

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



2020 Newsletter

Issue No. 21

Without a shadow of a doubt 2020 has been an extraordinary year. For the first time since the SRPG was founded in 1997 we were forced to cancel all our field meetings. However this has not stopped Somerset botanists from going out and making great plant discoveries across the county. There have been some wonderful finds all of which will have been entered on to the MapMate database and sent off to the BSBI, which of course helps in wildlife conservation.

At the start of the lockdown one of the big challenges for the committee was to come up with alternative ways of keeping members involved with the SRPG. We wanted to come up with little projects that everyone could get involved with. I was really encouraged and delighted at members' enthusiasm for getting involved in one way or another, either posting news of their discoveries or looking for first flowering dates. A really big thank you to everyone for all your efforts.

Members of the public contacted us via our website and we had a steady flow of questions and requests for help on a wide range of topics. We supported a landowner who is establishing a rewilding project, helping by recording the species found on his farm, pointing out the importance of flower-rich banks

and woodlands on his land. We were asked if a weed (Thorn-apple) growing in a garden was poisonous and if so what to do about it. Someone working for a television company wanted to know where to film a nature documentary and a Somerset author wanted help with a question over what plants would be in flower during the winter.

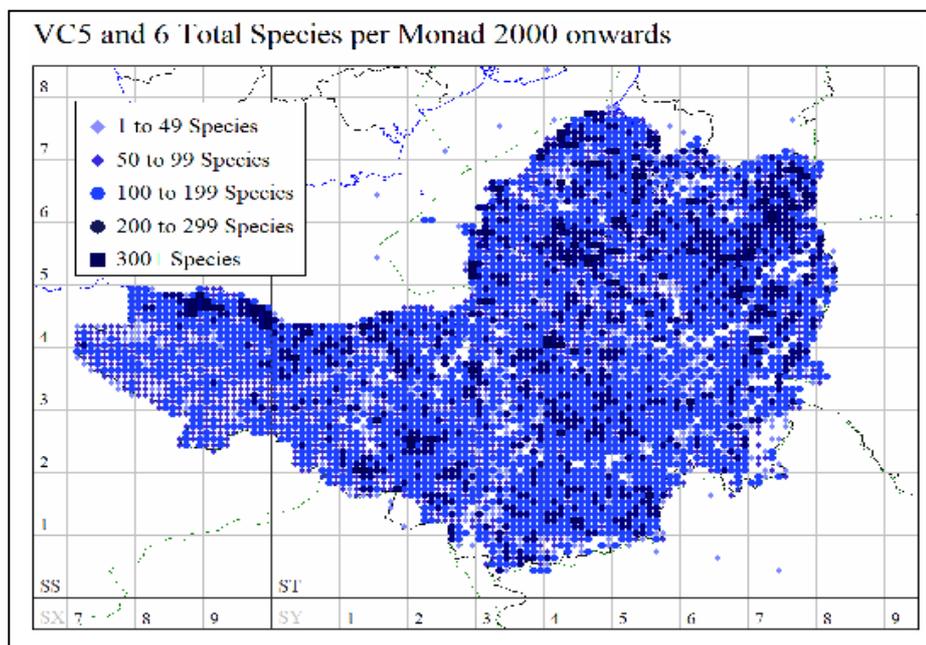
Somerset Rare Plants Group does not have twitter account but a tweet from Natural England about a find by SRPG members at Shapwick Heath led to a BBC Somerset radio interview and other media interest from across the country. Some members quickly took to the newly created SRPG WhatsApp group and posted queries on identification and other questions on plants they had found.

There is nothing good about a global pandemic, however I think the lockdown did make many people much more aware of the importance of wildlife. Newspapers, radio reports and social media reported the awful news day after day but then I noticed more and more stories about the natural world and how much it did for our wellbeing.

As the traffic stopped, botanists were able to record along once busy roads. There was even a short term boost for wild plants as councils stopped cutting the

road verges, allowing plants to flower and set seed. I do hope that we can all take something positive from our experiences in 2020. But let's hope that next year we can meet up again and carry on the important work of recording Somerset's wonderful flora.

Steve Parker



Part 1: Reports 2020

Part 1: Reports

Saturday 4th January 2020 at Taunton

Leader: Steve Parker

Report: Steve Parker

This year the SRPG agreed to meet on the 4th January 2020 in Somerset's county town. The rules of the BSBI New Year Plant Hunt are very simple: to record all native and non-native plants in flower, excluding obviously planted species in private and public gardens. The recording walk lasts about three hours, this time excluded the lunch time break taken on the banks of the Taunton to Bridgwater Canal in the centre of Taunton.

For the first time this year the list for the SRPG was compiled and submitted via the BSBI smartphone App. This App proved very easy to use, albeit a little slow to start with. The route had been previously suggested by Simon Leach, who knows Taunton's flora very well. However, Simon was unable to attend the meeting so Steve Parker was the nominal leader for the day. Our starting point was the Silk Mills Lane Park and Ride. From here the group made its way into town more or less following the route of the River Tone and then back to the starting point.



SRPG members beside the river Tone ©Steve Parker

During the three-hour period we found eight species of grasses, these included relatively uncommon species such as Bearded Couch *Elymus caninus* and Bread Wheat *Triticum aestivum*, the now frequently encountered Water Bent *Polypogon viridis* together with very common species such as Cock's-foot *Dactylis glomerata*, False Oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* and the ubiquitous Annual Meadow-grass *Poa annua*.

Close to the start of the walk the non-native *Poterium sanguisorba* subsp. *balearicum* was found to be still in flower, this plant first appeared in the location when the Silk Mills road was 'planted up' following the construction of the park and ride. Waste ground and carparks are always a good hunting ground for botanists, we tend to be drawn to them by some unknown force. In these unloved areas we found Lesser Chickweed *Stellaria pallida*, Tall Melilot *Melilotus latissimus* and Boreau's Ramping-fumitory *Fumaria muralis* subsp. *boraei*. Taunton railway station is well known for a range of uncommon plants, here Yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata* was seen by peering through the railway security fence.

Close to the large allotment gardens at Frieze Hill, Japanese Honeysuckle *Lonicera japonica* was covering a long section of semi-urban hedgerow. While Bilbao Fleabane *Conyza floribunda* and Field Madder *Sherardia arvensis* were doing well on roadside verges and pavement cracks. Together with most other groups and individuals undertaking the plant hunt we found Daisy *Bellis perennis*, Groundsel *Senecio vulgaris* and Dandelion *Taraxacum* agg.

This was the fourth year that members of Somerset Rare Plants Group have taken part in the New Year Plant hunt. The SRPG has always come close to the top of the groups with the longest list. In 2017 in and around Watchet a total of 69 plants were found in flower and we came 5th, in 2018 the group recorded 74 species (6th), while in 2019 we also found 74 plants and the Group was joint 9th. In 2020 we came third with a grand total of 87 plants. This is always a very enjoyable outing and despite some inclement weather over the years it seems to be popular with everyone.



Peering through the security fence to record *Blackstonia perfoliata* ©Steve Parker

AGM & Member's Meeting

Saturday 19th January 2020

Report: Liz McDonnell

24 members and guests gathered in the brand new classroom at the Avalon Marshes Centre. It was a bright sunny day and the sun streamed through the large expanse of windows on the south side of the wooden chalet-type building. Steve Parker chaired the meeting and welcomed everyone. He thanked everyone for the huge recording effort that SRPG members made over the last year. All of the records have now been sent to BSBI for inclusion in Atlas 2020.

As an employee of Natural England (NE), Steve gave a report on the many ways in which NE uses the botanical records that SRPG gathers in Somerset (VC5 & VC6) and how important they are for conservation and decision-making. An example of this was the use of records of plants associated with the sea walls of the Severn Estuary to ensure that the quality and composition of the flora doesn't decline during current and future work on the sea defences. NE works closely with the Internal Drainage Boards (IDB) and Environment Agency (EA) looking at the distribution and spread of invasive species, especially aquatic species such as Floating Water-primrose (*Ludwigia peploides*) and Floating Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*). SRPG current records are invaluable for understanding the spread of these rapid-spreading species. Leon Debell (SERC) has offered the use of a drone to help with the mapping of invasive species.

Steve presented plans for recording priorities in the coming year. The committee has highlighted the need for more training in plant identification not only for our own members but also for other partner organisations such as EA. There will also be more site recording this year, which will help to link in to management requirements for Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT), National Trust (NT) etc.

Ellen McDouall (Membership Secretary) reported that the current membership of SRPG stands at 76. To help members keep in touch with each other for car-sharing and other membership notices, a private area on the SRPG website is proposed.

Chris Loudon (Website Manager) reported that the website had been updated during the year and she invited suggestions for its continual improvement.

Clive Lovatt (Treasurer) presented the annual accounts, and reported on income from membership

subscriptions and miscellaneous book sales and outgoing monies for meeting venues and miscellaneous expenses. He considered that the annual subscription of £8 did not need to be increased at present. Clive also presented the need for a constitution, following Barclays Bank's request for more information about our group. Clive and other members have drawn up a draft based on a Charity Commission template for similar non-charity groups such as ours. This will be tailored for our own aims and objectives and circulated to the committee and later to the membership as a whole before formal adoption. Clive reminded members that SRPG's insurance is for third part cover only, and does not cover personal accident at meetings.

Graham Lavender (Meetings Secretary) presented the 2020 programme of summer meetings, the first one of which begins on Sunday 5th April. This year there are 13 Field meetings in various parts of the county, four workshops - Beginners and Improvers plant ID, Clovers, Aquatic Plants & Ferns, and an opportunity for 'Pop-up Meetings' in Taunton and Exmoor. Graham emphasized the need to let the leaders know as soon as possible that you will be attending meetings, as this helps them to plan their meetings and to know if there is a need to split the group into smaller recording or training units.

Steve reported that all the Committee Members are willing to serve again in 2020. Bill Urwin has agreed to run the SRPG Photographic Competition, taking over from Ian Salmon, who has done it very ably for the last few years.

Ro FitzGerald promoted the formation of small regional recording groups within SRPG. She is part of the 'Friday Group', a VC5 group of 4 members operating mainly in West Somerset and pointed out the benefits of working in a small group. Parking and access are less of an issue as they can travel in one vehicle, and individual identification skills benefit the group as a whole.

Liz McDonnell alerted the members to a number of books on sale in the other meeting room. Among them, was a collection of books belonging to the late John Keylock, who was a prominent Somerset naturalist. Money raised by the sale of these natural history books is for the benefit of SWT. Other books for sale or exchange were for SRPG funds. Two new books written and published by Sylvia Haslam on River ecology were also for sale.

After the 'Bring and Share' lunch, Steve gave a presentation on the highlights of VC5 recording. This

included several VC5 first records, such as *Dactylorhiza incarnata* subsp. *pulchella* at Yarty Moor and *Haloragis erecta* at East Quantoxhead. He reported that several species were very threatened or have declined over the last 20 years – Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*) and Adders-tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) being two of these. Helena Crouch gave her report of VC6 recording in 2019. Many of the VC6 new and interesting records were non-native, as is expected as new species spread into the countryside as escapes or casuals, but several natives were found where they hadn't been recorded before, or for many years – Dwarf Sedge (*Carex humilis*) was found on a SRPG meeting at White Sheet Down, the first time it has been recorded in this part of VC6, and Limestone Fern (*Gymnocarpium robertianum*) recorded in Mells, which may be the same site as in Rev Murray's flora 1896, but had not been recorded there for 123 years! So many good records made by SRPG members, which will contribute to Atlas 2020, the national plant distribution atlas. Helena showed the latest Somerset 'Blue Maps' indicating the increase in the number of records and areas that have been recorded in this year, compared with 2018.

The Members' Meeting concluded with the annual quiz, compiled as usual by Steve. This was a varied bunch of questions, not only on botanical subjects, but the identification of SRPG members (their heads obscured by a shrek head), places, birds, plant galls, sea creatures, authors, fungi, insects and strange warning signs. It was great fun and was won this year by the VC6 team.

Indoor Meeting

Saturday 15th February 2020

Report: Liz McDonnell

26 members met at our usual venue at the Avalon Marshes Centre, Westhay on a wet and windy day. Storm Dennis threatened to cut short our meeting, but the weather was not bad enough for us to finish early. Before the main talk of the day, Steve Parker (SRPG Chairman) presented John Poingdestre with the book *Flowers of the Field* by Steve Nicholls in recognition of his long service and for his many valuable botanical records made in Somerset over the years. Graham Lavender awarded the Dandelion Cup to Simon for the highest number of *Taraxacum* specimens collected during the year and presented

him with a mug with an illustration of *Taraxacum amicum* printed on it.

The main talk of the day was from one of our members - Fred Rumsey, Senior Curator in Charge, Historical Collections, Natural History Museum, London. The title of Fred's talk was 'The right name? How we choose which name to use'.

In this talk Fred sought to explain how the intertwined but fundamentally different disciplines of nomenclature and taxonomy work and how the application of their rules can lead to the changes of names. One of the first things stressed was that there can be many correct names but there are also names which can never be right under the rules of nomenclature. He briefly looked at how these rules were arrived at and the process by which they are improved and amended through voting at special sessions at International Botanical Congresses (the most recent iteration of the code was published in 2018 following the meeting held at Shenzhen in China and its rulings are accessible online).

A very clear explanation of this often baffling set of rules is given in Nick Turland's very helpful book *The Code Decoded* which is highly recommended. We then looked at the subtle difference between names that are valid and those which are legitimate. Names are not validly published when they fail to meet the requirements set out in the code, often because they are lacking crucial information, or a type specimen. Names might be validly published but still illegitimate for a number of reasons, one example being that the newly published name is a homonym, i.e. has been used before by a different author.

The fundamental principle of nomenclature, the rule of priority, was stressed and explained. It can be responsible for the necessity to change names if an earlier validly published name is discovered. The important role of the Type specimen – the thing which defines and characterises the name – was also considered and a recent example was given where detailed examination of a type (*Asplenium trichomanes*) had revealed that it wasn't of the taxon for which the name has generally been used, which will necessitate changes and new names.

He then went on to consider how scientists and natural historians select which of the possibly many validly published names to use and the other reasons why taxonomic thoughts change. One of the main drivers of change in recent years has been the application of molecular studies, which have done

much to reveal more about underlying relationships between taxa by presenting different evidence from that derived from appearance. One of the principles that has been used when deciding on how to group and thus correctly name things is that of monophyly; a monophyletic group is one with a shared ancestor and which includes all of its derivatives.

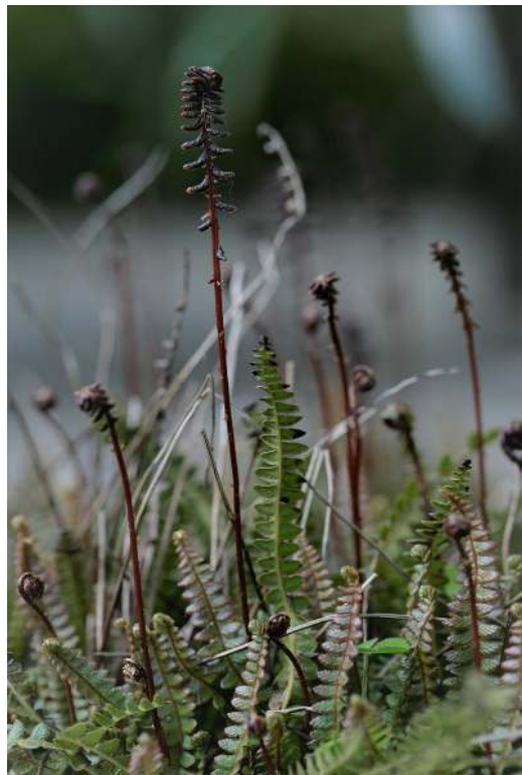


Blechnum spicant (dwarf form found in Madeira)
©Fred Rumsey

The strict application of this principle has been responsible for very many of the changes that we struggle to cope with. However, it was stressed that there are often different ways of viewing the same data. The taxonomic system is a hierarchical one and different people may choose to recognise the same taxa but at different rank. Two contrasting recent treatments of the fern genera *Asplenium* and *Blechnum* were used as an example. Both have traditionally been regarded as big genera with many species. The recent treatment by the Pteridophyte Phylogeny Group in 2016 chose to redefine what had been subgenera in the latter into genera, necessitating a huge number of name changes and saw our *Blechnum* become *Struthiopteris*, if we choose to accept this view.

A similar case could be made for *Asplenium* in which case we would have the few British species potentially split into 7+ genera! Fred's view was that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with big genera. Where they, as with *Blechnum*, make morphological sense to a wide audience he would favour retention. The desire to maintain stability and minimise changes to names where possible and a consistent treatment across all groups should guide

those making taxonomic decisions. There is always going to be room for differences in viewpoint. So what is the right name?...the conclusion was that it is often a matter of opinion and yours may be as valid as anyone else's!



Australasian *Blechnum penna-marina* ©Fred Rumsey

Chris Loudon gave us a short talk on mobile phone Apps for identifying plants in the field. This is thought to be a possible alternative to taking reference books into the field for identifying species when you find them. Several members commented that you could not rely on them to give you the correct determination as very few Apps were designed just for the UK. Jeanne Webb gave a talk about her work (with husband Tim) on the recording and conservation of Rough Marsh-mallow (*Malva setigera*) at Cleeve Hill, near Watchet (see *Jeanne's article later in the newsletter*).

After lunch Helena Crouch gave us a progress report on recording critical taxa in VC6. There are 15 rare Whitebeams (*Sorbus* spp.) in VC6 and they are continually evolving. Libby Houston has made a special study of them and is a national expert on this specialist group. Early autumn is the best time for determining species as the shapes of the leaves and fruit are important features. Eyebrights (*Euphrasia* spp.) are one of Helena's obsessions and she has contributed to the production of the BSBI Handbook *Eyebrights (Euphrasia) of the UK and Ireland*. The fact that they hybridise easily makes them a rather

difficult group to study. Helena has produced an illustrated document - *Eyebrights of Somerset* - to help members with this group of species and this is available on the SRPG website.

There has been a long history of interest in the Hawkweeds (*Hieracium* spp.) in Somerset and Helena has a list of all the 25 species known to occur in VC6 and she is helping Mike Shaw in the production of a Handbook for the South West of England. SRPG needs to do more work on the Roses of Somerset. The distribution of *Rosa micrantha* & *R. agrestis* is fairly well known, but other taxa and their hybrids are less well known. There is also work to be done on other groups – *Sparganium erectum*, *Montia fontana*, *Ranunculus auricomus*, *Cotoneaster*, *Betula*, *Quercus*, *Salix*, *Ulmus* and *Arctium*. Workshops on some of these would be welcome additions to Field meetings for the future.

Graham Lavender informed us about the progress of recording critical taxa - Dandelions, Eyebrights, Hawkweeds and Whitebeams in VC5. Most of this has been done by the 'Friday Group' or by Graham himself and they have been greatly helped by BSBI referees who have either accompanied them in the field, or determined their pressed specimens. Tim Rich came to Exmoor to help us with the identification of the Bristol Channel Hawkweed (*Hieracium eustomon*) and Exmoor Hawkweed (*H. eminentiforme*). Specimens of these are now in Taunton (TTN) Herbarium. Graham asked that members record all Hawkweeds with an 8-fig grid ref. and the number of stem leaves, even if the record is only *Hieracium* agg.

Much work has been done on Dandelions in VC5 over the last few years and each specimen collected has its own field checklist which Jeanne Webb designed. This important document is filled out in the field and accompanies each specimen when sent to the *Taraxacum* referee and then into the herbarium. Roses are under-recorded in VC5 and it is important to collect specimens for determination at the right time of year (fresh fruiting material) and to make good notes in the field. There are many hybrids and not all can be determined with the aid of the BSBI Roses Handbook, so some specimens have been sent to the BSBI referee Roger Maskew.

There are very few Whitebeams in VC5, most of them have a coastal distribution. They are currently well recorded. Many Eyebright records have been made in VC5 this year and sent to Chris Metherell for determination or confirmation. Graham encouraged

members to record Eyebrights as 8-figure grid refs, even if only recorded to *Euphrasia* agg., as the sites can be re-visited at a later date and a more accurate identification may be possible. All the work done by a relatively small number of SRPG members has greatly increased the critical recording in Somerset.

Liz reported on progress with targeted searches by SRPG members in 2019. Many of the Somerset rare/scarce plants were under-recorded and many of the old sites have not been revisited, partly as the 1997 Atlas Flora of Somerset records were not digitised. Location details of Autumn Ladies-tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*), Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*), Green-winged Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*) and Nit-grass (*Gastridium ventricosum*) that had not been recorded since 2000 were extracted from the 'Wallpaper files' and entered on separate spreadsheets and sent out to members that requested them.

This was a successful project and many records were received and added to the MapMate database. From the targeting work that has been done over the last two years, it was found that Toothwort was still fairly abundant in suitable habitat, but that Autumn Ladies-tresses, Green-winged Orchid and Nit-grass had declined in Somerset, due a variety of reasons including intensive horse-grazing, scrub invasion and under-grazing. Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) was chosen as one of next year's targeted species.

Helena gave a report on progress with the Somerset Rare Plant Register. For the benefit of newer members, she explained the scope of the project and the criteria for inclusion of species. At present there are 644 taxa on the list, of which 113 are considered "Lost". The list is presented as a table in the RPR section of the SRPG website, with columns to indicate the reason(s) for which each taxon is included. Helena reported that 196 accounts were written and available on the website and showed six examples of these. All can be accessed by clicking on a highlighted species name in the table. Many others are ready to be written. Thanks to assiduous recording, fifteen taxa have recently been removed from the list, no longer Scarce. Some species need more records updating, for example *Gentianella amarella* subsp. *amarella*, *G. amarella* subsp. *anglica*, *Valeriana dioica*, *Myriophyllum alternifolium* and *Scutellaria minor* [Since the talk, this last species has been recorded off the list].

'First Flowerings'

A collective endeavour to keep track of spring during the COVID-19 lockdown

Simon Leach & Members of the Somerset Rare Plants Group

With thanks to the following contributors, most of them SRPG members, plus a few who aren't.

Chris Billinghurst, **Hilary** Brownnett, **Ann** Burman, **Sue** Carpenter, **Anne** Cole, **Helena** Crouch, **Jim** Crouch, **Fiona** Davis, **Linda** Everton, **Vicki** Fairfax-Ross, **Jan** Fawcett, **Ann** Fells, **Ro** FitzGerald, **Caroline** Giddens, **Keith** Gould, **Val** Graham, **Dave** Green, **Ian** Green, **David** Hawkins, **Dee** Holladay, **Libby** Houston, **Ruth** Hyett, **Kate** Jeffreys, **Brian** Lancaster, **Graham** Lavender, **Ben** Leach, **Simon** Leach, **Sue** Lloyd, **Chris** Loudon, **Ian** Loudon, **Clive** Lovatt, **Liz** McDonnell, **Ellen** McDouall, **Karen** Netto, **Toby** Nowlan, **Steve** Parker, **Gill** Read, **David** Reid, **David** Robins, **Andrew** Robinson, **Fred** Rumsey, **Georgina** Shuckburgh, **Hester** Stanwood, **Alastair** Stevenson, **Lynda** Stewart, **Eve** Tigwell, **Karen** Turvey, **Jeanne** Webb, **Maureen** Webb, **Tim** Webb, **Margaret** Webster, **Pat** Wolseley.

Contributors are referred to throughout by their first names, but we've added in initial letter/s of surname if there's more than one – as is the case with Chris, David, Ian, Karen and Sue!

18th March

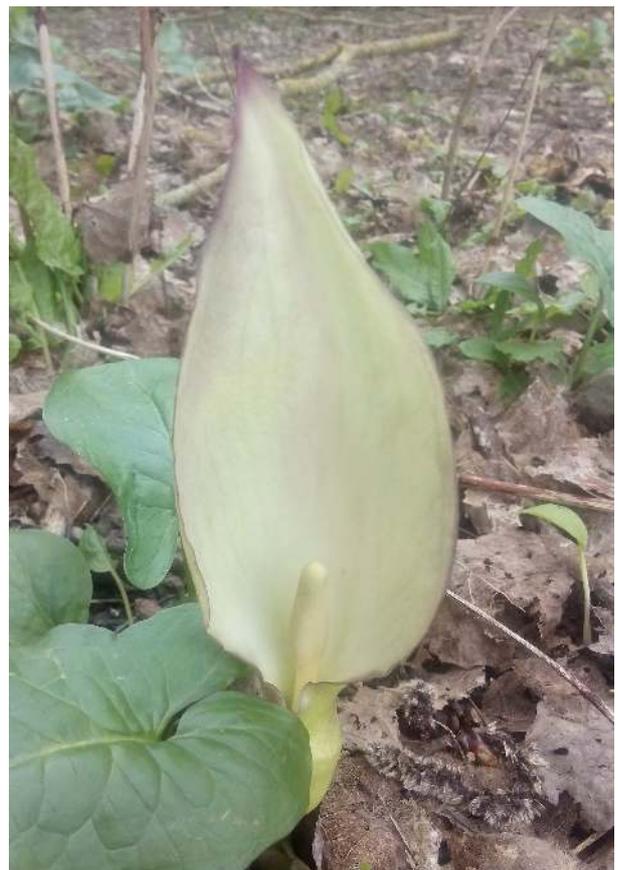
Getting started – the dog & the Arum

I was walking Gilly down by the river yesterday morning, reflecting on the general grimness of our present situation, and expecting that many of us will now be taking steps towards self-isolation/social distancing. And reflecting, too, on the likelihood that our spring and summer meetings programme may also end up having to be substantially curtailed or cancelled.

I was also lamenting the fact that my recording of first flowering dates, or FFDs for short, has been a bit lackadaisical lately, not least because I just haven't really been feeling in the mood for it. And then I saw my first Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum maculatum*, and immediately I felt I wanted to share the enjoyment of it with the rest of the group. Seeing something is one thing, sharing what you've seen with your mates is another thing entirely...

Anyway, I sat with the *Arum* while the dog chewed a stick, and it got me thinking that maybe others in the

group might also enjoy helping to record some of this year's first flowerings. What I've got in mind is something along the following lines: I would endeavour to send an email each week to Ellen, for onward circulation round the group. This would include a list of, say, 10-20 species needing to be looked for in flower during that week, and would ask anyone venturing out to let me know if they'd seen any of them. No need for lengthy details: just the species, date and a rough location will do. And then, following the first email, weekly 'round robins' would summarise highlights of the previous week, and give a list of the next species to be targeted.



Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum maculatum*, Obridge, Taunton
17/03/20 ©Simon Leach

I floated the idea round a few in the group, and there was a general feeling this could be a good thing to try. Several people have suggested more sophisticated ways of keeping in contact and 'posting' our observations directly on the website, so maybe this could morph in the coming weeks into something less 'clunky' than round-robin emails¹. Who knows? But, for this week anyway, let's just make a start and then see where it takes us. We'll

¹ An SRPG WhatsApp Group was created at the end of June, and became an important means of communicating new sightings.

run the weeks from Thursday to Wednesday, so Week 1 starts tomorrow. But bear in mind this is supposed to be fun, so only take part if you really fancy it, and just dip in and out as you wish.

Now, as you'll have already noticed, this year spring seems to be very early. Having recorded first flowerings in the Taunton area for twelve years now, for almost 340 species I can look back at average FFDs for the decade 2008-17 to see how this year compares. On the basis of these 'decadal averages' I would have expected species coming into flower in the next week or so to have included Moschatel, *Adoxa moschatellina*, Wood Anemone, *Anemone nemorosa*, Greater Stitchwort, *Stellaria holostea*, Rue-leaved saxifrage, *Saxifraga tridactylites*, Spotted Medick, *Medicago arabica*, Laurel, *Prunus laurocerasus*, Hairy Violet, *Viola hirta*, Wood Spurge, *Euphorbia amygdaloides* and Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*. But none of these are on the first list of target species because, at least on my home patch, they've already started flowering. Are they in bloom yet in your own area, I wonder? If they aren't, it might be interesting to see when they *do* start flowering—so do do let me know your first dates for these if you get them coming into flower over the next week or two.

Right then: Week 1, 19th – 25th March. And here's a list of 19 species that could be next in line to start flowering (probably in next 10-20 days or so), but which aren't yet blooming in the Taunton area.

Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*; Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*; Garlic Mustard, *Alliaria petiolata*; Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis*; Wood-sedge, *Carex sylvatica*; Common Stork's-bill, *Erodium cicutarium*; Cleavers, *Galium aparine*; Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*; Yellow Archangel, *Lamium galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum*; Field Wood-rush, *Luzula campestris*; Hairy Wood-rush, *Luzula pilosa*; Cowslip, *Primula veris*; Goldilocks Buttercup, *Ranunculus auricomus*; Crack-willow, *Salix fragilis*; Charlock, *Sinapis arvensis*; Hedge Mustard, *Sisymbrium officinale*; Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*; Germander Speedwell, *Veronica chamaedrys*; Common Dog-violet, *Viola riviniana*.

Have you seen any of these yet? If you have, or when you *do* see them, let me know. And also keep a note of *anything* that you think might be especially early—it may be on a later list and you'll be kicking yourself you never jotted it down.

25th March

Week 1 of lockdown – moschatel, wood-rush...

A fantastic response: I've been inundated, and some really good records too. I'm starting to wish we'd set up something like this a few years ago. Thanks to everyone who emailed, texted or 'WhatsApped' during the week.

I listed nine species that had already been seen in flower in the Taunton area, but which I would have expected, in a 'normal' year, to start flowering during the week just gone. Of these, no-one reported seeing Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, or Wood Spurge, *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, but I think the rest were all mentioned in dispatches. Several people had first-flowering Moschatel, *Adoxa moschatellina*, this week: Margaret near Lords Wood on the 12th, David H. in the Portishead area on the 15th, Steve in North Petherton on the 16th or 17th, Gill at Postlebury on the 20th, Caroline at Tivington (near Minehead) on the 21st, and Georgina at Nordrach on Mendip on the 23rd. (My own date in the Taunton area was the 14th, at Fyne Court.)

Our Week 1 target list comprised 19 species, 12 of which were recorded in flower by at least one person during the week². This was clearly 'wood-rush week'. Many people (although not me, sadly) are starting to see Field Wood-rush, *Luzula campestris*, in flower. Unfortunately the places where I might go to see it here aren't really within easy walking distance, and I now have no car—for reasons too complicated to explain here. (And not sure, now, how useful a car would actually be, with full lockdown having kicked in on the 23rd.) David H. had it—that's *Luzula*, not the car—in Portishead on the 15th, Liz in Wedmore on the 18th, Steve in North Petherton around the 17th, Gill at Postlebury on the 20th, Margaret at Winford on the 21st, and Caroline, on her lawn in Minehead, on the 22nd. Hairy Wood-rush, *Luzula pilosa*, was also spotted in flower, by me on the 20th, at Thurlbear, and by Caroline at Tivington on the 21st.

Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis*, had already been seen by a few of you during the two weeks prior to the start of lockdown: for example, Georgina had it in flower at Hinton Blewett on the 11th, and Margaret near Lords Wood on the 12th. These are much earlier dates than my own in previous years

² Throughout this account *target* species for the week in question are shown with their scientific names **emboldened**.

for the Taunton area, but this is probably because it doesn't seem to be terribly common around here—so the chances of stumbling across it when it's just beginning to bloom are much lower as a result.

