

Recent spread of *Lactuca serriola* (prickly lettuce) noted in Glasgow during 2017

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Lactuca serriola (prickly lettuce, or compass plant) is a tall plant which can be found on hard waste ground, roadsides and pavements. It grows in two distinct forms: forma *serriola*, with cut leaves (Fig. 1), and forma *integrifolia*, with entire leaves (Fig. 2). While very common for centuries in the south-eastern region of England, it has been spreading north only in recent years, becoming common in Birmingham since 2000, and thence northwards to Manchester, north Wales and Scotland.



Fig.1. *Lactuca serriola* (prickly lettuce), forma *serriola* growing in Glasgow during 2017. (Photo: M. Philip)



Fig. 2. *Lactuca serriola* (prickly lettuce), forma *integrifolia* growing in Glasgow during 2017. (Photo: M. Philip)

Keith Watson stated in *The Flora of Renfrewshire* that the species is “very rare in Scotland” and noted only a single record for vice-county 76 (vc76) at King’s Inch, Braehead in 2012 (Watson, 2013). *The Changing Flora of Glasgow* also mentions just one record at Milngavie Station (vc99) in 1976 (Dickson *et al.*, 2000). Prior to 2010, there were only two records for vc77, both within the City of Glasgow. The first noted occurrence was in 1918 as a casual at Kelvingrove. Subsequently, there were no more records in the 20th century. The second record is dated 20th September 2001, near King George V Dock. The latter was documented by the late Peter Macpherson (Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) recorder for Lanarkshire, 1979-2015). According to *The Flora of Lanarkshire*, it was then seen twice in 2010, twice in 2011, and once more in 2012 (Macpherson, 2016). A further single in 2015 means that, by the end of 2015, there had been a total of just eight records in vc77. It should also be noted that, at the time of writing, there is a total of only 18 other records for this species in the whole of Scotland, outside Lanarkshire.

Thanks to a general increase in botanical activity in the vice-county, and in particular the recent extensive urban fieldwork carried out by Malcolm Macneill throughout Glasgow, numerous sightings of prickly lettuce were reported in 2017. Following correspondence with Dr. Richard Carter (BSBI referee for the genus), reference to published literature, and the compilation of detailed photographic records by Peter

Wiggins, all contemporary sightings have now been assigned to one of the two formae. Approximately two thirds of local records are forma *integrifolia*, and one third forma *serriola*.

Prickly lettuce has now been recorded over 40 times in vc77, in 24 different monads (in 12 different tetrads) in greater Glasgow, from Shieldhall in the west, to Cambuslang in the east - a range of over six miles. All records are within ~1.5 km of the River Clyde, and most are close to railway lines.

In the above correspondence, Dr. Carter points out that the species is known to be capable of “epidemic spread” under favourable conditions, and this may be what we have witnessed in Glasgow during 2017. It will be of great interest to discover whether the sudden upsurge of the species in the Glasgow area is part of a wider spread in Scotland, or whether it is a local phenomenon. Further work is needed to explain why it should have occurred at this time. Since Glasgow has seen almost constant urban development across wide areas for decades providing much suitable habitat, a small recent climatic temperature increase would seem the more likely triggering factor. Also, it will be interesting to see whether 2017 represents a sustainable increase, or just a “flash in the pan”.

REFERENCES

- Dickson, J.H., Macpherson, P. & Watson, K. (2000). *The Changing Flora of Glasgow*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
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