

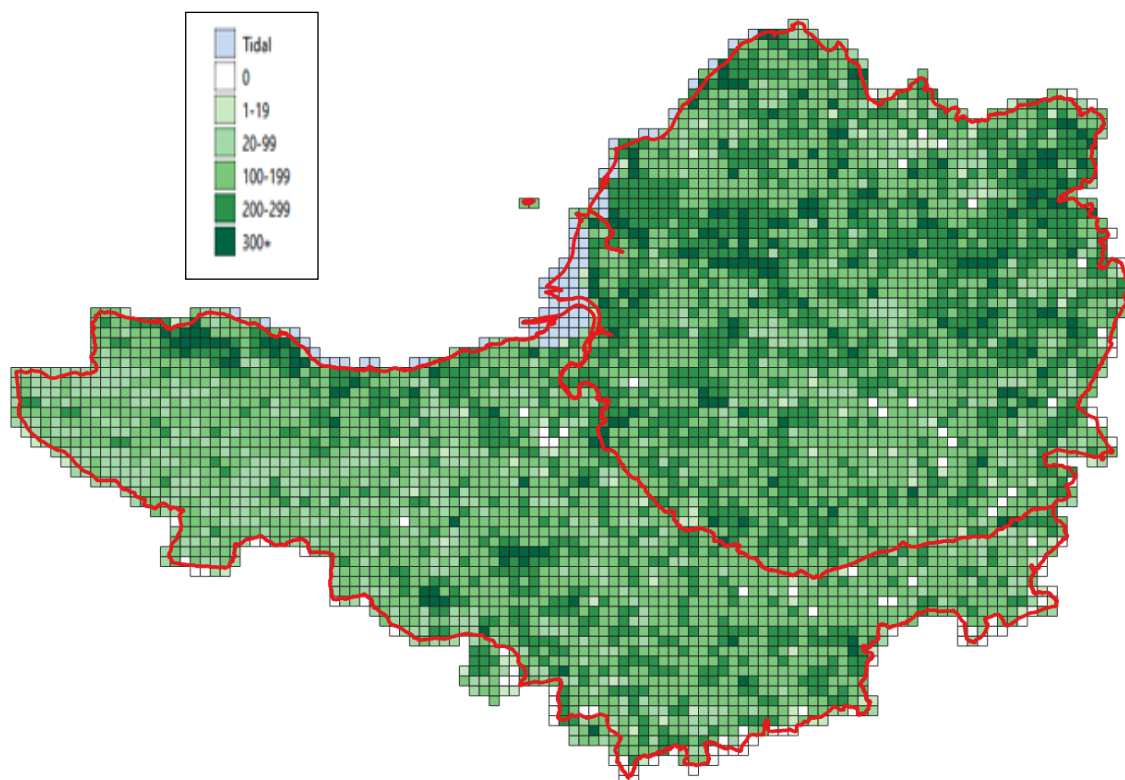
# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

*Recording all plants growing wild in Somerset, not just the rarities*



2024 Newsletter

Issue No. 25



SRPG Members added a huge total of over 57,000 plant records to the database in 2024.

The above map shows the count of distinct taxa by monad based on data from 2000 to 2024. Source: BSBI Distribution Database

## Co-chairs' 2024 Review

### SRPG highlights of 2024

The year's meetings had a strong training element with eight training days reflecting changes in the way botany is being used and valued.

Some were formal classroom sessions on dandelions, grasses and sedges, others were field-based workshops on twigs, two sessions focusing on trees at either end of the year and a pop-up introduction to recording flora. In a less traditional vein was Steve's 'mock FISC'.

The FISC or Field Identification Skills Certificate tests have been running since 2007 and for the last two years have been administered by BSBI. FISC has become the industry standard for assessing the level of botanical skills of professional ecologists, greatly increasing demand for botanical training (and long overdue says

Ellen). Steve took a group of members out to Ash Priors to have a go at the field identification element and also talked through techniques for the demanding indoor specimen ID sections. The training paid off, with at least four attendees achieving levels four or five when they later took the test.

The summer outdoor meetings demonstrated the wonderful array of habitats we are blessed with in Somerset, covering rich woodlands, limestone hills, lowland meadows, coastal habitats, heaths and mires. Lovely! This was in large part due to long-term leaders having an eye to succession of knowledge; the aim is to make sure that new generations of Somerset botanists are well acquainted with the county's best sites.

We also held our barmiest-ever field meeting, opting to visit the utterly exposed Brean Down in the teeth of Storm Kathleen on 6<sup>th</sup> April. It was just as well that our target species were all under 75mm high (that's 3 inches in old money). Hands and knees were by far the best way of getting about.

So many thanks are due to everyone who led meetings and put so much effort into preparing and delivering training as well as to the committee members who continue to ensure that the group holds together so well.

**Helena Crouch & Ellen McDouall**  
**Co-chairs**

## **Membership Report**

Our membership is in a state of flux at the moment. As at the end of 2024 there were:

125 people on the mailing list

91 active members paid their subscriptions in 2024

6 honorary members

Total membership is therefore 97.

**Ellen McDouall**



Our first field meeting of 2024 was on Brean Down during Storm Kathleen! A prostrate position was deemed the safest way to look at plants, enabling us to appreciate the tiny botanical treasures of this species-rich coastal SSSI. We made good records for some species which might otherwise be overlooked, and best of all, we found tiny fronds of Moonwort, last seen here in 2011. (See page 14 for the report).

We all have very happy memories of this meeting and of Margaret Webster who co-led it.

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## Part 1: 2024 Meeting Reports



Searching for flowers alongside the Brue Estuary © Steve Parker

### **Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023, New Year Plant Hunt, Burnham-on-Sea (VC6) Leader & Report: Helena Crouch**

With forecasts of heavy rain and strong winds, fifteen brave members met at Apex Park in Burnham-on-Sea to participate in the annual New Year Plant Hunt (NYPH) run by the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (BSBI). The rules are simple: find as many “wild” plants in flower as possible, in a maximum of three hours. Recent storms had left Somerset bleak and water-logged, so we began with low expectations; however, a scout around the car park yielded thirteen species in flower, including Daisy (*Bellis perennis*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum* agg.), Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) and Annual Meadow-grass (*Poa annua*) which are the four most commonly found species in the NYPH.

We set off through the park towards the Brue Estuary. On Butcher’s-broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*) we found a tiny green flower, borne on the surface of a “cladode”, the leaf-like flattened stem. Enthusiastic plant-hunters ranged around the edges of the park,

getting mixed up with the large numbers of dog-walkers, but by the time we left the park we had recorded an impressive 25 species in flower. These included Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Celandine (*Ficaria verna*), Ox-eye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), Musk Stork’s-bill (*Erodium moschatum*) and Sea Radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum* subsp. *maritimus*).



Steve bearing a precious flower! Photo © Val Graham

Emerging from the park onto the coastal path along the Brue Estuary, we were immediately buffeted by strong winds. The saltmarsh was bleak and the path

had been cleared of weeds and the edges strimmed, but the estuarine views were remarkably fine!



Ellen checking for stamens on Hedge Bedstraw (*Galium album*). Photo © Karen Andrews



The base of the wall had been swept clear of plants ... but Andrew found treasures on the other side!  
Photo © Karen Andrews

We added nine species, including Sea Aster (*Tripolium pannonicum*), Wall Speedwell (*Veronica arvensis*) and Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites pyrenaicus*), but our most exciting find of the day was not in flower!



Yellow Horned-poppy (*Glaucium flavum*) by the River Brue.  
Photo © Helena Crouch

On piles of sand and stone chippings by the boat quay, an over-excited and squeaky leader spotted a single plant of Yellow Horned-poppy (*Glaucium flavum*). This Rare Plant Register species, Near Threatened on the England Red List and Rare in VC6, was last recorded at Burnham-on-Sea by Robert Cropper in 1981.

Heading north along the South Esplanade, we found Field Madder (*Sherardia arvensis*), Spotted Medick (*Medicago arabica*) and Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) in flower in short turf along the verge. With the threatened rain still remarkably absent, despite the disappearance of Exmoor, the hunt was paused and we hunkered down in the shelter of the sea wall for lunch.



SRPG members relaxing momentarily over lunch.  
Photo © Nicky Hodges

Refreshed after a chilly New Year's Eve picnic, we ventured forth again, soon finding Sun Spurge (*Euphorbia helioscopia*), Lesser Swine-cress (*Lepidium didymum*), Common Whitlowgrass (*Erophila verna*) and Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*).



Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*) on a wall.  
Photo © Karen Andrews

The rain swept in, with a brief hailstorm, but the flower-hunters continued, unfazed. Heading for St Andrew's church along the botanical desert of the High Street, Pellitory-of-the-wall (*Parietaria judaica*) was spotted in a yard, its tiny pink flowers visible with a hand lens. The churchyard was disappointingly neat and tidy, although we found Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), Ivy-leaved Speedwell (*Veronica hederifolia*) and Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*). In the adjacent Marine Cove Gardens there were dainty pink flowers of Common Stork's-bill (*Erodium cicutarium*). By the church, a single plant of Guernsey Fleabane (*Erigeron sumatrensis*) was spotted behind railings. Just outside the churchyard, we found Bilbao's Fleabane (*E. floribundus*) with smaller capitula lacking the dense bristly hairs of the former species.



Pot Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) on a wall.  
Photo © Helena Crouch

Our next destination was the cemetery. We added a few species on the way, including Sweet Violet (*Viola odorata*) and Mexican Fleabane (*Erigeron karvinskianus*), and found a smart Pot Marigold on a wall. The cemetery itself was very tidy but tiny flowers were discovered on a Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*).



A single open flower on Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*).  
Photo © Karen Andrews

Honesty (*Lunaria annua*), Trailing Bellflower (*Campanula poscharskyana*) and Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*) were found at the edges of the cemetery.

With time running out, and the threatened storm still holding off, we headed back towards Apex Park, scouring walls, verges and any scruffy edges in our desperate hunt for flowers. We found Fat-hen (*Chenopodium album*) and Knotgrass (*Polygonum aviculare*) by a busy road, and Water Bent (*Polypogon viridis*) on a pavement, but the hundreds of plants of Alexanders had only a few tightly closed buds.

To great excitement, two tiny flowers were discovered on Small-flowered Crane's-bill (*Geranium pusillum*) on the edge of the kerb. The petioles of this species have very short (0.1-0.2mm) patent (spreading) hairs, whereas those of Cut-leaved Crane's-bill (*G. dissectum*) are longer (0.3-0.6mm) and retrorse (pointing downwards). Dove's-foot Crane's-bill (*G. molle*) has a mixture of short glandular hairs, medium hairs and long wispy hairs.



Small-flowered Crane's-bill (*Geranium pusillum*).  
Photo © Karen Andrews

Pineappleweed (*Matricaria discoidea*) and Love-in-a-Mist (*Nigella damascena*) were added just before time was called. Our final total was 75 species, which far exceeded our expectations, as did the clemency of the weather. The four days of New Year Plant Hunts across Britain and Ireland, generated over 2000 lists: SRPG's was the sixth longest! The following day, however, our total was soundly surpassed by Simon, who found 81 species in flower in Taunton. It will be VC5's turn to host the SRPG NYPH next year.

## Saturday 20th January 2024, AGM & Social, Shapwick

Report: Karen Andrews



Members at the SRPG's 2024 AGM. Photo © Karen Andrews

Steve opened the AGM by highlighting that it was the first in-person AGM for 4 whole years! As a result, there were lots of new members present who had never experienced an SRPG AGM and social event before. SRPG AGMs had always given an opportunity to socialise, share lunch and ideas. Steve promised to keep the AGM formalities to an absolute minimum.

Steve thanked all leaders and co-leaders who had made the year's extensive programme of field meetings possible. These had taken place in a wide range of habitats. There had also been good training events like the John Poland vegetative plant identification workshop, the aquatics workshop with Nick Stewart and the fern workshop with Fred Rumsey. The anniversary conference was also excellent. Steve stressed that it is not a big task to lead a field meeting. It is not necessary to be a nationally recognised botanist to lead one.

Steve announced that Graham Lavender is standing down as the Meeting Secretary. This task used to be run by a sub-committee, meeting at Liz McDonnell's house, poring over maps to decide where to go on field meetings. Since that time, membership has skyrocketed.

Val Graham was thanked warmly for his work on the website. A show of hands revealed how many members participated in the WhatsApp group. There followed a discussion about whether there should be a division into separate groups led by Christine and Nicky. Had the WhatsApp group become too general? In the past week alone, the subjects had ranged from galls to polar bears! The consensus in the room was

that the group should remain together. The diversity of posts was seen as an enjoyable feature of the group.

Steve queried whether members would find anything else useful. Would a YouTube channel be of interest? Next, he called for a shout-out for the fantastic newsletter with an insistence that a thank you to Karen be minuted. A limited number of newsletters can be printed in full colour if members ask Helena Crouch.

Helena is also responsible for creating the 'never-ending' list of our new and interesting plant records of the past year that appears in the newsletter. It is also published in the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History (SANHS) Proceedings <https://sanhs.org/digital-proceedings/>. This annual journal was first published in 1849. Simon explained that it contains a section on Somerset ecology, covering everything from vascular plants to plant galls, to arachnids and birds, etc. The 166th edition had just been published.

Ellen McDouall, Membership Secretary, discussed the growing trends in our membership. She displayed a map showing the home locations of our members inside and outside the county and length of membership. Figures now stand at 115, with 2 new members having joined already in the new year. There is a welcome growing trend for lots of Natural England and other advisors and young consultants to join the SRPG.

Next, Steve turned to the subject of the Group's finances. Supreme difficulties with Barclays Bank could be traced back two years to the time when Clive Lovatt stepped down as Treasurer. The loss of both Clive and Liz created an horrendous issue with the bank over signatories. The 18-month saga was further compounded by the bank's inability to trace Steve. After six months of wrangling and a rapid increase in grey hairs, Steve finally managed to convince the bank of his identity in a 4-hour visit to the Bridgwater branch. There was a complaint that the AGM minutes for last year were not signed. Steve asked to make a complaint to a superior, who when he checked, could not see anything wrong. It turned out that the bank had been trying to send statements to Clive's old address.

There are now 3 signatories to the account: Helena, Simon and Steve. Bank statements are arriving every

quarter. Steve asked the membership if the Group should change banks. A discussion ensued. Halifax and Nationwide do not like little group accounts. Lloyds seemed to be the only alternative. A change of bank would be one of the first new items for the new committee to consider. Helena stated that ethical banks she had researched will not take on small groups.

The accounts were available for all to consult on the day. The Group is in a strong financial position. The membership fee will remain £10. Many have already paid. Members have the option to pay by cash, cheque or direct debit. The accounts were duly approved.

With access to the bank account now sorted, the timing was perfect to introduce a new Treasurer. It was proposed that Anna Mullett become the new Treasurer. She was duly elected to the role.

Next, Steve explained that the Chair is not elected but chosen by the committee. Although stepping down as Chair, Steve will continue to serve on the committee as one of the Vice-county Recorders along with Simon and Helena. In the next year, the Group will have two chairs. Ellen and Helena agreed to take on the role jointly going forward. The previous year's minutes were agreed.

With the formalities over, Fred Rumsey introduced the photo competition. The competing photos were split into 3 groups: Somerset Rare Plant Register, non-rare plant register and meeting photos. Fred asked members to vote for the best photo in each category and the best overall photo. There were 38 entries in 3 categories and members could vote for 2 in each category.

Steve then summarised the recording year in VC5. Unfortunately, a bad fall placed Steve out of action for two months. This resulted in the lowest number of VC5 records entering the BSBI database in years. There were 10,000 records. The peak was in 2020 with 40,000 records. Steve presented recording efforts per monad since 2000. Few sites were recorded in the Quantocks. Shortage of parking and busy lives play their part. We are not good at the crossover points with VC3 in Devon and VC9 in Dorset.

John was declared the star recorder of the year. Steve highlighted some of the year's wonderful records.

Invariably, Ian and Paul Green make new discoveries when they visit Somerset. They found 5 new rarities. Fred seems to specialise in strange aliens and garden centres. Graham Lavender contributed some unusual plants. A long list came from Simon and Steve. Simon mentioned 3 new Dandelion species for VC5 and one for VC6.

Steve ventured out with RoAM, the Recorders of the Avalon Marshes. Most of their visits are in VC6 but include Steart which would merit an SRPG visit. The big find was *Tragopogon pratensis* subsp. *pratensis* – a first record since 1945. The find of Hairy Buttercup (*Ranunculus sardous*) shows that the site is changing a lot and that we need to record there more.

Another VC5 group call themselves the STOIICS. Chris explained that this is based on the grid reference ST02.

Ian shared Snake's head Iris (*Iris* or *Hermodactylus tuberosus*) on the What's-App group. This Iris has been in the same location beside a lamppost for 100 years. The Wild Flower Society found the tall grass *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* this year – only the second record for Britain. Meanwhile, Steve Little found Pink or Hirsute Garlic (*Allium trifoliatum*) in a bramble patch.

Steve ran through some of the outstanding events of the year and mentioned some of the exciting tree and vegetative identification events that were soon coming up. Steve finished by thanking everyone for the brilliant conference held in VC5 and the records submitted. The aim is for many more records in 2024. He ended by mentioning Fred and Helena's invitation to Steep Holm in VC6.

The proceedings broke for lunch. Lunch was a wide range of shared food brought in by members. Many of the healthy and indulgent contributions had been baked by members themselves. As ever for an SRPG meeting, there was no shortage of cake. Members also grabbed the opportunity to catch up with others after the long winter break and to vote on the photo competition.

After lunch, Helena presented some of the botanical highlights of 2023 in VC6. The end of Steve's presentation neatly led into Helena's highlight of her Steep Holm visit with Fred. She described zooming across by boat in the spray to land on the beach. They spent 12 hours on the island before the return trip.

Following Helena's presentation for BSBI on Aliens of Somerset, Ian Benallick corrected Rob Randall's Royal Crescent garden escapee of Violet Cress (*Cochlearia acaulis*) to Corsican Mint, (*Mentha requienii*). It smelt of mint when revisited.

The Vegetative Key Workshop with John Poland was a great success. Some 36 members attended.

It has been an unlucky year for Somerset's recorders. Helena fractured her arm just before the Nunney walk. She thanked everyone for all the lifts while she was unable to drive.

Exciting finds included firsts for Cam Valley of Common Cudweed (*Filago germanica*) on old coal tips at Haydon Batch and Lesser Water-parsnip (*Berula erecta*) at Paulton and Timsbury Basins. Such discoveries demonstrate how important it is to keep looking and to return to well-recorded sites.

John found 16 plants of Prickly Poppy (*Roemeria argemone*) on Somerton Moor. This was the first record for Somerset since 1992.

Nettle-leaved Goosefoot (*Chenopodium murale*) had found a home in an upturned cannon in the gun emplacements on Steep Holm. It had last been recorded there in 2006.

One of the best field meetings of the year was led by Nick Stewart at Southlake Moor. Finds included Tassel Stonewort (*Tolypella prolifera*) that had not been seen since 2006. The large population of Greater Water-parsnip (*Sium latifolium*) was also a highlight of the meeting.

Other VC6 discoveries included Caucasian Germander (*Teucrium hircanicum*). Small Lovegrass (*Eragrostis minor*) turned up in Somerton. Fred reported that it was new to Somerset but was killed by weedkiller shortly afterwards. Terrestrial Water-starwort (*Callitriche terrestris*) appeared in paving in a garden centre. Valdivia Duckweed (*Lemna valdiviana*) is creeping out into the wild. It was discovered in a trough at Catcott, a lake at Westhay and a ditch at Vole. A housing estate in Bath produced the third record for VC6 and Somerset of Martin's Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria reuteri*). Meanwhile, Limestone Fern (*Gymnocarpium robertianum*) had taken up residence in a drain in Bath.

Helena displayed blue maps to show how many more records we now have. The white spaces are more filled in and squares are darker. The big gap remains south of Wincanton – a challenge to tackle in 2024.



Entries in the 2024 photo competition. Photo © Karen Andrews

Fred announced the winners and runners-up in the photo competition as follows:

#### **Rare Plant Register Species**

1<sup>st</sup> – *Hyoscyamus niger* - Helena Crouch

2<sup>nd</sup> – *Dipsacus pilosus* – Simon Leach

#### **Non-rare Plant Register Species**

1<sup>st</sup> – *Myosotis discolor* – Fred Rumsey

2<sup>nd</sup> – *Sagittaria sagittifolia* – Karen Andrews

#### **Meetings**

1<sup>st</sup> – Sunset at Berrow – Helena Crouch

2<sup>nd</sup> – Helena pushing Nick into the water – Karen Andrews

**Overall winner:** Sunset at Berrow – Helena Crouch

Next came the celebrated, challenging and long-awaited quiz courtesy of Steve. The quiz had been running for 24 years until stopped by COVID. VC5 (plus a few strays) were pitted against VC6. The questions favoured allrounders rather than pure botanists. Do you know your fungi, butterflies and plant galls? Botanical species were described with nicknames. Do you recognise Goosey Gander, Adder's Meat, Fly Trap, Squatmore, Small Frog's Lettuce and Billy Beatie?

A further challenge was recognising fellow members as pumpkin heads. Some members couldn't even recognise themselves. There was much laughter and puzzlement. VC5 and VC6 were fiercely competitive. Aspersions were cast over VC6 powers of arithmetic. There were calls for a steward's enquiry. However, all was resolved amicably in the end with VC6 declared the winners ... by a narrow margin.

**Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2024, Winter Twigs Workshop, Carymoor Environmental Centre, (VC6)**

**Leaders: Simon Leach & Steve Parker**

**Report: Nicky Davies & Nicky Hodges**

February saw the SRPG receiving a warm welcome from Adam, Neil, and Chrissie at the Carymoor Environmental Centre. This winter meeting had another fantastic turn out with 19 attendees in total, including some new SPRG members.



Carymoor Environmental Centre: Designed by local architect James Godden, the building is designed to demonstrate a range of sustainable features, such as solar hot water, photovoltaic shingles, and locally sourced materials. Photo © Nicky Davies

The Carymoor Environmental Centre is managed by the Carymoor Environmental Trust. Set up in 1996 the Trust has overseen the conversion of an open landfill site into 'an oasis of wildlife habitats in a landscape dominated by intensively farmed land'. The conversion was experimental and saw the capping of the landfill with 1m of clay on which wildflower meadows, ponds, and hedgerows were created along with orchards cultivating 38 rare and traditional Somerset varieties of apple. The lovely Small Blue Butterfly (*Cupido minimus*) has been seen within the created calcareous grassland and 29 of the UK's butterfly species have been recorded here. The site's Wildflower Collection contains around 450 plant species including rarities like Starved Wood-sedge (*Carex depauperata*) and White Rock-rose (*Helianthemum apenninum*). The Trust's conservation work continues to expand - in 2022 it was awarded £96,000 to create new woodland and scrub habitat for nightingales.



Winter Twig Workshop inside Carymoor Environmental Centre. Photo © Nicky Hodges

The winter twig identification workshop began with Steve Parker giving an overview of the characteristic features of a twig using the *FSC Winter Trees Field Key* (Dominic Price & Leif Bersweden, 2013, 2023). Were buds opposite, alternate or spiralling on the stem? Were the bud scales sticky, hairy or did the edge of the leaf bud have cilia (a row of tiny hairs)? How many vascular bundles did the leaf scar have? With the absence of the clues and cues of a winter tree or shrub in situ, twig identification could be trickier than expected for some.



