

Starting a local lichen group

Looking at lichens can be good as a shared experience where people pool their knowledge and learn together. No one needs to be an expert – if you have a little lichen knowledge you can help someone else who is a complete beginner - and you don't have to be a BLS member to be involved. Keep it informal to start with – a few like-minded people going out together to look at lichens. Once it seems that there is the nucleus of a longer-term group it may be time to formalise things.

The BLS wants to support the development of local groups so here are some useful suggestions to get started. If you'd like to discuss anything contact the BLS education-promotion@britishlichensociety.org.uk

Setting up the group:

Find other people

Finding members can be a natural process: a few people already in contact may be the motivating factor for forming a new group but looking for additional members can seem daunting. Any public engagement can help link up interested people. Here are a few ideas:

- There may be an existing network of natural history groups with their own online presence or newsletters – contact them to get listed or even write an article, making sure you include a way for people to contact you.
- These organisations might include biological records centres, wildlife trusts or local naturalists.
- Local newspapers or online news sites may be interested in an article, and you might advertise in parish magazines.
- Why not offer a display about lichens at a local event or a public walk to introduce people to a few lichens on trees or in a churchyard? Or offer a display at a local library?
- Set up some sort of online presence (social media) that you can show interested people so they can see what you get up to. This is free and allows sharing of photos and information as well as discussion. You might also post about yourselves on other lichen groups.

The BLS can help:

- ask to chat to someone already running a lichen group – see the Local Groups listing on the BLS website.
- setting up a Local Group page on the website can reach lots of people (LINK).
- BLS Local Contacts (LINK) are members around the country willing to be contacted – they may be able to help with local knowledge and suggestions.
- The BLS runs online chat and discussion groups (LINK) – find out if anyone involved is in your area.
- Ask for a mention of the new group to be put in the BLS's bi-annual newsletter to members (email president@britishlichensociety.org.uk).

Publicise the group

Try the suggestions in the section above.

The BLS can help: you can advertise yourselves through a Local Group page on the BLS website. This provides an opportunity for others to discover the group and to contact the organiser and request to join. All the local groups on the website are listed here LINK with a map showing the area where they meet. Suggested content for a local group page: group name; photo of some of the group in the field; the area covered by the group; any particular interests of the group; how the

group is organised / how often it meets; a contact person with an email address. Contact webmaster@britishlichensociety.org.uk to set up a group page.

Agree roles/shared tasks

Groups can be run by a committee, a single organiser or different members in turn - whatever works. If enough people are involved, responsibilities can be shared. These include: planning future activities, running trips (this is the main activity – every one needs a named organiser with contact details) and communication (mainly with members). No money need change hands in which case a treasurer and bank account are not necessary.

Set up communication, eg email list

Keeping everyone informed is important. The easiest way is via an email list with one person acting as the communication focal point. They would send out details of forthcoming trips and any other events, keeping track of responses. A social media presence also allows easy contact, including queries from the public.

Be aware that:

email addresses are personal details that should only be shared with others if permission is obtained in advance. The members of a group could be asked for permission to share everyone's email addresses with all group members, or the organiser should use the BCC (blind copy) facility to keep individuals' email addresses private. The BLS does not hold responsibility for GDPR policy relating to local groups. Details of meetings can then be sent out and updates sent as required.

Plan regular trips to a range of sites and advertise them

Practicalities - think about space for car parking, public transport, accessibility (legal access rights and how rough is it underfoot). There are often no facilities, eg toilets, but it's useful to mention this in trip information. Is the site interesting for lichens? – a good selection of common species is ideal. You might want to visit different parts of your area to see varying ecosystems and link up with members there. Visiting a site beforehand is important.

The BLS can help: the events of all local groups can be added to the BLS website events page ([LINK](#)). All event listings can show any details that the group wishes to display. These pages effectively become 'hidden' after the event has passed so are not useful for displaying reports or species lists, but links to write-ups can easily be added to the local group's own page on the website. Email events@britishlichensociety.org.uk to get your trip put on the calendar.

