

STARTING/STRENGTHENING LOCAL BSBI GROUPS: EXPERIENCE & TIPS FROM VC55

If you are considering setting up a local BSBI group from scratch, this is what we did: it may offer some pointers. We found the whole process surprisingly quick and easy.

If you already have a local group in your v.c., we'd like to hear about your experience and any of your ideas on how to strengthen local groups.

Either way, please get in touch with us via the contact details on our webpage

<http://www.bsbi.org.uk/leicestershire.html>

The background

In 2008, three recent BSBI members decided to email other local botanists, only some of whom we knew, to suggest setting up a local BSBI group. We do recommend actually calling it a BSBI group, as it's a great way to promote the Society and we think your group will benefit greatly from the association – ours has!

We wanted to maximise the time spent on botany and minimise any admin or bureaucracy, so quickly decided against either a formal structure or a local subscription fee. We also chose to include local botanists who were not (yet) BSBI members: we see the local group as a sort of outreach programme for national BSBI, where we can demonstrate and explain the Society's work and the advantages of membership. This approach arguably proved more productive than insisting people pay a national subscription beforehand.

The mailing list

- 1) We set up a mailing list and contacted our VC Recorder for suggestions on whom to invite. We actually opted to keep two lists, one for BSBI members and one for guests. As of January 2012, we have a total of 93 people on our two mailing lists. Also, we realised the importance of involving our VC Recorder, who has supported the group from its inception, and continues to provide invaluable help and guidance.
- 2) Checking the *BSBI Yearbook* for members in our v.c., we added people with email addresses to our spreadsheet.
- 3) We checked that everyone was happy to share their contact details within the group.
- 4) We contacted the following groups to tell them what we were doing, asking them to spread the word and suggest whom we might invite onto the mailing list:
 - a) our local Wildlife Trust, other conservation groups and natural history societies;
 - b) ecologists/nature conservation officers at our city/county council, who might be able to help with access to interesting, and otherwise inaccessible, sites;
 - c) recorders of other taxa via the local Records Centre, who might have suggestions to make or contacts we could approach.
- 5) Our contacts in the University of Leicester Biology Dept. proved helpful in promoting the new group. Other institutions, e.g. FSC, Museums Service, FE colleges, which have relevant courses may be equally helpful and supportive, and the Society's reputation helps a lot here!
- 6) Our local herbaria and botanic garden offered to host identification sessions as well as provide volunteering opportunities.

The spreadsheet

- 1) We put the names from our list onto a spreadsheet with columns for contact details, car-sharing ability/needs, days and times when free, and any special interests/skills.
- 2) We added a column asking for one proposal from each person for a field meeting – where, when and why a fieldtrip there might be of interest – the proposer to arrange access if necessary and organise that meeting.
- 3) We sent the spreadsheet to everyone on our mailing list and asked them to fill it in and return it: the collated results yielded a potential calendar of events, each organised by a different member, so spreading the work.

The Meetings Calendar

- 1) We allocated a suitable week for each proposed field meeting, and then added some contrasting sites, so we had a good variety of woodland sites in spring, wetter and drier meadows in summer (expect jostling for prime slots in June!) and aquatics and ruderals in early autumn.
- 2) Meetings were spread across the v.c. to maximise attendance, including both urban and rural sites where possible, and we tried to target under-recorded squares.
- 3) We tried following up old records and resurveying sites from previous county Floras but access proved difficult in many cases.
- 4) A few sites known to be species-rich – often Wildlife Trust reserves – were included and highlighted as especially suitable for beginners; otherwise we concentrated on under-recorded areas.
- 5) We included outdoor winter meetings for conifers & lower plants, and indoor Herbarium/lab meetings & talks, to keep our observational skills sharp and prevent the group from dispersing over winter. A winter social/planning meeting, to discuss next year's calendar and new ideas, was also included.
- 6) We circulated the calendar to everyone on the mailing list and asked for feedback & further suggestions.
- 7) We scheduled each meeting a week or more in advance using the free on-line polling system *Doodle*, and circulated the link to everyone on the mailing list. People voted on which of several suggested dates and times they could attend. The majority vote was then carried, which maximised attendance. People could also arrange lifts and car-sharing by leaving comments on the *Doodle* page. Click on <http://doodle.com> to see how quick and easy it is to schedule an event this way.

The Future

- 1) A national network of Local Group Administrators, perhaps with a dedicated webpage/forum so we can share ideas & tips, promote what our local groups are doing and how this raises the BSBI's profile?
- 2) A starter pack and help for new groups starting up?
- 3) A webpage for newcomers to the BSBI website with a list of local group contacts?
- 4) More botanic outreach, raising the BSBI's profile & recruiting new members, ideally via a local BSBI group in every v.c.?

Please get in touch with us via our webpage <http://www.bsbi.org.uk/leicestershire.html>

Email us and pass on experiences & tips from your group:

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