Female flower of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). Photo © Nicky Hodges

Heading outside to the tree trail and using John Poland's *The Field Key to Winter Twigs* (2020), we puzzled over the difference between a thorn (short modified branchlet with a sharp hard point, usually above a leaf scar or at the end of a short branch) a spine (a stiff sharp point originating as a modified leaf, stem or stipule, usually below a leaf scar or bud) or a prickle (hard sharp pointed along the internode of a stem) but were distracted by a minute female Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) flower and the reflexed sepals of the early flowering Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*), distinguishing it from the spreading sepals of Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) - a useful ID tip as the flowering periods of these related shrubs overlap a little.



Cherry plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) flower showing the reflexed sepals.  
Photo © Nicky Hodges

As we headed back down the hill for lunch in the centre building, we were able to cut samples from a selection of trees to key out.

Lunchtime was a sociable opportunity to warm up and regather our energies. A few stayed behind to key out their morning finds and label them up as a personal reference set.

Back out on the tree trail, we marched on past a line of willows, one of the trickier groups to key out, instead

attending to the badger snuffle holes along the path. We'd already contemplated a *Tilia* in the morning, though the more experienced had kept quiet about the characteristic dense epicormic shoots at the base until we'd arrived at Common lime *Tilia x europaea*.

At the top of the trail, we stopped at a tree with an attractive pyramidal shape, woody 'cones' and stalked buds with 2-3 scales. The 'cones' (actually a female catkin) looked like oversized versions of those found on the native Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*). This Italian Alder (*Alnus cordata*) had larger and rounder stalked buds compared to the club-shaped buds of Alder.

We continued on, noting the clusters of buds at the tips of Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) twigs, admiring a Service-tree (*Sorbus domestica*). The wafting smells from the tip ushered us back towards the centre past trees already in blossom including Cornelian-cherry (*Cornus mas*) with its bright yellow flowers.



Cornelian-cherry (*Cornus mas*) flowers. Photo © Nicky Hodges

At the centre, we thanked our hosts and headed home, with further twigs to practice keying out. Hopefully, most heeded Mr Poland's advice to store their twig collection in the fridge or freezer so that characters important for ID purposes are retained. It is all too easy to bring home a little pile with the best of intentions but then find they are only fit for the hibernaculum.

**Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2024, Fyne Court (VC5)**

### **Leaders & Report: Steve Parker and Helena Crouch**

The second SRPG winter field workshop of the year attracted over twenty members of the group. Fyne Court is a property in the Quantock Hills owned and managed by the National Trust. We selected this site, a wild garden with a fair selection of conifers and broad-leaved trees, to continue our study of trees in winter, with a focus on conifers.

After a brief safety talk, as the site was very muddy with some ponds and watercourses, our first tree was a large specimen of Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) on the edge of the car park. The tree was still in bloom: the large flowers with reflexed sepals and green twigs are distinctive features of this early flowering tree.



Reflexed sepals of Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*).  
Photo © Sarah Shuttleworth

Next, we inspected a Yew (*Taxus baccata*) and keyed it out using *the Vegetative Key*. Leaves were clearly single along the twig, each arising from an oblique projection. Leaves of Yew are also **discolorous**, the upper and lower surfaces are clearly different colours, and the midrib is raised on both sides.

Beside the path from the car park, specimens of Spindle (*Eunonymus europaeus*) and Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) were compared. Both have opposite buds, but Spindle has green twigs whereas Dogwood twigs are green and red. A row of mighty Sycamores (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) presented another opportunity to revise winter twigs, as did a magnificent old Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*). Sycamore has fat green buds, with

opposite lateral buds; Beech has long pointed reddish-brown buds and the lateral buds are alternate.

Reaching a small group of non-native conifers, we took these through *the Vegetative Key*. Leaves were **imbricate**, overlapping like roof tiles, and **opposite decussate**, in opposite pairs with each pair at right angles to the next. The branchlets were flat and the apex of each flat facial leaf did not overlap the next facial leaf. Each leaf had an oval resin gland and, after much discussion, we mostly agreed that the leaves smelled of parsley!



Opposite decussate imbricate leaves of Lawson's Cypress (*Cupressus lawsoniana*), with each flat facial leaf separated from the next facial leaf by the paired bases of the lateral leaves.  
Photo © Sarah Shuttleworth

This, and the small round cones, indicated that the trees were planted specimens of Lawson's Cypress (*Cupressus lawsoniana*). Close by was a sapling, suggesting that the trees had produced viable seed.

Leaving the garden and walking along the edge of the parkland, we spotted a row of alders with very large cones. The hairless twigs and green globose buds helped us identify these as Italian Alder (*Alnus cordata*). We also admired a veteran Sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) before walking to the largest conifer on the site, a Wellingtonia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). The small scale-like leaves of this species were imbricate but arranged spirally around the branchlet. Cones were examined and it was noticed that the branches were downcurved, which apparently makes it a difficult tree to climb. Wellingtonia, or Giant Redwood, was introduced to Britain in 1853 by William Lobb.

Back in the Fyne Court garden, we discovered a large Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) has recently been felled, probably due to being blown over in a winter

storm. This gave us the opportunity to inspect both the leaves and the cones up close. Leaves of cedars are arranged in dense clusters on short woody spurs; Cedar of Lebanon has green leaves (needles) which are almost 3cm long. The barrel-shaped cones gradually disintegrate on the tree.



Cone and clusters of leaves of Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*).  
Photo © Karen Andrews

Next to the Cedar was a fine example of Monterey Pine (*Pinus radiata*). This tree has very long needles in bunches of three and old cones which remain attached to the branches, a character that was obvious on this specimen.

After lunch at the National Trust café, we explored other parts of the gardens, admiring large old shrubs of Box (*Buxus sempervirens*) in flower. The next group of conifers proved very difficult to identify, as we were unable to reach the foliage and could not find cones on the ground, so could only study fallen branchlets. Leaves were single, 4-angled needles, **concolorous** (all one colour), less than 3cm long. The twigs were orange-brown, but seemed to be sparsely hairy, which meant

that they failed to key neatly to Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*) which is what we were sure they were!

We moved on to a large specimen of Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) with its characteristic fissured bark, soft needles and slender pointed buds, almost like little Beech buds. This tree had also shed many cones making identification very easy as the cones have distinctive three-pronged bracts protruding from between the scales.

Our final conifer, by the estate buildings, was Western Red-cedar (*Thuja plicata*) with abundant flask-shaped cones. Like Lawson's Cypress, branchlets are flattened and leaves are imbricate and opposite decussate, however in *Thuja* the apex of each acutely **cuspidate** (sharply pointed) facial leaf just overlaps the next facial leaf. The foliage has a distinctive pineapple scent.



Opposite decussate imbricate leaves of Western Red-cedar (*Thuja plicata*), with each flat cuspidate facial leaf just overlapping the next facial leaf. Photo taken in Paulton Cemetery.  
Photo © Helena Crouch

The meeting ended with a well-deserved afternoon tea in the courtyard outside the café.

Saturday 6th April 2024, Brean Down (VC6)

Leaders: Helena Crouch & Margaret Webster

Report: Helena Crouch



White Rock-rose (*Helianthemum apenninum*) on Brean Down. Photo © Helena Crouch

As Storm Kathleen raged across Ireland and western Britain, eighteen members assembled in the car park at Brean Down. A slow ascent via the track sheltered us from the worst of the wind and provided plenty of botanical interest. Vegetative plants of Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) were spotted near the bottom of the hill, and dead spikes of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobancha hederæ*) on the bank. Rock outcrops supported miniature gardens, with treasures such as Early Forget-me-not (*Myosotis ramosissima*), Rue-leaved Saxifrage (*Saxifraga tridactylites*) and Fern-grass (*Catapodium rigidum*).

At the top, we searched for White Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) where a single plant was seen in 2017, but alas in vain. Heading east, Small-leaved Buttercup (*Ranunculus parviflorus*) was spotted on thin soil on the ridge. In a small hollow, we saw the first Slender Thistle (*Carduus tenuiflorus*), whilst a smart Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) rosette was seen on rock outcrops nearby. Heading west again, keeping to the sheltered north side of the ridge, a small gravelly area beside the Military Road proved exciting: here we found Sea Stork's-bill (*Erodium maritimum*) and Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*).



SRPG members hunker down to study Sea Stork's-bill (*Erodium maritimum*) and Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*).  
Photo © Karen Andrews

Whilst on the relatively sheltered north side of the ridge, it seemed wise to have lunch, with great views across Weston Bay. Fortified, we braved a look at some rock outcrops on the southern side, where those who could bear the gale-force wind saw Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*), with its characteristic fibrous leaf-bases.



Fibrous leaf-sheaths of Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*).  
Photo © Nicky Hodges

Nearby we discovered Dwarf Sedge (*Carex humilis*) in flower, and after examining many tiny plants we found convincing specimens of Little Mouse-ear (*Cerastium semidecandrum*), with broad silvery margins to the bracts. We also saw tiny plants of Dwarf Mouse-ear (*Cerastium pumilum*), although the first ones found seemed to consist of little more than a flower! Later we found larger plants, with bracts which have narrow silvery margins. We also saw patches of the more abundant Sea Mouse-ear (*Cerastium diffusum*) which has only four petals.

On the south-facing slopes, White Rock-rose (*Helianthemum apenninum*) was just coming into flower. As a native, this nationally rare and Vulnerable species is only otherwise found at nearby Purn Hill and at a few sites on the Torbay Limestones of South Devon; however, on Brean Down it is gloriously abundant on the southern slopes and cliffs. A yellow-green patch of tiny plants caused us to drop to the ground again – with great relief since it was so difficult to stand in the wind! This was Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*), an inconspicuous short-lived annual, formerly largely a coastal species in Somerset but increasingly found inland on road verges.

To the north of some steps on the ridge, we encountered an area of limestone heath, with patches of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and Heath Speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*). There were scattered plants of Pale St John's-wort (*Hypericum montanum*), which is Near Threatened on the GB Red List, and a sharp-eyed member spotted a

few leaves of Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*). It was here that the tiny fern Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*) had last been seen in 2011, so all members sank thankfully to their knees once again and the search began. To our delight, we found four tiny fronds: a new species for some members and definitely the highlight of the day.



Diminutive Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*) on the ridge of Brean Down. Photo © Nicky Hodges

Beside the steps were many more plants of Sea Stork's-bill and Small-flowered Buttercup. Here we also found vegetative patches of Bird's-foot Clover (*Trifolium ornithopodioides*) which is scarce in VC6.

Exhilarated by our finds, we headed slowly back, bravely descending the steps on the south side, admiring large plants of Knotted Hedge-parsley (*Torilis nodosus*) on the steps, and many flowering plants of White Rock-rose whilst clinging to the railings. Fortunately, we made it down before the tea shop closed: a break from the wind was very welcome. We had recorded 175 species in our target monad and had a great day despite the forecast.

## Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2024 Park Wood, Chaffcombe (VC5)

**Leaders: Steve Parker & Simon Leach**

**Report: Steve Parker**

Park Wood, Chaffcombe is a private woodland owned and managed by John and Valerie Godsmark. They have owned this site for over ten years and have carried out significant conservation management, including clearing large stands of Rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) and the eradication of the invasive Indian Fountain-bamboo (*Yushania anceps*) with considerable success. John and Valerie had arranged car parking on an adjacent forest track. They met the group of nine SRPG members at the entrance to the site. Here they explained the recent history of recording at the site. In 2000 the Green brothers had visited while in 2011 four members of the SRPG had recorded the flora with the wood's owners.

Large standard Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) and very old and large coppiced Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) form the significant woodland cover; under these is a carpet of Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) and other scattered woodland species such as Wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*). Since the last recording visit the owners have carried out some tree planting including Small-leaved Lime (*Tilia cordata*). Valerie is very concerned about the recent colonisation of the wood by the Alder Leaf Beetle (*Agelastica alni*) which is now present in very large numbers. She has been in contact with various conservation organisations and government bodies to ask advice on the impact the insects may have on the ecology on the site but has not had much reassurance so far.

Moving further into the woodland the ground conditions changed under the influence of a small watercourse that

runs through the site; here the ground is saturated for much of the year making management difficult. The spikes of Great Horsetail (*Equisetum telmateia*) were just pushing through stands of Ramsons (*Allium ursinum*) together with Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage (*Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*) in the wettest areas. Surprisingly in these wet areas Herb-paris (*Paris quadrifolia*) has colonised ground that was once covered by the Rhododendron, we counted over one hundred flowering shoots of this ancient woodland indicator species. The wood has a large amount of dead wood which was supporting a wide range of fungal fruiting bodies.



Herb-paris (*Paris quadrifolia*) in full flower. Photo © Steve Parker

My memory from the visit of 2011 is of the fantastic display of Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*) that was present on the hazel trees; I was not disappointed as this parasitic plant is still to be found in the woodland with one large and partly rotting stump covered in it. Other parts of the wood could only be accessed by following in the footsteps of John and Valerie. They lead us to a few small stands of Marsh Valerian (*Valeriana dioica*). It was an enjoyable visit helping to update the owners on the plants that they look after in their special site.

Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2024, Babcary Meadows (VC6)

Leader: Fred Rumsey

Report: Fred Rumsey & Helena Crouch



Babcary Meadows. Photo © Fred Rumsey

Nine members met on a rather dull afternoon to visit Somerset Wildlife Trust's Babcary Meadows reserve, the meeting timed for us to witness the spectacle of the impressive Green Winged Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*) population in flower. Notified as an SSSI in 1988, 8 of the 9 fields, (12 ha in total) have been owned and managed by SWT since 1999. These traditional hay meadows lie alongside the River Cary and may have formed part of a Catch Meadow system, with ridge and furrow features evidence of medieval arable strip farming. The site has benefited from regular survey visits by the Somerset Botany Group in recent years, helping the Trust to fine tune its management. Our focus for the evening was the appreciation of the floral display, although we did make some detailed and useful records.

It had been a very wet spring, and downpours were still commonplace: there had been a deluge the night before the meeting. Consequently, access to the site down North Street, perfectly dry when pre-walked by the leader two days before, now threatened even the welly wearers with wet feet!

Having crossed the flood, it was interesting to see the different character and composition of the vegetation from field to field, the result of underlying geology, hydrology and past management. Part of the delight of the site is that as you stray further from habitation each

field seems to be better than the last, the carpets of Green-winged Orchids in their many colour forms and the abundant Cowslips (*Primula veris*) becoming ever denser. That is until you reach the margins of the reserve and are met by the surrounding sea of dark-green intensive agriculture. A stark reminder of the island-like nature (and vulnerability) of these protected sites.



Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) in abundance.  
Photo © Fred Rumsey

Another of the delights of these unimproved neutral wet meadows is Adder's-tongue fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*). Previous surveyors had recorded this species

in the low-lying part of the eastern field, in a discreet area in front of the tree in the above photo. However, perhaps because of the very wet spring, this distinctive but easily overlooked little fern was found at a range of sites, being recorded in five different 6-figure grid references, in two different fields, and in unprecedented numbers.

The group was able to practice vegetative identification of other axiophytes (AKA squeaky plants), indicative of quality habitat and thus increasingly nationally threatened. Pepper-saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*) was distinguished from Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*) by its purple hydathodes and stomata only on the under-surface of the leaf. In the corner of one field, we also found the distinctive serrated-edged foliage of Saw-wort (*Serratula tinctoria*). One of the most colourful floral displays was that of the Wild Turnip / Bargeman's Cabbage (*Brassica rapa* subsp. *campestris*), providing a golden margin to the southernmost fields alongside the River Cary. The open flowers overtop the buds, which distinguishes it from Oil-seed Rape (*Brassica napa*).



Bargeman's Cabbage (*Brassica rapa* subsp. *campestris*).  
Photo © Helena Crouch

The spectacular star plants of the evening though were the Green-winged Orchids. The reason for its common name is most obviously apparent when looking at the white and paler pink pigmented forms of the plant. This charming orchid is Vulnerable on the England Red List,

having declined dramatically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to "improvement" of pasture. It is now mostly found in protected sites, like Babcary Meadows, which are managed appropriately for this species. There are indications that the considerable decline has now bottomed out. We can only hope ... and continue to manage the protected sites in which it thrives.



Green wings apparent on a pale form of the eponymous orchid.  
(*Anacamptis morio*). Photo © Fred Rumsey

Having circumnavigated the reserve, our happy band finally beat a dry retreat, on an alternative permissive path through a neighbouring garden, and adjourned to the local hostelry which had very kindly allowed us to park. We are grateful to all who came and made this such a pleasant evening's ramble and to the Red Lion, Babcary for allowing us use of their car park on what was obviously a busy quiz night.

Leader: Simon Leach

Report: Barbra Lakin



Taking a closer look at Dandelions. Photos: Barbra Lakin

This meeting was limited to 8 people, so a small but keen group gathered to learn something about the fascinating world of dandelions.

The day started at the Avalon Marshes Centre where Simon had a selection of pressed specimens and 'bagged' freshly-collected samples, plus a few potted, labelled dandelions that he had been growing in his garden. Several members had brought additional samples for us to examine and have a go at identifying.

We began by taking a closer look at what features distinguish dandelions from other lookalike yellow composites.

A dandelion **flower-head** (*capitulum*) is actually quite a complex structure, consisting of an *involucre* of usually greenish outer and inner bracts (these are often called *phyllaries*) and many yellow *florets*; each floret is a flower. The flower-head sits at the top of a stem, with there always being just one flower-head per stem. The florets are more or less tubular and 'ligulate', the outer florets having ligules with often distinctively-coloured stripes underneath. The presence or absence of pollen is a helpful feature when trying to distinguish between some species, while the colour of the stigmas – yellow, orange, greenish or even blackish – may also be diagnostic.

Unlike many other composites, the flowering **stem** (known as the *scape*) is entirely leafless, as well as being hollow and filled with white latex. The scape may be hairless in some species, while markedly hairy in others. Young scapes are often more obviously hairy than older ones. Unlike many other composites (such as the cat's-

ears, hawkbits and hawkweeds) the **fruit** pappus hairs are not feathery. The **root**, as many gardeners will know to their cost, is a deep taproot, and the plant will happily regrow from discarded root fragments.

Simon explained that almost all British dandelions are **apomictic**, meaning that they produce seeds without the usual requirement for pollination and cross-fertilisation. Each dandelion species is essentially a **seed-clone**, with 'daughter' plants being genetically identical to their 'mothers'. For British dandelions, then, pollen is almost entirely redundant.

Putting names to dandelions is a tricky and painstaking business, a species often being defined by a bewildering range of flower and leaf characters. Recording forms exist so that we can document all the details, such as the one devised by Jeanne Webb that is available to download from the SRPG website.

Many characters need to be recorded while the plant is still fresh. The diameter of the flower-head should be measured when fully open. Outermost ligules usually have a coloured ligule stripe: 'grey-violet' is the commonest colour, although in some species the stripe may be brown, orange, red, or even – as in *Taraxacum nordstedtii* – puce (a rich brownish purple). Inner ligules usually have yellow teeth, but other colours also feature on some species – e.g. *T. necessarium* has inner ligules with black teeth, while the teeth of *T. croceiflorum* are red! Outer involucral bracts should be measured and then checked with a hand lens to see whether they have white or purple borders, while the 'attitude' of these bracts – e.g. appressed, spreading, reflexed or recurved – is often important.

Leaf shape is also critical, and thankfully this is one feature that shows up well after pressing. Leaves may be homophyllous (all of more or less one shape) or heterophyllous (with inner and outer leaves differing quite markedly in their shape, particularly in the size and shape of the terminal lobe). The end-lobes should be described, carefully noting their shape and whether they are sub-divided into several (often rounded) 'lobules'.

The pairs of lateral lobes need to be counted, although Simon pointed out that it is sometimes hard to decide with certainty whether the (usually smallest) bottom-most pair of lateral lobes are actually lobes or are part of the petiole which may itself be variously winged and toothed. The shape of the lateral lobes is often an important character, and lobes may be toothed (dentate) along their proximal and/or distal margins, while the 'interlobes' (the narrow section of leaf between pairs of lateral lobes) can also be toothed. Some species, such as *T. multicolorans* (photo below), can have dark blotches on the leaf interlobes.

The colour of the leaf midrib (on *upper* surface of leaf) and the petiole (on *underside* of leaf) should also be noted while the plant is fresh, since by the time it's been pressed and dried these colours may have become hard to discern. The value of describing the plant in its fresh state (and taking pictures, too) extends to many of the features that rely on colour.

**Pressing Dandelions.** Simon showed some of his stunningly beautiful, pressed dandelions and outlined the steps he takes to achieve this. The whole plant is pressed but some leaves can be judiciously removed if the basal rosette is excessively crowded or if some leaves are dead, damaged or diseased. Ideally, the plant is sliced off just below ground level, but the root collar can be whittled down if it is too thick. Small jewellery tags with collection code number, grid ref. and date can be attached to the plant, ensuring notes and photos made in the field can be linked to the correct specimen.

Once the plant is in the press and flattened, there is a 24-hour window in which leaves (and so on) can be rearranged so as to display their features to best advantage. The plant is pressed with plenty of corrugated cardboard and newspaper to wick away moisture.

It is important to dry dandelions as quickly as possible to stand the best chance of retaining their colour. Storing the press in an airing cupboard, or on a radiator, or in a car parked in a sunny spot, will help to speed up the

drying process, along with frequent (twice daily) changes of newspaper. A specimen can take up to a week to dry, after which it can be removed from the press and placed loose in a folded sheet of newspaper for storage. Completed field notes and forms can be inserted with the specimen.



Pressed Dandelion – this one is a specimen of *T. multicolorans* collected near Chew Magna (VC6) – with jewellery tags attached.  
Photo © Barbra Lakin

**When to collect and when *not* to collect...** Spring is the time when dandelion species tend to look their best: depending on the year's seasonal conditions, they are best collected between late February and the end of April. Any time after the middle of May, at least in southern England, is likely to be too late. If plants have been mown or otherwise damaged they can quickly become impossible to identify, and leaf plasticity often results in the development of 'summer leaves' quite unlike those found in spring. The leaves become 'over-enlarged' (gross) and 'wrinkled' and they lose some of their characteristic lobing and colouration. Summer leaves may be more deeply divided (or, perversely, *less* divided) than their counterparts in the spring.

For various reasons, it is unsafe to assume that a dandelion can always be identified. In fact, most dandelion plants – maybe as many as 90% - are not really good enough examples for purposes of identification. It is important, therefore, to learn what a 'good' dandelion looks like – but teaching the difference between 'good' and 'not so good' isn't straightforward!

It is vital that specimens, together with all their supporting documentation – notes, photographs, etc. – are examined by someone who knows what they're doing. As a rule, only specimens determined (or

confirmed) by the national referee, John Richards, or by another expert such as Tim Rich, Jon Holt or Alex Prendergast, will be accepted as valid records and added to the national *Taraxacum* database. However, after a while, you may find John will allow you to make records without the need for vouchers for those species with which you are particularly familiar. Simon, for example, after eight years of recording, now has a list of about ten such species!

After a quick lunch break, we car-shared to Canada Farm where we looked at dandelions in the field. The first areas of grassland we visited were very wet and marshy, with several small dandelions amongst many species of sedge and patches of *Euphrasia*. These included putative *T. nordstedtii* (with lovely puce ligule stripes!) and (possibly) *T. chlorofragale*, plus something with rather grubby, spotted leaves (and no pollen) that we think could have been a 'Section Naevisa' species. Specimens were collected, and notes and photos taken, though at the time of writing (early November 2024) we have yet to learn what John Richards has made of them.

In Skinner's Wood we also collected a possible example of *T. atactum* (photo below), which would be a new hectad record. Elsewhere we found several further colonies of what we think was *T. chlorofragale*. This is an under-recorded dandelion that was only described as a British and Irish species in 2019. Very similar to *T. nordstedtii*, the species was recorded for the first time in Britain in Somerset, on Exmoor, by Graham Lavender. In the last couple of years it has been seen elsewhere in VC5 in the Blackdown Hills and on the Quantocks. If confirmed, our records for Canada Farm would be the first for VC6.