Wood-sedge, *Carex sylvatica*, was already flowering at Thurlbear on the 20th, and then on the 22nd Margaret spotted it at Bithams Wood. She also spied a single flower of Goldilocks Buttercup, *Ranunculus auricomus*, and some (unusually early) Sweet Vernal-grass, *Anthoxanthum odoratum*. Also very early was Wayfaring-tree, *Viburnum lantana*, seen by me near Corfe on the 19th—13 days earlier than my previous earliest, in 2012.



Cowslip, *Primula veris*, Chewton Mendip 28/03/20 ©Ellen McDouall

Cowslips, *Primula veris*, have been popping into flower all over the place, amazingly with three of us all reporting them for the first time on the 20th: me at Thurlbear, Ro at Kilton Church, and David H. at Portishead. Caroline and Linda have both seen Common Dog-violet, *Viola riviniana*, with Linda spotting it in her garden.

Only two people have so far reported Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum maculatum*, the species that set this hare running in the first place. Ro saw it, in all its glory, on the 22nd in Lilstock, while Helena had it in her garden on the 24th, her delight at seeing it being pinged through as a WhatsApp message complete with a very nice photo!

As yet, we have had only singleton records for Common Stork's-bill, *Erodium cicutarium* (Margaret, on the 20th at Sand Bay), Yellow Archangel, *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum* (Linda, on the 23rd in woods up near Wellington Monument), and *Galium aparine* (me, Holway Hill, Taunton, on the 22nd); plus there have been two records for Germander Speedwell, *Veronica chamaedrys*—Andrew, in Weston-super-Mare on the 23rd, and Ro, at Kilve/Lilstock on the 25th.

Taken overall, these dates are mostly very early in comparison with 2008-17 average FFDs for the Taunton area. This week, Garlic Mustard, *Alliaria petiolata*, Common Dog-violet, Cuckooflower, Goldilocks Buttercup, Wood-sedge, Cleavers, and Bush-vetch, *Vicia sepium*, all recorded their earliest FFDs 'since records began' (i.e. since 2008!). And, last but not least, I had Wood Melick, *Melica uniflora*, on the 20th at Thurlbear—an extraordinary date, almost four weeks earlier than my previous earliest back in 2008 and 2011.

* * *

On to Week 2 which runs from tomorrow, 26th March, until next Wednesday, April Fools' Day. We've had sunny days and frosty nights lately (frosts even in Taunton), and the forecast for the next few days is dry and sunny too—which makes it deeply frustrating that there is now an increasingly urgent demand from Government that we stay at home and only venture forth for essential journeys, and for purposes of daily exercise. Any continuation of this little project will obviously have to work within these understandable and necessary constraints.

If you live in the countryside, of course, you may be able to get out a little more easily (and have more botanically productive habitats close to hand) than those of us in the towns; but all of us, wherever we live, will be finding getting out to botanise less and less easy over the coming days and weeks.

It's amazing, though, how much one can see in one's local street, hedgebank, park or road verge, and even, of course, in one's own garden—as shown by Linda's Common Dog-violet, Caroline's Field Wood-rush, and Helena's Lords-and-Ladies. This week, during my regular garden patrols (which now include, much to the amusement of the neighbours, a few press-ups and 'standing runs'), I have seen Bee-flies, *Bombylius major*, and Flower Bees, *Anthophora plumipes*, as well as Small Tortoiseshell, *Aglais urticae*, Comma, *Polygonia c-album*, Holly Blue, *Celastrina argiolus*, and Brimstone, *Gonepteryx*

rhamni. And whenever we sit on the garden bench, a friendly Peacock comes and perches on the wall beside us. That's the butterfly, *Aglais io*, not the bird.

On the botanical front, too, things are gathering pace in the garden—Lesser Celandines, *Ficaria verna*, are at full throttle, Dandelions, *Taraxacum* spp, are starting to look their best too, and there are Primroses, *Primula vulgaris*, and Early Dog-violets, *Viola reichenbachiana*, everywhere.

So, despite the constraints of the Coronavirus lockdown, I thought it would still be worthwhile sending out a Week 2 list of 17 potential targets, seven of which are carried over from last week, namely:

Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*; Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*; Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*; Crack-willow, *Salix fragilis*; Charlock, *Sinapis arvensis*; Hedge Mustard, *Sisymbrium officinale*; Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*.

But to these we can now add the following ten species:

Bugle, *Ajuga reptans*; Glaucous Sedge, *Carex flacca*; Pendulous Sedge, *Carex pendula*; Beaked Hawk's-beard, *Crepis vesicaria*; Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*; Dove's-foot Crane's-bill, *Geranium molle*; Hedgerow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pyrenaicum*; Meadow Buttercup, *Ranunculus acris*; Red Clover, *Trifolium pratense*; Common Vetch, *Vicia sativa*.

And one more to look forward to, probably not until the 1st or 2nd week of April, but – who knows? – it could just make an appearance in March: Early-purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula*.

1st April

Week 2 – email heaven – the joy of spread-sheets – crane's-bills, cowslips & foxtails

Each evening I peer into my email in-box to view the little parcels of unopened treasure lined up in a column, with subject titles like 'flowering dates', 'first flowerings', 'FFDs', 'Carex?' and 'Only Charlock!'. It's like Christmas come early, and almost as good as having been there in the field with you and seen them myself. It's been a remarkably good week for records, too, despite the extent to which daily activities have been curtailed by the Coronavirus lockdown. In fact, you've sent in so many records I've had to construct a spread-sheet to

hold them all; which means that I can now sort the records by date, species, recorder, etc.

Anyway, thanks to everyone for sending in their sightings. In all, you submitted more than 100 records in Week 2, covering at least 50 species. If Week 1 was wood-rush week, Week 2 was cowslip-and-foxtail week. As reported last time, Cowslip, *Primula veris*, was seen by three of us on the 20th, but these widely separated early records heralded a wave of first flowerings for this species across the county: Linda saw her first, near Wellington, on the 23rd, Helena had them already flowering well in her garden in Paulton on the 26th, and then there were records from Somerton on the 27th (David Ro.), and Chewton Mendip (Ellen) and Winford (Margaret) on the 28th. Meadow Foxtail, *Alopecurus pratensis*, wasn't on the target list – omitted because it had already been found flowering exceptionally early, on the 18th, in Taunton. That didn't stop a surge of first dates for it during the week, though, from Brent Knoll (Andrew), Winford/Frog Lane (Margaret), Postlebury (Gill), Paulton (Helena) and Clevedon (Dee).

Turning now to the 17 target species for Week 2, a total of 12 were seen either during the week or, in one or two instances, towards the end of the previous week. Running through them in alphabetical order...

Horse Chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*, began flowering in French Weir Park (Taunton) on the 30th. It always seems to be the same tree each year, but still a very early date for a species that should be at its peak of flowering at the start of May, just when the Swifts return. (Something to look forward to, eh?)

Glaucous Sedge, *Carex flacca*, was seen at Brent Knoll on the 30th (Andrew) and at Kilve today, 1st April (Ro). Very early dates! Pendulous Sedge, *Carex pendula*, has been seen too, in Wellington on the 29th (Linda), and along the banks of the Sherford stream, Taunton, on the 31st (Simon). In a matter of days we'll probably find it popping into flower right across the county. (Also on the sedge front, Andrew recorded Wood-sedge, *Carex sylvatica*, flowering at Brent Knoll; that's a third record to add to the two from Week 1.)

So far, just the one record of Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*, from Wooten Hall on the 24th (Ellen). I saw it in bud in Thurlbear Wood on the 20th, but haven't been back since, for obvious reasons. I imagine some of the woodland paths up there to be

lined with its star-burst of flowers by now; I absolutely *love* Woodruff, and it's intensely frustrating that I can't pop out there to see it...

Or maybe Week 2 should be called the 'week of the *Geranium*'. We had three of them on our hit list, and all of them have been notched up by someone somewhere in the county. Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*, was seen by Margaret at Winford/Frog Lane on the 26th, and by Steve in North Petherton on the 27th. I've been searching hard for this in Taunton – as Vicki will testify – but maddeningly there's been no sign of it in flower yet, although (slight digression) several patches of it have had leaf-roll galls caused by the mite, *Aceria geranii*. Dove's-foot Crane's-bill, *Geranium molle*, is *just* starting to flower now in Taunton – first seen this morning, down near the cricket ground, while Andrew also had it today at Brent Knoll. The first sighting of it, though, was by Steve, in North Petherton, on the 28th. Hedgerow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pyrenaicum*, too, was on my tally of 'new flowerers' this morning, down at Firepool Weir, but Jeanne actually reported it already in bloom last week, on the 21st, on the roundabout at Tropiquaria – while, needless to say, she was out there sampling Dandelions, *Taraxacum* spp.

Meadow Buttercup, *Ranunculus acris*, has now been seen by three people: Caroline, in Minehead, actually saw it *last* week, on the 21st, while Steve saw it in North Petherton on the 27th and Gill, at Postlebury, on the 30th. In Taunton there's plenty of Bulbous Buttercup, *R. bulbosus*, on the road verges especially, but still no sign of *R. acris*.

Of the willows, Crack-willow, *Salix fragilis*, catkins are about the last to appear. Goat Willow, *S. caprea*, and Sallow, *S. cinerea*, were both 'flowering' in the last week of February, but it's only this week that Crack-willow has finally made its appearance. Jeanne saw it on the 24th in the community orchard in Old Cleeve, while I had it on the 28th, on the banks of the River Tone. Today, during daily exercise, I noticed that many Crack-willow trees were now in catkin, and looking very splendid too.

Dee got in touch to say she'd recorded Charlock, *Sinapis arvensis*, flowering in Clevedon on the 19th, at the start of Week 1, but the only other record for this species was today, from Helena. Ro had Hedge Mustard, *Sisymbrium officinale*, at Kilve/Lilstock on the 22nd, while it was also seen in Taunton on the 27th (Simon) and North Petherton on the 28th (Steve).

Common Chickweed, *Stellaria media*, is a plant you can find in flower pretty much at any time of the year, but its larger cousin, Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*, doesn't tend to flower until the end of March or early April. And, as if on cue, two of you have seen it this week: Steve in North Petherton, and Linda in Wellington – and both on the 27th.

Amongst other noteworthy finds of the week were: Tormentil, *Potentilla erecta*, seen by Pat out at Nettlecombe on the 31st; Hemlock Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe crocata*, also by Pat, on the 26th, a *very* early record; Hemlock, *Conium maculatum*, by me, this morning, down at Firepool Weir where it was growing on waste ground close to the Hedgerow Crane's-bill; and a second very early record for Wood Melick, this one by Anne from near Rodney Stoke on the 25th.

We have also had records this week for Wild Strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*, while two more records for Wood Spurge, *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, and three for Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, provide ample evidence – along with the Woodruff and Wood-sedge already mentioned – that spring is galloping along in our woods.

The strangest find of the week for me, though, was on the 29th when I stumbled upon a young tree of Bird Cherry, *Prunus padus*, growing near the River Tone in a strip of rough secondary woodland behind 'Go Outdoors'. I was flabbergasted. And it was blooming nicely too. I was absolutely *convinced* this would be a new monad, and maybe even a new tetrad or hectad. No such luck; a quick look on the BSBI database showed that it had already been recorded, at that very spot, in 2019. *What?* I couldn't *believe* it! Who could possibly have recorded it there? On *my* patch! And then I looked again and saw, to my amazement, that the recorder's name matched my own...

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Week 3, if you're up for it, runs from tomorrow, 2nd April, until next Wednesday 8th April. Five species are carried over from last week, namely:

Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*; Bugle, *Ajuga reptans*; Beaked Hawk's-beard, *Crepis vesicaria*; Red Clover, *Trifolium pratense*; Common Vetch, *Vicia sativa*.

To which we can now add the following ten species:

Barren Brome, *Anisantha sterilis*; Winter-cress, *Barbarea vulgaris*; Greater Pond-sedge, *Carex riparia*; Lesser Swine-cress, *Lepidium didymum* (= *Coronopus didymus*); Early-purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula*; Elder, *Sambucus nigra*; Common Comfrey, *Symphytum officinale*; Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*; Common Nettle, *Urtica dioica*; Wood Speedwell, *Veronica montana*.

Hopefully this gives you a decent range of species to look out for, whether you're out in the sticks or an out-and-out townie. If spring continues advancing at the same pace as it has up until now, we probably ought to have knocked all these off by about the 12th. By which time the swallows will be back.

8th April

Week 3 – summer migrants – Mendip goodies – precocious umbellifers

It's amazing how no sooner than one week ends, the next one begins. There's no let up, is there? A steady flow of emails and WhatsApp messages too. The spread-sheet is proving its worth, all the records neatly stacked and sorted. Without it I'd be in a complete pickle by now.

The warm weather, especially in the last couple of days, has really kept spring rattling along nicely. Not botany, I know, but yesterday several of you reported your first Orange Tips, *Anthocharis cardamines*. (I saw my first this morning when walking out to Roughmoor.) Also yesterday we had our first Small Whites, *Pieris rapae*, here, while two days ago there was a big arrival of Willow Warblers. We had one singing in a neighbour's garden first thing in the morning; then along the River Tone, between Obridge and Creech Castle, I counted at least twenty in full song where two days earlier there'd been none. Several of you have reported Swallows too, suggesting that many summer migrants have been arriving in the last few days, no doubt helped on their way by the southerly breeze.

In spite of the continuing lockdown, 14 of you have submitted records during the week, which is a considerable achievement in the circumstances. It may be different in the countryside, of course, but in town the police are now a much more visible presence, with regular patrols of parks and open spaces to break up any gatherings and to check that no-one's exercising further away from home than strictly necessary. For now, though, we have continued to do our usual daily walks, which means

being out of the house for about an hour-and-a-half. Having a dog seems to help, and it certainly *feels* easier botanising in town when Gilly's trotting along beside me. It's as if a dog provides an immediately obvious explanation for why one might be 'out and about', and so much easier to just say you're walking the dog than having to admit that what you're really doing is searching for flowers on some plant or other.

So, it's been another good week for first flowerings. In all, we made more than 80 records in Week 3, and these included first sightings for more than two-thirds of the target species. But before we get to these, let's have a quick look at some of the species you've found that *weren't* targets. These include a few real rarities, like Spring Cinquefoil, *Potentilla verna*, which was recorded flowering at Black Rock (Cheddar) by Georgina on 31st March – so actually at the end of Week 2 – and Alpine Penny-cress, *Noccaea caerulea*, also found by Georgina, this time at Blackmoor, on the 2nd. And she attached a lovely photo to prove it, too. Such Mendip specialities seem a world away at the moment to those of us holed up in the 'deep south'.

It's also been a week of 'strange umbels', in that we've had some *incredibly* early sightings of three umbellifers (Apiaceae) that one wouldn't expect to see in flower until late June, or even July. Ro saw Wild Parsnip, *Pastinaca sativa*, in flower at Lilstock on the 5th, while Georgina had Rough Chervil, *Chaerophyllum temulum*, at Ubley Drove on the 2nd (both records supported by super photos); and then today, to cap it all, Andrew reported Upright Hedge-parsley, *Torilis japonica*, flowering at Brent Knoll. Extraordinary! Will these prove to be 'one-off' anomalies, I wonder? Certainly, it would be worth keeping an eye out for these species in the coming weeks.

An unusual record of my own, on the 6th, was Subterranean Clover, *Trifolium subterraneum*, several patches of which were flowering in a road verge near the roundabout by the Shell garage on Priory Bridge Road, Taunton. It was growing there with flowering Dove's-foot Crane's-bill, *Geranium molle*, and Scarlet Pimpernel, *Lysimachia* (= *Anagallis*) *arvensis*. Another highlight of the week was Crosswort, *Cruciata laevipes*, seen by Pat at Nettlecombe on the 5th, while she was also able to confirm this week an earlier sighting of Three-nerved Sandwort, *Moehringia trinervia*, on 31st March.

For some species I've been playing 'catch-up' this week, including Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis* (Longrun Meadow) and Goldilocks Buttercup, *Ranunculus auricomus* (Cotlake Hill), both on the 5th, and at last, Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*, on the 6th, in a flower bed on Eastbourne Road, Taunton.

Turning now to the 15 target species for Week 3, the following 11 (names emboldened) were seen by one or more of us, either during the week or, in one or two instances, towards the end of the previous week. Running through them in alphabetical order...

Sycamore, ***Acer pseudoplatanus***, was recorded by David H. on the 1st, at a location 'up north' to such an extent that it was actually just in VC34 apparently. We'll let him have it though, shall we? On the 7th Anne reported Sycamore flowering on Mendip, while I had two trees starting to flower in Taunton, also on the 7th. (Incidentally, Caroline, in Minehead, had her first Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*, flowers on 29th March, and she says that her earliest blossom, like mine, always seems to be on the same tree each year.)

Barren Brome, ***Anisantha sterilis***, was actually seen by Andrew flowering on Brent Knoll last week, on 30th March, while this week we've had three more records for Sweet Vernal-grass, *Anthoxanthum odoratum* – Helena in Paulton, Pat at Nettlecombe, and me in Longrun Meadow, all of them today. Helena has also notched up the first record of flowering Winter-cress, ***Barbarea vulgaris***, on a road verge in Paulton, while interestingly David H. and Andrew both report having seen American Winter-cress, *Barbarea verna*, during the week. *B. verna* is actually quite a scarce plant in Somerset, and an alien, whereas *B. vulgaris* is a widespread native, pretty common through most of the county apart from in the far west. I've seen the latter in bud this week, but not yet in flower...

Chris B. had Greater Pond-sedge, ***Carex riparia***, flowering in the Molly Brook – a tributary of the River Chew – on the 1st, while I had it just starting to flower on the River Tone in Taunton on the 5th. (Pendulous Sedge, *Carex pendula*, by the way, is now flowering in many places in the Taunton area, although it has yet to be reported from other parts of the county.)

I saw a just-opening 'capitulum' of Beaked Hawk's-beard, ***Crepis vesicaria***, in Taunton today, along with flowering Lesser Swine-cress, ***Lepidium didymum***. Both of these I'd happily swap, however, for the

Early-purple Orchids, ***Orchis mascula***, seen this week – by Chris L. on the 2nd at Langford Budville, by Pat at Nettlecombe on the 5th, and by Hilary on Hutton Hill (near Weston-super-Mare) on the 7th. Linda's Early-purple Orchids were *in bud* in woodland below Wellington Monument on the 7th, so will surely be blooming there by the middle of Week 4. (She also saw Wood Sorrel, *Oxalis acetosella*, on the 7th. Has anyone else seen this in flower yet?)

Red Clover, ***Trifolium pratense***, is starting to make its presence felt, with records of it flowering on the 2nd and 5th in Taunton (me) and on the 7th in Wellington (Linda). Common Nettle, ***Urtica dioica***, has also made its first appearance this week, being seen flowering in Taunton today (me).

And finally a couple of 'V's – Wood Speedwell, ***Veronica montana***, which was seen by Anne at Hill Lane (Mendip) on the 2nd, and by Andrew on Brent Knoll today. And while Andrew was busy racking up first-flowerers on Brent Knoll – lucky sod – I was scuffling about the not-so-salubrious verges of Taunton, with dog by my side, where as well as Beaked Hawk's-beard, Lesser Swine-cress and Common Nettle I also spotted a single but very 'showy' flower of Common Vetch, ***Vicia sativa***. The plant was growing on the grassy bank beside Tangier car-park, just a stone's throw from Riverside Chambers, where Natural England used to have its local HQ, and where I spent many a long year filling in spread-sheets, writing reports and generally keeping my nose clean.

Those were the days...

* * *

Right, here we go again—Week 4. First, we have four species carried over from last week, namely:

Bugle, *Ajuga reptans*; Elder, *Sambucus nigra*; Common Comfrey, *Symphytum officinale*; Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*.

To which we can now add the following 12 species:

Greater Celandine, *Chelidonium majus*; Cut-leaved Crane's-bill, *Geranium dissectum*; Cat's-ear, *Hypochaeris radicata*; Ox-eye Daisy, *Leucanthemum vulgare*; Bird's-foot-trefoil, *Lotus corniculatus*; Smooth/Spreading Meadow-grass, *Poa pratensis/humilis*; Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*; Salad-burnet, *Poterium sanguisorba*; Broad-leaved Dock, *Rumex obtusifolius*; Procumbent Pearlwort, *Sagina procumbens*; Sanicle, *Sanicula europaea*; Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*.

As last week, this should give you a decent range of species to watch out for in your local patch, whether that's the back garden or slightly further afield while taking your permitted exercise – with or without a dog! You'll see that I've included Ox-eye Daisy, even though on road verges in Taunton it's been flowering – much like Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium* and Cock's-foot, *Dactylis glomerata* – since the start of the year. It would be good, though, to see if we can get a date for it away from road verges, i.e. in 'proper' grassland.



Bluebells, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, Thurlbear Wood
16/04/2020 ©Maureen Webb

15th April

Week 4 – Tim Dee's Greenery – woodruff at Thurlbear – whitethroats – unseasonal betony

This morning I took delivery of *Greenery: Journeys in Springtime*, a new book by Tim Dee. If you haven't read anything by Tim Dee, he's well worth a try. His latest book is a fitting accompaniment to what we're trying to capture about *this* spring, the spring of 2020, in our own particular neck of the woods. Tim Dee resides for much of each year in Bristol, and his parents live in Minehead. So our own neck of the woods is his, too. You'll find references in *Greenery* to many familiar places—Dunkery Beacon, Horner Wood, Dolebury Warren, Black Down, Burrington Combe, and Ham Wall—as well as to many *less*

familiar, in East Anglia, Africa and Scandinavia, for example. It's a book about places, yes, but it's also a book about life and death, about happy coincidences, about loss and longing. About spring, but also about the *meaning* of spring.

My own week has included several highlights, not all of them botanical, but the best of the lot came on Bank Holiday Monday when Ben persuaded me to 'break cover' and dare to head out of town to Thurlbear Wood. In the car it took us nine minutes to get there, and seven to get back—being downhill on the return leg—so it was, I admit, *marginally* further away from home than the five-minute 'rule' for how far you can drive to reach a place for purposes of taking your daily exercise. It was strange to be sitting in a car again—my first trip out on four wheels in almost a month—and when we reached the wood I felt slightly light-headed, woozy. The wide open spaces seemed to me to be somehow *wider* than I remembered them, the lush greenery seemed *greener* and *lusher* than I had anticipated. The Bluebells, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, carpeting the woodland floor, were somehow *bluer*—but the star-bursts of Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*, lining the paths were just as I was expecting them to be. We walked in the woods for about an hour, Gilly having a field day with sticks, me having a field day with flowers. We met one other person up there, so social distancing was a doddle. I think it may have been the Bluebells, but I got a bit emotional; and it was a reminder, if I needed it, to never take a place like this for granted ever again.

So, spring continues its glorious gallop towards summer, a fact reflected over and over again in this week's batch of FFDs. Of course, the weather helps, doesn't it? It's been a dry week, and for the most part remarkably sunny and warm; here in Taunton we had four days in a row—Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday—with temperatures above 23°C. By my reckoning, it was the warmest, and sunniest, Easter weekend for at least a quarter of a century. And while the sunshine has continued, the last couple of clear nights have produced grass frosts, even here in the middle of Taunton.

Let's begin, like last week, with a few *non*-botanical happenings. It's been another good week for butterflies: Orange Tips, *Anthocharis cardamines*, all over the place, plus our first Green-veined Whites, *Pieris napi*, on the 9th, Speckled Woods, *Pararge aegeria*, on the 10th, and then this morning (15th) the first Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*, of the year. Flower bees, *Anthophora plumipes*, and Bee-flies,

Bombylus major, continue to patrol the Lungwort, *Pulmonaria officinalis*, and Primroses, *Primula vulgaris*, in the back garden, while Mason Bees, *Osmia* sp., emerged about a week ago and are busy around the 'bee boxes'. We've also noticed large numbers of mining bees (not sure which species) nesting on areas of bare, dry soil. Many such areas seem to be far less disturbed/trampled than usual, so this could prove to be an excellent year for mining bees.

On the bird front, last week's 'fall' of Willow Warblers proved to be a transient affair; no sooner had they arrived than they left again, and I haven't heard one since. But other summer visitors have taken their place. On the 10th, Sand Martins were back at their little colony beneath a road bridge at Creech Castle, Taunton—their nest-sites situated in drain pipes set into a concrete retaining wall. Then today Vicki had House Martins down near the cricket ground, while I enjoyed ten minutes listening to my first Whitethroat, singing lustily from a hedgerow on the northern flank of Cotlake Hill, Trull. Whitethroats make me smile. They seem to take everything terribly seriously, and get so easily agitated.

Turning now to botany, it's been another bumper week for first flowerings. Very many thanks, once again, to everyone for sending in their records. During Week 4 we made, between us, more than 130 records involving at least 75 species. And who would have anticipated that this week's offering would include rarities such as Petty Whin, *Genista anglica* (Langford Heathfield, on the 14th, seen by Chris L.), Soft-leaved Sedge, *Carex montana* (Ubley Warren, on the 8th, Georgina), and Green-winged Orchid, *Anacamptis morio* (Stoke Camp, Mendip, on the 10th, seen by Georgina's niece, with a pin-sharp WhatsApp photo to prove it)?

This week we had 16 target species to look out for, four of them carried over from Week 3. Between us, we saw 11 of them during the week. Here's a summary, in (roughly) alphabetical order...

The first report of Bugle, *Ajuga reptans*, was on the 5th. It came from Libby, who saw it in her garden—the proper wild plant, not a garden variety—but then she realised that it shouldn't really count because she doesn't live in Somerset. The first records for Somerset *sensu stricto* came a few days later, when Margaret saw it at Winford on the 12th, and then it was seen at Thurlbear (me) and near Wellington (Linda) on the 13th.

I have still not seen Greater Celandine, *Chelidonium majus*, flowering in Taunton – although my chances have diminished significantly as a result of Vicki's enthusiastic weeding of the back path (a former stronghold for it) over Easter weekend. However, Linda produced a photo of it in flower which she'd taken in Wellington on 21st March – a very early date for it – while Alastair saw it flowering in Minehead a few days later, on the 25th. The only person to see it coming into flower during Week 4 was Andrew, who recorded it in Brent Knoll village on the 9th.

And now for a few grassland species. I had my first Cat's-ear, *Hypochaeris radicata*, on the 14th, in a front garden on South Road, while two of you recorded Bird's-foot-trefoil, *Lotus corniculatus*, this week – Andrew at Cross Quarry on the 12th, and Hilary at Bleadon Hill on the 13th. No doubt others will follow in the days ahead. Smooth/Spreading Meadow-grass, *Poa pratensis/humilis*, was noted on Taunton road verges for the first time on the 14th, while Salad-burnet, *Poterium sanguisorba*, was one of a whole clutch of first-flowerers up at Thurlbear on the 13th, although Andrew had already seen it flowering on Brent Knoll on the 10th.

Broad-leaved Dock, *Rumex obtusifolius*, and Common Comfrey, *Symphytum officinale*, were both found *just* starting to flower in Taunton, by the River Tone, on the 11th. The comfrey was more than three weeks later than last year's FFD, possibly delayed due to high river levels and flooding in February and early March. Other early-flowering comfrees reported during the week included White Comfrey, *S. orientale*, and Creeping Comfrey, *S. grandiflorum*.

Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, was seen in Henlade on the 12th, my third earliest FFD for this species in the last twelve years. Pat also had it on the 12th, at Nettlecombe, while Andrew saw it on the 14th, at Brent Knoll. Sanicle, *Sanicula europaea*, also recorded its third-earliest FFD, being about three weeks earlier than the average FFD for the last decade in the Taunton area. Helena and Jim were the first to spot it, 'up north' at Chewton Wood on the 12th; this was followed in the next three days by records from Nettlecombe (Pat), Langford Heathfield (Chris L.), Thurlbear (me) and Postlebury (Gill).

Lastly, Anne recorded Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*, at Hill Lane, Mendip, on the 9th, while Pat had it at Nettlecombe on the 14th.

Of the target species from earlier weeks, you have been sending in lots of records this week for the

likes of Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*, Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*, Sweet Vernal-grass, *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, Pendulous Sedge, *Carex pendula*, Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*, Yellow Archangel, *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum*, and Wood Speedwell, *Veronica montana*. But the species with the most records, by a country mile, was Early-purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula*, with reports of it from Gill (Postlebury, 10th), Anne (Littlestoke, 10th), Georgina (Long Wood, Mendip, 11th), Helena and Jim (Chewton Wood, 12th), me (Thurlbear, 13th), Linda (Wellington, 13th), and Pat (Nettlecombe, 14th).



Early-purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula*, Chewton Wood
12/04/20 ©Helena Crouch

While on the subject of orchids, two of us – me and Chris L. – recorded Common Twayblade, *Neottia ovata*, in flower on the 14th. This compares with an average FFD over the last 12 years of 4th May, and Walter Watson's date from the 1930s of 23rd May. Grey Sedge, *Carex divulsa*, was seen by me in Trull this morning (15th), the earliest FFD for this species in the last decade, and (like Common Twayblade) more than five weeks earlier than in Watson's time.

We've had several notable records of summer-flowering species 'getting ahead of themselves', so to speak. The most extraordinary, surely, has to be Linda's record of Betony, *Betonica officinalis*, which

she found on the 13th near Wellington. To put her date into some sort of context, Watson's average FFD for Betony in the 1930s was 9th July, while my own average for the decade 2008-17 was 5th July. The earliest FFD in the last 12 years was 6th June. Almost as surprising was Andrew's report of Fairy-flax, *Linum catharticum*, on the 12th at Cross Quarry – a species that usually doesn't start flowering until mid-May. Alastair's Common Ragwort, *Jacobaea vulgaris*, and Pat's Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota*, also seem to be in the same category; although some species, and maybe Common Ragwort is a good example, can sometimes continue flowering right through the winter, such that early flowering in the spring is perhaps best viewed as being exceptionally late flowering from the previous summer – since the flowers often continue to appear on the previous year's shoots.

You recorded a number of other species during the week that are, broadly speaking, probably flowering at about the right time, but which weren't on the target list due to a paucity of data from previous years – usually because they occur only very infrequently (or not at all) in the Taunton area. These included Lousewort, *Pedicularis sylvatica*, Heath Milkwort, *Polygala serpyllifolia*, Pill Sedge, *Carex pilulifera*, and Flea Sedge, *C. pulicaris*, all recorded flowering by Chris L. at Langford Heathfield on the 14th, and Bitter-vetch, *Lathyrus linifolius*, seen by both Chris L. on the 14th at Langford Heathfield, and by Linda on the 13th, on a lane bank near Wellington. Also Thin-spiked Wood-sedge, *Carex strigosa*, seen by Gill on the 10th at Postlebury, and by Chris L. on the 14th at you-know-where. And lastly, as a follow-up to Linda's Wood-sorrel, *Oxalis acetosella*, on the 7th, there were two more records of it during the week, both of them 'up north': at Charterhouse (Georgina, on the 10th), and at Postlebury (Gill, on the 15th).

Oh yes, and Pedunculate Oak, *Quercus robur*, was recorded coming into flower during the week too, the first records being from Chris B. by the River Chew on the 10th and from Steve in North Petherton on the 11th. My own date this year was Easter Day, the 12th, in Ruishton and Henlade. It's not a species I routinely record – heaven knows why not – but the dates I *do* have for it suggest very little variation from year to year, the FFDs normally falling (like this year) between 10th and 20th April.

