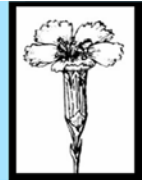


SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



2018 Newsletter

Issue No. 19

Editor Dee Holladay

Somerset Rare Plants Group has come of age – 21 years and still going strong. Our membership continues to grow year on year, which is fantastic. As usual, much of our effort in 2018 was targeted at under-recorded areas, including so-called ‘zero monads’ – those 1km squares no-one seems to have recorded in since the turn of the century. In recent years, ‘turning the map blue’ has almost become a strapline for our Group; and, as you can see from the map below, our county is indeed turning blue. Recording and data entry for the BSBI’s Atlas 2020 project ends on 31st Dec. 2019, so one final push in to visit the white bits and then we can heave a sigh of relief and think about what we want to do next.

Apart from the Rare Plants Register, one option we might consider is doing what the county’s ornithologists did. After recording for the national Bird Atlas finished in 2011, they put in one extra year’s work targeting under-recorded squares and species and then produced their own ‘Somerset Atlas of Breeding and Wintering Birds’. Could we have a go at something similar, perhaps? We have the *Atlas Flora of Somerset*, of course, but that was published in 1997. A few of our youngest members probably weren’t even *born* when Paul and Ian Green and co. began fieldwork for that

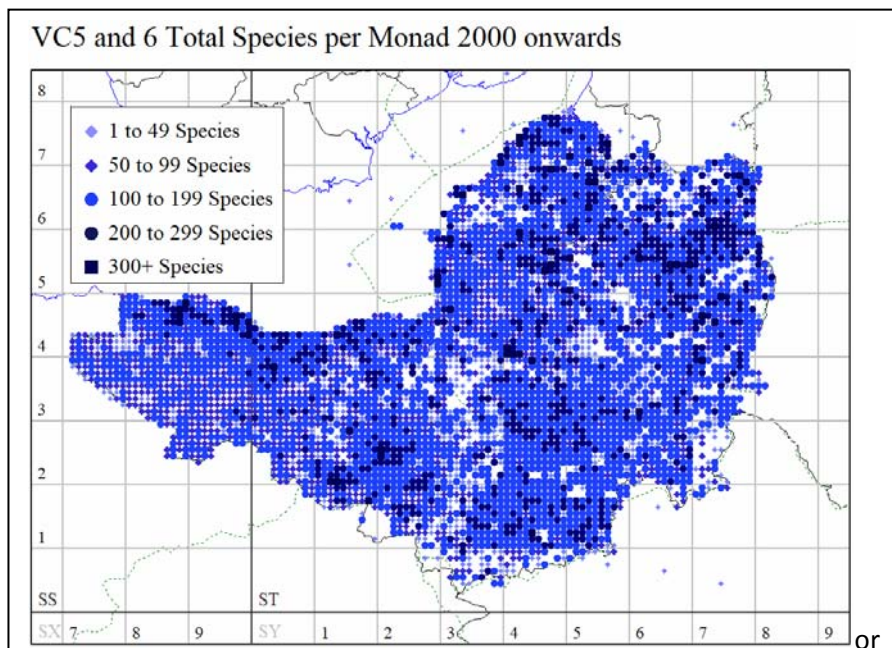
commendable tome. And much has changed in that time. Consider, for example, the decline of Green-winged Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*), the invasion of the road network by Danish Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia danica*), or the whirlwind spread of Water Bent (*Polypogon viridis*). There’s a lot going on out there.

I’ve never been that keen on making the distinction between ‘beginners’ and ‘experts’. You can spend years trying to master dandelions, only to discover at the end of it all that you still know next to nothing about hawkweeds. (And, to be honest, there’s probably an awful lot you still won’t know about dandelions – but that’s beside the point.) The thing about ‘expertise’ is that it exists on a kind of sliding scale, and each of us sits at multiple points along that scale, depending on the subject. In a Group like ours *everyone*, even the so-called beginner, is an expert on *something*. The point is this: if you can tell a Hawkbit (*Leontodon*) from a Cat’s-ear (*Hypochaeris*) by the hairs on the leaves, then you’re a bit of an expert in the eyes of someone who never knew that the hairs of one were forked while the hairs on the other were simple. And ‘being an expert’ is only *partly* about knowledge; it’s also got a lot to do with enthusiasm and single-mindedness.

In the last 21 years we’ve been fortunate in having many beginners join the Group who now find they’ve become experts in something – whether that’s getting to know their local patch, having a love affair with *Atriplex*, knowing how to tell x from y, or having a ‘sixth sense’ for where to find z. So if you’re baffled by a Whitebeam or a Willow, an Eyebright or an orchid, you’ll usually find someone in the Group who’s able to help. (And others who may be unable to help, but more than happy to sympathise!)

Right then, let’s turn that map blue...

Simon Leach



Winter Meetings

New Year Plant Hunt, Clevedon (VC6)

Monday 1st January 2018

Report by Helena Crouch

After travelling through torrential rain, 22 members met in Clevedon for a cold but miraculously dry New Year Plant Hunt. We set off along Bay Road, but as always we scarcely moved at first, peering into front gardens finding common species such as Keeled-fruited Cornsalad (*Valerianella carinata*), Common Field-speedwell (*Veronica persica*), Ivy-leaved Speedwell (*V. hederifolia*) and Petty Spurge (*Euphorbia peplus*) in flower, together with a few grasses, Annual Meadow-grass (*Poa annua*), Tall Fescue (*Schedonorus arundinaceus*) and False Oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*), which were carefully examined for anthers. Progressing along the road, we found Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites fragrans*), Tree-mallow (*Malva arborea*) and a clump of Summer Snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum* subsp. *pulchellum*) in flower on the verge. Eventually we reached Ladye Bay and descended onto the beach, where an intrepid slithery clamber over rocks produced no further species in flower, but on the cliffs above we spotted Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and a large bush of Laurustinus (*Viburnum tinus*) in flower. Returning along the coastal path we steadily added more species to our list of flowers, including Wild Madder (*Rubia peregrina*), Alexanders (*Smyrniolum olusatrum*) and Sweet Violet (*Viola odorata*). Back in urban surroundings we found Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*), Yellow Corydalis (*Pseudofumaria lutea*), Green Alkanet (*Pentaglottis sempervirens*) and Mexican Fleabane (*Erigeron karvinskianus*). Under trees we were pleased to find Ivy Broomrape (*Orobanche hederaceae*) in flower.

We stopped the clock for a chilly picnic at the Marine Parade, some members sitting on breezy benches with a sea view, others on sheltered rocks on the beach. We were soon off hunting again, finding several new species on amenity lawns on the sea front, including Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*), Field Madder (*Sherardia arvensis*) and Wall Barley (*Hordeum murinum*), then Sea Radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum* subsp. *maritimus*) on the beach. A disturbed bank by the crazy golf course added Musk Stork's-bill (*Erodium moschatum*), Hoary Mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*) and Viper's-bugloss (*Echium vulgare*) which was apparently new to the hectad. As we neared the end of our three hours, frantically scrutinising flower beds around the

park for weeds, we added Grey Field-speedwell (*Veronica polita*), Thale-cress (*Arabidopsis thaliana*) and Hairy Bitter-cress (*Cardamine hirsuta*). After much agonising in the last few minutes, we eventually found anthers on a specimen of Water Bent (*Polypogon viridis*), which was a very pleasing final species for our list as it was new to the (admittedly very small) hectad, thus adding another spot to the Atlas 2020 map for what is possibly our most rapidly spreading species. Altogether we recorded 74 species in flower; we celebrated with tea at the Walton Park Hotel. Ours was the sixth longest list in the 2018 BSBI New Year Plant Hunt.

Annual Members' Meeting and AGM

Avalon Marshes Centre, Westhay

Saturday 20th January 2018

Report by Liz McDonnell, Helena Crouch & Simon Leach

Thirty members met for our usual brief AGM and annual social get-together. After coffee and a chat, Steve Parker welcomed new members, some of whom joined SRPG after attending last year's conference. Steve gave a brief summary of SRPG activities in 2017, describing the variety of talks, field meetings and identification workshops. He gave a special mention to the 20th Anniversary Conference held in October and on behalf of the members, presented Liz McDonnell with a specially commissioned painting by local artist Jenny Barron for her work on organizing the conference and her varied work for SRPG over the last 20 years.



Liz McDonnell receiving her award from Steve Parker (Chair of SRPG)

Liz gave an update on membership and reported that although the SRPG database had just over 100 members names on it, only about half of them had paid their subscriptions and/or came to meetings

and so a revision and tightening up of the membership was needed. New data-protection rules will soon be in operation and it was agreed that only those who paid the annual subscription should be members (together with our few Honorary Members).

Clive Lovatt gave the financial report. The accounts for the year ended 31 December 2017 were distributed to members at the AGM and show that SRPG had net assets of £1,385 at the year end, represented by funds in a Barclays current account, less year end creditors. This approximates to three years' subscriptions which is considered a reasonable amount to retain. As a result, 2018 subscriptions are unchanged at £8. The deficit for the year (excess of expenditure over income) of £379 (2016 surplus £34) is best explained in its three contributing parts.

Subscriptions (56 paid up members) and related donations and proceeds from book sales (£19) covered indoor meeting expenses, insurance and printing and binding a few copies of the annual newsletter for the record and for those not able to access it electronically, and limited costs of stationery and the like. This segment yielded a surplus of £145, applied towards the Taunton herbarium project.

Several SRPG members continued to work on Mondays at the Taunton herbarium and spent £372 on herbarium supplies, mainly flimsies to protect specimens, back-up storage for specimen images, a copy of Stace and refreshments. SRPG regards it as very important to restore the herbarium to usable condition and fit for long-term survival and therefore can make an occasional investment in an asset it has access to but does not own.

The 20th anniversary conference was priced at £10/participant based on covering all costs except for external speakers' expenses (£178) and resulted in a subsidy by SRPG of £152 (£2.50 per paying attendee). This was regarded as a reasonable and appropriate use of reserves. SRPG does not pay travelling or related expenses to the committee or members and only reimburses them for direct and necessary out of pocket expenditure.

Helena Crouch gave us an update of VC6 recording, illustrated with the usual stunning photographs. She highlighted many important finds for North Somerset. One of the most important and interesting was a hybrid Eyebright (*Euphrasia arctica* x *pseudokernerii*) with large flowers and wide leaves,

found at Bannerdown. This is new to science, having never been recorded before, as the two parents have distributions in Britain that do not usually overlap. There was a hybrid theme as two other hybrid Eyebrights were recorded new to Somerset, whilst *Holcus x hybridus*, found at Emborough, is the first record for Somerset since 1925, and *Rorippa x anceps* at Claverton was the first since 1920. Chia (*Salvia hispanica*), found at Chew Valley Lake by Margaret Webster, is the first record for Britain. This probably originated from bird seed. Helena showed us the newest 'Blue Map' of the whole of Somerset indicating the huge difference that over 95,000 records made by members in 2017 have made to the total species per monad. Andrew Robinson's systematic recording of ST35 and John Poingdestre's records in South Somerset were particularly mentioned, but others have made huge differences to the map too.



Euphrasia arctica x *pseudokernerii* ©Helena Crouch

Simon Leach gave us a summary of recording effort in VC5, with a diagrammatic map showing the spread of individual members and groups working across various parts of the vice-county. He also showed a fascinating graph indicating that our recording effort is well balanced - that we are recording both common, scarce and rare species equally well for purposes of Atlas 2020. However, he pointed out that some relatively common plants are

currently being markedly under-recorded e.g. Danish Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia danica*), Oxford Ragwort (*Senecio squalidus*) and Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*). All these are roadside plants and Simon made a plea for car passengers (NOT drivers) to make a note of these while travelling around the county, including to and from SRPG meetings, as many useful records can be made in this way. An important VC5 record this year was Chaffweed (*Centunculus minimus*), found at the north end of the Quantocks by the 'Friday Group'. This was the first record since 2000 in VC5. Purple Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria purpurea*) was re-found at one of its old sites on the Brendon Hills and doing well; this is currently its only site in Somerset. Making only brief mention of galls, Simon noted the discovery at three sites in the Blackdowns of an inflorescence gall on *Galium verum*, probably caused by the gall-mite *Contarinia acrocecis*. This gall-mite was only recognized in Britain in 2014, galling Hedge Bedstraw (*Galium album*) in Suffolk, although known to induce galls on Lady's-bedstraw in mainland Europe. This is the first record of it in Somerset, and the first time it has been found in Britain on Lady's-bedstraw. Simon gave a summary of the SRPG Dandelion Workshop held in Wedmore in April and mentioned a couple of the more important *Taraxacum* records that SRPG have made this year, adding to an already impressive list of Somerset and VC records.

Clive Lovatt reported that the Copse Bindweed (*Fallopia dumetorum*) at Nailsea was still present in 2017. He collected a small number of seeds, sending some to both Cambridge and Bristol Botanic Gardens.



Helianthemum apenninum at Brean Down - winner of the 2017 competition ©Cath Shellswell

After our usual bring and share lunch, Ian Salmon announced the results of the 2017 Photo competition. Cath Shellswell won both categories – her photo of the White Rockrose (*Helianthemum apenninum*) won the 'plant' category [and was used very effectively earlier in the year as the beautiful logo for our 20th Anniversary Conference] and her photo of the SRPG group at Brean Down won the 'non plant' category. The runners-up were photos of Mousetail (*Myosurus minimus*) and 'A Wet Picnic'. All four of these photos are in the 2017 Newsletter.

Graham Lavender presented the 2018 Field Meeting Programme consisting of 17 meetings throughout Somerset between April and October. Graham worked hard to produce this earlier this year, in response to requests from members. Beginners and improvers are welcome on all meetings and we all learn from each other on these field meetings and workshops.

Steve Parker prepared the annual quiz – not all botanical questions, but also people, buildings and historical figures. It was, as usual, good fun and this year the VC6 team was the winner.

Indoor Meeting, News and Updates

Saturday 24th February 2018

Report: Liz McDonnell

There was a very large turn-out for this second indoor meeting, with 27 members and colleagues coming to hear about habitat creation and re-wilding schemes, progress towards Atlas 2020, Somerset Rare Plants Register, Arable plant conservation and a rare plant introduction. After coffee and chat, Steve Parker kicked off the day with his thought provoking talk on Re-wilding, Reintroductions and habitat creation. He outlined Nature Conservation activities in Britain that we are familiar with – coppicing of ancient woodlands, traditional hay meadow management, grazing of saltmarsh and cliff grassland and the many challenges that face some of our important habitats – undergrazing and land abandonment, encroachment of scrub and non-native species, inaccessible islands, coastal squeeze and poor water quality. He gave us examples of species that have been very successfully re-introduced e.g. Red Kites in Wales and the Large Blue Butterfly on the Polden Hills, and those that have been more difficult to establish – Greater Water-parsnip on the Somerset Levels.

Steve pointed out that most of our nature reserves in Britain and Somerset are very small. They are important for the conservation of species, but most are islands in an agricultural desert with little or no connection between them for movement of species. He showed us several examples in both Britain and in Europe of much larger areas devoted to nature conservation and re-wilding schemes, transforming intensely farmed areas or former industrial land to allow nature to take its own course. Examples from the Netherlands include Oostradersplassen, an abandoned industrial site just outside Amsterdam and De Biesbosch National Park, a large wetland site where the natural river patterns are being reinstated.

The most interesting area in Britain is the Knepp Castle Estate, in West Sussex, where a large area of land – once intensively farmed - has been allowed to develop in a more ‘natural’ way in a pioneering rewilding project. Using grazing animals as the drivers of habitat creation, and with the restoration of dynamic, natural water courses, the project has seen extraordinary increases in wildlife. Extremely rare species like turtle doves, nightingales, peregrine falcons and purple emperor butterflies are now breeding here; and populations of more common species are increasing. This promoted a discussion about whether this could work in Somerset – and whether there is a large estate somewhere where a similar experiment could take place.

Helena Crouch gave a progress report on the Somerset Rare Plants Register. Helena has already written the accounts of all the extinct species in Somerset and is currently working on the 561 extant taxa on the list. 92 of those have been written and uploaded onto the SRPG website. It is a long process, as data from a variety of sources not just our MapMate database have to be consulted. Cath Shellswell is helping to write some of the arable species on the list. There is a live link for each completed species account on the RPR page of the website and members are encouraged to consult this valuable resource.

Helena showed us all of the ‘species coverage’ maps from 2015 to 2018 showing the huge progress made in recording in under-recorded areas of the county, especially south and west Somerset. She particularly showed the the huge effort that John Poingdestre has made in four hectads in south Somerset and Andrew Robinson in ST35.

Val Graham has recently updated the maps showing the number of different taxa recorded in each 1km square and this can be downloaded from the SRPG website. Helena stressed that although we have made huge progress on recording coverage in the county, there are still many species that are under-recorded. These are not necessarily the rare species, but many are associated with ‘good’ habitats including calcareous grassland, wet and marshy areas, arable and ancient woodland, and need to be searched for in areas where they have not been recorded since 2000. Examples of these priority species include: Cats-ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*), Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Autumn Lady’s-tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*), Knotted Pearlwort (*Sagina nodosa*), Heath Pearlwort (*Sagina subulata*), Marsh Horsetail (*Equisetum palustre*), Marsh Arrowgrass (*Triglochin palustris*), Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*), Frogbit (*Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*), Field Gromwell (*Lithospermum arvense*), Dense-flowered Fumitory (*Fumaria densiflora*), Alternate-leaved Golden-saxifrage (*Chrysosplenium alternifolium*), Bird’s-nest Orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*), and Herb-paris (*Paris quadrifolia*).

