



Most of the proposed meetings listed in the Programme for 2002 took place, and were well attended. The weekend in Kent had to be cancelled due to a shortage of bookings – unfortunately, the dates coincided with the Queen’s Jubilee celebrations and many of our members were engaged elsewhere. The only other cancellation was the trip to Rodney Stoke Wood to look at *Sorbus* on 5th October. An indoor meeting to check on progress was held instead.

It is good to see that eleven different members have contributed to this Newsletter, mainly the walk leaders. Perhaps more of you could contribute some **plant notes** similar to those included at the end on page eight, for next year. It would be good to hear from you. Thanks to all who sent in reports, especially those who sent them in without prompting!

REPORTS OF MEETINGS, 2002

INDOOR MEETINGS**Saturday, 19 January –Members Winter Meeting & AGM.**

Our first AGM took place during a meeting at English Nature’s offices at Roughmoor on 19 January 2002. Whilst declining the title of Chairman, Steve Parker opened the meeting with Liz McDonnell our Co-ordinator. About 20 members were present, a good number for an indoor meeting. Ann Cole, our Treasurer, said we had over £300 in the bank.

It was felt essential that we computerise our records and various software programmes were discussed. MapMate seemed the most affordable and further information on this was to be gathered. It was also felt that a GPS for use in the field to obtain exact map references would be useful but it may prove too expensive at present. All those present agreed that they were satisfied with the way the RPG is working. The Summer Programme was nearing completion.

After a very good ‘bring and share’ lunch and the customary raffle Margaret Earle showed some excellent colour slides illustrating a selection of the plants and places visited during 2001.

C.J. Giddens

Saturday 16 February - Working Group

Six members again met at Roughmoor to finalise the division of Somerset into natural areas, each area to be put in charge of a member who will organise additional monitoring of rare plants. Steve had produced a draft list of Somerset rare plants, the newsletter was distributed and the Summer Programme finalised.

C.J.G.

Saturday 16 March - Working Group

Six members were again present for this meeting and by this time Steve had obtained a copy of MapMate and entered about 2000 records as a trial. It seemed satisfactory but if other members were to use it, it was felt that a demonstration/training day would be advisable.

C.J.G.

Saturday, 6 April – Ubley Warren, Charterhouse.

Leaders: Liz McDonnell & Ann Cole.

OUTDOOR FIELD MEETINGS

A beautiful, warm sunny day brought out 22 people for the first outdoor meeting of the season. The reserve manager, Nigel Milbourne, showed us round the site. We were surprised to find the nationally scarce *Carex montana* (Soft-leaved Sedge) so widespread and abundant on the limestone outcrops lining the track into the reserve that it outnumbered the normally commoner sedges.

On the steep rock faces of the rakes there was a thriving population of *Hornungia petraea* (Hutchinsia) which was counted and mapped. It has been known here since 1935. There was a further large number of seedlings on a limestone spoil heap.



Hutchinsia - *Hornungia petraea*

Next the group moved into Blackmoor, the adjoining S.C.C. reserve, where we were pleased to find several plants of *Cerastium pumilum* (Dwarf Mouse-ear), and a

larger group of *Minuartia verna* (Spring Sandwort) on top of a limestone cliff where it was recorded by Murray in 1896.

Ian Green then took us to the lake to see a good population of *Thlaspi caerulescens* (Alpine Penny-cress) spreading over the path and down a steep south facing slope of vitrified lead spoil. A final pleasure was a group of *Potentilla argentea* (Hoary Cinquefoil) a rare introduction surviving on a triangle of dwarfed grassland on the lead spoil.

Anne Cole

Saturday 27 April - Nunney

Leaders: Gill Read & Paul Green

Before the 15 members made their way along Nunney Combe, I showed a variety of comfrees I had collected from my garden. I particularly wanted to demonstrate the difference between *Symphytum tuberosum* (Tuberous Comfrey) and the similar *S. grandiflorum* (Creeping Comfrey), which is often mistaken for it.

A patch of *Polygonatum multiflorum* (Solomon's Seal) was our first plant of interest, growing near *Ornithogalum angustifolium* (Star-of-Bethlehem) and *Anemone nemorosa* (Wood Anemone), which had the odd plants with deep pink flowers. At this point we came across our first patches of *S. tuberosum*, but only in bud. *Carex strigosa* (Thin-spiked Wood-sedge) was very common along the side of the path and we compared it with the odd clump of *C. sylvatica* (Wood Sedge). As we left the trees, a large stand of *Heracleum mantegazzianum* (Giant Hogweed) greeted us. This population of Giant Hogweed seems to stay stable and has not increased up or down stream since Miss I.F. Gravestock first found it in 1984.

We crossed over the bridge to be on the other side of Nunney Brook. Here, the trees were cleared in about 1997 and since then the flora has changed dramatically. Most of the *S. tuberosum* has been swamped out by nettles, etc. In this area there are many stands of *S. tuberosum* x *S.x uplandicum*, the only Somerset site for this hybrid (first found in 1999 by Rob Cropper). There are also many clumps of the hybrid which have backcrossed with *S. x uplandicum* (Russian Comfrey) to give a whole spectrum of intermediates. Walking back into woodland again, the *S. tuberosum* patches were breathtaking now, being the dominant species.

