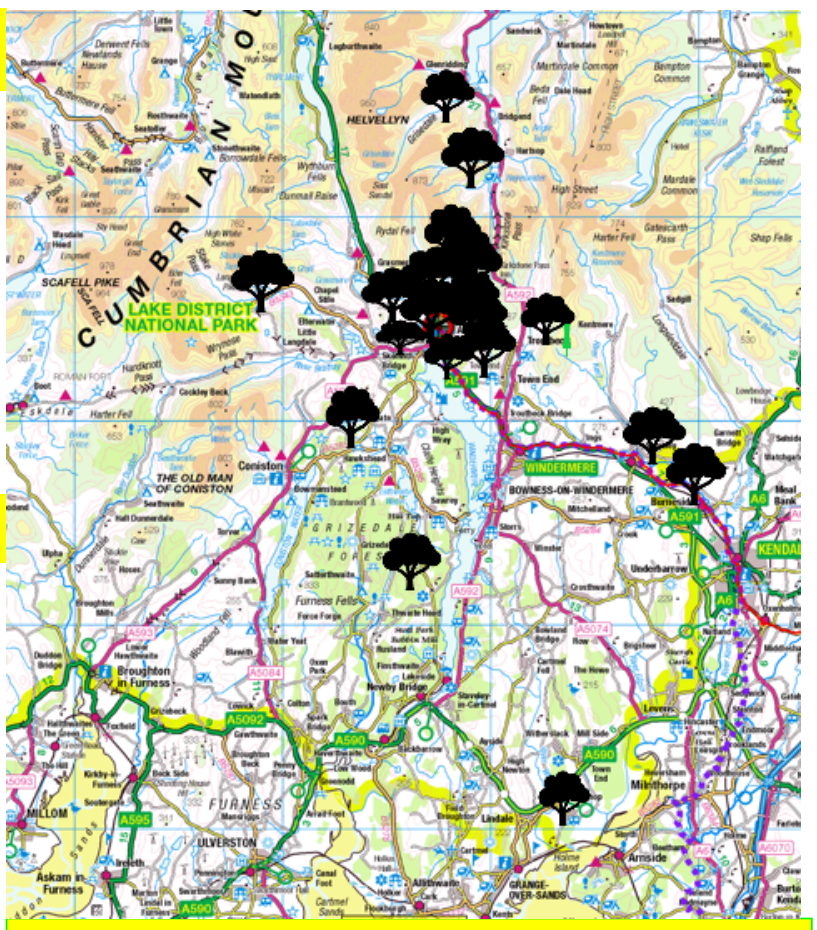
Beyond LOST: Rapid Woodland Assessments and lichen species counts

What and why?

Many of us starting with lichens find it difficult to keep up the initial momentum: what I needed after the New Generation Botanist training was to get out and practice my identification skills. The training had introduced Plantlife's Rapid Woodland Assessment (RWA) as a way for non-specialists to estimate a wood's lichen interest. But it all seemed a bit vague. Had anyone actually used it? So, I decided to conduct RWAs in woods in the southern Lake District, whilst at the same time doing a 90 minute "survey" to see how many of the "indicator species" ("easily identified" members of the Parmelion and Lobarion) I could find.