Deliberating over a possible *T. atactum*. Photo: © Barbra Lakin

On the verge of Station Road, on our way back to the cars, Simon showed us *T. pulchrifolium*, a new hectad record and possibly only the third or fourth record for VC6.

Many thanks to Simon for helping beginners like myself to become familiar with some of the complexities of dandelions; and discovering, in the process, that getting to grips with such a 'difficult' and challenging group can actually be good fun too.

## Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2024 Ash Priors Common (VC5)

**Leaders: Simon Leach & Steve Parker**

**Report: Steve Parker**

The Field Identification Skills Certificate (FISC) is a way of testing the proficiency of a botanist. They are managed by the BSBI with a small number of organisations running the tests. More and more they are a requirement for people working for consultancies and nature conservation organisations. SRPG cannot run a FISC, but it was thought that we could help our members become more familiar with the field test and help reduce some of the anxiety that many candidates experience before and during the tests. As I have helped run FISC for Natural England, I was able to briefly explain the process and organise the field test element of the process. Simon Leach agreed to act as the Gold Standard surveyor, allowing people to compare their species list against Simon's.

Ash Priors Common is a very well recorded site, with over 330 species recorded since 2000, the vegetation is complex, making the site an excellent location for a FISC field test. SRPG have visited the site at least twice; there are good records from John Poingdestre, Ian and Paul Green, and Simon Leach and me.

After a brief discussion about the FISC process, members paired up (to reduce any possible stress) to spend an hour in the wooded part of the common making a list of the species they could find and, at the same time, Simon surveyed the same area. A small group of us also started recording.

At lunch we compared lists and discussed our findings. Then we ran a second recording session on the open grassland of the common, again meeting at the end to compare lists. On the day, as a group, we listed nearly one hundred species on the site.

The acid grassland is very rich and is famed for its impressive display of Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa*

*pratensis*) later in the year. Other species included Heath Milkwort (*Polygala serpyllifolia*), Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) and Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) all of which are Near Threatened the England Red List.

A few non-native species have been recorded on the site over a long time period, for example, Siberian Iris (*Iris sibirica*) was found by Ian Green in 1996 and is still growing well. *Astrantia* (*Astrantia major*), was a new plant for the site. This was growing on the roadside and was spotted by Simon. I was pleased to learn that a number of SRPG members have done well in FISCs this year.



Botanists at work. Photo © Steve Parker

**Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2024, Blackmore Farm, near Crewkerne (VC5)**

**Leaders: Val Graham & Fred Rumsey**

**Report: Val Graham**

This meeting was the result of a contact from the owners of the farm which is at the head of a valley next to the hamlet of Woolminstone.

Elise, the latest family member to run the farm, explained that the farm includes two blocks of ancient woodland (recognised Local Wildlife Sites) and pasture for sheep and horses. They are also diversifying into provided camping facilities in this notably quiet valley.

The pasture is managed non-intensively and there is no active woodland management. Around 100 years ago, some of the wood was planted with beech. Poplar was also planted on the lowest, wettest area of the wood about 40 years ago.

Twelve members set off with two of the farm's staff to look at the small meadow at the edge of Blackmoor

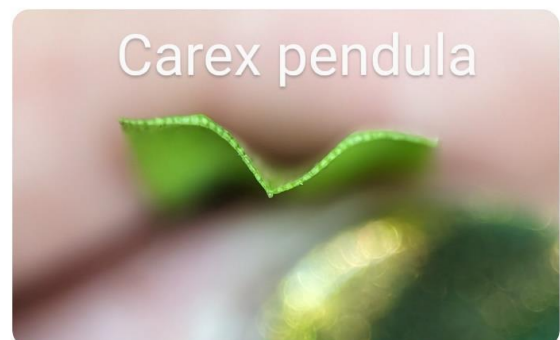
Wood. There was a good variety of species including Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*), Red Campion (*Silene dioica*), Ragged Robin (*Silene flos-cuculi*), and Common Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*). Some wildflower seed had been sown here, with Black Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*) and Salad Burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba*) being noted.

One group followed the circular path up the hill while a second group went the other way following the small stream.

The first group noted the extensive areas of Ramsoms (*Allium ursinum*) and Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) which were now mostly at the fruiting stage.

Farther up the hill this group found a large clearing of abundant growth, particularly Nettle (*Urtica dioica*), indicating high nutrient levels. Ellen later explained that soils on Greensand are often naturally high in phosphates.

The other group found their part of the wood was dominated by Pendulous Sedge (*Carex pendula*) and was extremely wet and boggy in places. However, they were rewarded with finding several patches of Thin-Spiked Wood-Sedge (*Carex strigosa*). Paul pointed out the distinctive M-shape cross-section of the leaves which were also showing their characteristic brown tips.



Leaf cross-sections of two sedge species showing the strongly angular M- shape of Thin-spiked Wood-sedge (*Carex strigosa*) compared with Pendulous Sedge (*Carex pendula*).  
Photos © Sarah Shuttleworth.

This group also crossed a small stream with tufa (precipitated carbonate minerals) coating twigs and stones. This highlights the distinctive geology of the valley with water emerging from the overlying Chalk and flowing over the impervious Greensand. Paul pointed out the distinctive moss *Cratoneuron commutata* (now called *Palustriella commutata*) growing in the shallow water.

Several ancient woodland indicator species were seen including Yellow Archangel (*Lamiastrum galeobdolon*), Moschatel or Townhall Clock (*Adoxa moschatellina*), and Spurge Laurel (*Daphne laureola*).



Yellow Archangel (*Lamiastrum galeobdolon*).  
Photo © Nicky Hodges

Towards the top of the wood there was a substantial woodbank, perhaps originally a field boundary, which provided a suitable place for the two groups to have lunch. Midges became evident before long and then the first raindrops encouraged us to make our way back down the hill.

Two areas we particularly wanted to see were a patch of Herb-paris (*Paris quadrifolia*) and an extensive area of the parasitic Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*). Elise led us to the Toothwort at the edge of the wood.

Although Toothwort often parasitises the roots of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) there was only one small such tree present. It was suggested that the large Poplars (*Populus* sp.) nearby may be the hosts in this case. We saw many

Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*) plants, with their distinctive white seed capsules, in quite a small area.



Seed capsules of Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*).  
Photo © Tony Steele

Next, we ventured into the undergrowth to find the Herb-paris (*Paris quadrifolia*), but it proved too dense and muddy underfoot to take the whole group there. Fred waded up the stream and returned in triumph a little while later reporting 40 Herb-paris plants and bearing a leaf of Wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetosa*).

By this time, the weather had worsened considerably and with the forecast predicting continuous rain and thunderstorms we abandoned our plan to look at some of the pastures. It had been an interesting visit and it provided 138 species records for the monad. A considerable improvement as there are currently only four records on the BSBI Distribution Database, and those from 1966.

We wish to thank Elise Gwyn for inviting us to visit the farm. She also invited members to return by arrangement to further explore the area.

**Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2024, Grasses Workshop, Heal Somerset, Witham Friary (VC6)**

**Leaders: Liz Biron, Ellen McDouall & Helena Crouch**

**Report: Sarah Shuttleworth & Helena Crouch**

There was an excellent turn-out for this workshop, with 18 attendees, including two guests from Dorset. We were hosted by Heal Somerset, a rewilding project near Witham Friary, with an indoor session in their meeting room in the morning followed by reinforcement of newly acquired knowledge in some of their fields in the afternoon. Participants were welcomed with tea, coffee and home-made cakes. Specimens of grasses collected by the leaders were displayed around the periphery of the room.

Liz began with a critique of a selection of grass identification guides and resources, explaining the relative merits of each. She particularly recommended the following:

Cope, T. & Gray, A. (2009). *Grasses of the British Isles (BSBI Handbook 13)*, BSBI.

Hubbard, C.E. (1984). *Grasses*, 3rd ed. rev. by J.C.E. Hubbard. Penguin Books.

Poland, J. & Clement, E.J. (2020). *The Vegetative Key to the British Flora*, 2nd ed. BSBI.

Rose, F. (1989). *Colour Identification Guide to the Grasses, Sedges, Rushes and Ferns of the British Isles and north-western Europe*. Viking.

Liz then explained why she would not be concentrating on using keys during this workshop, but instead would be using a few particular species to focus on explaining vegetative characters, as these can be used at any time of year.

Ellen and Helena handed out vegetative samples of False Oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*) for us to start work. We were told to look closely at the variability of hairs on the leaves: some were more or less glabrous whilst others had some noticeable hairs. In particular Liz asked us to study the clove/bulb shaped scales on the roots and bases. The orange roots of this species are also distinctive.



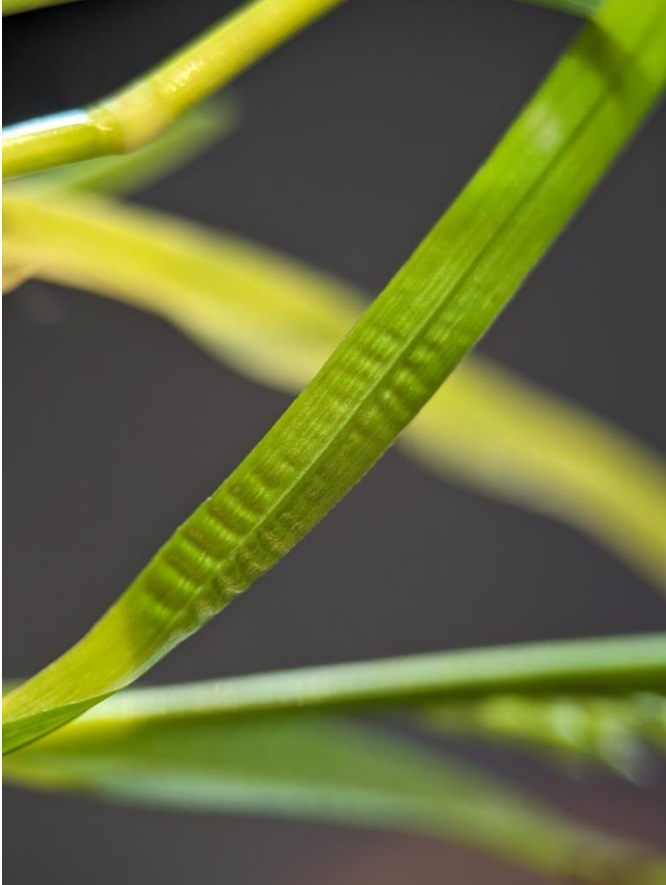
Orange roots and bulb-like scales of False Oat-grass.  
Photo © Liz Downey

We also used False Oat-grass (*A. elatius*) as well as Soft Brome (*Bromus hordeaceus*) to examine the floral structures of a grass. The inflorescences of grasses vary considerably, from simple spikes to branched panicles. These are composed of spikelets, each of which has two bract-like glumes at the base and may include one, two or several florets. False Oat-grass has two florets per spikelet. Each floret of a grass consists of a lemma and palea between which are the stigma and stamens. The lower floret of False Oat-grass has a long awn originating from the base of the lemma.



One spikelet of False Oat-grass, showing two papery glumes, supporting two florets. Each floret has a green lemma and flimsy membranous palea, between which are the sexual organs. The lemma of the lower floret bears an awn. Photo © Liz Downey

Next, we examined the features of Rough Meadow-grass (*Poa trivialis*) and Annual Meadow-grass (*P. annua*), noticing the variability of ligule length in Rough Meadow-grass in flowering versus non-flowering shoots, and the transversely wrinkled leaves of Annual Meadow-grass.



Wrinkled leaves of Annual Meadow-grass (*Poa annua*).  
Photo © Sarah Shuttleworth

Specimens of Couch (*Elymus repens*) were dished out: we observed the softly hairy leaves and clasping auricles at their base.

Before we knew it, we had exceeded our allotted time in the classroom and we had only covered a handful of

species. Clearing up, we migrated outside for lunch on the front lawn of the farmhouse. Discussions on grass identification continued, while we examined the grasses around us and Liz continued to share her expertise.

Once satiated, we split into a few smaller groups to carry out mock quadrats on the areas of lawn, which were surprisingly diverse in grass species. We quickly got our eyes in with vegetative characters, finding Yellow Oat-grass (*Trisetum flavescens*) with spreading hairy sheaths, Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*) with distinctive red bases to the shoots and clear auricles, and Cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*) with its laterally flattened waxy sheaths. There were some more tricky ones like Timothy (*Phleum pratense*), and we were surprised to find Spreading Meadow-grass (*Poa humilis*), with a fringe of short hairs at the junction of leaf blade and sheath. We also discovered a group of Blackening Waxcaps!

The remaining time in the afternoon was spent walking through a few of the fields across the road from the farmhouse, examining more grass species as we came across them and discussing various aspects of rewilding and grassland management. Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*) was not easy to identify vegetatively and is surprisingly similar to Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*), but the basal sheaths are yellowish whereas those of Perennial Rye-grass are bright purplish-red. We observed large patches of Meadow Foxtail (*Alopecurus pratensis*) with unequal leaf bases and purplish-brown bases to the sheaths.

We returned to the farm buildings having studied only a small selection of grass species, but many different features and characters. For those of us used to identifying grasses in flower, it had been a revelation to discover the wealth of vegetative clues available, thanks to the expert tuition provided by Liz.

Saturday 8th June 2024, Pitney (VC6)

Leaders: John Poingdestre & Helena Crouch

Report: Helena Crouch



SRPG members studying Round-fruited Rush (*Juncus compressus*) in a yellow field in Pitney. Photo © Helena Crouch

Twelve members assembled in Pitney for a walk which inadvertently coincided with a village day of events celebrating wildlife. We had been invited to visit a private field about five minutes' walk from the car park – obviously it took us over an hour to get there! Distractions included Giant Scabious (*Cephalaria gigantea*) with large yellow flowers, growing in the road outside a cottage garden, only the third post-2000 record for VC6.

Eventually we reached the promised fields, where we were greeted by two small dogs and two horses. John showed us Round-fruited Rush (*Juncus compressus*)

which he had found here in 2021 – it was flowering in several parts of the wet rushy field. This small rush is Vulnerable on both the GB and England Red Lists and thus a Rare Plant Register species. Some time was spent keying out a *Persicaria*: in the horses' field we had seen annual Redshank (*P. maculata*) with cuneate leaves, but the second field had patches of the perennial Amphibious Bistort (*P. amphibia*) with cordate leaves. Several Southern Marsh-orchids (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*) were flowering in the field.



Round-fruited Rush (*Juncus compressus*).  
Photo © Fred Rumsey



Yellow Stinking Iris (*Iris foetidissima* var. *citrina*).  
Photo © Helena Crouch

A thirteenth member joined us as we left the field and set off purposefully towards the church for lunch. On the roadside bank, we saw both Stone Parsley (*Sison amomum*) and Corn Parsley (*S. segetum*). Arriving at the churchyard, we were reminded that soup, hot drinks, cake and facilities were available in the adjacent village

hall – what a civilised meeting! We found Hoary Plantain (*Plantago media*), Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Field Woodrush (*Luzula campestris*), Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*) and Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*) in the turf of the churchyard, and Knotted Hedgeparsley (*Torilis nodosa*) by the gateway. Just outside the gate was a large clump of yellow-flowered Stinking Iris (*Iris foetidissima* var. *citrina*).

Turning up Church Hill, we soon found our second target plant of the day. Several patches of tall scrambling Berry Catchfly (*Silene baccifera*) were seen, but alas no flowers. This rare alien was first recorded in hedgerows in Pitney in 1981. Although there are other more historic sites elsewhere in England, in the last 20 years there have been no records anywhere except Pitney.

In the hedgerow we found both White Bryony (*Bryonia dioica*), a member of the Cucurbitaceae, related to cucumbers and melons, and Black Bryony (*Tamus communis*, or perhaps better regarded as *Dioscorea communis*), a member of the Dioscoreaceae, related to yams. Both bryonies are herbaceous twining plants, both are dioecious, yet one is a dicot and one a monocot.

At the north end of Church Hill, we stopped to admire Short-styled Field-rose (*Rosa stylosa*), with a conical hip disc and large uniserrate leaflets which are dark green above and paler and pubescent below.



Yellow Vetchling on a verge in Pitney. Photo © Helena Crouch

A few members turned back and those remaining realised that the original plan to record in two monads had been over-ambitious! Instead, we left our target square briefly, setting off briskly with no recording. That didn't last! A beautiful patch of Yellow Vetchling (*Lathyrus aphaca*) was flowering on the north verge of Woodbirds Hill Lane. We found this Vulnerable species again as we ventured through another monad back to our target one, where we found a single plant on a field edge, thereby updating three spots on the map for this species!

We returned to the village along a green lane, stopping to admire a patch of Purple Gromwell (*Aegonichon purpureo-caeruleum*) outside a garden wall: we pondered

its status. Passing the churchyard again, we spotted a patch of Long-stalked Crane's-bill (*Geranium columbinum*) on a grave, which we had missed earlier! Reluctant to stop recording, we took in another loop of the village, paused to talk to a tortoise and its owner, and found some beautiful plants of Dwarf Mallow (*Malva neglecta*) in a gateway. Several more garden escapes were added to our list as a happy weary band of botanists eventually returned to the car park, having recorded 248 species in a single monad. It had been a good day!

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**Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2024, Berrow Dunes (VC6)**

**Leaders: Helena Crouch & Richard Whyman**

**Report: Fred Rumsey & Helena Crouch**



Summer solstice at Berrow Dunes. Photo © Liz Downey

A group of 14 members met in glorious sunshine, making the most of the summer solstice to view the botanical treasures of Burnham & Berrow Golf Course. Through kind invitation by the Head Greenkeeper, Richard Whyman, this evening visit was arranged to give members the opportunity to see the Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) at its only site in Somerset, as well as a range of other rare coastal species for which Berrow Dunes SSSI is notified. The golf course forms the greater part of the SSSI: Richard explained the

management work that is undertaken to protect the rare species, increase biodiversity and improve sustainability in this fragile and very dynamic habitat. For this visit we concentrated on the southern part of the golf course, following a similar path to the route taken in 2018. We soon found our first target species.

Some of the Lizard Orchids were past their best, but others were at their peak giving us the chance to appreciate the curious twisty-lipped flowers with their

strong goat scent. Disappointingly, numbers were significantly down this year.

Many of the site's treasures are plants of open communities on the well-drained sandy soils which by mid-summer are parched. We became experts at appreciating the distinctive tones and textures of the mortal remains of some rare and unusual species. We found coppery swathes of the small annual grass Bearded Fescue (*Vulpia ciliata* subsp. *ambigua*) at the edges of the fairways. This species was first found at Berrow Dunes in 1960; this remains its only site in VC6.



Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*). Photo © Fred Rumsey



Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*). Photo © Helena Crouch

On a particularly dry track, Richard looked on with amusement as botanists fell to their knees to study tiny clovers. Helena explained the distinguishing features of Rough Clover (*Trifolium scabrum*), with its scabby vein endings and, distinctive small patches of the much rarer Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*), with clustered mossy calyces and long-petioled leaves. In Somerset this species is Rare in both VC5 and VC6, restricted to a few coastal sites.



Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*). Photo © Fred Rumsey

Nearby, Fred pointed out Bulbous Meadow-Grass (*Poa bulbosa*), which is definitely easier to spot when dying back and turning orange, or indeed when dead and dried and demonstrating its small bulbous shoot bases. We later found this species further south, on a path north of the clubhouse, a new monad spot for this Rare Plant Register (RPR) species which is Scarce in VC5 and VC6. In a nearby hollow, we found Bur Chervil (*Anthriscus caucalis*), Bugloss (*Anchusa arvensis*) and Hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*).

Heading south we explored damp fringes of the golf course, studded with Marsh and Spotted Orchids (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa* and *D. fuchsii*) and a small Club-rush (*Isolepis* sp.) too immature for confident identification. Crossing back across some higher dunes into another monad, we found two more small annual grasses, Dune Fescue (*Vulpia fasciculata*) and Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*), both RPR species. A star find of the evening was Sea Bindweed (*Calystegia soldanella*), persisting on two dunes, last recorded in this monad in 1991. It was flowering well, the big pink

trumpets closed for the night. Sadly, the small damp hollow, where in 2018 we discovered Small-fruited Yellow-sedge (*Carex viridula*), was a deep pond this year! We also failed to re-find the small population of Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) seen in 2018, perhaps also due to persistent excessive water. Every year has different highlights.

The weary group made their way back northwards, revelling in the glorious golden glow of the longest day. Jewel-like were the flowers of Pyramidal Orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) and the Evening Primroses which, living up to their name, had opened as our journey progressed. A pale form of Fragrant Evening-primrose (*Oenothera stricta*) was particularly admired. We certainly made the most of the longest day: thanks to Helena for arranging and leading and to Richard and the Golf Club for allowing us access.

### Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2024, Robber's Bridge (VC5)

#### Leader & Report : Steve Parker

This meeting was a repeat of an earlier SRPG meeting. Ten members gathered to search for Large-flowered Butterwort (*Pinguicula grandiflora*), which has been known from the Weir Water mires, at least since the 1970s. The population of this introduced plant is very large and has been recorded by many botanists over the last twenty years.

Once on site our first problem was finding our way on to the mires along the river. Apparently, the access has changed a little since our last visit and it took several attempts to find our way to the area we needed to search. While wading across the small stream, our first interesting find was of a large stand of Smooth-stalked Sedge (*Carex laevigata*) on the stream bank.



Recording by the stream. Photo: © Steve Parker

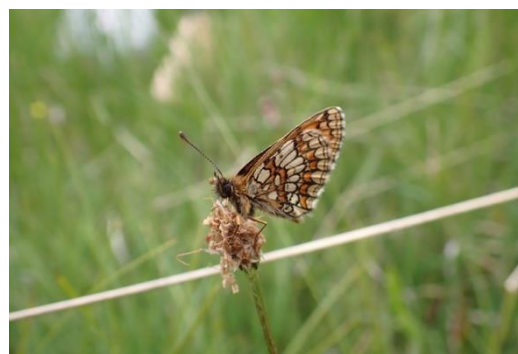
Following the course of the stream a fine specimen of Narrow Male-fern (*Dryopteris cambrensis*) was spotted under low-growing trees on the stream bank by Helena Crouch and Fred Rumsey. However, access was blocked and we had to retrace our steps before eventually finding a way on to the mires. Here Round-leaved Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*), Many-stalked Spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), Star Sedge (*Carex echinata*) and Flea Sedge (*Carex pulicaris*) are key elements of the flora.

It took a little time to come across the first colony of the Large-flowered Butterwort. But once found it was obvious that the plant is doing exceedingly well. Our population estimate was between one and two thousand plants; rather disappointingly we could find no flowers, but there was no problem in identifying the plant by its pale green leaves, some of which had caught insects on their surface.



Large-flowered Butterwort (*Pinguicula grandiflora*). Photo © Steve Parker

This is a wonderful Exmoor habitat rich in other wildlife, the trees covered in lichens. We were also extremely lucky to have excellent views of a resting Heath Fritillary butterfly. Trying not to get too distracted by the other wildlife we continued to record the plants, adding a few small patches of Cornish Moneywort (*Sibthorpia europaea*) in the somewhat drier areas of the mire. The stream had stands of Alternate Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum alterniflorum*), a characteristic plant of Exmoor watercourses.



Heath Fritillary. Photo: © Steve Parker

Lunch was taken sitting on the side the valley admiring the local scenery. The hillside vegetation was mostly dominated by Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) with acid-loving grasses and scattered trees. Our recording efforts were more or less restricted to the vegetation along the edge of the watercourse.