Mark Simmons and Cath Shellswell (both Plantlife staff) presented the Plantlife **Colour in the Margins** project, a national initiative supported by Natural England and several other organisations to address the conservation of rare and threatened arable habitats which have been affected by modern farming practices. This ‘Back from the Brink’ project will focus on 10 plant species including Pheasant’s-eye (*Adonis annua*), Broad-leaved Cudweed (*Filago pyramidata*), Red Hemp-nettle (*Galeopsis angustifolia*) and Corn Buttercup (*Ranunculus arvensis*), and three ground beetles, but many other threatened species of plant and animals will benefit too. Volunteers are currently being recruited to work with farmers and landowners to survey arable fields, especially in the Mid-Somerset Hills area, an important arable plant area. Training will be provided and SRPG members were encouraged to take part.

Fred Rumsey talked about his recent work on the reintroduction of Interrupted Brome (*Bromus interruptus*), Britain’s only endemic grass species. This is a very rare arable species, last recorded in Somerset in 1913, and considered extinct in the wild in GB. It is very similar to Soft Brome (*Bromus hordeaceus*) but is separated from that species by its congested inflorescence and split palea. See Fred’s

article about the details of this 'Back from the Brink' project later in this newsletter.

Indoor Meeting - SRPG Updates and Herbarium workshop

Saturday 17th March 2018

Report: Liz McDonnell

Sixteen members met at the Avalon Marshes Centre for a mixed bag of interest to SRPG members. Graham Lavender started the day with his report on the work done in VC5 by the 'Friday Four' – Graham, Ian Salmon, Ro FitzGerald and Jeanne Webb. These keen botanists meet each Friday and have undertaken a wide range of different projects this year as a group, or as individuals. They have been searching for rare and scarce species not recorded recently in VC5 (South Somerset). Purple Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria purpurea*) is a Rare Plant Register species in Somerset and they found that it was still present in its old haunt at Capton. Graham & Ian found Grand-toothed Hawkweed (*Hieracium grandidens*) in an under-recorded monad east of East Anstey, and later were thrilled to find a specimen in the Taunton (TTN) Herbarium which had been collected by E. S. Marshall in 1916 at the same location. Some of the Friday Four met with Rob Randall to learn about Bramble identification and collected 50-60 new records on each occasion, which is a good addition to our knowledge of this difficult group. They have also searched for Eyebrights and Graham found a rare hybrid which was confirmed as *Euphrasia confusa x scottica* – a first record for Somerset.

As well as regular monad recording, especially in under-recorded parts of West Somerset, they have been looking in detail at Dock and Sedge hybrids and subspecies of Rushes and Mouse-eared Hawkweeds and adding records of those taxa to our database. Graham has been making good use of the BSBI Referees to determine many of their specimens and encourages everyone to take advantage of this valuable resource. He gave a brief report on the Exmoor Mires Project that he has been helping with this year. This seeks to undo some of the damage that was done to the blanket bogs in the 19th Century and he is planning a talk and field meeting on Exmoor next year so that SRPG members can get to know more about this Somerset 'rewilding' project.



Simon Leach and Jeanne Webb demonstrating at the Herbarium Workshop

Simon Leach gave us an interesting and amusing talk about our love/hate relationship with Dandelions. The Dandelion Workshops that we held last year has inspired an impressive recording effort and several members of the group have been working hard to get to know this large group of micro-species. There have been many Vice County records from allotments, gardens, car parks and road verges, as well as from good species-rich habitats. Simon told us the intriguing story of *Taraxacum litorale*, a rare Baltic species which has turned up on a lane verge near Taunton – apparently the first record for Britain (see *SRPG Newsletter* 18:43-44 and *BSBI News* 138: 36-38 for details). [*The story doesn't end there, but you'll have to wait until the next Newsletter to find out what happened next... Ed.*]

Clive Lovatt gave a talk on the cultural history of herbaria and the philosophy of collecting plants and particularly the activities of the Botanical Exchange Clubs from the 1830s. Their Annual Reports included comprehensive lists of specimens that were distributed with the comments of referees and a list of wanted specimens (*desiderata*) too, as well as instructions on how to collect and press the plants in a way suitable for distribution. It involved a large number of people and it was the way in which botanists learnt about the distribution and variation of species around Britain. Many specimens were collected for distribution from our area and they can easily be found in institutional herbaria including at

Taunton. The publication of a comprehensive *Flora of the British Isles* by Clapham, Tutin & Warburg in 1952 obviated the need for widespread collecting, as botanists could take a decent handbook into the field.

Liz McDonnell briefly outlined the progress of the Taunton Herbarium project and reported the current work involved with reorganising the collections into Stace 3 taxonomic order. The aim is to ultimately have a good comprehensive Somerset collection and we are currently identifying gaps, which could be filled by our own cautious collecting of missing species where possible. Liz and Jeanne showed all the equipment that was needed to make a herbarium collection – a wooden press (home-made or purchased for the job), cardboard packing sheets, newspaper and self-tightening straps for the pressing part, herbarium paper, glue and tape for mounting (all archive quality and acid-free) for mounting specimens as well as bags, pots and containers for collecting suitable plant specimens in the field. They demonstrated how to arrange fresh plants in newspaper with all the essential information – where and when it was collected and by whom for the plant press. Jeanne showed how to press bulky specimens such as Willows and emphasized how important it was to collect different parts some plants at different times of year i.e catkins at one time, fully developed leaves at another, so very important to mark the tree to avoid confusion.

All members had a chance to try their hand at pressing, deciding which bits of the specimen should be discarded, which leaves should be placed so that their upper or lower sides showed etc., to make a visually pleasing herbarium specimen. We discussed the pressing times, changing of flimsies or newspaper and identification and documentation of each specimen, as well as the practicalities of sending plants to referees for determination. It was explained that a well pressed and carefully mounted herbarium specimen will last almost indefinitely if kept cool and dry (the earliest sheet so far found in the Taunton herbarium is a Thomas Clark specimen dated 1821 which is in excellent condition). Members of the Herbarium team are willing to take interesting specimens for possible inclusion into the Taunton collection, but would prefer them to be unmounted. This is so that they can be mounted by the team in a way that is consistent with the current Taunton methodology.

Spring, Summer and Autumn Meetings

Leigh Woods, Bristol (VC6)

Sunday 8th April 2018

Leaders: Clive Lovatt and Liz McDonnell

Report: Liz McDonnell

This first field meeting of the year was well attended, with twenty members and guests. We were delighted to welcome botanical colleagues from Hertfordshire for this meeting. We met in the Forestry Commission car park and Clive explained that due to the lateness of the season, we had chosen an alternative route to the one planned at Paradise Bottom. We walked southeastwards along the main track towards Stokeleigh Camp, looking at the vegetative differences between the woodland sedges, as the flowering spikes were not yet visible. We found Wood Sedge (*Carex sylvatica*), Thin-spiked Sedge (*C. strigosa*) and Remote Sedge (*C. remota*) growing together by the main path. Three clumps of Narrow Buckler-fern (*Dryopteris carthusiana*) were found near the wall and members were shown the pale stem scales. This feature separates this species from the similar Broad Buckler-fern (*D. dilatata*), which has scales with a dark central stripe. Hard Fern (*Blechnum spicant*) was also found here.



Helleborus viridis subsp. *occidentalis* ©Graham
Lavender

Scrub clearance had recently taken place on the Stokeleigh Camp ramparts and we searched the moderately species-rich grassland on the slopes finding a large number of Green Hellebore (*Helleborus viridis* subsp. *occidentalis*) plants, flowering beautifully and numerous leaves of Goldilocks Buttercup (*Ranunculus auricomus*) in all the variety of their different shapes. Lunch was

taken near the camp before finding the path down to the River Avon through Nightingale Valley. The woodland here is semi-natural, broadleaved and ancient, and species recorded here included Narrow-leaved Bitter-cress (*Cardamine impatiens*) Hard Shield-fern (*Polystichum aculeatum*), Wood Melick (*Melica uniflora*) and numerous spikes of Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*) under Hazel (*Corylus avellana*).



Lathraea squamaria ©Helena Crouch

We made our way down through the woodland to the towpath below and found a small patch of Yellow-flowered Strawberry (*Potentilla indica*) at the edge of the footpath. A few of the group made a short foray onto the saltmarsh, finding Wild Celery (*Apium graveolens*), which is a common plant along this part of the River Avon. Wild Madder (*Rubia peregrina*) was frequent, scrambling amongst the shrubs at the side of the path.

There was also a large patch of Southern Polypody (*Polypodium cambricum*) and a few dead spikes of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobanche hederæ*) in this area too. Some of the Avon Gorge specialities were found on rock outcrops along the towpath. Bristol Rock-cress (*Arabis scabra*) and Dwarf Sedge (*Carex humilis*) were both flowering and accessible without too much scrambling. There was a small patch of Spring Cinquefoil (*Potentilla tabernaemontani*) at the base of the rocks. Members and guests saw many of the plants for which Leigh Woods and Avon Gorge is famous.

King's Cliff Wood (VC5)

Sunday 22nd April 2018

Leaders: Steve Parker & Simon Leach

Report: Simon Leach

King's Cliff Wood lies in a steep-sided valley just at the extreme eastern end of the Quantock Hills, just to the west of North Petherton. The woodland extends for some three kilometres east to west; it is mostly planted – including lots of large Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) – but there are also a few older bits with a richer ground flora, as well as a ribbon of streamside alder/willow scrub which runs along much of the valley floor. The wood is an open access area popular with dog walkers and young families, and there is a decent forest track/footpath along its full length (it lies on the Macmillan Way West, a long distance footpath that runs between Castle Cary and Barnstaple).

In recent years neither the woodland nor the more open habitats adjoining it have received much attention from botanists, so our aim for the day was to make lists for as many monads as we could. A day of square-bashing, in other words. We split into four groups. Our efforts were mainly directed at those squares towards the western end of the area – ST2531, ST2631 and ST2532 – while Steve led a group for 'beginners' centred on ST2732. One of the monads (ST2531) also fell at the extreme north-east corner of Simon's 'Taunton Flora' area, so for that square separate lists had to be kept for each of the ½km squares visited, i.e. ST2531/NW and ST2531/NE.

Our lists weren't especially long, but they did include an impressive number of new records, as can be seen in the Table.

Square	No. taxa recorded	No. 'new' taxa
ST2531/NW	119	80
ST2531/NE	115	75
ST2532	132	131
ST2631	163	116

So, lots and lots of good records, but relatively few 'standout' species. The ground flora was decent in places though, and all groups saw a reasonable range of species. The highlight of the woodland floor was probably Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), a species listed as Near Threatened on the England

Red List; but we also enjoyed plenty of Moschatel (*Adoxa moschatellina*), a lovely little plant that turned out to be surprisingly abundant in some areas, such as along the southern edge of the wood in ST2531. One group was able to distinguish both subspecies of Ivy-leaved Speedwell (*Veronica hederifolia* subsp. *hederifolia* and *lucorum*), plus they found what they decided were vegetative plants of both Slender St John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*) Trailing St John's-wort (*H. humifusum*) – although this last one needs checking as it became apparent later in the year (at Yarty Moor) that one member of that group, at least, sometimes mistakes small 'trailing' vegetative plants of Slender St John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*) for *H. humifusum*. (That's me, in case anyone's wondering.)

Three of us collected dandelions that were later pressed and sent to the national *Taraxacum* referee, John Richards, to be determined. It turns out we had four species, all of them widespread members of (the mainly western) *Taraxacum* section *Celtica*: *T. bracteatum*, *T. britannicum*, *T. nordstedtii* and *T. subbracteatum*. Voucher specimens of these are being added to the reference collection of dandelions at the Somerset County herbarium.

The flora may have been a little underwhelming, but this was more than made up for by the pleasant weather, excellent company and the 400+ new species-records for the squares visited. You can't beat a woodland walk in April...

Blackdown Hills SSSI (VC5)

13th May 2018

Leaders: Steve Parker & Ian Salmon

Report: Steve Parker & Helena Crouch

Meeting at Staple Hill Car Park, a large group of SRPG members gathered together to help with the recording of two under-recorded monads on the Blackdown Hills. Being such a large group, it was decided to divide in to two smaller parties in order to cover more ground. Steve's group began recording immediately, and as always with botanists, spent some time around the edge of the car park, finding at the entrance a small colony of the double flowered form of Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis* 'Flore Pleno'). Leaving the car park, the group headed south along the Farm Lane recording the flora of the lane verges, a small patch of Moschatel (*Adoxa moschatellina*) some still in flower and others in full fruit on the hedge bank.

Trespassing into an improved field we were somewhat surprised to discover a small colony of Fringecups (*Tellima grandiflora*) which was well naturalised on the remains of an old water tank.

The roadside vegetation was relatively species-poor; by chance the group was able to obtain permission from the local farmer to survey his land to the west of this minor road. He warned us that the woodland was very wet and dangerous. Initially the farmland was relatively improved and not of much interest. After lunch, things improved and we spent some time in a small but high quality mire. Large patches of Blinks (*Montia fontana* subsp. *chondrosperma*) together with Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*), Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*), Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*) and Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) were scattered in the wetter parts. A small pond at the base of the mire sadly was less interesting, however on the margin of the pond were more *Montia* plants.



Viola palustris ©Helena Crouch

The very wet woodland looked tempting but access was extremely difficult: eventually we gained access to this area. The woodland was as we had been warned very wet with many fallen trees and it was with some difficulty we managed to make progress, however the effort was well rewarded by finding the very beautiful Wood Horsetail (*Equisetum sylvaticum*) together with Smooth-stalked Sedge (*Carex laevigata*).

Meanwhile Ian's group marched off down Farm Lane and beyond, to record in a different monad. Amazingly, we also immediately found double-flowered Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis* 'Flore Pleno') on the verge outside Buckland Farm. Our route took us along a track with old hedgebanks, with Moschatel (*Adoxa moschatellina*) and Wood-

sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), through carpets of Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) to Birchwood Church, a small chapel of ease, where we stopped for lunch. In wet woodland near the chapel we were amazed to find a large specimen of Australian Tree-fern (*Dicksonia antarctica*), surrounded by luxuriant Ostrich-fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*), originally planted but now naturalised in a swamp: the pteridologically inclined gardener turned green, as she struggles to grow both of these species in her elevated garden on limestone!

Continuing along the lane, we were seduced into a small trespass by the sight of wet mud in a field, where we found Blinks (*Montia fontana*), sadly vegetative so not identifiable to subspecies, Pignut (*Conopodium majus*), Common Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*) and Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*), but then discovered an amazing calcareous grassland community on the remains of a tumbled-down wall. Species here included Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Spring Sedge (*Carex caryophyllea*), Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*), Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*), Ox-eye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), Burnet-saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*) and Cowslip (*Primula veris*).

Completing our circular walk around the lanes of Birchwood, we left the road again to explore a mire. Here we found Common Cotton-grass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*), Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*), Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*), Creeping Forget-me-not (*Myosotis secunda*), Round-leaved Crowfoot (*Ranunculus omiophyllus*), Marsh Willowherb (*Epilobium palustre*), Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*), Ragged-Robin (*Silene flos-cuculi*) and Smooth-stalked Sedge (*Carex laevigata*). This was a great finale to an interesting day.

Uphill Hill (VC6)

Saturday 19 May 2018

Leaders: Helena Crouch & Pam Millman

Report: Helena Crouch

On a glorious day fit for a royal wedding, 25 members of SRPG and Bristol Naturalists' Society met to discover the botanical treasures of Uphill Local Nature Reserve.

Ascending the hill towards the church, many calcareous grassland species were studied and recorded, including Common Milkwort (*Polygala*

vulgaris), Crested Hair-grass (*Koeleria macrantha*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*) and Spring Sedge (*Carex caryophyllea*). Several botanists spent ages sitting on the path, finding Little Mouse-ear (*Cerastium semidecandrum*) which has bracts with broad scarious margins.



SRPG at Uphill ©Margaret Webster

The grassland was studded with hundreds of Cowslips (*Primula veris*) and Green-winged Orchids (*Anacamptis morio*). In the churchyard, Early Forget-me-not (*Myosotis ramosissima*) was flowering on the path, alongside Field Forget-me-not (*M. arvensis*) for comparison. We also found both Common Cornsalad (*Valerianella locusta*) and Keeled-fruited Cornsalad (*V. carinata*): it was good to compare the seed shapes. Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Pilosella officinarum*) was in flower, later identified as subspecies *officinarum* by Graham Lavender. A Wall butterfly was an added bonus.



Koeleria vallesiana ©Helena Crouch

Outside the churchyard we admired a lovely display of Wild Clary (*Salvia verbenaca*) just beginning to flower and Liz McDonnell found a large patch of Knotted Clover (*Trifolium striatum*). Some rock

outcrops offering shade were a perfect spot for lunch, amidst hundreds of Green-winged Orchids and swathes of a striking grass, just coming into flower. Liz soon identified it as French Oat-grass (*Gaudinia fragilis*) which was new to many members. We saw patches of it in several places on the hill. This species is GB Scarce, although not scarce in Somerset. Its status in Britain is uncertain: it is considered to be 'Native or Alien'.



Euphrasia tetraquetra ©Helena Crouch

After lunch, we moved to the steep west-facing slopes to see one of the target species, Honewort (*Trinia glauca*), which was flowering profusely. This species is dioecious, but most plants in flower were male and only a few female plants were seen, with fruits already developing. We recorded this GB Rare species flowering in seven localities on the hill.

On rock outcrops we found Dwarf Mouse-ear (*Cerastium pumilum*), with narrow scarious margins to the bracts and also Sea Mouse-ear (*Cerastium diffusum*), with entirely green bracts. A few tiny plants of Western Eyebright (*Euphrasia tetraquetra*) were in flower, with their distinctive square shoots and short glandular hairs, flowering early in the year at a low node.

