

Britain's Most Threatened Plants

Until six years ago there was virtually no protection for any British plant that was not growing on a national nature reserve or a reserve with byelaws, such as those of the National Trust. Since 1975 a select list of 21 plants have been protected from being picked, dug up or otherwise damaged, with a penalty of £100 for doing so. At the time of writing the Wildlife and Countryside Bill is going through Parliament: when it becomes law this list is likely to be changed, one or two plants being omitted and hopefully a good many more added.

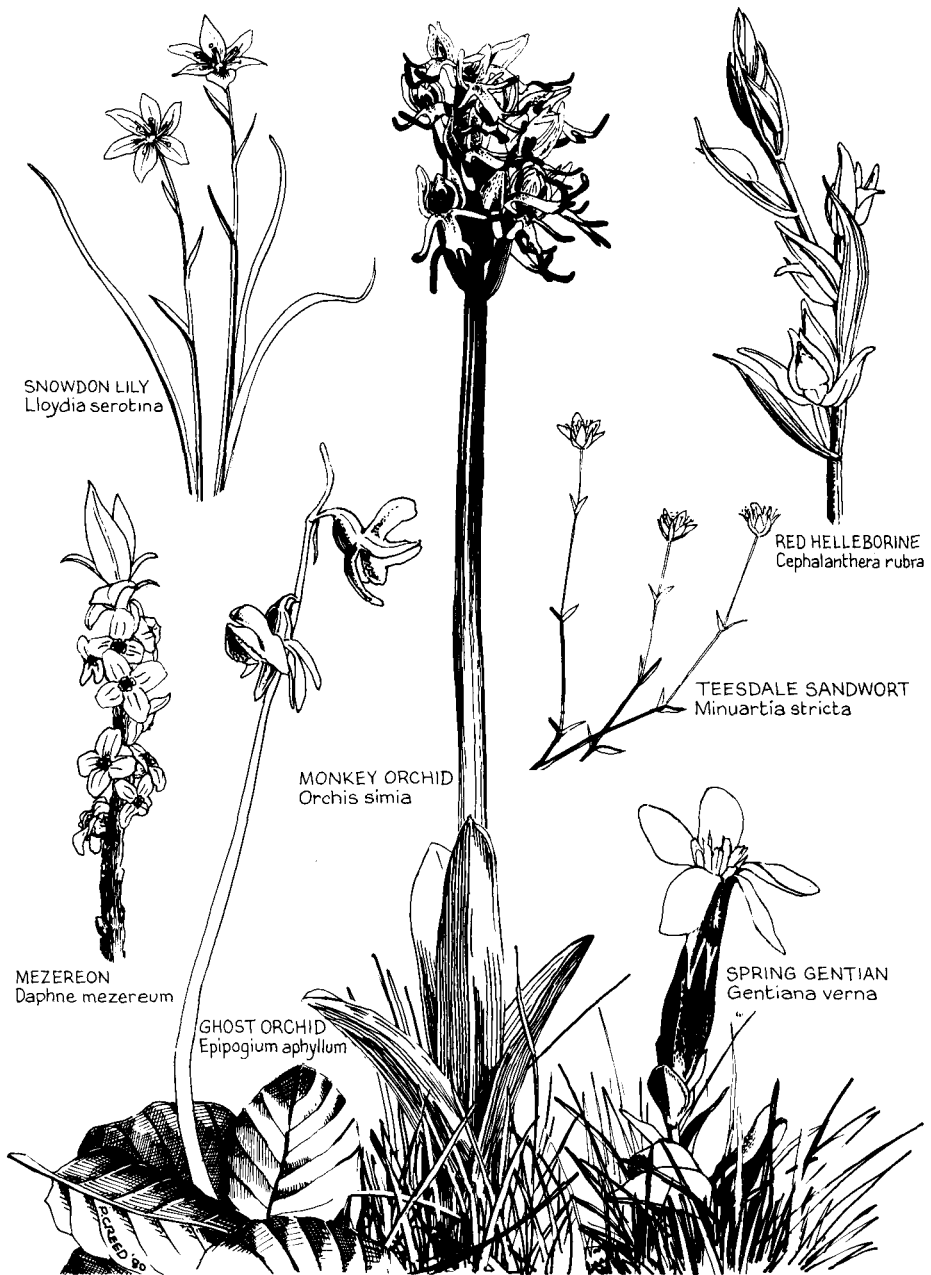
The 21 presently protected plants comprise three ferns, five orchids and 13 other flowering plants, six of which are illustrated opposite. The three ferns are the two tiny woodsias, alpine *Woodsia alpina* in Scotland and oblong *W. ilvensis* in England and Wales both confined to comparatively few of the higher hills, and Killarney fern *Trichomanes speciosum*, now almost extinct in Great Britain following the great rape of wild ferns by Victorian collectors.

