



The latest news from Helen Lawless, Hillwalking, Access & Conservation Officer

## All around the blooming heather



Helen Lawless

The sight of heather-cloaked hills over the summer can awaken us to the beauty and wonder of nature. Heather is one of the larger and more visible plants on our hills. While there is one dominant species, ling, it is only one of three heather species that commonly occur on the Irish mountains. **Helen Lawless reports**

This article describes the key characteristics of the three main species – ling, bell heather and cross-leaved heath – and provides some background information on each. It does not cover the rarer species of heather, which are found only in the west of Ireland.

Our three common heather species are native and evergreen.

Bell heather and cross-leaved heath flower from June to September, with the more plentiful ling flowering later, normally July to October. They are all woody shrubs, growing from 20cm up to 1m tall. As all gardeners will know, they are particularly suited to acidic, peaty soils and are, therefore, found principally on blanket bog, wet heath and dry heath, habitats which are common on the hills.

### Ling Fraoch Mór *Calluna vulgaris*

Ling is by far the most widespread and abundant of our heathers and, perhaps because of this, some people and books refer to it simply as 'heather.' It can be distinguished from the other common heathers by its leaves, which are overlapping and appear to cling to the stem. Ling's pale purple flowers grow in a loose spike on the upper part of the plant's woody stems. Its flowers are not bell-shaped – they are smaller and prettier than those of bell heather and cross-leaved heath – so it is worth the effort of looking closely. Occasionally you may come across ling with white flowers; this is believed to bring good luck.

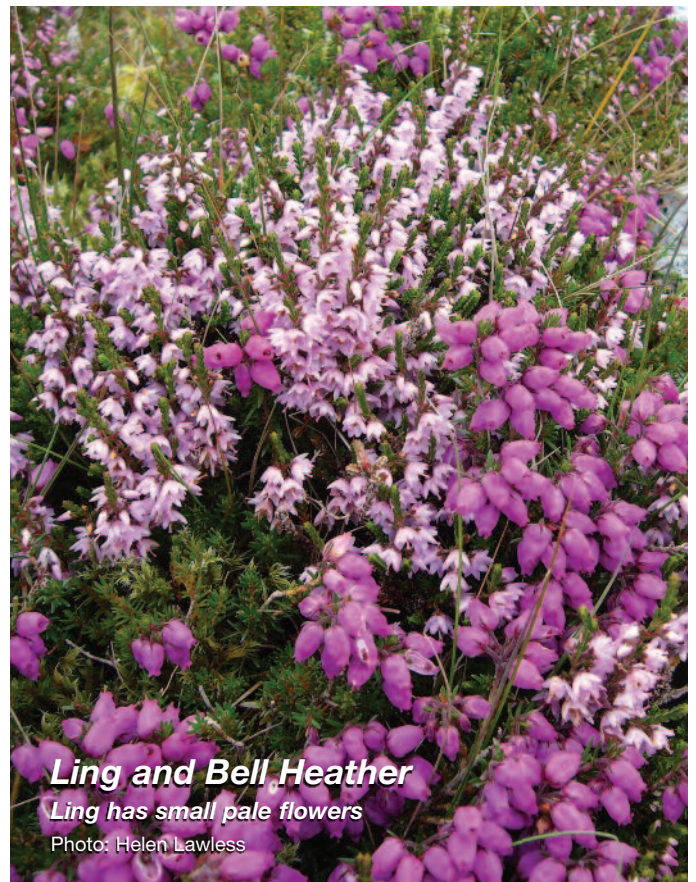
If left to mature, ling heather can live for around 30 years. The name ling is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *lig*, meaning 'fire,' and recalls the importance of heather in early times as fuel.<sup>1</sup> It's not surprising, then, that mountain wildfires can burn so vigorously, as seen earlier this year and during the spring of 2010.

The origin of ling's generic name, *Calluna*, also relates to its usefulness, as it comes from a Greek word meaning 'to brush.' Stems of heather were often tied together to make brushes and brooms.<sup>1</sup> Heather was also used for thatching and as bedding and stems were woven into baskets, samples of which can be seen in the County Life Museum near Castlebar, Co Mayo.

### Bell Heather Fraoch Cloíneach *Erica cinerea*

Bell heather is the classic heather species, which brings magnificent purple patches to drier hillsides. It is particularly characteristic of the Mourne, but will be easily found among the ling heather and gorse on most hills. The vivid purple bell-shaped flowers grow in groups along the plant's wiry stems.