On rock outcrops near the fenced quarry, we found another target species: Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*), recognisable by its swollen, fibrous culm-bases. This grass is GB Rare, restricted to a few sites on the limestone of the western Mendips.

In the grassland on west-facing slopes patches of Pale Flax (*Linum bienne*) were just coming into flower and we found a few leaves of Dropwort (*Filipendula vulgaris*). Woodland at the east of the Local Nature Reserve added a few more species to our list, but by then the number of botanists had

dwindled and the lure of ice creams was irresistible. Heading towards Uphill Wharf Café we found a few patches of Rough Clover (*Trifolium scabrum*) on rocky outcrops and saw a Small Blue butterfly by the path. Revived by ice creams we explored the accessible quarry, finding a good population of Honewort on the cliffs and, rather bizarrely, a small patch of Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*). Heading back to our cars, we recorded a single plant of Wild Celery (*Apium graveolens*), Horse-radish (*Armoracia rusticana*) and Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) by the roadside rhyne. Altogether we recorded 209 species and added 35 taxa to this well-recorded monad. The weather was glorious and we had seen many of the interesting and rare species of this site.

Bridgwater Canal (VC5)

3rd June 2018

Leaders: Steve Parker & Ian Salmon

Report: Steve Parker

On a sunny June day a large contingent of the Rare Plants Group gathered outside Morrisons supermarket in Bridgwater and being a large group, it was decided to split in to two recording groups. One section was lead by Steve Parker, the other by Ian Salmon. The objective of this meeting was to record on the outskirts of Bridgwater town concentrating on the route of the Bridgwater to Taunton canal. In 2009 a few invasive aquatic species, including Water-lettuce (*Pistia stratiotes*) had been recorded in the canal by Simon Leach and Steve Parker and we wanted to make sure that these invasive species had not spread to this section of the water-course.

After finding the some of the most widespread species including rough Meadow grass (*Poa trivialis*) and Shepherd's purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*), we found Fern-grass (*Catapodium rigidum subsp. majus*). This appears to be a very common grass in the streets of Somerset towns. After a short walk along the towpath we came across an area of disturbed ground, home to a small patch of Long-headed Poppy (*Papaver dubium*).

In this area, the banks of the old canal are fringed by Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), Reed mace (*Typha latifolia*) and Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*). Other species in the water-course included Frogbit (*Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*), Water Plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*) with Arrowhead (*Sagittaria sagittifolia*). We saw a few submerged

aquatics from the bank, including Spiked Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*).



Urban Botany ©Ro FitzGerald

After a short lunch break taken on the canal bank, Ro FitzGerald who was in the lead noticed the delicate fronds of Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*) which was growing out of the old stone-lined bank of the watercourse. This was the first record of the tiny fern in the 10km square.

Retracing our steps, we headed on to a large area of grazing marsh known as the Meads Eco Park, this is a local wildlife site much loved by local people from the adjacent housing estate. The marsh is divided up with a series of field ditches and larger watercourses, but most of the ditches were of poor quality. In the small tree-lined stream which runs through the marsh, a large raft of a water starwort was spotted and collected by Graham Lavender. This was identified as Blunt-fruited Water-starwort (*Callitriche obtusangula*). Much of the grazing marsh flora turned out to be rather impoverished, however it does support a large population of Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*).

Leaving the Meads, the group returned to the route of the canal, and it was here by a small bridge that a small colony of an aquatic plant was found in the canal. On close inspection the plant was identified as Fringed Water-lily (*Nymphoides peltata*). This attractive non-native species has been known in the canal since 1975 (Atlas Flora of Somerset).

The last habitat to be searched was the grassland around a large water body known as Browne's pond. It was here that Graham Lavender collected a large specimen of a dock which on careful examination was confirmed by John Akeroyd to be *Rumex conglomeratus x sanguineus* = *R. x ruhmeri*. This

hybrid is rarely recorded in Somerset but is probably common.

We made our way back to the supermarket and met up with the other group who had recorded a total of 240 species. Urban botany can be very rewarding and long lists of native and alien plants can be encountered. This area did not disappoint.

Blagdon Lake, Mendips (VC6)

Saturday 16th June 2018

Leaders: Liz McDonnell & Clive Lovatt

Report: Liz McDonnell

Blagdon Lake is one of the two large reservoirs on the Mendip Hills (the other being Chew Valley Lake) which is a SSSI notified for its wildfowl and wintering birds, MG5 Neutral grassland and Standing Waters. With special permission from Bristol Water, the field meeting was arranged for SRPG members to see the very special species-rich meadows not generally accessible to the general public. Fourteen members met at Heron's Green, Chew Valley Lake and drove in convoy to the lakeside compound where Nigel Milbourne, one of Bristol Water's bird wardens who knows the flora and fauna of this site very well, met us at the gate. We drove to the furthest parking place to see the meadows at Butcombe Bay, then made our way back eastwards throughout the day dipping into the meadows that line the northern shore. The fields here are very species-rich, with neutral/calcareous grassland communities that would have been the norm here when the reservoir was created by Bristol Waterworks Company (completed in 1905) by damming the River Yeo and flooding this gentle valley.

The orchids that Clive and I had seen flowering so well the previous week had mostly gone over, but we were able to see a few Southern Marsh-orchid (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*), Common spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), and obvious hybrids between them (*Dactylorhiza x grandis*). Dyer's Greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*) was just coming into full bloom, colouring the fields yellow as it was so abundant. Its common associate was Saw-wort (*Serratula tinctoria*), still in bud and it is now very unusual to see these two species growing together in such profusion. Other associates were Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), Betony (*Betonica officinalis*), Common Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*), Common Milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*)

and the occasional plant of Pepper-saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*).



Genista tinctoria and *Serratula tinctoria* ©Graham
Lavender

The common grasses were Upright Brome (*Bromopsis erecta*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Tall Fescue (*Schedonorus arundinaceus*), Meadow Fescue (*S. pratensis*), Yellow Oat-grass (*Trisetum flavescens*) and Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*). In one of the damper areas we found Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*) and a few plants of Marsh Valerian (*Valeriana dioica*). Blunt-flowered Rush (*Juncus subnodulosus*) was conspicuous here, as the flowering parts in the bud stage are very pale. We looked at the vertical and horizontal cross-joints in the leaves, which separates this species from other jointed rushes which have only horizontal septa. In this area, the sedge component of the grassland was important, with abundant Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*), Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*), Tawny Sedge (*Carex hostiana*) and Flea Sedge (*Carex pulicaris*).

In several places we ploughed through the head-high fringing zone of Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), where Common Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum flavum*) was occasionally found, to the lake shore to find abundant Flowering Rush (*Butomus umbellatus*) just coming into bloom with its beautiful head of pink flowers. This is easy to determine vegetatively, as the long green glossy leaves are triangular in cross-section and nearly always are twisted along their length. On the small muddy areas at the water's edge where the water-fowl come to shore, Round-fruited Rush (*Juncus compressus*) is abundant. At the end of the afternoon, we waded through the reeds to reach some tall inflorescences of Horse-radish (*Armoracia rusticana*) growing in water, a very unusual habitat and saw a large clump of Common Club-rush

(*Schoenoplectus lacustris*), but this was too far out into the lake and so out of reach. As we made our way back at the end of the afternoon, Rough Hawk's-beard (*Crepis biennis*) was abundant by the gateway.

Berrow Dunes (VC6)

Tuesday 26th June 2018

Leaders: Bob Corns & Helena Crouch

Report: Helena Crouch

Fifteen members joined Bob Corns of Natural England and the Head Greenkeeper of Burnham & Berrow Golf Course for a warm and sunny evening walk at Berrow Dunes. After no rain for several weeks, the dune vegetation was scorched and frazzled, but despite their disappointingly withered state, it was good to see many Lizard Orchids (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) on several different dunes. Another target species, Sea Bindweed (*Calystegia soldanella*) was soon relocated in a hollow near the number "3" sign, but was also found in flower on a dune towards the clubhouse, where Bob had seen it years before. Berrow Dunes is now the only known site in Somerset for this species, so it was great to find it is still in two locations, albeit both in the same monad.



Epipactis palustris ©Helena Crouch

We found several characteristic grass species of the dunes, still identifiable despite their desiccated

state. Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) was demonstrating its textbook inrolled leaves, an adaptation to survive dry conditions. Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*), Rare in VC5 and Scarce in VC6 due to lack of habitat, is frequent on the dunes here. We found patches of Dune Fescue (*Vulpia fasciculata*), with its distinctive large spikelets and extremely unequal glumes: in Somerset this species is only known along the coast here in VC6 and also around Minehead golf course in VC5. Later we found a patch of the smaller Bearded Fescue (*Vulpia ciliata* subsp. *ambigua*), which has a similar but more restricted distribution in Somerset.

Heading south towards the clubhouse, we explored some slacks and were delighted to find seven plants of Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) in flower, in a small damp area. This appears to be a completely new site at Berrow Dunes for this most beautiful orchid, although it grows in some quantity further north, in the adjacent monad. Due to the recent drought, we were able to venture into a slack at the edge of the dunes which Bob explained had been dredged about ten years ago, and where he had previously found Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*). We did indeed find *Salix repens* and as the slack was in the adjacent monad to our main recording area, and is actually in a different hectad (10km square), we recorded Creeping Willow new to ST35, so this was another excellent record. In the slack, members also spotted Brookweed (*Samolus valerandi*) and Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*), but the most exciting discovery of the evening was made by Fred Rumsey, who identified some diminutive yellow sedges as Small-fruited Yellow-sedge (*Carex viridula*), the first record for this species in Somerset since 1994. This little sedge has had a nomenclaturally chequered history, so some members knew it as *C. serotina*, others as *C. oederi* and for a while it was *C. viridula* subsp. *viridula*! It is absent from VC5 and was only recorded from four sites on the Levels for the Atlas Flora of Somerset, so this was a significant record for a Somerset Rare Plant Register species.

Returning to the car park at dusk, we stopped to study some Evening-primroses in full flower, recording Large-flowered Evening-primrose (*Oenothera glazioviana*), Fragrant Evening-primrose (*O. stricta*), Small-flowered Evening-primrose (*O. cambrica*) and puzzling over a very pretty mystery plant. This was later identified as the hybrid *Oenothera x fallax* (*O. glazioviana* x *O. biennis*): we didn't find Common Evening-primrose (*O. biennis*)

but it has been recorded from the dunes in the past. Despite the initially daunting parched appearance of the dunes, this was an extremely productive evening, with several significant records made for Somerset Rare Plant Register species.

Chalk Water, Exmoor (VC5)

Sunday 1st July 2018.

Leader & report: Graham Lavender

The heatwave had been with us for most of June and unfortunately July 1st was the first day most of us had seen rain since May. But it was not heavy rain and the only real casualty was the recording card which seems to be very environmentally friendly and dissolves at the first sign of moisture.

Eleven members met at Robbers Bridge car park and walked the short distance to Chalk Water. This fairly wide combe is unusual in that it is a sheep holding area, particularly in the winter when the close proximity to the coast and sheltering hills make it a fairly frost free area for them to take refuge from the bleaker windswept open moor.



Drosera rotundifolia ©Graham Lavender

The large numbers of sheep maintain a short sward and one of the beneficiaries of this habitat which we saw early on was Bird's-foot (*Ornithopus perpusillus*) in flower and to say in thousands could be to underestimate the numbers. Both Silver Hair-grass (*Aira caryophyllea*) and Early Hair-grass (*Aira praecox*) were also frequent in this short dry grassland.

Even before we got to our target area of the mires further up the combe, Ivy-leaved Crowfoot (*Ranunculus hederaceus*) was found growing in a

small flush beside the path. This is a good record as the predominant Exmoor Water-crowfoot is Round-leaved Crowfoot (*Ranunculus omiophyllus*).

As is often the case with SRPG meetings, it took longer than expected to reach our first target mire and indeed first priority by then was lunch. No sooner had we sat down on the edge of the mire than Mark Kitchen found Cornish Moneywort (*Sibthorpia europaea*) at his feet. The find was extra special since the Moneywort was also in flower with its incredibly small 1-2mm delicate petals.

The dry weather had restricted the Eyebrights in the combe to slightly damper spots under Bracken or beside the river. However we all dissected English Eyebright (*Euphrasia anglica*) over lunch and noted the characteristic long glandular hairs of this diploid species which makes identification relatively straightforward. Currently, apart from hybrids, it is Somerset's only long glandular hair Eyebright. We also practised measuring the corolla and determining the lowest flowering node essential for checking with the new BSBI Eyebright handbook to confirm identification.

The mires were recorded after lunch and we found Marsh St John's-wort (*Hypericum elodes*) just coming into flower and Ivy-leaved Bellflower (*Wahlenbergia hederacea*). Although this is considered to be a relatively well recorded monad we still managed to add some 40 records. The mires of Exmoor are special places; many of the records are 'front of card' and Red List Plants for England mostly due to loss of habitat, particularly from drainage, in the South East of the country.

Walk Farm, Bruton (VC6)

Saturday 7th July 2018

Leader: David Reid

Report: Helena Crouch

On a hot summer's day, seven members of Somerset Rare Plants Group and friends joined lepidopterists and members of Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society for a day at Walk Farm. We had previously visited in May 2012 and were again privileged to be guided by the farmer, Robert Oram. Most of the day was spent exploring just a few of the traditionally managed hay meadows which have become increasingly species-rich over the last forty years. Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), Pignut (*Conopodium majus*) and Betony (*Betonica officinalis*) all

suggested that the soil here is acidic. In a spectacular meadow with sheets of Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*) and Devil's-bit Scabious and clouds of butterflies, we found a few plants of Bitter-vetch (*Lathyrus linifolius*), Dyer's Greenweed (*Genista tinctoria* subsp. *tinctoria*) and abundant Saw-wort (*Serratula tinctoria*). Meanwhile the lepidopterists spotted several Purple Hairstreaks fluttering at the tops of oak trees.



Serratula tinctoria ©Helena Crouch

After lunch in the shade, a bright yellow patch of Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*) attracted our attention and drew us to an area where the soil pH was clearly higher. Here we found Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Burnet-saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*), Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*) and Ox-eye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*). Venturing into the next field, we found more Bitter-vetch, Dyer's Greenweed and Saw-wort, but also large patches of Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*), some clumps of Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*). We spotted the characteristically leaning stalks of Heath Grass (*Danthonia decumbens*) and found a small patch of Sneezewort (*Achillea ptarmica*). In 2012 we recorded hundreds of flowering plants of Heath Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza maculata*) in this meadow; however on this visit we found only dead unidentifiable *Dactylorhiza* stalks! Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*) was present in several fields, with its distinctive fruits.

We returned through carpets of Saw-wort, which was perhaps the star plant of the day, for its sheer quantity. Passing a patch of Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), we found a single clump of Oval Sedge (*Carex*

leporina) growing with Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*) and Velvet Bent (*Agrostis canina*).



Achillea ptarmica ©Helena Crouch

We managed to walk through small parts of four different 1km squares, and whilst species counts were not particularly high for any of them (and the recorder was slightly befuddled by the end) we had seen glorious species-rich meadows, abounding with insect life, which is such a rare treat. We can only hope that future agricultural policies will allow these amazing meadows to be maintained in such spectacular condition.

Stearth Marshes and East Quantoxhead (VC5)

Joint meeting with the Wild Flower Society (WFS) 11th & 12th August 2018

Leaders: Ro FitzGerald, Liz McDonnell & Graham Lavender

Report: Ro FitzGerald & Liz McDonnell

This weekend came exactly when the weather broke after the long hot summer. This was cruel luck for members who had come from far away to enjoy this lovely area round the Quantocks, and as Sunday in particular dawned with wind and fierce rain, plans had to be altered and somewhat restricted. Somehow, the days were not a disaster! Members of both groups joined up so that we were about 20 on both days, and Graham Lavender, Liz McDonnell and

I really appreciated the good humour and determination shown by everyone.

Saturday was planned to have a thorough look at the Wildlife and Wetlands Trust reserve at Stearth, by the River Parrett. The reserve is primarily for birds, and to create habitat for wildfowl and waders a breach has been created in the tidal river bank, forming a series of lagoons and intertidal fields which are periodically inundated. There are public paths and hides, but WWT are very friendly to botanists, and organise surveys of the general biodiversity interest of their holdings. We therefore had access to areas not open to the public, and were to make some of the first botanical recordings of the newly created habitats. Kitted up with yellow hi-viz tabards (WWT policy for off-road work), we divided into three groups and set off into three different 1km squares.



Stearth Mud ©Liz McDonnell

Two parties headed for the river, looking at the tidal banks and at the land just inland – this was formerly grassland, but now because of periodical inundation with salt water they are being colonised by some saltmarsh species. This process is recent, so they are currently species-poor, and we did get pretty tired of Annual Sea-blite (*Suaeda maritima*) and Spear-leaved Orache (*Atriplex prostrata*) as the dominant vegetation! The only relief came from occasional clumps of Meadow Barley (*Hordeum secalinum*), which must have persisted from the former fields, looking strange flowering on bare dried mud.

Most interesting plants were on the raised bank of river path and small 'islands'. Here a popular find was numerous tiny Wild Celery plants (*Apium graveolens*), dwarfed by the drought but highly aromatic. Sue Cooper called this the 'scratch and sniff' day - this was appropriate as we also (on both days) found Stone Parsley (*Sison amomum*) and Corn Parsley (*Petroselinum segetum*), both with extremely inconspicuous flowers but distinctive smells when a

leaf is crushed. The scent of Stone Parsley has been described as 'petrol and spice'! A distinguished plant, characteristic of this part of the Bristol Channel coast, was found by both groups near the river – Sea Clover (*Trifolium squamosum*) had been completely shrivelled in the drought, but the almost-spiny heads were still distinctive.