Finding no easy way to cross the stream we were forced to wade across. Luckily no one slipped on the boulders of the streambed. Once across the water our route took us out of the valley, via a dry track.

Helena had remembered that it was here that Heath Pearlwort (*Sagina subulata*) had been recorded on the SRPG meeting in July 2010 - not an easy plant to find. After a search there came the call of "found it". It was then on hands and knees that an estimate of the plant's population was made. In the end it was discovered in three separate locations.

While searching for the Pearlwort a single specimen of Bird's-foot (*Ornithopus perpusillus*) was found. Taking the grid reference, we found it was just outside the monad we had been in for the whole day.

The group made its way along the private track, back to the road where the cars were parked. Across a small field a tree was seen in flower, this was later confirmed by Helena as Tree Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster frigidus*). Helena's follow-up email states "I see there is a long history of it in that area and Graham [Lavender] recorded that very tree in 2022".

It was agreed that the SRPG needs to do more recording trips to Exmoor. It's such a wonderful place.

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## Monday 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024, Ashton Court (VC6)

**Leaders: Helena Crouch & Aisa Irvine**

**Report: Helena Crouch**



Evening walk at Ashton Court. Photo © Helena Crouch

It was dry, but remarkably chilly, as seven members and two guests assembled for an evening meeting exploring the grounds of Ashton Court. The estate covers 850 acres, including parkland laid out by Humphrey Repton, golf courses, woodlands and deer parks: much of the site is an SSSI, designated for its saproxylic invertebrate fauna.

Setting off, we focused on some common species of grass, comparing the spikelet arrangement of Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*) and Common Couch (*Elymus repens*), some of which had long awns (*E. repens* f. *aristatus*). Meadow Foxtail (*Alopecurus pratensis*) with its soft cylindrical spikes was compared with the more rigid spikes of Timothy (*Phleum pratense*), but we

struggled to distinguish small Timothy from Small Timothy (*P. bertolonii*). The best difference is the size of glumes: 2-3.6mm in *P. bertolonii* and (3.5)4-5.5mm in *P. pratense* (both including awns), but even that has a slight overlap and is not an easily measurable field character.

The vegetation near the mansion was unremarkable, but we studied vetches, finding Bush Vetch (*Vicia sepium*) and Common Vetch (*V. sativa* subsp. *segetalis*), Hairy Tare (*Ervilia hirsuta*) and Meadow Vetchling (*Lathyrus pratensis*). There are some splendid old trees, for example a huge Plane (*Platanus x hispanica*), and also some interesting recently planted specimens: we admired a young Bhutan Pine (*Pinus wallichiana*), with long (up to 20cm) soft drooping needles in clusters of five.

Beside a junction of tracks, we found a large patch of an unfamiliar yellow crucifer.



The distinctive fruits and small flowers of Austrian Yellow-cress (*Rorippa austriaca*). Photo © Helena Crouch

The mystery crucifer wouldn't key out in the Wild Flower Key, but that was because it is not included! A handy app suggested it was of Austrian Yellow-cress (*Rorippa austriaca*) which immediately made sense – this species has been found at several sites around Bristol and indeed David Hawkins had found it at Ashton Court in 2020, but in a different monad.

Heading back towards the mansion, we explored a small, fenced pond, recording Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), Common Duckweed (*Lemna minor*), Greater Duckweed (*Spirodela polyrhiza*), Marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*) and abundant Curly Waterweed (*Lagarosiphon major*), at least some of which were clearly planted.

Reviewing my photos later, I was about to delete a poor image of Marsh-marigold in the middle of the pond, when I noticed some clover-like leaves in the photo! They are clearly a species of Water-clover (*Marsilea* sp.), an aquatic fern, but a return visit is needed as it could be one of two species which are only distinguishable by examination of their sporocarps! It was almost certainly planted originally.



SRPG members collectively confirming our identification of Jointed Rush (*Juncus articulatus*) by the pond. Photo © Libby Houston

Our next stop presented a dilemma: garden waste was clearly being dumped under some trees near the ice-house. Here we found Turkish Sage (*Phlomis russeliana*), Red Bistort (*Bistorta amplexicaulis*) and Aunt Eliza (probably *Crocasmia paniculata* x *pottsii*), all of which had probably grown from discarded garden waste. The origin of a plant of Robin's-plantain (*Erigeron philadelphicus*) was less clear as this is not commonly grown. There are records for other sites in Bristol, including Leigh Woods, nearby.



Turkish Sage (*Phlomis russeliana*) growing by dumped garden waste, presenting a recording dilemma. Photo © Helena Crouch

Returning through the formal rose garden, it was much easier to decide what to record. We added numerous weeds of cultivation, confident that nobody would have planted Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*), Chickweed (*Stellaria media*), Shepherd's-purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) or Procumbent Pearlwort (*Sagina procumbens*). Sadly, we had little time to admire the roses as the car park would soon be closing.

Views across Bristol were spectacular as we returned past the mansion, admiring stately ancient trees. At the edge of the gravel path, against the mansion walls, we were delighted to see many plants of Small Toadflax (*Chaenorhinum minus*), which was perhaps our star find. This dainty archaeophyte grows at the edges of arable fields, or more commonly on gravelly tracks, roadsides and disused railways. This was the first record for the hectad since we recorded it on our SRPG meeting at Tyntesfield in 2019. During the evening, we made 164 records and took the total for the monad to 216 species (since 2000). Ashton Court is a large estate, so a return visit is planned.

## Sunday 14th July 2024, Britty Common (VC5)

**Leaders: Karen Turvey, Linda Everton & Steve Parker**

**Report: Steve Parker**

Thirteen SRPG members attended the meeting which started at Staple Hill car park, a very popular dog walking venue. The aim of the meeting was to record the mires on the northern slope of the Blackdown Hills. Setting off

from the car park the group walked downhill to the bottom of the slope where we divided into two groups, one going to the mire on Mount Fancy, led by Linda Everton and Karen Turvey, while the other group continued on to Britty Common.

Mount Fancy is a Butterfly Conservation reserve and has a relatively large mire which supports a good population of Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) and a small patch of Marsh St John's-wort (*Hypericum elodes*) and Marsh Valerian (*Valeriana dioica*).

The mire is surrounded by scrub and there are signs that the scrub is increasing on the mire, the ground conditions must make access for scrub management extremely difficult, with grazing animals finding it impossible to have much impact on the mire vegetation.

The track below the mire runs with water, making it a habitat for plants such as Round-leaved Crowfoot (*Ranunculus omiophyllus*), Star Sedge (*Carex echinata*) and Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*). Drier grassland has a selection of Eyebrights including English Eyebright (*Euphrasia anglica*) with carpets of Tormential (*Potentilla erecta*) and some scattered plants of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*).

The second group walked further along the track to Britty Common. This area had been cleared of conifers by the Neroche Project which had started in 2005 removing trees and introducing cattle grazing. The site has shown some signs of recovery.

The small mire has Pale Butterwort (*Pinguicula lusitanica*). On an earlier visit in May the leaders had recorded seven plants, on this visit we counted 40 plants, many of them in flower. This is a considerable increase on earlier counts where just one specimen had been seen in the past.



Exploring the Britty Mire. Photo © Steve Parker

The mire has a good range of sedges with Pale Sedge (*Carex pallescens*), Common Sedge (*C. nigra*), Carnation Sedge (*C. panicea*) and Flea Sedge (*C. pulicaris*). It also supports Lesser Skullcap (*Scutellaria minor*) and Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*). Like the Mount Fancy mire, Marsh St John's-wort is also scattered across the wet parts of Britty. On a patch of very muddy ground, we recorded a small colony of Leafy Rush (*Juncus foliosus*). One of the plants was collected and later sent to Mike Wilcox the BSBI referee for rushes. Mike had requested samples of this species to be sent to him.

At lunch, the two groups met up again and discussed what they had found. Karen Turvey had a map showing the mire that was spared from coniferisation in the early 1960s. With the aid of this we were able to rediscover a small very wet area that has Bogbean and very large tussocks of Greater Tussock-sedge (*Carex paniculata*). Access was difficult so only limited recording could be carried out. Thanks to everyone who helped with the recording of this interesting location.



Leafy Rush (*Juncus foliosus*). Photo © Steve Parker

As part of the Neroche Project, there was a major investment in a walking route along the hill. This is a well-made and very wide path, with ditches on either side. These ditches intercept the water draining from the mire. Along the edge of these ditches there were many stands of the very beautiful Wood Horsetail (*Equisetum sylvaticum*) with Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*).



Wood Horsetail (*Equisetum sylvaticum*). Photo © Steve Parker

Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> July 2024, Collard Hill (VC6)

Leader: Fred Rumsey

Report: Fred Rumsey & Helena Crouch



View from Collard Hill. Photo © Fred Rumsey

On a fine day, thirteen members assembled in the car park on Ivythorn Hill. Although in the same monad (ST4834) as our main target for the day, Collard Hill, a separate recording card was kept for this discrete unit. The aim of the meeting was to introduce members to some of the later summer flowers of these calcareous Polden grasslands. Almost immediately we encountered tall, large-flowered Eyebrights: from the broad leaves and short glands we confidently identified these as Arctic Eyebright (*Euphrasia arctica*), a species not previously recorded in the area. Also frequent under grass on barer soils were the small pink stars of Lesser Centaury (*Centaureum pulchellum*), which became one of the plants of the day, seen in all areas and both monads. This diminutive species appears to have declined in Somerset since publication of the last Flora, but the Poldens remain a stronghold; this year's weather would seem to have suited this annual species. In grassland glades the mortal remains of orchids were examined, including Greater Butterfly-orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*), dozens of which had been flowering a month earlier. Even though this is a reasonably well recorded area, by the time the group had reached the busy road junction, 21 species had been added to the monad.

Once safely across the junction, a new card was started, for Collard Hill itself. The triangle of grassland in front of the gate to the reserve rewarded us with Pepper Saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*), a "tetrad smartie" (first record for the tetrad since pre-2000) for this declining species. On the edge of the road we were surprised to find Round-leaved Fluellen (*Kickxia spuria*), an arable weed new to the monad. Once inside the reserve, the well-worn grassy track ascending the hill was seen to be studded by the blushing pink flowerheads and fluffy globular fruiting heads of Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*), which rather surprisingly, considering the number of visitors to Collard Hill, was also a tetrad smartie. The grassland alongside the main ridge path is not particularly species rich, so we soon plunged down the steep south-facing terraced side of the hill. Here, on the barer ground by the tracks along the contours, we found many typical species of calcareous grassland, including Small Scabious (*Scabiosa columbaria*), Common Rock-rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*), Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus drucei*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Meadow Oat-grass (*Helictochloa pratensis*), Dwarf Thistle (*Cirsium acaule*), Carline Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*) and the handsome architectural

Woolly Thistle (*Cirsium eriophorum*). We also found Squinancywort (*Asperula cynanchica*), surprisingly new to the monad, and Heath Grass (*Danthonia decumbens*), another species which appears to have declined in Somerset. The group made their way to higher ground for lunch with spectacular views across South Somerset.



Clustered Bellflower (*Campanula glomerata*).  
Photo © Helena Crouch

Replenished, we set off in search of Clustered Bellflower (*Campanula glomerata*), found nearby in 2023 by one participant: to our delight we found a splendid plant. We then headed to the sheltered steeply-sloping East Bank, which is favoured by Large Blues and lepidopterists and largely lies in the adjacent monad (ST4833). Our next goal was Nit Grass (*Gastridium ventricosum*), seen on this slope in 2023. Of contentious status, this Nationally Scarce species is a feature of scuffed bare ground on sunny Polden slopes. In 2023 it had an *annus mirabilis*, present in huge quantities on ground laid bare by parching, both here and elsewhere. In this wet year we struggled to find our first plants, but eventually saw them in both monads. The cigar-like shape of the ripe panicle and the shining “nits” made by the swollen glume bases were distinctive once seen and this species was eventually found in several spots.



The Nitty panicle of *Gastridium ventricosum*. Photo © Fred Rumsey

On the small area of steep south-facing slope at the southern end of the site (in ST4833) we recorded 82 species including a rather vexing Eyebright. The leader was reluctant to name this in the field, although a tentative suggestion of *Euphrasia nemorosa* x *E. confusa* was reached; specimens were collected for subsequent determination.

We returned to the car park across Ivythorn Hill through woodland and glades on the south side of the road, pleased to find a large colony of Common Gromwell (*Lithospermum officinale*). Some interesting additions and many useful records were made: over 300 records altogether, adding 37 species to the main monad and 8 to the second. We also updated records for several Rare Plant Register species and had a good day with great views.

## Saturday 3rd August 2024, Sedges Workshop, Avalon Marshes Centre (VC6)

**Leader: Fred Rumsey**

**Report: Ellen McDouall**

Twelve of us were the lucky ones to collect at the Avalon Marshes Centre for Fred's Sedges workshop, numbers being necessarily limited by the venue and the leader working solo.

We were greeted by tables of green – pots of sedges of all descriptions covering the tables.

We started with the basics, the best keys to use, what makes a sedge a sedge and the classifications within the genus *Carex*. For the most part, these turned out to be quite logical (you can tell I have little faith that taxonomy will make things simple). Sedges are broadly grouped by those that have multiple spikes with mixed male and female flowers (subgenus *Vignea*), multiple spikes with male and female separate (subgenus *Carex*), and single spiked (subgenus *Psyllophora*). Oh, and the rare, montane ones we needn't worry about as long as we stick to our local patch – an incentive not to travel too far!

So far, so good. Next, where to start on the ID journey.

The first "cut" can be made by habitat as many, if not most, sedges are fairly specific in their preferences for soil type, position in shade or sun and hydrology. After that there are a range of vegetative characters that can be a short-cut to small groups of species. Each of these was illustrated by photos and live plant material so we could compare the "not like that, like this" characters side by side. This section taught us the need to collect as complete a sample as possible, right down to the top of the root.

Finally, to the flowers. First rule – don't even try with immature flower spikes. It's tips like these that can save the beginner so many hours of fruitless keying out.

As with the vegetative characters, each part of a sedge flower structure was covered and demonstrated clearly with the material at hand. I never knew before that utricles (the "skin" covering the ovary) are in fact modified glumes.

Equipped with the tools needed to ID sedges, we moved on to the sedges of Somerset and adjoining counties. It turns out that we are blessed with 47 of the 80+ UK species which, along with 2 aliens and 6 hybrids and a further 3 species in neighbouring counties, give the SRPG plenty of variety to practice our skills on. We learned that this diversity includes real rarities and regional specialities: Soft-leaved Sedge (*C. montana*), Dwarf Sedge (*C. humilis*) and the nationally rare Starved Wood-sedge (*C. depauperata*). Again, we were able to turn to the splendid collection of live material to examine examples.



Some of the sedges and some of the attendees.  
Photo © Steve Parker

Finally, Fred gave us a view of some of the rare and wonderful sedges we could find, should we go beyond our local patch.

After lunch came the crunch: "Common Confusions".

Here the live plant material made all the difference to learning, for example literally getting a feel for the soft, grassy leaves of *C. montana*. We started simple: the differences between Glaucous Sedge (*C. flacca*) and Carnation Sedge (*C. panicea*); compared Spring Sedge (*C. caryophyllea*), Pill Sedge (*C. pilulifera*) and Soft-leaved Sedge, covered the issues of Greater and Lesser Pond Sedges (*C. riparia* and *C. acutiformis*), discussed Smooth-stalked Sedge (*C. laevigata*) versus Green-ribbed Sedge (*C. binervis*) and Pendulous Sedge (*C. pendula*). By the end of the afternoon, we were confident enough to start tackling the yellow and spiked sedge groups, the latter considered by Fred to be the most challenging. I at least am now quite sure I almost certainly won't be looking at Large Yellow-sedge (*C. flava*) and know how to check my Common Yellow-sedge (*C. demissa*) is neither Small-fruited Yellow-sedge (*C. viridula*) or Long-stalked Yellow-

sedge (*C. lepidocarpa*). Look for a gap between the female spikes and the male spike. Female spikes clustered at the base of the male spike separates Small-fruited and large. Then check the orientation of the utricle beak – straight (Common) or bent (Long-stalked). And there you are. Well, it works on the page – time will tell if it works in the field or if I will be bombarding Fred with crumpled samples and asking for help again.

Thanks are due, first and foremost, to Fred who put so much work into the day and who led us on a really accessible, informative and useful journey into the subject of sedges that was rewarding for everyone whatever their previous knowledge.

Thanks to both Fred and Helena for making their sedge collections available to the group. These made the day so much more than a just another presentation. If Helena cares to divulge what she feeds her plants, many of us would be glad of the tip. We none of us had seen two-foot tall Glaucous Sedge before.

Finally, thanks to Natural England for allowing us use of the meeting rooms at the Avalon Marshes Centre.

Fred's presentation and other material will be circulated to members, which will hopefully mitigate having to limit numbers to the over-subscribed workshop. Apologies to those who had to be turned away. We hope to run more similar events.



Up close and personal with the biggest Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*) ever seen. Photo © Steve Parker

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> August 2024, Pawlett Hams (VC6)

Leaders: John Poingdestre & Helena Crouch

Report: Helena Crouch & John Poingdestre



Sea Wormwood (*Artemisia maritima*) on the sea wall above the River Parrett near Gaunt's Clyce. Photo © Helena Crouch

As a follow-up to last year's meeting at Pawlett Hams, eighteen members gathered to survey the southern edge of this roughly circular peninsular, which is part of the Bridgwater Bay SSSI. We split into two groups and headed down the track towards Gaunt's Clyce: Helena's group marched off to record in the most southerly monad, whilst John's group began recording immediately.

Several patches of Dotted Loosestrife (*Lysimachia punctata*) were growing close to the track indicating their probable origin. The two tall crucifers, Black Mustard (*Brassica nigra*) and Bargeman's Cabbage, or Wild Turnip (*B. rapa* subsp. *campestris*) were growing side by side, allowing close comparison. A floating mat

of Frogbit (*Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*) covered several metres of a rhyne. As a distraction, fruiting bodies of the fungus Ergot were found to be infesting the heads of Timothy (*Phleum pratense*).

The saltmarsh, dominated almost completely by Sea Aster (*Tripolium pannonicum*), was relatively narrow and dropped steeply down to the muddy channel. Occasional colonies of Sea-blite (*Suaeda maritima*), Greater Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia media*), Sea Milkwort (*Lysimachia maritima*), Sea Arrow-grass (*Triglochin maritimum*) and Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*) added some variety. Just above High Water Mark, a large fruiting plant of Parsley Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe lachenalii*) was found. This species of estuarine marshes

and brackish ditches is Near Threatened on the England Red List, thus a Rare Plant Register (RPR) species.

Heading west the sea wall comprises tightly interlocking stone blocks. Here Sea Wormwood (*Artemisia maritima*) has found its niche: a colony continued almost uninterrupted to the edge of the monad and beyond. Occasional dried specimens of English Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia anglica*) were seen, and a fine colony of Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) was bearing swollen fruits. Hard-grass (*Parapholis strigosa*) was found, but not Curved Hard-grass (*P. incurva*), previously reported nearby.

Returning along the landward side of the sea wall, we were disappointed not to find Sea Clover (*Trifolium squamosum*), also previously found here. The present grassland management appears not to favour this species. There was, however, an interesting brackish rhine containing many plants of Parsley Water-dropwort, with Sea Club-rush (*Bolboschoenus maritimus*), Square-stemmed St John's-wort (*Hypericum tetrapterum*), Gypsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*) and False Fox-sedge (*Carex otrubae*). Also, at the edge of this rhine, a lucky few glimpsed a Harvest Mouse amongst the tall vegetation!

Meanwhile, eight members had headed southwest and also found an extensive colony of Sea Wormwood, the first plant recorded as we walked through the corner of the next monad to reach our target southern one. Sea Wormwood is a RPR species as it is Near Threatened on the England Red List, so it was good to see so much. Both Stone Parsley (*Sison amomum*) and Corn Parsley (*S. segetum*) were growing on the sea wall. We recorded 79 species in the small slither of that monad we passed through, adding ten species to the records for the square. By the time we reached our target monad it was almost time for lunch!

Replenished, we moved from an ungrazed field and saltmarsh to a heavily grazed area: the contrast was dramatic. Many would think a grazed area would have a depleted flora: botanists know better! On the low bank separating the upper and lower saltmarsh, we found our first Sea Barley (*Hordeum marinum*): this species was scattered along the bank, and we later found a continuous swathe alongside a small path.



Sea Barley (*Hordeum marinum*) alongside a path.  
Photo© Helena Crouch

A dried-up pond was a productive deviation. Here we found many plants of Marsh Dock (*Rumex palustris*), Pink Water-speedwell (*Veronica catenata*), Tufted Forget-me-not (*Myosotis laxa*) and Common Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus aquatilis*).

Returning to the saltmarsh, we found a tiny scrap of Sea Wormwood and much more Sea Barley along the low bank separating upper and lower saltmarsh.



Diligent botanists studying Sea Barley (*Hordeum marinum*) while the Co-chairs of SRPG play on their phones. Photo © Nicky Hodges

Here we found another target of the day: the diminutive and unusual umbellifer, Slender Hare's-ear (*Bupleurum tenuissimum*). This RPR species, like Sea Barley, grows on thinly vegetated coastal sites. Both species are Vulnerable on the GB and England Red Lists and Nationally Scarce.



Slender Hare's-ear (*Bupleurum tenuissimum*).  
Photo © Helena Crouch

Having agreed to return by 4pm, we turned back, despite only walking half the coast path in our target monad! A detour along a rhyne gave the opportunity for putting improvised grapnels into operation. Here we found Lesser Water-parsnip (*Berula erecta*), Flowering-rush (*Butomus umbellatus*), Frogbit (*Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*) and Hairlike Pondweed (*Potamogeton trichoides*).

It had been a good meeting. The Southern Explorers added 52 species to the records for the target square, despite incomplete coverage. Between us, we updated records for several Rare Plant Register species. For the lucky few who saw it though, the Harvest Mouse was perhaps the highlight of the day.

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## Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> September 2024, Hawkridge Reservoir (VC5)

**Leaders: Steve Parker & Ellen McDouall**

**Report: Liz Downey**



View east across Hawkridge Reservoir. Photo © Liz Downey

Seven members met at the car park on Lawyer's Hill to record at Hawkridge Reservoir, a 32-acre County Wildlife Site 7 miles west of Bridgwater. The plan was to set off towards the fishing lodge and continue round to the north side of the reservoir via the walkway over the dam. We were welcomed to the site by a raven calling from the trees on the opposite bank and, soon after, the first

target species, Round-fruited Rush (*Juncus compressus*), was recorded. This is scarce in VC5 and was identified by the globose, glossy capsules 1½ x as long as the perianth, the lowest bract longer than the inflorescence, and the anthers about as long as the filaments (Streeter 2009).

Corn Mint (*Mentha arvensis*) and Water Mint (*M. aquatica*) were both found, the flowers being in axillary whorls in the former, and in terminal heads in the latter (Stace 2019). Furthermore, the hybrid between the two - Whorled Mint (*M. x verticillata*) - was identified. The mints were teeming with insects, including hornets, a Small Copper and an unusual hoverfly (thought to be *Sericomyia superbiens*).

Not unexpectedly, several aquatic plants were found including Common Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus aquatilis*), Spiked Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*), Fennel pondweed (*Stuckenia pectinata*) and Curled Pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*).



Whorled Mint (*Mentha x verticillata*) and Curled Pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*). Photos © Sarah Shuttleworth

The second target species was Orange Foxtail (*Alopecurus aequalis*), also scarce in VC5, and we were pleased to see this delicate grass, with its bright orange anthers, scattered along the southern edge of the reservoir. Another highlight was seeing Trifid Bur-marigold (*Bidens tripartita*) - identified by the three terminal barbed spines on the achenes (Streeter, 2009) - throughout the drawdown zone & beyond. In these areas we also recorded Red Goosefoot (*Oxybasis rubra*) interspersed with Many-seeded Goosefoot (*Lipandra polysperma*).