Right, that's it: I've run out of steam, and need to get to bed. Apologies to anyone whose records should have been mentioned, but weren't – like Andrew's

Buck's-horn Plantain, *Plantago coronopus*, and Common Milkwort, *Polygala vulgaris*, Alastair's White Ramping-fumitory, *Fumaria capreolata*, Margaret's Soft-brome, *Bromus hordeaceus*, my own Yellow Oat-grass, *Trisetum flavescens*, etc, etc...

* * *

Shall we see if we can keep this up for another week? In which case, there are five species to be carried over from last week, namely:

Cut-leaved Crane's-bill, *Geranium dissectum*; Ox-eye Daisy, *Leucanthemum vulgare*; Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*; Procumbent Pearlwort, *Sagina procumbens*; Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*.

To which we can add the following ten species:

Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*; Black Mustard, *Brassica nigra*; Carnation Sedge, *Carex panicea*; Pignut, *Conopodium majus*; Dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*; Spindle, *Euonymus europeus*; Yellow Pimpernel, *Lysimachia nemorum*; Sorrel, *Rumex acetosa*; White Clover, *Trifolium repens*; Guelder-rose, *Viburnum opulus*.

Please look after yourselves, stay safe, and I hope you all have a good week. Only another fortnight and the Swifts will be back.

22nd April

Week 5 – more Greenery – two seasons or four? – St Mark's flies - pignut

This was the week when someone, maybe flagging just a little, asked the question: how long, exactly, is this first-flowering malarkey going to go on for? Until the end of spring, perhaps? Well, yes. Certainly let's try to keep going until the end of spring. But what exactly *is* spring? And how can its end be best determined? Meteorologists keep it simple – four seasons, each one precisely three months long. For the weather-watcher, then, spring neatly starts, without fail, on the first day of March, then carries on until the last day of May. Come June, come summer! The rest of us do something similar, but using equinoxes and solstices as our seasonal dividers; so the *start* of spring coincides with the spring equinox, while the summer solstice marks its ending.

Tim Dee, on the other hand, suggests in *Greenery* (p. 9) that the year may be more fittingly divided into *two* seasons rather than *four*...

"But I see, and have always seen, the year in two halves. I feel it like that: a coming, spring, and a going, autumn; six months forward before six months back, six months up before six down, six months of lengthening days before six of longer nights, six greening months before six browning, six growing before six dying; in autumn things fall apart, in spring things come together ..."

Viewed this way, it's not that summer and winter don't exist, exactly, but that they represent moments of *overlap* between spring and autumn. So 'summer' becomes the time when spring overlaps with autumn, while 'winter' is when autumn overlaps with spring. Maybe that's why we so happily, and productively, begin our search for the 'first signs of *spring*' in the depths of *winter*. Equally, though less obviously, why we might discern the *last* signs of spring at the back end of *summer*, even though our chatter then is all about 'mists and mellow fruitfulness', and the garden, each morning, is slung with spiders' webs.

If anything speaks of springtime it's surely 'first flowerings', yet there are hosts of plants that don't start to bloom until long after the summer solstice, by which time many others are – to use Dee's terminology—'on their way down'. So, perhaps we should stretch our notion of spring in both directions, not only by beginning it around Christmas-time with the first flowering of, say, Spurge-laurel, *Daphne laureola*, but also by not ending it until about the second week of September when Ivy, *Hedera helix*, begins to blossom. Which means we can keep going for another four to five months if we want to...

Week 5 then: another dry, sunny week, except for Friday and Saturday which were grey, chilly, damp and, in Taunton at least, intermittently drenching. One of the stranger aspects of the last five weeks of Coronavirus lockdown has been how for almost all of this time we've been bathed in warm sunshine. It pains me to say it, but *never* has there been such a perfect start to a cricket season, weather-wise. It's just the complete lack of cricket that's the problem. Friday, on the other hand, felt like a *throwback* to another life, a day sitting in the pavilion watching covers being removed and replaced, removed and replaced, without a single ball bowled; a time for 'business as usual', reminding us—just for a day—of a pre-virus world marked by endless rain, rivers full to bursting, ground saturated, mud everywhere. Who would have guessed that we might hanker after such days, before the pause button was

pressed, before the weather changed and everything else changed with it? Anyway, yes, it's been another mainly dry, fine week—and, it has to be said, another truly remarkable week for first flowerings too.

First, though, a nod to things *non*-botanical. Vicki and I had our first Swallow on the 16th, then on the 17th we heard newly-arrived Reed Warblers—several of them—*chug-chug-chugging* from riverside bramble patches between Obridge and Creech Castle, in the reed-beds and willow scrub behind B&Q, then on the 19th from the little patch of reeds around Roughmoor pond. No Sedge Warblers yet³, which seem to have declined in this area as the Reed Warblers have increased. Still much activity amongst the solitary bees, while Eve says in her area St Mark's flies, *Bibio marci*, have been in evidence in the last few days. On the 21st Vicki and I spotted our first dragonfly: a Southern Hawker, *Aeshna cyanea*, patrolling the herbage bordering the footpath through Orchard Wood—the place where, three weekends ago, we were due to hold our first field meeting of the year. My old dragonfly book suggests *A. cyanea* should be on the wing mid-June to mid-October, while the British Dragonfly Society website suggests May onwards. So, is 21st April especially early for it, does anyone know? A sign, perhaps, that not only wild flowers are quick to respond to such 'unseasonal' weather.

This week, Week 5, 21 of you including two friends of Caroline's, Ruth and Sue L., contributed more than 130 records involving 96 species. We had 15 target species to look out for, 10 new ones and five rolled over from Week 4. Many of these were species of more open habitats, so it felt like we were finally emerging from beneath the trees. Early spring involves a lot of rooting around on the forest floor, but most woodland herbs have now been ticked off, and indeed many—like Moschatel, *Adoxa moschatellina*, Wood Anemone, *Anemone nemorosa* and Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*—are already at or well past their peak of flowering.

Of the 15 target species, only Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*, White Clover, *Trifolium repens*, Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*, and Guelder-rose, *Viburnum opulus*, have evaded us this week. Here's a summary of the 11 we *did* see, arranged, as usual, in (roughly) alphabetical order, with various others getting a mention here and there...

³ I didn't see one all year!

Black Mustard, *Brassica nigra*, was seen by me coming into flower on the bank of the River Tone at Creech Castle on the 19th, but the more remarkable riverside find was the next day when Vicki and I witnessed the first fully-open flowers of Yellow Iris, *Iris pseudacorus*. The only sedge on this week's list was Carnation Sedge, *Carex panicea*, recorded by Chris L. on the 20th at Langford Heathfield (with Pale Dog-violet, *Viola lactea*, and/or possibly the hybrid between *lactea* and Common Dog-violet, *V. riviniana*). But other sedges seen for the first time this week included Hairy Sedge, *Carex hirta*, at Longrun Meadow on the 18th, and two records of Greater Tussock-sedge, *Carex paniculata* from VC6, one by Steve on a work trip to Shapwick. (And there's Starved Wood-sedge, *C. depauperata*, in my garden – but that probably shouldn't count, should it?)

Other 'C' species included the first records of Pignut, *Conopodium majus*, seen by Linda near Wellington Monument on the 21st, and Sue L. near Selworthy on the same day. We also had second sightings for Rough Chervil, *Chaerophyllum temulum*, by David H. on Tickenham Hill on the 19th, while Steve had Hemlock, *Conium maculatum*, in North Petherton, also on the 19th.

Turning to shrubs... On the 16th Andrew spied flowering Dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*, in Burnham-on-Sea, while Vicki and I notched up Spindle, *Euonymus europeaus*, today, at Roughmoor. More of you are now reporting Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, including Ro in Lilstock and Steve in North Petherton. Elder is one of a number of white-flowered shrubs/small trees—others include Blackthorn, *Prunus spinosa*, Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*, Wayfaring-tree, *Viburnum lantana*, Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia* etc.—that seem to be flowering earlier now than they did, say, 50 years ago. I see that neither Elder nor Rowan are mentioned in the Ladybird book '*What to look for in spring*', illustrated by Charles Tunnicliffe; instead they're featured in the companion '*... summer*' volume, published in 1960, with the telling comment that Elder blossom "... most distinctly speak[s] of June and midsummer..." Not any more, it doesn't! (Although it may still do in other parts of the country, of course.)

Cut-leaved Crane's-bill, *Geranium dissectum*, has been recorded beginning to flower this week on grassy banks, verges and arable field margins: the first sighting of it was on the 19th in Trull (me), then on the 20th in Middle Street (Andrew), and the 21st in

Wellington (Linda). The plea for records of ‘proper’ Oxeye-daisy, *Leucanthemum vulgare*, was answered by Ro on the 15th (Nether Stowey), me on the 19th (Taunton, various places), and Alastair on the 21st (Hurlstone). Back beneath the trees, Yellow Pimpernel, *Lysimachia nemorum*, was spotted by two of you on the same day, the 20th: by Linda, in Wellington, and by Gill at Postlebury. I think Gill’s was probably first, though, as she’s usually tramping around her patch while the rest of us are still fast asleep.

Docks aren’t especially eye-catching, they’re easily overlooked and do little to raise the pulse. Nevertheless, several of us have turned up Sorrel, *Rumex acetosa*, this week: Andrew and me on the 16th, in Burnham-on-Sea and Taunton respectively, closely followed by Margaret on the 20th in Winford, and Hilary on the 22nd at Uphill (where she also saw Green-winged Orchid, *Anacamptis morio*, and picked up a second very early record for flowering Betony, *Betonica officinalis*). We’ve also had a couple of other docks, Clustered Dock, *R. conglomeratus*, and Wood Dock, *R. sanguineus*, coming into flower this week, both on the 18th in Taunton, and surprisingly early—certainly the earliest recorded FFDs for these in at least the last twelve years.



Herb-Paris, *Paris quadrifolia*, Harptree Combe 14/04/20
©Chris Billinghamurst

Procumbent Pearlwort, *Sagina procumbens*, has now started flowering in many parts of the county, including Minehead on the 15th (Caroline), Taunton on the 17th (me), Wellington on the 21st (Linda) and Burnham, also on the 21st (Andrew). An exciting discovery was Sea Pearlwort, *Sagina maritima*, on the 22nd, growing on the verge of the A38 in Taunton. Exciting, not because it was flowering, but because this appears to be the first record of it for the Taunton area. It was growing with Common Stork’s-bill, *Erodium cicutarium*, Sea Fern-grass,

Catapodium marinum, and large numbers of tiny plants of (flowering) Bird’s-foot Clover, *Trifolium ornithopodioides* – the last was a big surprise, being only the second inland locality for it in VC5. (Also, while we’re on the subject of clovers... Another of this week’s highlights, for me, was a healthy colony of now-flowering Least Trefoil, *T. micranthum*, within spitting distance of the Subterranean Clover, *T. subterraneum*, found a couple of weeks ago. But, amazingly, still no Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*, in this corner of the county.)

Last but not least, I can report that Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*, was in full blossom in Taunton on the 17th, in the ‘children’s wood’ by the River Tone. Helena says that in the ‘far north’ many species seem to be behind in their flowering, but she reports that her garden Rowan is in full blossom.

Other highlights this week have included FFDs for (the highly photogenic) Herb-Paris, *Paris quadrifolia*, in Harptree Combe on the 14th (Chris B.) and at Long Wood, Mendip, on the 21st (Georgina), and Purple Gromwell, *Aegonychon purpureocaeruleum* (= *Lithospermum*), on the 18th (Anne). Liz had flowering Blinks, *Montia fontana*, in two flower pots in Wedmore. In the far west of the county Alastair recorded Sheep’s-bit, *Jasione montana*, at Hurlstone on the 21st, and Grass-vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*, at Minehead on the 20th. Amongst my own ‘earliest yet’ FFDs were Wood Millet, *Milium effusum*, at Thurlbear on the 16th and Hairy Tare, *Ervilia hirsuta* (= *Vicia*), in Longrun Meadow on the 22nd. Meanwhile, up at Portishead on the 17th, David H. spied an unusually early Brooklime, *Veronica beccabunga*. More mundanely, we have two reports of (the easily ignored) Rough Meadow-grass, *Poa trivialis*, in flower this week – in Taunton and North Petherton.

Apologies to anyone whose records I should have mentioned, but the night is no longer young and neither am I.

* * *

And on to Week 6. There are four species to be carried over from last week, namely:

Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*; Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*; White Clover, *Trifolium repens*; Guelder-rose, *Viburnum opulus*.

To which we can now add the following twenty species:

Wetted Thistle, *Carduus crispus* (= *acanthoides*); Fern-grass, *Catapodium rigidum*; Remote Sedge,

Carex remota; Crested Dog's-tail, *Cynossurus cristatus*; Broad-leaved Willowherb, *Epilobium montanum*; Yorkshire Fog, *Holcus lanatus*; Rye-grass, *Lolium perenne*; Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*; Water-cress, *Nasturtium officinale* (agg.); Silverweed, *Potentilla anserina*; Celery-leaved Buttercup, *Ranunculus sceleratus*; Dog-rose, *Rosa canina* (agg.); Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus* (agg.); Curled Dock, *Rumex crispus*; Annual Pearlwort, *Sagina apetala/filicaulis*; Wild Clary, *Salvia verbenaca*; White Stonecrop, *Sedum album*; White Campion, *Silene latifolia*; Black Bryony, *Tamus communis*; Heath Speedwell, *Veronica officinalis*.

29th April

Week 6 – The delights of kerb-crawling – seaside plants in unlikely places – swifts & cuckoos – Fred's sedges & personal bests...

When I'm kerb-crawling I always think of Clive. I mean this, of course, in the nicest way possible. He and I share, along with many others in the group, a particular fondness for road-verge botanising, and this week I've been reflecting on why this might be so. It may have something to do with the lure of the unexpected. Absolutely *anything* can pop up on the kerbside, so you never quite know what you might come across next. It could be a scarce alien, like the (flowering) plants of Annual Toadflax, *Linaria maroccana*, I stumbled upon a couple of weeks ago on the edge of Canal Road, near the site of Taunton's old livestock market – only the third record for this species in VC5 this century. Or what about the Woolly Clover, *Trifolium tomentosum*, found last year, and again this, on the cut-and-scalped verge outside Wickes?

Aliens are all well and good, but often it's roadside *coastal* plants that generate the greater excitement. This week's offering (after last week's Sea Fern-grass, *Catapodium marinum*, Sea Pearlwort, *Sagina maritima*, and Bird's-foot Clover, *Trifolium ornithopodioides*) has included (fruiting) Sea Stork's-bill, *Erodium maritimum*, on Trenchard Way—the new road on the south side of Taunton railway station—and Lesser Chickweed, *Stellaria pallida*, a sand dune annual masquerading as a pavement weed in Bridge Street near the wholefood shop. Botanically, these verges often have a distinctly maritime feel to their flora; so if, like me, you're an inland dweller desperate for a whiff of sea air, a stroll along a (relatively) deserted highway could be the answer. You can't go to the seaside, so why not

investigate your local road verge and see if the seaside's come to you?

Still on verges, several of you are noticing that flowery roadsides have (so far) escaped their usual 'spring cut'. Not so in Taunton, where the mowing gangs—and gang mowers—have been much in evidence this week; frustrating, I agree, if the plants you were willing into flower end up decapitated before their time, but a pleasing sight, for Clive and me at least, since many of the little annuals in these places—Knotted Hedge-parsley, *Torilis nodosa*, and Small-flowered Buttercup, *Ranunculus parviflorus*, for example—seem to thrive on a regular close shave; plus, ideally, a combination of spring/summer drought and a pinch of de-icing salt in winter.

Week 6. Another dry, warm week, until a late hiccup of rain yesterday and today which, in a parallel universe, annoyingly led to the final day of the championship match between Somerset and Hampshire being a wash-out. It would have fizzled out as a draw, probably. In *this* universe, Steve spotted his first Swifts while clapping for carers in North Petherton on the 23rd. Maureen, who lives in Priorswood—a real hotspot for breeding Swifts—had two flying over her house on the 25th, while we heard high-altitude 'screamers' on two evenings, the 24th and 27th, but despite much sky-scanning we have yet to actually *see* them. Anyway, the main thing is: THEY'RE BACK! Which, as Ted Hughes says, "... means the globe's still working, the creation's / still waking refreshed, our summer's / still all to come ..."

Summer migrants to touch down this week included Lesser Whitethroats (Eve's on the 26th, mine on the 27th) and Cuckoos (Eve, in Mendip, on the 24th; Maureen, on Cothelstone Hill, on the 25th). Still no Sedge Warblers though. And as for Tree Pipits, Pied Flycatchers, Redstarts and Wood Warblers; well, for those of us unable to visit wooded combs on Exmoor or the Quantocks, these birds are the stuff of dreams...

Turning now to 'first flowerings', it is interesting to see how varied FFDs are from different parts of the county. Several of you have noted how onset of flowering is affected by altitude, distance from the coast, aspect, etc. As Ellen and Eve will testify, anyone high up on a north-facing slope a long way from the sea should expect to be perhaps two to three weeks behind the rest of us. Even in the 'deep south', this is the case. The moment of 'peak bluebell' at Thurlbear Wood (80-90 metres a.s.l.)

was about 10 days ago, but at Cothelstone Hill (250 metres a.s.l.) they've only just begun to look their best, with the peak probably still a few days away. It is noteworthy, though, that since the middle of March *everyone* has seen *something* in flower before anyone else—even those who feel that they're generally trotting along about two weeks behind the rest of us.

This week, the sixth since lockdown, was another exceptional week for first flowerings, with seventeen of you contributing more than 110 records involving 86 species. Our target list for Week 6 comprised 24 species, of which 14 were seen and 10 weren't. Here's a summary of the 14 we *did* see, arranged, as usual, in roughly alphabetical order, with others of particular interest getting an honourable mention in passing...

Starting with the 'C's... Welled Thistle, *Carduus crispus*, was just starting to flower near Roughmoor on the 28th, where it grows in a scrum of tall herbage on the banks of the River Tone. Remote Sedge, *Carex remota*, is yet to start flowering in Taunton, but Andrew had it in Brent Knoll churchyard on the 21st. Other sedges have been widely noted, and it's been a good week, especially, for Grey Sedge, *C. divulsa*: Steve had it in North Petherton on the 23rd, while Caroline, also on the 23rd, saw it flowering in Alcombe, followed by Dee in St Mary's churchyard, and Liz in Wedmore, on the 25th.

Following my (bracketed) mention of back-garden Starved Wood-sedge, *Carex depauperata*, Fred—from his tiny enclave of would-be Somerset within a region otherwise known, apparently, as Hampshire—reports no fewer than 18 species (or hybrids) flowering in his sedge collection. Many are northern 'exotica' that aren't found in Somerset, and, frankly, shouldn't really be in Hampshire either, like Fibrous Tussock-sedge, *Carex appropinquata*, String Sedge, *C. chordorrhiza*, Bird's-foot Sedge, *C. ornithopoda* and Sheathed Sedge, *C. vaginata*. Not to mention a Lady's-slipper, *Cypripedium*, called 'Hank Small'. On the 23rd, he saw Yellow Pimpernel, *Lysimachia nemorum*, and Marsh Valerian, *Valeriana dioica*, in a nearby local nature reserve. Talking of which... Back in Somerset proper, Gill encountered Marsh Valerian on the 28th at Postlebury. A really interesting 'first', this one, as it's probably not something many of us are likely to come across on our home patches. It's certainly not on mine.

Returning to 'C', the large form of Fern-grass, *Catapodium rigidum*, subsp. *majus*, was found

flowering as a pavement weed on Holway Avenue, Taunton, on the 26th. It had been 'in bud' for about 10 days, and then suddenly—overnight—the yellow anthers emerged. These made the whole inflorescence look 'gritty', as if it had become covered with minuscule sand grains.

Moving on to 'E'. Just the one this week, Broad-leaved Willowherb, *Epilobium montanum*, which was seen by Steve in North Petherton on the 20th, in Week 5, but its identity wasn't confirmed until the start of Week 6. I had it in Taunton, another pavement weed, on the 26th. Then there's a couple of grasses. Yorkshire Fog, *Holcus lanatus*, was seen in Taunton on the 26th and by Linda in Wellington on the 27th, while on the 25th Andrew had Rye-grass, *Lolium perenne*, on Brent Knoll. Within a week or so it'll probably be everywhere.

We did well with the 'P's: we had two to find and we found them both. Graham L. recorded first flowers of Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*, on the 23rd, and close-up examination of the hairs on the leaves identified his plants as subsp. *euronota* (described in 'Sell & Murrell', but not in 'Stace'). Andrew also saw it on the 23rd, at Uphill, Dee had it in Clevedon on the 24th, Linda in Wellington on the 25th, and finally, *finally*, I saw it just coming into flower at Thurlbear on the 27th. Silverweed, *Potentilla anserina*, was spotted by Andrew in a lay-by at Webbington, while Linda saw it in Wellington, both on the 25th. Helena, also on the 25th, dashed past it while on a two-mile run with her daughter Jenny. Doubtless spurred on by the Silverweed, Helena notched up a new 'personal best' of 20 minutes 45 seconds.

We did even better with the 'R's. Two of you reported Celery-leaved Buttercup, *Ranunculus sceleratus*: Andrew in Brent Knoll village on the 19th (so actually in Week 5), and Liz in Wedmore on the 28th. Dog-rose, *Rosa canina* (agg.), was flowering at Roughmoor on the 28th, and at Obridge on the 29th. I anticipate a flood of Dog-rose records during Week 7. The first Curled Dock, *Rumex crispus*, was on the 24th, in Taunton, although Graham or Clive might well have determined it as a 'probable hybrid'. But as it was me determining it, this simplified things enormously.

One species I thought we wouldn't get this week was Wild Clary, *Salvia verbenaca*. Certainly, its sites around Taunton are all too distant or difficult to get at easily. Anyway, I needn't have fretted, as Andrew turned it up on his visit to Uphill on the 23rd – along

with Honewort, *Trinia glauca*: another of those Mendip specialities that, to me, feel like the half-forgotten inhabitants of a former world, one where Somerset would doubtless have trounced Hampshire within three days...

White Clover, *Trifolium repens*, on the other hand, is a plant we can *all* relate to, and one we're all bound to get sooner or later. Probably sooner, since Andrew and I both had it on the 24th—me near Taunton railway station, and Andrew on Brent Knoll. Four days later it was coming into flower more widely in Taunton, including in Longrun Meadow.

And finally, our 'V' of the week was Guelder-rose, *Viburnum opulus*, reported from Bossington by Caroline's friend Ruth on the 21st, Brent Knoll churchyard on the 24th (Andrew) and Roughmoor on the 28th (me).

Amongst the other more interesting FFDs this week: Kidney-vetch, *Anthyllis vulneraria*, at Uphill on the 23rd (Andrew); Lesser Pond-sedge, *Carex acutiformis*, and Oval Sedge, *C. leporina*, at Wedmore on the 28th and 27th respectively (Liz); a second FFD for Crosswort, *Cruciata laevipes*, this time at Ubley Warren on the 23rd (Georgina); Swine-cress, *Lepidium coronopus*, in Trull on the 25th (me), and Wedmore on the 28th (Liz); Ivy Broomrape, *Orobanche hederæ*, in Clevedon on the 23rd (Dee); Lousewort, *Pedicularis sylvatica*, at GB Gruffy nature reserve on the 26th (Georgina), and near Wellington on the 27th (Linda, with Tormentil, *Potentilla erecta*); Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*, at Uphill on the 23rd (Andrew); Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*, at Rew Mead nature reserve, near Wellington, on the 25th (Linda); Salsify, *Tragopogon porrifolius*, in North Petherton on the 23rd (Steve); a second record of Brooklime, *Veronica beccabunga*, this time at Nettlecombe on the 29th (Pat); a second record for Yellow Flag, *Iris pseudacorus*, near Wellington on the 25th (Linda); and lastly, Biting Stonecrop, *Sedum acre*, on Priory Bridge Road, Taunton, on the 24th — that's almost four weeks earlier than my previous-earliest FFD for it, and more than six weeks earlier than Walter Watson's FFD in the 1920s/30s.

Contender for the strangest find of the week, though, was a *Camassia*, a single plant of which was discovered in a field/wood-border in Trull. I'm hopeless on garden plants, so didn't have a clue what it was, but a WhatsApp photo pinged across to Helena produced an immediate response. The key in the *European Garden Flora* indicated that the Trull plant was most probably *C. leichtletii*, rather than

C. quamash which curiously is the only *Camassia* species mentioned in 'Stace'. Many thanks to Helena for sorting this one out. It's a beautiful plant, so worth googling if you don't know it.



Camassia leichtletii, field wood border Trull 25/04/2020
©Simon Leach

Other than that, I've been playing catch-up for much of the week, with Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*, on the 24th, Greater Celandine, *Chelidonium majus* on the 25th, Prickly Sow-thistle, *Sonchus asper*, on the 26th, and Yellow Pimpernel, *Lysimachia nemorum*, on the 27th.

Many thanks, as usual, for your records. And for your stories too. On days when every piece of news seems destined to depress, there's always fun to be had from peering into my in-box.

* * *

For Week 7, we have ten species to carry over from last week, namely:

Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*; Crested Dog's-tail, *Cynosurus cristatus*; Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*; Water-cress, *Nasturtium officinale* (agg.); Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus* (agg.); Annual Pearlwort, *Sagina apetala/filicaulis*; White Stonecrop, *Sedum album*; White Campion, *Silene latifolia*; Black Bryony, *Tamus communis*; Heath Speedwell, *Veronica officinalis*.

To which we can now add a further ten:

Horse-radish, *Armoracia rusticana*; Quaking-grass, *Briza media*; White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*; Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*; Smooth Hawk's-beard, *Crepis capillaris*; Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*; Square-stalked Willowherb, *Epilobium tetragonum*; Common Rock-rose, *Helianthemum nummularium*; Corn Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*; Dewberry, *Rubus caesius*.

Several other species, for which early FFDs have already been recorded, should soon be coming into flower more generally, so it would be well worth keeping a note of when you first see them, e.g. Black Knapweed, *Centaurea nigra*; Rough Chervil, *Chaerophyllum temulum*; Yellow Flag, *Iris pseudacorus*; Fairy Flax, *Linum catharticum*; Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*; Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*.

6th May

Week 7 – ‘BOOM!’ – bryonies black & white – small heaths & spring skippers – rockroses at Purn Hill

I dived into my emails on Saturday morning and alighted immediately on an incoming message with the subject title “BOOM!!” It was from Linda. Two days before, on the 30th, she had emailed with a photo of her first—our first—Black Bryony, *Tamus communis*. I suggested, in reply, that all she needed now was White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*, to complete the set. I imagined this would be unlikely so early in the week, and besides, I had my own plans for White Bryony; last year there had been a great sprawling, clambering—and early-flowering—patch of it in a riverside tangle at Roughmoor, so that was where I’d be heading. This would be one of the easier plants, I fancied, in the week ahead—just a matter of getting the timing right, really.

But the next day, May Day, Linda took a stroll out to Nynehead, where (expletives deleted) she stumbled upon the first flowering *Bryonia* of the year. In VC6 this would be called a *squeak*; in VC5, evidently, it’s now to be known as a *BOOM*. Attached to her email there were three photos: one of the plant, a close-up of the flowers, and one of a woman with a Cheshire cat grin, standing beside a hedge. The subject title, the message and the photos said it all, really, revealing both the plant and the pleasure, plain as day, in black and white—*black* one day, *white* the next... The complete set, damn it!



Linda, on discovering White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*, in flower 01/05/20 ©Ian Everton

Black Bryony has had quite a week. Along with its white namesake (no relation—one’s a monocot, the other’s a dicot), it was on our list of potential Week 7 first-flowerers. But whereas our FFDs for most species have tended to span several weeks—varying according to microclimate, aspect, altitude, distance from the sea, etc.—the onset of flowering of Black Bryony has shown a remarkable synchronicity across the county. Following Linda’s trail-blazer on 30th April, Val (Glastonbury), Ro (Honibere) and I (Orchard Wood) all reported it for the first time on May Day, followed by Liz (Wedmore) and Chris L. (Wiveliscombe) on the 2nd – and then Helena and Jim (Paulton) on the 3rd, who took a seven-mile hike to Chewton Wood and saw “nothing from the Week 7 list until we were almost home when ... we finally found *Tamus*.” So it’s a fair bet that others will start seeing it in the next few days. Note that the earliest flowers tend to be on the lowest (least conspicuous) axillary racemes, while the upper, more visible, racemes are still tightly in bud.

To put these FFDs for Black Bryony into context, in twelve years of recording first flowerings my *earliest* date for it was 29th April, in 2011, while the *latest* was 2nd June, in 2013. For the Taunton area, the 2008-17 decadal average FFD for Black Bryony was 18th May; Walter Watson’s, from almost a hundred years ago, and similarly based mainly on observations around Taunton, was 2nd June. By any measure, then, for Black Bryony the spring of 2020 is proving to be an especially early one...

... Which is hardly surprising, given the weather we’ve been having. The long, warm, dry spell has been only briefly punctuated by cooler, damper conditions. We had a taste of these during Week 7, with fronts bringing cloud and rain on Thursday,

Sunday and Tuesday, and with temperatures for the most part well down on previous weeks. One evening we even lit the fire. The rain was badly needed and, despite the cooler temperatures, has probably helped to further *accelerate* spring rather than slow it down.

Before we tackle the rest of this week's hit-list, let's quickly highlight a few other happenings in the natural world...

- It's been another good week for butterflies: Holly Blues, *Celastrina argiolus*, are still in abundance, while I had my first Small Heaths, *Coenonympha pamphilus*, Grizzled Skippers, *Pyrgus malvae*, and Dingy Skippers, *Erynnis tages*, on the 4th at Thurlbear. Georgina reported her first 'dingy' on the same day, at Ubley Warren, but her first 'grizzly' was much earlier, on 19th April—same date as in 2019, apparently. Has anyone had a Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*, yet?
- And what about dragonflies? My first Beautiful Demoiselle, *Calopteryx virgo*, was on the 2nd, beside the River Tone at Obridge. No damsels, although surely others are seeing them by now?
- If you're on the Levels you'll wonder what all the fuss is about, but in Taunton this year we appear to have at least *four* singing Cetti's Warblers – one each at Hankridge, Obridge, Longrun and Roughmoor.
- Last week's Swifts vanished, so we had to endure several days of empty skies, until the 4th when there was a sudden arrival of new birds – and these turned out to be *our* birds. From midday onwards screamers were circling high overhead, while later in the afternoon some of the birds began hurtling about at rooftop height ...
- And then one of them peeled away from the rest of the group, suddenly dipping and dropping, then curving round and up for a first, hurried 'fly-past' of its nest-site. It's hard enough to comprehend the length of the journey this bird must have been on since it was last here, yet harder still to appreciate the precision of its return; back from Africa, somewhere south of the Sahara, to the familiar, slightly warped fascia board on the gable-end of 16, Gordon Road (TA1 3AU).

This week, the seventh since the start of lockdown, produced the largest batch of first flowerings yet: more than 160 records and about 100 species, shared between 18 recorders. We saw 16 of the 20 species on our target list. Here they all are, as usual

in roughly alphabetical order, with a few 'extras' getting a mention along the way...