Here also we had ten plants of *Ornithogalum pyrenaicum* (Spiked Star-of-Bethlehem) of which only one was going to flower. I first saw it here in 1998 when five plants were found. At this point we had lunch and sat on a carpet of *Ranunculus ficaria* ssp. *Bulbilifer* (Lesser Celandine). We retraced our steps almost back and a clump of *Aconitum napellus* (Monk's-hood) was spotted at the base of an Alder. *Hieracium speluncarum* (Hawkweed sp.) was growing on a garden wall at the start of the lane and a clump of *Primula x polyantha* (False Oxlip) was in the field opposite.

Our next stop was at Finger Farm to do some clearance of the wall to help *Draba muralis* (Wall Whitlowgrass), which has been known at this site since 1867. Some of the plants had died from the drought and others were in a bad condition. Ivy, nettles, moss, etc. were removed from the wall, which has continued to deteriorate over the last twenty years and is in bad

need of repair. Whether our work helped or not is hard to tell, with more stones being lodged loose and moss being removed. The Wall Whitlowgrass plants were often growing in the moss, but nobody seemed to take this into consideration. The moss also helps to stop the seeds from being washed off the wall.

The day was ended with a visit to the roadside running along the edge of Millards Hill House, south of Trudoxhill, to see *Cardamine bulbifera* (Coral-root).

Paul Green

Tuesday, 7 May – Monitoring at Minehead Golf Links.

Leader: Simon Leach.

It did not feel too bad on getting out of the car but as it was raining I put on full waterproofs with my Gore-Tex panelled boots. Once on the footpath across the Golf Course it really was exposed and very chilly and Gore-Tex leaks in wet grass. One member was wearing a woolly balaclava helmet and I wished I had brought my woolly hat. When will someone invent windscreen wipers for spectacles?

The rain meant fewer golfers and so less risk of injury from stray missiles, which was a little straw to clutch at in our misery. I found myself wandering disconsolately from one roughet to another, trying to discover and map tiny tufts of *Trifolium subterraneum* (Subterranean Clover) and populations of *Arenaria serpyllifolia* (Thyme-leaved Sandwort) and *Moenchia erecta* (Upright Chickweed). Not having done any preparation for the meeting I was slow developing the "jizz" for recognising species.

Our leader Simon Leach was comparing previous mappings of about ten species with today's locations on wet paper, using a sort of tented clipboard. After a freezing lunch break there was a sudden recognition by the leader and then everyone else that *Poa bulbosa* (Bulbous Meadow-grass) was "tiny". I mean that two eyelashes joined so as to curve away from each other and coloured pale chestnut brown, having a tiny "bulb" at the join describes the appearance of one individual. However, they grow in flattened tufts about 5cm across so that once one realised the characteristics they became so obvious that the increasing blizzard could not dampen our enthusiasm. We were using a scale of abundance where A represents 1-9 plants, B is 10-99, C is 100-999 and so on. Minehead Golf Course was suddenly developing a population of a rare plant running into G+ (i.e. millions).

The Rare Plants Group carries out a very useful function, enabling ordinary members to become familiar with field characters especially of rare plants. In this way new populations of otherwise unfamiliar plants may be recognised more widely and thus be conserved. Normally, it is just good fun. Honest!

Tony Smith

Sunday 12 May – Dunkery, Exmoor.

Leaders: Caroline Giddens & Alistair Stevenson (assisted by Paul Green).

The Exmoor expedition this year took place in glorious sunshine which lasted all day – what a difference from last year's visit to Winsford Hill when it rained and rained.

Eighteen of us met on Dunkery and we were pleased to welcome Mr Desmond Meikle, plus two visitors from Bristol. Paul Green had journeyed up from Cornwall and we were glad of his help in re-locating *Listera cordata* (Lesser Twayblade) in some of the sites where he and Ian found it in 1994. The first of these was in Hanney Combe, where there was a minimum of six in flower and 15 non flowering plants.

Having clambered back up the heather slopes to the roadside viewpoint, it was decided to have lunch there with the far reaching views across the Avill Valley, the Quantocks and beyond. The next site to be checked was the north side of Dunkery where *Listera* was first recorded in 1849; we were pleased to find it still flourishing amongst the sphagnum, heather and whortleberry.

A plant of *Pinguicula grandiflora* (Large-flowered Butterwort) which we suspect was introduced here in July 1999 was refound in bud and we counted 13 tiny seedlings nearby. *Huperzia selago* (Fir Clubmoss) was



Fir Clubmoss *Huperzia selago*

also present here although numbers seem to have decreased a little. *Pedicularis sylvatica* (Lousewort), *Polygala serpyllifolia* (Heath Milk-wort), and *Eriophorum angustifolium* (Common Cottongrass) were all flowering and Paul showed us *Carex laevigata x binervis* = *Carex x deserta* (Smooth-stalked x Green Ribbed Sedge) at its only English site (there is also one in Wales). This species was confirmed in 1998 and the voucher specimen is in B.M. herbarium.

