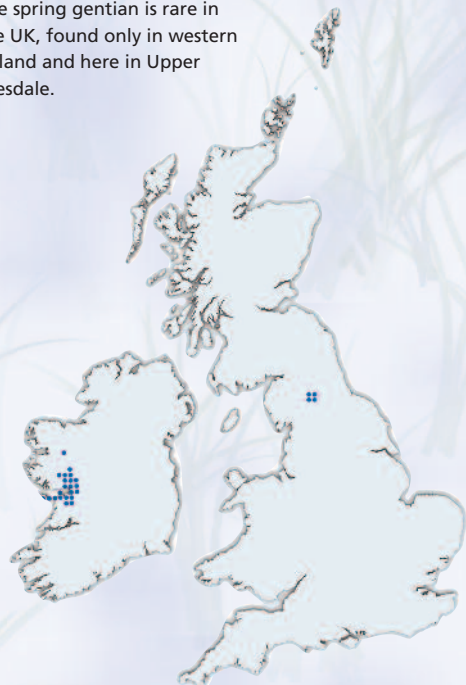


Distribution in Britain and Eire

The spring gentian is rare in the UK, found only in western Ireland and here in Upper Teesdale.



Map reproduced from J. Ecol, 51, 755-767

It is said to be bad luck to bring a gentian into the house as you stand the chance of being hit by lightning!



Painting of spring gentians by C A Mason

Bird's eye primrose

Another plant you may see in spring is bird's eye primrose. Like a small, delicate pink cowslip, each flower has a yellow (or bird's!) eye in the centre.

Along with the spring gentian, it forms part of the Teesdale Assemblage – a group of 20 internationally important plants.

The plants we see today are examples of the first vegetation that grew here about 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, after the last ice age.

Bird's eye primrose is found in damp lime-rich vegetation, growing to about 20cm tall. The leaves vary from 2 to 10cm long and 1 to 2cm wide, with a crinkly edge. The stem and underside of the leaves have a mealy covering – hence its other name, mealy primrose.

You can see these flowers in similar places to spring gentian and by the Tees near Wynch Bridge.



Bird's eye primrose
© M E Bradshaw

To find out more

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We can provide a summary of the information contained in this leaflet in large print, different formats and other languages on request. Please call 01388 528801.

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NORTH PENNINES

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Spring gentian

Teesdale is a botanist's paradise, but one plant stands out – the spring gentian. You can see gentians in flower from many public footpaths in Upper Teesdale. Please stick to the path to protect these and other rare plants.

When can I see them?

Spring gentians are best seen on warm, bright days, from April to early June. A sun-worshipper, this little flower closes as the weather becomes dull, leaving nothing to see but small, dark-blue spikes. However the flowers quickly open again when the sun emerges from behind the clouds.

Small but impressive

Hidden among the short vegetation, spring gentians often go unnoticed, but when you do find them they stop you in your tracks with their startling deep-blue flowers. The flowers are typically 15 to 30mm across. Look out for a delicate plant with a solitary, intense-blue flower, like a tiny, five-pointed star. It is surprisingly small for a flower with such a big reputation!



Tiny gentians the size of daisies © M E Bradshaw

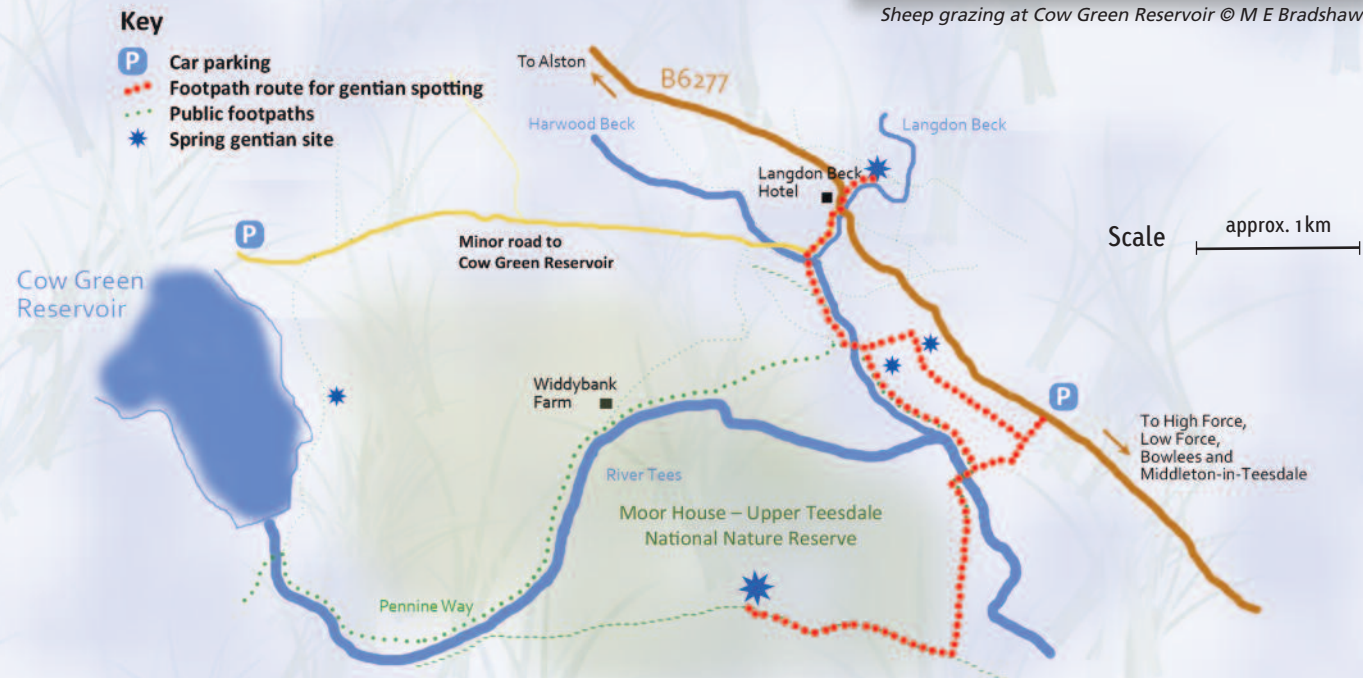
A 'bit' of give and take

We have the humble bumble bee to thank for pollinating the flowers. However, some bees bite through the base of the flowers and rob the nectar without pollinating the plant.



© www.northeastwildlife.co.uk

One of the easiest places to see the flowers is along Natural England's Nature Trail along the access road at Cow Green Reservoir. The area is safe from rabbits and sheep in a fenced-off enclosure and relatively easy to access.



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Rocky foundations

Within Upper Teesdale there is a special type of calcium-rich grassland associated with outcrops of 'Sugar Limestone'. This occurs where certain Carboniferous limestones have been baked by the molten rock which cooled to form the Whin Sill, around 295 million years ago. The resultant



Sheep grazing at Cow Green Reservoir © M E Bradshaw

sugar-like marble supports many lime-loving species such as spring gentian. Grazing plays an important part in keeping back more competitive grasses, but needs to be regulated as severe trampling in summer can loosen the limestone and lead to erosion. Moor House–Upper Teesdale National Nature Reserve carries out much work to conserve this and other arctic-alpine species.

Stamp of approval

The spring gentian is the smallest plant in its family of about 400 different species and was first recorded in Upper Teesdale in 1796. A symbol of Teesdale, it is a scarce perennial (plants that last three seasons or more) found in only a few other places such as the Burren in Western Ireland. It appeared on a Great Britain stamp in 1964 to celebrate the 10th International Botanical Congress.



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