Get to know the habitats and lichens in your area

The local wildlife trust or biological records centre might have information about habitats and ecosystems. Look at a geological map and learn the basics about rock types and how these affect wildlife, including lichens. Ordnance Survey maps show woodland and other clues to habitat type, as well as access land and rights of way. Maps will also show churchyards which can be important lichen habitats, especially in areas where there has been environmental degradation. Old mine workings and other brown field sites can also have important lichen communities.

The BLS can help: you can get existing BLS records and try to re-find some of them. The BLS records officer can send a spreadsheet of all lichen records for an area, eg your vice-county, so that you can see species distribution as well as areas with few or only old records. Contact them here records@britishlichensociety.org.uk

Running a lichen group - some ideas:

- consider setting up a Facebook group or use a different social media platform (free, no IT expertise needed, but someone will need to keep an eye on it and not everyone will be signed up or want to do so). Setting up and running a website is trickier and is likely to incur a cost. Find out whether someone in your group has social media experience and would be willing to run this side of things.
- maintain interest – produce regular trip reports, articles, photos, discussion etc and share with members and the public.
- eventually aim to record lichens and submit a list to the BLS.
- consider a BLS grant to buy field guides, equipment such as handlenses, etc.
- BLS public liability insurance is available at no cost to affiliated groups *by arrangement* [LINK](#). The lichen group would need to have a named official, eg a secretary who is a BLS member, a constitution and an annual meeting, as well as completing a risk assessment and register of attendees for every trip. This insurance is cover against damage or injury to members of the public and may be required by some land owners. NB it is not personal injury insurance.

Running a field trip for a day

- advertise the details in advance.
- have a named organiser with contact details.
- recce the site beforehand – lichens, conditions underfoot, hazards, parking.
- get permissions if necessary – access and taking specimens.
- organiser completes a risk assessment which is available for participants to see ([LINK](#) to template).
- have a sign-in sheet to keep a list of participants and their contact details (for use on the day only – destroy afterwards).
- make a lichen list, take photos and write a trip report afterwards which is put on social media.
- think about submitting records to the BLS.

Concerns people raise:

- group members don't know enough about lichens and no expert is available locally. This is an understandable concern but can be alleviated by seeing yourselves as a self-learning group, ie you learn together using field guides etc and share knowledge. Someone will always know a little more than someone else and can pass this on. Some experts within the BLS are willing to help beginners with identification once initial effort has been put in. There is also a useful online forum [LINK](#), plus social media groups and individuals where help can be sought. The regular informal BLS online sessions [LINK](#) are a good place to ask for help – all welcome. The BLS also runs beginners' tutorial groups online and has started to help these participants progress to further levels through occasional face-to-face courses with an expert tutor.
- attracting new active members – try all the suggestions above and keep promoting what you do. Sometimes it can take a while to reach enough people so don't give up.
- sharing tasks to avoid burnout – try to avoid a small number of people taking on too much.
- is there a conflict between helping beginners (or public engagement) and looking at and recording lichens more seriously? Some lichen groups may never come across this but for others this can be an issue once members become more knowledgeable and experienced, as helping beginners takes up lots of time on an outing. Planning in advance helps, eg taking it in turns to do the teaching or allot only part of the day for this, plus good local knowledge so

that there's a range of common and more difficult species at the site. Encouraging beginners to do some preparation and homework might also be suggested for those who intend to stay involved, eg making their own lichen list and notes for species seen plus looking them up afterwards (various lichen websites and other resources can be recommended). This way everyone progresses towards being better at licheneering and can, in turn, help others.

In summary:

it's really rewarding being involved with, or establishing, your own local group. This is a fantastic way to learn, meet like-minded people and explore new places. The BLS are supportive and happy to help in any way possible.

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