Our third location for *Listera* involved a short drive of about 5 miles, passing through the watersplash at Cloutsham, the ancient oak woods just coming into leaf, up the steep road to Stoke Pero and on to the moor at Nutscale Drive. There was lots of *Botrychium lunaria* (Moonwort) beside our parked cars, some pretty flowers of the narrow leaved form of *Lathyrus linifolius* var. *montanus* (Bitter-vetch) and the tiny *Montia fontana* ssp. *minor* (Blinks). A wood warbler was singing in the trees as we walked down to Nutscale Reservoir and Paul pointed out a clump of *Polypody interjectum* (Intermediate Polypody). A plant of *Potentilla erecta* ssp. *strictissimi* a robust ssp of Tormentil was found. The *Listera cordata* appeared to be doing well in all three sites checked.

- Caroline Giddens

14th May Babcarry Meadows SSSI.

Leaders: Liz McDonnell & Elaine Sage

This meeting was planned as a short evening session on identification of grassland species. Elaine Sage, who is the SWT Reserve Manager for Babcarry Meadows, was our guide. A large number of species have been recorded from these traditionally managed species-rich unimproved neutral grassland fields.

The first field at the entrance had a large number of grass species, so identification features of this group were pointed out. The next large field was very species-rich, with abundant Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*), several plants of which were pink or white. Glaucous sedge (*Carex flacca*) was frequent in the sward, with species such as Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*), Saw-wort (*Serratula tinctoria*), Betony (*Stachys officinalis*) and Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*). Several umbellifers were present on the site, including Pepper saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*), Burnet Saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*), Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*), Rough Chervil (*Chaerophyllum temulum*) and Hedge Parsley (*Torilis japonica*), so it was a good opportunity to distinguish them in their vegetative state. It was a big treat to see Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) so abundant. We thank Elaine Sage for showing us these beautiful fields.

- Liz

McDonnell

Saturday, 25th May – Weston Big Wood & Walton Common.

Leader: Steve Parker

Weston Big Wood is an Avon Wildlife Trust Reserve on the north side of the Gordano Valley. The meeting to this site was to monitor two uncommon species found in the woodland. A large colony of *Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum* (Purple Gromwell) has been known on the roadside at the edge of the wood for many years. On this visit the SRPG members recorded over 1000 plants in this area, this colony seems to be increasing. This is despite the fact that the vegetation is cut as part of road maintenance activities. The second colony of *L. purpureocaeruleum* is located at the quarry edge. Here, fewer plants grow, and there may be some problem in the future with scrub invasion.

The other species of interest in the wood is *Sorbus eminens*. A single specimen has been known by Stephen Parker for some five years, this plant grows alongside the ride on the south side of the wood. During this meeting a number of *Sorbus* species were noted growing on the steep quarry sides, samples were taken by Libby Huston for further study.

Lathrea squamaria (Toothwort), *Euphorbia amygdaloides* (Wood Spurge), *Sorbus torminalis* (Wild Service Tree), *Paris quadrifolia* (Herb Paris) *Platanthera chlorantha* (Greater Butterfly Orchid), *Arabis hirsuta* (Hairy Rockcress) and *Helianthemum nummularium* (Yellow Rockrose) were also seen during the day. There was a mixture of sun and showers and we decided not to go on to Walton Common as suggested in the programme.

Steve Parker

Sunday, 2nd June – Catcott Reserves, Somerset Levels.

Leader: Steve Parker

The Parish plot at Catcott has an interesting history, one of peat cutting for use by the village poor. Botanically the site is very rich; it is an example of a vegetation type that is extremely rare in southwest England, indeed this plant community is normally encountered in eastern England. The plants of interest

here include *Peucedanum palutre* (Milk Parsley), which is common over the site together with *Lathyrus palustris* (Marsh Pea). Several smallish patches of *Cladium mariscus* (Great Fen-sedge) were also recorded on the site and near to this was *Potentilla palustris* (Marsh Cinquefoil), while *Thelypteris palustris* (Marsh Fern) is abundant. However, the star plant of the day was *Carex lasiocarpa* (Slender Sedge), this is very rare in Somerset, the only other site being Street Heath NR.

Steve Parker

Saturday 15th June. Canada Farm, Shapwick Heath SSSI.