Limonium binervosum ©Liz McDonnell

Common Sea-lavender (*Limonium vulgare*) was fairly frequent in the narrow strip of saltmarsh lining the River Parrett and a few plants of Rock Sea-lavender (*Limonium binervosum*) were found growing on rocky, river bank reinforcement.

Our third group on this day went inland to former common land and damp grazing on Stockland Moor. Here again WWT are encouraging winter inundation, and one field provided a tremendous thrill. The habitat includes a pond, well trampled by grazing cattle, and wide areas of almost bare ground with no grass where water had lain till the drought set in.

A huge population of the Red Data Book Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) was in lavish flower, with abundant shiny heads of the annual Hairy Buttercup (*Ranunculus sardous*) (also relatively uncommon). It's not clear what the origin of the Pennyroyal may be. It's become extremely rare since the days when it was a staple herb of country healers, and flourished in damp places such as by village duck ponds, and there is anecdotal evidence of it turning

up in (weirdly) Canadian grass seed mixes designed for use on reservoir and river banks, but it could also be a previously unrecorded relic in this ancient common land.

The day was dull overhead and rather chilly, but although many of us shared Peter Hilton's opinion of the 'new' habitat near the lagoons 'I looked hard on those intertidal fields but regrettably no! they were not very interesting', our efforts have made an excellent record of a point in time, as vegetation gradually colonises and develops, while the Pennyroyal find was a really big 'squeak' for VC5!



Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) ©Ro FitzGerald

Sunday at East Quantoxhead had a dreadful weather start, so plans were changed to shorter walks, with just two parties. Half headed for the cliff path (here running along the famous ammonite-laden stripy cliffs of lias limestone and coloured clays). Again the drought had decimated much of the vegetation, but interest was still found. There was a good opportunity to compare the Oxtongues – Bristly Oxtongue (*Helminthotheca echioides*), a common weed round here, and Hawkweed Oxtongue (*Picris hieracioides*), which is the more elegant one, and we found the rayed form of Chalk Knapweed (*Centaurea debeauxii* ssp. *thuillieri*). A small forest of Grass Vetchling (*Lathyrus nissolia*) was found, slightly easier to spot when in pod, and Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) was still in flower. This is a fairly common plant in this part of Somerset, but for some of the WFS visitors, it was the first time they had seen it.

The second party had the privilege of walking the gardens of Court House, historic seat of the Luttrell family. Wild plants had to compete with the 17th century carved pew ends in the church, and the gardens themselves. Amazingly early rain had stopped, and the sight-seeing element meant

progress was slow, but we did see both Stone Parsley and Corn Parsley again, and we saw the dainty Dwarf Mallow (*Malva neglecta*) in full flower in the yard of the tile-roofed cattle hovels near one of the famous East Quantoxhead Black Poplars.

After an extended morning there was very cheerful meeting up for cakes at the Chantry tearooms in Kilve - the leaders extremely relieved that weather had not ruined the weekend, and everyone delighted by good finds in spite of difficulties!

Black Down, Mendip (VC6)

Thursday 23rd August 2018

Leaders: Helena Crouch & Margaret Webster

Report: Helena Crouch

On a fine day, eleven members assembled in Burrington Combe for a steady walk up onto Black Down. The targets for the day were to update records for Rare Plant Register species and explore a less well-recorded monad. Our first mission was to search for the small patch of Bristle Bent (*Agrostis curtisii*) discovered by Liz McDonnell beside the path on the west side of Black Down in 2008. Black Down is the only site for this species in VC6, but although we had seen four large clumps on an SRPG walk in 2011, none was found this time and the bank has been invaded by bracken. We continued uphill to record in our target monad (ST4757), much of which is dominated by bracken. On the path Margaret spotted Early Hair-grass (*Aira praecox*) which we continued to find frequently along the edge of ruts along tracks. In an area of willow carr and boggy ground along a small brook we found Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*), Lesser Skullcap (*Scutellaria minor*) with pretty pink flowers, Star Sedge (*Carex echinata*) and Narrow Buckler-fern (*Dryopteris carthusiana*). The open area had large tussocks of Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), some with added Wood Small-reed (*Calamagrostis epigejos*) which made them exceptionally tall! Nestled against one *Molinia* tussock, Liz found the star plant of the day: a baby Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*). This is an amazing record – as far as I know it has never been found anywhere on the Mendips before.

Lunch was partaken on a hillock above the willow carr, with far-reaching views across the Severn Estuary to Wales. Returning to a path we continued our ascent of Black Down and were delighted to find a few plants of English Eyebright (*Euphrasia anglica*) at the edge of a path. This species has distinctively

large flowers and long glandular hairs and is Endangered on the GB and England Red Lists. In a seasonally damp area beside a track we found Heath Rush (*Juncus squarrosus*), which is Scarce in VC6, and Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvatica*). Some extraordinary patches of a short bristly grass on the track were immediately identified by Liz as Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*), another Scarce species in VC6.

Eventually, after meeting the herd of huge Devon Ruby Red conservationists, we reached the pond at the edge of Black Down, which looked like a hippo wallow! Undaunted, we explored the edges of the large muddy puddle and found wonderful bright green patches of Floating Club-rush (*Eleogiton fluitans*), another VC6 Scarce species. Our main target, Lesser Marshwort (*Apium inundatum*), which is Vulnerable on the England Red List and Scarce in VC6, had last been seen here in 2010, so it was with great excitement that Helena found 5 baby plants on mud at the margin of the pond. Meanwhile Liz discovered a few patches of Ivy-leaved Crowfoot (*Ranunculus hederaceus*), which had not been recorded in this tetrad since before 1997. We also saw Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*) in the pond, and a small patch of Water-purslane (*Lythrum portula*) at the edge.

Returning to our target square, we walked along a track between the curious tumps constructed during the Second World War as a bombing decoy to protect Bristol. On one of these Margaret pointed out the alien blackberry *Rubus laciniatus*, which was first recorded on Black Down by Mark Kitchen in 1992. On another track we found a further 20 plants: it is probably bird-sown.



Osmunda regalis ©Helena Crouch

We returned to Burrington Combe via the rocky path past Goatchurch Cavern and Sidcot Swallet. It had been a very successful day in terms of updating

records of Rare Plant Register species and we recorded 96 species in the bracken-dominated target square, taking its total to 146 species. The baby Royal Fern was the most exciting find – it will be interesting to monitor its survival.

Atriplex Field Workshop, Wall Common (VC5)

Saturday 1st September

Leaders & report: Liz McDonnell & Clive Lovatt

Unfortunately, as a result of retiring as BSBI Welsh Officer and moving back to Ireland, Paul Green was unable to co-lead this meeting to help us with this confusing group of species. However, Clive and Liz had made a site reconnaissance last year and again just before the meeting, and Clive had also been looking at *Atriplex* in Gloucestershire and North Somerset and felt confident to ask the right questions, even if not to give all the right answers*.

We were delighted that so many members (24) arrived for the meeting and as there were so many, we decided to work in three separate groups on the day; a more specialist *Atriplex*/critical plants working group (Clive), a general saltmarsh plants identification group for any level of knowledge (Liz), and a recording group (Helena Crouch & Steve Parker).

Liz & Clive had brought a range of different Orache (*Atriplex*) species from inland and coastal habitats to add to those found on the workshop, so that we could see the different leaf shapes and fruit structure. To help with understanding the latter, Liz had constructed large models of the fruiting structures of Spear-leaved Orache (*Atriplex prostrata*) and Babington's Orache (*A. glabriuscula*) enabling the different shape and adhesion of the bracteoles and the direction in which the radicle points to be seen more easily than in real life. *A. prostrata* has a flat-based triangular bracteole (fused basally) and the embryo inside the seed coat has a sideways-pointing radicle. In *A. glabriuscula* the bracteoles are rhombic (almost square, stalked to the angle) and fused to the side angles; the radicle points upwards. A useful field character is that by the end of September the laxly spread out upper bracteoles of *A. glabriuscula* enlarge and blacken.

The specialist group went to search amongst the coastal Oraches for the much rarer Long-stalked Orache (*A. longipes*). This rare Somerset species has only been found at Wall Common and Steart, but it

is difficult to distinguish from the very similar *A. xgustafssoniana*, the hybrid between the Long-stalked and Spear-leaved Oraches. Both become yellowish (*A. prostrata* senesces to a reddish hue) and have stalked bracteoles – particularly the ones in the lower leaf axils. *A. longipes* is less common (we did not re-find it here) and the hybrid (relatively easily found), which is probably ubiquitous in the Severnside saltmarshes, has stalks absent or up to 5mm, and bracteoles if they are foliaceous (flat and in a small way, leafy) up to 10mm, whereas *A. longipes* has more and longer-stalked larger bracteoles. *A. prostrata* is variable but will never have stalked or longer than 5mm flat-tipped (foliaceous) bracteoles. It is extraordinary to recall that *A. longipes* was only recognised and named in the 1970s.



Liz McDonnell demonstrating the structure of *Atriplex* bracteoles ©Ian Salmon

The specialist group also looked at some other difficult or variable plants. At the edge of standing water on the track inside the sea wall we found batrachian (water) buttercup seedlings, likely to be Brackish Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus baudotii*). Simon Leach collected some Knotgrasses (*Polygonum aviculare* agg) samples to try to match to the account in the 2018 volume 1 of Sell & Murrell's *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*. At the back of the marsh we saw a perennial variant of Curled Dock (*Rumex crispus* ssp *crispus*) whereas on the shingle there occurs the shorter and larger-fruited subspecies with curled fleshy leaves, ssp *littoreus*.

The general saltmarsh group went first to clamber into a brackish ditch near the edge of the sea wall to see Parsley Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe lachenalii*) growing with Sea Club-rush (*Bolboschoenus*

maritimus) and a few strands of Sea Milkwort (*Glaux maritima*).

We then ventured into the dense Sea Couch (*Elytrigia atherica*) - dominated saltmarsh where we met the recording group who had just found 20 large flowering/fruited plants of Slender Hare's-ear (*Bupleurum tenuissimum*) in the tall dense mass of Sea Couch. This was rather surprising, as this slim, hard-to-spot plant is usually found at this locality on thin, open grassy & shingly substrates and paths.



Atriplex littoralis ©Ian Salmon

We looked at the zonation in the saltmarsh around water-filled depressions and found Saltmarsh Rush (*Juncus gerardii*) with Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra* ssp *littoralis*) at the higher levels, then Annual Sea-blight (*Suaeda maritima*) and Glasswort (*Salicornia* spp.) amongst the salty water. The reddish stems of Hardgrass (*Parapholis strigosa*) here alerted us to this inconspicuous grass, but most of the spikelets had dropped off and dispersed. The recording group noted a few patches of Sea-purslane (*Atriplex portulacoides*) in the low saltmarsh. This has colonized the area recently and could pose a threat if it dominates the habitat as it does at Porlock.

All the groups made their various ways across the saltmarsh towards the shingle bank where we had lunch overlooking the muddy shore. There was much discussion about the prostrate Oraches on the shingle bank and the specialist group indicated that they had seen *A. prostrata*, *A. glabriuscula* and *A. x gustafssoniana* (the two latter confirmed by John Akeroyd, the BSBI Referee). The three groups joined together to walk back across the muddy creeks and sand bars (where Sand Couch (*Elytrigia juncea*) was frequent in the mobile sand) and found one large plant of Grass-leaved Orache (*Atriplex littoralis*) amongst some strands of Lyme-grass (*Leymus arenarius*), a large blue-leaved grass that is fairly

common in the Bridgwater Bay area but new to this site. We made our way back to the cars, stopping on the way to visit the Siberian Violet-willow (*Salix acutifolia*), a rare Willow recorded from only 2 locations in Somerset - Minehead and Wall Common. Bill Urwin identified Giant Willow Aphid (*Tuberolachnus salignus*) which was abundant on this tree. Back at Liz's camper van, we had tea and Jammy Dodgers and compared our findings and concluded that it had been an inspiring identification and recording day.

**Shortly after the meeting a thorough and well-illustrated account by Bob Leaney entitled Terminology and Identification in the annual native Atriplex species of the British Isles: Part II Identification and key was published in BSBI News for September 2018 (139: 36-44). This excellent article reinforces and supports the findings and comments made during our workshop. However, it does not fully account for the variation within the species and hybrid that we could see in the field or in the specimens we displayed at the car park before walking onto the marsh. The account in Sell & Murrell's Flora of Great Britain and Ireland (Vol 1 (2018): 400-411) should be referred to for named varieties. Neither account may represent the last word on the subject.*

Yarty Moor, Blackdown Hills (VC5)

Sunday 16 September 2018

Leaders: Steve Parker & Liz McDonnell

Report: Liz McDonnell

Yarty Moor is a mire and wet grassland site at the source of the River Yarty. As there is no parking at the site, we met at the Staple Hill car park and shared cars to a convenient adjacent pull-in and walked to this Somerset Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve. The site was being grazed by a suckler herd and appeared to be in very good condition. Steve decided to concentrate our recording in the southern part of the site and to leave the rest of the site (in a separate monad) to another visit. Before getting very far into our recording area, one of our group noticed Yellow Bartsia (*Parentucellia viscosa*), a rare Somerset plant. It was first found at Yarty in 2011 and this is now thought to be the only extant site in VC5. We all clustered around to look at this yellow-flowered member of the Scrophulariaceae family, with its sticky glandular hairs.

We then split into two recording groups to range over a wider area of this botanically interesting site, one group going down slope towards the damp valley mires and scrubby edge of the river and the other group staying higher up amongst the gorse scrub and rough grassland. The Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) was well grazed and we jumped from tussock to tussock and negotiated the sinking peaty mud to find the tiny pale pink flowers of Pale Butterwort (*Pinguicula lusitanica*), a carnivorous plant that traps small insects on the sticky glands of its in-rolled leaves. This species has a highly restricted western distribution in Britain & Ireland. We found many other mire species in the wet peat of the runnels that run down the slope including Marsh Lousewort (*Pedicularis palustris*), Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), Marsh St John's-wort (*Hypericum elodes*), Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*), Star Sedge (*Carex echinata*), Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*), Lesser Skullcap (*Scutellaria minor*) and Marsh Arrowgrass (*Triglochin palustris*). We found an extraordinary number of 'target' species for the Somerset Rare Plant Register, including at least a dozen declining widespread species listed as Near Threatened in the England Red List.



Galium uliginosum infected with gall wasp *Dasineura hygrophila* ©Simon Leach

Other highlights included Saw-wort (*Serratula tinctoria*) and several scattered stands of Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*), while gall-hunters found strange, spongy 'cuckoo-spit' galls on Fen Bedstraw (*Galium uliginosum*) caused by the gall midge *Dasineura hygrophila* - the first record for Somerset of a species that also appears to be quite rare nationally. *Brachycollis stellariae* on Lesser Stitchwort (*Stellaria graminea*) was also a 'first' for Somerset, while *Acalitus calycophthirus* causing 'big

bud' galls on Birch (*Betula pubescens*) was new to VC5.

Of particular interest was a small patch of White Beak-sedge (*Rhynchospora alba*), another extremely rare Somerset species, Yarty being the only site where it has been recorded recently. It was growing amongst Many-stalked Spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), and the narrow leaves of both were difficult to separate from each other. Deergrass (*Trichophorum germanicum*) was occasional on the boggy middle and lower slopes.

The two groups merged to explore the upper slopes and the western boundary hedge. We were pleased to find a few plants of Wood Horsetail (*Equisetum sylvaticum*) before leaving the site via a gateway where we saw several plants of Corn Spurrey (*Spergula arvensis*). We all agreed that the site was species-rich and that grazing levels were about right to maintain the mire and grassland habitats in good condition. A further recording visit was needed next year to complete the survey. (2019 Yarty Field Meeting is arranged for Saturday 16th June, when a sedge identification day is planned).

Frome (VC6)

Sunday 7th October 2018

Leaders: Helena Crouch & Simon Leach

Report: Helena Crouch & Simon Leach

On the first Sunday of the month, Frome is home to a huge street market showcasing local crafts and produce, which meant that the town was busy and vibrant for our urban meeting! Ten members met on a fine autumnal day, splitting into two groups to record in adjacent monads.

Helena's group meandered through the streets of Trinity, recording many common wall species, including Wall Lettuce (*Mycelis muralis*), Pellitory-of-the-Wall (*Parietaria judaica*), Wall-rue (*Asplenium ruta-muraria*), Maidenhair Spleenwort (*A. trichomanes*), Rustyback (*A. ceterach*) and Hart's-tongue (*A. scolopendrium*). In the large churchyard of Holy Trinity Church, we found Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*), Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*), Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Pilosella officinarum*), Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*) and Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*).

We found a bench in the sun beside the River Frome for lunch, where we recorded Branched Bur-reed (*Sparganium erectum*), Spiked Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*), Gypsywort (*Lycopus*

europaeus) and Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*).

Following the riverside path back towards town we found two patches of Small Teasel (*Dipsacus pilosus*), Unbranched Bur-reed (*Sparganium emersum*) and Water Forget-me-Not (*Myosotis scorpioides*). While we puzzled over a duckweed, a man asked whether we were recording for Atlas 2020! He was a BSBI member from Hampshire, visiting friends in Frome, and apparently recognised immediately that we must be botanists – goodness knows how! The duckweed was later confirmed to be flat Fat Duckweed (*Lemna gibba*), new to the hectad.