Trifid Bur-marigold (*Bidens tripartita*) flowers and achene. Photos © Liz Downey

At this point the leader pointed out that only a few hundred metres of ground had been covered in almost two hours, so we proceeded to the boat ramp in front of the fishing lodge for lunch. There, one member of the group spotted Sharp-leaved Fluellen (*Kickxia elatine*), which we later observed in large numbers on the opposite bank.

After lunch, the group finally made it to the grassland across the dam and began the attempt to re-find Autumn Lady's Tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*). Unfortunately, this proved fruitless, but we were consoled by the sight of a large flock of House Martins feeding near the surface of the water alongside us.



Recording in the drawdown zone. Photo © Liz Downey

A variety of speedwells were observed but the favourite was Pink Water-speedwell (*Veronica catenata*). It was identified by its pink peppermint- striped petals and the pedicels shorter than the bracts (Stace, 2019). We had seen Marsh Yellow-cress (*Rorippa palustris*) but unfortunately, its relative, Northern Yellow-cress (*R. islandica*), first recorded at this site in 2001, was not re-found.



Sharp-leaved Fluellen (*Kickxia elatine*) and Pink Water-speedwell (*Veronica catenata*). Photos © Liz Downey

It wasn't possible to circumvent the reservoir (at least not easily) so we retraced our steps back to the car park, listening to the tenacious calls of the young Great Crested Grebes as we went. Sadly, most of the shoreline had been carpeted with the invasive alien, New Zealand Pygmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*), so boots were cleaned prior to leaving in an effort to prevent it from spreading elsewhere. On the bright side, the weather had remained warm and dry, and we had together recorded 124 species plus several Somerset rarities.

## References

- Stace, C. A. (2019). *New flora of the British Isles*. 4th ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Streeter, D. (2009) *Collins Wildflower Guide*. HarperCollins Publishers, Dublin.

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## Friday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2024, Jack's Castle Plantation and King's Wood Warren (VC6)

### Leader & Report: Helena Crouch



Val, Jane, Sam, Barbra and Dave by the Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) in King's Wood Warren. Photo © Helena Crouch

Seven members met in the car park for Alfred's Tower on a fine autumnal morning. We were joined by the BSBI England Officer, Sam Thomas. We set off through Jack's Castle Plantation, part of the Stourhead (Western) Estate, finding Pill Sedge (*Carex pilulifera*) under some old Beech trees. This woodland is actively managed for timber, with a variety of conifer and broadleaved tree species planted. There were many self-sown conifer saplings, which presented an opportunity to learn some commonly planted species. We recorded Western Red-

cedar (*Thuja plicata*), Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), Western Hemlock-spruce (*Tsuga heterophylla*), Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*), Sitka Spruce (*P. sitchensis*), Japanese Larch (*Larix kaempferi*) and Lawson's Cypress (*Cupressus lawsoniana*).

On the track to Jack's Castle, we stopped to examine a Rush, seen here a few weeks earlier during a pre-walk, tentatively identified then as Lax-flowered Rush (*Juncus anthelatus*), later confirmed from a specimen. This

species resembles Slender Rush (*J. tenuis*) but has a more diffuse inflorescence which is about 15cm long, with many flowers borne singly. The capsules of *J. anthelatus* are no more than twice as long as wide and less than three-quarters the length of the tepals: those of *J. tenuis* are nearly three times as long as wide and are over three-quarters the length of the tepals. Both species are neophytes, native to North America. Lax-flowered Rush is new to Somerset.



The diffuse inflorescence of Lax-flowered Rush (*Juncus anthelatus*).  
Photo © Helena Crouch

Continuing along the woodland track, we found several species characteristic of acidic soils, including Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*), Slender St John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*) and Green-ribbed Sedge (*Carex binervis*). Jack's Castle is an impressive mound, but not a castle! It is an ancient Bronze Age bell barrow, built on the summit of the hill between 1500 and 1100 BC (and thus higher and considerably older than the more prominent Alfred's Tower!) The barrow has recently been cleared and on its side we admired Climbing Corydalis (*Ceratocarpus claviculata*), which frequently appears in clearings in this area.

On the damp track leading north from Jack's Castle, we found patches of Common Water-starwort (*Callitriche stagnalis*), Toad Rush (*Juncus bufonius*) and a single plant of Water-purslane (*Lythrum portula*) which was a new species for some members. In VC6 this species is almost confined to the Lower Greensand ridge at the eastern border and acidic parts of the Mendips. Amazingly, Sarah showed us this species on her arm, part of a complex and stunning tattoo!



Water-purslane in Jack's Castle Plantation.  
Photo © Sarah Shuttleworth

Although much of the woodland is recent plantation, there are some splendid Beech trees, one of which had lost a large limb. A notice beside it explained that this was a valuable habitat. Beautiful Porcelain Fungi (*Oudemansiella mucida*) were erupting from this.

We headed down the steep north-facing slope into King's Wood Warren, an older plantation woodland. Here we found Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*) and False Fox-sedge (*Carex otrubae*) on the damp path edges, and Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) on the dry bank above. We had lunch in the sun, on a bank by the track.

Two of the group had to leave after lunch, but the rest continued, with thunder rumbling in the distance, the threatened storm approaching! By the track, we puzzled over a large patch of mint. Like Corn Mint (*Mentha arvensis*), the flowers were arranged in whorls subtended by leaf-like bracts, but the scent was wrong, and the leaves looked more like Water Mint (*M. aquatica*). A specimen examined later was found to have no seeds at all and keyed neatly to the hybrid Whorled Mint (*M. x verticillata*).

We stopped to admire the extraordinary find which Gill had made when she and I checked the route: a single plant of Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) on the bank of the track. It seems most likely that this arose from a spore from plants known by the lake at nearly Stourhead gardens rather than a distant native plant!



The twice-pinnate frond of Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) in King's Wood Warren. Photo © Helena Crouch

With thunder crashing, we headed back up the road, sheltered from the heavy rain by large beeches, and finished the meeting with a cup of tea or an ice cream, standing under a tree together in pouring rain!

### Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2024, Wincanton (VC5)

**Leaders: Steve Parker & Fred Rumsey**

**Report: Fred Rumsey & Helena Crouch**

Eleven members met in Wincanton, for a day of urban botanising, in a monad which spans the VC5/VC6 boundary. The VC6 portion, where we met, already had 222 species recorded since 2000, whereas there was only one record for the VC5 part: rather than split into two groups, we decided to focus on the VC5 half of the monad.

Leaving the car park, we set off briskly to the vice-county boundary, then slowed to recording pace as we meandered through a maze of alleys and back streets. A damp wall beside a downpipe yielded three species of fern: Hart's-tongue (*Asplenium scolopendrium*), Maidenhair Spleenwort (*A. trichomanes* subsp. *quadrivalens*) and Male-fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*). Wall-rue (*A. ruta-muraria*) and Rustyback (*A. ceterach*) were soon added to the list. We found many cosmopolitan street weeds and wall plants including some of the regular garden escapes which make urban recording so species rich.



Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*) in an alley. Photo © Helena Crouch

Towards the end of the alley a tuft of bronze sedge caused some excitement and considerable debate. A self-sown escape from the neighbouring garden, this was an example of one of several Australasian species which are now popular in the horticultural trade. The plant was not flowering. It was originally thought to be Silver-spiked Sedge (*Carex buchananii*), but other very similar species are available now and identification seems to depend upon floral features.



*Carex* sp. New to VC5 whichever species it is! Photo © Steve Parker

Entering another car park, we explored some wasteland, adding several species to the list, and puzzled over a stunted damaged vegetative plant in the gutter. After lengthy contemplation, the Flora Incognita app suggested *Nyger* (*Guizotia abyssinica*) and suddenly the identity was obvious! *The Vegetative Key* was produced and the characters carefully checked. At the edges of the car park, two large patches of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobancha hederaceae*) were found, apparently new to the hectad. A small sapling of Cappadocian Maple (*Acer cappadocicum*) was also new to the hectad and only the third record of this species in VC5.

Leaving the car park, members were distracted by an impressive seat created from a carved tree trunk. Along another alley, a grass was spotted high on a wall: a specimen was collected and confirmed as Flattened Meadow-grass (*Poa compressa*). This was the first post-2000 record for this species in the hectad! We were briefly lured into VC6 as we descended Tout Hill, as Fred spotted a patch of polypody on the opposite roadside wall. He confirmed that this was Southern Polypody (*Polypodium cambricum*), the first record for the hectad since 1952.



A characterful bench is inspected by the group.  
Photo © Steve Parker

We had lunch on a bank in a recreation ground, with expansive views to the south, then made our way inexorably downhill, ending up parallel to the A303, in a new estate which was disappointingly less diverse in its weedy flora. Attempts to locate a footpath to take us to the southernmost fringe of the monad were thwarted. Instead, we crossed the A303 via a road bridge, briefly leaving the target monad, but finding little to add for our efforts. Meanwhile John explored the verge of the busy main road, finding Sea Fern-grass (*Catapodium maritimum*) new to the monad. This roadside halophyte

has been found at several inland sites in Somerset in the last ten years, thriving in response to the winter salting of our major highways.

Returning uphill along residential roads, one front garden bank was much admired for its profusion on mining bees; we met a knowledgeable householder who appreciated our interest. Elsewhere we found a patch of casual aliens which had clearly arisen from bird seed. Alarming, most of the group could identify *Cannabis* (*Cannabis sativa*) vegetatively, but the flowering Buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) was new to some members!

It began to rain as we reached the town centre and found to our delight that a tea shop was still open. The meeting thus ended with convivial refreshment around a large table. We had recorded 218 species in VC5, with eight new to the hectad, and we took the total for the monad to 319 species. Thanks to Steve for leading and to all who took part and contributed to making this a most enjoyable meeting.

## **Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2024, Autumn One Day Hunt, Taunton (VC5)**

**Leaders: Simon Leach & Steve Parker**

**Report: Simon Leach**

Foggy first thing, but by the time fifteen of us had gathered at Silk Mills park-and-ride car park the sun was breaking through; the beginning of a glorious almost-balmy day of unbroken sunshine. Perfect for this 'final fling' of a meeting where we would once again join in with the Wild Flower Society's 'Autumn One Day Hunt' – a quest to see how many plants can still be found *in flower* on a single day in the last week of October.

Just a bit of fun really, but this would be the fifth time we've held such a meeting in Taunton, and it would be interesting to compare this year's total with those of previous years having followed the same route on each occasion. A few of the regulars could probably have done it blindfolded!

Amazingly, getting out of the car park only took an hour this year. Within its confines we quickly notched up 50 still-flowering species including some much-admired Blue Fleabane (*Erigeron acris*), plus Common Stork's-bill (*Erodium cicutarium*), Wall bedstraw (*Galium parisiense*) and Field Madder (*Sherardia arvensis*).

Into Longrun Meadow, and we soon added Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) and White Dead-nettle (*Lamium album*), but not much else until we were delighted to see what, for many, would be the plant of the day, a still-flowering Hybrid Goat's-beard (*Tragopogon x mirabilis*).



Hybrid Goat's-beard (*Tragopogon x mirabilis*) at Longrun Meadow.  
Photo © Helena Crouch

Crossing back onto the north side of the river, we followed the path to French Weir Park, spotting Nipplewort (*Lapsana communis*), Enchanter's-nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*) and Wood False-brome (*Brachypodium sylvaticum*) as we went. By lunchtime we had reached The Weir café (and our total had reached 90 species) where some of us stopped for a coffee in the sunshine, while others ate packed lunches on the riverside wall where they found it impossible to ignore the Pellitory-of-the-Wall (*Parietaria judaica*) and Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*). Make that 92, and counting...

At this point, a couple of people called it a day, while another unexpectedly arrived. On we went, along the footpath at the back of Tesco's which, as always, produced a good crop of new species, including Stinking Tutsan (*Hypericum hircinum*), Shasta Daisy (*Leucanthemum x superbum*), and, just like last year, Hedgerow Crane's-bill (*Geranium pyrenaicum*) and Musk Stork's-bill (*Erodium moschatum*). And, again like last year, on the grassy bank between Castle Street and Tangier car park we added the (now abundant) Flat-stalked Meadow-grass (*Poa compressa*), along with still-flowering Yellow Oat-grass (*Trisetum flavescens*), Hedge Bedstraw (*Galium album*) and Fodder Burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba* subsp. *balearicum*).

Then into Goodlands Gardens where we expected to find, and did, White Melilot (*Melilotus albus*), but here there were also a few surprises, notably two grasses: Yellow Bristle-grass (*Setaria pumila*) and Hairy Finger-grass (*Digitaria sanguinalis*) – the latter being only the second record for the Taunton area! Also, by the river we saw Hemp-agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum*) and Hemlock Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), while a little farther on, between Morrison's and Firepool, there was Gypsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*) and Stone-parsley (*Sison amomum*).



Yellow Bristle-grass (*Setaria pumila*). Photo © Helena Crouch

A quick dash around the edge of the old livestock market site produced Yellow Chamomile (*Cota tinctoria*), Common Mallow (*Malva sylvestris*) (about time too!) and Tall Melilot (*Melilotus altissimus*), plus *Rumex x pratensis*, the hybrid between Broad-leaved (*R. obtusifolius*) and Curled (*R. crispus*) Docks.

By the time we'd walked a short stretch of the canal, then up onto Trenchard Way, it was already 3 pm and time was running out. And, heaven forbid, we'd lost Fred, who had continued going straight ahead when the rest of us had turned left, but who was rewarded handsomely by finding Fortune's Holly-fern (*Cyrtomium fortunei*), a 'first' for the Taunton area. But ferns don't flower so sadly, on a day like today, we weren't that impressed!

With Fred back on track, though, the verges of Trenchard Way once again delivered, with Perennial Wall-rocket (*Diplotaxis tenuifolia*) to add to the Annual Wall-rocket (*D. muralis*) seen earlier, closely followed by Spear-leaved Willowherb (*Epilobium lanceolatum*) (a real rarity in the Taunton area), Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*), Fat-hen (*Chenopodium album*), Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) and Hoary Mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*). And finally, another contender for 'find of the day', a kerbside grass that was later confirmed as Japanese Millet (*Echinochloa esculenta*), a first record for the Taunton area and only the second for the vice-county.



Japanese Millet (*Echinochloa esculenta*). Photo © Helena Crouch

We mopped up a few more species on our way back to the cars, including a couple of brambles (*Rubus ulmifolius* and *R. caesius*) to add to the 'Himalayan Giant' (*R. armeniacus*) we'd spotted earlier in the day.

Our total, after several recounts, was 158 taxa. A good number and the same as our previous highest, in 2018 – the year we found Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) beside the Chip Lane roundabout.

These late-season meetings always seem to turn up something.

## Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> November 2024, Winter Trees Meeting, Vivary Park, Taunton (VC5)

**Leaders: Steve Parker & Simon Leach**

**Report: Simon Leach**

An unlikely venue for a field meeting, but nevertheless as good a place as any, we thought, to get to grips with trees in winter. Except that we appeared to be in the thick of a particularly mild autumn – we were yet to have a ground frost, and Storm Bert was still some weeks away – meaning that many deciduous trees and shrubs were most easily identifiable by their still-attached leaves!

First a potted history: Vivary Park used to lie within the grounds of Wilton House (now a residential home), until 1894 when it was purchased in order to create a municipal park, complete with grand cast-iron gates, a network of paths, a centrepiece bandstand – and lots of trees. The name 'Vivary' is much more ancient though, alluding to the former existence here of a complex of fishponds (known as a *Vivarium*) when the land was owned by the Bishop of Winchester in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

With 'Wilton Lands', tennis courts and children's playgrounds included, the park extends to almost 5 hectares, and our intended route around its perimeter could easily have been walked in about ten minutes – although today, at a more glacial pace, it would take us at least four hours!

Seven of us met by the main gates at the north end of the park, opposite Upper High Street. From here we would tread a zigzag but essentially anti-clockwise route around the park. Our hope was that we might see perhaps fifty different tree and shrub species or cultivars. We used a variety of identification aids, including John Poland's *Field Key to Winter Twigs* and *Vegetative Key*, plus FSC guides to *broad-leaved trees in winter*. Also worth its weight in gold was Ian's 'crib sheet' – a copy of an out-of-print leaflet describing a 'Vivary Park Tree Trail', including helpful oblique 3-D plan showing the layout of the park and locations and names of 32 of the more significant trees.

As you'd expect, though, we quickly succumbed to the lure of AI on our smartphones, using several different apps to conjure up possible names for some of the things we were puzzling over. We knew that we should take care not to presume that 'the phone is always right', but

it's easy to be seduced by technology, and it was indeed surprising how often our phones all seemed to agree as to what something was; and, at the very least, they would help to point us to the right part of the field guide or Flora, from where we could then run through the keys: just like the old days, peering through hand lenses, arguing over degrees of hairiness, whether something might be patent rather than erect, and, for pity's sake, can anyone remember the meaning of 'retrorse'?

Anyway, armed with field guides and smartphones we began our perambulation of the park. We were soon puzzling over conifers, sorting out the differences between Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) and Deodar (*C. deodara*), and how to tell one Cypress (*Cupressus*) from another. Is that a 'Leyland' or a 'Lawson's'? And could that really be a Japanese Red-cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*)?

After an early overdose on conifers, surely the rest would be straightforward in comparison. A fine Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) was followed by False-acacia or Locust Tree (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), two trees we all knew, and then a flurry of not-so-well-known shrubs and small trees such as Persian Ironwood (*Parrotia persica*), Mexican Orange (*Choisya ternata*) and a rather lovely Wedding Cake Tree (*Cornus controversa*).



Wedding Cake Tree (*Cornus controversa*). Photo © Simon Leach

In the False-acacia we noted Mistletoe (*Viscum album*). Vivary Park, it has to be said, is renowned for its Mistletoe: the Limes (*Tilia x europaea*) in particular look weighed down by it, but during the day we also recorded bunches of Mistletoe on a range of other species, including Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*), Rowan (*S. aucuparia*), Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*), Red Horse-chestnut (*Aesculus carnea*), Weeping Willow (*Salix x sepulcralis*), Apple (*Malus* sp.), Hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.), Large-leaved Lime (*Tilia platyphyllos*) and a Poplar (maybe a *Populus trichocarpa* hybrid of some sort, we thought).

Other arboreal highlights included more than one Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), various maples (*Acer* species) such as Red (*A. rubrum*), Ashleaf (*A. negundo*), paperbark (*A. griseum*) and Cappadocian (*A. cappadocicum*), Honey-locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), Indian Bean-tree (*Catalpa bignonioides*), Foxglove-tree (*Paulownia tomentosa*), Tulip-tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) and American Sweet-gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*).

Also, in passing, we noted several commemorative trees, such as the two fine specimens of Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) near the bandstand – one commemorating the silver jubilee of King George V, the other the coronation of King George VI – as well as trees celebrating the coronation and various jubilees of Queen Elizabeth II. One of them was planted to mark her golden jubilee visit to Taunton in 2002, when she was driven through the town, and then through Vivary Park where she was greeted by hundreds of local school children (my own amongst them).

So yes, even the park's *Quercus robur* seem to have been planted. And indeed, few, if any, of the trees we saw could be said to be truly 'wild', although in Wilton Lands, around the ornamental lake, amongst the larger trees there were also thickets of mixed-aged suckers (and potentially self-sown?) Caucasian Wingnut (*Pterocarya fraxinifolia*). 'Well-established, maybe naturalized' we thought, after much debate.

We lunched in sunshine in the rose garden, still only a short stone's throw from the main gates, but it was getting chillier, and with rain forecast for later in the afternoon we were determined to increase our pace.

But even botanical 'fast' is 'slow', and the trees kept coming, and the list grew and grew.



Caucasian Wingnut (*Pterocarya fraxinifolia*). Photo © Simon Leach

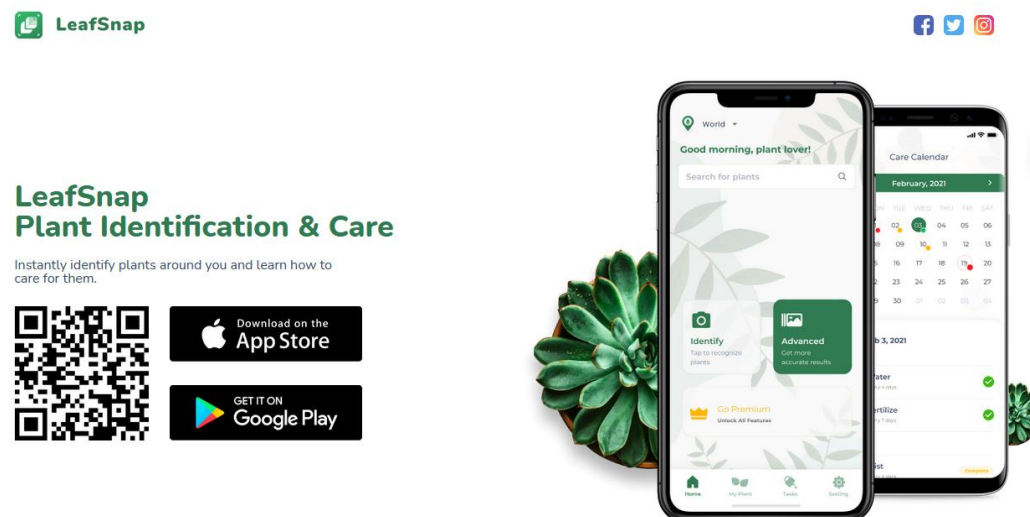
Later in the afternoon we retreated to the Coffee Station, a warm and welcoming vegan café in what used to be the Park-keeper's office and store-room for the miniature railway. Suitably refreshed, we admired a line of large Siberian Elms (*Ulmus pumila*) (no. 19 on Ian's crib sheet!) and then headed back past the 'sensory garden', down the main path towards Upper High Street, where we noted an old Mulberry (*Morus nigra*) and a Strawberry-tree (*Arbutus unedo*).

By the end of the day, we'd notched up 104 tree and shrub taxa (species/cultivars), a list that wouldn't have looked out of place for a small provincial botanic garden or Arboretum. Also, straying occasionally from the script, we'd spotted a few 'non-woody' things of some interest, such as a single plant of Navelwort (*Umbilicus rupestris*) (The Vivary Park area is its only known locality within the town), and a large colony of always-nice-to-see Henbit Dead-nettle (*Lamium amplexicaule*) with its tiny easily-missed 'winter' flowers, quite unlike the showy blooms it would have produced earlier in the year. These non-opening 'cleistogamous' flowers seemed entirely appropriate given how chilly the day had become. Within a couple of days there would be ground frosts and sleet showers. Maybe, after all, we were closer to winter than we'd imagined.

## Part 2: Articles

### How to make a botanist 'appy

By Nigel Chaffey



It's often the case that reviewing a book generates ideas for follow-up articles. As a case in point, this item was inspired by my reading Simon Barnes' [\*How to be a bad botanist\*](#)\*

One of my main goals in life is to enhance the public's botanical literacy. In that way I hope to do my bit to tackle the phenomenon known as plant blindness [hence [my blog's](#) stated aim of "Reducing plant blindness, one post at a time..."] Although enhancing botanical literacy can take many forms, for me it's primarily promoting knowledge about, and an appreciation of, plants, and an understanding of their importance to humankind. One way of achieving that is to encourage people to look at plants and identify them, to be able to give them a name\*\*. The importance of which activity is underlined by these sage words: "A name is not a label but a portal – walk through it and your understanding grows: of the individual, of the ecosystem it inhabits, of the world we all share" (p. 70, *How to be a botanist* by Simon Barnes).