'A'. At last, we've 'ticked' Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*. I'd begun to think we'd never get it. Ro was the first, at Lilstock, on the 4th, followed by Andrew in Highbridge and me in Trull, both on the 5th. The Trull plants were growing along an arable margin with new-flowering Black-bindweed, *Fallopia convolvulus*. Two days earlier, on the 3rd, Andrew also had Horse-radish, *Armoracia rusticana*, on Wick Lane, near Brent Knoll.

'B'. White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*. As a footnote to Linda's record, my phone 'pinged' a few minutes ago and it was an incoming WhatsApp photo of a White Bryony flower, from Helena in Paulton. Which means we have now had *two* records for it this week.

'C'. This week's sedges have included a very early Pale Sedge, *Carex pallescens*, recorded by Chris L. at Langford Heathfield on 30th April, and several records of False Fox-sedge, *Carex otrubae*, including Linda in Wellington on the 1st, Liz near Wedmore on the 2nd, and Ro at Lilstock on the 4th. Remote Sedge, *Carex remota*, is now widely flowering in the south of the county, with records this week from Wellington, Langford Heathfield, Taunton, Thurlbear and Orchard Wood. Dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*, has been slow to blossom, but Ro saw it at Lilstock on the 4th, while I had it the next day at Trull.

We've also notched up two of this week's *target* 'C's. Smooth Hawk's-beard, *Crepis capillaris*, was seen by Alastair in Minehead on 24th April (so actually in Week 6), while Dee had it in Clevedon on the 30th. Crested Dog's-tail, *Cynosurus cristatus*, was coming into flower on a road verge in Taunton this morning. But perhaps the most exciting – and certainly the most photogenic – 'C' of the week was Chris L.'s record of first-flowering Meadow Thistle, *Cirsium dissectum*, at Langford Heathfield. This isn't a species I routinely record, so I'm not sure whether this is especially early or not – but Walter Watson would have been flabbergasted: his FFD for it was 12th June.

'H'. In Week 6, Hilary visited Purn Hill where, on 23rd April, she recorded not only Common Rockrose, *Helianthemum nummularium*, but also White Rockrose, *H. apenninum*, and the hybrid between the two, *H. x sulphureum*. Andrew also saw Common Rockrose in Week 6, at Cross Quarry on the 25th, while in Week 7 Ellen had it at East Harptree on the

1st, and Anne at Broadmead Quarry on the 3rd. It isn't flowering yet at Thurlbear.

'L' to 'P'. Just the one record for Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*, Helena seeing it in the churchyard in Midsomer Norton this afternoon (6th). 'L' of the week, though, should probably go to Andrew for his first-flowering Pale Flax, *Linum bienne*, at Uphill on the 2nd. (The only 'L' I could produce was Rye-grass, *Lolium perenne*, in the back garden on the 2nd.) Water-cress, *Nasturtium officinale*, was spotted by Liz on the 2nd.



Meadow Thistle, *Cirsium dissectum*, Langford Heathfield
06/05/2020 ©Chris Loudon

The first record for flowering Corn Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, was also on the 2nd, as Gill pushed her bike up the hill coming out of Nunney. I had it this morning, in less desirable surroundings, on a road verge in Taunton. But 'P' of the week, although not on our list, must surely be Greater Butterfly-orchid, *Platanthera chlorantha*, recorded at Thurlbear Quarrylands (me) and Ivythorn Hill (Fiona), both on the 4th – an exceptionally early first date. My decadal average FFD for Greater Butterfly-orchid is 28th May, while Watson's first date for it was 4th June.

'R'. The first bramble to come into flower is usually Dewberry, *Rubus caesius*. Watson's dates were 5th May for Dewberry and 21st June for

Rubus fruticosus agg. While the latter is now flowering much earlier than that, FFDs for Dewberry have hardly changed at all. Anyway, we've had both during the week: the first *R. caesius* records were from Orchard Wood on the 1st, Roughmoor on the 3rd and Lilstock on the 4th (Ro), while the sole *R. fruticosus* record was from Station Road, Brent Knoll, on the 3rd (Andrew). Early-flowering 'fruticosus', at least in Taunton, tends to be the alien – and delicious – 'Himalayan Giant', *R. armeniacus*, which should start blooming within the next week. Elm-leaved Bramble, *Rubus ulmifolius*, usually follows about a fortnight after the 'Giant'...

We had three 'S's on the list, and we found them all! Annual Pearlwort, *Sagina apetala/filicaulis*, was recorded in pavement cracks in Taunton on the 4th and Midsomer Norton on the 6th. White Stonecrop, *Sedum album*, was flowering on a road verge in Taunton, again on the 4th, and in Burnham-on-Sea on the 5th. Chris L. had what seemed to be the first record of White Champion, *Silene latifolia*, at Runnington (near Wellington), on 30th April, followed by Andrew's at Berrow, beside the churchyard, on the 4th. Then Alastair, in an email this afternoon, listed it with several other species as having been in flower at Dunster beach on 26th April (Week 6); but then another email, close on its tail, was to say he'd just remembered that White Champion was already flowering there several weeks earlier, on 27th March (Week 2) – and he attached a photo to prove it. That's a very early record for it, but there's no doubting its veracity. Another 'S' of note, by the way, was an early Bittersweet, *Solanum dulcamara*, recorded by Liz near Wedmore on the 2nd.

'T' is for *Tamus*. Nothing to add on that one. But a brief nod here to Goat's-beard, *Tragopogon pratensis*, which several of you have reported for the first time this week, including Liz in Wedmore, Val in Glastonbury, Ro at Lilstock, and Andrew at Lympsham. It should probably have been one of our Week 7 targets. Another 'T', White Clover, *Trifolium repens*, is now popping up all over the county, from Nynhead and Lilstock in the south and west to Midsomer Norton in the far north.

And finally, 'V'. This week's 'V' is Heath Speedwell, *Veronica officinalis*, which was flowering at Thurlbear Quarrylands on the 4th.

Amongst the other more interesting FFDs this week: Bugloss, *Lycopsis arvensis*, at Dunster beach on 26th April (Alastair) and Wellington on 4th May (Linda);

Downy Oat-grass, *Avenula pubescens* at Berrow on the 4th (Andrew); a third Rough Chervil, *Chaerophyllum temulum*, this time on Cotlake Hill, near Trull, on 30th April; Foxglove, *Digitalis purpurea*, at Hurlstone on the 2nd (Alastair); Common Spike-rush, *Eleocharis palustris*, near Wedmore on the 2nd (Liz); Smooth Tare, *Ervum tetraspermum* (= *Vicia tetrasperma*), at Nettlecombe on the 6th (Pat); Tall Ramping-fumitory, *Fumaria bastardii*, at Lilstock on the 2nd (Ro), plus White R-f, *F. capreolata*, at Wedmore, also on the 2nd (Liz); Small-flowered Crane's-bill, *Geranium pusillum*, in the churchyard at Berrow on the 4th (Andrew); Common Water-crowfoot, *Ranunculus aquatilis*, near Wedmore on the 2nd (Liz), and its coastal counterpart Brackish Water-crowfoot, *Ranunculus baudotii*, at Dunster beach on 26th April (Alastair); second records of Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*, from Chewton Mendip on the 1st (Ellen), and Wild Clary, *Salvia verbenaca*, in and around Ro's garden at Lilstock on the 3rd; Common Figwort, *Scrophularia nodosa*, at Greenaleigh on the 1st (Alastair); Sea Campion, *Silene uniflora*, at Blackmoor, Mendip, on the 4th (Georgina); Bog Stitchwort, *Stellaria alsine*, on Croydon Hill, also on the 4th (Alastair); and Field Pansy, *Viola arvensis*, at Nynehead on the 1st (Linda).

Oh yes, and one more 'first' this week, from Ellen: "The first forage harvester heard howling on the hill beyond the village ... [which] always marks the transition from spring to summer for me."

Many thanks, as usual, for your records, and apologies if I've inadvertently omitted anything of particular interest. You've brightened up my week no end.

* * *

And on to Week 8... First, four species carried over from last week:

Quaking-grass, *Briza media*; Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*; Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*; Square-stalked Willowherb, *Epilobium tetragonum*.

To which we can add the following 16 species:

Ground-elder, *Aegopodium podagraria*; Spiked Sedge, *Carex spicata*; Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*; Eyebright, *Euphrasia* sp/agg; Flote-grass, *Glyceria fluitans*; Meadow Vetchling, *Lathyrus pratensis*; Lesser Hawkbit, *Leontodon saxatilis*; Privet, *Ligustrum vulgare*; Meadow Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*; Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*; Corky-fruited Water-dropwort,

Oenanthe pimpinelloides; Creeping Cinquefoil, *Potentilla reptans*; Weld, *Reseda luteola*; Meadow Fescue, *Schedonorus pratensis* (= *Festuca pratensis*); Hedge Woundwort, *Stachys sylvatica*; Hop Trefoil, *Trifolium campestre*.

13th May

Week 8 – birdsong – common blues – quaking-grass

I have to begin with Blackbirds. Since the start of lockdown eight weeks ago, one of the compensatory pleasures of being home-bound has been the opportunity—with the relative lack of traffic noise—to listen to birdsong. And even now, while I'm *clack-clack-clacking* on the computer keyboard, I'm aware of a more or less continuous backdrop of Blackbird song. From 5 in the morning until 9 at night, one particular Blackbird in our street is endlessly broadcasting its presence from various TV aerials and chimney pots. His song is both wonderfully varied and endlessly repetitive: he has two immediately recognisable 'stock phrases', both of them quite different to those of his neighbours. He can start to sound like a cracked record—the same phrases recurring *ad nauseam*—but listening more closely we've noticed that no two phrases are ever *quite* the same. Each time he repeats, he adds a squeal or a chatter drawn from an evidently limitless supply of 'terminal flourishes'. So while one phrase might sound strident, like a statement of intent, the next—same phrase, but ending this time with an upward lilt—seems more like a question. Or, same again, but dipping at the end and melancholic in tone, might be followed by another that's cheerily optimistic—like the punch line of a joke, complete with terminal chuckle. He seems to be *playing* with his song, testing out what works and what doesn't, and keeping us on tenterhooks to find out exactly *which* phrase, with *which* flourish, he'll choose to pull out from his bottomless song-bag next. He's become the talk of the street. And during our VE-Day street party on Friday he was perched on the TV aerial adding his own commentary to the evening's celebrations.

Week 8, and the start of the *eighth* week of lockdown, was dry and predominantly sunny again, the first half warm (26°C on Saturday), the second half less so. There was a ground-frost on Monday morning, the temperature overnight dipping to just 2°C in Taunton. Sunday evening's announcements on the gradual easing of the lockdown seemed to clarify and confuse in equal measure, but one thing we *do* know is that, from today, we're free to take as

much exercise as we like, and to drive as far as we like to take it – as long as that doesn't involve driving into Wales, where the 'stay at home' instruction still applies. On the face of it, then, for some of us this may open up new possibilities for exercising/botanisng further afield. I'm tempted, but I think for now I'll be continuing to stick pretty close to home. Besides, I'm enjoying the lack of traffic...

Not many *non*-botanical highlights to report, although Helena seems to be chalking up a new 'personal best' of one sort or another each time she dons her lycra. Her latest was a two-mile run, the first mile of which she completed in 9 minutes 13 seconds. (She doesn't say how long the second took.) Usually she makes a few plant records while she's out running—like we all do, I suppose—but now everything's becoming a bit of a blur, apparently. We've also had three first-sightings of Common Blues, *Polyommatus incarus*: Georgina on the 7th, me on the 10th and Andrew on the 12th. And I had a Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*, this morning, presumably a newly-arrived migrant rather than a surviving over-winterer.

Right! First flowerings. Another good week, but suddenly everything seems to be coming at once, and in no particular order. 123 records and 94 species. I'm beginning to lose track. Anyway, we saw 16 of the 20 species on our target list for Week 8, or 18 if you include records from the 'eastern enclave' otherwise known as Fred. Only Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*, and Common Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*, seem to have evaded us altogether. The following summarises our Week 8 records: target species, as usual, with their names emboldened, other notables slotted in as and when, and the whole lot loosely arranged in alphabetical order by scientific name...

'A'. There have been patches of *winter*-flowering Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium*, on some road verges this year (my first record of Yarrow in flower in Taunton was between Christmas and New Year), but this is unusual and the decadal (2008-17) average FFD for it is 15th May. So the spring flush of new flower-heads noted in Taunton on the 7th and Wellington on the 9th (Linda) is much in line with expectations. Ground-elder, *Aegopodium podagraria*, has yet to be spotted flowering in Somerset, the only record so far being from the eastern bloc, in St Michael's churchyard in Aldershot. Two more records for Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*, during the week, Helena in Paulton, and Jeanne between Blue Anchor and

Watchet, both on the 10th. Jeanne found it in a field of (flowering) Crimson Clover, *Trifolium incarnatum* subsp. *incarnatum* – a stunning plant which used to be much grown as a fodder crop. (Interestingly, on the 9th Maureen had Crimson Clover in another field, near Kilve.) Georgina had a 'hairy' day in Mendip on the 7th, with both *Hairy Lady's-mantle*, *Alchemilla filicaulis* subsp. *vestita*, at Black Rock, Mendip, and *Hairy Rock-cress*, *Arabis hirsuta*, at Velvet Bottom. Andrew recorded (and photographed) a gorgeous 'Star of Persia', *Allium cristophii*, growing beside a rhyme on Middle Street on the 9th – possibly a first or second record for VC6 and Somerset, and one of a number of unusual aliens to be mentioned in dispatches this week.



Star of Persia, *Allium cristophii*, Middle Street 09/05/20
©Andrew Robinson

'B'. This was the week for Quaking Grass, *Briza media*, with first-flowering records from Winford on the 9th (Margaret), Thurlbear and Brent Knoll on the 10th (me and Andrew), and Ubley Warren and Runnington on the 12th (Georgina and Chris L.). The unlikeliest 'B' came from Margaret's garden in Winford, with a report of self-seeded Interrupted Brome, *Bromus interruptus*, now flowering in one of her flower pots.

'C'. Spiked Sedge, *Carex spicata*, actually made its first appearance in Week 7, Margaret seeing it in Winford on the 7th, and Ro at Lilstock on the 5th. Some species, though, *really* seem to be getting ahead of themselves, and I've had two this week, both bindweeds, both in Taunton: Hedge Bindweed, *Calystegia sepium*, on the 7th, and Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, on the 11th – the first in South Street, the second on Upper Holway Road. It's been quite a week for thistles too: Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, our 'target' thistle, was seen by Linda in Wellington on the 9th and by Val in Glastonbury on

the 13th. Pat, also on the 9th, had a very early Creeping Thistle, *C. arvense*, at Nettlecombe, while Alastair saw flowering Marsh Thistle, *C. palustre*, at Crowcombe on the 8th. And Georgina recorded Musk Thistle, *Carduus nutans*, in Cheddar Gorge on the 7th. As if to emphasise how much later some parts of the county can be than others, Chris B. had her first-flowering Pignut, *Conopodium majus*, at East Harptree on the 10th, almost three weeks after its earliest sighting near Wellington. Finally, Alastair saw Hound's-tongue, *Cynoglossum officinale*, starting to flower at Dunster beach on the 10th.



Musk Thistle, *Carduus nutans*, Cheddar Gorge 07/05/20
©Georgina Shuckburgh

'D'. Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, has been popping up all over the place – at Ivythorn Hill on the 8th (Fiona), Langford Heathfield on the 9th (Ian L), Thurlbear on the 10th, and Middle Street, Brent Knoll, on the 12th (Andrew). Ian L had flowering Heath Spotted-orchid, *D. maculata*, also on the 9th, and also at Langford Heathfield.

'E'. I had Square-stalked Willowherb, *Epilobium tetragonum*, in Taunton on the 7th, while Fred reported it in flower in Bordon on the 9th. I know, I'd never heard of Bordon either. It's between Alton and Haslemere. Chris B. had an Eyebright, *Euphrasia* sp., in East Harptree on the 10th, while Andrew reminds me that he had seen early-flowering *Euphrasia tetraquetra* at Uphill on 23rd April.

'G'. Huge excitement beside the River Tone on the 12th, with drifts of Meadow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pratense*, just starting to flower—only 43 days earlier than Watson's FFD for it! Also Flote-grass, *Glyceria fluitans*, in Taunton on the 9th, and Middle Street, Brent Knoll, on the 12th. And Margaret had Plicate Sweet-grass, *G. notata*, at Dundry Hill on the 9th.

'H'. Barely worth mentioning but, following last week's flurry of records, I can report that Common

Rock-rose, *Helianthemum nummularium*, was just starting to flower at Thurlbear on the 10th.

'I'. I'm not sure what to make of the yellow-flowered variety of Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* var. *citrina*. Margaret had a flower of it at Sand Point in March, and I've now found another patch—the first time I've seen it in the Taunton area—flowering nicely in a roadside hedge in Killams. I'm guessing it's either deliberately planted there or else a garden escape/throw-out. Does this variety tend to flower especially early, I wonder? And is it generally regarded as a native variety, or as a plant in cultivation that sometimes leaps the garden wall? Can anyone shed any light please?

'J'. 'J' is for *Senecio*... Two more records this week for Common Ragwort, *Jacobaea vulgaris* aka *Senecio jacobaea* – Linda in Wellington on the 9th, and Andrew in Highbridge on the 12th.

'L'. Our first Meadow Vetchling, *Lathyrus pratensis*, was seen by Linda in Wellington on the 9th, while there were two further records for Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*, in Brent Knoll churchyard on the 6th (Andrew) and in Taunton on the 11th (me); also I've had our first Lesser Hawkbit, *L. saxatilis*, flowering on the road verge where I'd seen Sea Pearlwort, *Sagina maritima*, and Sea Hard-grass, *Catapodium marinum* a few weeks earlier. We've also had Privet, *Ligustrum vulgare*, spotted by Val in the Glastonbury area earlier today. And finally, there was a precocious Honeysuckle, *Lonicera periclymenum*, flowering in a hedgerow at Killams, Taunton, on the 9th.

'M.'. Common Mallow, *Malva sylvestris*, is now flowering quite widely, with records this week from Minehead (Alastair) and Middle Street (Andrew). Our only flowering Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*, was annoyingly from the eastern enclave, so remains on the list as one of our targets for Week 9.

'O'. Once again, Brent Knoll leads the charge, with the county's first (and so far only) record of flowering Corky-fruited Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe pimpinelloides* on the 10th, in Brent Knoll village, where Andrew says, "I was amazed to see these plants, which went from basal rosettes to 18 inch stems and first flowers in less than a week!" A couple of alien 'O's too this week: Linda had flowering Star-of-Bethlehem, *Ornithogalum umbellatum*, on the 9th in Wellington, while I had Upright Yellow-sorrel, *Oxalis stricta*, on the 12th, growing as a pavement weed on East Reach.

'P'. A motley collection of 'P's this week, only one of which was on the target list – Creeping Cinquefoil, *Potentilla reptans*, seen by Andrew on the 9th at Middle Street, and by me in Taunton on the 12th. Another Common Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, this time at Dunster beach on the 10th (Alastair), while Pat had an extraordinarily early Corn-parsley, *Petroselinum segetum*, at Nettlecombe on the 6th. Andrew's Hoary Plantain, *Plantago media*, on the 10th at Brent Knoll, was also very early—its 2008-17 decadal average FFD for the Taunton area is 31st May. Lastly, I had Common Knotgrass, *Polygonum aviculare*, on the 8th on Cotlake Hill, Trull. Another early date: Watson would have been amazed, his own FFD for *P. aviculare* from the 1920s/30s was more than a month later, 16th June.

'R'. Lots of Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*, seen this week, including Chris B. at East Harptree on the 4th, Margaret at Winford on the 9th, me at Thurlbear on the 10th, and Sue C. in St James's churchyard, Taunton, on the 12th. Other than that, our first Weld, *Reseda luteola*, was flowering well on waste ground on Canal Road, Taunton, also on the 12th, along with my own first Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus* agg., which, as expected, was 'Himalayan Giant', *R. armeniacus*. And today, Alastair has seen Marsh Yellow-cress, *Rorippa palustris*, flowering at Wimbleball Reservoir.

'S'. Like Chris B.'s Pignut, so also Ellen's just-flowering Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, on the 8th, which again illustrates the difference in FFDs between the 'balmy south' and the 'frozen north'. A ridiculously late 'first date', really, given that our earliest FFD for it this spring was on Easter Sunday, 12th April—but even Ellen's date would have seemed early to Watson, his FFD (from the Taunton area, don't forget) was 20th May. See also 'U', below.

More 'S's... First, *Schedonorus pratensis*, Meadow Fescue, which several of us have seen, including Pat at Nettlecombe on the 6th, and me in Trull on the 11th. And Fred's had it in the Far East too. Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*, was flowering in Longrun Meadow on the 7th, while Chris L. had Bladder Campion, *S. vulgaris*, at Thorne St Margaret on the 8th. Several more records of Bittersweet, *Solanum dulcamara*, this week too, including Taunton, Minehead and Aldershot. And early records for Branched Bur-reed, *Sparganium erectum*, in Taunton on the 9th, and Lesser Stitchwort, *Stellaria graminea*, at Nettlecombe, also on the 9th (Pat). We've had two records for Hedge Woundwort, *Stachys sylvatica*, at Sandford on the 7th (Andrew) and in Taunton on the 11th.

'T'. Andrew spotted first-flowering Knotted Hedge-parsley, *Torilis nodosa*, at Oldmixon on the 8th, and we have had another good record for Salsify, *Tragopogon porrifolius*, this time Linda in Wellington on the 9th. Our target 'T' was Hop Trefoil, *Trifolium campestre*, which Alastair spotted in flower on the 7th on North Hill, Minehead.

'U'. Ellen would, I'm sure, want everyone to know that on the 8th, on Greendown, she saw Common Nettle, *Urtica dioica*. In an email entitled 'Catching up with Taunton', she says: "[I've had] my first flowering *Urtica*—and I had to go out of my way to find it out of *thousands* searched..." Here in Taunton, meanwhile, I'm struggling to find any that's *not* flowering! Interestingly, very few of you have reported this species, so I'm starting to wonder, could Taunton be out of kilter with the rest of the county? If it's any consolation, Watson's FFD for it was 22nd May—so you're in good company, Ellen!

'V'. Heath Speedwell, *Veronica officinalis*, seems to be flowering quite widely now, with records this week from Black Rock, Mendip (Georgina), Langford Heathfield (Chris L.) and Wimbleball (Alastair). Plus a record from Bramshill (Fred). And, for what it's worth, I've finally seen Brooklime, *Veronica beccabunga*, at Thurlbear on the 10th.

Winding up for another week, here are a few lines from a poem, about spring, printed in last week's *Guardian Weekly*:

"... the lights of the flowers / coming in waves /
as I walked with the budburst / and the flushing
of trees ..."

Exactly.

* * *

Assuming you're still happy to continue, for Week 9 there are four species we failed to see last week, namely:

Ground-elder, *Aegopodium podagraria*; Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*; Meadow Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*; Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*.

To which we can now add the following 16 species:

Pyramidal Orchid, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*; Meadow/Smooth Brome, *Bromus commutatus/racemosus*; Southern Marsh-orchid, *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*; Hoary Willowherb, *Epilobium parviflorum*; Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*; Dyer's Greenweed, *Genista tinctoria*; Long-stalked Crane's-bill, *Geranium columbinum*; Tutsan,

Hypericum androsaemum; Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* (the real McCoy, NOT var. *citrina*); Dwarf Mallow, *Malva neglecta*; Water Forget-me-not, *Myosotis scorpioides*; Yellow Water-lily, *Nuphar lutea*; Reed Canary-grass, *Phalaris arundinacea*; Greater Plantain, *Plantago major*; Selfheal, *Prunella vulgaris*; Zigzag Clover, *Trifolium medium*.

Other species, so far only recorded once or twice, will soon be flowering more widely, so would also be worth recording if you see them, e.g. Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*; Hoary Plantain, *Plantago media*; Knotgrass, *Polygonum aviculare*; Lesser Stitchwort, *Stellaria graminea*; Knotted Hedge-parsley, *Torilis nodosa*. And what about Dog-rose, *Rosa canina*?

Please dip in and out as you wish. It's not compulsory.

20th May

Week 9 – lockdown begins to ease – hairy yellow-face bees – damselflies, dog-roses & bindweed – an escape to Pewsey Down

A tentative and partial 'release' from lockdown seems to have changed things quite dramatically for some of us, yet barely a jot for others. 'Stay at home' was a clear message, easily understood and (to a large extent) universally applied. Now it's all got a bit more complicated than that. The roads are busier, and the daily routine isn't quite as straightforward as before. There are more options, and apparently we now have to 'stay alert', whatever that means.

Nothing this week has seemed quite the same as last week. There's the Blackbird, for a start. His endless 'variations on a theme' have been replaced by something a little more mundane, less adventurous, less *musical* somehow. It's as though his heart isn't quite in it any more. And while his stock phrases still ring out—especially very early in the morning when some of us are starting to wish he wouldn't bother—in the middle of the day he becomes silent and skulking. He seems distracted, as if his mind's on other things; and of course it is, since for the last couple of days we've been seeing them flying about with beaks full of nestling food. Once the eggs have hatched, there's clearly more to life than singing. And so this weary rooftop flautist now has to spend some of each day food-gathering for hungry nestlings, or else delivering his urgent *chook-chook-chook* alarm calls from the deep cover of the neighbours' holly tree. Which probably means cats are about. I fear this may not end well.

We have a hefty lump of flint on our garden table, collected some years ago from the beach at Sidmouth. It's about the size of a butternut squash, with rounded knobbles and dark recesses and holes running through it. For us, it serves as a paperweight, but also, I've just noticed, it's become a favourite resting place (or maybe nesting site?) for tiny bees. These little bees I'd been dismissing as flies; and they really are *extremely* small—probably no more than about 4-5mm in length. After much bee-watching, I've worked out they're Hairy Yellow-face Bees, *Hylaeus hyalinatus*. It seems that telling one *Hylaeus* from another is a challenge. There are about a dozen species in Britain, each one sporting its own unique black-and-yellow face pattern. Males and females have different markings, too. Only one, thank goodness, has a hairy face like ours. Plate 2 of Steven Falk's field guide, depicting the faces lined up in six ranks of four, looks like something ripped from a catalogue of Darth Vader masks, or maybe one of those charts at Slimbridge showing how to distinguish one Bewick's Swan from another by its bill pattern. I've been mesmerised by these minuscule bees on their cobble of flint; if I hadn't been instructed to stay at home I'd probably never have noticed them.

When it comes to botany, of course, I'd like to think I'm better able to pick up on these sorts of things. Yet, with apologies to Graham, Fred and Helena, I still happily turn a blind eye to Hawkweeds and Eyebrights. I just don't *get* them. But you can't hope to do everything, can you? You have to pick your battles...

Some battles, though, are more easily won than others, and Ro this week reminded me of one that, like getting to grips with *Hylaeus*, could be particularly well suited to this time of 'staying put': the colour-pattern variants of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*. Mostly we ignore them, and yet Peter Sell took a particular delight in them, naming no less than ten easily recognised colour forms. We know we have many of these in the county, but which are common, and which less so? Could we perhaps, between us, work out a 'league table' for Somerset, from commonest to rarest? Do any of them have differing or particularly distinctive ecologies or habitat/soil requirements? To start the ball rolling, here's a key to the colour forms so, if you'd like to, you can have a go at working out which ones you've got in your local area. I promise: they're *much* easier than dandelions.

A key to flower-colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis* subsp. *arvensis* – adapted from Sell & Murrell (2009, *Flora of Great Britain & Ireland* Vol. 3, pp 342-3)

1. Inside of corolla pure white except for yellow throat, and sometimes a ring of pink/purple marks ('tick' marks) above the yellow throat → 2
 Inside of corolla tinted pink or with clear white-and-pink stripes, with or without a ring of pink/purple marks ('tick' marks) above the yellow throat → 3
2. Inside of corolla pure white except for yellow throat, no 'tick' marks = forma **arvensis**
 Inside of corolla pure white with yellow throat and ring of dark 'tick' marks just above yellow throat = forma **notatus**
3. Inside of corolla tinted pink all over most of surface, or pink except for white band above yellow throat → 4
 Inside of corolla with pink and white stripes → 7
4. Inside of corolla tinted pink all over surface except for yellow throat → 5
 Inside of corolla deep pink round top half with white band above yellow throat, into which point 5 lobes of the pink → 6
5. No 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma **pallidiroseus**
 Purple 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma **pallidinotatus**
6. No 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma **perroseus**
 Purple 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma **quinquevulnerus**
7. Inside of corolla with 5 white stripes and 5 pink 'windows' → 8
 Inside of corolla with 10 white stripes and 10 pink 'windows' → 9
8. No 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma **pentarrhabdotus**
 Purple 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma **pentastictus**
9. No 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma **decarrhabdotus**
 Purple 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma **decemvulnerus**

Week 9, then. Weather-wise it was like a back-to-front Week 8, this time *starting* with a ground frost

(1°C in Taunton on the 14th) and *ending* with a heatwave (25°C on the 20th). Another dry week too, and for the most part sunny. It pains me to say it, but still there's been hardly a day of cricket lost to the weather, if only *every* day hadn't been lost already—to the virus. Dragonflies and damselflies are really taking off now, if you'll excuse the pun. I saw Broad-bodied Chaser, *Libellula depressa*, at Orchard Wood on the 14th, while Eve had *depressa* in the north of the county this week too. Several of you have reported seeing Beautiful Demoiselles, *Calopteryx virgo*, but not yet Banded, *C. splendens*. Of the damselflies, in Longrun Meadow Keith—who I bumped into on Alma Street earlier this week—has so far recorded Large Red, *Pyrrhosoma nymphula*, Blue-tailed, *Ischnura elegans*, Common Blue, *Enallagma cyathigerum*, and Azure, *Coenagrion puella*. Butterfly highlights of the week included two reports of Green Hairstreaks, *Callophrys rubi*: one by a friend of mine, Lynda, at Thurlbear on the 19th, the other by Georgina at Ubley Warren on the 20th. Georgina also had her first Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, *Boloria selene*, on the 20th.

On the botanical front it's been another busy week, with 16 of you sending in a total of 145 records covering 113 species. These included quite a few 'late' FFDs from higher altitudes of things recorded flowering in the 'low country' several weeks ago. It's all starting to get terribly confusing, though, and hard to predict which species we need to be looking out for next. In all, we saw just 11 of the 20 species on our target list this week. The following summarises our Week 9 records: target species, as usual, with names emboldened, other notables slotted in as we go along, and the whole lot roughly arranged in alphabetical order by scientific name...

'A'. Records have been tumbling in for Ground-elder, ***Aegopodium podagraria***. Georgina says it was actually flowering in her garden *last* week, on the 12th, but others have begun seeing it this week, including Margaret at Strode on the 15th, Pat, also on the 15th, at Nettlecombe, and Helena with Dave on the 19th at Woolverton. The only other 'A' of note was Wild-oat, *Avena fatua*, in Upper Holway, Taunton, on the 18th.

'B'. I saw Meadow Brome, ***Bromus commutatus***, in grassland near Orchard Wood on the 14th, and then at Longrun Meadow on the 18th and Thurlbear on the 20th. Remarkably, also some *very* early Yellow-wort, *Blackstonia perfoliata*, in open stony ground beside the railway at Taunton station on the 15th.

Watson would be spinning in his grave—his FFD for it about a century ago was 27th June.

