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A Flower with Latitude

Encounters with Purple Saxifrage



Purple saxifrage in Cwm Idwal. (*Rob Collister*)

One April, in an era not so long ago when we could go where we liked, I made my way up to a favourite cwm on Snowdon. It was during a prolonged dry spell: long-dead bracken stalks crackled underfoot, mosses were brown and desiccated, and I was able to amble dry shod where normally angels would fear to tread without wellies. At the mountain wall two shaggy long-horned feral goats were waiting to usher me into the cwm before drifting away out of sight. I headed up grass and scree aiming for the bottom end of a band of crags that slants steeply up the hillside all the way to the ridge crest far above. Damp, vegetated and unattractive from a climbing point of view, they looked, instead, as though they might be home to some interesting plants. Geologically, they are probably formed of a basic tuff, volcanic ash from an eruption in Ordovician times that filtered down through a shallow sea to mingle with calcium from the skeletons of countless marine creatures on its bed.

Sure enough, almost immediately, my eye was caught by a bright splash of colour, which at this time of year could only be one thing – a clump of

purple saxifrage. This always flowers early (I found it once in the Devil's Kitchen, Twll Du, on 8 February) but it was still a delightful surprise since I had not been consciously looking for it. The sight induced the same sort of excitement as hearing the first cuckoo of the year, a reassuringly familiar yet significant milestone in the annual cycle.

The excellent new book by Jim Langley and Paul Gannon¹ tells me that the purple saxifrage (*saxifraga oppositifolia*) holds the record for the highest flowering plant in the Alps, having been recorded at 4,450m on the Dom, in Switzerland. It also grows further north than any other flower so it is truly an arctic-alpine and almost at the southern limit of its range in Snowdonia. As the climate warms it will become increasingly uncommon here.

If I had to name a favourite alpine plant it would probably be this one. In the startling boldness of its colour and its ability to thrive in the most inhospitable places it has rivals, of course: king-of-the-Alps (*eritichium nanum*) springs to mind, or moss campion (*silene acaulis*), perhaps. But, for me, purple saxifrage has more memorable associations with mountains around the world than any other plant.

There was the occasion in Alaska when five of us were descending Mount Deborah after making the first ascent of the east ridge. I was climbing with John Barry and Roger Mear but as the ridge had achieved the status of 'last great problem' two locals, Carl Tobin and John Cheesemond, had dashed up to join in. At a time when nearly 500 people were thronging Denali, we were the only climbers in the entire eastern sector of the Alaska range.

We had been on the mountain the best part of a fortnight, initially sleeping in snow caves and latterly bivouacking in some alarming situations on the crest of a hugely corniced ridge. I was coming down last, climbing slowly and carefully under the weight of a 300ft rope on top of everything else. We were only a few feet from the glacier on some rather suspect rock and I was feeling tired and a bit sorry for myself when, suddenly, I noticed a little dab of purple by the toe of my boot. Totally unexpected, at first I was puzzled but as soon as I realised what it was my spirits lifted, instantly. It was like being welcomed back into the land of the living. It was quite an emotional moment for me though none of the others had noticed the tiny blooms and no one seemed interested when I mentioned them. No matter, there was a renewed spring in my step as we set off up the glacier.

Another occasion was in the wilds of Kyrgyzstan. John Cousins and I had crossed a high ridge into the otherwise inaccessible Terekty valley to attempt Pik Kirov, an unclimbed 6,000m peak in a remote corner of the Tien Shan. Lacking today's obligatory props of satellite phone or emergency beacon, we were far from any possible help should things go wrong. Finding the solitary dash of purple in a sea of moraine as we set off on the final push felt like a message of encouragement, as if we were being wished good luck. In the event, we did not reach the summit, retreating in a storm from high on the mountain, but given an extremely close call with a collapsing cornice,

1. J Langley & P Gannon, *The Alps, A Natural Companion*, Oxford Alpine Club, 2019. See Andy Tickle's review in *AJ* 2020.



Purple saxifrage in spring sunshine, south Spitsbergen, near Hornsund fjord.



Last chance to see? *Saxifraga oppositifolia* likes altitude or latitude and climate change is squeezing it out of British mountains.

I have always felt the flowers were indeed a good omen.

Then there was the campsite at 5,600m on the lower slopes of Makalu, in Nepal, a stony carpet adorned with purple rosettes, once we had cleared away the trash left behind by a recent trekking party. In fact, I seem to have found this lovely plant everywhere; everywhere that the rocks contain some calcium and can be described as base-rich, that is: at sea-level in the Lyn-gen Alps, Norway, having been dropped by boat to ski up Riekkavarri, one May; in profusion on bare shale around the Dix hut above Arolla; on the sun-drenched limestone walls of the Tenailles de Mont Brison in the Écrins; nearer home, on the basalt escarpment of the Quirang on Skye and where basalt has been intruded into the gabbro of the Cuillin.

Here in Wales it grows in many places on Snowdon and in Idwal, where the geology is right. I found it once on Moel Siabod, inspired to look there by the story of Evan Roberts, a quarryman from Capel Curig. Shooed out of the house by his wife on a day off, he came upon it purely by chance in the cwm above Llyn y Foel. He was so enthralled by the sight that he took to searching for it elsewhere and was soon discovering other unusual plants. He went on to become the leading authority on the arctic-alpine plants of north Wales, with an honorary degree from Bangor University to prove it. I met Evan just the once, after he had gone blind, when he was still able to describe in detail how to find the colony of mountain avens (*dryas octopetala*) that flourishes in a most unlikely spot in the Carneddau. Curiously, though, I have never been able to find the purple saxifrage again on Moel Siabod, despite several searches.

This time, on Snowdon, here it was, growing in profusion, not just on the crag but in the grass at its foot as well. In some places the blooms were etiolated and washed out; in others, an unusually deep vibrant shade, the difference presumably linked to varying mineral content in the soil. Kneeling to examine the flowers more closely, I noticed specks of calcium that had been extruded from the tips of tiny leaves. On limestone the whole leaf becomes encrusted with calcium, an adaptation believed to provide extra protection against wind and sun. For a few seconds my absorption was complete and when I re-awakened it was with an inkling of what Jim Perrin meant when he wrote of, 'those acts of attention that are the profoundest prayer': prayer in the sense of stillness and loss of self, anyway. Continuing upward, I found nothing else yet in flower but purple saxifrage was everywhere. Finally, I emerged from the shaded, ice-carved north face onto sunlit grassland, grateful and glad at heart, happy to leave the summit to the multitude toiling up the Llanberis path even at this time of year.