Meanwhile, Simon's group headed south into ST7747 (Keyford). We too opted for a zig-zag approach, aiming to cover as varied a range of habitats as we could muster. This included a small allotment, various bits of waste ground, parkland, streets and back alleys, planted woodland, culverted stream, industrial estate, churchyard, and even – though nobody needed it, thank goodness – Frome's very own Dental Access Centre. There were very few recent records on MapMate for this part of Frome, so adding new species was really easy; even so, we were surprised to find that by the end of the day we had added well over 200 taxa. Highlights included a patch of Balkan Spurge (*Euphorbia oblongata*) in an alley-way, a nearby wall-top with Narrow-leaved Meadow-grass (*Poa angustifolia*) and, in the concrete wall of a stream culvert, an unlikely few stems of Sneezewort (*Achillea ptarmica*). We stopped for a late picnic on a grassy slope, surrounded by patches of (introduced?) Meadow Crane's-bill (*Geranium pratense*) and the background 'buzz' of Roesel's Bush-crickets (*Metrioptera roeselii*).

In the afternoon we wandered through a small industrial/trading estate, where we found a hawkweed; a specimen was taken, and Helena's hunch of Southern Hawkweed (*Hieracium argillaceum*) was later confirmed by Tim Rich. Road verges and pavements produced a few unusual species such as Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*), while on an old building site we noted a sprawling and seemingly well naturalised Grape-vine (*Vitis vinifera*).

For anyone with a soft spot for knotgrasses, you'll be pleased to know we think we had four species: *Polygonum aviculare* and *P. arenastrum*, of course, plus a couple of the more difficult (and less

recorded) segregates within 'arenastrum' – Bushy (*P. polychnemiforme*) and Naked (*P. denudatum*). And, as if the names weren't already hard enough, in the new edition of Stace *P. arenastrum* has a new name, *P. depressum*. Whether this describes the plant, or the mood of the person trying to sort out what it is, we're not entirely sure.

And as a fitting end to a productive and enjoyable day, the two groups convened for tea in the courtyard of the Garden Café.

Taunton (VC5)

27th October 2018

Leaders: Simon Leach & Ian Salmon

Report: Simon Leach

The last time our Group held a field meeting in Taunton was on 9th July 2016, a joint meeting with the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. The present meeting, too, was in essence a joint enterprise, in spirit at least, since our aim was to contribute to the Wild Flower Society's 'Autumn one day hunt'.

This was all about seeing how many different species we could find in flower in a single day. It made a nice change from card-filling, and felt strangely liberating to be allowed to completely ignore anything that wasn't in flower! Following a long, hard, sweltering field season, this was as near as you could get to being given a day off for good behaviour.

We met at Silk Mills 'park and ride', from where we walked out past Roughmoor to the pond, then through Longrun Meadow to French Weir, along the mill stream to Tangier and into Goodlands Gardens, with a lunchtime stop at 'The Shed' tearooms. By that time our list of flowerers was already blooming nicely: 88 taxa, including – as an aside – several plants in new 'quartads' (½-km squares), and even one or two plants new to hectad ST22 like Great Lettuce (*Lactuca virosa*) and the hybrid dock *Rumex x dufftii*.

In Longrun Meadow we located the still-thriving population of Hoary Cinquefoil (*Potentilla argentea*) at its only site in VC5, while in Goodlands Gardens we saw White Melilot (*Melilotus albus*), Henbit Dead-nettle (*Lamium amplexicaule*) and Yellow Bristle-grass (*Setaria pumila*). All in flower too!

From the tearoom we headed downstream along the riverside path to Firepool Weir, then along the canal a little way before climbing up to join the 'new

road' (Trenchard Way) near the railway station. On rough ground beside the canal path we noted Balkan Spurge (*Euphorbia oblongata*) – another new 'quartad' record – while the roadside near the station produced still-flowering plants of Hairy Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus subbiflorus*) and Hare's-foot Clover (*Trifolium arvense*), along with other late flowerers like Rosebay Willowherb (*Chamerion angustifolium*), White Campion (*Silene latifolia*), Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota* subsp. *carota*) and Fig-leaved Goosefoot (*Chenopodium ficifolium*). A couple of days prior to the meeting one of us had found Corn Knotgrass (*Polygonum rurivagum*) there, and knotgrass devotees (thin on the ground, admittedly) were delighted to also see Naked Knotgrass (*P. denudatum*) and Arable Knotgrass (*P. agrestinum*). Another interesting find was Grass-leaved Orache (*Atriplex littoralis*), still in flower and only the second record of it from ST22.



Mentha pulegium ©Ian Salmon

We then walked along Trenchard Way to the Chip Lane roundabout. These road verges, like those at the station, seem to produce something unusual whenever anyone visits them, and this time was no exception. Here we found a single patch of Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) – and in full flower too. Undoubtedly alien, presumably having arrived here as a contaminant of a road-verge seed mix, but a surprising discovery and a well-deserved 'tick' –

the first record of this Schedule 8 Red-listed species in ST22, and only the second or third record for VC5.

After the Pennyroyal it was always going to be a struggle, so at that point we decided to return along the footpath beside Turner's Allotments, through the community orchard and back to the 'park and ride'. Calling it a day is easier said than done though, and we continued to spot new species in flower as we went, including Stone Parsley (*Sison amomum*) and Lesser Burdock (*Arctium minus*) next to the railway line. By now it had started to rain, and it was cold too, but even back at the cars there was one more species to be found – a tiny scrap of still-flowering Rough Chervil (*Chaerophyllum temulum*).

We'd had an excellent day. Our total count of 158 was much higher than we had been anticipating. Indeed, it turned out to be one of the highest counts anywhere in the country! And we're pretty sure it was the *only* count that included Pennyroyal.

We really must do it again sometime

New Year Plant Hunt Burnham-on-Sea (VC6)

Sunday 30th December 2018

Report: Helena Crouch

Sixteen members met at Apex Park in Burnham-on-Sea to participate in the BSBI New Year Plant Hunt. Having appointed a conscientious time-keeper, we began our three hour hunt for species in flower: as always, we took ages to leave the car park! Our first five species were five of the top six in the NYPH: Shepherd's-purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*), Daisy (*Bellis perennis*), Common Chickweed (*Stellaria media*), Annual Meadow-grass (*Poa annua*) and Dandelion (*Taraxacum* agg.), all species which flower all year round. In the hedge we found Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) in flower and the yellow catkins and red female flowers of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*).

After careful checks for anthers, we added Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*) and Cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*), along with several other common species. By the time we moved away from the car park entrance, we had recorded 22 species in flower!

Exploring the eastern edge of Apex Park, we added Three-cornered Leek (*Allium triquetrum*), Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) and False Oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*). With an element of self-sacrifice, we found flowers on Common Nettle

(*Urtica dioica*), and soon added Sea Radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum* subsp. *maritimus*), Bramble (*Rubus ulmifolius*), Annual Mercury (*Mercurialis annuus*) and a huge Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*).



Petasites fragrans ©Helena Crouch

Beside the lake, some enjoyed the scented flowers of Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*); we also found Green Alkanet (*Pentaglottis sempervirens*), Ivy (*Hedera helix*) and a grove of Grey Alder (*Alnus incana*) with catkins. After adding several more common species, we left the park and set off alongside the estuary of the River Brue. Here we found Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*), Greater Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia media*) and Common Cord-grass (*Spartina anglica*) in flower on the salt-marsh and Sea Mayweed (*Tripleurospermum maritimum*) on the sea wall. A huge patch of Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites fragrans*) was admired for its scent. We stopped for lunch on the sea wall, with excellent views of Stert Island and the coast of South Somerset (VC5).

Refreshed, we headed for the South Esplanade, to explore the sea lawns and banks. Whilst searching in vain for Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) in flower, Helena managed to walk directly underneath lovely catkins of Osier (*Salix viminalis*), spotted by Ellen! The plantain was later found in flower on the bank, along with Spotted Medick (*Medicago arabica*) and Flattened Meadow-grass (*Poa compressa*). A good find on the sea lawns was Henbit Dead-nettle (*Lamium amplexicaule*). Reaching the town, we added more typically urban species: Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*), Pink-sorrel (*Oxalis articulata*), Seaside Daisy (*Erigeron glaucus*) and Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*).

We were pleased to find both Bilbao's Fleabane (*Conyza floribunda*) and Guernsey Fleabane (*Conyza sumatrensis*). In the churchyard of St Andrew's, we finally found Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*) in flower, always slightly challenging due to the lack of petals. Here we also added Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) and, rather surprisingly, a single plant of Purple Viper's-bugloss (*Echium plantagineum*) in the grass. In the adjacent Marine Cove Gardens, we found more Henbit Dead-nettle (pleasingly in a different monad) and a small pretty Garden Pansy (*Viola x wittrockiana*) growing in a lawn.

Out of time, we headed back to Bay View Café on the seafront for tea and cakes. Altogether we had recorded 74 species in flower, which in the end was the 9th longest list submitted to the BSBI



Tripleurospermum maritimum ©Helena Crouch



Hedera helix ©Helena Crouch

Botany Articles

The Friday Group 2018

Graham Lavender (edited by Ro FitzGerald)

Once again the gang of four, Ro FitzGerald, Jeanne Webb, Ian Salmon and I decided that in 2018 Fridays were sacrosanct and only adverse weather would prevent us from recording in our target area, essentially anywhere west of Taunton in VC5. 2018 differed from previous years in a number of ways as there were fewer zero monads to look at (so many now done!) and we were targeting more species on the Somerset Rare Plant Register, and digging into history (much helped by the **TTN** herbarium at the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton) to find interesting old records to try to refind.

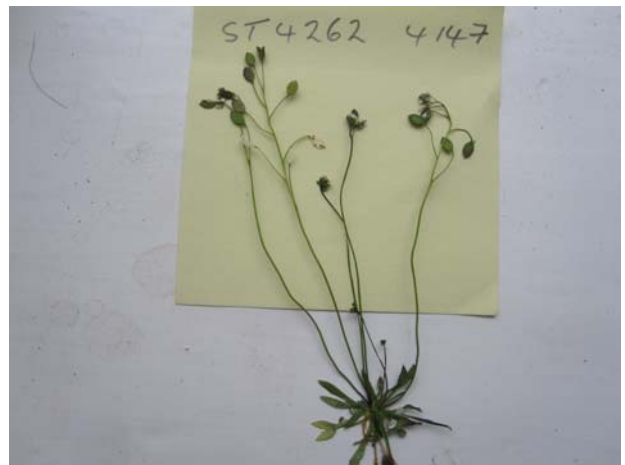
January naturally had few records but we had thought up a winter plan which we put in place in February. Determining the range of Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*) along the coast in VC5 was our primary challenge and we added Early Meadow-grass (*Poa infirma*) and Glabrous Whitlowgrass (*Erophila glabrescens*) as these species favour similar habitats. In the event we found Lesser Chickweed in every coastal hectad in VC5, often in abundance and not infrequently under our feet in gravelly coastal car parks.

One of the discoveries was that Caravan Parks with short grass pitches were a very good winter hunting ground. One of the best days was at Hoburne Caravan Park at Blue Anchor where we found all three targets. Without a doubt the rare Early Meadow Grass (only recently recorded in counties outside Devon and Cornwall) was the most exciting find. Its very characteristic yellow colour gave it away at a caravan pitch that had had some disturbance. Our winter hunts resulted in 19 records for Lesser Chickweed, 3 for Early Meadow-grass and 4 for Glabrous Whitlowgrass. Our thanks must go to Tim Rich for determining our first (*Erophila glabrescens*) and Clive Lovatt our first *Poa infirma* – we are strong believers in getting less familiar targets expertly confirmed to avoid recording errors.

April arrived with a prolonged cold spell. We still ventured out, but unkind weather did limit the records we made. I think Jeanne and I managed to collect a significant number of Dandelions (*Taraxacum*) on our Friday sessions when they finally appeared in April, much later than the previous year.



Poa infirma at Hoburne caravan park ©Graham Lavender



Erophila glabrescens ©Graham Lavender

Two highlights of May were firstly unrestricted access to Minehead Golf Course and secondly Tim Rich joining the Friday Group for an early Hawkweed (*Hieracium*) hunt. Minehead Golf course is a special site and although well recorded the records were overdue for an update. Our first success was Spring Vetch (*Vicia lathyroides*), which Helena's presentation at one of SRPG's winter meetings had highlighted as a species needing updates. Target was accomplished within a few yards of the edge of the golf course, and the first monad we looked in had it in abundance updating a 1999 record. That morning, sunny and with skylarks singing, had too many front-of-card records to list but for me the sight of flowering Sand Catchfly (*Silene conica*) in one of its few remaining UK sites was perhaps the highlight. Then on the last Friday in May Tim Rich joined us with the particular target of updating a very old record for the Bristol Channel Hawkweed (*Hieracium eustomon*) which is a very early flowerer being in section Stelligera. We found a flowering Hawkweed at its old site high up on Culver Cliff and we had climbing gear with us but the perilous state of the

cliff face denied us access. Tim pronounced it was highly probable from what he could see that this was the target, but was unable to make a definitive determination. It is always a joy to have Tim with us and this day resulted in a number of other records and an opportunity to check and record the Somerset Whitebeam (*Sorbus subcuneata*) on Culver cliff which was in flower for our visit. A *Sorbus* in woodland above Minehead was suspected to be *S. roceocarpa* but could not be confirmed until October when a sample of the orange fruit was sent to Tim.

June got under way with a trip to Exmoor to check up on the only Somerset site for Small Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum azoricum*) which was a success, though the adjacent site for Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*) did not produce a result. We fared no better at an old site for Lesser Twayblade (*Neottia cordata*). Searching for old records can be hard going and discouraging at times – but SO well worth it when successful!



Gymnadenia densiflora ©Graham Lavender

A long-planned and anticipated search for Eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) in Bridgwater Bay was one of those red letter days when everything worked out well. (As such is subject of a separate article). A memorable achievement in June was finding Horned Pondweed (*Zannichellia palustris*) in ponds right beside a Minehead supermarket, not seen in the area since pre 2000.

July was a challenge, the heat was oppressive and severely restricted the distances we were prepared to walk. On possibly the hottest day of the year, Jeanne's husband Tim arranged parking for us at a caravan site at Warren bay Cliffs. Not just parking but a space at the top of a very short access path to the base of the cliff. The heat was oppressive and we recognised we would not be able to go far and in the

event I doubt we went more than 100 yards. At a snail's pace we set off and were rewarded! Within a 100 yards we found *Rosa micrantha*, (later confirmed by Rob Randall). There were old records for *R. canina* x *micrantha* in the next monad but no post 2000 records and no previous records for *R. micrantha* itself.

The highlight however was the Marsh Fragrant orchid (*Gymnadenia densiflora*) which we had found at peak flowering time. A voucher specimen now resides in Taunton herbarium. Another notable July day featured a trip to Haddon Moor Butterfly Nature reserve at Upton. Although well recorded during the last few years we were still able to locate some unexpected plants which must have been previously overlooked. Pale Butterwort (*Pinguicula lusitanica*) delighted us in flower (not recorded since the Green brothers in 2003), but highlights new to the site were Cornish Moneywort (*Sibthorpia europaea*) and Ivy-leaved Bellflower (*Wahlenbergia hederacea*). Even in this relatively well recorded small site we increased the total records from 121 to 145, proving that focused update efforts can be well worth it.



Mentha x villosanervata ©Graham Lavender

The other notable achievement for July was refinding Bermuda Grass *Cynodon dactylon* at Minehead Golf Course, last recorded in 2002 and feared lost from the site, but still hangs on almost under the wheels of parked cars! The other record of note was a flowering Sharp-toothed Mint (*Mentha x villosanervata*) last seen in Somerset in 1967 which was found by a track bordering Williton Allotments.

By the first week of August it was time to update some interesting old records, as I had just acquired the 'Wallpaper' files. [The Wallpaper files are essentially a list of all front of cards recorded for The Atlas Flora of Somerset by Paul & Ian Green and Geraldine Crouch]. The SRPG winter meeting in

March 2019 will include a session on them and provide future access to them for members. *Sorbus devoniensis* is well recorded in VC4 but its area of distribution seems to stop at the border with VC5 except for a couple of old records. We decided to update those records from Bury down towards Dulverton, first with the hedgerow records and secondly with those on edge of small copses. The day started well with both objectives achieved, so we made a car journey to a site over near Brushford. This was a search for the elusive and declining Greater Broomrape (*Orobanche rapum-genistae*). The first possible area seemed to have been partly cleared and although some Gorse remained we searched without success. The second site did not look promising, overgrown somewhat with shrubs and brambles, so we sat and had lunch, both of us thinking the same thing, "time to call it a day". But refreshed by lunch we spotted the tall spikes of Greater Broomrape just 20-30 yards from where we had been sitting! We only found 4 spikes in all, equally spread under Gorse and Broom. The last record here had been in 1996, so this was a red letter day indeed. August continued hot and it was a little hard to know where to go next with large swathes of brown vegetation in the fields.



Orobanche rapum-genistae ©Graham Lavender

In the event we decided nearer water might be a good option and plumped for Wimbleball reservoir, well recorded on the northern end but less so down the western bank. Parking in the main car park near the tea room Broad-leaved Helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*) was growing within yards of the cars on

the edge of the car park, never previously recorded here. We were not unhappy to increase the monad total from 114 to 189 with 16 front-of-cards plants.

The last outing of the month was to Triscombe Quarry - the monad had some previous records but no one had ventured into the quarry itself. In the event we were disappointed to find no aquatic plants in the deep water pools, but we still found 8 front-of-cards including abundant *Euphrasia anglica* and *Plantago major* subsp *intermedia*. Later in the month SRPG held one of its most successful and best attended SRPG workshops so far, for *Atriplex* and salt-marsh species, at Wall Common. Having collected reference samples of *Atriplex glabriuscula* and *A. x gustafssoniana* at the meeting and had them confirmed by Dr John Akeroyd it seemed logical to continue to use that knowledge and a walk from Lilstock to Hinkley Point found both targets in multiple monads.



