

2022 Excursion to the Eifel, western Germany

The trip to the Shetland Isles had been organized and paid for. However, cancellation was the only option once the Indian variant had taken hold and the associated restrictions were put in place. In December 2021 the Dutch Government once again locked The Netherlands down because of the South African variant and any thought of travel was impossible. No Annual Excursion for a number of years was disappointing and with the world becoming used to living with the epidemic a decision was made to organize a trip which did not involve getting in an aeroplane. The chosen destination was the former army barracks at Vogelsang located above the Rur valley between Schleiden and Simmerath on the western side of the Eifel region in Germany. The groups accommodation was one of the Kameradschaftshäuser designed by Clemens Klotz and built in the mid 1930s which had become Das Gästehaus K13. Vogelsang had conveniently become the location of the Eifel National Park visitors centre.

Saturday 7th May 2022 – around the barracks

An uneventful afternoon drive from Leiden to the old army barracks at Vogelsang. After dinner a short walk from our lodgings down to the running track to familiarize the students with some of the resident plants. In the grassy areas *Ajuga reptans*, *Euphorbia cyparissias*, *Potentilla anserina*, and *Valerianella locusta* were found, while at the edges of the woodland *Alliaria petiolata*, *Galium aparine*, *Galium mullugo*, and *Stellaria holostea* (common and flowering at this time) were seen.



Our base at Vogelsang – Das Gästehaus K13.



The view from Das Gästehaus K13 with the Vogelsang running track visible.

Sunday 8th May 2022 – a raised bog

The view across the valley was completely obscured by dense fog which persisted during our drive to Monschau, an attractive small old German town situated in a steep sided valley on the border with Belgium. The walls on the edge of the narrow streets were constructed of a locally outcropping metamorphic shale which was home to impressive populations of *Asplenium trichomanes* and *Asplenium ruta-muraria* along with flowering *Cymbalaria muralis*. The destination for the day was not Monschau but just over the border west of Mützenich in Belgium. Here the group entered the Hohen Venns (High Fen) Nature Park, an oligotrophic, acid raised bog. The area is one of the wettest and coldest parts of Belgium but fortunately once the fog lifted it became a pleasant day. After parking the cars at Parkplatz Nahtsief the group traversed the Höhe Brackvenn situated at approximately 622 m above sea level. Amongst the tussocks *Calluna vulgaris* and *Erica tetralix* were present but much more common was *Vaccinium myrtillus* (particularly in the shade cast by *Betula* and *Salix* trees) and *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* (which preferred more open spots).

Walking along the track a mid 20th century archaeological artefact was discovered which reminded the group of the desperate German counter attack in the area during the winter of 1944 – a 50 calibre shell case was spotted with the markings DM 43 (manufactured in 1943 by Des Moines Ordnance Plant, Ankeny, Iowa). This probably had been dropped from an aeroplane mounted Browning M2 machine gun.

For a moment all eyes were lifted from ground level to get an overview. In front of us was clearly a fossilized pingo. A circular topographic feature, the very damp centre was bounded by a low bank. Patches of *Eriophorum angustifolium* grew in the drier areas in the fossil pingo centre but in the wetter places the red berries of *Vaccinium oxycoccus* were seen lying on blankets of *Sphagnum* moss. A couple of specimens of the low woody shrub *Vaccinium uliginosum* were also present.

Further along the track another fossil pingo was encountered but this one was flooded and inhabited by *Potamogeton polygonifolius* with its red floating leaves abundant.

Before the group returned to the car park a grassy track was investigated. Here flowering specimens of *Pedicularis sylvatica*, *Polygala serpyllifolia*, and *Potentilla erecta* were admired. A specimen of the later was excavated to illustrate how remarkably large the root is of this small plant. A stream traversed the track, its water copper in colour. The rock exposed in the channel was tested for the presence of CaCO_3 by applying a few drops of HCl. No fizzing confirmed a substrate suitable for califuge plants.

Despite an intensive search no *Drosera rotundifolia* was found, it was probably too early in the season.



Entering Belgium and the Hohes Venn Park.



The 2022 Botany Club Annual Excursion participants at the edge of the bog.



The raised bog that was visited.

