

DISC REVIEW

British Ferns, Clubmosses, Quillworts & Horsetails

by James Merryweather

on DVD-ROM (for the computer)

£15

visit: www.merryweather.me.uk

free upgrades, as available, from the author

When our Editor sent me this package for review, I pondered the politics. In the event of an indifferent review, he could potentially have a conflict of interests, whilst I might have a conflict of conscience. Fortunately, no such dilemmas surfaced, as this is a most enjoyable production - easy to use, entertaining to view, rich in content, and fine in photography.

On loading, the DVD dialogue provides the choice of either running from the DVD drive, or loading onto the hard drive. The latter is the recommended option, for ease and speed of use, and to permit the original DVD to act as a backup. The load wizard is straightforward and quick, and subsequent navigation through the PowerPoint based program itself is very easy. Apart from the program itself there are the following support sections – Information, Checklist (of British pteridophytes), Diagnostics (table of male fern characters), Help (wherein load information is contained), and Acknowledgements. The Information section points out that the DVD is intended to supplement *The Fern Guide* (Merryweather, 2007).

There are 14 Parts – the first being the “Introduction”, and the last “Ferns in winter”. Two parts cover “Fern Anatomy”, and the other 10 parts are arranged by the degree of frond cutting (7 parts) and the other pteridophytes not lending themselves to the frond cutting approach (3 parts).

The “Introduction” takes us through the evolution of pteridophytes, their interrelationships, the etymological derivation of “pteridology”, the function of spores, and FAQs concerning the historical use of the word “fern”, and the “male” “lady” fern derivations. In parts 3 & 4, the anatomy of rhizomes and frond structure respectively are covered comprehensively.

Each of the remaining 10 sections follows a similar pattern, but with different emphases depending on the relative difficulties of species identification. Typically there are profuse excellent



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photographic images of each species (far more than one could expect in any book). Illustrated and demonstrated are habitat, habit, key morphological features, comparisons for confusion avoidance (side by side images), different age classes, and reproductive structures with the sporangia development sequence: developing-ripe-spent. The sequences and images are presented creatively with the dynamic annotation of photographs using PowerPoint’s arsenal of visual aids, but helpfully and not intrusively (I have attended some PowerPoint presentations where the content is eclipsed by a barrage of visual gimmickry!)

A particularly good illustration of this comprehensive approach is the sequence in part 9 differentiating between *Polystichum setiferum* and *P. aculeatum*, where a multitude of characters are demonstrated – habitats, frond shape and orientation, pinnule shapes and hairiness, angular relationship of the pinnule to the costa, and indusial characters. In this first DVD version, photographs for some of the rarer species are wanting or in short supply (e.g. *Isoetes histrix* and *Anogramma leptophylla*, restricted in distribution to the Channel Islands). However, this is not a serious shortcoming as all of our most significant pteridophytes are covered comprehensively.

In Parts 11 & 12, the male ferns *Dryopteris filix-mas*, *D. oreades*, *D. affinis*, *D. borrieri* and *D. cambrensis* are compared and contrasted at great length (and quite rightly so!). Characters used are the shadiness of the habitat, frond

appearances at different stages of unfurling, and the morphologies of the pinnae, pinnules and sori. The last three species covered comprise the “*D. affinis* aggregate”, the identification of which is a continuing struggle for most amateur (and many professional) pteridologists, and this is given due recognition in their treatments. The taxonomy used is consistent with Fraser-Jenkins, 2007, although within that paper both *Dryopteris affinis* and *D. cambrensis* are divided into subspecies (and not to mention hybrids). However, the identification of taxa below species level would not be appropriate in a guide aimed primarily at beginners. Equally extensive is the treatment of the buckler ferns (in part 13) where differentiating characters are covered in detail, and particularly brave attempts are made to help us distinguish *Dryopteris expansa* from *D. dilatata*.

I particularly liked Part 14, “Ferns in winter”, within which many photographs are shown of species at different points in the winter calendar to demonstrate that there need not be a closed season for “ferning”! A very helpful scale of 1-5 is used to signify the extent to which each species is deciduous or not. Other works have tended to mention whether a species is wholly deciduous, partly deciduous, or wintergreen (or some such phrases), but to my knowledge such a comprehensive treatment of the appearance of ferns in winter has not appeared before.

Although this guide is aimed primarily at beginners in fern identification (the more important messages being reinforced by repetition), there is much learning within for the more experienced. It treats the subject in ways that are not possible in book format, and in this respect succeeds well in being complementary to *The Fern Guide* and other British fern texts. I would recommend it to all for perusal and study, particularly on those dark winter evenings when you might even be tempted to go out “ferning” the following morning!

References

Fraser-Jenkins, CR (2007). The species and subspecies in the *Dryopteris affinis* group. *Fern Gazette*, 18(1): 1-26.

Merryweather, JW (2007). *The Fern Guide*. A field guide to the clubmosses quillworts and horsetails of the British Isles, 3rd edition. Field Studies Council A.I.D.G.A.P. series.