The purpose of the meeting was a training exercise in National Vegetation Classification (NVC) methodology. We had also planned a meeting with Swedish Botanists who were the guests of Gill Read, and who were also botanising on Shapwick Heath that day. I stood in for Simon Leach, who unfortunately was unable to lead the meeting. Nine keen members met at the Willows Garden Centre and walked down to the Canada Farm part of the Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve armed with ranging poles, quadrats and clipboards. After a brief explanation of the methodology we walked around the selected field unit to establish the homogeneous vegetation types. We agreed that most of the field was similar, so avoiding edges and small areas where *Arrhenatherum elatius* was abundant, we randomly selected five points at which to place the 1 x 1m quadrats. The members split into small groups and recorded all plants (including mosses where possible) within each quadrat. The frequency of each species was assessed and given a 'domin' score. When all five quadrats were completed, we compiled a species table showing both frequency and abundance. We worked through the vegetation keys and studied the floristic tables in the NVC volumes, and it appeared that our community was closest to a MG5 *Cynosurus cristatus*-*Centaurea nigra* grassland, despite *Cynosurus cristatus* and several other constants for that community being absent. The presence of *Filipendula ulmaria*, *Ranunculus acris* and *Rumex acetosa* as constants here, indicated an affinity with MG4 *Alopecurus pratensis* - *Sanguisorba officinalis* grassland, suggesting that the community in this field was intermediate MG4/MG5 grassland. Our results corresponded with the 1994 NVC survey, but did accord with the survey undertaken in 1999, which showed a M22 *Juncus subnodulosus* - *Cirsium palustre* fen-meadow community in this field. This generated much discussion over lunch about methodology, accuracy, changes that may have taken place, and limitations of the NVC system. However the arrival of Ian Green with the nine Swedish botanists cut our discussions short. We chatted and took group photos, then arranged to meet up later for a picnic tea. The SRPG spent the rest of the afternoon looking at plant communities in the very species-rich meadows on the other side of the road where *Juncus subnodulosus* and *Cirsium palustre* were frequent, and where M22 community was more likely.

The rain at the end of the afternoon forced a change of picnic venue, and I offered to host the social

part of this international meeting at my house a few miles away. In addition to members' contributions to the picnic, Gill had prepared a wonderful variety of buffet foods including strawberries and cream. We laid out the culinary delights on the kitchen table, and members and guests spent an enjoyable couple of hours eating and chatting about plants and their relative distributions in Britain and Sweden. Thanks to Gill for the idea of the SRPG meeting up with her Swedish botanist guests, and all her preparation that went in to the splendid picnic.

- Liz McDonnell

Tuesday 25th June - Bristol University Botanic Gardens.

Leader: Pam Millman.

The purpose of this small-group evening meeting was to observe the area of the garden devoted to the 'Rarities of the South West Region'.

Being aware of the almost certain move of the Botanic garden in the near future we felt that the SRPG could usefully be involved in the layout and management in the future of the new rarities beds.

For many years the arrangement has included one north facing shady raised bed and one raised bed which is south facing.

The south facing bed included:

Allium sphaerocephalum (Round-headed Leek)

Allium ampeloprasum (Wild Leek)

Paeonia mascula (Peony)

Dianthus gratianopolitanus (Cheddar Pink)

Coincia wrightii (Lundy Cabbage)

Galium pumilum (Slender Bedstraw)

Eryngium campestre (Field Eryngo)

Juncus acutus (Sharp Rush)

Helianthemum appeninum (White Rock-rose)

Matthiola sinuata (Sea Stock)

Arabis scabra (Bristol Rock-cress) - just about holding on!

Sedum forsterianum (Rock Stonecrop)

The *Hutchinsia* label has not yielded any plants for some years! (PM observation)

The shaded bed included:

Carex depauperata (Starved Wood-sedge)

Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum (Purple Gromwell)

Polygonatum odoratum (Angular Solomon's-seal) - one plant suffocated by Lily-of-the-valley!

Our criticisms of the present area are as follows:

The plants have different habitat requirements and this is not reflected in the structure of the south facing border. An area based on the Avon Gorge rockface is needed rather than a horizontal area for several plants. The Bristol Rock-cress was hardly in evidence and its nicely labelled area was covered with *Sedum forsterianum*, to the confusion of any visitor. The Field Eryngo is allowed to invade a large area to the detriment of the Bristol onion.

Other plants were present and it would be useful to obtain a complete list for the SRPG after the move. I could do this.

Pam

Millman

Sunday, 30th June – Cleeve Hill SSSI and Watchet Cliffs

Leaders: Jeanne & Tim Webb.

This was a very well organised meeting. Car parking had been arranged at Warren Bay Holiday Park. On arrival Tim handed each a map and write-up of the day's proposed activities whilst directing us 200 yds up the road to the first site where Jeanne was ready to welcome us.

This site is one of Plantlife's 'Back From the Brink' operations managed for *Althaea hirsuta* (Hairy Mallow). In 1997, when Jeanne and Tim began work here, there were just four plants left. The following year there were 11, then 30, then 80. In 2001 there was no count due to F&M but this year there were 32 plants. They are a very pale, almost white, form with hardly any pink in them. As most seem to grow best on the path, small flags had been put as markers. Numbers of other limestone plants have also increased here with the bigger area of grassland but the scrub still reappears despite cutting to the ground each winter.

At the next site, known as Jenny Cridland's Copse, the Webb's have cleared a massive amount of scrub and they were pleased to see *Blackstonia perfoliata* (Yellow-wort) and *Centaureum erythraea* (Common Centaury) reappearing after the first year, plus a 200% increase in *Salvia verbenaca* (Wild Clary). We were glad to see *Gastridium ventricosum* (Nit Grass). In the past *Ophrys apifera* (Bee Orchid) were here but were dug up by thieves some years ago. In 1991, fifteen plants of *Bupleurum tenuissimum* (Slender Hare's-ear) were recorded but have not been seen since.

