



Where I work Rory Hodd

My work focuses on a side of Ireland that few visitors ever see: the temperate rainforest of Killarney National Park, a 10,200-hectare reserve near the southwest coast. The climate here – usually damp and, by Irish standards, relatively warm, with temperatures in autumn afternoons typically edging beyond 10°C – creates ideal growing conditions for all sorts of mosses, ferns and simple moss-like plants called liverworts.

Here, in a picture taken last November, I'm taking a close look at a piece of moss growing in a marshy spot next to a holly tree. I'm an independent, freelance scientist, and the government often hires me to survey the area's incredible biodiversity.

One square metre of ground here can support 30 species of moss and liverwort, and it often takes a keen eye to tell one from another. If I'm stumped, I'll take a sample back to my laboratory – actually a spare room in my house – to examine the cell structure and other identifying features under a microscope.

I grew up near this park, and despite all the time that I've spent here, there are still surprises. In summer 2019, I found a tiny tropical fern (*Stenogrammitis myosuroides*) that is native to the mountains of Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and Cuba. The most likely explanation for its appearance here is that spores got swept up into the atmosphere, soared across the Atlantic and happened to land in a place where the plant can survive. It makes you think about all the spores and seeds floating around out there that aren't so lucky.

Here, I'm a two-hour walk away from the nearest road. Sometimes, red deer walk by and white-tailed eagles fly overhead. When it's pouring down with rain, I wonder what I'm doing out here. But, in between storms, there's no place I'd rather be. It's quiet but lively, and when you have an eye for moss, there's always something to catch your attention.

Rory Hodd is an independent botanist living in Wicklow, Ireland. **Interview by Chris Woolston.**

Photographed for *Nature* by
Chris Maddaloni.