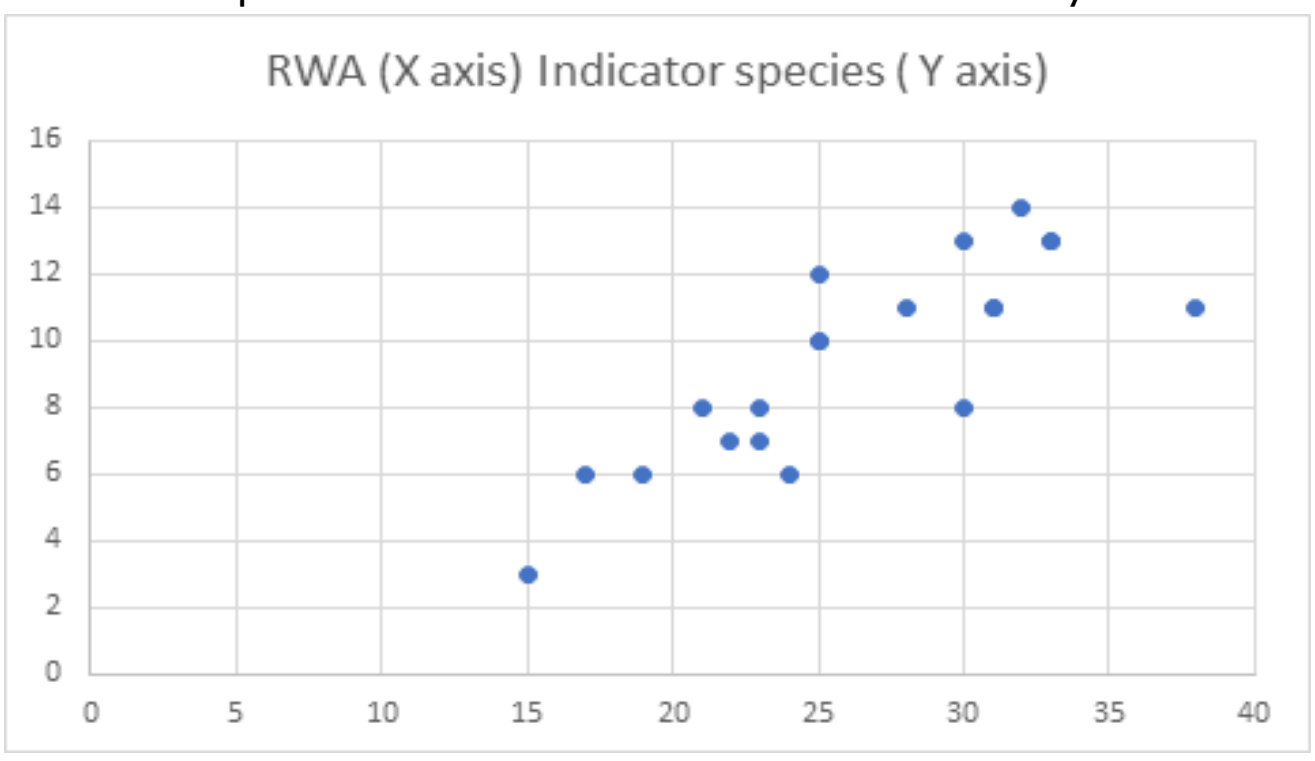
How?

Over the winter of 2018-19 I visited 20 woodlands: map on the right. In each, I counted the number of "indicator species" found in 90 minutes searching, and also did a Rapid Woodland Assessment.



Does the RWA work?

The graph below tells the story: there's a high correlation (excel gives a score of +.824) between RWA score and number of indicator species found. So I think the answer is yes!



NB: the two pairs of identical scores show up once each on the graph

What about coppicing?

Most Lake District woodlands have a history of coppicing. Yet the RWA doesn't ask about it. My hunch was that coppiced woods would have fewer lichen species.
I noted which woods had obvious signs of past coppicing. Three of the four highest scoring (for species) woods had little or no indication of it, but most of the other woods did, at least in part. But in some fairly high-scoring woods it was the obviously coppiced sections that contained the lichens! And whilst the mean number of species for obviously-coppiced-in-the-past woods was 7.4, and for not-obviously-coppiced it was 10.5, for those-coppiced-in-part, it 11.3! It's obviously a complicated relationship that requires further study!

Project and photos by Pete Martin

But most importantly...

The project got me out looking at woods; my ID skills developed loads as I became familiar with the indicator species; and I'm keen to spend lots more time exploring Cumbria's wonderful Atlantic woodlands.