra Hall in Hassocks. David Brown has spent a considerable amount of time and effort in organising an interesting and we hope profitable show which is a shop window for us and hopefully may attract some new local residents to come and join us. David has revamped the schedule in an effort to make it more user friendly for members entering their first show. He has also introduced photographic, flower arrangements and artistic classes and it is my hope everyone can enter one or more classes. Mary Randall has again agreed to judge the classes.

On **Saturday the 20th of May David and Ruth Brown have kindly agreed to open their garden in Hassocks for our Annual Open Garden Fund Raising Event.** Please make sure you have entered the date in your diary, bring your wife/husband, relations and friends to this enjoyable event. We shall be endeavouring to raise money for our Group Funds through a raffle, plant sales and other events. Not only can you visit another member's garden but have tea and socialise with other Group members and in that way we get to know each other better and become a more cohesive Group.

After that you can have a period of well earned rest until we start again on the 16th of September. The programme of speakers for 2006/2007 is in place and the programme will be distributed to members at the last meeting of the year in April.

We now have our own steel storage cupboard in the Hall into which goes the projector, PA equipment, name badges etc. A new 5ft screen has also been purchased and will be stored in the Hall both are due to the efforts of our Admin Secretary - Geoff Smith, for which I extend my grateful thanks.

**Keith Moorhouse**