The third site was perhaps the most impressive and it was here that we opted to have lunch. Major scrub clearance has already taken place and this winter the Webbs' intend to cut back the whole site to its boundaries. It is a south facing slope, reached by asramble up a steep bank but well worth the effort. Five years ago there were c30 *Anacamptis pyramidalis* (Pyramidal Orchids) and one *Ophrys apifera* (Bee Orchid). By the year 2000 there were 427 *Anacamptis* and 12 *Ophrys*. This year has produced 300 *Anacamptis* and 10 *Ophrys*. Perhaps more importantly, the hard work has been rewarded with the reappearance of one *Althaea hirsuta*. I noticed this was carefully guarded by Jeanne whilst we were there! Other plants at this site included *Gastridium ventricosum*, *Salvia verbenaca*, *Lathyrus sylvestris* (Narrow-leaved Everlasting Pea), *Centaureum pulchellum* (Lesser Centaury), *Euphorbia exigua* (Dwarf Spurge), *Geranium columbinum* (Long-stalked Crane's-bill) and *Lathyrus nissolia* (Grass Vetchling).

We continued by looking at the flora in the adjoining fields where there were hundreds (thousands?) of *Lathyrus nissolia*, *Carlina vulgaris* (Carline Thistles), *Blackstonia*, *Linum bienne* (Pale Flax), *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, *Gastridium ventricosum*, *Cuscuta epithymum* (Lesser Dodder) and other limestone species. 71 spp have been recorded here. The top of the field brought us out by the Holiday Park again where we had left our cars and there was now a choice of either calling it a day or continuing down to the beach with Tim to look at the cliff flora and hopefully confirm the presence of Burnet Rose.

Those who made the effort of scrambling over the stones on the beach were well rewarded. Not only were there 50+ roses but also we were able to relocate four *Ophrys insectifera* (Fly Orchids). Tim's rock-climbing knowledge enabled him to guide the remaining three members back up the cliff.

C.Giddens from notes provided by Jeanne Webb

Saturday, 13th July – King's Wood & Urchin Wood SSSI's, Congresbury.

Leaders: Anne Cole, Anne Bodley, Phil Quinn.

Ten members assembled at these beautiful ancient woodlands, to re-survey the populations of *Lithospermum purpureocaerulean* (Purple Gromwell) and *Polygonatum odoratum* (Angular Solomon's-seal).

The three woods, (Kings-, Urchin- and Ball Wood), consist of mixed age deciduous trees with some Douglas fir and Norway spruce. There are numerous rocky outcrops of carboniferous limestone. Two steep escarpments fall away, guarded by pollarded small limes and massive ancient yews. There is a dense canopy of Lime, Ash, Field maple, Cherry, Oak and White beam. The wide rides and woodland edges have abundant Hazel, Holly, Wych elm, Spindle, Spurge laurel, Blackthorn and Dogwood. The Wild service-tree was unfortunately not seen. We found 5 sites for the purple gromwell along the rides, rather sparse under the dense shade of Urchin wood, but a large flourishing patch in the more open ride in Kings Wood. The gromwell was more or less where it had been found in 1992. No Lily of the valley was found.

There are several mosaics of relict limestone grassland at the wood margins. These contain a good mixed Flora, including Pignut, Woodruff, Moschatel, Aquilegia, Fairy Flax and the sedges *Carex pallescens* and *C. flacca*.

Unfortunately the site in Ball wood where the Angular Solomon's-Seal was found in 1992, is now covered with a heavy scrub of bramble, regenerating cut Hazel and Ash, Dogwood and coarse grasses. Despite a long search, no plants were seen. It would be worth a visit in the late spring to see if any have survived.

Anne Cole

Sunday, 4th August – Windsor Hill Marsh and Ham Woods, Shepton Mallet.

Leader: Ian Green.

Ten members met to survey *Blasmus compressus* (Flat-sedge) and *Eleocharis uniglumis* (Slender Spike-rush). Both were found but only in small quantity. *Equisetum arvense* × *E. fluviatile* (*E. × litorale*) (Shore Horsetail) was found, new for this site. This is probably an overlooked hybrid in the county.

In the afternoon the party visited Ham Woods. A small, disused limestone quarry was explored and a woodland ride. *Vicia sylvatica* (Wood Vetch) was found in good quantity. *Dipsacus pilosus* (Small Teasel) and *Chrysosplenium alternifolium* (Alternate-leaved Golden-saxifrage) were also seen.

Afterwards some of the party visited a nearby rocky grassy slope to look at *Sedum stellatum* (Starry Stonecrop). Only a few specimens were found of this little annual Sedum, which is only an introduction in

Britain, only known from this one site. - Ian P. Green

See also *PLANT NOTES* at the end of this Newsletter for an exciting new record from Ham Woods.

Saturday 17th August – Yarty Moor, Blackdown Hills.