Atriplex x gustafssoniana ©Graham Lavender

Possibly the last special day of the season was a trip to Exmoor to target a site for Bloody Whitebeam (*Sorbus vexans*) last recorded by Dr Margaret Bradshaw in 1984 at 'The Guildhall' Yenworthy Wood on the north Somerset Coast near to the border with VC4. This is a really strange site with an almost vertical cliff of 80-100ft within yards of the coastal path yet completely invisible from it. In the event we found a total of 7 Whitebeams all of which Dr Tim Rich was able to confirm as *S. vexans* and samples were taken for Taunton herbarium. We had determined only to record Whitebeams on the day and not be distracted but could not ignore the fairly abundant Dodder (*Cuscuta epithymum*) on the Gorse. An excellent day even if climbing back up to the cars at the end felt a real challenge!

So 2018 saw a satisfying number of gaps filled, both in monad cover and in updating significant old records. The challenge in 2019 is to visit the few monads still to be recorded, however dull and/or inaccessible they look, and increasingly to target old records particularly those on the Somerset Rare Plant Register.

Back from the Brink – again!

Recovering Interrupted Brome (*Bromus interruptus*)

Report: Fred Rumsey

Interrupted Brome (*Bromus interruptus*) [Hack.] Druce occupies a singular and paradoxical position in the British flora as an Endemic which is also widely considered to be a Neophyte (Preston et al., 2002). It is also, famously, Extinct in the wild (EW) and the first extinct British plant species for which recovery was attempted.

Seed protein, allozyme and Nuclear DNA sequence studies have all shown a very close similarity to the widespread *B. hordeaceus* L. from which *B. interruptus* is therefore believed to have originated through mutation. Whether this occurred in the British Isles, or elsewhere, is still open to debate. It is assumed by some to have been unwittingly introduced as a fodder crop seed contaminant from overseas, its pattern of distribution suggesting an Alien status (Rich & Lockton, 2002). Contrary to many sources (eg. UK Biodiversity Group, 1998) the species is not well established in the Netherlands, from where only two 20th century casual occurrences are actually known (Ermelo, 1933 & Amsterdam docks, 1934). Aside from these it has never been found outside of England. Cope & Gray, (2009) accordingly regard it as native; a mutation of Soft Brome which occurred in England and was then dispersed locally. It was particularly associated with Sainfoin (*Onobrychis viciifolia* Scop.), itself of controversial status (Clement, 2009) and introduced as a crop in the mid 17th century from France, and the Brome's spread, success and then decline probably mirrors the fortunes of Sainfoin as a crop in this country.

The earliest known specimen of Interrupted Brome was collected in 1849 at Odsey in Herts, but it was not formally described (as a variety of *B. mollis* L. = *B. hordeaceus* L.) until 1889 (Druce, 1889). He subsequently raised it to full species level (Druce, 1895).



Bromus interruptus ©Fred Rumsey

The introduction of improved seed-cleaning methods and other changes in agricultural practices during the early part of the 20th century meant that it was already recognised as a diminishing species by the 1930s (Druce, 1932). Perring (1962) found only six post-1936 records, all in East Anglia (W. Norfolk, VC.28 and Cambs, VC.29). Following his alert that the species may be close to extinction it was re-found at a site near Pampisford in 1962 (Perring & Sell, 1963) where it was last seen in 1972. In spite of attempts to manage the site that winter and further attempts to recover the population in 1978 no further plants have been found here, or indeed in any of its other past sites. Seed stocks at Cambridge Botanic Garden were found to be inviable and it was therefore believed extinct.

Its survival was dramatically revealed at a BSBI conference in Manchester in 1979 when P.M. Smith, who had been earlier working on this genus for his PhD. produced a growing potful. From these few plants all of the subsequent recovery work has happened. In 1995 Tim Rich & Penny Angold began data collation and revisiting sites with a view to re-introduction, initial attempts to get funding were however unsuccessful. With the development of the UK BAP process resources became available and responsibility for the recovery programme for this species was taken up by RBG Kew as Lead Partner, with Stewart Henchie (senior horticultural manager)

working closely with Ron Porley (EN) to deliver the targets. Bulking up of seed stocks necessary for the re-introduction was carried out for Kew by Paignton Zoo (from 2001) and the re-introduction process commenced at Whittlesford, Cambs. with national press coverage in 2003. A second site was added in 2004 at Aston Rowant NNR (an area under direct management by EN) A third introduction site (as called for by the SAP) was selected and sown at Cholderton, Wilts. in 2005.

For various reasons both of the earlier introductions failed within 4 years but due to changes in personnel within the key organisations involved (NE, RBG Kew) impetus was lost, the work was not continued and crucially knowledge of the procedures and progress (or its lack) were not captured, or reported. This failure only became apparent when a status review was commissioned in 2013, the genesis of which had been the need for information for the England Red-list, then in preparation. Re-survey by FJR in June-September 2013 confirmed the species absence and it was considered probable that the species had again become extinct in the wild.

Fortuitously, following consultation with Dr Pete Stroh (BSBI), Pete Michna (Cambridge University Botanic Garden) and Ashley Arbon MBE, the farmer on whose land the 2003 introduction had occurred, it was realised that there was both a willingness and the availability of material and other resources to immediately proceed with a re-introduction project. Fresh seed from CUBG, and stocks retained by Ashley Arbon from an initial harvest (2003-4) from the original introduction, were sown in adjacent plots on 1st Oct. 2013. Germination of the fresh material, but not the stored seed, occurred within a week and a population of plants estimated as up to c.1000 (i.e. a 20% survival to maturity) were recorded on a follow-up visit by PS & PM on 10th Feb. 2014. The crop was successful allowing trial plots on two other ecologically dissimilar areas nearby to be set.

Wanting a publically accessible site and conscious that once again success was heavily reliant on one or two individuals, the search for other partners began. Contact from Pete Grainger (Sedgemoor Council) with the offer of an arable display site maintained by volunteers at Apex Leisure Park, Burnham on Sea (VC.6) was thus warmly received. Seed was sent in July 2014 but because of operational difficulties was not sown until March 2015. Initially this was thought to have failed but c.110 plants were found, some still in flower in Oct. 2015 by FJR and HJC. Appropriate

management has not subsequently been adopted and the grass has failed to re-appear but some seed stocks were retained and further attempts are promised.

More successfully, material has been introduced to two other reserve areas with good historical links to the plant, excellent arable weed communities and proven volunteer commitment/ demonstrable site management: College Lake, Tring (VC.24), a BBOWT reserve and Ranscombe Park, Cuxton (VC.16) Plantlife's flagship arable site. At both seeds were introduced to two plots in Autumn 2015 with considerable success. The bumper crop from College Lake was used by FJR to re-introduce the grass to the Cholderton Estate (VC.8/12) in 2016. A good crop resulted and its persistence as the field is left to pasture will be monitored, the excess seed used elsewhere on site.

There have been various setbacks, all of which have, however, added to our knowledge of the grasses tolerances and ecology, allowing better management prescriptions to be drawn up. Modern agricultural practices particularly deep ploughing and seed cleaning are inimical to the species survival.

It is still too soon to say whether this programme has been successful, it is still too heavily reliant on a few committed volunteers for delivery but a wider community is now involved at a wider range of sites. It seems likely that because of aspects of its seed biology it, like a range of other critically endangered arable species, may always require some level of intervention and effective cultivation to survive. This has resource implications. The plight of the plant is however now better known, it is widely grown by a large group of individuals and as such will never again face the threat of total extinction.

A description of *Bromus interruptus* can be found in the Rare Plant Register at:

<http://www.somersetrareplantsgroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Bromus-interruptus.pdf>

Classical origins of the names of two common plants

Val Graham

The other day, I happened to find out about the origin of the names of two common plants which I thought the group might like to hear about. These plants are linked by an origin in the classical world and derive from two figures, one a legendary

goddess and one a historical king, who through centuries of myth-making, acquired a reputation for knowledge of potions, poisons and herbal lore. This is mostly culled from internet sources, so classicists please forgive my errors.

The first plant is the extravagantly named but humble *Circaea lutetiana*, Enchanter's-nightshade.



Circaea lutetiana by Pethan July 26, 2005 Mosel, Germany

The brilliant Richard Fortey's latest book (2016) tipped me off about this story which begins, in recorded form anyway, with Homer's *Odyssey* in the 8th century BC, and the arrival of wily Odysseus and his band of adventurers at the island of Aea. A shore party sent ahead by Odysseus discovers it is ruled over by Circe, daughter of an illustrious father – the sun-god Helios. The sailors are welcomed by Circe and presented with a fine feast. Naturally there is a catch – the meal is laced with a magic potion which turns the men into pigs. Odysseus is tipped off by one sailor who escapes and, with help from Hermes (it's not what you know...) rescues his men and settles in for a year of feasting and carousing before carrying on with their long journey home from Troy.

From this beginning, Circe's reputation as a sorceress and mistress of herbal lore developed. The learned of Paris (ancient Lutetia – check your *Asterix*) came to believe that the pig-producing potion was derived from the plant we call *Circaea lutetiana*. Other authorities believed it was the nightshades proper (*Solanum*), hence the qualification "of Paris". It is known in French as

Circée de Paris or *Herbe aux sorcières*. It is not clear, to me at least, why this member of the Willowherb family was linked with the nightshades, perhaps it is simply through an association with potions and poisons.

Plant number two is the common wetland species *Eupatorium cannabinum*, Hemp-agrimony.



Eupatorium cannabinum, Shapwick Heath ©Val Graham

Eupatorium is derived from *Eupator Dionysus*, the nickname of Mithridates VI, king of Pontus (120-63BC). An aggressive empire-builder he expanded his kingdom on the southern shores of the Black Sea to Georgia, the Crimea and the rest of Anatolia. However, at this time, the Roman republic was also expanding into Asia Minor and a series of "Pontic Wars" followed, the last of which resulted in his defeat by Pompey "the Great" (he of the mighty quiff and ego to match).

All of which may not seem to have much to do with herbs, except for Mithridates' legendary death. When all was lost, he poisoned his family (clearly a charming chap – he had previously married his sister) and took a large dose himself, which failed to have the desired effect because, being justifiably paranoid, he had become immune by regularly dosing himself with various poisons. He then died by the sword, either asking his bodyguard to kill him, or being slaughtered by Roman troops.

Romans had great respect for those that stood up to them (provided they eventually lost), and a story developed that Mithridates had discovered a universal antidote to poison, which Aulus Cornelius Celsus (c.25 BC – c.50 AD) called the *Antidotum Mithridaticum*.

A century or so later Pliny the Elder wrote about the plant "Eupatoria" in his *Naturalis Historia* – a huge encyclopaedic work that he was still working on

when he died in the eruption of Vesuvius in 79AD. He described it thus: "The stem of it is ligneous, hairy, and swarthy, and a cubit or more in length. The leaves, arranged at regular intervals, resemble those of cinquefoil or hemp; they have five indentations at the edge, and are swarthy like the stem, and downy. The root is never used. The seed, taken in wine, is a sovereign remedy for dysentery." (Translation from Bostock and Riley, 1855, Vol 5, p. 103).

Herbal uses of the plant continued down the centuries. John Pechey in *The Compleat Herbal of Physical Plants* (1694) stated: 'Tis Epatick and Vulnerary [i.e. for treating the liver and blood]. 'Tis chiefly used for an ill Habit of Body; for Catarrhs and Coughs; for Obstructions of Urine, and the Courses [menstruation]. It cures the Jaundice." (Grigson 1958).

The scientific names of both plants, and many others, derive from Carl Linnaeus's work *Species Plantarum* (1753) which introduced the consistent binominal naming system for plants. He added the specific epithet "*cannabinum*" for the native European *Eupatorium* after its *Cannabis*- or hemp-like leaves. He also allocated several North American plants to this genus.

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Botanical Note

From Tony Watts

Tony Watts (a contact of Liz McDonnell) sent in these photos that he took in 2008. He says "We have both kinds of Fluellen growing in our garden. As you see, this is the round-leaved kind, but this particular specimen has decided to produce actinomorphic flowers. Paul Green said he'd only seen this once before, so I imagine it's a rare phenomenon.

I'm afraid I wasn't a very good record keeper in those days, so I can't give you a date other than

2008. It was found in a cottage garden in Hatch Beauchamp (grid ref: ST313196)."



Fluellen (*Kickxia spuria*) with normal and actinomorphic flowers ©Tony Watts

Additions to the Dandelion flora of Somerset – 2018 update

Report: Simon Leach, Graham Lavender & Jeanne Webb

Listed below, in alphabetical order, are those species for which records in 2018 represented county and/or vice-county 'firsts'. All records are based on material collected by us and determined/confirmed by John Richards (AJR); in every case, a voucher specimen is being deposited in the Somerset/SANHS herbarium in Taunton (TTN). Collectors: GEL = Graham Lavender; SJL = Simon Leach; JW = Jeanne Webb.

The bulk of our collecting in 2018 was in VC5. Rob Randall gathered specimens from several sites in VC6, but at the time of writing (1 February 2019) these have yet to be examined by AJR. The list below

includes 16 taxa new to VC5, 10 of which are also 'firsts' for the county as a whole. With these additions, the *Taraxacum* flora of Somerset now stands at 151 species, 133 in VC5 and 90 in VC6.

Taraxacum coartatum

Oare (SS80124715), 21 Apr, at edge of field, GEL, det. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset.

Taraxacum diastematicum

Washford (ST04634140), 12 Apr, on grassy path, JW, det. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset.

Taraxacum excellens

Taunton, Wood Street/Tangier Way (ST22562483), 14 Apr, in wide grassy roadside verge outside former Lidl's supermarket site, SJL, det. AJR; first record for VC5, second for Somerset and first since 1983.

Taraxacum haematicum

Hawkcombe (SS88394584), 20 Apr, in vegetable garden, GEL, det. AJR; first record for VC5, second for Somerset.

Taraxacum hesperium

Fair Cross, Yarde (ST05333959), 16 Apr, in mown grass verge, JW, conf. AJR; first record for VC5, second for Somerset and first since 1982.

Taraxacum insigne

Sheep Dip, Steart (ST26164479), 23 Mar, grassy verge to saltmarsh, GEL, JW & Ian Salmon, det. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset.

Taraxacum lacinosifrons

Taunton (ST23462363), 20 Apr, on edge of footpath/cycleway at base of wall behind Richard Huish College, SJL, conf. AJR; first record for VC5, second for Somerset and first since 1983.

Taraxacum macranthoides

Thurlbear Wood/Great Boles Wood (ST26732043), 8 May, at edge of forestry ride/track, next to timber storage stacks, SJL, det. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset.

Taraxacum obtusifrons

Cloud Farm (SS79274730), 21 Apr, in grassy lane leading to campsite, GEL, det. AJR; Milverton (ST11142697), 24 Apr, in roadside grass/parking area, JW, GEL & SJL, det. AJR; Hawkcombe (SS88394584), 28 Apr, on waste ground, GEL, det. AJR; first records for VC5 and Somerset.

Taraxacum pectinatiforme

Allerford (SS90334669), 2 Apr, on road verge, GEL, det. AJR; first localized record for VC5, second for Somerset and first since 1976. Reported for VC5 in Roe (1981), but without details.

Taraxacum piceatum

Sheep Dip, Steart (ST26104489), 23 Mar, on grass bank by saltmarsh, GEL, JW & Ian Salmon, det. AJR; Shillett Wood (SS86014571), 1 May, grassy bank at edge of wood, GEL, det. AJR; first and second records for VC5 and Somerset.

Taraxacum pietii-oosterveldii

Pickedstones (SS80533718), 7 May, in short grassland on high moor, GEL, det. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset, and only the third record for Britain. Originally described from material gathered in Denmark and the Netherlands (Øllgard 2015), but recently been recorded from Ireland where it may be quite widespread (Richards & Doogue 2017).



Taraxacum porteri from Langford Heathfield, new to Somerset. Voucher specimen to be held in Somerset County Herbarium (TTN)

Taraxacum porteri

Langford Heathfield (ST10672255), 24 Apr, on wooded lane-bank with several other *Taraxacum* spp including *T. celticum*, SJL, det. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset. A striking member of section *Celtica*, originally thought to be confined to Wales

and the Welsh border counties (Haworth 1990, Dudman & Richards 1997), but recently found to also occur, very sparingly, in N. Devon (VC4).

Taraxacum proximiforme

Wall Common (ST26134528), 23 Mar, grassy edge to car-parking area, JW, GEL & Ian Salmon, conf. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset.

Taraxacum richardsianum

Snowdrop Valley (SS92683982), 3 May, edge of wet pasture, JW, det. AJR; first record for VC5, second for Somerset.

Taraxacum stenacrum

Milverton (ST12122591), 24 Apr, road verge/pavement outside parish church, JW, GEL & SJL, det. AJR; first record for VC5 and Somerset. Also Hawkcombe (SS88394584), 28 Apr, on stone path/edge of wall, GEL, det. AJR, and Galmington (ST209208), 1 May, in lane-bank/hedgerow in Comeytrove Road, SJL, det. AJR; second and third records for VC5 and Somerset.

Acknowledgements

We thank John Richards for his continued interest in the county's *Taraxacum* flora and for so speedily examining and determining our collections. Thanks also to members of the Somerset Rare Plants Group – and to our friends and families too – for tolerating what has become, for us at least, a bit of an obsession.