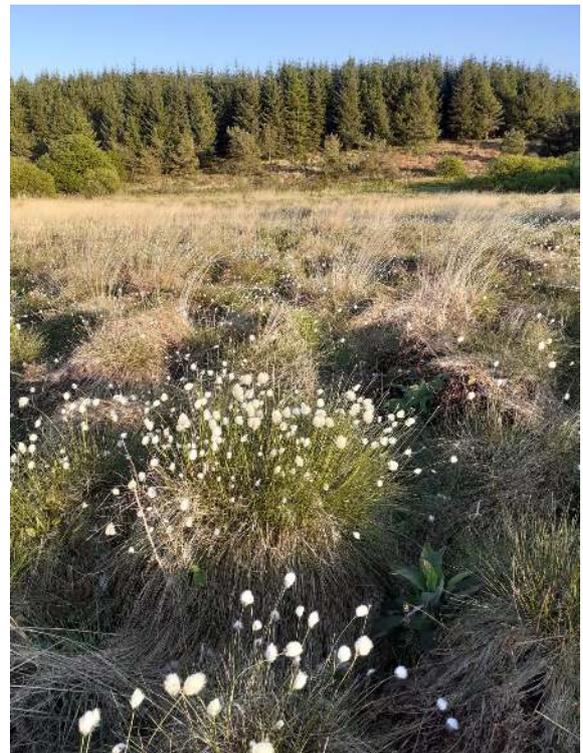


Bogbean, *Menyanthes trifoliata*, Mount Fancy 16/05/20
©Linda Everton

'C'. Linda very usefully picked up a couple of new sedges on a visit to Mount Fancy on the 16th, Common Yellow-sedge, *Carex demissa*, and Star Sedge, *C. echinata*. (Along with several other nice things, including Bog-bean, *Menyanthes trifoliata*, Lesser Spearwort, *Ranunculus flammula*, and Marsh Violet, *Viola palustris*. This is quite a late FFD for the violet, probably due to the fact that mostly none of us get to visit the right sort of habitat for it.) More sightings of Marsh Thistle, *Cirsium palustre*, this week included Linda at The Quants on the 13th, and me at Thurlbear on the 16th. Many of Pat's FFDs at Nettlecombe are, unsurprisingly, lagging behind some other parts of the county, so all the remarkable that she recorded Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, on the 15th, when Taunton's plants—and I've looked at *hundreds* of them this week—are still stubbornly in tight bud. Two more records of Crested Dog's-tail, *Cynosurus cristatus*, at Burnham-on-Sea on the 15th (Andrew), and at Lilstock on the 19th (Ro).

'D' for Dactylorchids... Margaret has seen both Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, and Heath Spotted-orchid, *D. maculata* this week, the

first at Winford (Redding Pits) on the 17th, the second on the 15th at Strode, where she also saw one of our target species, Southern Marsh-orchid, *D. praetermissa*. However, her *first* Southern Marsh-orchids were actually a day earlier, on the 14th, at Berrow, during her first botanical walk away from Winford since lockdown nine weeks ago. There have also been a couple more FFDs for Foxglove, *Digitalis purpurea*: at Ford Street on the 13th (Linda), and in Taunton on the 18th.



Hare's-tail Cottongrass, *Eriophorum vaginatum*, Priddy Mineries 13/05/20 ©Helena Crouch

'E'. Hoary Willowherb, *Epilobium parviflorum*, has at last been found flowering away from Fred's 'eastern enclave', so in the part of Somerset called Somerset: Andrew saw it at Highbridge on the 19th. Helena visited Priddy Mineries on the 13th, with one of the highlights being Hare's-tail Cottongrass, *Eriophorum vaginatum*. She says it's normally an early-flowerer, but Watson would still have been mildly surprised, his average FFD being 30th May; although even 'back in the day' he did see it, very occasionally, flowering as early as April. More mundanely, I had flowering Californian Poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*, on waste ground in Canal Road, Taunton, on the 15th. (Nearby there was a lovely sprawling Sweet-pea, *Lathyrus odoratus* – a real rarity in the wild in Somerset, apparently.)

'F'. Our target list included Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*, but Hilary went one better, with flowering Dropwort, *F. vulgaris*, on Purn Hill on the

16th. No-one has yet seen Meadowsweet, although it was very close to flowering in Killams, Taunton, on the 19th.

'G'. A sudden rush of records of Long-stalked Crane's-bill, *Geranium columbinum*, this week: David H. at Middle Hill Common on the 9th (so actually Week 8) was followed by Hilary on Bleadon Hill on the 14th, Chris L. at Langford Budville also on the 14th, me at Thurlbear on the 18th, and Gill up in the far north-east on the 19th. And a second record for Meadow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pratense*, at Woolverton on the 19th (Helena).

'H'. Margaret's lockdown break-out to Berrow on the 14th also produced some flowering Sea Sandwort, *Honckenya peploides*, while there have been two records for Tutsan, *Hypericum androsaemum*, in Taunton on the 18th, and in Leigh Woods on the 19th (David H.). Nettlecombe's first Cat's-ear, *Hypochaeris radicata*, was on the 17th, more than a month later than its first sighting in the Taunton area.

'L'. A record from Fred of Grass-leaved Vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*, in Hants, but so far only a solitary Somerset record—that incredibly early one of Alastair's in Minehead on 20th April. I have searched in several likely places, without success. But it must be flowering by now, mustn't it? (And what about Yellow Vetchling, *L. aphaca*, too?) Meadow Vetchling, *L. pratensis*, has been remarkably slow off the mark, with Andrew's record from Burnham-on-Sea on the 15th being the only one of the week. Privet, *Ligustrum vulgare*, was beginning to flower in Taunton on the 17th, while we also have a second record of Honeysuckle, *Lonicera periclymenum*, this time from Langford Budville area on the 14th. Marsh Bird's-foot-trefoil, *Lotus pedunculatus*, seems to have begun flowering very much under the radar: David H. saw it at Leigh Woods on the 19th, reporting that it had probably "been flowering for a while."

'M'. I saw a single plant of flowering Dwarf Mallow, *Malva neglecta*, growing around a roadside bollard in Upper Holway, Taunton, on the 18th. Ro was delighted to notch up Common Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*, on the 15th at Walford's Gibbet where it was "... looking so pretty in dappled sunlight." Linda also had Common Cow-wheat, at Thurlbear on the 18th. Following records in Week 8 of flowering Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*, in Hants and Bristol, we've finally had it beginning to flower in Somerset, in Gwynne Lane, Taunton, on the 18th.

'N'. Yellow Water-lily, *Nuphar lutea*, was recorded by Val on the 11th (so Week 8) in the Glastonbury area, then on the 18th by Andrew on the Huntspill River. (Not one I usually record, but White Water-lily, *Nymphaea alba*, was looking splendid on the pond at Roughmoor on the 17th.)

'O'. Corky-fruited Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe pimpinelloides*, was just beginning to flower on the 18th in Trull.

'P'. I had my first Hoary Plantain, *Plantago media*, at Thurlbear on the 20th, 11 days earlier than the 2008-17 decadal average FFD for it in the Taunton area, and more than 3 weeks earlier than Watson's average FFD. David H.'s record of Wood Meadow-grass, *Poa nemoralis*, in Leigh Woods on the 19th was similarly early. 'P' of the week, though, must surely go to Helena for her record of flowering Angular Soloman's-seal, *Polygonatum odoratum*, in Cheddar Gorge on the 14th, while I had the first flower on Hoary Cinquefoil, *Potentilla argentea*, in Longrun Meadow on the 17th. Oh yes, and Andrew had Knotgrass, *Polygonum aviculare*, at Burnham-on-Sea on the 15th.

'R'. Lots of sightings of Dog-rose, *Rosa canina*, this week, including Wellington, Glastonbury, Brent Knoll, Bleadon Hill and Leigh Woods. Only one more record, though, for Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus* agg. But, more interestingly, a 'first' for Raspberry, *Rubus idaeus*, at Nordrach on Mendip on the 15th (Georgina).

'S'. It would be remarkable if Helena's FFD for Mossy Saxifrage, *Saxifraga hypnoides*, on the 14th wasn't also its first flowering in the UK, given that Cheddar Gorge is an extreme southerly outpost for this 'northern' species. There have also been further sightings of many other 'S' species, including Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*, Bog Stitchwort, *Stellaria alsine*, Lesser Stitchwort, *S. graminea*, and Hedge Woundwort, *Stachys sylvatica*. Plus, a cecidological 'S': in Leigh Woods on the 19th David H. spotted galls on Wayfaring Tree, *Viburnum lantana*, caused by the gall-midge *Sackenomyia reaumurii*. I haven't checked yet, but suspect this may be a 'first' for Somerset⁴.

'T'. Further records this week for Goat's-beard, *Tragopogon pratensis*, and Salsify, *T. porrifolius*, as well as the hybrid between the two, *T. x mirabilis*⁵.

⁴ Indeed it was.

⁵ Hester reported that this patch of hybrid Goat's-beard was flowering for a second time at the end of August.

I've also been pleased to pick up flowering Hop Trefoil, *Trifolium campestre*, and Knotted Hedgeparsley, *Torilis nodosa*, on Taunton road verges, and Zigzag Clover, *Trifolium medium*, just beginning to flower on the 20th up at Orchard Wood. The most notable 'T', though, must surely be Steve's "many plants" of Woolly Clover, *Trifolium tomentosum*, at Huntworth, near Bridgwater Services, on the 17th—only the second record of this species in VC5 and Somerset.

'V'. Helena, presumably running more gently than usual, was able to spot Bithynian Vetch, *Vicia bithynica*, already flowering well on the 15th at Paulton. Other than that, the main 'V's this week have been Squirreltail Fescue, *Vulpia bromoides*, on a droughted grassy bank in Longrun Meadow on the 17th, and Rat's-tail Fescue, *V. myuros*, which was seen on the 15th by Helena on her front path, and coincidentally by me on the same day on mine. And finally, the newsflash you've all been waiting for: on the 18th Helena ran 5 kms—that's 3.15 miles—in under 35 minutes, and her first mile was 9 minutes 11 seconds, so two seconds faster than her previous best. I've never actually timed it, but suspect my own personal best over 5 kms is at least an hour and a half.

I'll leave it to David H. to wrap up this week's report. On Sunday, 17th, he bravely "ventured into Wiltshire", to visit Pewsey Downs...

"Couldn't find a single orchid in flower ... but did scratch out a few plants of Field Fleawort [*Tephrosia integrifolia*]. To be honest the best thing was the ... Chalk Milkwort, *Polygala calcarea*, and Horseshoe Vetch, *Hippocrepis comosa*, stretching on and on, like a pattern infinitely repeated with slight variations. And ... Marsh Fritillaries all over the shop, and [a single] Adonis Blue, like a scrap of the Aegean alighted on the Wessex ridge."

* * *

I'm going to take a short break from weekly report-writing, so here's an extra-long target list of 28 species that hopefully will keep us going until 3rd June. First of all, the 'roll over' of nine species from last week's list:

Pyramidal Orchid, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*; Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*; Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*; Dyer's Greenweed, *Genista tinctoria*; Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* (the real McCoy, NOT var. *citrina*); Water Forget-me-not, *Myosotis scorpioides*; Reed Canary-grass, *Phalaris*

arundinacea; Greater Plantain, *Plantago major*; Selfheal, *Prunella vulgaris*.

To which we can now add the following 19 species:

Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*; Wild Onion/Crow Garlic, *Allium vineale*; Fool's Watercress, *Apium nodiflorum*; Black Horehound, *Ballota nigra*; Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*; Rosebay Willowherb, *Chamaenerion angustifolium*; Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*; Great Willowherb, *Epilobium hirsutum*; Hedge Bedstraw, *Galium album*; Marsh Bedstraw, *Galium palustre*; Lady's Bedstraw, *Galium verum*; Bristly Ox-tongue, *Helminthotheca echioides*; Hairy St John's-wort, *Hypericum hirsutum*; Perforate St John's-wort, *Hypericum perforatum*; Purple Loosestrife, *Lythrum salicaria*; Timothy, *Phleum pratense*; Wood Club-rush, *Scirpus sylvaticus*; Alsike Clover, *Trifolium hybridum*; Tufted Vetch, *Vicia cracca*.

And don't forget to have a look at the crib chart and key to colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, and then—if you fancy it—see if you can work out which ones you've got in your 'home patch'.

3rd June

Weeks 10 & 11 – an end to the heatwave – marbled whites & meadow browns – banded demoiselles – meadowsweet & bedstraws – botanical graffiti

The Blackbird has fallen silent. He was broadcasting from the TV aerial first thing this morning, but now the rain's clattering on the roof and he's made for cover. Eerily quiet, then, and a day quite different from every other day since the middle of March: overcast, wet, and much warmer indoors than out. Somerset should have been playing a T20 today against Sussex at Hove, but it would almost certainly have been rained off anyway—a consoling thought. So we've given Hove a miss, and instead Ben and I have been walking the dog up at Staple Hill and Mount Fancy where, apart from a good crop of first-flowerers, I was particularly pleased to witness another excellent show of Stinkhorn fungi, *Phallus impudicus*, in the same place we saw them as a group almost exactly a year ago.

Taking the fortnight as a whole, today's rain has been an aberration at the end of another prolonged period of dry, sunny, warm weather. You'll have heard on the TV News that it's been the sunniest spring on record (since 1929); and in Taunton, at least, ten of the last 14 days have recorded temperatures of 25°C or above. The lack of rain this

spring has also been noteworthy. Effects on first flowerings can be strange and unpredictable: while drought stress might cause one species to 'stall', another—sensing impending doom, perhaps—decides to flower as quickly as it can, resulting in a mixture of responses. Even a single species can behave quite differently in different places, blooming precociously early on a dry, sheltered, sunny, south-facing slope while remaining stubbornly in bud everywhere else.

This also means that different people can have wildly differing perceptions of how FFDs are progressing. So, while some of us have had rich pickings in the last fortnight, others have been complaining that they've found next to nothing. Today's rain, especially if it's the start of a period of more changeable weather, may even things up a bit. Expect the barrenness of recent days, if that's been your experience, to be followed by a great flourish of new records in the next week or two...

Turning to what we've seen in the last fortnight, let's start, as usual, with things other than plants. At home—where, despite all this talk of 'easing', I still seem to spend much of my time—I've been mainly distracted by bees and blackbirds. In Week 10, continuing the 'b' theme, it was beetles. The first, appearing like a mislaid brooch on the doormat, was a Rose Chafer, *Cetonia aurata*, to be swiftly followed, in the back garden, by an equally iridescent and jewel-like Thick-legged or Swollen-thighed Beetle, *Oedemera nobilis*. They're not *thighs* of course—beetles don't have thighs, do they?—but the first segments of the male's back legs (the 'hind femora', to give them their proper name) are noticeably swollen, making it instantly recognisable: a beetle that looks like it's been seriously 'working out' at the gym. I'm sure I've been shown them on SRPG or SANHS field meetings, but this is the first time we've spotted one in the garden. It's a 'southern' species, with a distribution centred on the Mediterranean region and southern Europe. In the UK, at its north-western limit, it used to occur only very locally in southern-most counties of England, but since the 1990s, presumably as a result of climate change, it's undergone a rapid expansion of range. Now common across England and Wales as far north as a line running from the Mersey to the Wash, there are even scattered records into northern England, and (most recently) the extreme south of Scotland. Definitely one to keep an eye out for in your flower borders.

It's been a good fortnight for butterflies. Georgina saw her first Small Blues, *Cupido minimus*, and Large Skippers, *Ochlodes sylvanus*, on the 25th at Stoke Camp, and first Marbled Whites, *Melanargia galathea*, and Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*, on the 30th at Draycott Sleights. My own first Meadow Brown, at Orchard Wood, was on the 25th, followed by several at Thurlbear on the 27th. Keith had Meadow Browns and Large Skippers at Longrun Meadow, Taunton, on 1st June. He also saw his first Emperor Dragonfly, *Anax imperator*, there on the 1st. On the 2nd, down by the River Tone at Obridge, we found there had been an overnight/early morning mass emergence of Banded Demoiselles, *Calopteryx splendens*. What a *gorgeous* insect this is! We walked between Obridge and Creech Castle and counted dozens and dozens and *dozens* (easily more than 50) where the previous afternoon we hadn't seen a single one. The description in Cyril Hammond's field guide is spot on: "females have a feeble fluttering flight ... [but] males are much more active and engage in chasing one another and sometimes more than half-a-dozen may be seen involved in the chase which can last many minutes. Courtship is pretty to watch, the male vibrating his wings rapidly in front of or above the female before flying with her in tandem." Their slow, bobbing, butterfly-like flight is distinctive, as are the broad bands on the wings of the males, which seem, like their bodies, to have been dipped in blue-black 'Quink'.

On the botanical front it's been a busy two weeks, with 19 of you sending in a total of 225 records covering goodness-knows-how-many species. As already hinted, while some of you found target species elusive, others (including me) were having a field day. In all, we saw all but five of our 28 target species. The following gives you an idea of what we've all been up to, and what we've seen; as usual, target species have their scientific names emboldened, other notables are mentioned along the way, and the whole lot is stitched together in an order that's vaguely alphabetical, except when it isn't...

'A's abounding! Two reports of Agrimony, ***Agrimonia eupatoria***, first seen by Kate at Stolford on the 23rd, and then by Andrew (another 'A') at Crook Peak on the 30th. Pyramidal Orchids, ***Anacamptis pyramidalis***, are beginning to flower all over the place, with many of you noticing how the first blooms open towards the base of the spike, even while the top of the pyramid is still tightly

closed. The first was Andrew's, at Yarley on the 25th, then me at Orchard Wood on the 27th, followed by Steve in Bridgwater on the 29th—right next to a courting couple, apparently. Keith photographed a Pyramidal Orchid on the 1st in grassland out near the Silk Mills park-and-ride, which is currently being used as a COVID-19 testing station. I had my first bulbil-laden head of Wild Onion, *Allium vineale*, in a Taunton roadside flower-bed on the 2nd. Also we've had two records of the much prettier Rosy Garlic, *A. roseum*, one in Taunton on the 24th, the other from Alastair in Minehead, actually on the 14th (Week 9). Fool's Watercress, *Apium nodiflorum*, is one of the species that seems to have 'stalled' in the last week or two, but I did see it in flower on the 2nd in Taunton. Other noteworthy 'A's included: Fool's Parsley, *Aethusa cynapium*, on the 31st in Bridgwater (Steve); Marsh Foxtail, *Alopecurus geniculatus*, on the 25th in Bridgwater (Steve) and 2nd June at Postlebury (Gill); and more Kidney-vetch, *Anthyllis vulneraria*, this time at Stoke Camp, Mendip, on the 25th (Georgina).

A paucity of 'B's. We had two to search for, and only struck lucky with one of them: Black Horehound, *Ballota nigra*, was starting to flower at Obridge, Taunton, on the 23rd, while Andrew had it at Berrow on the 3rd. Flowering Rush, *Butomus umbellatus*, we'll have to carry over to Week 12. Amongst other 'B's, we've had first sightings of flowering Yellowwort, *Blackstonia perfoliata*, in 'proper' habitat, i.e. NOT beside a railway line. Georgina had it at Draycott Sleights on the 30th, while the next day Andrew saw it on Crook Peak; for the record, it's still only 'in bud' at Thurlbear. A couple of sightings of Borage, *Borago officinalis*, this week, from Steve and Linda, and also a surprisingly early record of Butterfly-bush, *Buddleja davidii*, on the 31st in Bridgwater (Steve).

'C' is for *Convolvulus*. I'll spare you the details, except to say that Andrew is leading the pack when it comes to colour-forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, with a score of 7/10. Looking at everyone's records so far, f. *arvensis* and f. *pentarrhabdotus* seem to be the most frequent, followed by f. *decarrhabdotus* and f. *pallidiroseus*. Colour forms with tick marks round the throat seem to be scarcer than those without. Or maybe they just start to flower slightly later? Thanks to Andrew, Jeanne, Ro and Linda, in particular, for their records, many of them with accompanying photographic evidence. (Sorry, I said I'd spare you the details, then couldn't resist giving you them anyway.)

Still on 'C's, and still on bindweeds, there have been several records of Large Bindweed, *Calystegia silvatica*, from Highbridge (Andrew), Wiveliscombe (Linda) and Taunton. I've been playing catch-up with my own 'C's, with Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, on the 24th, and Basil Thyme, *Clinopodium acinos*, on the 30th, the latter in its usual spot on Thurlbear Quarrylands. Of our targets, Rosebay Willowherb, *Chamaenerion angustifolium*, showed its first flowers in Taunton on the 2nd (on our back path) but Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*, (also on our back path) is yet to show itself. 'C' of the week, though, must surely be Steve's Bermuda-grass, *Cynodon dactylon*, at Bridgwater docks on the 24th. Only the second record of this grass in VC5.

'D' is for Ellen's exceptionally late FFD for Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. It was the same with her nettles, which you'll remember were also very late. Rumour has it she's still having to scrape ice off her windscreen each morning. For sheer classiness amongst the 'D's, though, what about Georgina's Cheddar Pink, *Dianthus gratianopolitanus*, seen flowering in the Gorge on the 30th?

'E'. I had thought Steve's Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*, on the 24th was a first for the year, until I looked back at Alastair's records and discovered that he'd seen this species flowering at Dunster on 18th April. So that one shouldn't have been on the list, really. Other than that, we've had our first Couch-grass, *Elymus repens*, in Taunton on the 29th and Highbridge on the 30th (Andrew), Great Willowherb, *Epilobium hirsutum*, in Taunton on the 30th, and Pale Willowherb, *E. roseum*, also in Taunton, also on the 29th. But still, amazingly, only a single record of Hoary Willowherb, *E. parviflorum*, which seems to have been badly affected by the prolonged dry spell. A couple of records of Caper Spurge, *Euphorbia lathyris*, on the 28th in Taunton and the 31st in Bridgwater (Steve). And, finally, a vaguely autumnal 'E' in the shape of Bell Heather, *Erica cinerea*, seen today at Staple Hill. This is usually the first of the 'heathers' to flower—even Walter Watson's FFD for it was mid-June—but should soon be followed by Cross-leaved Heath, *E. tetralix*, and then Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*. If you're out looking for any of these, keep an eye out also for the first Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*. Oh, and Slender St John's-wort, *Hypericum pulchrum*, too...

'F'. Just the one target this week, Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*, which three of us have seen—me on the 24th in Taunton (in the same ditch as the

Apium a week later), Andrew at Binham Moor, near Mark, on the 28th, and Steve in Bridgwater on the 31st. Others have commented on how it seems to have got 'stuck' in bud. Have another look in the next couple of days and you may find today's rain has worked its magic.

One other 'F' in passing: a plant of the not-so-common Common Cudweed, *Filago vulgaris*, flowering in bare ground off Canal Road, Taunton, on the 1st. We've had records of it in previous years from road verges near the railway station, but this is the first in Taunton away from that area. It's quite a scarce plant in Somerset, and 'Near Threatened' on the England Red List, so a nice one to have whether flowering or not.

'G'. Three species of bedstraw, *Galium*, were on our target list for the fortnight, and Andrew managed to twitch them all! On the 30th he found Lady's Bedstraw, *G. verum*, on Brent Knoll; the next day he had Hedge Bedstraw, *G. album*, on Crook Peak; and the day after that he picked up Marsh Bedstraw, *G. palustre*, at Wick Lane, Brent Knoll. And, not wanting to miss out completely on this sudden rash of bedstraws, I can also report seeing Fen Bedstraw, *G. uliginosum*, flowering nicely today at Mount Fancy, Staple Hill. To put these dates into some kind of perspective, Walter Watson's FFDs for *verum* and *album* were 25th June, *palustre* 10th June, and *uliginosum* 3rd August.

Our only other target 'G' was Dyer's Greenweed, *Genista tinctoria*, flowering at Thurlbear on the 26th and at Ellen's place 'up north' on the 28th. Amongst other 'G's, there were records of Goat's-rue, *Galega officinalis*, in Minehead on the 25th (Alastair), Gallant-soldier, *Galinsoga parviflora*, in Bridgwater on the 31st (Steve), Yellow Horned-Poppy, *Glaucium flavum*, at Dunster beach on the 25th (Alastair), and Corn Marigold, *Glebionis segetum*, near Nynhead on the 23rd (Linda). There were also three records for flowering French Oat-grass, *Gaudinia fragilis*, from Yarley, Brent Knoll and a field near Thurlbear. The last was in a new monad, in a field through which I've walked, probably every week, for the last 25 years. I'd like to think it must be a recent arrival, or else I've been extremely good at overlooking it all these years. I suspect the latter.

'G' is also for (botanical) Graffiti. Several of you have been in touch about the #morethanweeds campaign, becoming popular during lockdown, to chalk up the names of 'weeds' (sic) growing in urban streets, in pavement cracks and on roadside walls

and verges. It's simple really, you just head out with some coloured chalks, then write on the pavement or wall the English and scientific names of the plants you find. The hope is that people walking by will be encouraged to notice these street plants, and their names, and maybe come to *value* them more as a result. I mean to start my own campaign of pavement-scribbling soon, as well as posting a few pictures on our recently-formed neighbourhood WhatsApp group— Adria Bellflower, *Campanula portenschlagiana*, Ivy-leaved Toadflax, *Cymbalaria muralis*, Mexican Fleabane, *Erigeron karvinskianus*, Guernsey Fleabane, *E. sumatrensis*, Water Bent, *Polypogon viridis*, etc, etc... And the odd dandelion too. But it turns out someone's already on the case, as I've just come across an 'annotated' Herb Robert, *Geranium robertianum*, growing against a wall in Eastbourne Terrace. That's got to be my plant of the week. (And it was flowering too.)



Herb Robert, *Geranium robertianum*, Eastbourne Terrace, Taunton 03/06/20 ©Simon Leach

'H'. Three target 'H's, and all of them picked up by somebody in Week 11. Bristly Ox-tongue, *Helminthotheca echioides*, was seen in Taunton on the 28th, and at Lilstock on the 2nd (Ro). Hairy St John's-wort, *Hypericum hirsutum*, was on Crook Peak on the 31st (Andrew), and at Thurlbear on the 1st, while Perforate St John's-wort, *H. perforatum*, was seen on waste ground in Taunton on the 1st, and in Langford Budville on the 2nd (Chris L.). We've also had records this week for Meadow Barley, *Hordeum secalinum*, in Bridgwater and Taunton. 'H' of the

week, though, has to be Andrew's Lizard Orchid, *Himantoglossum hircinum*, at Berrow on the 22nd.

'H' is also for Helena, who's beaten her personal best so often in the last fortnight it's making me dizzy just thinking about it.

'I'. The normal colour variety of Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima*, is now flowering quite widely, following an early first sighting at Lilstock on the 19th (Ro), then Thurlbear and Orchard Wood on the 23rd (me) and Brent Knoll on the 29th (Andrew). Ro's experience is worth sharing, since it shows the lengths to which we're prepared to go when plant hunting: "I had one of those walks that just turns out horrid. An arable field edge ... had become choked with tangled Alexanders and Blackthorn suckers ... and Brambles, so I had a hellish struggle to get round ... I managed to collect two ticks and get stung and pricked." But it was worth it, in the end, as she also picked up her first flowers of Stinking Iris—or *Gladdon* as she and several others have called it. This name is derived, apparently, from the Latin *Gladiolus*, and was formerly applied also to Yellow Flag, *I. pseudacorus*, when early botanists knew it as 'water gladiolus.' (With thanks to Geoffrey Grigson.)

'J'. A rush of rushes this week, with first flowerings noted for Hard, *J. inflexus*, on the 23rd (Kate), Soft, *J. effusus*, and Compact, *J. conglomeratus*, on the 26th at Thurlbear, and a trio of Toad, *bufonius*, Bulbous, *J. bulbosus*, and Jointed, *J. articulatus* all flowering up at Mount Fancy earlier today. Watson would have expected these to be coming into flower in the last ten days of June, except for *J. bulbosus* for which his FFD was the 16th. So they're all jolly early, basically. Has the dry weather sped them up, I wonder?

'L'. Grass-leaved Vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*, and Meadow vetchling, *L. pratensis*, are both flowering well now, while there have been further records for Fairy Flax, *Linum catharticum* (me, at Thurlbear), Honeysuckle, *Lonicera periclymenum* (Gill and Liz, at North Wootton) and Purple Toadflax, *Linaria purpurea* (Dee, Clevedon). The first flowering Purple Loosestrife, *Lythrum salicaria*, was beside the River Tone on the 2nd.

'M'. Tufted Forget-me-not, *Myosotis laxa*, this week, but still no Water Forget-me-not, *M. scorpioides*. Alastair, by the way, had Bastard Balm, *Melittis melissophyllum*, at Sully on the 20th. (Helena had some in her garden, but that probably shouldn't count. Lovely picture though.) We've also had further records for Dwarf Mallow, *Malva neglecta*, Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*, both in Bridgwater,

and Common Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*, in both the Blackdowns and the Quantocks. The Thurlbear plants could well be subsp. *commutatum*, which is the one that tends to occur on calcareous soils. It needs checking though, so there's a specimen in the press for Fred to examine later...

'O'. More records for Corky-fruited Water Dropwort, *Oenanthe pimpinelloides*, including near Castle Cary on the 24th (David Re.) and Bridgwater on the 25th (Steve). Several records of Bee Orchid, *Ophrys apifera*, too: Orchard Wood (me) and Yarley (Andrew), both on the 25th; Fiona's lawn (no idea where she lives, maybe near Street?), on the 26th; and Chantry, on the 1st (Gill). And then, to cap it all, there was Jeanne and Tim's Fly Orchids, *Ophrys insectifera*, on the 26th. And Andrew has just reported seeing first-flowering Common Restharrow, *Ononis repens*, at Berrow golf course. This would have been on next week's list, had he managed *not* to see it. But he did, so it isn't!

'P'. We saw three of the four 'P's on offer: Canary Reed-grass, *Phalaris arundinacea*, was flowering well beside the River Tone at Obridge on the 29th; Selfheal, *Prunella vulgaris*, had just started flowering at Yarley on the 25th (Andrew) and at Orchard Wood on the 27th; and Greater Plantain, *Plantago major*, flowering (if you can call it that) on a road verge in Taunton on the 30th. Which just leaves Timothy, *Phleum pratense*, to carry over to Week 12.

'R'. Interesting to note how much later-flowering Field Rose, *Rosa arvensis*, is than Dog-rose, *R. canina*. That was the case in Watson's day, too. Whereas our first *R. canina*, was on 28th April (Watson's = 22nd May), our first *R. arvensis* wasn't until 28th May when Linda had it at Langford Heathfield (Watson's = 7th June). The next day, on the 29th, Gill saw it at Truddoxhill, while my own first for it was on the 30th in Taunton.

'S'. Firsts this last fortnight for Small Scabious, *Scabiosa columbaria*, on the 30th (Georgina, Draycott Sleights), Pepper-saxifrage, *Silaum silaus*, on the 23rd (Kate, Stolford), and Wood Club-rush, *Scirpus sylvaticus*, on the 29th (me, River Tone at Obridge). Nothing much else of note, although good to see Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*, now being widely reported, as also Common Figwort, *Scrophularia nodosa*, and Water Figwort, *S. auriculata*.

'T'. A third record for Hop Trefoil, this one from Linda on the 30th in Wivvy. More significant, though, was Georgina's discovery, on the same day, of Wild

Thyme, *Thymus drucei* aka *praecox* aka *polytrichus*, just starting to flower on Draycott Sleights.