Monday 9th May 2022 – an ancient woodland, river valley, and pasture

The previous day had dealt with the calcifuge types, but this day was spent searching for calcicoles in the Urft valley between Urft and Nettersheim. The cars were parked just outside Urft before the group started its walk southeastward / upstream along the floodplain of the River Urft in glorious sunshine. It was sobering to observe what the floods of 2021 had done to the railway track. Some of the tracks were hanging in mid-air, the ballast having been washed away, while others were twisted. The first stretch was in an ancient woodland (consisting of *Acer campestre*, *Acer pseudoplatanus*, *Carpinus betulus*, *Corylus avellana*, *Crataegus monogyna*, *Fagus sylvatica*, *Prunus spinosa*, *Sambucus nigra*, and *Viburnum lantana*) whose canopy had not yet developed. For this reason the group was treated to a display of typical understory herbs which flower in spring. *Galium oderatum*, *Anemone nemorosa*, *Allium ursinum*, and both male and female specimens of *Mercurialis perennis*. The latter two species formed monospecific colonies. Other species encountered included *Buglossoides purpureocaerulea* (displaying its impressive blue flowers), *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*, *Polygonatum multiflorum*, and *Viola hirta*. Amongst the trees a Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) was seen going about its business. Near the channel a flowering specimen of *Geum rivale* was found and many plants of *Filipendula ulmaria* and *Petasites hybridus*. Nearer to Nettersheim the grass fields were being cut presumably for fodder. This length of valley was the site of a Roman canal and also subterranean stone lined channels. These features had survived the previous year's flooding remarkably intact.

Bedded outcrops of lime rich rock were exposed on the valley sides. At some spots *Anemone nemorosa* and *Anemone ranunculoides* were seen growing next to one another. *Viburnum lantana* was flowering in many places.

Nettersheim was reached where a welcome coffee accompanied by a slice of Apfelstrudel was consumed. Above the town glided a Kite (*Milvus milvus*). Time was tight so the 6 km return journey was done at pace. Steps were not retraced, but a route along the northern side of the channel was taken. Calcareous grassland occupied the slopes on the group's right side. On these grew *Primula veris*, *Sanguisorba minor*, and *Globularia vulgaris*. A fine colony of *Cruciata laevipes* was passed in flower. At one spot *Geranium sanguineum* was seen in flower.

The cars were reached at 5.45 pm – a long productive day. The evening meal was most welcome. After eating we sat outside K13 getting our notes complete for the day. As we did a constant rain of pollen grains descended from the pine trees nearby. Some members of the group photographed the local lizards – both male and female *Lacerta muralis* (one had ticks, *Ixodes ricinus*, attached behind its front leg) while others watched the bats flying over head.



The Urft valley between Urft and Nettersheim.



The Urft valley railway looking worst for ware after the 2021 floods.



Anemone ranunculoides and *Anemone nemorosa* near Nettersheim.



Buglossoides purpurocaerulea in old woodland near Urft. Note the petals covered in pollen grains.



Geranium sanguineum on a grassy bank near Urft. The petals are covered in pollen grains.

Tuesday 10th May 2022 – a (presumably) managed woodland

On this morning, as on most mornings and evenings during our visit, the Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) screamed or cried or sang (depending on your opinion) at us. The Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) were grazing at the running track every morning.

After breakfast the group descended the steep slope from our guest house to the Victor Neels brücke (bridge) which crossed over the dammed river (Rur) in the valley below. The descent was made through predominantly *Fagus sylvatica* and *Carpinus betulus* woodland. In the shade on some rocky outcrops at the edge of the track we saw flowering *Oxalis acetosella* and a lot of *Teucrium scorodonia*. Once on the other side of the valley a stiff ascent was made in predominantly a *Quercus* woodland. All the trees looked the same age and there was little understory vegetation. A patch of *Vaccinium myrtillus* was growing in the shade in a very shallow soil on a metamorphic rock. Several specimens of *Luzula arcuata* were also seen. At a higher elevation it was clear from the disturbed leaf litter that wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) had been around recently. Then a boar appeared just in front of the group disappearing out of sight down the slope under some *Picea abies* trees.

At lunch time a brief visit to the Eifel National Park visitors centre was made before jumping into the cars and driving to Einruhr to look at the vegetation growing at the water's edge. There turned out to be little waterside or damp ground plants, but *Lysimachia nummularia* was found along with *Mentha aquatica* and *Filipendula ulmaria*. Pollen grains were everywhere covering pavements and roads, and getting on clothes and shoes.

Despite an intensive search no specimens of *Paris quadrifolia* were found during the whole excursion – shame!



Oxalis acetosella at the bottom of Vogelsang.



The view from half way across the Victor Neems brüche at the bottom of the Vogelsang slope.



Wild boar country – (presumably) a managed woodland with trees of roughly the same age and few under-storey herbs.

Wednesday 11th May 2022 – relaxing town visit.

After a revision session outside our base at Vogelsang we travelled to Monschau in beautiful weather seeing the landscape that had been covered in fog the last time the route was taken. A celebration Apfelstrudel and coffee in the centre of Monschau and then a little leisure time to explore this atmospheric Medieval town with its distinctive architecture (including timber framed houses) and cobblestone streets. *Meconopsis cambrica* was flowering on one of the town walls. A rather large male Great or Western Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) gave us a fine display of its dance on one of the rocks in the River Roer (which flows through the town).

The afternoon was spent mainly on the A2 heading north back to Leiden.



Monschau and the Roer River (with the support Ukraine banner on the hillside).