The orchids are the extremely rare lady's slipper *Cypripedium calceolus*, confined to one or two spots on the Yorkshire limestone; the red helleborine *Cephalanthera rubra*, now known only from one or two Cotswold beechwoods and a single site in the Chilterns where it has not flowered for more than twenty years; the elusive ghost orchid *Epipogium aphyllum*, lost from its West Country sites and confined to two or three Chiltern beechwoods; the military orchid *Orchis militaris*, with one fine site in Suffolk, open to the public this year in June, and three more secluded ones in the Chilterns; and the monkey orchid *O. simia*, a rarity with a handful of sites in Kent and Oxfordshire.

Most of the remainder are alpiners: the tiny deep blue alpine gentian *Gentiana nivalis* in Angus and Perthshire; spring gentian *G. verna*, also real gentian blue and the glory of Upper Teesdale; pale blue alpine sow-thistle *Cicerbita alpina*, a great Highland rarity because it can grow only on rock ledges which even blackface sheep, who love its luscious leaves, cannot reach; white diapensia *Diapensia lapponica*, discovered only thirty years ago, on a single Inverness-shire hilltop; drooping saxifrage *Saxifraga cernua*, a speciality of Ben Lawers and a few other bens; tufted saxifrage *S. cespitosa*, another great Scottish rarity, still also hanging on in Snowdonia; white Snowdon lily *Lloydia serotina*, most easily seen at Cwm Idwal in Snowdonia, and the little white Teesdale sandwort *Minuartia stricta*, growing only on Widdybank Fell.

Of plants that are not alpiners there is the blue-flowered heath *Phyllodoce caerulea*, with a famous locality on the moors of the Sow of Athol, in Perthshire, and now two more in Inverness-shire; Cheddar pink *Dianthus gratianopolitanus*, which graces the limestone cliffs around Cheddar Gorge, Somerset, and nowhere else in Britain; spiked speedwell *Veronica spicata*, a handsome deep blue native of the East Anglian Breckland heaths and a few western limestone cliffs; the wild *Gladiolus illyricus* of the New Forest, and mezereon *Daphne mezereum*. This favourite garden plant, once ruthlessly dug up by village gardeners, became so rare in chalk and limestone woods that it had to be added to the schedule of the 1975 Act. Now it has made a good recovery and is likely to be omitted from the specially protected list in future.

Although some plants have been made rare by such direct threats as picking and digging up, the major threat to the future of all our plants, common and rare, is habitat destruction. It was the ploughing of the downland turf that made the military and monkey orchids rare, and excessive sheep grazing in the



SNOWDON LILY
Lloydia serotina

RED HELLEBORINE
Cephalanthera rubra

TEESDALE SANDWORT
Minuartia stricta

MONKEY ORCHID
Orchis simia

MEZEREON
Daphne mezereum

SPRING GENTIAN
Gentiana verna

GHOST ORCHID
Epipogium aphyllum

Seven of the 21 rare British plants protected since 1975, drawn by Peter Creed

Highlands that reduced so many of our native alpine plants to a few ledges on a handful of higher benches. So it is of extreme importance that the additional protection for all Sites of Special Scientific Interest, for which the voluntary wildlife conservation bodies have been pressing as the Wildlife and Countryside Bill goes through Parliament, should be granted.

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