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Red Valerian leaf-roll gall (*Trioza centranthi*)

Simon Leach

I can appreciate that you're probably all getting a bit fed up with me going on about galls. But here's one you really should be looking out for – the leaf-roll gall on Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*), caused by the psyllid bug *Trioza centranthi*. The books give it as 'widespread but rare', and until fairly recently it was thought to be mainly coastal. Go back six years and the only records from Somerset were sightings at Uphill (VC6) in 2011, and an apparently unlocalized record from the Minehead area which was probably in VC5, but could equally have been in VC4.

The first record for VC5 on the British Plant Gall Society (BPGS) database was in 2014, when I found it in Trinity Street, within five paces of my front door! Since then, the number of records has been going up each year: one more in 2015, three in 2016, 18 in 2017 and 39 in 2018. The total records so far for Somerset on the BPGS database is 62. So, *T. centranthi* is clearly spreading very rapidly. Whether this is climate-related is uncertain, but it does seem to be becoming more abundant and expanding its range nationally (Spooner 2016, and pers. comm.) – so not just in Somerset.



Fig 1 Centranthus ruber with the psyllid bug Trioza centranthi ©Simon Leach

It would be marvellous if we could get a better picture of its current distribution in the county. The gall is easily spotted. I know I tend to say that about all sorts of galls, but honestly, truly, this one really is easy. Just find yourself a patch of Red Valerian, then examine it for the tell-tale leaf rolls. If the plant is red-flowered, you'll find that the galls are also tinged red, as in Fig 1. And when it's badly afflicted the gall is hard to miss (this photo was taken at our meeting

in Frome in October). On white-flowered plants the leaf rolls tend to be creamy-yellow or a very pale green, so not quite so eye-catching. It can be knocked back by hard weather, but in the last couple of years it's been possible to find it quite easily right through the winter. So it's a good thing to hunt for during the botanical lean season.

Fig. 2 shows the current tetrad distribution of Red Valerian in Somerset (green squares, courtesy of MapMate on 15/01/2019) with, overlain in blue, records of the *Trioza centranthi* galls. You can see from the map how widespread the gall is becoming, inland as well as on the coast; but there are masses of tetrads for which we don't (yet) have records.

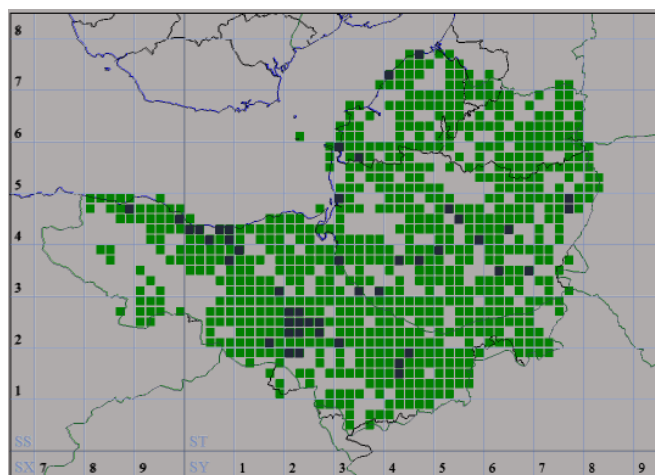


Fig. 3 Tetrad distribution of Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*) in Somerset (green squares), overlain with records of *Trioza centranthi* galls (blue) [correct as at 15/01/2019]

Any records would be most welcome. There's no need for loads of detail: just recorder's name, date and monad will do. You can send records to me by email (to simonleach@phonecoop.coop), either in batches or as singletons. Many thanks.

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An update on the Colour in the Margins project

Alison Mitchell, CitM Monitoring and Advisory Officer (Mid-Somerset Hills and North Downs)

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The 2018 survey season passed in a flash, partly because I only joined the Colour in the Margins team in June but mainly because we crammed so much into an incredibly short period!

We held seven events in the Mid-Somerset Hills target area. These attracted 27 volunteers, from experienced botanists to enthusiastic beginners, many of whom attended several events. Our events were focused on two sites, Lytes Cary owned by the National Trust and Fivehead Arable Fields SSSI owned by Somerset Wildlife Trust.

Our events kicked off on a sunny June evening when ten volunteers joined us for a Spreading Hedge-parsley (*Torilis arvensis*) population survey at Lytes Cary. The species occurs in the margins of one of the cultivated fields on site and the National Trust have been carrying out positive management there for a number of years. We counted 40 individual plants and were so consumed with identification that we did not get to finish the quadrats!

In July and August, we held several seed collection days at Fivehead Arable Fields SSSI to collect seed for inclusion in the Millennium Seed Bank. The reserve, which is owned and managed by Somerset Wildlife Trust, is designated for its 'assemblage of rare and notable plants of arable field' and is a real treat to visit. Not only is it packed with interesting arable plants but it's also buzzing with insect life and alive with the chorus of birdsong.

Kew staff, Stephanie Miles and Jenny Peach, delivered a fantastic training session on the first seed collection day on the 14th July, which was forward due to the early maturation of seeds in the hot dry weather. Participants learned seed collection protocols including how to judge when seeds are ready for collection and how to calculate the target number of seeds in order to collect in a sustainable way. Four further collection days followed and I was lucky to be joined by some dedicated volunteers. The volunteers and I found seed collecting to be a very relaxing and interesting task, enjoying the beautiful surroundings and the good company, not to mention collecting some stunning seeds! In total, we collected over 65,000 seeds (approximately!) from 9 species including three CitM target species; Corn Buttercup (*Ranunculus arvensis*), Spreading Hedge-parsley (*Torilis arvensis*) and Broad-fruited Cornsalad (*Valerianella rimosa*).

During the 2018 season, we also carried out surveys on ten farms across the target area. Following each survey, landowners are provided with an information pack, which includes the findings of the surveys and species-specific management recommendations; arable plant species information guides, habitat management guides and information

guides on other arable wildlife. The farmers we have worked with so far have been very interested in the project and have been receptive to making changes to management for the benefit of arable plants. In many cases, these farms have been in the family for several generations and, during our visits, the farmers have recounted tales of the changes they have seen in wildlife over the years.

I am now planning events and surveys for this season and will be in touch with all project volunteers as these are confirmed. There are many opportunities to get involved with the project so please do get in touch if you would like to contribute to the Colour in the Margins project.

In the meantime, I would like to thank the SRPG members who have been involved in the project so far. It has been a privilege to work with some very knowledgeable and enthusiastic individuals and I hope to see more of you all this season!

An intertidal adventure

Ro FitzGerald (reporting for the team)

On June 15th last year five members gathered at Stolford on the shore of Bridgwater Bay for a hunt which had been more than two years in the planning. The personnel were Steve Parker, who had been thinking about trying to refind a nagging 'lost' plant for some time, Graham Lavender and Ian Salmon (leaders of a regular Vc5 local Friday recording group) and its other members Ro FitzGerald and Jeanne Webb. The target species is not only extremely rare in Somerset (in fact believed to be extinct when Helena Crouch wrote a Rare Plant Register account in 2016), but is one of the most mysterious and seldom seen of our native plants.



Intrepid botanists ©Ro FitzGerald

Zostera marina Eelgrass belongs to a group of flowering plants which grow actually in the sea! Britain and Ireland have two Eelgrass species – *Z. marina* and *Z. noltii* (please ignore references to *Z. angustifolia*, a morphological variant which used to cause plenty of arguments, but is now definitively lumped with *Z. marina*) which are found scattered round the Irish coast; in Britain mostly across the south (including the Isles of Scilly) and in western Scotland; with some clusters of distribution on the Welsh side of the Bristol Channel, in the Thames Estuary and on the East Anglia coast; and in the Firth of Forth and the Moray Firth. The IUCN Red List citation lists their habitat as 'Marine Neritic, Marine Intertidal', which basically translates 'visible at low tide or always under water'. Its county history has always been obscure because of the difficulty of ever seeing populations, and because sometimes the only sign of an Eelgrass population may be leafy strands washed up on a beach, with no way of checking their source. Captain Roe's *Flora of Somerset* (1981) mentions a couple of records from Stolford in VC5 (1957 and 1969), and says former records between the mouth of the Brue and Brean Down in VC6 had not been confirmed since 1929. The Green twins' *Atlas* (1997) lists the most recent Stolford sighting- 1969 – but considered the plant 'Extinct'. Helena Crouch and Fred Rumsey found a leaf on the beach at Burnham in 2015, but could not pinpoint a source, so had to maintain the 'Extinct' category for both vice-counties.

Graham and Ian spent a year planning the search. Tide tables were consulted for special low-tide dates, and the possibility of searching from a boat was investigated but proved too likely to result in a day stuck on a mud bank! In spite of the intertidal zone off Stolford having been well used by the famous 'mud horse' fishermen of this part of the Severn Estuary, their guidance was no longer available, and the likelihood of soft mud or quicksand dangers was unknown. Walking roped together was discussed – indeed the whole project took on the aspect of a 'Famous Five' adventure!

The project gained added impetus a month or so before the chosen date when work on the Somerset herbarium **TTN** revealed the key specimen referred to in the published sources. The date, 1957, and the collector, Derek Ranwell, then with the Nature Conservancy (now Natural England) were known, but the thrilling aspect for us was in the notes on the label. Some collectors give frustratingly little detail, but this one was a model of clear information! It

specified 'Mudflats off Catsford Common... 100 yards east of Little Arch and just below the toe of the shingle beach'. A little local knowledge (Little Arch is a sluice bringing brackish seepage and fresh water off the salt grazing fields of Catsford Common) and we could work out exactly where to start searching. He also described the habitat so precisely that none of us has been able to add anything significant to his account of seeing the plants '... at low tide in fresh-water drainage runnels with mud and pebble bottoms lying between soft mud ridges'. These strange and precise conditions were exactly as we found them 61 years later, with a rocky or pebbly substrate (below varying amounts of soft mud) seeming to give the plants the necessary firm rooting base, with daylight for photosynthesis, as plenty were in flower. Anyone who has walked the beaches near Hinkley Point or the mouth of the Brue will be familiar with that fine mud deposited by the brown waves of the Severn Sea, and with the way it moves with tides and winds – even the limestone pavement beaches nearer Minehead can show temporary mud coverings, usually gone with the next tide. The seepage runnels coming from under the Stolford shingle bar must keep the *Zostera* colony with enough daylight to flourish, as these clear 'streams' all had pillowy mud ridges pushing close to them. Away from the area with runnels we found no plants, and were quickly discouraged from venturing onto deeper mud flats by walking difficulties. The habitat is probably changeable within the population as mud comes and goes with weather and tides, but it was striking that the population extent we observed was so exactly like that seen by Ranwell, making it likely that this is the one place in the area where conditions precisely suit the plant's requirements.

It was a thrilling time. First steps away from the shingle were cautious (frankly nervous on my part!), but when it proved possible to follow the runnels and keep to a firm substrate we scattered more bravely. The first cry of 'found!' came from Jeanne, and soon we were all calling out good examples. Ranwell's label had estimated the population as occupying '4-5 acres' and Ian and Graham ventured out to establish the present extent as well as taking grid references and checking monad boundaries. Very pleasingly, there seems to be no decrease, so we were all glowing when we finally returned to land, and I felt huge gratitude for the efforts of Graham in particular to inspire us out on what had seemed to me a scary, uncomfortable, and possibly hopeless search!



The target species found by Jeanne Webb
©Ro FitzGerald

The good result is actually more important than just being a success with a target species. Eelgrasses, sometimes called Seagrasses, actually have great importance in the web of biodiversity, and they are threatened and decreasing globally. Their strange underwater meadows are a crucial nursery habitat for fish and other marine creatures, and when exposed at low tide form a vital food-source for birds such as overwintering Brent Geese who graze the leaves. In the Mediterranean most Seagrass populations are a rather similar plant *Posidonia oceanica* which grows in rather deeper water. This species has a place in literature and folklore because its fibrous dead leaves and roots can be rolled around in the narrow tidal range to form curious balls, found quite often on beaches. These balls seem so well constructed that there used to be speculation about their being man-made, and they are known as Neptune Balls (or *egagropili* in Greece). Apparently classical writers knew of these 'bodies' thrown up by the sea. Galen and Aristotle mention burning them to use the ashes as a cure for scrofula. Where very numerous they were reportedly used in papermaking and to stuff mattresses. This may all seem very distant from Bridgwater Bay, but the importance of this group of plants is the same world-wide as a habitat for creatures themselves threatened and declining, in particular to shelter immature populations. The European Red List of Habitats points out that in areas where beds occur 'the abundance and diversity of the fauna and flora living in seagrass meadows are consistently higher than those of adjacent unvegetated areas' but decline is thought to be happening because of 'anthropogenic disturbances (eg benthic trawling, shellfish digging, boat anchoring), and deterioration of water quality'.

We must hope that our precious Stolford population will persist. It is 'upstream' of the works at Hinkley Point, which are extending west not east, but new management policy for the shingle bar – future storm breaches are not to be 'mended' – may alter the land habitat which has been the source of the apparently essential fresh-water seepages for centuries.



Zostera marina ©Ro FitzGerald

For anyone interested in the amazing Eelgrasses and Seagrasses, I do recommend the 1984 BSBI Presidential Address given by John Cannon, Keeper of Botany at the Natural History Museum 1978-1990. Titled 'Seaballs and Lakeballs' it gives a delightful overview of these strange objects, memorably recording his experiments in his domestic washing-machine ('a Hotpoint Automatic De Luxe 1972 – a top loader') on making such balls at home (with some success after three washing cycles)! His observation that 'the only real way to gain an impression' of a seagrass meadow in the Mediterranean is by snorkelling, allowing one to 'float gently over a *Posidonia* bed, observing the plants and numerous small animals'. Although I've never actually seen the reported baby Seahorses, this advice has given me some idyllic holiday memories! The paper appeared in print in *Watsonia* **15** (1984-1985). Unfortunately Part 3 is not yet up on the BSBI online archive, but can be tracked down to read in a Harvard archive version.

Libby Houston wins the Marsh Botany Award

Libby is a poet, botanist and rock climber based in Bristol, where she is a research associate at the University.

Shortly after she moved to Bristol in 1979, Libby started helping Dr Frost at the University with research on the flora of the Avon Gorge, including Spiked Speedwell and Bristol Rock-cress. Importantly, her skill as a rock climber allowed her to study populations nobody else could reach! She still routinely surveys the populations of many rarities, keeps track of how they are doing and advises on management. Nobody will ever know the Gorge and its plants as well as she does.

Much of Libby's recent work has been related to Whitebeams (*Sorbus* spp.) in the Avon Gorge, and she discovered an unusual hybrid Whitebeam which Tim Rich named after her. She was a co-author of the 2010 monograph on *Sorbus* published by the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland and has since found another two new Whitebeams in the Avon Gorge and new populations of the rarest species.

Her activities have extended to the Wye Valley and Cheddar Gorge where she has discovered three more novelties. Anyone who knows Libby will vouch for her ability to spot something unusual – if she says it is different, the results normally confirm her hunch!

Libby's contribution has also included the provision of sound advice regarding conservation decisions affecting the rare plants that she has studied. She suggests appropriate habitat management and often supervises the work to ensure that it is done properly. She also leads educational walks and forays for scientists, conservation practitioners and the general public.

This account and the photo are reproduced by kind permission of the Marsh Christian Trust. This Award recognises an individual's lifetime achievement and outstanding contribution in the field of botanical research and conservation.



Libby receiving her award from Charles Micklewright (charity trustee).

Report: The Herbarium team

Liz McDonnell, Ro FitzGerald, Simon Leach, Ian Salmon & Jeanne Webb

The team has met at the Somerset Heritage Centre each Monday throughout the year to continue reorganising the Somerset County Herbarium (TTN). All of the existing specimens in William Watson's and other smaller ancillary collections have been incorporated into one system and arranged by Stace 3 taxonomic order. All the specimens were moved from the Victorian cupboards and cardboard boxes, placed in archive-quality genus and species folders, and moved into the waiting herbarium cupboards.

The existing museum database continues to be updated to follow the new taxonomy and location. It was becoming clear as the work progressed that more space would have to be sought for the collection, as the 'new' cupboards were filling rapidly. Estimates were sought from a local joiner for identical wooden cupboards to be made to museum specifications to match those that had previously been obtained from National Museum of Wales. Funding is being sought through the SANHS Museums Panel. Team members started to bring in their own specimens to be mounted as possible future accessions to the Somerset herbarium. Other work during the year included mounting dandelion specimens that had been collected in 2017 and determined by John Richards the *Taraxacum* referee. By the end of the year, more than 300 dandelion specimens had been added to the herbarium, with a further 80 or more collected in 2018 still to be mounted. This is an important collection of *Taraxacum* specimens, including many new county/vice-county records and a number of nationally scarce or rarely collected taxa.

2018 Plant Records

Compiled by Helena Crouch

In 2018, over 74,000 records were made for vascular plants in Somerset. Thank you very much to all those who sent any records, all of which contribute to the BSBI's Atlas 2020 project as well as being useful at a local scale. This list includes records by eighteen individual members of SRPG, but many other members have also contributed valuable records in 2018 and every member's contribution is valued. Although most new Somerset/Vice-County records were inevitably for alien species, in 2018 SRPG

members made many significant records for native taxa, including Rare Plant Register species, some of which are listed in the third section. In particular, thank you to John Poingdestre, who alone made almost 17,500 records last year. All records below are for 2018 unless otherwise stated. *Those marked with an asterisk are neophytes (recent introductions)*. Recorders and referees whose names appear more than once have been abbreviated as follows:

SRPG	Somerset Rare Plants Group
WFS	Wild Flower Society
JRA	John Akeroyd
HJC	Helena Crouch
RFitzG	Ro FitzGerald
DEG	Dave Green
GDK	Geoffrey Kitchener
GEL	Graham Lavender
SJL	Simon Leach
RM	Roger Maskew
EJMcD	Liz McDonnell
EllenMcD	Ellen McDouall
CM	Chris Metherell
JP	John Poingdestre
RDR	Rob Randall
TCGR	Tim Rich
FJR	Fred Rumsey
ITS	Ian Salmon
JW	Jeanne Webb

Where reference is made to Green, P.R., Green, I.P. & Crouch, G.A. (1997) *The Atlas Flora of Somerset*, it is abbreviated to AFS.