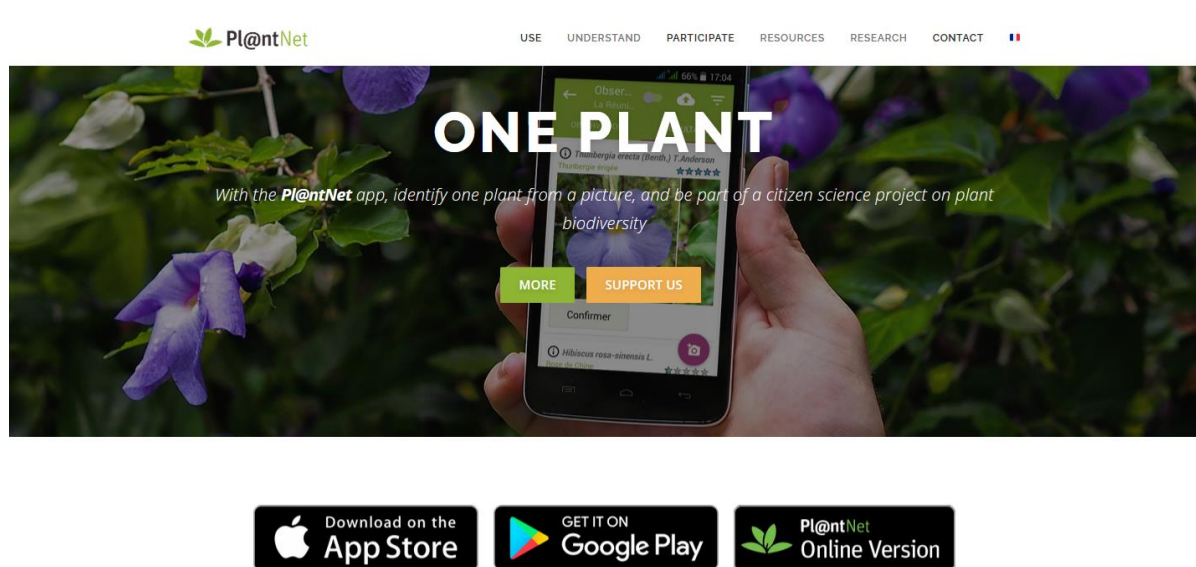
Although identifying plants is something that gets easier with practice (so I'm told!), it's often tricky knowing where to begin. When I used to teach undergraduates about plant identification in a former life, I stressed that one – arguably, the least 'painful' – way to get started with this was to go out into the field with a knowledgeable botanical friend\*\*\*, and learn from them the names of some plants – and their important identification features. In return, all you have to do is remember what you've been told, and give the same name to the same plant when next you meet it(!)

Even if the expert can't be with you all of the time, that initial introduction to plant identification [ID] will hopefully give you the necessary confidence to start to name plants (that are new to you) for yourself. But, how to do that without your botanical mentor? The traditional way is to use a plant ID guide or flora that provides information about the plants in a particular area. A good flora will contain a key to help you whittle down the possible identities of a plant to just the one that it is. But such aids can be quite daunting for the uninitiated – as Barnes tells us in *How to be a bad botanist* (and where he's not afraid to name some that are probably too scary for the beginning botanist). Certainly, some plant ID books are better than others\*\*\*\*.

Increasingly these days, a more IT-savvy generation wishing to know their plants is likely to turn to an 'app' rather than a book. Using that technology, all you need to do is take a photo of the 'mystery' plant and let the app do the identifying for you. As acknowledged by Barnes: "There are also apps for smartphones that will do a very great deal of the legwork for you. Or have a damn good shot at it anyway" (p. 76, *How to be a bad botanist*).

But, as with plant ID books, with so many available; how do you choose the best app? Or, at least, one that works for you? You can ask those who use plant ID apps to let you know how good, bad, or indifferent they are. But you have to find those individuals in the first place. Probably the main avenue to explore is the internet. There you will find lots of advice in the form of scientific articles and internet posts that can help you to select an appropriate app. But, you don't necessarily have to do that for yourself. Ever-helpful – well, anything that might get newbies up to speed with plant ID and therefore improve their botanical literacy and plant-appreciation – I've done some of the 'donkey work' on your behalf.

But! You will still need to make your own decision regarding which app(s) you want to check for your own particular plant ID purposes. Anyway, here's a round-up of internet items about plant ID apps.



### Some guidance about plant ID apps

[In Best Plant ID Apps – No Need to Pay!](#), Susan Harris evaluates plant ID apps PlantNet (which version of the name seems to work as an alternative to [Pl@ntNet](#), and [iNaturalist](#).

Ellen Airhart considers [The Best Plant Identification App](#), and looks in-depth at [Pl@ntNet](#) and [iNaturalist](#). Other apps – [PictureThis](#), [LeafSnap](#), [Seek](#) (iNaturalist's app for kids), [What's That Flower](#), and [Flora Incognita](#)– are mentioned, but with much less in-depth coverage.

In [Comparing Plant ID Apps for Beginner Botanists](#), James Common specifically looked at apps with beginners in mind, and appraises [PlantNet](#) [also known – more properly – as [Pl@ntNet](#)], [PlantSnap](#), [Picture This](#), [Seek](#), and [LeafSnap](#).

Pam Baker looks at the [Best plant identification apps for mobile in 2025](#), and covers [PlantNet](#) in detail, and also mentions [FlowerChecker \[Kindwise\]](#), [LeafSnap Premium](#) (paid subscription to [LeafSnap](#)), [PlantID](#) and [PlantSnapPro](#).

Writing [Free Plant Identification Apps](#) for [gardentrip.co.uk](#), contributor 'plightto' assesses four free apps – [PlantSnap](#), [Flora Incognita](#), [PlantNet](#), and [Garden Answers](#).

Simon Barnes gives a good mention of [Pl@ntnet](#) and [Google Lens](#) (p.76, *How to be a bad botanist*).

For a handy guide to using [Google Lens](#) – on either an iPhone or an Android device, see Cheryl Spencer's article [How to identify plants with Google Lens on iPhones](#).

Academic journal articles that evaluate plant ID apps include:

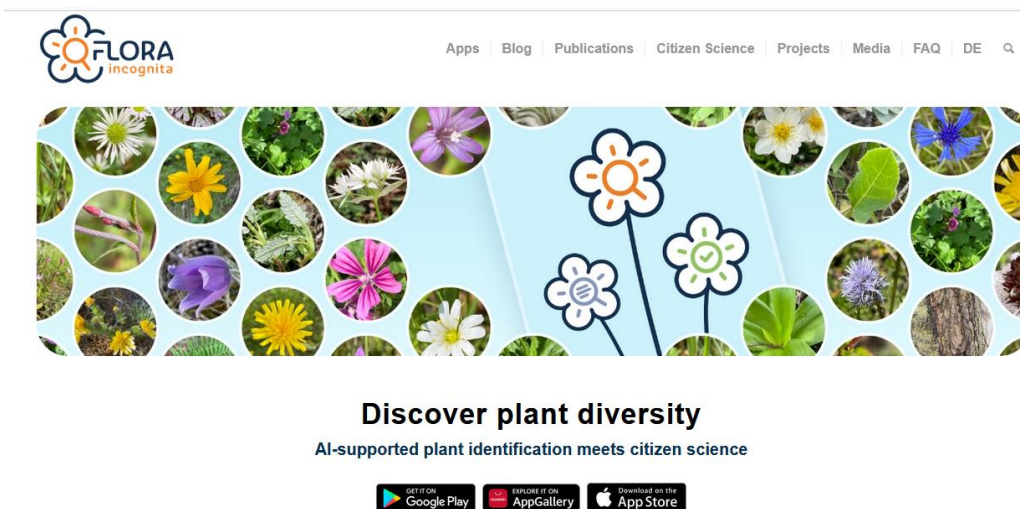
Hamlyn Jones (2020a) evaluated 9 free apps or websites for automated plant identification – of species from the British flora – that were suitable for use on mobile phones or tablet computers in the field: [Bing](#), [Candide \(Plant ID\)](#), [Flora Incognita](#), [Google Lens](#), iPlant Plant identifier [<https://au.chartoo.com/itunes/app/1372113110-iplant-plant-identifier>], plant.id [<https://plant.id/>], PlantNet, PlantSnap, and Seek. A similar set of ID app comparisons is also contained in another of his articles, [Hamlyn Jones \(2020b\)](#).

[Adam Hart et al. \(2023\)](#) involved professional ecologists in assessing the accuracy of the free automated plant identification applications, PlantNet, PlantSnap, LeafSnap, iNaturalist Seek, and Google Lens. A plain language summary of this article is available: [Free plant identification apps for mobile phone are very accurate](#). Encouragingly, Hart et al. (2023) found that “subject to some caveats, free phone-based plant identification applications are valid and useful tools for those wanting rapid identification and for anyone wanting to engage with the natural world”.

The Flora Incognita app is described and discussed by [Patrick Mäder et al. \(2021\)](#), and compared to PlantNet and iNaturalist. Flora incognita is also considered in [Michael Rzanny et al.’s autumn 2024 article](#). Rzanny et al. have helpfully produced an accompanying [plain language summary of their paper here](#).

Finally (for this limited review of the literature), if you’re interested specifically in identifying toxic plants, [Jenna Otter et al. \(2021\)](#) compare the accuracy of “three popular iPhone plant ID apps, PictureThis, PlantSnap, and Pl@ntNet, to identify 17 commonly encountered toxic plants” (which included *Nerium oleander*, *Cascabela thevetia*, *Brugmansia suaveolens*, *Datura wrightii*, *Ricinus communis*, *Nicotiana glauca*, *Phytolacca americana*, *Lantana camara*, *Digitalis purpurea*, and *Conium maculatum* – commonly encountered that is “in Southern California from September 2019 to June 2020, and several other common species found during travel within the USA”). That paper also provides interesting background to the apps they tested, telling us that: “PictureThis was created by Glority Global Group Ltd., a company that creates several picture-based smartphone identification apps; it claims 95% accuracy in plant identification (source: [picturethisai.com](http://picturethisai.com)). PlantSnap was created by an American entrepreneur and utilizes an online encyclopedic database of plants for identification (source: [plantsnap.com](http://plantsnap.com)). Pl@ntNet is a self-described “citizen-science project on plant biodiversity” whose origin is with a French group interested in open-access botany education and biodiversity research (source: [plantnet.org/en](http://plantnet.org/en))”.

A reminder: I will not tell you which app to use. That choice will depend upon many factors – e.g. your location, the make and model of smartphone you have, the operating system you use, the group of plants you’re interested in, personal preference, etc. Instead, you are encouraged to look at the information that’s available to help you to make an informed decision.



### Some take-away messages...

Although I've not provided much by way of assessment of the sources indicated above, some of the overall conclusions of the academic studies are worth stating.

As a result of his extensive evaluation of several apps, [Jones \(2020a\)](#) felt able to conclude that “These results confirm that automatic image recognition has now matured to a stage where it provides a powerful tool for field botanists in support of many botanical and ecological studies, with several viable apps readily available for free”. And that, “Notwithstanding the limitations for quantitative studies, any of the better-performing apps here should be of great value to beginners and amateurs in plant identification and may even stimulate interest in plants, plant identification and nature in general”.

The aspiration that such apps will stimulate interest in plants – i.e. increase botanical literacy – is encouraging, and is a view that was previously espoused by Andrew Robinson in [AI is learning from our encounters with nature – and that's a concern](#): “In China the latest version of the Baidu browser (a so-called [Chinese Google](#)) comes with a plant recognition feature built into it. ... Such apps are triggering a new wave of botanical interest among the general population in China”. Which words have also been echoed by Hart *et al.* (2023): “For the inexperienced or non-professional user applications provide an excellent entry point for finding out more about plants, albeit with some limitations”.

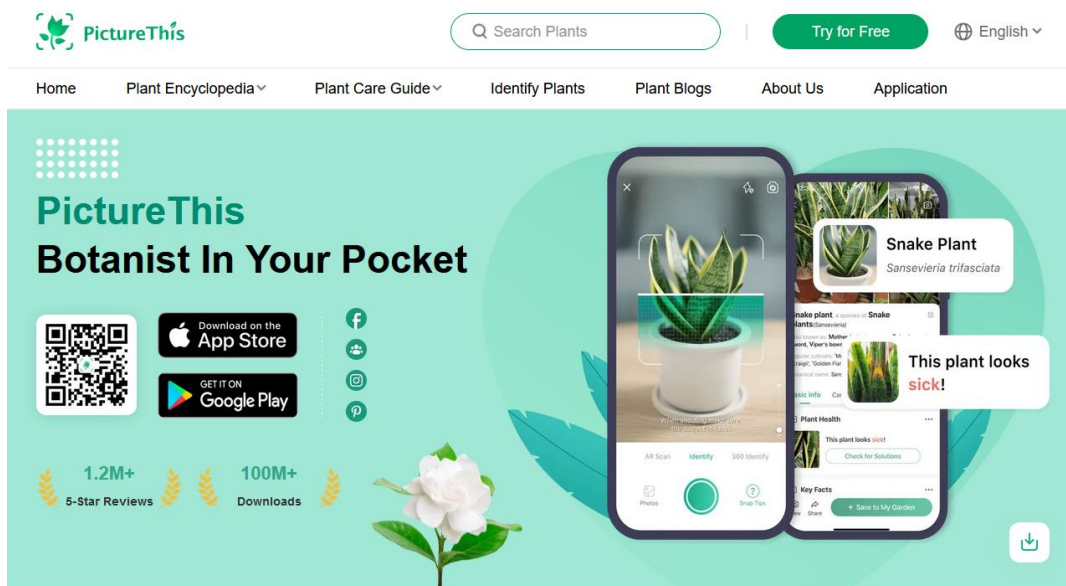
Jones (2020a) does, however, issue an important note of caution about use of plant ID apps in suggesting that “their ease of use may actually act as a disincentive to gaining further knowledge”. This point is also raised – and even more explicitly – in another of this author's publications (Jones, 2020b), “My main concern is that the ease of use of automatic apps might lead to many people becoming lazy and just accepting the given identifications without further questioning, thereby missing out on the development of botanical skills required to distinguish critical or rare species, especially those where identification depends on subtle or cryptic characters”. Nevertheless, Jones (2020b) believes that “Wider use of such apps has great potential for stimulating greater interest in plant identification” (even if, “In most cases, however, the user still needs to use a traditional flora or another identification app to validate the suggested id”).

Regardless of the accuracy of Flora Incognita's plant identification, Mäder *et al.* (2021) “found that the proposed intuitive identification process [of Flora Incognita] stimulates social awareness for plant diversity and biodiversity”. In other words, the app does promote botanical literacy amongst the public, which is great to know. Rzanny *et al.* (2024) also give a big ‘thumbs-up’ for that app specifically, and address concerns raised by Hart *et al.* (2023) regarding the accuracy of plant ID apps.

Otter *et al.* (2021) concluded that “the three apps evaluated in our study were able to identify toxic plants, with varying degrees of accuracy”. Which is encouraging. However, they also caution that “In a field where incorrect identification of a toxic plant could have dire consequences, these apps are not yet ready for use as a stand-alone tool for use in acute unknown plant poisonings”. And that “Results of plant identification apps for identification of toxic plants can be accurate but should be interpreted with caution and the data used in consultation with experts in the field”. Slavish acceptance of the app's ‘ID’ is therefore not advisable. Such tools are not infallible, and the back-up provided by human expertise is still important.

That recourse to human expertise is also echoed by Jones (2020a) “Nevertheless, any suggested id still needs some independent confirmation, while for quantitative studies, further validation using experts or rigorous floras will still be required for some time, especially for rare or hard-to-distinguish species” Thankfully, apps haven't – yet! – done away with the need for ‘the Darrels’\*\*\* of this world.

It's good to see such encouraging – if appropriately, and suitably, cautious and caveat-constrained – approval for digital plant ID apps. And this endorsement can only increase as the accuracy of the apps' IDs are likely to improve because each use of an app for identification is used by its in-built technology to ‘train’ the app. Which sounds like a good thing – increased accuracy of ID can only help users, whether they are botanists undertaking vegetation surveys or physicians providing treatment for those poisoned by toxic plants. But, is this all too good to be true..?



### You have been warned...

Use of apps to ID plants doesn't just help the app – and the human plant-hunter – to improve, it may also have a darker side. As expressed by Andrew Robinson in his thought-provoking article, “We are building huge repositories of data related to our natural environments ... But there are ethical concerns that should be addressed: about how data is [sic.] collected and shared, who has the right to share it and how we use public data for machine learning. And there's a bigger concern – whether such apps change what it means to be human”. His article ends with the rather chilling, “This exploration of the natural world – this observing, comparing, playing, discovering, loving – is an impulse that's core to our humanity, and one, I'd suggest, we should be careful not to lose”.

Nevertheless, using an app to get to know plants better – and thereby becoming more plant aware, less plant-blind, and enhancing one's botanical literacy – has to be a good thing. Additionally, plant ID apps can be a powerful force for good, maybe helping you find happiness [Ed. – ‘appiness..?'] and satisfaction, as found by [Estelle Tang in a Guardian wellness article](#). Using a plant ID app is yet another way that interacting with plants can boost humanity's well-being – and without getting your hands dirty for the gardening-averse (e.g. Sarah Sloat in [Even Just a Little of This 1 Overlooked Activity Can Dramatically Reduce Depression](#)).

### Final thoughts

The overall conclusion appears to be that, if used appropriately – and with acknowledgement that appropriate input by experts still has an important part to play in learning the art of plant identification – apps *can be* a great help to those who want to know the names of plants (and a great way of engaging the public and enhancing botanical literacy).

And, for those who may be concerned about such things, Barnes does not consider using an app to be ‘cheating’ because “Anything that advances knowledge seems to me a good thing” (p. 77, *How to be a bad botanist*). I concur with that statement.

\* Although reading Barnes' book was the inspiration, the impetus to get on and write the original post came from a [‘Tweet’ by Dr Timothy Utteridge on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2024](#), which stated that “Apparently, PlantSnap can “Identify 90% of all known species of plants and trees” Usefully, that Tweet included a link to the app in question, [PlantSnap](#), which claims to be “A plant expert at your fingertips”, that will “Identify plants, flowers, cacti, succulents and mushrooms in seconds with the click of a button on your mobile device”.

\*\* And let us not overlook the unalloyed joy and genuine sense of achievement that identifying an ‘unknown’ plant for yourself can be. This thrill is beautifully conveyed by Barnes after having identified Yellow Archangel with the help of a plant ID book: “And it was a bit of a breakthrough. I had seen, observed, noticed, researched and named a wildflower ... I had established a personal relationship with the plant: it was now part of my brain, part of my thinking, part of the way I see the world. I had been walking this lane for five years, and all the while I had been entertaining archangels

unawares. Now I always see them. It was a moment of confirmation: I had finally made it. Now I really was a bad botanist” (p. 66, *How to be a bad botanist*). Now that memory is something to treasure.

\*\*\* At the UK university where I taught, we were blessed with the phenomenon known as ‘the Darrel’. Real name [Darrel Watts](#), he was – and no doubt still is – one of the most knowledgeable field botanists it has been my great pleasure to have met, shared field courses with, and have the good fortune to call a friend. For some more help with plant ID, do look at the [BSBI \[Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland\] website](#).

But, you don’t have to wait for a chance encounter with a plant ID expert. Joining a national organisation such as the BSBI will give you access to a network of plant ID expertise that you can learn from on their numerous field trips, and be part of a friendly, helpful, plant-appreciative community. More locally, there are many plant groups throughout the country [although I’m speaking from my UK perspective, I’m sure this situation applies globally] that have trips to locations of plant interest. An excellent example of this sort of organisation is our very own Somerset Rare Plants Group, which has a wealth of plant ID expertise that is freely shared with members on forays into the field (and for which knowledge-sharing I continue to be extremely grateful!).

\*\*\*\* Whilst I have nothing against the plant ID book [Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe \(Collins handguides\)](#) by RSR Fitter, Alastair H Fitter & Marjorie Blamey [it does provide the opportunity to share a plant ID-related anecdote. Back in my botany teaching days we had a first-year exercise that involved recording the vegetation in two woodland sites on campus, in November. As you might imagine there was hardly anything in flower at that time of year. The best advice I would give the students about that book was for each of them to take two copies into the woods, place them on the ground about two feet apart, and then kneel on the books (to avoid getting knees muddy and/or wet). Why was such advice given? Because identification of plants using that book was based upon floral characteristics. With no flowers to examine, using it for the purposes of plant ID was not appropriate. Furthermore, the book concentrated on ‘flowers’ to the exclusion of grasses and sedges. And was silent on the ferns that we had at those sites. This taught the students a valuable lesson: you need to choose your flora or plant ID book carefully – certainly having in mind the vegetation at the site of interest, and the time of year. Not to worry, we weren’t as cruel to the students at that tale might imply because a, we had the Darrel with us, and b, we provided the students with prepared lists of likely vegetation at the sites – to focus their ID attention.

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[This article is amended from [The ‘appy botanist](#) post, originally published on the author’s Plant Cuttings blog]

## Dandelion Update 2024

By Simon Leach (SJL) & Jeanne Webb (JW)

2024 produced another bumper batch of interesting *Taraxacum* records. This year we put more effort into straying beyond our home vice-county, between us notching up several productive forays into the ‘far north’: JW exploring sites in the Mendip Hills, SJL making another visit to the Poldens (Ivythorn Hill) as well as a quick trip to the area around his nephew’s cider orchard near Chew Magna. As always, our specimens were examined, and their identities determined or confirmed, by the national expert and BSBI *Taraxacum* referee John Richards (AJR), who we thank for his encouragement and continued interest in the dandelions of Somerset. Not wishing to blow our own trumpets, but he must be heartened to see that our identification ‘success rate’ continues to improve.

Amongst the *circa* 80 specimens this year there were three species new to Somerset as a whole (*Taraxacum acutum* [VC6], *T. ingens* and *T. leptodon* [both VC5]), plus a further two new to VC5 (*T. curtifrons*, *T. quadrans*) and three new to VC6 (*T. disseminatum*, *T. severum*, *T. speciosiflorum*). In addition, we had new records at hectad level for a further 30 species, including second VC records of *T. angustisquameum* and *T. inopinatum* in VC5 and *T. scoticum*, *T. subexpallidum* and *T. tumentilobum* in VC6. Full details of all these records are given below. Also, as an aside, SJL can report that, much to the bemusement of his neighbours, he added another nine new dandelion species (albeit two of them deliberately introduced) to his ‘garden list’, which now stands at 36 species!

Apart from our own fieldwork, as volunteers in the Somerset County Herbarium (TTN) this year we enjoyed working on specimens, mainly from the 1970s and 1980s, collected by the late Somerset botanist and all-round naturalist John G. Keylock. We are fortunate that he had a particular fondness for taxonomically challenging groups, including dandelions. Many of his *Taraxacum* specimens were determined at the time by the national referees, either AJR or Chris Haworth, but we felt it would be worth AJR taking a fresh look at some of the sheets to see what he made of them now, nearly half a century later, in the light of new knowledge and taxonomic insights. It turns out that these specimens include what we now believe to be the earliest records in Somerset of three species, *T. chlorofrugale*, *T. densilobum* and *T. ronaë*. It is worth noting that the first and last of these didn’t even exist as recognised taxonomic entities when they were collected –

highlighting the enormous value of pressed specimens in allowing the identity of a plant to be determined (or re-determined) years or decades after the original record was made. Details of Keylock’s ‘county firsts’ are given below, pre-dating as they do, by several decades, our own ‘firsts’ for these species.