On bell heather, the individual leaves are easy to see and grow in



**Ling and Bell Heather**

Ling has small pale flowers

Photo: Helen Lawless

sets of three, with tufts of shorter leaves where the three longer leaves join the stem. The leaves are dark green, and narrow to cope with extended dry periods, from winter frosts and summer drought. This is a feature heathers share with other plants such as gorse. As bell heather prefers drier soils it is often found on steeper slopes, dry banks, tussocks, rocks and other well-drained areas.

### Cross-leaved Heath Fraoch Naoscaí *Erica tetralix*

The plump, bell-shaped pink flowers of cross-leaved heath hang in a bunch at the top of the stem. Its leaves are also easy to distinguish. In contrast to bell heather, they grow in sets of four, hence the name 'cross-leaved heath.' The leaves are narrow and grey-green in colour.

Cross-leaved heath plants tend to be smaller than ling and bell heather and are often scattered rather than growing in profusion. Cross-leaved heath favours wetter ground. It is typically found at the edge of bogs and in damp hollows between tussocks.





### **Bell Heather**

*With bell-like flowers*

Photo: Helen Lawless



Lousewort  
(Helen Lawless)



### **Cross-leaved Heath**

*With leaves in whorls of four forming a cross shape*

Photo: Helen Lawless

Bell heather and cross-leaved heath are closely related and easily confused; bell heather's preference for drier ground is a useful distinguishing factor. On cross-leaved heath, the flowers are only at the top of the stem and they are usually larger and paler than those of bell heather. Closer examination will reveal tiny hairs on the stems and leaves of cross-leaved heath; bell heather is hairless.

### **The original worldwide web**

John Muir, the Scottish-born naturalist and author who founded the Sierra Club in the United States, was one of the first to articulate the interconnectedness that maintains balance in the natural world, as expressed in the following quote:

*'When we try to pick out anything by itself,  
we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe'*

– John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911)

As with all other living things, heathers don't exist in isolation. For instance, red grouse are heavily reliant on heather, requiring a patchwork of old heather for nesting and nutritious young heather shoots for food. A recent national survey of red grouse showed a decline in numbers and a contraction in the range of this species. Contributory factors include habitat loss due to peat-cutting, afforestation and conversion to pasture, along with the detrimental effects of overgrazing and inappropriate burning practices.

The uplands remain a stronghold for red grouse, particularly the Wicklow and Dublin Mountains, the Slieve Blooms in Co Laois and the Blue Stacks in Co Donegal.<sup>2</sup> A research project on Boleybrack Mountain, Co Leitrim, has worked to improve the habitat for grouse.

Heather is also an important source of food for moths and other insects. Amongst the moths, the northern eggar moth is one of the largest and more interesting. Its brown, furry caterpillars (up to 65mm long) are often seen on ling through summer and autumn, taking two seasons of feeding to reach their full size.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, heather is a valuable food source for bees. The bees gather nectar from ling and bell heather, which in turn makes tasty and much sought-after heather honey. You may notice tiny holes in bell heather flowers; these have been drilled by bees to extract the nectar.

Heathers also have relationships with other plants. Lousewort, for

example, is a semi-parasitic plant that attaches to the roots of host plants (often heathers) to compensate for the poor supply of nutrients in its bog and heath habitats.<sup>4</sup>

Hopefully, this introduction to our three main heather species will add to your enjoyment of the floral display that graces our hills over the summer. Perhaps you will even pause to figure out which species is which. Heathers play a major role in the biodiversity of Ireland's uplands, but there's a supporting cast of plants, birds and other creatures waiting to be discovered too. Enjoy it all!

• Thanks to Dr Mary Tubridy for comments on a draft of this article.

1. Reader's Digest Field Guide to the Wild Flowers of Britain
2. Irish Mountain Log No 96 (Winter 2010)
3. The Natural History of Ulster
4. Flora Hibernica



## **Green Tip**

### **Pack your bag**

Most of us agree that litter is unsightly and takes from the beauty of our hills and countryside. Research has shown that the presence of litter attracts more litter. Therefore, if we can keep our hills clean, there is a better chance they will stay that way.

Packing a small plastic bag in your rucksack makes it much easier to take home litter that you come across, including messy items like banana peel and tea bags. Next time you're out, instead of getting annoyed at the sight of litter, do something positive by taking it away. Go on – pack your bag now!