New Somerset Records

**Acaena inermis* (Spineless Acaena) – Barrington (ST38861816), 4 Jun, small patch on verge of Cope Shoot Lane, JP, VC5.

Cardamine amara (Large Bitter-cress) – Bath, Royal Victoria Park (ST745652), 5 Jun, well-established amongst *Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta* in pond at

crazy golf course, possibly accidentally introduced with the grass, RDR, VC6.

Centaurea nigra* subsp. *rivularis (Common Knapweed) – East Quantoxhead (ST13874332), 18 Aug, in pasture field, very long ray florets, RFitzG, VC5. First record for SW England.

****Eryngium giganteum*** (Tall Eryngo) – Down End, nr Puriton (ST3141), 17 Jul, 1 flowering plant in shade on verge, Andrew Robinson, VC6.

****Hedera algeriensis*** (Algerian Ivy) – Bath, East Twerton (ST73546456), 13 Nov, abundant along fence-line on N side of railway bank, to W of bridge over railway, almost certainly colonised from garden across footpath (probably the cultivar 'Gloire de Marengo'), HJC & DEG, VC6.

****Paeonia lutea*** (Yellow Tree-peony) – Saltford, N of (ST68486815), 12 Jul, 1 tall plant on E bank of Avon Valley Railway cycle path, HJC & DEG, VC6.

****Perovskia atriplicifolia*** (Russian Sage) – Taunton, Church Street (ST23582448), 12 Jul, 1 young plant in pavement crack with lots of *Verbena bonariensis*, both species escaped from neighbouring front garden, SJL, VC5.

****Saxifraga 'Arendsii'*** (Rockery Saxifrage) – Ilminster (ST35641499), 30 Jul, patches in tarmacked pavement, apparently surviving trampling, JP, VC5. Maybe formerly mis-recorded in Somerset as *S. hypnoides*].

****Thalictrum speciosissimum*** (Glaucous-leaved Meadow-rue) – Burrington Ham (ST48295834), 4 Jul, 1 plant in flower by main E-W path, HJC & Cam Valley Wildlife Group, VC6.

****Veronica pinguifolia*** (Thick-leaved Speedwell) – North Brewham, NE of (ST73543788), 23 Feb, 1 large old plant established on W verge of lane, under trees on bend, possibly originally dumped, HJC & Gill Read, VC6.

New Vice County Records

****Agrostis castellana*** (Highland Bent) – Kilton (ST16164303), 30 Jun, in sown conservation headland, EJMcd & RFitzG (det. T.A. Cope), VC5.

Euphrasia confusa* x *tetraquetra – Shurton Bars (ST19214588), 4 Jul, in short grass on cliff edge, GEL & RFitzG (det. CM), VC5.

Festuca rubra* subsp. *juncea (Red Fescue) – First Rocks (SS85524836), 3 Sep, fairly frequent on rocky

maritime cliffs and very glaucous, GEL (conf. A. Copping), VC5.

****Hieracium cardiophyllum*** (Heart-leaved Hawkweed) – Upton churchyard (SS9961328916), 10 Sep 2008, in wall of car park and on grassy bank of churchyard, JW (det. P.D. Sell, conf. 2018 D.J. McCosh); (SS99632891), 1 Jun, still present on walls in church parking area, GEL, VC5.

****Malva alcea*** (Greater Musk-mallow) – Yeovil Marsh, N. of (ST54191952), 25 Aug, several flowering/fruitlet plants in field ditch used as overflow from slurry pit, JP, VC5.

****Mentha x villosanervata*** (Sharp-toothed Mint, *M. spicata* x *longifolia*) – Williton Allotments (ST09244179), 25 Jul, 1 plant next to hedge on allotment side of road, opposite entrance to landfill site, presumably escaped from allotments or landfill site, GEL & RFitzG, VC5.

****Rubus cockburnianus*** (White-stemmed Bramble) – Stockwell Stream /Richard Huish cycleway (ST23202399), 23 May, large patch, has been well established here for at least 10 years, SJL (conf. HJC), VC5.

****Verbascum speciosum*** (Hungarian Mullein) – Yeovil, Houndstone (ST52221680), 15 Jun, 2 well-grown plants in highways depot where trucks and mowing machines are washed, JP, VC5.

Other Interesting Records – Native species

Asplenium marinum (Sea Spleenwort) – Bath, Guildhall (ST75096490), 30 Jul, 15 plants on outer wall of basement area, growing beneath stone balustrade, at Bridge Street/High Street corner, Mark & Clare Kitchen (det. HJC), VC6. An astonishing inland record for this coastal fern.

Atriplex x gustafssoniana (*A. longipes* x *prostrata*) – Kilve Pill (ST14474442), 10 Aug, at top of shingle close to where small stream enters beach, GEL & RFitzG (det. JRA); Lilstock Pill (ST17434523), 24 Aug, around high tide region in shingle, GEL (det. JRA); Porlock Weir (SS86454790), 3 Sep, c. 50 plants on shingle immediately adjacent to car park, GEL; Bossington Marsh (SS88804785), 6 Sep, at side of ditch in middle saltmarsh, GEL; Hinkley Point West (ST19224592), 7 Sep, on shingle ridge, GEL & ITS, VC5; Westhay, Burtle Road (ST42034229), 2 Sep, 1 plant on disturbed peat on the side of a rough track by Godwins peat extraction area, EJMcd & Clive Lovatt (det. JRA), VC6. Third and subsequent sites for

this hybrid in VC5 and an unusual inland record in VC6.



Bupleurum rotundifolium ©Helena Crouch

Bupleurum rotundifolium (Thorow-wax) – Norton St Philip (ST77315513), 7 Aug, 1 plant on imported topsoil in cultivated bed in private field, found by the owners, HJC, VC6. Only the second record for Somerset since 1955.

Callitriche brutia* subsp. *brutia (Pedunculate Water-starwort) – Priddy (ST52135225), 21 Jul, frequent in dried-up duck pond on S side of B3135, HJC & FJR, VC6. Third record for VC6; first record was in nearby pond N of B3135.

Carex viridula (Small-fruited Yellow-sedge) – Berrow Dunes (ST30005098), 26 Jun, many plants in slack towards SE end of golf course, N of club house, FJR, VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since *AFS*.

Drabella muralis (Wall Whitlow-grass) – Little Solsbury Hill (ST766682), 23 Apr, 50+ large plants on one large active anthill, RDR, VC6. First native record for this GB Scarce species in this hectad since pre-1939, confirming a previously doubted record by T.H. Green, and an unusual site, not on rock outcrops or walls.

Epilobium x heterocaule (*E. montanum* x *roseum*) – West Coker (ST52271297), 12 May, 3 clumps on W side of Font Lane, in damp patch close to base of bank, JP, VC5. Second record for VC5 and first since 1935, and fourth record for Somerset.

Euphrasia tetraquetra (Western Eyebright) – Kilve cliffs (ST14114427), 12 Aug, several plants in species-rich grassland on slumped cliffs, SRPG & WFS; Lilstock (ST16264536), 24 Aug, on cliff edge, GEL, RFitzG & JW (det. CM); Lilstock (ST15634500), 9 Sep, calcareous grassland at edge of unstable cliff W

of Range Quadrant Hut, RFitzG (det. GEL), VC5. Fifth and subsequent sites for VC5.

Gaudinia fragilis (French Oat-grass) – Hollies Lane, nr. Batheaston (ST77646923), 17 May, in field near N end of Hollies Lane, present throughout field, EllenMcD; Ashton Court Meadow (ST54497213), 25 May, David Hawkins, VC6. First records for this GB Scarce grass in both hectads since pre-2000.

Hieracium eustomon (Bristol Channel Hawkweed) – Culver Cliff (SS96224788, SS96054787), 29 May, 2 plants and 17 plants visible from beach, GEL, TCGR, ITS, JW & Tim Webb, VC5. First record for VC5 and Somerset since 1985, at only known location (but no safe access to plants at either site, so cannot definitively confirm identification).

Hieracium umbellatum* subsp. *bichlorophyllum (Umbellate Hawkweed) – Nutcombe Bottom (SS97764238), 8 Oct, 150+ plants on steep bank opposite car park entrance, stretching for some 100 yds, GEL, VC5. First record for the subspecies in VC5 and Somerset since 1981.



Mentha pulegium ©Ro FitzGerald

Mentha pulegium (Pennyroyal) – Steart Marshes, Stockland Marsh (ST24524400), 11 Aug, large amount in grazed, former flooded pasture, SRPG & WFS; Taunton (ST22002555), 27 Oct, 1 plant in newish road verge next to roundabout at Staplegrove Road junction with Trenchard Way and Chip Lane, SRPG (found by Paul Seymour), VC5. Fourth and fifth records for VC5, the fifth a new hectad record for this GB Scarce Endangered species (Critically Endangered in England).

Orobanche elatior (Knapweed Broomrape) – Greendown (ST580532), 14 Jun, 2 spikes on *Centaurea scabiosa* in garden, EllenMcD, VC6. Third post-2000 site for VC6 and Somerset.

Pilosella officinarum* subsp. *officinarum – Uphill (ST316583), 19 May, in flower in churchyard, Bristol Naturalists' Society & SRPG (det. GEL); Westbury-sub-Mendip (ST499487), 23 Jun, several flowering/fruited plants in mown moderately species-rich grassland in churchyard, EJMCD, VC6. Second and third records for VC6 and first since 1917.

Polycarpon tetraphyllum (Four-leaved Allseed) – Yeovil, Houndstone (ST52551659), 15 Jun, 30 clumps at base of short low wall and on adjacent bank, N side of road, JP, VC5. Second record for VC5.

***Potentilla verna* (*P. tabernaemontani*)** (Spring Cinquefoil) – Keynsham (ST64256994), 11 Apr, small patch in flower on bank, on top of retaining wall to S of bridge, W side of A4174, HJC & DEG, VC6. New hectad record for GB Scarce species.

Rosa corymbifera (*R. canina* group *Pubescentes*) – Worthy Manor (SS86084807), 26 Sep, edge of footpath; Culbone Church (SS84214824), 5 Oct, edge of woodland path near church, GEL (det. RM), VC5. First records for VC5 since pre-2000.

Rosa micrantha (Small-flowered Sweet-briar) – Warren Bay Cliffs (ST05654333), 16 Jul, 1 shrub of 2m at base of cliff close to shingle. GEL, ITS & JW (det. RDR); Hawkcombe (SS88354587), 10 Oct, 1 bush at edge of woodland just above lane, GEL (det. RM); Island Pond, Nettlecombe (ST06013814), 18 Oct, edge of wood round the pond, GEL (det. RM), VC5. First records for VC5 since AFS.

Rosa tomentosa (Harsh Downy-rose) – Briggins Moor (SS89362510), 15 Aug, in roadside hedge near gate to Briggins Moor, GEL; Yearnor Wood (SS84824840), 26 Sep, steep wooded coastal cliffs, GEL (det. RM); Monkham Hill (SS98213875), 8 Oct, edge of footpath next to gate, just before wooded area, GEL (det. RM), VC5. First post-2000 records for VC5.

Rosa x andegavensis (*R. stylosa* x *canina*) – Lilstock (ST16494515), 20 Sep, in hedge by footpath to cliff (f x m, but a second specimen from ST16494507 was either fxm or mxf), GEL (det. RM), VC5. First post-2000 record for VC5.

Rosa x scabriuscula (*R. canina* x *tomentosa*) – Briggins Moor (SS89512497), 15 Aug, roadside, GEL; Lilstock (ST16164537), 20 Sep, on cliff edge, GEL (det. RM), VC5. Second and third post-2000 records for VC5 and Somerset.

Rumex x mixtus (*R. pulcher* x *sanguineus*) – Bossington (SS90034797), 15 Oct, in steep SW-facing

field with both parents, GEL (conf. GDK), VC5. Second record for VC5 and Somerset since AFS.

Rumex x ruhmeri (*R. conglomeratus* x *sanguineus*) – Bossington (SS90044793), 15 Oct, on steep south-west field near bottom of field near very small stream with both parents, GEL (det. GDK); Bridgwater (ST29883644), 3 Jun, one plant by Brown's Pond, SRPG (det. JRA), VC5. First records for VC5 and Somerset since AFS.

Sorbus porrigentiformis ((Grey-leaved Whitebeam) – Yearnor Wood (SS84814840), 26 Sep, tree with 5 small trunks from base on top edge of old disused lower footpath, GEL (conf. TCGR), VC5. First record since 1995; may be the tree first recorded by J. Bevan and RFitzG in 1981.

Verbascum lychnitis (White Mullein) – Axbridge (ST42505467), 4 Oct, eleven plants on road verge at S end of link road between Cross Lane and Axbridge by-pass (A371), EJMCD, VC6. First record for this GB Scarce species in this hectad since pre-2000.

Other Interesting Records – Alien species

****Allium nigrum*** (Broad-leaved Leek) – Yeovil (ST53601704), 18 Jun, probably originally planted, but well naturalised beneath shrubs at edge of amenity meadow, JP, VC5. Fifth site for VC5.

****Allium subhirsutum*** (Hairy Garlic) – Cudworth (ST37301089), 19 Apr, population at known site now reduced to one small patch in rank grassland by fence, JP, VC5. First record for VC5 since AFS.

****Capsella rubella*** (Pink Shepherd's-purse) – Bath, Beechen Cliff School (ST74996364), 27 Feb, many plants on bank in school grounds, HJC & DEG, VC6. Second record for VC6 and Somerset and first since 1949.

****Chenopodium giganteum*** (Tree Spinach) – Bruton, St Catherine's Hill (ST680349), 2 Aug, 1 young plant growing in tarmac of lane verge, SJL, VC6. Second record for VC6.

****Helleborus argutifolius*** (Corsican Hellebore) – Darshill (ST60694393), 4 May, street weed on N edge of Back Lane, HJC & Val Graham, VC6. Third record for VC6.

****Lonicera caprifolium*** (Perfoliate Honeysuckle) – Martock (ST47501978), 8 May, 1 plant scrambling through hedgerow on E side of track/footpath immediately N of Taepper Court Farm, JP, VC5. First record for VC5 and Somerset since pre-2000.

****Macleaya x kewensis* (*M. cordata* x *microcarpa*)** – Litton Churchyard (ST59365470), 12 Sep, large stand in churchyard, probably rooted through wall from adjacent cottage garden, HJC & DEG; Bath, Locksbrook (ST72846488), 7 Dec, small clump on waste ground at side of gardens, none in adjacent garden, HJC & DEG, VC6. Third and fourth records for VC6 and Somerset, and first since pre-2000.

****Malva trimestris*** (Royal Mallow) – Bath, South Twerton (ST73046429), 13 Nov, 1 plant at edge of track to playing field, HJC & DEG, VC6. Third record for VC6 and first since pre-2000.



Malva trimestris ©Helena Crouch

****Oloptum miliaceum* (*Oryzopsis miliacea*)** (Smilgrass) – Bath, Bear Flat (ST74866388), 27 Feb, 12 clumps along alley between back gardens, spread from a planted specimen in a bed outside one garden, HJC & DEG, VC6. Second record for VC6 and Somerset and first since 1978.

****Physalis peruviana*** (Cape-gooseberry) – Bath (ST74636533), 19 Jan, 2 plants on stonework in pedestrian street linking Brock Street and Circus Mews, HJC & FJR, VC6. Fifth record for VC6.

****Saxifraga cymbalaria*** (Celandine Saxifrage) – Crowcombe Heathfield Station (ST13633447), 19 May, 1 plant on road verge close to Puff Cottage, SJL (det. Stephen Parker), VC5. Fourth record for VC5 and first for VC5 and Somerset since AFS.

****Sorbus croceocarpa*** (Orange Whitebeam) – Minehead (SS96994694), 29 May, 1 tree of 5m, 30ft above road near tight bend, confirmed from fruit in October, GEL, ITS & TCGR (conf. TCGR), VC5. Second record for VC5.

****Teucrium chamaedrys*** (Wall Germander) – Merriott (ST44701288), 13 Jul, large patch in dry area of nursery field, JP, VC5. Third site for VC5.

****Vicia villosa*** (Fodder Vetch) – Kilton/Stringston (ST16164286, ST16164303), 30 Jun, in sown conservation headland, EJMCD & RFitzG (det. D.A. Pearman), VC5. Third and fourth record for VC5.

****Vinca difformis*** (Intermediate Periwinkle) – Upper Westholme (ST57854143), 23 Oct, on verge of Higher Westholme Road, HJC & FJR, VC6. Third record for VC6.

****Xanthium spinosum*** (Spiny Cocklebur) – Nethercott (ST15883223), 17 Nov, 1 plant on waste ground used for chopping wood etc., GEL & ITS, VC5. Third record for VC5 and first since 1990.

****Xanthium strumarium*** (Rough Cocklebur) – Halse (ST14102876), 2 Nov, 1 plant at edge of game cover field next to *Datura*, GEL & ITS, VC5. Third record for VC5 and first since 1994.

SRPG Membership and Contacts

Somerset Rare Plants Group annual subscription is currently £8, payable in January of each year. Payment can be made by cheque or direct into SRPG account. Contact the Treasurer Clive Lovatt (see below) for payment details. Members attend meetings at their own risk. Field meeting leaders carry a list of emergency phone numbers so 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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