

British Wildlife October 2008



**The Fern Guide, 3rd edition**

James Merryweather  
Field Studies Council AIDGAP series 2007  
96pp, line drawings throughout and 8 colour plates  
(ISBN 978 185153 228 5) pbk £6.95



**Key to common ferns**

James Merryweather, illustrated by Carol Roberts  
Field Studies Council 2005 8pp, colour paintings  
(ISBN 1 85153 290 0) Folded laminated chart £2.75



**British Ferns**

James Merryweather  
Merryweather Natural History 2007  
DVD £15 Available from [www. UKferns.org.uk](http://www.UKferns.org.uk)

Despite a universal appreciation of their architectural beauty, many naturalists regard ferns, clubmosses, quillworts and horsetails as unidentifiable beyond very broad groupings. This is a great pity, because there are relatively few species within the British Isles, and a lot of fun can be had searching for some of the more obscure plants. *The Fern Guide* should overcome the excuse of not matching your specimen to one in a book (it even illustrates the more common alien species).

As we can expect with an AIDGAP publication, the key has been well tested, especially as this is the third edition. Interspersed within the key are helpful notes and thoughts - I particularly liked the technique for distinguishing Field Horsetail from its hybrid - making it friendly to read. Each species is accompanied by a small distribution map. The line drawings are excellent, and the few pages of photographs are amongst the best I have seen. Regrettably, there was not space for more, but the resourceful author has risen to the challenge and published a DVD (see below).

I suppose that it is an ineluctable feature of publishing a book that new species to the region are always discovered at the time of publication. Missing from the key are the very recent additions to the pteridophyte flora, although the nomenclature is up to date. References are few, but cover the most useful publications; unfortunately, there are omissions in the two general floras of the British Isles (the date of CTM is missing, and only the first edition of Stace is there). Hybrids are largely omitted from the key and illustrations, but they are in the checklist, including some recently discovered taxa. I am pleased to see that the three well-established segregates of Scaly Male-ferns have been tackled with some friendly encouragement, and an excuse if you do not want to go this far.

When the review copy dropped through my letter box I had intended to skip through it and get on with something else. The fact that it was two hours before I put it down is a testament to its readability.

Miffed by not having space to include photographs of all the British ferns in the FSC publication, the author has produced a DVD to complement the Guide. It is set out as 14 PowerPoint presentations. It is agreeable to run through one of these and imagine yourself ~n a lecture theatre, but the enduring use of the photographs will be to confirm identification. At first I thought that the only way to find a particular fern was to work through the appropriate presentation, but from the help file I then found that there were two *ways* of going straight to the species I wanted. These are excellent photographs to which I shall be referring for information that is inadequately presented elsewhere. The author can easily revise the disc; so, the one that you buy will be better and more up to date than the one I have reviewed.

The Key is one of the series of fold-outs which the FSC has been producing over the years. On one side is a very workable key and detailed drawings of pinnae: a slimmed-down version from the Guide and covering only pteridophytes with proper fronds. The whole of the other side is devoted to lively illustrations of ferns. The filmy-ferns are nicely painted, but unfortunately some of the other fronds suffer from artistic sinuosity. Nevertheless, the Key can easily be carried in a pocket and it will enable you to identify with reasonable confidence the ferns you are likely to meet.

**Robin M Walls**