'V'. And, as usual, ending with our 'V' of the week... This time, Andrew's patch of Tufted Vetch, *Vicia cracca*, at Wick Lane, Brent Knoll.

* * *

For Week 12 we'll go for 18 species. First of all, there are five to 'roll over' from our Weeks 10 and 11 list—a bit of a 'mixed bag' I'm afraid:

Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*; Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*; Water Forget-me-not, *Myosotis scorpioides*; Timothy, *Phleum pratense*; Alsike Clover, *Trifolium hybridum*.

To which we can now add the following 13 species, lots of them tall and showy, so hopefully fairly easy to spot as soon as they begin to flower:

Water-plantain, *Alisma plantago-aquatica*; Wood False-brome, *Brachypodium sylvaticum*; Greater Knapweed, *Centaurea scabiosa*; Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*; Hemp-agrimony, *Eupatorium cannabinum*; Reed Sweet-grass, *Glyceria maxima*; Field Scabious, *Knautia arvensis*; Musk Mallow, *Malva moschata*; Wild Madder, *Rubia peregrina*; Perennial Sowthistle, *Sonchus arvensis*; Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*; Great Mullein, *Verbascum thapsus*; Vervain, *Verbena officinalis*.

Plus there are lots of species, e.g. Common Centaury, *Centaurium erythraea*, Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota*, Branched Bur-reed, *Sparganium erectum*, and Betony, *Betonica officinalis*, for which we've had one or two anomalous/exceptionally early records, but which should soon be flowering more generally.

10th June

Week 12 – enchanter's-nightshade – colliding seasons – tigers in the polytunnel – field scabious & great mullein – a queue at the dump

It's raining again. This time, a soft crackle on the tiles sounding like the sizzling tick and patter of an old vinyl record. An indifferent week, weather-wise—which, given what's gone before, is surely noteworthy—often breezy, sometimes wet, not especially hot, and generally a fairly unpredictable mixture of cloud and sunshine. Which has given us new things to ponder, like whether it might be sensible to wear a coat of some sort. Or maybe take a brolly, just in case?

This week I've been reading Madeline Miller's *Circe*, a (quote) 'bold and subversive' retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, written from the point of view of the goddess-witch Circe, the much-maligned daughter of Helios, God of the Sun. And, would you believe it? One minute she was giving birth to her son, Telegonus, via what appeared to be *self-administered* Caesarean section; the next, on the back path, I came across first-flowering Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*. The link between the witch and the plant had never really occurred to me before, but is well summarised in Geoffrey Grigson's *Dictionary of English Plant Names*. To quote:

"The Flemish botanist Mathias de l'Obel (1538-1616) equated the Greek plant *kirkaia*, Latin *circaea*, used in charms, [at] first with *Solanum dulcamara*, the Woody Nightshade, then [later] with *Circaea lutetiana*. *Kirkaia* was taken to mean the plant of the witch or enchantress Kirke, or Circe..."

Or, more simply, as noted on the Woodland Trust's website:

"*Circaea* relates to Circe, an enchantress sometimes depicted as the Greek goddess of magic, who was known for her knowledge of herbs."

Strange, anyway, that two such disparate worlds—of Greek myths and first flowerings—should collide in this way.

And Tim Dee's two seasons of spring and autumn seem to be colliding too, which means that (in spite of this week's weather) it's really starting to feel like *summer*... And, as if to prove the point, Georgina reported her first Dark Green Fritillary, *Speyeria aglaja*, on the 5th, at Blackmoor. There have been further sightings of Marbled Whites, *Melanargia galathea*, and Large Skippers, *Ochlodes sylvanus*, Ro's had a Green Hairstreak, *Callophrys rubi*, and suddenly Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*, seem to be *everywhere*. Amongst other 'miscellaneous records', Helena and Val spotted a Swollen-thighed Beetle, *Oedemeria nobilis*, in Great Breach Wood on the 9th, while Andrew, on the same day, saw Chimney Sweeper moths, *Odezia atrata*, at GB Gruffy. And Ro reports that she has tigers in her polytunnel, although in this case, thankfully, *Scarlet Tigers*, *Callimorpha dominula*.

In the next couple of weeks, if you find yourself tramping through rough grassland, listen out for the first stridulating grasshoppers and bush-cricket; Meadow Grasshopper, *Chorthippus parallelus*, and

Field Grasshopper, *C. brunneus*, are the two commonest species in the county, and they're also often the first to reach adulthood and make themselves heard. You'll probably tell me now that you've heard them already...

On the botanical front it's been a more straightforward week, with a shorter list of target species, and many of them big and blousy, so quite easy to spot, even at a distance. The rain has helped, too, to push things on a bit, and we've managed to record all but five of the 18 species on our list. Another interesting week, too, for *late* first flowerings, particularly so for Pat over at Nettlecombe. She's been noticing how delayed some of her FFDs are in comparison with those from coastal or more lowland areas to the east. Tutsan, *Hypericum androsaemum*, for example, came into flower at Nettlecombe on 7th June (cf. 18th May in Taunton). But, don't forget, Pat also had the earliest FFD in the county for Creeping Thistle, *Cirsium arvense*, which shows that it's never safe to generalise. I've had my own catching up to do this week, with one of my best finds being on the 4th, an extraordinarily late FFD for White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*—five weeks after Linda's FFD for it at Nynehead. Even Watson would have found my date unremarkable; his FFD for it was 2nd June. Being five weeks behind Linda is bad enough, but two days behind Watson? I'm beginning to understand how Pat and 'ice-scraping' Ellen must feel. But, anyway, it's not a competition. Is it?

Here's a summary of what we've all found this week. A bit shorter than usual, partly because there are less species to cover, but mainly because I'm hoping for an early night.

An Absence of 'A's. Well, not quite, but nothing from the target list other than more sightings of Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, at East Quantoxhead on the 3rd (David H.), and Stoke Hill, Stoke St Mary, on the 6th (me). David H. also reported having seen Pyramidal Orchid, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, flowering at St George's Flower Bank on 25th May, the same day as Andrew's at Yarley. Potentially the most interesting 'A'—although at this point there will doubtless be shouts of 'L' for *Lysimachia*—was Chris L.'s Bog Pimpernel, *Anagallis tenella*, at Langford Heathfield on the 9th. This isn't one I usually record, but Watson's date for it was 23rd June.

'B' for *Brachypodium*. Two reports of Tor-grass, *Brachypodium rupestre/pinnatum*, both in Week 11,

and both from Crook Peak: David H. on the 28th, and Andrew on the 31st. But Week 12 was certainly the week for Wood False-brome, *Brachypodium sylvaticum*. The first report of it was from Wellington on the 5th (Linda), which provoked an email discussion about when, exactly, a grass like this can be said to be *flowering*. Grasses are difficult, we decided; and while some are quick to reveal their sexual parts, others, including this one, can be decidedly coy about it. (Wall Barley, *Hordeum murinum*, is another.) Anyway, following Linda's slightly optimistic record there was a flurry of sightings: David H. in Leigh Woods on the 7th, Andrew at Purn Hill on the 8th, and then on the 9th there were records from Helena and Val at Great Breach Wood, Pat at Nettlecombe, and me at Thurlbear. The first flowering Butterfly-bush, *Buddleja davidii*, in Taunton, incidentally, was on the 5th.

'C'. Two of you have seen Greater Knapweed, *Centaurea scabiosa*, both records were on the 3rd, so actually in Week 11. In our far-eastern enclave, Fred had it in bloom while he was investigating broomrapes near Whitchurch, and the same day David H. saw it at East Quantoxhead. As already mentioned, first records this week also for Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*: Taunton on the 4th, Leigh Woods on the 7th (David H.), and Paulton on the 9th (Helena).

'C' is also for *Convolvulus*. Several of you have been sending in records of the various colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*. Early indications are that f. *arvensis* (white) and f. *pentarrhabdotus* (5-pointed star) are the *most* frequent, while those having 'tick' marks round the yellow throat are the *least* frequent. The scores at the moment are:

f. <i>arvensis</i> = 8 records;	f. <i>pentarrhabdotus</i> = 8;
f. <i>perroseus</i> = 4;	f. <i>pallidiroseus</i> = 3;
f. <i>decarrhabdotus</i> = 3;	f. <i>pallidinotatus</i> = 2;
f. <i>notatus</i> = 1;	f. <i>decemvulnerus</i> = 1;
f. <i>pentastictus</i> = 1;	f. <i>quinquevulnerus</i> = 0.

Needless to say, these ten forms can seem like points along a continuum of variation, with the pink of some flowers being very pale, and tick marks faint, while others are much more strongly marked. The f. *perroseus* is particularly striking, the flower usually being a very pretty deep pink with contrasting white 'star' in its centre. The f. *pallidiroseus* can be hard to separate from

f. *arvensis*, the pink ‘flushing’ often being very pale; yet, put one of these barely-flushed flowers next to a pure white f. *arvensis* and you can immediately see the difference: f. *arvensis* is the colour of an ‘ice white’ polo shirt, whereas f. *pallidiroseus* is like the same polo shirt after it’s been through the wash with a pair of red socks. Also, I do wonder whether f. *arvensis* flowers tend to be slightly smaller than f. *pallidiroseus*?

‘D’ is for Carrot. Lots of records of Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota*, now, including Dee in her garden on the 1st, then at Clevedon Pill on the 7th, David H. at East Quantoxhead on the 3rd, and Andrew at West Huntspill on the 5th.

‘E’. Hemp-agrimony, *Eupatorium cannabinum*, earlier today, on the bank of the River Tone beside Goodlands Gardens. I’d been watching it all week as it was ‘pinking up’, but only this morning did the first flowers begin to open. Also, following last week’s rain, Hoary Willowherb, *Epilobium parviflorum*, has finally begun to flower in Taunton; and a second record of Great Willowherb, *E. hirsutum*, this time in Brent Knoll village (Andrew). Oh yes, and a ‘first’, too, from Chris L. who has reported having seen Cross-leaved Heath, *Erica tetralix*, at Langford Heathfield on 26th May—so actually in Week 10. Very early! (Watson’s date for it was 23rd June.)

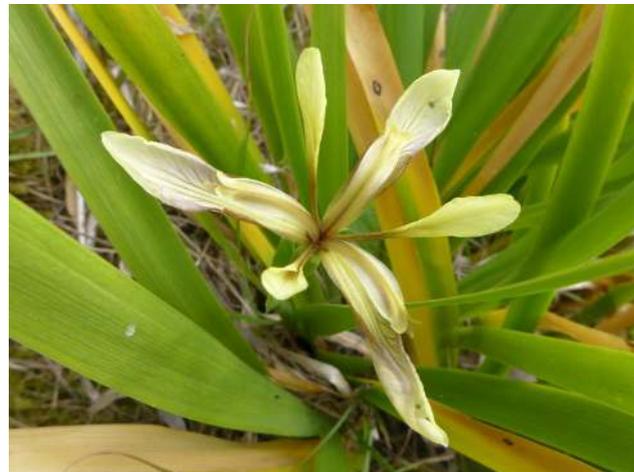
‘F’. Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*, popping up everywhere now—even at Nettlecombe where first flowers were seen on the 10th.

‘G’. *Galiums* galore this week, with lots more records for *verum*, *album*, *palustre* and *saxatile*. Reed Sweet-grass, *Glyceria maxima*, like *Brachypodium sylvaticum* a rather ‘shy’ grass when it comes to exposing its anthers, is now beginning to flower along the canal in Taunton, near Firepool Weir. Panicles are nicely expanded, anyway.

‘H’. It’s also been quite a week for St John’s-worts. Plenty more Hairy, *Hypericum hirsutum*, and Perforate, *H. perforatum*; plus lots of first-flowering Slender, *H. pulchrum*, including Georgina on the 5th at Blackmoor, Pat on the 7th at Greencombe, Linda on the 8th at Wivvy, and Chris L. at Langford Heathfield on the 9th.

‘I’. An early FFD for Ploughman’s-spikenard, *Inula conyzae*, was Andrew’s from Purn Hill on the 8th. The yellow variant of Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* var. *citrina*, has also been spotted again, this time by Helena and Val at Great Breach Wood: “Interestingly, we first started seeing yellow ones on the slope above the former Monocot Nursery ... but

there was quite a bit on New Hill, further along the slope, mixed in with blue ones.” Which leaves me still wondering to what extent this variety might have been preferentially taken into cultivation, from where it has then got back out into the wild as a garden escape or throw-out.



Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* var. *citrina*, Great Breach Wood 09/06/20 ©Helena Crouch

‘J’. Not a first-flowerer, but we can’t pass this point in the alphabet without a nod to David H.’s discovery in Leigh Woods on the 7th of *Janetiella lemeei*, a midge causing little wart-like galls on Wych Elm, *Ulmus glabra*. This appears to be a new county record of a species for which there is only a handful of GB records on the NBN. (With thanks to Simon Haarder, a Danish cecidologist/dipterist, and Keith Harris for confirming its identity.) David also had a couple of nice midge galls on Lime, *Tilia* sp., *Contarinia tiliarum* and *Didymomyia tiliacea*, the latter also, possibly, a ‘first’ for the county.

‘K’. Field Scabious, *Knautia arvensis*, was on our target list, but probably shouldn’t have been, since David H. had seen it flowering at St George’s Flower Bank on 21st May (at start of Week 10), and Chris L. saw it in Langford Budville on 28th May (at start of Week 11). My own FFD, in Taunton, was on 5th June.

‘L’. One species that’s begun to spread in these parts recently is Great Lettuce, *Lactuca virosa*. Previously a real rarity in VC5, the first record for the Taunton area was Graham’s on the day of our ‘last week hunt’ at the end of October 2018, in the Silk Mills park-and-ride car park. In 2019 we found it to be quite abundant on road verges near the Somerset Heritage Centre. And this week, to my astonishment, I’ve seen it in two new roadside sites on Obridge Road, and close to the junction of Priorswood Road and Lyngford Road. The plants were flowering well, but more than anything it was their height that

really impressed: they were *massive*, with the tallest attaining a height in excess of 3 metres. A plant with real *chutzpah*. (For Bog Pimpernel, *Lysimachia tenella*, you'll have to go back to 'A'.)

'M'. Two targets this week: Water Forget-me-not, *Myosotis scorpioides*, which was found to be flowering well in the canal near Firepool Weir, Taunton, on the 4th; and Musk Mallow, *Malva moschata*, which started blooming with great synchrony this week, in Taunton on the 4th, Wivvy on the 8th (Linda), and Clevedon also on the 8th (Dee), to list but three. Lucerne, *Medicago sativa* subsp. *sativa*, was also seen this week, like the *Malva*, in Taunton and Wivvy.



Musk Mallow, *Malva moschata*, Wiveliscombe 08/06/20
©Linda Everton

'P', 'R', 'S'. One of each. Timothy, *Phleum pratense*, at last, was seen by Andrew on the 6th, at Highbridge. Wild Madder, *Rubia peregrina*, was picked up by David H. on his highly productive visit to East Quantoxhead on the 3rd (Week 11), while I had it in a wood-border hedgerow at Thurlbear on the 8th. The only 'S' was Perennial Sowthistle, *Sonchus arvensis*, which was seen on the 6th in a road verge beside a bridge over the M5 between Stoke St Mary and Taunton. Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*, though, we'll have to roll over to Week 13.

'T'. Three extra-curricular 'T's this week: Hare's-foot Clover, *Trifolium arvense*, in flower on Berrow golf course on the 7th (Andrew); Bulrush, *Typha latifolia*, in Taunton on the 9th; and, with thanks to David H.'s

father, a record of Common Meadow-rue, *Thalictrum flavum*, on Weston Moor on the 5th.

And, as ever, our 'V's of the week, and both Week 12 targets: Great Mullein, *Verbascum thapsus*, on 30th May in Wivvy (Linda), on the 6th at Highbridge (Andrew), and on the 8th in Taunton; and Vervain, *Verbena officinalis*, in Brent Knoll village on the 4th (Andrew).

Am I the only one to find that a good way to remain sane while in a traffic jam is to engage in roadside botany? Well, it paid off handsomely on the 8th, with my own first-flowering *Verbena officinalis* being the high point—along with Greater Quaking-grass, *Briza maxima*, and Wall Bedstraw, *Galium parisiense*—of an hour spent queuing to get into Priorswood Recycling Centre.

* * *

For Week 13, we'll go for 19 species. I think maybe we should give up on Alsike Clover, *Trifolium hybridum*, so let's start by rolling over four from Week 12, three of them wetland species:

Water-plantain, *Alisma plantago-aquatica*; Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*; Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*; Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*.

To which we can now add the following 15 species:

Creeping Bent, *Agrostis stolonifera*; Greater Burdock, *Arctium lappa*; Lesser Burdock, *Arctium minus* agg; Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*; Hairy-brome, *Bromopsis ramosa*; Lesser Centaury, *Centaureum pulchellum*; Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*; Wild Basil, *Clinopodium vulgare*; Tufted Hair-grass, *Deschampsia cespitosa*; Teasel, *Dipsacus fullonum*; Square-stalked St John's-wort, *Hypericum tetrapterum*; Marjoram, *Origanum vulgare*; Autumn Hawkbit, *Scorzoneroides autumnalis*; and, lastly, for anyone who happens to be on the Levels, what about Tubular Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe fistulosa*? Or, if you're near the coast, Parsley Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe lachenalii*?

17th June

Week 13 – thunder storms – The Subtle Knife – Captain Roe's card index box – square-stalked St John's-wort – autumn hawkbit

The air today is thick and humid, and there are distant—and then not-so-distant—rumbles of thunder. For the last ten minutes a Peregrine has been circling overhead, calling and pulling in a mob of agitated gulls. An absence of Swifts, and the

rumbling's getting louder: the sky is dark to the west, darker still to the north-west. It's dry here, for now, but it's probably pelting on the Quantocks. Today's brewing storm feels like it might be a reprise of yesterday's cloudburst, with rain drops like gobbets the size of garden snails, or liquid marbles, each one producing its own miniature puddle as it hits the ground. Within a minute, down-pipes full to bursting, drains in the street bubbling up from below; and our Blackbird dumb-struck and marooned in the depths of his holly tree.

Yet now, I notice, the rumbling has gone away, the air has cleared, the sun is shining again and next door's plastic roof gutters are clicking in the heat. And that, really sums up the week, a mixed assortment of weather that each of us would probably describe quite differently; a week when it feels unsafe to generalise, when one person's moment in the sun doubtless coincided with another person's drenching. The only settled days, in Taunton at least, were on the 14th and 15th. Otherwise, we had rain here each day, with two days, the 11th and 12th, also quite windy. Daytime temperatures in the upper teens, peaking stickily yesterday at 24°C. Nights have been warm too, actually warmer than during earlier 'heatwaves', presumably due to the frequent overnight blanket of cloud.

Yesterday I was scanning the bookshelves for Philip Pullman's *The Subtle Knife*. Ben used to have the boxed set, but only the first of the 'Dark Materials' trilogy—*Northern Lights*—is in the box, the other two have disappeared. Searching for something is always an opportunity to find something else that you weren't really looking for, that maybe you'd forgotten you ever had. *The Subtle Knife* was proving elusive, but instead I came across something far more interesting: an old card index box, with pull-out drawer and covering of imitation snake skin. The box, I now remember, came to me on loan from Helena a few years ago. It had previously belonged to Captain Robert G.B. O'Neil Roe, BSBI's Vice-county Recorder for VC6 1965-1993, and VC5 1978-1993. Roe, like Walter Watson before him, had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the flora of Somerset and was an assiduous keeper of records. The two men, luckily for us, also shared a particular interest in first flowering dates. But while Watson's dates were eventually published (at least in summary form) Roe's remained hidden away in this card index box. There are *hundreds* of 5" x 3" index cards, one for each species, and each one listing FFDs—with

locations—for the period 1951-61. He had the neatest writing, and the smallest too. His records aren't always straightforward to interpret, not least because in some years they were as likely to relate to places in Cornwall, or Wiltshire, as they were to Somerset. Also, his own 'local patch' was around Bath, whereas Watson's was Taunton; and, as we've seen in our own records this year, dates are liable to vary considerably from one part of the county to another. But Roe's record-cards nevertheless provide a rich seam of data that would merit much closer examination.

Interestingly, many of his FFDs seem to be as late, or later, than those recorded by Watson in the 1920s/30s. To take a random example: Tutsan, *Hypericum androsaemum*, was said by Watson to flower between June and August, with an average FFD of 26th June, whereas even Roe's *earliest* FFD in the 1950s was 1st July. Sometimes he didn't see it flowering until August, and his *average* FFD was 8th August, so about six weeks later than Watson's. As a comparison, my own average FFD for the period 2008-17 was 6th June, while our earliest FFD for Tutsan this year was 18th May, three days earlier than even the *earliest* FFD during the period 2008-17. Watson would have been astonished, but Roe would have been *flabbergasted*. Anyway, be prepared, from this week onwards, for our own records to be cross-referenced occasionally with Roe's as well as Watson's dates.

Now, as you'll be aware, the premiership football season gets underway again today, with some matches even being shown on terrestrial TV. In celebration of this long-awaited shift towards normality, I'll start this week's botanical summary by giving you the latest 'state of play' on *Convolvulus arvensis* colour forms. Assume that there are five matches, then, and that each match is being played between a 'non-ticked' colour form (on the left in the Table below) and its 'ticked' counterpart (on the right). So, for these purposes, you have to imagine that f. *arvensis* (all-white strip, without 'ticks') is playing against f. *notatus* (similar strip but with a rather smart ring of purple 'ticks' around the neck)...

Field Bindweed, interim scores up to end of Week 13

You can see from the table that all those teams sporting 'tick' marks (apart from Sheffield United) are consistently being thrashed by their 'unticked' rivals, giving a combined score of 35 records for 'non-ticked' colour forms against just seven for 'ticked'. Oh yes, and while I think of it, to add to last

week's notes about how to distinguish between *f. arvensis* and *f. pallidiroseus*, it's also worth stressing that the first has *white* anthers while the second has *purplish* anthers.

Aston Villa	0	v.	Sheffield United	0
Manchester City	3	v.	Arsenal	0
<i>f. arvensis</i>	12	v.	<i>f. notatus</i>	2
<i>f. pallidiroseus</i>	4	v.	<i>f. pallidinotatus</i>	3
<i>f. pentarrhabdotus</i>	11	v.	<i>f. pentastictus</i>	1
<i>f. decarrhabdotus</i>	3	v.	<i>f. decemvulnerus</i>	1
<i>f. perroseus</i>	5	v.	<i>f.</i>	0

This also holds good for the 'ticked' variants *f. notatus* (corolla and anthers white) and *f. pallidinotatus* (corolla flushed palest pink, anthers purple).

Now for our sightings from the last week. Between us, we saw ten of the 19 target species...

'A' is for Bent. On our target list we had Creeping Bent, *Agrostis stolonifera*, seen on the 15th in Taunton, and reported by Andrew on the 16th from Lots SWT reserve—the latter along with flowering Common Bent, *A. capillaris* and Velvet Bent, *A. canina*. Amongst other 'A's, Andrew recorded the first few flowers on Water-plantain, *Alisma plantago-aquatica* at Brent Knoll village on the 14th. Pat, out at Nettlecombe, picked up Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, on the 17th, amongst another really interesting batch of relatively late FFDs. Other species of note included Alastair's Babington's Leek, *Allium ampeloprasum* var. *babingtonii*, at Porlock Marsh on the 8th, a second record of Bog Pimpernel, *Anagallis* (= *Lysimachia*) *tenella*, this one at Lots on the 16th, and Meadow Oat-grass, *Avenula pratensis*, another one of Andrew's records, at Priddy Mineries on the 12th.

'B'. Betony, *Betonica officinalis*, has now begun its 'proper' flowering season, with records from GB Gruffy on the 9th (Andrew), Ashton Court meadows on the 14th (David H.), and at Long Dole Meadow, also on the 14th (Helena and Fred). Still no sign of it, though, at Thurlbear or Orchard Wood. One other 'B' of note was Rye Brome, *Bromus secalinus*, on the 17th, on a road verge in Taunton rather than in its usual arable habitat.

It was a week of 'C's, with four on the target list and all of them seen by at least one of us. Lesser Centaury, *Centaureum pulchellum*, was actually seen by Jeanne on the 7th (so in Week 12), at Blue Anchor; Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*, had begun to flower at Observatory Hill—so *just* in VC34—when

David H. visited on the 16th; first-flowering Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*, was clambering over a low shrub-border on the edge of Tesco's car park off Wellington Road, Taunton, on the 14th; and Ro had Wild Basil, *Clinopodium vulgare*, at Lilstock, also on the 14th. Other noteworthy 'C's included Steve's Whorl-grass, *Catabrosa aquatica*, near North Newton, on the 13th, and my own (very early) Fat-hen, *Chenopodium album*, near Creech St Michael on the 12th. Just for the record, Watson's average FFD for Fat-hen was 8th July, while Roe's earliest FFD in the 1950s was 9th July.

'D'. Two reports of first-flowering Tufted Hair-grass, *Deschampsia cespitosa*, this week: GB Gruffy on the 9th (so actually Week 12), courtesy of Andrew, and North Newton on the 13th, with thanks to Steve. Another grass seen flowering for the first time this week was Heath-grass, *Danthonia decumbens*, at Thurlbear on the 15th and at Lots on the 16th. Also at GB Gruffy on the 9th was Wavy Hair-grass, *Deschampsia flexuosa*, which is now flowering well at several heathland sites on the Blackdown Hills, along with a couple of 'E's, Bell Heather, *Erica cinerea*, and Cross-leaved Heath, *E. tetralix*.

'H'. This has definitely been the week for Square-stalked St John's-wort, *Hypericum tetrapterum*, with records from Old Cleeve on the 9th (Jeanne), Creech St Michael on the 12th (me), The Quants on the 15th (Linda), and Langford Heathfield on the 17th (Chris L.). Another 'H' of possibly only 'niche' interest, was the discovery earlier today of a large roadside/waste ground population of (flowering) Hoary Mustard, *Hirschfeldia incana*, on Trenchard Way, close to the bridge across Station Road. This seems to be the first record of Hoary Mustard for ST22 and the Taunton area since the turn of the century.

'L'. First records this week for: Prickly Lettuce, *Lactuca serriola*, on the 17th at Creech Castle, Taunton; Yellow Loosestrife, *Lysimachia vulgaris*, on the 12th at Postlebury (Gill); and Water-purslane, *Lythrum portula*, on the 15th at Blackdown and Sampford Common—just over the border in Devon, I admit, but always considered, by me at least, to be part of 'Greater Somerset'. Well, the parking place is in Somerset!

'M', 'N', 'O'... Just the one target species: Marjoram, *Origanum vulgare*, which, like the Water-purslane fell just outside the county's borders—this time at Observatory Hill, Bristol, where it was seen by David H. on the 16th. Other than that, a motley collection including reported first flowerings of Creeping

Forget-me-not, *Myosotis secunda*, Water Chickweed, *Myosoton aquaticum* (*Stellaria aquatica* in Stace 4), Mat-grass, *Nardus stricta*, Bog Asphodel, *Narthecium ossifragum*, and Spiny Restharrow, *Ononis spinosa*.

'P'. Included this week are sightings of two 'P's that would have been on later lists: Hawkweed Oxtongue, *Picris hieracioides*, on the 17th at Creech Castle, Taunton; and Burnet-saxifrage, *Pimpinella saxifraga*, on the 12th at Priddy Mineries (Andrew). Linda found flowering Pale Butterwort, *Pinguicula lusitanica*, at Ring Down on the 13th, while there were also two records of Annual Beard-grass, *Polypogon monspeliensis*, from Stock Moor on the 14th (Steve), and on waste ground at Firepool Weir, Taunton on the 15th. The latter is an attractive and eye-catching grass that seems to be spreading, at least in parts of VC5.

'S'. Our target was Autumn Hawkbit, *Scorzoneroides autumnalis*, which was seen by three of us: Helena in Paulton on the 14th, me in Taunton, also on the 14th, and Andrew at Crook Peak on the 17th. This is exactly a month earlier than Watson's average FFD of 15th July, and 3-4 weeks earlier than Roe's dates in the 1950s. Its English name really ought to be Summer Hawkbit. Some really lovely 'S's tagging along too, such as Chris L.'s Lesser Skullcap, *Scutellaria minor*, at Langford Heathfield on the 14th, Helena and Fred's Devil's-bit Scabious, *Succisa pratensis*, at Long Dole Meadow on the 14th (a very early date), and—less lovely, but still noteworthy—my own Sand Spurrey, *Spergularia rubra*, on Blackdown and Sampford Common where it was growing alongside the Water-purshlane. The only Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*, was in Surrey (thanks Fred!), so that one stays on the list for another week I'm afraid.

'T'. Amongst her batch of 'late' FFDs, Pat also had our earliest FFD for Wood Sage, *Teucrium scorodonia*, on the 15th. Also, we had two more reports of Wild Thyme, *Thymus drucei*, both in Week 12: one from 'near Watchet' on the 8th (Alastair), the other, also on the 8th, from Purn Hill (Andrew).

'V'. A strange absence of 'V's this week, apart from Gill's Vervain, *Verbena officinalis*, at Truddoxhill, and my own Tufted Vetch, *Vicia cracca*, which has at last begun to flower in the Taunton area.

The end of another week, each one now seeming a little more 'normal' than the last, despite the need for endless discussions about what's acceptable and what's not, how one defines a 'bubble', whether to wear a mask, which is the best hand sanitizer... not

to mention daily amazement at some people's interpretation of what is meant, exactly, by the term 'two metres'.

Yet amid all the uncertainty and understandable worry, it's good to see that a few of us are beginning to meet up with friends again for the occasional socially distanced botanical foray; and good, too, that the numbers of sites being visited seem to be increasing each week. A sure sign that we are returning—slowly, tentatively—to some of our old haunts and old ways.

Do keep the *Convolvulus arvensis* records coming in, by the way. It seems that f. *arvensis* may be destined to win the League—much like Liverpool—and that 'non-ticks' will ultimately hold sway over 'ticks'. But, as football commentators always say following a late goal against the run of play: "it's never over 'til it's over"...

And we *still* haven't found *The Subtle Knife*.

* * *

I'm taking another one-week sabbatical, so we'll have a list to last us a fortnight this time around. Let's go for 21 species. First of all, there are nine to carry over from Week 13:

Greater Burdock, *Arctium lappa*; Lesser Burdock, *Arctium minus* agg; Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*; Hairy-brome, *Bromopsis ramosa*; Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*; Teasel, *Dipsacus fullonum*; Tubular Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe fistulosa*; Parsley Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe lachenalii*; Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*. To which we can add the following 12 species:

Wild Angelica, *Angelica sylvestris*; Spear-leaved Orache, *Atriplex prostrata*; Fig-leaved Goosefoot, *Chenopodium ficifolium*; Marsh Cudweed, *Gnaphalium uliginosum*; Many-seeded Goosefoot, *Lipandra polysperma* (= *Chenopodium polyspermum*); Gypsywort, *Lycopus europaeus*; Purple Moor-grass, *Molinia caerulea*; Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*; Stone Parsley, *Sison amomum*; Tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*; Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*; Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*.