One other record in the list, again of *T. ronaë*, requires some further explanation. It relates to a dandelion first seen by SJL in a front garden in Taunton in 2019 that, with only three hastily grabbed leaves to go on, was initially determined by AJR as “certainly section *Naevosa*, but needs further collection”. Easier said than done! The householders were so quick to pounce on the plant whenever it dared to show itself above ground that it wasn’t until more than four years later (in Sep 2023) that it survived long enough to produce two ‘clocking’ flower-heads, one of them invitingly poking through the fence and onto the pavement. Joy of joys! Achenes plucked from this clock were soon producing pot-grown plants in SJL’s back garden at 15 Trinity Street (ST23502440). Whole plants, leaf samples and capitula from these, photographed and pressed, were finally confirmed as *T. ronaë* by AJR in late 2024.

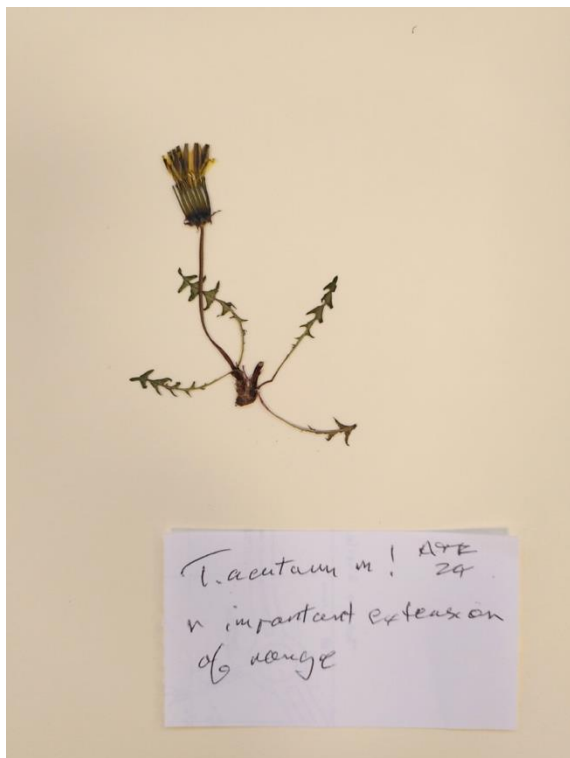


*Taraxacum ronaë*, a markedly ‘western’ British-and-Irish endemic which has – at last! – been confirmed as occurring in Taunton. And it only took five years to prove it! The original plant in Noble Street seems to have gone, but its offspring are now thriving in nearby Trinity Street... Photo © Simon Leach

In the list below, dates refer to 2024 unless otherwise specified. Voucher specimens for all these records (and

many more) are being deposited in **TTN**. An updated checklist of the county's dandelions, correct as at Dec 2024, can be found on the SRPG website. The list of *Taraxacum* for Somerset as a whole now stands at 178 species, 164 in VC5 and 100 in VC6.

***Taraxacum acutum*** – Wavering Down (ST41085579), in short-grazed species-rich limestone grassland, 24 Apr, JW, conf. AJR who noted that this was “a very important extension of range”; first record for VC6 and Somerset of a species typically associated with the chalk of SE England and East Anglia (see map in Richards 2021).



*Taraxacum acutum*, one of several tiny ‘section Erythrosperma’ species occurring on Wavering Down. A GB endemic, *T. acutum* is otherwise unknown in SW England, being generally found on chalk grassland in SE England and East Anglia. Photo © Simon Leach

***Taraxacum angustisquameum*** – Blagdon Hill, Curdleigh Lane (ST217179), at base of grassy hedge-bank, 25 Apr, SJL, det. AJR; second record for VC5, the first having been one of JW’s finds in Old Cleeve in 2020 (Lavender *et al.* 2021).

***Taraxacum chlorofrugale*** – [1] Ashcott (ST443393), 4 May 1975, J.G. Keylock, originally det. AJR (in 1975) as *T. nordstedtii*, but re-det. AJR (Aug 2024) as *T. chlorofrugale*; first record for VC6 and Somerset, a very early record of a taxon not distinguished from *T. nordstedtii* until 2019. [2] Shapwick Heath/Canada Farm (ST41814608, ST41824066, ST41884043, ST41924037), 5 May, SRPG & SJL, conf. AJR; at the

time we presumed these to be the first records for VC6, unaware of Keylock’s 1975 specimen that only came to light three months later!

***Taraxacum curtifrons*** – Hopcott Common, Minehead (SS96434463), in shade in woodland, 23 Apr, JW, det. AJR; first record for VC5, second for Somerset, the first having been in VC6 in 2016 (Leach, Richards & Webb 2017).

***Taraxacum densilobum*** – Berrow (ST2952), in foredunes, no date but possibly 1989, certainly pre-1990, J. G. Keylock, det. AJR (Aug 2024); first record for VC6 and Somerset, pre-dating by at least 25 years the previously-claimed ‘first’ for Somerset, in VC5, in 2016 (Leach, Richards & Webb 2017).

***Taraxacum disseminatum*** – Wavering Down (ST41085579), in short-grazed species-rich limestone grassland, not far from *T. acutum*, 24 Apr, JW, conf. AJR; first record for VC6. Thought to be probably introduced in Britain, Richards (2021) suggesting that it may have come in as a grass-seed contaminant; its occurrence in good unimproved/semi-natural grassland on Wavering Down is therefore noteworthy.



*Taraxacum ingens*, new for VC5 and Somerset, only the seventh GB record of a species that is probably more widespread than we think. Photo © Simon Leach

***Taraxacum ingens*** – Taunton, Trinity Street (ST23502440), in brick paving in back garden of 15 Trinity Street, 6 Apr, SJL, det. AJR; first record for VC5

and Somerset. Not included in Richards (2021), as only recently recognised as a GB species. As at Jan 2025, the national *Taraxacum* Database had just seven GB records from six vice-counties, the first being from S. Devon (VC3) in 2022.

***Taraxacum inopinatum*** – Roughmoor (ST209254), in short rabbit-grazed grassland to E of Silk Mills park-and-ride car park, at least 30 plants, 18 Apr, SJL, conf. AJR; second record for VC5 and Somerset, the only previous having been Graham Lavender's at Hurlstone Point in 2021 (Leach *et al.* 2022).

***Taraxacum leptodon*** – Wootton Courtenay (SS92024125), on lower slopes of Dunkery Beacon, 20 Apr, JW, det. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset. Initially only tentatively determined: AJR examined the pressed specimen, the supporting photos of which had unfortunately been lost, and wrote "I would suggest *T. leptodon* but [from the pressed material] I cannot see if the bracts are twisted". In Feb 2025 JW found the mislaid photos, including one of the involucre bracts in a fresh state, which were clearly twisted; on seeing the image AJR happily confirmed that the plant was indeed *T. leptodon*.

***Taraxacum quadrans*** – [1] Taunton, Mount Walk (ST23302384), at edge of cyclepath at back of Richard Huish College, 20 Mar, SJL, det. AJR. [2] Exford, Chetsford Bridge (SS84744208), grassy road verge by moorland, 13 Apr, JW, conf. AJR. First and second records for VC5.

***Taraxacum ronaë*** – We report here on two records in addition to (and pre-dating) those in 2020 listed by Lavender *et al.* (2021). [1] Ashcott (ST443393), edge of raised bog, 4 May 1975, J. G. Keylock, originally det. AJR as '*T. praestans*', but later questioned by Chris Haworth who examined the specimen, noting the leaves were spotted and saying that "this is [a] v. interesting specimen. I have no firm ideas ... It could be a good find". It was examined again in Aug 2024 by AJR who agreed that it was, in fact, *T. ronaë*; a first record of *T. ronaë* for VC6, and a first for Somerset too, pre-dating those of Len Margetts, in VC5, by about ten years. [2] Taunton, Noble Street (ST23762459), one plant on edge of path in tiny front garden beneath low 'wrought-iron' fence, 30 Apr 2019, SJL, eventually det./conf. AJR (Dec 2024) from photos and pressed vouchers of cultivated material.

***Taraxacum scoticum*** – Wavering Down (ST41355570), in short-grazed limestone grassland at 212 metres above sea level, 24 Apr, JW, conf. AJR; second record for

VC6 and Somerset, the only previous having been in 1980 (*Taraxacum* Database).

***Taraxacum severum*** – Brent Knoll (ST33655094), grassy area on slopes leading up to the top of the hill, 5 Apr, JW, conf. AJR; first record for VC6, second for Somerset, the only previous having been Graham Lavender's in VC5 in 2021 (Leach *et al.* 2022).

***Taraxacum speciosiflorum*** – Brent Knoll (ST33865096), in grassland at about 100 metres above sea level, 5 April, JW, conf. AJR; first record for VC6.

***Taraxacum subexpallidum*** – Wavering Down (ST41355573), in close-cropped limestone grassland, 24 Apr, JW, conf. AJR; second record for VC6, the only previous having been in 1990 (*Taraxacum* Database).

***Taraxacum tumentilobum*** – Brent Knoll (ST34035094) in grassland at 140 metres above sea level, 5 Apr, JW, conf. AJR; second record for VC6, the only previous having been in 1987 (*Taraxacum* Database).

In 2024 one of us (SJL) attended the BSBI *Taraxacum* training and recording weekend based in Devizes and visiting sites mainly in North Wiltshire (VC7). Over the weekend as a whole about 80 species of dandelion were recorded, of which at least 45 were 'firsts' for Wiltshire, and many also 'firsts' for SJL! Somerset botanists were well represented at the meeting, with SRPG members Karen Andrews and Barbra Lakin also in attendance. And some close neighbours were there too, including John Day from Devon (VCs3&4), Robin Walls from Dorset (VC9) and Dylan Peters from Bristol/W. Gloucestershire (VC34). We visited an interesting range of sites, including chalk grassland SSSIs at Pewsey Down and Roundway Hill, and wet meadows at Clattinger Farm – a Wiltshire Wildlife Trust nature reserve and SSSI renowned for its large populations of Fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) and Downy-fruited Sedge (*Carex filiformis*).

The highlight of the weekend was at Clattinger Farm, where we witnessed an extraordinary array of dandelions associated with Thames Valley flood-meadows, including *T. akteum*, *T. subundulatum*, *T. tamesense*, *T. fulgidum*, *T. palustre* and *T. anglicum*. Of these, only *T. fulgidum* has so far been recorded in Somerset, despite the county having plenty of suitable-looking fen meadows and marshy grassland, especially across the Somerset Levels and Moors. Maybe we're just not looking hard enough...

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## Leaf Shape and Climate

By Val Graham



Photos from left to right: Olive tree leaves by Monica Arellano-Ongpin from Flickr CC BY 2.0; Spring leaves by Ben124 from Flickr CC BY 2.0; Saw-toothed leaves by Nicholas A Tonelli from Flickr CC BY 2.0

I've occasionally peered at a lovely piece of species-rich grassland and wondered a) how all the different species co-exist and b) what benefit the many different leaf shapes convey. [Answers on a postcard please](#). However, I came across some information on one tiny facet of this issue while browsing information about the methods used to infer climatic conditions in the ancient past.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century two Harvard researchers – Irving W. Bailey and Edmund W. Sinnott – wanted to establish whether there were patterns in the distribution of leaf shapes across the world's climatic zones. Through this they hoped to use fossil remains of leaves as a guide to the prevailing climate at the time of their preservation. Their work showed that there is a correlation between cooler climates and toothed leaves in woody dicots. This has now developed into a mature and well-tested method called Leaf Margin Analysis as one of many methods for determining past climatic conditions – which has immense practical relevance in the current climate crisis.

Fuller explanations can be found in the articles mentioned below. These two papers explore some of the reasons for this trend and consider some of the confounding factors. There appears to be a strong link between deciduous trees and toothed margins, perhaps linked to the need to establish photosynthesis in the early spring, but a weaker correlation for other types of plant.

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## *Callitriche terrestris* Raf. – an increasing alien established in horticultural outlets

By Fred Rumsey



*Callitriche terrestris*, *Cardamine corymbosa* and *Sagina procumbens* at Garden World, Brent Knoll (VC6), July 2023. Photo © Fred Rumsey

Sometime following the publication of the BSBI Handbook to *Callitriche* in Europe (Lansdown 2008), which I helped illustrate, I discovered a small terrestrial example of the genus in the pot of a *Phoenix* Palm for sale at a local B&Q outlet in Farnborough, Hants. (SU8655), VC12. Richard Lansdown identified this for me as the American species *C. terrestris* Raf. But given its obvious recent import and localisation to the pot neither of us considered it worthy of further documentation. A few years later C. Westall discovered an unfamiliar *Callitriche* on the soil around a potted bonsai tree imported from Holland, at Ashford Nurseries, Staffs. (SO8687), VC39. This was grown on and sent to Richard, who named it too as *C. terrestris*, commenting this was the second find of the species in Britain. The find, with this observation, was published in *BSBI News* 131:50, although the earlier find and its whereabouts were not

mentioned. As weeds in imported plant pots, neither could really be considered naturalised, and many would not bother to record them.

Fast forward nine years to July 2023 and once again I see a small terrestrial Water Starwort, but this time it is in some abundance, not in a pot and established between paving blocks over a significant area at “Garden World”, the Sanders Garden Centre at Brent Knoll, (ST3449), N. Somerset, VC6. Other neophytes still largely confined to horticultural outlets or urban paving: *Euphorbia maculata* L., *Cardamine corymbosa* Hook. f. and *C. occulta* Hornem. were also noted, as was *Polycarpon tetraphyllum* (L.) L. The find was duly reported as the first naturalised occurrence of the species in Britain by Helena, in her annual roundups for this Group (SRPG)

and Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society (SANHS).

This September (2024) I found the *Callitriche* in a similar situation and again in some quantity, between pavements at Dobbies Garden Centre, Shepton Mallet, (ST6342), North Somerset, VC6, before going on in October to discover it at Monkton Elm Garden Centre, Monkton Heathfield (ST2627), South Somerset, VC5. The last, unlike the two previous, not run by large multi-site horticultural firms [Blue Diamond Group; Dobbies], but a family-owned concern – although admittedly grander in scale than most small nurseries. I would expect movement between outlets within particular horticultural firms, as happened with the grass *Mibora* and Notcutts in the 1980s, but I have no evidence of that yet. A search of another large Blue Diamond group Garden Centre, at Congresbury in November, revealed only *Cardamine corymbosa* and *Euphorbia maculata*, both recorded here by Ian Green in 2003! Checking another Blue Diamond outlet at Gillingham, Dorset in December revealed no interesting aliens.



*Callitriche terrestris* and *Sagina procumbens*, Monkton Elm Garden Centre, VC5, November 2024. Photo © Fred Rumsey

What links each of the *Callitriche* sites is a heavy reliance on regular imported material, I suspect largely of Dutch origin – the likely source – and an available microhabitat that favours the plant's establishment. In each the plant was found in intricately paved plant sales areas in the narrow soily, moss-covered strips beloved of *Sagina procumbens* and the thallose liverwort *Marchantia*. Gravelled or asphalt covered areas even when damp and mossy in other garden centres investigated, such as Otter Garden Centre, Taunton, have failed to harbour the species. It achieves greatest luxuriance where there is some moisture, near taps/watering stations, or where rainwater might gather, but persists in drier conditions than typical for the genus. Numbers have fluctuated at the initial site between 2023 and 2024, with the plant less obvious recently. It may succumb to cleaning operations – Helena observed the Dobbies site being pressure washed in December, although this may promote its spread through fragmentation.

The species has I believe been overlooked because of its size and where it grows. The earlier records in pots suggest it may well have been around for some time. En masse it catches the attention by its pale, slightly greyish yellow-green colour and is perhaps in that regard most similar to stunted terrestrial examples of the native *C. brutia*. That tends to be a larger plant with more parallel sided leaves and reflexed styles. The other predominantly terrestrial, *C. stagnalis* is easily distinguished, again by its larger size, without recourse to the examination of the flowers/fruits which thankfully in *C. terrestris* are generally present. The fruits of *C. terrestris* are shorter than wide, <0.8mm and with a very narrow (<0.03mm) wing. In *C. stagnalis* they are at least as tall as wide, >1.2mm and with a wing to 0.5mm.

The near sessile (pedicel <0.6mm in fruit) and uninflated mericarps respectively distinguish this from two other New World species: *C. deflexa* and *C. peploides*, the former naturalised between paving in the Azores and Madeira. These may occur elsewhere as weeds of horticulture and accordingly might be expected to arrive in this country. It is therefore worth close examination and cultivation on to fruiting to establish the identity of any plants found. Currently these Somerset examples are the only British records, but it seems extremely unlikely that it does not occur in other garden centres and horticultural outlets.

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A FISC Experience

By Karen Andrews

Several SRPG members opted to take a Field Identification Skills Certificate or FISC in 2024. It is run by the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI). The FISC is increasingly attractive to ecologists. This is not a scary exam with a pass or fail mark. Rather it offers botanists an opportunity to assess their botanical skills.

The Botanical Skills Ladder recognises 7 Levels:

|  | Skill Level                     | Skill Description                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                    | Level 7 – Outstanding ID Skills | National Expert Level                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                    | Level 6 –                       | Comprehensive knowledge. Able to record 90% of species on a site.                                                              |
|                                                                                    | Level 5 –                       | Able to record at least 70% of all taxa present at a site and use keys accurately.                                             |
|                                                                                    | Level 4 – Good ID Skills        | Able to identify most widespread vascular plants including grasses, rushes, sedges and ferns<br>Able to survey professionally. |
|                                                                                    | Level 3 – Reasonable ID Skills  | Able to identify many common and widespread flowering plants.                                                                  |
|                                                                                    | Level 2 – Modest ID Skills      | Able to identify some common flowering species.                                                                                |
|                                                                                    | Level 1 – Basic ID Skills       | Able to recognise a few common and widespread flowering plant species such as a buttercup or daisy.                            |

Abbreviated Table of the Botanical Skills Ladder. Source: BSBI (see references below). Photo: CC

Although my day job has no direct need for a FISC, I booked a mid-June place to give myself an improvement target for 2024. My competition was purely with myself. The goal helped me focus on getting to grips with more challenging species. I pushed myself to use *The Vegetative Key* and Stace 4 more. I even tackled sedges.

Steve and Simon’s SRPG mock FISC at Ash Priors proved very useful to assess my progress. While I had no trouble finding enough plants, I couldn’t always remember their names quickly enough. I didn’t care whether the Latin or common name came to mind first. It was frustrating when I knew I knew a plant, but the name deserted me in that instant. I realised that more practice was needed to write plant names down quickly – and legibly at that.

Conscious that most of my botanising has centred on the West Country and its limestone and chalk grassland, I booked a little Airbnb a couple of days before my FISC to explore the area. It was ideally situated between

Shrewsbury and the Field Study Centre at Preston Montford. I tested myself on aquatic species as I walked along the river into the town and paid my respects to Darwin’s birthplace and statue. I enjoyed the dramatic scenery of Stiperstones and the abundant foxgloves at Old Oswestry Hill Fort.



The dramatic scenery and heathland of Stiperstones, Shropshire. Photo © Karen Andrews

As it happened, foxgloves were one of the 10 species that featured in the first section of my FISC the next day. It was such a lovely sunny day that the test started on tables with trays of plants outside. This first part takes place without access to any books or keys. It is a matter of instant recognition – or not. I breathed a sigh of relief. I recognised all the species, although the fern's name annoyingly deserted me in the moment.



Abundant Foxgloves, *Digitalis purpurea* at Old Oswestry Hill Fort.  
Photo © Karen Andrews

The second part of the test is the most challenging of all. Panic descended as I entered the lab to see 20 trays of plants laid out on the right-hand side. I didn't recognise a single species as I walked into the room to sit down. We could start identifying the plants in any order that we wished. We could use our familiar field guides and keys to help us. It was off-putting to have no clue as to habitat.

Panic subsided slightly when I realised that I recognised a saltmarsh species from our SRPG walk at Sand Bay in 2023. Recognising the right plant family helped me to narrow down possibilities for others. Initially, I doubted

myself when I keyed out a rare species that I had never seen before. I stopped panicking and smiled to myself. I started to enjoy myself as I identified species that I had never had the opportunity to see before from Scotland and the North of England. I felt a bit pushed for time but managed to put at least a guess for a genus if not a confident species for every plant. After the test was over, I avidly noted down all the correct identifications. I thought that it was fantastic that the BSBI had introduced me to so many new species on the day despite my initial panic.

Examinees had a pleasant packed lunch sat on the grass outside the field study centre in the sunshine. After lunch we set off in minibuses. It was like a mystery tour, watching the road signs and trying to guess where we were heading. The BSBI uses a variety of locations during the year and then moderates the results. We arrived at a nature reserve. The field boundaries of our survey were discussed. We were warned about false positives as any misidentifications that were not found to be present by the gold standard surveyor would result in marks being deducted. The gold standard was set by a very experienced ecologist.

Remembering what I had learnt from the SRPG's mock FISC, I kept moving to ensure that I covered all the ground. I referred to my *Collins Wildflower Guide*, but didn't waste time if something eluded me. By the end, I was satisfied with my long list of species.

That evening I enjoyed a sunny walk by the Ironbridge at Telford. On my journey home the next day, I stopped off for lunch among the orchids at Minchinhampton Common in Gloucestershire, before joining the fabulous SRPG evening walk at Berrow Dunes.

All the practice was well-rewarded. An email arrived. I had reached the professional standard of a Level 4. Several SRPG members were successful in achieving 4s and 5s. My FISC experience proved a lot less daunting than I had thought. I enjoyed it and would contemplate resitting the test again in the future. The difference between a Level 4 and a Level 5 is reputedly quite a jump. So maybe in a couple of years' time I'll have another go? I can now see more clearly what to do to make further improvements. I certainly need to get more confident at keying. I also need to botanise more outside the West County in different habitats.

## Robert David Randall 1948-2024 – a personal tribute

By Helena Crouch with Simon Leach



Rob Randall 1948-2024. Photo © Helena Crouch

The sudden death of Rob Randall in March 2024 has left a huge hole in the botanical community. He was a member of SRPG since the Group's early days, yet many members will not have met him. Indeed, even when present, he was such a modest quiet man that members might be forgiven for not noticing he was there, but most would have known him by repute. Nobody knew more about the natural history of the Bath area, particularly the flora, but Rob's contribution to botany beyond Bath is extensive and wide-ranging.

After joining Bath Natural History Society (Bath Nats) in 1976, Rob became the society's Botanical Recorder in 1977, a position he held for nearly fifty years. He joined the BSBI in 1978 and in 2005 became BSBI's joint VC Recorder for N. Somerset (VC6), with Ian Green. Ian lived in Scotland by then: the following year he retired as VCR in VC6 to focus on being VCR for Moray (VC95), and I

became joint VCR for VC6 with Rob. We were co-recorders for ten years, before Rob retired from the role to spend more time on his *Rubus* work.

Rob's name will be indelibly linked with brambles. A highly respected expert on the genus, he was co-author with Alan Newton of the *Atlas of British and Irish Brambles* (Newton & Randall 2004), and latterly he was a BSBI referee for *Rubus* in southern England. He led many field meetings and training workshops on brambles, including several in Somerset. Rob was also an acknowledged expert on roses (*Rosa*), leading walks and workshops on them as well. Rob considered brambles to be easier than roses which is little consolation to those of us who struggle with both! As a referee he visited the Somerset County Herbarium in Taunton to cast an expert eye over the county's *Rubus* and *Rosa* collections, with many specimens being freshly determined (or re-determined) as a result. Rob's own significant herbarium of *Rubus* specimens has been accepted by the Natural History Museum, where newly acquired specimens are now digitised during accessioning, so that one day Rob's specimens will be accessible worldwide.