Arranged by: Liz McDonnell

Thirteen members gathered at the Forestry Commission Car Park for car sharing to the site where parking is very limited. We were handicapped by the absence of Liz McDonnell who was unable to lead because of illness, but she had supplied us with maps, species lists and the SSSI citation, so we set off in search of the target plants - *Equisetum sylvaticum* (Wood Horsetail), *Drosera intermedia* (Oblong-leaved Sundew), *Pinguicula lusitanica* (Western Butterwort) and *Rhynchospora alba* (White Beak-sedge). The latter seemed to be flourishing with large patches in the boggy areas and closely associated with it and with *Narthecium ossifragum* (Bog Asphodel) was the *Pinguicula*, though in much smaller numbers. *Drosera rotundifolia* was abundant but *D. intermedia* was only found in one small area. *Equisetum sylvaticum* we failed to find largely because time and energy ran out.

The site contains areas of *Juncus* dominated grassland with *J. effusus* and *J. acutiflorus* abundant and occasional *J. squarrosus*. In the wetter areas various species of *Sphagna* are represented and in standing water *Potamogeton polygonifolius* (Bog Pondweed) with *Hypericum elodes* (Bog St. John's Wort). *Eriophorum angustifolium* (Common Cottongrass), *Eleocharis multicaulis* (Many-stalked Spikerush), *Menyanthes trifoliata* (Bog-bean), and *Pedicularis palustris* (Red Rattle) also occur together with many species of *Carex*.

Yarty Moor is a rich and varied site and was well worth the visit. It is however difficult terrain to walk over and several people arrived back at their cars very wet and muddy, having fallen or plunged into an unseen deep hole filled with soggy peat.

Anne Bodley

Sunday, 8th September - Fern identification at Cheddar

Leader: Liz McDonnell

The purpose of this meeting was to help members to identify a range of ferns. Cheddar Gorge was the selected location, as a large number of species are present in a fairly small area. Members met at Blackrock Gate and walked eastwards along the wooded track towards the disused quarry. The dry-stone wall on the right of the track is damp and shaded and supports a rich moss and fern flora.

We soon found the delicate fronds of Brittle Bladder-fern (*Cystopteris fragilis*) growing in mossy cracks at the base of the wall. Maidenhair Spleenwort (*Asplenium trichomanes*) was also present in this habitat, the sub-species in this limestone area being ssp. *quadrivalens*.

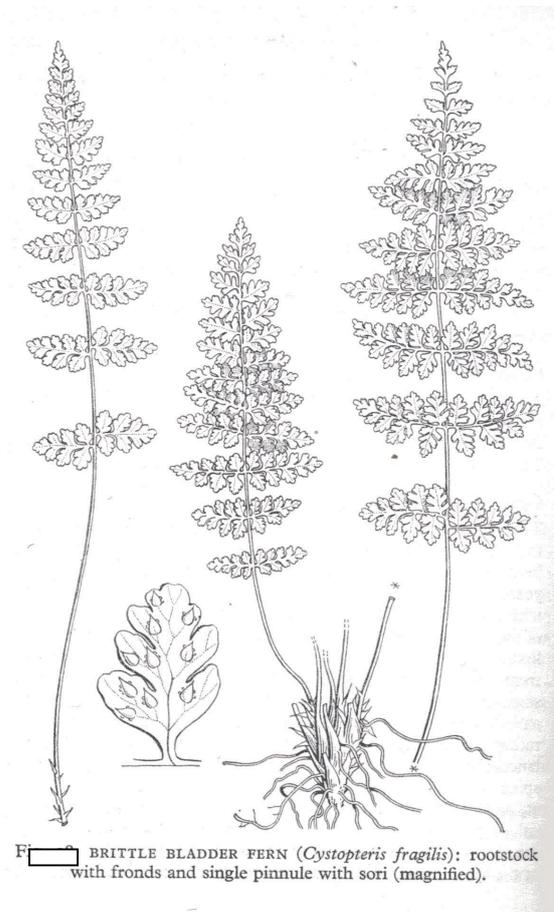


FIG. 1. BRITTLE BLADDER FERN (*Cystopteris fragilis*): rootstock with fronds and single pinnule with sori (magnified).

Leaving the main track and climbing up through the woodland, we found many plants of Hard Shield-fern (*Polystichum aculeatum*). Soft Shield-fern (*Polystichum setiferum*) was much less frequent, and when we found it, the difference between the two species was discussed at length. Hard Shield-fern may be distinguished from Soft Shield-fern by the stiff leathery rigid fronds, the shorter stipe and the acute angle at the base of each pinnule. We recorded Hart's-tongue (*Phyllitis scolopendrium*), Broad Buckler-fern (*Dryopteris dilatata*), Male-fern (*Dryopteris felix-mas*), Scaly Male-fern (*Dryopteris affinis*) and Lady-fern (*Athyrium felix-femina*) in the woodland.