1st July

Weeks 14 & 15 – a marathon, not a sprint – one-metre plus – a very hot day – ringlets & grasshoppers – the blue cummerbund – marsh woundwort

"This is a marathon, not a sprint." Admittedly, that statement was being used in relation to our slow

emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic, and to highlight the need to remain vigilant as the lockdown eases. But it could equally well apply to first flowerings. In the last two weeks we've slipped beyond the summer solstice. Tim Dee would declare this to be the time when things start to unravel and fall apart; when the surge of spring that's been carrying us forward suddenly seems to dissipate, and we're left to face the long trudge toward autumn. Well, I'm as prone to 'PSD' (post-solstice doldrums) as anyone, but I'm not prepared to give up on spring just yet. As the politician said: this is a marathon, not a sprint.

So, we've reached that point in the year when (in our parallel universe) thoughts would turn to Wimbledon and Glastonbury and Lord's. Roger Federer, Kaiser Chiefs, Jonathan Agnew... The weather has had a distinctly summery edge to it: hard to pin down or predict with any certainty, frequently wet, sometimes windy, and occasionally hot and humid. Just enough rain, probably, to turn Worthy Farm into a steaming mud bath. We had a particularly drenching day on the 18th, when it rained from start to finish, then on the 25th we endured the hottest day of the year so far (32°C in Taunton); when UV levels were supposedly the highest ever recorded in the UK, and when too many of us decided to head off for a day at the seaside. Some roads were gridlocked, car parks and beaches were packed. Throughout lockdown many have struggled with the concept of 'two metres', but we're now expected to re-calibrate to a new measurement called *one-metre plus*—which, once the pubs open and the summer holidays begin, could very quickly come to mean 'no distance at all'. If we can avoid a second wave it'll be a miracle.

In the last update, I got so carried away with Captain Roe's index cards that I forgot to report on non-botanical matters. These included first 'hearings' of Meadow Grasshoppers *Chorthippus parallelus* and Field Grasshoppers, *C. brunneus*, on the 14th—at Longrun Meadow in the south, and Long Dole Meadow in the north. Also on the 14th there were Small Skippers, *Thymelicus sylvestris*, and Six-spot Burnets, *Zygaena filipendulae*. In Weeks 14 and 15 the 'buzz' of high summer continued with Ringlets, *Aphantopus hyperantus*, from the 22nd, while Ro had her first Humming-bird Hawk-moth, *Macroglossum stellatarum*, nectaring on Red Valerian, *Centranthus ruber*, on the 26th. Several of you have commented on the exceptional numbers of Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*, and Marbled Whites, *Melanargia*

galathea. Apparently this is the second good summer on the trot for Marbled Whites; anyone living in Taunton would normally expect to have to head into the Blackdowns to guarantee seeing this butterfly, but in the last few weeks they've been popping up all across the town—in Vivary Park, Goodlands Gardens, between Obridge and Creech Castle, Longrun Meadow and Roughmoor. Since mid-June there's also been a flurry of records of 'summer brood' Commas, *Polygonia c-album*, perhaps a couple of weeks earlier than usual. These are the offspring of over-wintering butterflies that emerged in early spring.

The dog's ears are a good barometer of the changing seasons, too. Gilly is a cocker spaniel, and once past the summer solstice her ears start to become tangled with burrs. A walk of one hour can lead to a de-burring session at least as long. At the moment it's mainly the burrs of Wood Avens, *Geum urbanum*, but within a week or two it'll be Goosegrass, *Galium aparine*, soon to be followed by Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*, and Burdock, *Arctium* spp. Each burr to its own season.

You've sent in many more records of *Convolvulus arvensis* colour forms in the last fortnight, and the scores are beginning to look less like football and more like rugby. So, here's an update, this time headed up by Exeter Chiefs' crucial game against Sarracens that lifted them to the top of the Premier League back in December. As before, teams wearing 'unticked' strips are on the left, those with 'ticks' on the right.

Clearly, teams lacking 'tick' marks continue to outscore their 'ticked' counterparts, with a combined score of 64 records for 'non-ticked' colour forms and just 10 for 'ticked'. In the latter group, only f. *notatus* and f. *pallidinotatus* are at all frequent, while those displaying five- or ten-point stars seem to be invariably tick-free. But maybe that will change as the season progresses.

Field Bindweed, scores up to end of Week 15

Exeter Chiefs	14	v.	Sarracens	7
f. <i>arvensis</i>	20	v.	f. <i>notatus</i>	3
f. <i>pallidiroseus</i>	9	v.	f. <i>pallidinotatus</i>	5
f. <i>pentarrhabdotus</i>	17	v.	f. <i>pentastictus</i>	1
f. <i>decarrhabdotus</i>	7	v.	f. <i>decemvulnerus</i>	1
f. <i>perroseus</i>	11	v.	f. <i>quinquevulnerus</i>	0

Now for our first flowerings from the last fortnight. Many thanks, as usual, for your records. This time we had 21 target species to search for, of which (amazingly) we saw all but three.

'A'. Our target list was awash with 'A's, and we saw all bar Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*. Chris L. had first-flowering Wild Angelica, *Angelica sylvestris*, on the 29th at Langford Heathfield. In Taunton, the two Burdocks had been stubbornly in bud for about two weeks, but the mini-heatwave produced a sudden 'opening' of Greater Burdock, *Arctium lappa*, on the 27th and Lesser Burdock, *A. minus* agg., on the 29th. Meanwhile, Andrew reported first flowers on Spear-leaved Orache, *Atriplex prostrata*, at Burnham-on-Sea on the 21st. It was seen flowering in Taunton, too, but not until the 29th. Amongst other 'A's, there was a second record of Water-plantain, *Alisma plantago-aquatica*, this time from the pond at Roughmoor, on the 26th, to add to the Great Water Dock, *Rumex hydrolapathum*, which began flowering there on the 18th. And another 'A', Alastair, spotted first flowers on Sea Aster, *Aster tripolium*, at Wall Common on the 25th. (Watson's date for Sea Aster was 24th July...)

'B'. Hairy-brome, *Bromopsis ramosa*, is another grass that can be hard to judge the flowering of. It has such graceful, dangling inflorescences, but at what point, exactly, do you decide it's flowering rather than merely *about* to flower? It's certainly up and showing well, as Linda reported on the 28th, and I've seen it close to flowering at Thurlbear on the 29th, and again earlier today, but I'm not convinced yet. Andrew, however, had it flowering at Hollow Marsh on the 30th, so that's great, and we can expect more records of it in the coming days. Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*, seems particularly shy this year, but I finally found a clump of it in flower on the River Tone at Obridge on the 27th. Not an especially early date for it. Watson's average FFD for *Butomus* was 7th July; Roe's earliest in the 1950s was 2nd July. All much of a muchness, then.

'C'. Just the one target species this week, given that Many-seeded Goosefoot is now *Lipandra* rather than *Chenopodium*. Fig-leaved Goosefoot, *C. ficifolium*, was seen first by Linda on the 23rd, in Wellington, then by me on a rare trip to the Levels, near Burrowbridge, on the 26th. Otherwise, 'C' is for 'catch-up', including my own first Greater Knapweed, *Centaurea scabiosa*, and Common Centaury, *Centaureum erythraea*, on the 22nd, Wild Basil, *Clinopodium vulgare*, on the 28th, and Stemless

Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*, on 1st July. All of them at Thurlbear. Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*, was flowering at Clevedon on the 18th (Dee), and at Sandford on the 25th (Ann B.). And Pat, at Nettlecombe, had her first Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, on the 28th, and Rose-bay Willowherb, *Chamaenerion angustifolium*, on the 30th, continuing the pattern of slightly later first flowering in that area. These dates are very much in line with what Watson would have expected in the Taunton area in the 1920s/30s, his FFD for the former being 26th June, and for the latter 8th July.



Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*, Ubley Warren 05/07/20
©Georgina Shuckburgh

'D' is for Teasel, *Dipsacus fullonum*, with Ro delighted to spot her first "blue cummerbund" on the morning of the 20th. Later the same day, Andrew had it beginning to flower at Highbridge, followed by records in Taunton on the 22nd and Linda's in Wellington on the 23rd. Among other 'D's' was Common Sundew, *Drosera rotundifolia*, reported by Andrew from Westhay on the 23rd. I've no idea whether this is early or not, but I see that Watson's date for it was 3rd July. Unfortunately, Roe's dates from the 1950s all seem to be from locations outside Somerset.

How can we skirt past 'E' without mention of Andrew's Marsh Helleborine, *Epipactis palustris*, at

Berrow on the 24th? The plants were small of stature, so the flowers were hidden in the herbage and hard to spot. Well worth the search though, and another one, like the sundew, for which the only FFDs we have to go on are those of Watson's—his date for it was 11th July.

'G' and 'H'. Just the one record so far of Marsh Cudweed, *Gnaphalium uliginosum*, seen flowering with *Lipandra polysperma*, on a muddy field margin near Roughmoor on the 26th. (Also with lots of Bulbous Canary-grass, *Phalaris aquatica*—a new hectad record for this game-cover alien.) And, just in passing, I need to note further sightings of Hoary Mustard, *Hirschfeldia incana*, in the Taunton area. Is this a recent colonist, or have I been overlooking it? A couple of plants of it are in full flower on the A3038 dual carriageway between Wickes roundabout and the Shell garage, while there are great thickets of it alongside the railway line between Staplegrove Road and Silk Mills. The petals are a more delicate, slightly paler yellow than those of Black Mustard, *Brassica nigra*, with which it sometimes grows, while the little club-shaped fruits and greyish leaves help to distinguish it too. It seems to be more widespread in VC6 than in VC5; in *The Atlas Flora of Somerset*, the Green twins note that it's "an increasing species in the county, especially in the Bridgwater area."

Two other surprising 'H's to report: Frogbit, *Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*, on the 23rd on Mark Moor (Andrew), and the 26th at Burrowbridge (me); and, also on the 23rd, Helena and Fred had Marsh Pennywort, *Hydrocotyle vulgaris*, at Tynning Wood, near Gare Hill—not just flowering, but a first record for the hectad this century. Watson didn't mention Frogbit in his paper on FFDs⁶, but a quick look at the BSBI Database revealed that there were only four records of this species for Somerset before 1930. It appears that Frogbit has become widespread across the Levels only since about 1950. I'd always presumed it to be a long-established native species in Somerset, but maybe that's not the case?

'L'. Many-seeded Goosefoot, *Lipandra polysperma*, had just started flowering out at Roughmoor on the 18th, in the pouring rain, with Marsh Cudweed following suit a few days later. Gypsywort,

⁶ Oh yes he did! Why would I ever doubt the man? He's got it sandwiched in his list between *Elodea* and *Neottia*, whereas I'd been looking in the vicinity of *Alisma*, *Sagittaria* and *Butomus*, which aren't even on the same page! Anyway, his date for it was 15th July.

Lycopus europaeus, was also flowering there, beside the pond, on the 26th, as it was on the Huntspill River (Andrew). Another noteworthy 'L' in the last week was Common Sea-lavender, *Limonium vulgare*, seen by Alastair at Wall Common on the 25th.

'M'. Just the one target: Purple Moor-grass, *Molinia caerulea*, which was seen by Andrew at Westhay on the 23rd. But a special mention, also, for Alastair's White Horehound, *Marrubium vulgare*, at Wall Common on the 20th.

'O' for *Oenanthe*. Andrew saw Parsley Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe lachenalii*, on the 24th at Berrow; but Tubular Water-dropwort, *O. fistulosa*, still eludes us. A few catch-ups of my own too, with Common Restharrow, *Ononis repens*, on the 22nd and Marjoram, *Origanum vulgare*, on the 23rd. Plus, to add a dramatic twist, a large colony of Common Broomrape, *Orobancha minor*, in Taunton, in the Frieze Hill community orchard between Roughmoor and the Staplegrove Road allotments. A scarce species in Somerset, and a real rarity in Taunton, so a real treat to see 200+ flowering spikes of it emerging amongst the apple trees.

'P'. Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, was spotted by Linda and Chris L. at Milverton on the 27th. Also a 'P' that used to be an 'S': Rock Stonecrop, formerly *Sedum* but now *Petrosedum forsterianum*, was found by Alastair at Greenaleigh on the 14th.

'S'. Just the one target, Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*, which was finally spotted in Taunton on the 20th (me), Minehead on the 23rd (Alastair), and Huntspill River on the 26th (Andrew). Even Watson would have been only mildly surprised by these dates, his FFD for it being 5th July. Three other first-flowering 'S's deserve a mention, all of them Andrew's: Common Skullcap, *Scutellaria galericulata*, at Westhay on the 23rd, and Floating Bur-reed, *Sparganium emersum*, and Arrowhead, *Sagittaria sagittifolia*, both on the Huntspill River on the 26th.

A couple of 'T's: Tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*, was seen just beginning to flower by Andrew on the 30th at Highbridge, while I had Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*, at Upper Holway, Taunton, on the 29th.

And lastly, no 'V's this week, but a first-flowering 'U' instead when Helena had Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*, at Stockhill on the 27th.

Apologies to anyone whose records I've overlooked. It's been a distracting week, with too much going on, and it seems that one drawback to the lockdown being eased is the way in which normal life starts to intrude again.

I can feel 'busy-ness' returning, and I'm not sure I like it...

* * *

As spring shifts towards autumn, so the pace of first flowerings begins to slow down, which makes me think it probably makes sense to do another list to keep us occupied for at least the next fortnight. First of all, here are the three species we're carrying over from Week 15:

Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*; Tubular Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe fistulosa*; Stone Parsley, *Sison amomum*.

To which we can add the following 11 species, making 14 in all:

Carline Thistle, *Carlina vulgaris*; Woolly Thistle, *Cirsium eriophorum*; Common Calamint, *Clinopodium ascendens*; Dodder, *Cuscuta epithymum*; Thorn-apple, *Datura stramonium*; Autumn Gentian, *Gentianella amarella*; Hoary Ragwort, *Jacobaea erucifolia*; Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*; Corn Mint, *Mentha arvensis*; Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*; Water-pepper, *Persicaria hydropiper*.

As well as the above, it would be worth keeping an eye out for species already recorded by one or two of us, but which should be coming into flower more generally very soon, e.g. Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, Burnet-saxifrage, *Pimpinella saxifraga*, Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*, Hawkweed Oxtongue, *Picris hieracioides*, and Devil's-bit Scabious, *Succisa pratensis*.

8th July

Week 16 – Test cricket – harebell & mugwort – it's starting to feel like autumn...

With today's return of Test match cricket, everything suddenly seems terribly *normal* again. Even the inevitable rain delays add to the sense of 'business as usual'. We've won the toss and, despite a forecast of intermittent mizzle and generally muggy conditions, we're going to bat. West Indies would have fielded anyway, apparently, so everyone's happy. I'm off to listen to the opening exchanges.

Well, play eventually started at two, and they were off by quarter past, England scoring one run and losing one wicket in the process. Another half hour lost to rain, then two more overs and now they're off again. Just two runs added to the total.

Turning away from the cricket for a moment, if you can bear it, Georgina had her first Harebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*, on the 6th at Blackmoor, Mendip; but she summed up the general mood when she said: "... it always feels like autumn when I see one."



Harebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*, Blackmoor on Mendip
06/07/20 ©Georgina Shuckburgh

And I felt a similar twinge of autumn too, on the 4th at Orchard Wood, when amongst trackside Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, and Upright Hedge-parsley, *Torilis japonica*, I found my first heads of Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*. Linda and Chris L. had already recorded it flowering near Milverton, on 27th June, so I'd been on the look-out for it. What surprised me, though, was how the sight of those flower heads triggered an unexpected flood of memories of childhood summer holidays in Devon, of ripening blackberries, cream teas, scrabble and Ambre Solaire. But those striking yellow blooms brought to the surface less pleasant feelings, too, of summer being *almost gone*—marking, as they

always did, the beginning of an unstoppable countdown to the start of a new term, the new school year...

Things may have stalled a little on the first-flowering front in recent days, but here's Georgina again, who has "nesting Spotted Flycatchers in the garden plus three baby Tawny Owls ... One of the adults was spied by me early one morning ... attempting to catch serotine bats returning to roost, so plenty of nature to amuse me even if I can't find many new plants." The first Gatekeepers, *Pyronia tithonus*, have been seen this week, too.

Yet despite the 'go slow', there were still first flowerings to be had: from our target list, I notched up Stone Parsley, *Sison amomum*, at Corfe on the 6th, plus Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*, and Water-pepper, *Persicaria hydropiper*, beside the River Tone on the 7th. Round-leaved Fluellen, *Kickxia spuria*, was a bonus while tramping the field-borders between Corfe and Pitminster. Also on the 6th, Andrew saw first-flowering Tubular Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe fistulosa*, at Max Bog, and Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*, at Mark Moor. The day before, there were reports from Ro of Burnet-saxifrage, *Pimpinella saxifraga*, flowering abundantly at East Quantoxhead, and Hawkweed Oxtongue, *Picris hieracioides*, at Kilton, while Georgina, at Ubley Warren, had her first Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*.

And then this morning, Andrew spotted the first few flowers on his local Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, in Brent Knoll village, while I came upon two plants of Small Teasel, *Dipsacus pilosus*, their flower-heads just beginning to 'burst'. What a gorgeous plant Small Teasel is, with its understated 'globose' heads and whitish flowers, and lacking the brashness and over-confidence of its much larger cousin. Walter Watson's FFDs for Water Mint and Small Teasel in the 1920s/30s were 30th July and 5th August respectively. Capt. Roe's dates for Small Teasel in the 1950s were even later than that, with six of his eight FFDs being in *September*. It may only be the second week of July, but we're closer to autumn than we think.

England have progressed to 35-1 off 17.4 overs. Bad light's stopped play, and there's more rain around, so they're taking an early tea. I think I'll do the same.

15th July

Week 17 – hair cuts – a trip to the supermarket – butterflies & bush-crickets – calamints, carline and woolly thistles – a ridiculously late bluebell

The last time pubs, cafes and hairdressers were open there were flowering Lesser Celandines, *Ficaria verna*, everywhere, and many of us were eagerly anticipating our first Moschatel, *Adoxa moschatellina*. For the last seventeen weeks—from Moschatel to Mugwort—their doors have been locked, their windows shuttered. But now, gradually, we emerge blinking into the light to enjoy a pint and get our hair cut; maybe it's time, too, to get that dandelion-clock tattoo we've all been hankering after.

Most of us are beginning to get out more, seizing opportunities to meet friends and family for socially-distanced gatherings in each other's gardens, or in the park, or else heading into nearby countryside for walks together. Even sharing *meals* together... For months we've tried to restrict ourselves to activities deemed to be 'essential', but the definition of that word seems to get broader and looser with each passing week. Last Friday I even stepped inside a supermarket, for the first time since 15th March.

So, despite the unexceptional weather—not to mention the cricket—I'm feeling much more upbeat about things; last week I was hurtling toward autumn, but this week it's been almost like spring again. The butterflies have helped: there have been newly-emerged Brimstones, *Gonepteryx rhamni*, on the wing—offspring, presumably, of those we saw while hunting for Moschatel—along with second-generation Holly Blues, *Celastrina argiolus*, and Common Blues, *Polyommatus icarus*.

Many 'high summer' butterflies have also been much in evidence. Still inordinate numbers of Marbled Whites, *Melanargia galathea*, but recently joined by a crowded rabble of Gatekeepers, *Pyronia tithonus*—much perkier and more richly coloured than the now drab and rather tired-looking Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*. This week, too, from the 12th, there were sightings of Silver-washed Fritillaries, *Argynnis paphia*. We've found them in good numbers up at Thurlbear, and at Orchard and Henlade Woods (the latter a Woodland Trust reserve).

Roesel's Bush-cricket, *Metrioptera roeselii*, continues to expand its distribution in Somerset. First reported from the county in 1996, and a real rarity until at least 2010, there were sightings of it in the Taunton area in 2018-19, at Longrun Meadow and in fields near Staple Fitzpaine. This week I've started hearing its distinctive high-pitched 'buzzing', on the 12th in an area of rank *Arrhenatherum* grassland at

Thurlbear Quarrylands, then the following day near Orchard Wood. Marshall and Haes's description of its song is worth quoting: "an intensely penetrating and continuous, if high-pitched, stridulation ... the sound has been likened to that of an electrical discharge such as is emitted by pylon-cables in damp weather." Definitely one to listen out for in the next few weeks.

When it comes to first flowerings, it's been a surprisingly productive week. Between us, we've seen 12 of the 14 species on our target list for Weeks 16 and 17, five of them for the first time during the week just gone. Here are some of the highlights, as usual in roughly alphabetical order.

'A'. Following Chris L.'s exceptionally early Wild Angelica, *Angelica sylvestris*, on 29th June, the rest of us are slowly catching up, e.g. I had it at Staple Hill on the 9th, while Alastair picked it up today, the 15th, at Wimbleball. Also today, a second record for flowering Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*, this time from Dee at Clevedon Pill.



Woolly Thistle, *Cirsium eriophorum*, nr Orchard Wood
13/07/20 ©Simon Leach

'C'. A couple of thistles: Georgina's Carline Thistle, *Carlina vulgaris*, at Ubley Warren on the 11th; and my own Woolly Thistle, *Cirsium eriophorum*, near Orchard Wood on the 13th – in an area that used to be a tree nursery, then became overrun with brambles, and is now an ever-improving mosaic of scrub and calcareous-clay grassland with hundreds (probably thousands) of Pyramidal Orchids, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, and dozens of Bee Orchids, *Ophrys apifera*. Also a good week for Common Calamint, *Clinopodium ascendens* (or *Calamintha* in

old money), with first-flowering records from Bleadon Hill on the 6th (Hilary), Wellington on the 9th (Linda), and Avon Gorge on the 14th (Georgina). And the first Dodder, *Cuscuta epithymum*, was also on the 14th, at Thurlbear Quarrylands.

I'll spare you a further update on the colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, except to say that f. *quinquevulnerus*, the one colour form that hadn't been reported yet, was seen at Henlade Wood on the 14th. The 'ticked' forms are still outnumbered by the 'unticked', although there have been lots of records of f. *notatus* and f. *pallidinotatus* in the last couple of weeks. Could 'ticked' forms be later-flowering than 'unticked'?

'E'. I was up at Staple Hill on the 9th and noticed several flushes with just-flowering Marsh Willowherb, *Epilobium palustre*. Not one I usually record, but Walter Watson gives it as the latest-flowering of the willowherbs, with an average FFD of 22nd July, so possibly the 9th is quite an early date for it. Has anyone else seen it yet?

'G'. Alastair reported Marsh Fragrant-orchid, *Gymnadenia densiflora*, from near Watchet on the 4th (so in Week 16). Between 2008 and 2019 my earliest FFD for Autumn Gentian, *Gentianella amarella*, was 27th July, while Watson's date for it was 15th August. So to find it just starting to flower at Thurlbear on the 12th came as quite a surprise—although Captain Roe's FFDs for six years in the 1950s did include one amazingly early date for it, in 1958, when he recorded it at Goblin Combe on 8th July.

'H'. Trailing St John's-wort, *Hypericum humifusum*, wasn't on our list of targets, but probably should have been. We may have missed its earliest flowering, but this week two of us recorded it for the first time: me at Staple Hill on the 9th, and Linda at Wiveliscombe on the 11th. It's one of the latest *Hypericum* species to flower, only Marsh St John's-wort, *H. elodes*, being later—for which Watson's FFD was 10th July. Have we missed that one too?

'I'. Ploughman's-spikenard, *Inula conyzae*, was flowering up at Thurlbear on the 12th, the first record of it since Andrew's on 8th June at Purn Hill.

'J' (a.k.a. 'S'). Dee has had flowering Hoary Ragwort, *Jacobaea erucifolia*, today, the 15th, at Clevedon Pill. Still in bud around Taunton, but we can expect more records of it in the next week or so. This is one of about a dozen species flowering later now than in Watson's day. Another, from the opposite end of spring, is Colt's-foot, *Tussilago farfara*.

'L', 'M' & 'P'. Alastair's highlight of the last fortnight was on the 8th, when he came across more than 150 plants of Weasel's-snout, *Misopates orontium*, at Porlock Marsh. More mundanely, it's been a week of 'catch-up' for me, with Purple Moor-grass, *Molinia caerulea*, on the 9th at Staple Hill, Burnet-saxifrage, *Pimpinella saxifraga*, also on the 9th at Orchard Portman, Wild Parsnip, *Pastinaca sativa*, on the 12th at Thurlbear, and Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*, on the 13th between Obridge and Creech Castle. Amongst Linda's 'catch-ups' was Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, on the 9th at Wellington, while Andrew's included Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, at Rooksbridge on the 13th. Dee saw Common Toadflax, *Linaria vulgaris*, on the 14th at Uphill, a species that should probably have been on the target list but wasn't. Oh yes, and this morning I noticed lots of Water-pepper, *Persicaria hydropiper*, flowering in scrapes and hollows, and around pools, in Longrun Meadow.

'S' is for *Sison*. Stone Parsley, *Sison amomum*, has been spotted coming into flower right across the county, including in Wellington on the 9th (Linda), Lilstock on the 12th (Ro), Brent Knoll village on the 14th (Andrew) and Clevedon today (Dee).

'T'. At last, Wild Thyme, *Thymus drucei*, is flowering at Thurlbear, but good grief it's taken its 'thyme'—probably because of a severe infestation of the mite *Aceria thomasi* which causes woolly-haired shoot-tip galls. These can affect the flower buds, apparently. Andrew, meanwhile, has had first-flowering *Thysselium palustre* (= *Peucedanum palustre*) on Catcott Moor on the 14th. I've never recorded an FFD for it, but Watson's date in the 1920s/30s was 28th July.

And lastly 'U' is, once again, for *Ulex*. Following Helena's Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*, on 27th June we've since had reports of it from Staple Hill on the 9th, and from Staple Plain, Quantocks (Maureen), Oakhampton Wood (Linda) and Langford Heathfield (Chris L.), all on the 11th.

To prove that spring isn't quite over yet, Helena sent me a photo via WhatsApp of a still-flowering Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, which she found in the Blackdowns on the 12th. She thinks this could be a record *last* flowering date. I wonder, can anybody find a later one?

* * *

Looking ahead to the next fortnight, we have just two species to carry over from last week:

Thorn-apple, *Datura stramonium*; Corn Mint, *Mentha arvensis*.

To which we can add the following 12, to give us a target list of 14 species:

Sea-purslane, *Atriplex portulacoides*; Nodding Bur-marigold, *Bidens cernua*; Trifid Bur-marigold, *Bidens tripartita*; Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*; Broad-leaved Helleborine, *Epipactis helleborine*; Blue Fleabane, *Erigeron acris*; Common Hemp-nettle, *Galeopsis tetrahit*; Sharp-leaved Fluellen, *Kickxia elatine*; Common Reed, *Phragmites australis*; Saw-wort, *Serratula tinctoria*; Goldenrod, *Solidago virgaurea*; Sea-blite, *Suaeda maritima*.

I was almost tempted to add Autumn Lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, to the target list, but it's very unlikely we'll get it flowering before the end of July. Worth keeping half an eye out for it though? It would be brilliant, too, if we could get a first date for Goldilocks Aster, *Galatella linosyris* (= *Aster linosyris*), and—while we're at it—what about Sea Wormwood, *Artemisia maritima*? Both of these we'd expect to start flowering sometime in August, but you never know...

22nd July

Week 18 – stragglers at the ball – an absence of blackbird song – beginnings and endings

A proper ragbag of first flowerings this week. It begins to feel like we're trying to keep a register of guests attending a summer ball: we're down to the last few stragglers who every year seem to make a habit of turning up this late, but there are others who must have sneaked in earlier—and it's only now, when their names are called out, that we realise they're already here.

Among the perennial latecomers, Helena spotted Common Hemp-nettle, *Galeopsis tetrahit*, at Mendip golf course on the 15th, while on the same day Jeanne and Tim had Sharp-leaved Fluellen, *Kickxia elatine*, in a field border between Old Cleeve and Washford. Chris L.'s and Karen T.'s just-flowering Broad-leaved Helleborine, *Epipactis helleborine*, near Huish Moor on the 18th, is another in this group, as is my own Common Reed, *Phragmites australis*, at Roughmoor Pond, also on the 18th. The dates for all of these are well ahead of Watson's, and mostly they're earlier than my own in previous years.

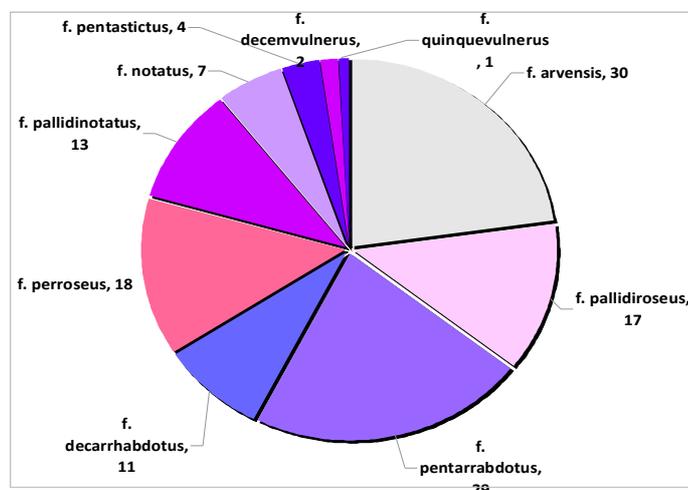
The second group includes Helena's Bog St John's-wort, *Hypericum elodes*, at Yarty Moor on the 10th, Maureen's Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*, at Staple Plain

on the 11th (both in Week 17) and Chris L.'s and Linda's Blue Fleabane, *Erigeron acris*, at Milverton on 27th June (Week 15); as well as Helena and Margaret's Saw-wort, *Serratula tinctoria*, at Strode on the 1st (also Week 15), which Margaret says had probably started flowering some days earlier. Chris L. had first-flowering Saw-wort at Langford Heathfield on the 4th. Also, it appears that Dodder, *Cuscuta epithymum*, started flowering earlier than suggested in last week's roundup: Jeanne reports having had it at Cleeve Hill on the 5th (Week 16).

Amongst my own catch-ups this week were Tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*, and Fennel-leaved Pondweed, *Potamogeton pectinatus*, between Obridge and Firepool Weir on the 20th. Which reminded me that we've been rather ignoring pondweeds, so if anyone has first dates for any of these, do please let me know.

While we're at it, here's a quick update on numbers of records of the various colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*—this time displayed (below) as a pie chart that has a faint hint of *decarrrhabdotus* about it!

Field Bindweed, interim scores up to end of Week 18



Not much happening in the *non*-botanical world this week, although this morning's first Jersey Tiger, *Euplagia quadripunctaria*, was a joy to behold. And since the 17th we've had (more or less) daily sightings of Migrant Hawkers, *Aeschna mixta*, in the garden.

More than anything, though, it's an *absence* that's been on my mind this week. Yesterday, I was listening to birdsong in Longrun Meadow. There were Blackcaps in the riverside Alders, Greenfinches rasping from the hedgerows, and a single

Song Thrush still triumphantly proclaiming its territory from the top of a Crack Willow. But there weren't any singing Robins or Chaffinches, and—worse than that—there was a strange and total lack of Blackbirds.

When I got home I checked back through the diary, to find that the last reference to our back-garden Blackbird had been in late June. Exactly on which day his chimney-pot monologue ceased, I cannot say. But if he sang in early July, I didn't hear him; or else, if I *did* hear him, I made neither physical nor mental note of it. I kick myself that he became utterly silent—at the start of his post-breeding moult, presumably?—without me noticing.

