



B. Gibbons

Early gentian - *Gentianella anglica*

This small plant is as the name suggests, a member of the Gentian Family. Gentians are recognised by having flowers in branched clusters and usually unstalked leaves. The flowers have four or five petals joined to each other at the base, forming a small tube, and often only open up in sunshine. Early gentian is named because, unlike its close relative, the autumn gentian, it flowers in May-June, rather than late July-early October. The flowers of early gentian usually only have four petals, which are a pale purple or whitish colour, and the plant is often tiny (2-3cm tall), though it can grow to 20cm.

Early gentian grows on shallow soil in closely grazed grassland on south-facing chalk downs, in quarries and on cliff-tops and sand dunes. The plant doesn't tolerate the harsh weather of the north and west of England and is therefore only found in the lowlands. It is an opportunistic annual, whose numbers fluctuate from year to year depending on the relative abundance of bare ground and soil moisture conditions. The seeds of early gentian can remain in the ground for several years before growing, so many of the known colonies consist of plants which only appear every few years.

Large colonies of early gentian are only found on the Isle of Wight and Purbeck, and the coast of North Devon and Cornwall. Away from these areas, this species has suffered a huge decline, caused by the large scale destruction of chalk grassland and the changing character of the remaining areas. Most remaining fragments of chalk grassland are now unsuitable since traditional grazing patterns have stopped, allowing taller grass and scrub to replace the short sward needed by this species. Populations of early gentians in protected sites, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCIs) are still at risk, because of the practical difficulties of grazing small patches of chalk grassland, cliff edges and coastal slopes. There are also difficulties with balancing the habitat needs of this plant, with those of other species in need of conservation.

Early gentian is endemic to England, meaning that the plant is found nowhere else in the world. It is classified as scarce in the UK and is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan species. Because it is unique to England, the UK has a special duty to ensure the plant's survival and it has special protection under various international conventions and directives. It is also protected under Schedule



8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. This means that early gentian is protected from picking, uprooting, destruction and sale. Also, the UK government is required to ensure that sites where early gentian grows are protected and managed appropriately.

In Kent, Early gentian is classified as being endangered and is currently only known to grow on Kemsing Downs SNCI (Site of Nature Conservation Interest), part of which is south-facing chalk grassland. The main threats to the continued existence of early gentian are loss of chalk grassland habitat to more intensive agriculture and reduced grazing on the remaining fragments of chalk grassland. However Plantlife, the wild plant conservation charity, has been working on the conservation of the plant since 1993 as part of its Back from the Brink project, and has carried out a review of sites where early gentian is known to grow. The Kent Biodiversity Action Plan aims to restore early gentian to former sites and chalk grassland is eligible for management and restoration grants under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. With these measures in place, it is hoped that early gentian will once again flower in large numbers on the chalk down and coast of Kent.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

UK Biodiversity Action Plan:

www.ukbap.org.uk/ukplans?ID=323

English Nature: www.english-nature.org.uk

Kent Wildlife Trust: www.kentwildlife.org.uk

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: www.kentbap.org.uk

The Kent Red Data Book, available from Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity

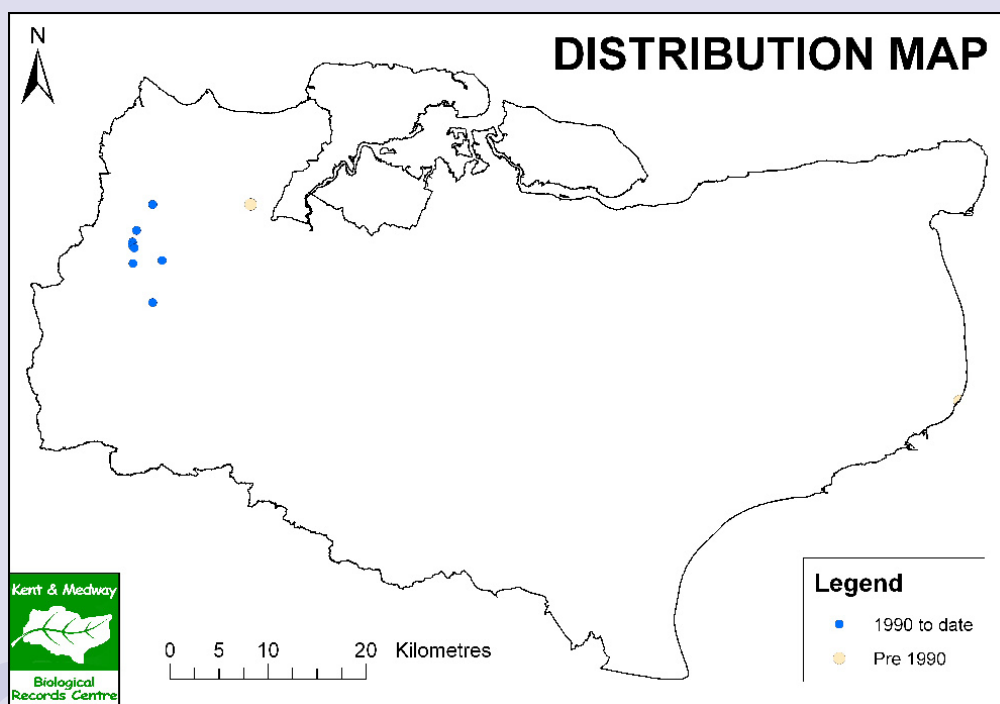
Plantlife, the wild plant conservation charity:
www.plantlife.org.uk

Kent Landscape Information System:
www.kent.gov.uk/klis

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre:
www.kmbrc.org.uk



English Nature



Data courtesy of English Nature