We walked over the fields at the top of Blackrock Drove and returned to the valley beside an open dry-stone wall, which had fine colonies of Wall-rue (*Asplenium ruta-muraria*) and Rustyback (*Ceterach officinalis*). We rejoined the valley near the entrance to Velvet Bottom, and found many fronds of Limestone Fern (*Gymnocarpium robertianum*) growing at the base of the fairly recently repaired wall. Some of the fronds were still young enough to enable us to see the very small glands that give the frond a mealy appearance. This is a Nationally Scarce species, which is very rare in Somerset. However, it is fairly frequent in Cheddar Gorge, especially wherever there are patches of scree on the steep slopes.

At the disused quarry, the group was shown the locations of two of Somerset's rare plants. Angular Solomon's-seal (*Polygonatum odoratum*) grows in woodland at the top of the cliff and *Hieracium stenolepiforme* occurs in crevices of the north-west facing vertical rock-face and on low grassy ledges nearby. This Hawkweed is a Cheddar endemic, found only at Black-rock quarry and on the south side of Cheddar Gorge. Although it was much too late in the

season to find flowering plants, we searched for the leaf rosettes on the low rock outcrops. Only one or two plants were found, and it was disappointing to find that scrub was continuing to increase here. The increase of Hawthorn, Brambles and Ash is likely to be shading out this very rare Hawkweed. It was decided that English Nature and the National Trust should be alerted to this problem.

On returning to Blackrock gate, we tried (unsuccessfully) to re-find Narrow-lipped Helleborine (*Epipactis leptochila*) that was recorded in the Ash/Hazel woodland near the track in 1997.

Liz McDonnell

Sunday, 20th October - STONEWORT MEETING, Gordano Valley. Leader: Nick Stewart

On a wet, windy Sunday morning, 6 members met at the entrance to the National Nature reserve at Walton Moor. Nick Stewart had travelled from Devon to show us some of the Stoneworts that occur in this area, and point out some of the identification features of this strange group of algae that are treated as 'honorary plants' by many botanists. Nick explained that the taxonomy of Stoneworts was rather complex, and that the nomenclature had changed since the production of the BSBI Handbook on Charophytes, but he gave us some fairly simple guidelines to help get to grips with this group. He also explained that charophytes are sensitive to pollution and so are indicators of good water quality.

The first ditch that we examined at ST 434727 had two species of interest, *Chara hispida* and *Chara virgata*. *Chara hispida*, as the name suggests, is a bristly species, with many long pointed spine-cells on the stem and branchlets. *Chara virgata* is a more slender species, with 'bumps' rather than spines on the stem surface. Both were found in shallow, peaty water, sometimes coated with pale purple blobs of algae. In this ditch we also found a single plant of *Baldellia ranunculoides* (Lesser Water-plantain), which is a rare plant in Somerset. In the second ditch at ST 435727, Nick found *Chara aculeolata*, which had not been recorded in this ditch before. It is a densely spiny species, often heavily encrusted with calcium carbonate. *Potamogeton coloratus* (Fen Pondweed) was also present. This is a Nationally Scarce species that is often associated with Stoneworts. The ditch also had *Baldellia ranunculoides*, and an abundance of *Anagallis tenella* (Bog Pimpernel) growing on the black soil of the damp banks.

The wide ditch that separates Walton Moor from Weston Moor was deep and shaded on the east side from tall bankside vegetation. It did not appear to be suitable for Stoneworts, but with the aid of his grapnel, Nick pulled out a small portion of *Potamogeton trichoides* (Hairlike Pondweed), a Nationally Scarce species, which has very narrow pointed leaves with a prominent midrib. At this point, the rain became heavier and more persistent and most of the party turned round and headed for home. The rest of the party continued, and recorded *Chara hispida*, *Chara virgata*, *Utriculata vulgaris* agg. (Greater Bladderwort) and *Potamogeton coloratus* at ST44267340, *Chara hispida*, *Myriophyllum verticillatum* (Whorled Water-

milfoil) and *Potamogeton coloratus* at ST 44227344, and *Chara globularis* at ST 43357300.

Thanks to Nick Stewart giving up a Sunday to show us some representatives of this interesting and important group of algae.

Liz McDonnell

INDOORS AGAIN:

Saturday, 5th October – Working Group

The meeting planned for this date to Rodney Stoke Wood to check on the *Sorbus* had to be cancelled, so it was decided to hold an indoor meeting at Roughmoor to evaluate progress to date. Six members attended this and it was ascertained that Steve is making headway with entering records on to his computer, using MapMate programme. A list of Nationally important species occurring in Somerset have been prepared and this has been broken down by the local recorders who now have lists relating to their designated areas.

It was agreed that records from 1987 onwards should be included – this will tie in with the BSBI Monitoring Scheme which is a base line used in the 'New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora' just published.

Work began on drawing up a species dossier form to collate records which Liz undertook to complete. One more indoor meeting is planned for this year.

THE SWEDISH INVASION

On the 14th June, ten Swedish botanists visited England. I had arranged four day excursions to varied habitats, where I hoped that they would see plants of interest to them. The help of Ian Green and Libby Houston was enlisted and to both I give my grateful thanks for their time and expert help.