Rob Randall in the Taunton Herbarium. Photo © Simon Leach

Rob appeared to be drawn to the challenges posed by so-called 'critical' taxa. In the 1980s he collected and recorded hawkweeds (*Hieracium*) in the Bath area with his friend Dave Green, and in 2017 he began a brief affair with dandelions (*Taraxacum*), collecting specimens quite widely in N. Somerset. In that year he notched up first VC6 records for *Taraxacum pallidipes*, *T. richardsianum* and *T. subhuelphersianum* (Leach & Richards 2018), as well as the first VC6 specimens of

something that was later described as a new species, *T. amicum* (Richards 2019). Rob had a discerning eye for interesting plants. In addition to his work on ‘critical’ taxa, he would often look critically at common species. In 2023 he made a study of Red Dead-nettles (*Lamium purpureum*), convinced, as I was too, that within *L. purpureum* there are different forms potentially meriting taxonomic recognition.

In common with several other Somerset botanists, Rob had a passion for the changing urban flora and relished the challenge of identifying mysterious non-native ‘street weeds’, in Bath and beyond. In the last ten years, Rob found at least a dozen species new to VC6, or indeed Somerset, including Buttonweed (*Cotula coronopifolia*) by a stream in Newton Park, Dwarf Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum molle*) in stonework in St James Square, and Honeybells (*Nothoscordum borbonicum*) in paving on Walcot Parade.

Rob was a brilliant all-round botanist. He leaves a vast legacy of records. He contributed many records to *The Flora of Somerset* (Roe 1981) and made more than 30,000 records for *The Flora of the Bristol Region* (Green *et al.* 2000). Rob also contributed *Rubus* records to *The Wiltshire Flora* (Gillam 1993) as well as records of *Rubus* and other taxa to the *Atlas Flora of Somerset* (Green, Green & Crouch 1997). He made about 20,000 records, particularly around Bath, for the BSBI’s *Plant Atlas 2020* (Stroh *et al.* 2023).

Rob was a mainstay of Bath Nats for nearly fifty years and was President at the time of his death. He promoted outreach events, meeting with the ‘Friends groups’ of different green spaces around Bath, carrying out botanical surveys for them; he enthused schoolchildren, quietly and generously sharing his unrivalled knowledge of Bath natural history (his expertise included galls, grasshoppers and lichens). For three decades – all the

time I knew him – he worked as a volunteer at Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, cataloguing the collections, developing their database and putting together exhibitions. He was a kind and generous friend to many and is greatly missed.

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[Thank you to Simon Leach for his help and support in writing this tribute.]

## Plant Records for 2024

### Compiled by Helena Crouch

During 2024, over 57,000 records were made for vascular plants in Somerset. Thank you very much to everyone – members of SRPG and others – who sent records. All records, even for common species, are valuable, indeed it is important that we monitor any changes in distributions of all species in Somerset. This annual list of plant records shows only the new additions to the county or to either vice-county, and selected other significant records; it does not really do justice to the huge contribution of many of our recorders.

As in 2023, the lists of taxa new to Somerset or to VC5 or VC6 consist entirely of aliens. This is not surprising: one of the trends identified by Stroh *et al.* (2023) in 'Plant Atlas 2020' was the increasing number of alien species in the British & Irish Flora. Somerset has a well-recorded native flora, but new non-native species are continually introduced into cultivation, subsequently escaping. Although some never become established in the wild, the recording and documentation of these taxa is important to identify and track potentially invasive aliens. Many significant records were also made for native taxa, including RPR species: some of these are listed in the third section. *Taraxacum* species new to Somerset or to VC5 or VC6 are listed in a separate note. All records below are for 2024 unless otherwise stated. Those marked with an asterisk are neophytes (recent introductions). Recorders whose names appear more than once have been abbreviated as follows:

|      |                            |
|------|----------------------------|
| CVWG | Cam Valley Wildlife Group  |
| DEG  | Dave Green                 |
| FJR  | Fred Rumsey                |
| GEL  | Graham Lavender            |
| GHR  | Gill Read                  |
| HJC  | Helena Crouch              |
| IPG  | Ian Green                  |
| JP   | John Poingdestre           |
| LE   | Linda Everton              |
| PAS  | Pat Steele                 |
| SJL  | Simon Leach                |
| SJP  | Stephen Parker             |
| SRPG | Somerset Rare Plants Group |

Where reference is made to the *The Atlas Flora of Somerset* (Green, P.R., Green, I.P. & Crouch, G.A., 1997; Wayford and Yeovil: privately published) this is denoted as AFS.

### NEW SOMERSET RECORDS

\**Anthyllis vulneraria* subsp. *carpatica* (a Kidney-vetch) – Taunton, Bathpool Bridge (ST24972564, ST24992567, ST25002568), 11 Jun, 12 plants on rough stony bank on E side of Bridgwater Road, SJL, conf. John Akeroyd, VC5.

\**Campanula carpatica* (Tussock Bellflower) – Minehead, North Hill (SS96584664), 18 Jun, wall by pavement, garden escape, GEL, VC5.

\**Davidia involucrata* (Dove-tree) – Yeovil, Sydney Gardens (ST552162), 22 Oct, 1 small tree self-sown near to parent tree, IPG, VC5.

\**Delosperma cooperi* (Cooper's Iceplant) – Minehead, North Hill (SS96864689), 13 Jul, patch c.3m x 0.5m on rocky bank beside road, GEL, VC5.

\**Erodium trifolium* (Three-leaved Heron's-bill) – Glastonbury (ST49783881), 2 Mar, 1 plant in lane off St Benedict's Close, Julian Woodman, det. HJC, VC6.



*Erodium trifolium* (Three-leaved Heron's-bill) in Glastonbury.  
Photo © Helena Crouch

\**Euphorbia prostrata* (Prostrate Sandmat) – Bath, Fairfield Avenue (ST75196676), 10 Aug, 4 plants in pot in garden, Stephanie Lockhart, VC6.

\**Juncus anthelatus* (Lax-flowered Rush) – Jack's Castle Plantation (ST74803534), 2 Aug, 1 clump on ride leading to Jack's Castle, HJC & GHR, conf. Michael Wilcox from a photo and scan, VC6.

\***Melica ciliata** (Silky-spike Melick) – Frome, Woodland Road (ST77754752), 4 Jun, 1 clump on pavement on N side of road, HJC & DEG, det. HJC, conf. Oliver Pescott, VC6.

\***Miscanthus nepalensis** (Himalayan Fairy-grass) – Minehead, North Hill (SS96984679), 10 Jul, 1 clump between wall and pavement, GEL, VC5.

\***Myriophyllum rubricaulis** (Red-stemmed Parrot's-feather) – Minehead, Higher Moor Farm (SS96284698), 27 May, first seen in January in small pond, now with red stems and pink flowers and covering entire surface of pond 10m x 7m, GEL, det. Johan van Valkenburg, VC5.

\***Origanum marjorana** (Pot Marjoram) – Minehead (SS9746), GEL, VC5.

\***Parthenocissus henryana** (Chinese Virginia-creeper) – Pitney (ST44512850), 8 Jun, 1 plant on verge outside village hall, SRPG, VC6.

\***Persicaria virginiana** (Jumpseed) – Wellington (ST13922036), 26 Jul, 3 plants as street weeds, SJP, LE & Karen Turvey, VC5.

\***Phedimus kamtschaticus** (Kamchatka Stonecrop) – Oakhill, Little London (ST62914748), 20 Jan 2017, small patch on rocks of cutting of disused miniature railway, HJC & FJR, VC6.

\***Pterocarya fraxinifolia** (Caucasian Wingnut) – Bath, Spring Gardens (ST752649), 19 Jul, small self-sown tree by the rubbish bin near large planted tree, IPG, VC6.

\***Verbascum creticum** (Cretan Mullein) – Stogursey (ST19904295), 29 May, escape from nearby school onto verge, Ro FitzGerald, VC5.

#### NEW VICE-COUNTY RECORDS

\***Callitriche terrestris** (Terrestrial Water-starwort) – Monkton Heathfield, Monkton Elm Garden Centre (ST262274, ST263274), 3 Oct, scattered between paving in outdoor plant sales area, FJR, VC5.

\***Camellia japonica** (Japanese Camellia) – Clevedon, Nortons Wood Lane (ST433723), 6 Mar, naturalised on edge of woodland, from garden waste presumably, David Hawkins, VC6.

\***Cotula australis** (Annual Buttonweed) – Bridgwater (ST30043743), 29 Dec, 2 plants in flower in gutter at E end of Black Bridge across River Parrett, HJC & SRPG, VC6.



*Cotula australis* (Annual Buttonweed) in Bridgwater.

Photo © Helena Crouch

\***Eragrostis pilosa** (Jersey Love-grass) – Yeovil Cemetery (ST55111650), 10 Sep, 1 plant on corner of flowerbed, IPG, VC5.

\***Euphorbia mellifera** (Canary Spurge) – Porlock Weir (SS8647), 21 Aug, GEL, VC5.

\***Hedera algeriensis** (Algerian Ivy) – Yeovil (ST555162), 27 Dec, spread naturally from where planted, climbing up at least one tree, Paul Green, VC5.

\***Lemna valdiviana** (Valdivia Duckweed) – Steart Marshes (ST25344412), 17 Jun, on S side of NE footpath just before point at which a track runs N, Robert & Stephanie Kirby, VC5.

\***Miscanthus sinensis** (Chinese Silver-grass) – Minehead (SS96204615), 18 Jun, 6 clumps, pavement weed, GEL, VC5.

\***Oloptum miliaceum** (Smilo-grass) – Minehead (SS96694664), 20 Aug, 2 clumps 5m apart in crack between wall and road, GEL, VC5.

\***Phedimus kamtschaticus** (Kamchatka Stonecrop) – Minehead (SS9646), 14 May, GEL, VC5.

\***Pittosporum tenuifolium** (Kohuhu) – Backwell Green (ST496690), 13 Aug 2017, Richard Bland, VC6.

**\**Santolina chamaecyparissus*** (Lavender-cotton) – Batcombe, (ST69213929), 11 Oct, 1 large plant in road, N side of Kale Street, HJC & GHR, VC6.

**\**Trachycarpus fortunei*** (Chusan Palm) – Minehead (SS97024686), 13 Jul, 1 plant <30cm tall on earthy verge, 15m from a full-grown tree on other side of fence, GEL, VC5.

#### OTHER INTERESTING RECORDS – Native taxa

***Apera spica-venti*** (Loose Silky-bent) – Wraxall, Watercress Farm (ST49947019, ST49967020, ST49967018, ST50007020), 1 Aug, 6 clumps on mounds of soil in field which was sown with a seed mix, HJC & FJR (found by Clare Mockridge & Suzanne Elson), VC6. Fifth record for VC6 and Somerset and first since 1931.

***Callitriche brutia*** (Pedunculate Water-starwort) – Lower Woods (Longleat Estate) (ST79014330), 10 Jul, in small pool to E of main N-S ride, HJC, VC6. Third record for VC6.

***Crassula tillaea*** (Mossy Stonecrop) – Weston-super-Mare, Sea Lawns (ST31666037, ST31716058), 27 May, hundreds of plants on lawn N of Clarence Road North and 20-30 plants on raised sandy patch of beach lawns, near junction of Clifton Road, Neil Burstow, VC6. Second coastal site for species previously only recorded in a few sites in the E of VC6.

***Dactylorhiza incarnata*** subsp. ***pulchella*** (Early Marsh-orchid) – Southey Moor (ST19391106), 29 Oct, FJR, VC3. Second record for this subspecies in administrative Somerset (but VC3).

***Galium parisiense*** (Wall Bedstraw) – Bartlett's Quarry (ST72324559), 19 Jun 2019, 5 plants growing in fines from an asphalt recycler, James McGill; Lytes Cary (NT Estate) (ST53292654), 1 Dec, some small plants in paving near front of manor house, FJR; Shapwick (ST41793834), 3 Dec, few plants on steps of village hall, HJC & FJR, VC6. Third, fourth and fifth records for VC6.

***Lotus subbiflorus*** (Hairy Bird's-foot-trefoil) – Avalon Marshes Centre (ST42604148, ST42614150, ST42624150), 16 Jul, 6 plants in cellular paving blocks of car park, HJC & FJR, VC6. Second site for VC6 and third for Somerset.

***Mentha pulegium*** (Pennyroyal) – Royal Portbury Dock Road (ST50137693), 13 Aug, several tight clumps on a very close-mown grassy bank, Phil Quinn, VC6. New hectad record for species which is GB Scarce and Endangered, and Critically Endangered on the England Red List, but likely to be an introduction at this site.

***Nardus stricta*** (Mat-grass) – Langford Heathfield (ST0923), 31 May, in compartment H5b West, SJL & LE, VC5. First record for the hectad since AFS for this England Red List Near Threatened species.

***Silene gallica*** (Small-flowered Catchfly) – Ilminster, Silver Street (ST35931457), 26 Jun, 6 flowering shoots on top of low old stone wall bordering road, FJR, VC6. Second record for VC5 and Somerset since AFS.

***Trifolium glomeratum*** (Clustered Clover) – Weston-super-Mare, Ellenborough Park SSSI (ST31906078), 29 May, Sarah Shuttleworth, VC6. First record since 1998 for the only site in VC6.

***Trifolium squamosum*** (Sea Clover) – Alford, landfill site (ST60693117), 22 Jun, several spreading clumps in fruit at the NW section of landfill site, JP, conf. Chris Preston, VC6. New hectad record for GB Scarce species.

***Viola x contempta*** (*V. arvensis* x *tricolor*) – Bossington (SS89324797), 24 Jun 2017, 1 plant at edge of Barley crop, Liz McDonnell & Wild Flower Society, VC5; Berrow Dunes (ST294525), 3 Jun 2014, 1 plant on turf nursery area to E of track N of church, SRPG, det. FJR; Priddy, SW of (ST518500), 12 May 2022, in an arable field between Priddy and Deerleap, PAS, det. IPG; Lytes Cary (NT Estate) (ST536266), 24 Jun, few plants with *V. arvensis* in wheat field margin parallel to wood, PAS, det. HJC, VC6. Third record for VC5 and third, fourth and fifth records for VC6.

#### OTHER INTERESTING RECORDS – Alien taxa

**\**Acanthus spinosus*** (Spiny Bear's-breech) – Lower Failand, E of (ST52047349), 26 Mar 2023, several plants on verge of track, opposite cottage, HJC & Bristol Naturalists' Society; Felton (ST51316553), 23 Oct, 1 plant on E side of road, IPG, VC6. Third and fourth records for VC6.

**\**Agapanthus praecox*** (African Lily) – Taunton, Church Street (ST23592448), 17 Jun, 2 plants, 1 flowering, in cracks in pavement, an escape from adjoining garden, SJL, VC5. Second record for VC5 and third for Somerset.

\****Brassica juncea*** (Chinese Mustard) – Old Cleeve (ST04054178), 20 May 2023, 1 plant flowering in vegetable garden, Jeanne & Tim Webb, VC5; Peasedown St John (ST70255747), 27 Jun, 1 plant at edge of footpath leading from Bath Road to car park, HJC & DEG, VC6. First record for VC5 since 1996 and second post-2000 record for VC6.

\****Callitriche terrestris*** (Terrestrial Water-starwort) – Shepton Mallet, Dobbies Garden Centre (ST63074257, ST63084258, ST63084259), 7 Sep, fairly frequent in paving in small area of outdoor sales area, FJR, conf. Richard Lansdown, VC6. Second site for VC6.

\****Chenopodium strictum*** (Striped Goosefoot) – Bath, Royal Victoria Park, 30 Oct, 1 tall plant on spoil from dredged pond, Alvan White, det. HJC, VC6. Fifth record for VC6.

\****Clematis cirrhosa*** (Early Virgin's-bower) – North Petherton (ST29143300), 24 Nov, 1 self-sown plant growing from concrete in front of a garage, SJP, VC5. Second record for VC5 and Somerset.

\****Coronilla valentina*** subsp. ***glauca*** (Shrubby Scorpion-vech) – Locking (ST35985991), 22 Mar, garden escape in pavement on Elm Tree Road, Andrew Robinson, VC6. Third record for VC6.

\****Cotoneaster dammeri*** (Bearberry Cotoneaster) – Stoke Lane Quarry (ST66794739), 24 Jul, large patch appressed to ground on bank on N side of track into quarry, HJC & DEG, VC6. Third record for VC6 and fourth for Somerset.

\****Cyrtomium fortunei*** (Fortune's Holly-fern) – South Petherton, West Street (ST43081668), 20 Jun 2023, 1 plant down drain, FJR, VC5. Second record for VC5.

\****Echinochloa esculenta*** (Japanese Millet) – Taunton, Trenchard Way (ST22592539), 26 Oct, 1 plant in kerbside, SRPG, det. SJL, VC5. Second record for VC5 and first since AFS.

\****Glandora diffusa*** (Purple Gromwell) – Minehead (SS9646), 18 Apr, GEL, VC5. Second record for the species in VC5 and Somerset.

\****Hieracium scotostictum*** (Dappled Hawkweed) – Taunton (ST24682477), 25 Jun, 1 plant in flower at edge of footpath between allotments and Hamilton Road, escaped from nearby gardens; Taunton, Gordon Road (ST23462442), 25 Oct, several plants along base of wall and in pavement, escaped from nearby garden, SJL, VC5. Fourth and fifth records for VC5.

\****Hoheria sexstylosa*** (Long-leaved Lacebark) – Minehead, North Hill (SS96134626), 2 Jul, small shrub to 1m growing out of base of Poplar, GEL, VC5. Second record for VC5 and Somerset.

\****Isotoma axillaris*** (Australian Harebell) – Minehead, High Street (SS96854621), 13 Jun, GEL; Taunton, Paul Street (ST228243), 7 Aug, in pavement at base of low brick wall, SJL, VC5. Second and third records for VC5.

\****Jasminum beesianum*** (Red Jasmine) – Low Ham (ST43282932), 15 Jul, large flowering shrub clambering over field wall amongst brambles opposite cottage, JP, VC6. Second record for VC6 and Somerset.

\****Lonicera caprifolium*** (Perfoliate Honeysuckle) – Minehead, North Hill (SS96834690), 13 Jul, on bank by road, GEL, VC5. Second record for VC5 and Somerset since AFS.

\****Miscanthus sinensis*** (Chinese Silver-grass) – Minehead (SS96984679), 15 Jul, on verge, GEL; Curry Rivel (ST39302342), 20 Jun, 2 stems in headland, JP; Porlock, Parson's Street (SS88594647), 12 Sep, 1 clump between tarmac of road and wall, GEL, VC5. Second, third and fourth records for VC5.

\****Muehlenbeckia complexa*** (Wireplant) – Minehead, North Hill (SS96534651), 2 Jul, in hedge, but some had escaped along road and self-seeded, GEL, VC5. Second record for VC5 and Somerset.

\****Nemesia denticulata*** (Toothed Aloha) – Bath, Orange Grove (ST752648), 17 Jun, 1 plant on pavement outside hotel, Paul Barton, det. HJC, VC6. Third record for VC6 and Somerset.

\****Nerine bowdenii*** (Bowden Lily) – Porlock (SS89254685), 31 Oct, growing through hedge on road verge, field behind, GEL, VC5. Third record for VC5 and fourth for Somerset.

\****Oxalis dillenii*** (Sussex Yellow-sorrel) – Frome (ST76664733), 6 Dec, several plants along pavement edge at base of wall, N side of Critchill Road, HJC & GHR, VC6. Fifth record for VC6.

\****Paulownia tomentosa*** (Foxglove-tree) – Wells, Portway (ST54344580), 27 Jul, 1 plant on pavement against wall of house, S side of road, HJC, VC6. Third record for VC6 and fourth for Somerset.



*Paulownia tomentosa* (Foxglove-tree) in Wells.  
Photo © Helena Crouch

\****Perovskia atriplicifolia*** (Russian Sage) – Rode, Church Row (ST80805345), 12 Oct, 7 plants in paving in new estate, DEG, VC6. Third record for VC6 and fourth for Somerset.

\****Phedimus hybridus*** (Siberian Stonecrop) – Wincanton, West Hill (ST70752863), 9 Oct, several plants on pavement below plants on garden wall, W side of Grants Close, HJC & FJR, VC6. Second record for VC6 and fifth for Somerset.

\****Phedimus kamtschaticus*** (Kamchatka Stonecrop) – Higher Holton (ST68362706), 22 May 2017, small clump on E edge of road, HJC & FJR; Cheddar (ST4653), 23 Apr 2022, on wall, IPG, VC6. Second and third records for VC6.

\****Phlomis russeliana*** (Turkish Sage) – Radstock, Colliers Way (ST69775518), 26 Jun, 1 plant in flower at S edge of cycle path, against fence of industrial estate, HJC & CVWG, det. HJC; Ashton Court Estate (ST55637154), 1 Jul, 1 plant growing in compost heap area under trees, SRPG, VC6. Second and third records for VC6 and Somerset.

\****Picris hieracioides*** subsp. ***villarsii*** – Taunton, Bathpool Bridge (ST25002568), 13 Aug, several plants on new road embankment on E side of A38, SJL, VC5. Second site for VC5 and Somerset.

\****Pittosporum tenuifolium*** (Kohuhu) – Wells, Milton Lane (ST54744623), 1 Nov, 1 small self-sown plant on footpath between Milton Lane and Ash Grove, FJR, VC6. Second record for VC6.

\****Rhinanthus angustifolius*** (Greater Yellow-rattle) – Faulkland, Lime Kiln Farm (ST751550), 7 Aug, originally planted in Rookery field but now self-seeded, HJC & CVWG, VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since 1918. Plants were in flower in August, the flowers having a sinuous curved corolla, with teeth of upper lip 2mm long. Seed was given by a friend, but the original source was Ham House Meadows in Richmond.

\****Rumex scutatus*** (French Sorrel) – Upper Swainswick (ST75926839), 5 Aug, 6 plants on kerb edge adjacent to wall of property, N side of road, DEG, det. HJC, VC6. Fifth record for VC6.

\****Santolina chamaecyparissus*** (Lavender-cotton) – Frome (ST76744775), 6 Dec, 1 mature plant on pavement, N side of Oakfield Road, HJC & GHR, VC6. Second record for VC6 and third for Somerset.

\****Scutellaria altissima*** (Somerset Skullcap) – Twerton, Bath City Farm (ST725641), 30 Jun 2022, Mike Williams; Batcombe (ST69373934), 11 Oct, 1 plant in edge of road, S side of Kale Street, self-sown from plants in border, HJC & GHR, VC6. Fourth and fifth records for VC6.

\****Teucrium hircanicum*** (Caucasian Germander) – Batcombe (ST69323933), 11 Oct, 4 clumps on bank, S side of Kale Street, HJC & GHR, VC6. Fourth record for VC6 and Somerset.

\****Verbena hastata*** f. ***rosea*** (American Vervain) – Knole, Appledore Quarry (ST48232608), 13 Jul, 1 plant on dumped soil, FJR, VC6. Second record for this species in VC6 and Somerset.

## **SRPG Membership and Contacts**

Somerset Rare Plants Group annual subscription is £10 from January 2024. Payment can be made directly into the SRPG account as a one-off transfer or by standing order. Please contact Ellen McDouall (see email below) for account details.

Members attend meetings at their own risk. Field meeting leaders carry a list of emergency phone numbers. Please contact Ellen McDouall if you have not completed a membership form, so that she has the telephone numbers of those to contact in case of illness or accident.

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