



Wyre Forest Study Group

THE REDISCOVERY OF COMMON WINTERGREEN (*Pyrola minor*) IN WYRE FOREST

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Our botanical predecessors of the Victorian era visited a Wyre Forest in which could be found three species of Wintergreen. They were rare plants even at that time and have remained elusive to the present day with only a handful of recorded sightings in the twentieth century.

These plants have a spike of bell-shaped flowers, each with five petals and looking similar to Lily-of-the-Valley, (*Convallaria majalis*), to a height of 20 cm. Their round, stalked leaves prevent confusion with this lily. They are perennial evergreens that grow as a creeping rhizome on the forest floor. The three species are quite similar in appearance being separated for identification by aspects of their flowers, as follows,

Common Wintergreen (*Pyrola minor*) has white or pale pink flowers. The style not protruding past the petals (i.e. not out of the bell).

Intermediate Wintergreen (*P. media*) has white flowers with a style that does protrude from the bell.

Round-leaved Wintergreen (*P. rotundifolia*) has more open flowers with a curved style.

Records for the Common Wintergreen (*Pyrola minor*), the subject of this article, start in the nineteenth century. A look in 'The Botany of Worcestershire' by J. Amphlett and C. Rea, where it has the common name of Lesser Wintergreen, shows that it was first recorded in the area in 1817, at Abberley, by the Rev. Mr. Severn-Rufford. During the rest of the century it appeared from time to time in a number of places. These being the Wyre Forest, in Shrawley Wood and near Bewdley. In the twentieth century there is a date, the 22 June 1905, when the Worcestershire Naturalists Club held a field meeting in New Parks, Wyre Forest (Transactions of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club, Vol. 3). During this meet Mr C. Rea came upon *Pyrola minor* in flower. This was the last dated record. It would have persisted past this date but eventually disappeared, the literature having no more records. Other species were being lost at the same time and the reasons for this can be put down to changes in forestry practice and the timber needs of World War I.

So the story of *Pyrola minor* in Wyre ends ca. 1920, but as is the way with these things, you never know what is going to turn up next. This is part of the draw and excitement of botany and, sure enough, on the 6 June 2005 *Pyrola minor* was rediscovered in the forest, a hundred years since the last record. There are approximately 100 plants with 21 in flower on this date. Our plants are pink tinged rather than pure white. They are found within an area of 4 metres. This area contains many single plants as well as some denser patches of plants,

though these may also be single plants because of their creeping rhizomatous habit. The location seems dryer than expected for a plant of damp woodland. They are growing amongst Bramble (*Rubus*), Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*), Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) and False Brome (*Brachypodium sylvaticum*), with Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and Birch (*Betula pendula*) growing immediately behind and the aspect to the south being open. There has been recent forest work at the area of the site. Whether this was damaging or beneficial to the plants we will have to wait and see. Though now the location is known, future disturbance can be avoided.

When I found this population of *Pyrola minor* it was a most unexpected find because I had a false preconception that Wintergreens grew only in Scotland. This left me wondering what they were doing here. However, being in ancient woodland it seemed they belonged. By the end of the day curiosity about how common *Pyrola minor* may be in the forest prompted me to phone Mrs R. Winnall. (She is an oracle of all things Wyre whom I had introduced myself to only that morning in respect of another plant of the forest, the Sword-leaved Helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*). Mrs Winnall has to be mentioned because without her encouragement my observations and grid reference would have languished in my notebook, never to be known about. That evening we checked and photographed the site and she insisted that I sent the record to the Vice County Recorder for Worcestershire. This is Mr J.J. Day who must also be acknowledged for supplying the plant records in this article and other information in his letter acknowledging the find.

A question to be raised is; where has *Pyrola minor* been in the last hundred years and how has it managed to return? There are three possibilities. Firstly it could have been brought in as seed or plants with trees transplanted into the forest. I think this unlikely. A second possibility is seed being blown in from populations in neighbouring counties. This is very possible as a visit to the site on the 16 August suggests. On this date only one seeding plant could be seen. The seeds are contained in a five-sided capsule that is similar to the three-sided capsule of Orchids, except being wider than long. The gentlest of taps releases a dust of seed into the breeze, which can then be carried some distance. The Wintergreens are not related to Orchids. They show similarity in seed dispersal and they also form association with soil fungi (the New Atlas describes them as being mycorrhizal). If this association is essential to a new plant establishing itself, as in the orchids, then the distribution of suitable fungi may limit the spread of the plant.



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Going back to my question. The third possibility, and I am sure this is the case, is that *Pyrola minor* has not been anywhere. It has just been hiding away in the woods and jumping location from time to time. This is strengthened by records that have recently come to light in a copy of Amphlett and Rea, owned by a botanist Mr W.H.Hardaker, who came to Worcestershire in 1902 – 1970. Amongst the notes written in this copy are two sites for *Pyrola minor* that probably date between the Wars. One site was near the Witty Pear and the other near Unclyls. This area together with New Parks could well hold other extant populations of *Pyrola minor*.

Another of the Wintergreens, Intermediate Wintergreen (*P. media*) is also likely to be extant and hiding in Wyre. The entomologist Dr N.E.Hickin in his book ‘The Natural History of an English Forest’ mentions being shown the plant in Rock Coppice where it ‘creeps through the forest litter at the base of the stringy bilberry’. The last record for it was in 1976 again in Rock Coppice. It is surely still here only thirty years later.

Acknowledgments

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References

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Common Wintergreen (*Pyrola minor*)

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