We were all quite nervous wondering whether we could show at least some plants that would be new to them. The party consisted of some formidable botanists. Two had published floras, one had a collection of almost 3,000 different species of wild plants in his garden and another had photographed all the Swedish plants and now had to travel afar for new pictures!

With visits to the Levels, Charterhouse, Cheddar, Brean Down, Avon Gorge and Liz McDonnell's kitchen for a picnic (she had kindly rescued us from the rain), the visit was a great success. The Swedes were delighted and couldn't thank us enough, and they all managed several new plants. To my delight, Anders Bertilsson, the botanist who seemed able to name every plant and claims that once he sees a plant he never forgets it! sent me a copy of his newly published beautiful Flora. With it came an invitation for a party of English botanists to visit his part of Sweden, Västergötland near Göthenburg where he would be pleased to show the botanical treasures.

If anyone is interested in such a trip, which would probably be in June or July 2003, please let me know as soon as possible.

Gill Read. Tel: 01373 836488.

PLANT NOTES

***Sium latifolium* (Greater Water-parsnip) at Southlake Moor.**

During the late summer I had the opportunity to monitor the population of *Sium latifolium* at Southlake Moor SSSI. Over the last couple year I have counted the plants in a drainage ditch, there have been regularly over 50 specimens of *Sium*, but this year I visited and only found 3 plants. I don't understand why the population has crashed; nothing in the habitat seems to have changed! I have been studying this species for over three years now, it is becoming clear to me that *Sium* is declining nationally, but I am no closer to finding out why.

Steve Parker

***Cyperus fuscus* (Brown Galingale) in the Gordano Valley.**

More bad news, due to changes in farming practices, the *Cyperus fuscus* in the Gordano Valley has again had a poor year. Pam Millman made me aware of the problem and I was able to speak to the site manager, who has now corrected the problem. There is an important lesson here for all the members of the Rare Plant Group, if you discover a threat to a plant, contact me as soon as you can, I may be able to take action to stop damage.

Steve Parker

***Pyrola rotundifolia* ssp. *rotundifolia* - (Round-leaved Wintergreen)**

Following the SRPG visit to Windsor Hill Marsh and Ham Woods on 4th August, Anne Cole took members of the Mendip Area Survey Group to Ham Woods ten days later, where she discovered, in full flower, a large clump about one metre across, of this rare and declining species. This is the first record for Somerset, so well done Anne for adding this beautiful plant to the long list of rare species in our county.

E.McD.

***Rorippa islandica* (Northern Yellowcress)**

It has been confirmed that the *Rorippa* sp. That we recorded on a SRPG meeting at Clatworthy Reservoir last year, is the very rare *Rorippa islandica*. We recorded at least 1000 plants on the muddy drawdown zone. This species is difficult to distinguish from *R. palustris*, but Ian Green's hunch that they were *R. islandica* was confirmed by Tim Rich, author of the BSBI Handbook on Crucifers. This is not only a 'first' for Somerset, but for England too. Congratulations Ian, another new one for our County list.

L.McD.

***Gymnocarpium robertianum* - (Limestone Fern)**

The only South Somerset site for this fern is on the spoil heap of the old slate quarry at Treborough Woods

on the Brendon Hills. This site used to be open to the public but now it is private. I had to visit the landowners during 2002 and during the visit managed to have a look at the spoil heap. I was pleased to find the fern had increased in quantity; there were at least a thousand fronds scattered over the NE facing slope with about eight main clumps.

CJG

***Silene colorata* – New to Britain**

Two small patches of this Mediterranean species were found by Jeanne Webb on Dunster Beach in 2000. The site has been carefully watched to see if it should recur. None has been seen at this situation but we were pleased this year when it turned up about half a mile to the west, on the edge of Minehead Golf Links. This is a new species to Britain and it will be interesting to see if it becomes established. It is very pretty with deep pink flowers.

***Erodium lebelii* – Sticky Storksbill**

In August, Ian Green led a meeting in Somerset for the Bradford Botany Group. This resulted in several new records for the Exmoor list as some of their experts got to grips with hybrid Willowherbs and Docks. This was to be expected, there are lots around if only we can identify them, but perhaps the most surprising record turned out to be *Erodium lebelii*. This has probably been seen by all of us, it must have been there for years but until now it has been taken to be a white variety of *E. cicutarium* (Common Storksbill). This is a lesson to us – take nothing for granted! The distinguishing features are as follows (taken from Stace):

1. Apical pits of mericarp separated from main part of mericarp by sharp ridge and groove, not overarched by hairs; flowers 3-7 per peduncle, mostly >10 mm across – **E. cicutarium**
2. Apical pits of mericarp not delimited by sharp ridge and groove, overarched by hairs from main part of mericarp; flowers 2-4(5) per peduncle, mostly <10mm across – **E. lebelii**

C.J.G.

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

Contacts: Liz McDonnell 01934 712649
Steve Parker 01823 283211 (day) or 01823 666006
Copy for Newsletter: Caroline Giddens 01643 707624
e-mail carol.enhs@virgin.net