It may be true that recording the *end* of something is harder than recording its beginning: the first Lesser Celandine, *Ficaria verna*, is easy, the last is much trickier. But does this Blackbird oversight also have something to do with our emergence from lockdown? As general 'busy-ness' resumes, maybe some of the little things that, during lockdown, assumed huge significance are starting to become small again. Odd, really, that when the world opens up—enlarges—there's also this *shrinking*.

29th July

Week 19 – blackberries, thorn-apples & autumn lady's-tresses

Perversely, just as we're able to get out more and range more widely around the county again, so there are less and less first-flowerers still to be found. But there are fruits galore. Among blackberries, 'Himalayan Giant', *Rubus armeniacus*, has been yielding abundant ripe fruit for about three weeks now, while Dewberry, *R. caesius*, is also fruiting well in the Taunton area. Even the berries of Elm-leaved Bramble, *R. ulmifolius*, are starting to ripen up well. Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*, trees are sparkling with their heavy load of orange-red fruits, wild plums are soft and sweet, and beneath every roadside 'Gean', *Prunus avium*, there's now the stain and smudge of wind-fallen cherries. Hedgerow brambles and flowery banks are alive with butterflies, too, with Gatekeepers, *Pyronia tithonus*, particularly abundant at the moment. My own butterfly highlight, though, was a spanking new second-brood Brown Argus, *Aricia agestis*, at Thurlbear Wood on the 27th.

Amid all this 'fruitfulness', it's been another week of latecomers to the summer ball. Of the target list, we found just two of the seven species we hadn't already encountered during Week 18. Corn Mint,

Mentha arvensis, was spotted by Linda at Combe St Nicholas on the 26th, and by me at Thurlbear on the 27th, while there were also sightings of Thorn-apple, *Datura stramonium*, from the Taunton area on the 23rd (me) and 28th (reported by Linda's friend Jan) and—more surprisingly—a record via Steve of a singleton that had been seen flowering in a driveway in the Crewkerne area on or around 24th June. That's five weeks ago!

Thorn-apple is instantly recognisable by its white trumpet-shaped flowers and large spiny fruit capsules. There's nothing else quite like it, really. It's a plant that draws you in and pushes you away at the same time. Its reputation for being seriously poisonous resulted in the Crewkerne plant being removed, while one of the party finding the plant/s on the 28th pointed out that, not only was it poisonous and hallucinogenic, but that "gypsy horse traders used to push the seeds up the backsides of ancient nags to give them a thrill and make them behave like two year-olds!" Roy Vickery's *Folk Flora* is less entertaining than that, merely stating that Thorn-apple was grown for various 'medicinal purposes' from about the 16th century, and that in the Channel Islands, at least, the stems and leaves were dried and smoked like tobacco as a remedy for asthma. I'd sooner use Ventolin, frankly.

The Thorn-apple colony found on the 23rd comprised at least 30 plants on disturbed former arable land adjoining a new housing development. I'll not mention its exact location, but can't resist noting that it lies within a cricket-ball's lob of the farmhouse where Walter Watson resided almost exactly a century ago while teaching at Taunton School. Is it too fanciful to imagine that these plants might be direct descendants of Thorn-apples, or 'Devil's Trumpets', seen by Watson—maybe even from his bedroom window—shortly after the end of the First World War?

Other finds reported during the last week include more Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*, seen by Linda near the Wellington Monument on the 27th, and by me, today, on the Quantocks at Dead Woman's Ditch; and another record of Blue Fleabane, *Erigeron acris*, this time by Andrew at Cross Quarry on the 24th. Also today, we've had another record of Autumn Gentian, *Gentianella amarella*, this time from Georgina at Ubley Warren. Chris L. had Gypsywort, *Lycopus europaeus*, on the 25th at Langford Heathfield—a late-summer-flowering species that not many have reported yet.

Amongst Andrew's FFDs were a few 'stragglers' from earlier weeks: Bifid Hemp-nettle, *Galeopsis bifida*, and Devil's-bit Scabious, *Succisa pratensis*, at Catcott on the 14th (Week 17), and Hoary Ragwort, *Jacobaea erucifolia*/*Senecio erucifolius*, in Brent Knoll village on the 16th (Week 18). The first-flowering of Devil's-bit Scabious is proving to be a long-drawn-out affair, beginning on 14th June when Helena and Fred found it to be already flowering at Long Dole Meadow. Andrew's on 14th July was followed by Chris L.'s at Langford Heathfield on the 25th: "At last, some Devil's-bit Scabious!" she said, adding "... I don't know why I say that, it's still *very early!*" Watson's FFD for it in the 1920s/30s was 5th August.

Hoary Ragwort, on the other hand, is a species that seems to have gone the other way, flowering much later now than in Watson's day. Unless it's a typo—and without seeing the original data we can't rule that out, of course—Watson's 'big table' lists the FFD of *J. erucifolia* as '26/6', i.e. 26th June. Our earliest record this year was Dee's at Clevedon Pill on 15th July, followed by Andrew's a day later, and my own, at Thurlbear Quarrylands, on the 27th—a full month later than Watson's date. This lateness is backed up by my own records for the period 2008-2019, with FFDs ranging from 13th July to 14th August. So, while most species seem to be flowering much earlier today than in the 1920s/30s—or, for that matter, Roe's 1950s—Hoary Ragwort, along with a handful of others, emphatically bucks that trend; the exception that proves the rule. (Or else a most unfortunate typo...)

And just now, I decided to make one last check of the emails and, blow me down, another message had come in from Andrew: "Somewhat to my surprise," he wrote, clearly trying to down-play his excitement, "this afternoon [29th] produced the first Autumn Lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, at Purn Hill." *Somewhat* to his surprise? I dread to think what 'very surprising' might involve—a Green-winged Orchid in January, perhaps? Anyway, Watson's date for Autumn Lady's-tresses was 6th September. Roe had five FFDs for it in the 1950s, ranging from 19th August to 22nd September. By any standard, then, this is an exceptionally early date.

So, there we have it, the third and last of our targets with *autumn* in their English names: first there was the Hawkbit (14th June), then the Gentian (12th July), and now the Lady's-tresses. Clearly, as already noted, summer is becoming more 'autumnal' by the day.



Autumn Lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, Barrington Hill
10/08/20 ©Simon Leach

* * *

For the next fortnight we have five species to carry over from our Weeks 18/19 target list:

Nodding Bur-marigold, *Bidens cernua*; Trifid Bur-marigold, *Bidens tripartita*; Goldenrod, *Solidago virgaurea*; Sea-purslane, *Atriplex portulacoides*; Sea-blite, *Suaeda maritima*.

To which we can now add:

Hop, *Humulus lupulus*; Sea Wormwood, *Artemisia maritima*; Glasswort, *Salicornia* agg.

Plus, while we're striding out across coastal rocks and saltmarshes, can anyone come up with a plausible date for Rock Sea-lavender, *L. binervosum* agg.? it should have started flowering in mid-July.

5th August

Week 20 – wood pigeons – vanishing swifts – hop, harebell & henbane – tramping through grass

She's right, of course. Everyone has their favourite season, it's just that this one isn't mine! But, yes, as Ellen points out, 'high summer' does indeed have its delights and compensations. Two weeks ago, for instance, I was lamenting the general lack of birdsong, but now—as if from nowhere—Wood Pigeons have stepped in to fill the breach: Tim Dee, this time in *Four Fields*, refers to late-summer pigeons playing "again and again [their] cracked tuba," to produce "... a lullaby sung on an iron-lung."

Apart from the pigeons, there's still the odd Blackcap, an occasional Chiffchaff, and the wheezy *rasp* of Greenfinches. And then yesterday, down by the River Tone, in an old apple tree, I heard my first 'post-moult' Robin. Further along the river, in a bramble patch, a Wren made a hesitant, half-hearted stab at singing again.

The world's still turning, then, and these scraps of birdsong make up, just a little, for the sudden absence of Swifts. Last Thursday there were *dozens* in the skies above Taunton; on Friday and Saturday they could still be seen, and heard, as they careered and screamed around the streets at rooftop height, as well as larger numbers at higher altitude, probably feasting on flying ants. (On Friday, the gulls were gorging themselves too, strutting around the outfield at the cricket ground, picking off ants as they crawled across the grass.) On Sunday, the local air-space had become quiet, just a single sighting of one Swift, late in the day—plus, for good measure, a 'mewing' Peregrine that circled high above the street, before landing on the church tower opposite, causing consternation and panic amongst the local gull population. On Monday, two Swifts, early in the morning, then nothing for the rest of the day; yesterday, four birds first thing, then nothing; and finally today, nothing, nothing, nothing. So, it seems our local Swifts spent the weekend fattening up on ants, then skedaddled.

We may yet glimpse the odd bird passing through, but there's no getting round the fact: they've gone. As Peter Brown puts it, in *Swifts Round a Tower*: "Three precious months / Is all that they could stay, / May, flaming June / And hot July. / Now swifts have left / To our dismay." At this point in the year, the 'Taunton Deane Swifts' WhatsApp group becomes a support network for those of us struggling with the harsh reality of a world without Swifts. It happens every year, of course, but that doesn't make it any easier.

There have, though, been arrivals as well as departures. Georgina had her first Clouded Yellow, *Colias croceus*, on the 30th, at Draycott Sleights—amongst "hundreds" of Chalkhill Blues, *Polyommatus coridon*—while Keith saw a female Clouded Yellow at Roughmoor on the 22nd. He also reports that in the last week at Thurlbear there's been the beginnings of a partial second brood of Dingy Skippers, *Erynnis tages*. Usually this butterfly has just a single generation each year, in the spring (April-May), but in especially hot summers second brood adults can occasionally be seen on the wing in

southern England in August. Plants can do something similar, re-enacting spring with a second burst of flowering late in the season, like Val's Spring Cinquefoil, *Potentilla verna*, at Velvet Bottom on the 31st, or Helena's ridiculously late (or early?) Cowslips, *Primula veris*, in the Cam Valley today.

It's been another week of thin pickings on the first-flowering front. Between us we saw just three of our target species: Georgina and friends recorded Sea-blite, *Suaeda maritima*, at Sand Bay on 23rd July (so in Week 19); while I saw my first Hop, *Humulus lupulus*, at Longrun Meadow on the 1st, followed by Trifid Bur-marigold, *Bidens tripartita*, between Obridge and Creech Castle on the 4th. The last of these was next to a fine patch of Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, which was flowering profusely despite having been noted as *not* flowering just four days earlier—which highlights how rapidly things can change, even when nothing much seems to be happening. The 4th was a good day for Water Mint, with Helena and Val both 'WhatsApping' reports of having seen it flowering in VC6, the latter at Catcott Heath.

What else? I recorded Sneezewort, *Achillea ptarmica*, at Ruggin SWT reserve this morning—although I expect someone will surely have an earlier date for it? There was a second record for Harebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*, this time from Liz at Westbury Beacon on the 4th. My own first-flowerers this week included Carline Thistle, *Carlina vulgaris*, on the 31st (Thurlbear), Sharp-leaved Fluellen, *Kickxia elatine*, on the 1st (Corfe), Dwarf Spurge, *Euphorbia exigua*, on the 4th (Staple Fitzpaine), and Sowbread, *Cyclamen hederifolium*, today (Angersleigh). Elsewhere, Margaret saw Bifid Hemp-nettle, *Galeopsis bifida*, at Redding Pits on the 3rd, while Georgina *et al.* had Henbane, *Hyoscyamus niger*, at Sand Bay on 23rd (Week 19); and, most exciting of the lot, perhaps, was a message (and lovely photo) from Clive on the SRPG WhatsApp group reporting the discovery by Brian of flowering Autumn Lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, at Sand Point on the 27th—two days *earlier* than Andrew's record of it at Purn Hill.

Ellen, in her email last week, noted the joy to be had from walking through grassland in summer, and I get what she's saying, I really do. It's interesting to track the subtle shifts in the nature of this experience as the season advances. The *sound* changes: in May and June, tramping through grass produces a soft, juicy-green *swish, swish, swish*, whereas now it makes a much harder, drier, *scrunch*; and each

scrunch, each footfall, is accompanied by an explosion of grasshoppers, like fire-crackers going off.

She's right: each season really *does* have its compensations.



Gill, first-flowering in the rain 09/07/20 ©Helena Crouch

12th August

Week 21 – wilting in the heat – bush-crickets & bellflowers – fuschia-mite galls – more last swifts – a dash to the seaside

By some margin, the hottest week of the year. I'm in the study sweating profusely, and with every intention of being here for as short a time as possible. Drafting first-flowering updates is not for the faint-hearted...

Actually, there's really not much to report, as everything—and everyone—seems to have been struck down by the heat. So to keep it brief, this week's summary can take the form of a diary, lifted mainly from the 'NoteBook' app on my phone—not much in my 'real' notebook—plus various texts, emails and WhatsApp messages. All very modern, all very 'twenty-first century'.

Thursday, 6th. 25°C. Spent the afternoon in friends' back garden in Rockwell Green. Chicory, *Cichorium intybus*, on the verge of Wellington bypass was my first of the year. They have a garden pond, in which Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, is flowering. They

also have Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, which they're keen to get rid of, so I try to convert them by saying that it's f. *pentarrhabdotus*. Not sure they were terribly impressed, to be honest.

Val finds his first Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, in flower, on Chasey's Drove, along with Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*, galled by the midge *Wachtliella persicariae*.

Evening: sitting in another garden, this time in Colin Avenue, Taunton, eating a Gurkha 3 takeaway and discussing the Test match—while keeping an eye on the sky. At least five Swifts repeatedly circling, the first birds for a couple of days. Clearly, they *haven't* gone after all. A huge relief.

Friday, 7th. 27°C. Early morning: an email from Andrew to report that he and others had seen Common Sea-lavender, *Limonium vulgare*, flowering at Uphill on the 4th, while there was Flowering Rush, *Butomus umbellatus*, on Allerton Moor on the 3rd, "... just when I'd given up hope of seeing any flowering locally [this year.]" Also, in response to my rather late FFD for Sneezewort, *Achillea ptarmica*, last week, he says that he saw it flowering at Edford Meadows on 7th July.

Late morning: to Thurlbear Wood, trying to find some shade. First-flowering Creeping-Jenny, *Lysimachia nummularia*, at last! Dark Bush-cricket, *Pholidoptera griseoptera*, 'chirping' in the brambles, plus late-summer generation (partial second brood) Small Heaths, *Coenonympha pamphilus*, and Dingy Skippers, *Erynnis tages*. Freshly emerged Brimstones, *Gonepteryx rhamni*, as well—two brightly-coloured males—it could almost be spring again.



Fuschia gall-mite, *Aculops fuschiae*, Clevedon 07/08/20
©Dee Holladay

Meanwhile, Toby posting on WhatsApp: "Afternoon all, first few Goldilocks Aster [*Galatella linosyris*] out at Brean Down today!" And another post, with photo, this time from Helena at Harptree Combe: "Pretty stars in the grass for you! *Campanula patula* [Spreading Bellflower] at its only Somerset site." And then another, less pretty, from Dee in Clevedon, who has Fuschias in her garden afflicted by the rather grotesque galls of the dreaded Fuschia mite, *Aculops fuschiae*. At which point, Steve decides to wander into *his* garden in North Petherton, only to find that *he's* got Fuschia gall mites too.⁷

Late afternoon: more Swifts, a tight group of at least fifteen. First one, then two, then *three* 'mewing' Peregrines, circling lazily, until one suddenly plunges into a stoop and aims directly at three, maybe five, Swifts dashing down the length of Gordon Road.

They scatter in all directions and the Peregrine—presumably a young bird from the nest on St Mary's church tower—gains height again to re-join its siblings, with nothing to show for its efforts. Friends had come over for a back-garden cuppa but hadn't bargained on such wildlife spectacles. Neither had we.

Saturday, 8th. 29°C. Listening to Test Match Special—England closing in on a most remarkable win against Pakistan—while also watching Taunton Deane narrowly lose to Taunton St Andrews. Then a couple of pints of cider on the outfield, which may explain the lack of Swifts this evening...

Sunday, 9th. 26°C. Morning: Longrun Meadow, thistle-down everywhere. Thistle heads looking like particularly dishevelled prime-ministerial hairdos. Small Teasel, *Dipsacus pilosus*, still flowering nicely.

An email from David Re. to say that he has Cowslips, *Primula veris*, flowering in his garden. And then Margaret posts a 'selfie' on WhatsApp, showing off her splendid new botanically-themed face mask. It looks *so* much better than my own (probably useless) black snood—unless you're needing to look

⁷ Worth keeping an eye out for this gall. It's a horticultural pest, and apparently spreading rapidly in southern Britain. First record in Somerset was in 2010 (Minehead), first record in Taunton area was in 2017. I think Dee's may be the first record of it from VC6 but, as demonstrated by Steve, it can be easily overlooked! Dee says: "I can't remember seeing it in my garden before, though perhaps I might not have noticed a low level of infection. Certainly it's pretty widespread in Clevedon: walking this morning, I noticed quite a lot of plants infected."

like a bank robber, in which case mine's perfect. Oh, and she also had flowering Water Mint at Blagdon Lake.



Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, Obridge-Creech Castle, Taunton 04/08/20 Simon Leach

Evening: supper in the garden. Three Swifts, very briefly, swoop down to chimney-pot height, calling madly; they give the impression of being local birds.

Monday, 10th. 24°C, the coolest day of the week, but still oppressively humid. Barrington Hill. Autumn Lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, looking its best: maybe 50+ spikes along top edge of Hilly Field, and smaller numbers in Clover Ground and the bottom field. Lower flowers on some spikes already going over—so may have been flowering for a week or more? Abundant Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*, now living up to its name: 'strawberries' everywhere. Gilly's ears covered in Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, burrs. Brilliant view of a Barn Owl, flushed from a hedgerow Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*. A fragment of Skylark song, and then a Robin; otherwise, very little bird noise—apart from numerous Wood Pigeons. Blackthorns, *Prunus spinosa*, laden with sloes; Oaks, *Quercus robur*, laden with acorns, many of them engulfed by knopper galls caused by the gall-wasp *Andricus quercuscalicis*. Also, several 'pepperpot galls' in the flower-heads of Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, caused by

a tiny fruit fly now known as *Myopites apicatus* (previously *M. inulaedysentericae*).⁸

On the way home, more Chicory, in a field border near Staple Fitzpaine. Also a Jersey Tiger, *Euplagia quadripunctaria*, perched on Hoary Ragwort, *Jacobaea erucifolia*. Various colour-forms of Field Bindweed, the best being f. *notatus*. Two Clouded Yellows, *Coleas croceus*, both males.

Late afternoon: 4.51 pm to be precise. Steve's on the wireless, BBC Radio Somerset, talking about the recent re-appearance of Lesser Water-plantain, *Baldellia ranunculoides*, at Shapwick. Excellent interview. Steve, afterwards, on WhatsApp: "stiff drink required."

No Swifts: stiff drink needed here, too.

Tuesday, 11th. 33°C. Sweltering! No desire to do anything today, really. First adult Speckled Bush-cricket, *Leptophyes punctatissima*, calling faintly from the flower bed.

A flurry of excitement on WhatsApp following Val's posting of photos of Broad-leaved Ragwort, *Senecio sarracenicus* (= *S. fluviatilis*), beside the River Brue at Baltonsborough. The Floras have it as an alien, the Atlas as a neophyte; yet its early introduction (before 1600) and first date in the wild (1633), combined with its decline nationally, suggests that it could be close to the fuzzy margin between neophyte and archaeophyte...

Meanwhile, Steve is beavering away in North Petherton, dealing with a "freedom of information request." Another stiff drink called for, perhaps?

Skies empty again, no Swifts.

⁸ Most easily searched for later in the autumn, after the flower-heads have begun to fall apart, but do look for it now if you enjoy a challenge. Work your way through a patch of Common Fleabane, pressing down on the disc of each flower-head. An ungalled head will feel slightly spongy, and if you strip off the disc florets you'll find the base of the flower-head (the receptacle) is small and relatively flat. A galled head will feel *hard* and *swollen* beneath the disc when you squish it, and removing the disc florets will reveal the galled receptacle, usually with a few tiny holes where the adult flies have exited the gall—hence the nickname 'pepperpot gall'. Apparently quite scarce in the UK, *M. apicatus* is generally rare in central and northern Europe, but more frequent in *southern* Europe. First record in Somerset was in 2015, but a thin scatter of records in recent years suggests either we've been overlooking it or that it's spreading. If the latter, this might be in response to climate change?

Today, 12th. The air today is unbearably heavy and humid. Didn't sleep well. Overnight low of 19°C. Early morning: up to Thurlbear Wood. Very little to report. Blackcaps: *tchack, tchack ... tchack* alarm calls, like someone flint-knapping in the trees. Other birds are lying low: just a few hard-to-locate and impossible-to-identify 'seep' calls from the undergrowth. A startled Blue Tit. A brief snatch of Robin song against the background noise of a jumbo jet passing overhead—normality raised another notch.

It's now mid-afternoon, and the temperature has risen to 35°C.

I can't stay in this room any longer, so we plan an evening dash to the coast.

Some while later...

We've been to Watchet. The smell of seaweed, views of the Welsh coast, ammonites, Sandwich Terns, and at least a dozen Swifts. And, later, fish and chips. Our second, but much-needed, visit to the seaside in nearly six months.



Clustered Bellflower, *Campanula glomerata*, CVWG
Botany Walk 12/08/20 ©Helena Crouch

Meanwhile, David H. is *in* Wales, not just looking at it from afar, and sends us WhatsApp 'postcards' from Llyn Fanod, Ceredigion: Lesser Skullcap, *Scutellaria minor*, Water Lobelia, *Lobelia dortmanna*, Floating Water-plantain, *Luronium natans*...

And then Helena, on her second Cam Valley Botany Walk of the summer, not only avoids the brewing thunder storms but also turns up flowering Autumn Lady's-tresses, Harebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*,

and Clustered Bellflower, *C. glomerata*. Clearly, a good week for bellflowers.

No preview needed for the coming week. Nothing much still to be seen, frankly. A few odds and sods, a few stragglers. And Ivy, *Hedera helix*, of course: the final piece in spring's jigsaw...

19th August

Week 22 – bad light stops play – 'A' levels & algorithms – sea-purslane – meadow saffron – eating out to help out – yet more last swifts...

Another week with very little, really, to report. In Week 21 we were sheltering from the heat, this week it's been more about trying to keep dry. In Taunton, at least, it's rained every day. In Southampton there's been 1½ days of cricket when there should have been 5. It began with the warmest night of the year—21°C in Taunton—and then 27°C the next day, after which the temperatures subsided to a pleasanter 18-22°C for the rest of the week; still very humid, sharp showers, and the occasional thunder clap. Oh yes, and a funnel cloud, apparently, in the Bristol Channel. We had three days on the trot without any sunshine, ensuring that bad light stopped play even when the rain didn't.

Let's try diary format again...

Thursday, 13th. Very little sleep. The warmest night for years. 'A' Level Results Day. The injustice of 'THE ALGORITHM'.

WhatsApp from Val: Small Teasel, *Dipsacus pilosus*, at Baltonsborough. Email from Pat, who had visited Porlock Weir on the 9th (so Week 21) to find Sea Aster, *Aster tripolium*, just starting to flower, and Sea-purslane, *Atriplex portulacoides*, which "had probably been flowering for weeks." Also a Jersey Tiger, *Euplagia quadripunctaria*, in the orchard at Nettlecombe.

Evening: a single group of three Swifts, circling high above Trinity Street. So they're still here...

Friday, 14th. Ivy, flowering in the rain in Upper Holway, Taunton. It's climbing over a roadside garden fence, but some of the leaves are suspiciously variegated; clearly a cultivated Ivy of some sort—and in keeping with the weather, my initial excitement that it might be first-flowering *Hedera helix* is soon dampened by the realisation that it's *H. colchica*.

Liz posts a stunning picture of Apple-of-Peru, *Nicandra physalodes*, from Wedmore allotments where it grows on a muck heap. The day's highlight,

though, is surely Fred's Least Lettuce, *Lactuca saligna*, on Fobbing Marshes, Essex, where he says it's "having an amazing year!"

Saturday, 15th. Email from Val: "I've seen Sparrowhawk at Catcott Lows, and last week a Hobby at Baltonsborough."

Sunday, 16th. Email from Georgina: just-flowering Meadow Saffron, *Colchicum autumnale*, at Velvet Bottom and Blackdown on Mendip. A real rarity in VC5, so didn't even think to have it on our target list, but Georgina's date is very early. Walter Watson's FFD for Meadow Saffron was 13th September, while Captain Roe had four FFDs for it in the 1950s, all of them in September.

At Ubley Warren, Georgina reports having had two second-brood Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, *Boloria selene*, on the 8th, and second-brood Dingy Skippers, *Erynnis tages*, on the 12th (all Week 21). Both occurrences are unusual, reflecting the exceptionally warm spring and summer we've been having.

Not entirely unconnected, an email from Hester, who has noticed a second flush of flowering of Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*, at Longrun Meadow, Taunton. Hester is a 'Friend of Longrun', one of the team of volunteers responsible for looking after the area.

Monday, 17th. THE ALGORITHM is ditched. Government announce that teacher-assessed grades will now apply.

Late morning: walking between Thurlbear and Winterwell, some fine large plants of Woolly Thistle, *Cirsium eriophorum*—a new monad record—and carpets of Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*. Meanwhile, on WhatsApp, Ian G is enjoying a profusion of Common Wintergreen, *Pyrola minor*, in Moray—our most northerly outpost yet.

Tuesday, 18th. Morning: walk over to Trull allotments to meet friends for a socially-distanced flask of tea and lemon drizzle cake. Interesting allotment weeds, including several species of *Oxalis*: Procumbent Yellow-sorrel, *O. corniculata*, and Upright Yellow-sorrel, *O. stricta*, are frequent enough in the Taunton area, but it turns out that Garden Pink-sorrel, *O. latifolia*, is new for ST22. Of the three, *O. latifolia* is clearly causing the most trouble, some plot-holders seem to be growing it for fun—lines of dwarf French beans with a rather lovely *latifolia* 'understorey'. Black currants infested with Black currant gall mite, *Cecidophyopsis ribis*. Pear

trees laden with fruit, their leaves orange-spotted with galls of the 'pear rust', *Gymnosporangium sabinae*.

Today, 19th. Morning: Thurlbear churchyard, picking blackberries; Ivy now so close to flowering—pedicels fully extended, buds swollen, but still tightly closed like clenched fists. How long before they show their hands? Within the next week to ten days, I reckon...

Afternoon: walk in to town. Happy students everywhere. Our first experience of 'Eat Out to Help Out!' Two teas and a flapjack for three quid, at the café in Goodlands Gardens where we stopped on our SRPG/Wild Flower Society 'last week hunt' in October 2018. White Melilot, *Melilotus albus*, in the stonework where the old millstream joins the River Tone. First recorded here in 2008, this is its only site in the Taunton area, and quite a scarce plant in VC5.

Late afternoon: walking back past the cricket ground, it's spitting with rain, and—would you believe it?—there are five Swifts, high above the rooftops and the floodlights, tacking into a strengthening headwind, tilting this way and that as they zig-zag across the sky.

Having been wrong several times already, I hesitate to proclaim that these are the last Swifts of the year.

(But I think they might be.)

26th August

Week 23 – another last swift – my first ever brown hairstreak – ivy! – endings and beginnings

A week of indifferent but sometimes dramatic weather. Rain each day, until today, and windy almost the whole week; two named storms, 'Ellen' (such a good name for a storm!) and 'Francis'. 'Ellen' was responsible for a little unauthorised felling of trees in Thurlbear Wood, while 'Francis'—the wilder of the two—threatened to flatten our back-garden fence. It was wobbling yesterday afternoon, but still upright this morning, thankfully. At least the weather should improve now the Test series is over.

On Saturday, 22nd, we arrived up at Taunton Deane Cricket Club too late to watch any cricket, as Wellington had offered only feeble resistance and the game was finished by about 4.30 p.m. So instead we walked the 'Wyvern Round' a particular dog-walking route (for some reason all our regular routes are called 'rounds') from Vivary Park to Mountfields: past Pool Farm, where Walter Watson once lived; through what's now known as 'Thorn-apple Field'; and then back along the path running behind

Richard Huish College, to check the Ivy, *Hedera helix*. (Still in bud.)

Anyway, here we are, sitting on the outfield. Half a pint of Thatchers Haze and an orange juice and soda; and much chatter about cricket, as you'd expect. And much chatter above, too: House Martins busily circling—a constant twittering—and then, suddenly, there's another kind of tilt and flutter, followed by a rapid scything through the air that leaves the martins looking almost pedestrian in comparison. Just a few seconds, and then gone! Or lost, let's say, against a sky that's darkening to the colour of roof slates. Could *this* one be the last, maybe? Almost certainly...⁹

Also on the ornithological front, Gill sent a photo this week of a grounded Sparrowhawk, wings splayed, beside a box of drying onions. She jokes that the bird may have landed in her garden thinking that the onions were eggs needing to be incubated.

* * *

On Sunday, 23rd, the dog and I were doing another 'round', this time near Orchard Wood, the venue for our first field meeting of spring had the year not unravelled in quite the way it did. In the shelter of a hedgerow there were Gatekeepers, *Pyronia tithonus*, a few bedraggled, storm-battered Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*, and a Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*. It was overcast, humid, and now there was spitting rain in the air.

A presumed-to-be Gatekeeper touched down on a bramble; in flight it looked unremarkable, but on landing it seemed far too smart, too dapper. It looked like a Gatekeeper on its way to a rather posh dinner party. It perched with wings closed: they were orangey-brown underneath, with thin black 'hair lines' across the undersides of both forewing and hindwing, one of those on the hindwing being accentuated by a white line along its outer edge, the other, shorter than the first, with a white line along its *inner* edge. At the bottom of each hindwing there was a little 'tooth' or... I don't know what to call it,

⁹ Having been proved wrong so often, I'm now *deliberately* suggesting this is the last Swift, since that is evidently the best way of guaranteeing that it isn't!

[In fact, our last Swifts weren't until 28th Aug: three circling, in the rain, above Trinity Street. I think that's the latest we've ever recorded them in Taunton.]

really: a 'sharp protuberance'; a miniature swallow-tail?

And then, coyly at first, it opened its wings, which were a velvety chocolate colour, the forewing sporting a large 'crescent' of orange; the hindwing's 'tooth' was orange too, with two little spots of orange on either side of it. It was beautiful. It was *gorgeous*. And it was my first ever Brown Hairstreak, *Thecla betulae*. According to Wikipedia, Thecla was an early Christian saint who was "miraculously saved from burning at the stake by the onset of a storm." Another 'Ellen', perhaps?

I'd never really rated Brown Hairstreaks. I'd been on a trip to search Blackthorn, *Prunus spinosa*, twigs in winter for their eggs; an experience that was a bit underwhelming, to be honest. I couldn't fathom what all the fuss was about. But then, unlike my fellow egg-hunters, I'd never seen the adult butterfly. Now, with this glorious female perched on a bramble stem, all became clear.

The name *Brown Hairstreak* really doesn't do it justice though. *Hairstreak*? Well, okay. But *Brown*? No, not okay: *brown* sounds boring, *brwn* sounds dull, *brwn* just doesn't cut the mustard. It needs a name that better reflects its deliciously rich colours, the dark chocolate, the bright orange—*Chocolate Orange* sounds suitably delicious, don't you think?

* * *

And now, finally, the botanical highlight of the week. Ivy, *Hedera helix*, is starting to blossom! First sightings were on Saturday, 22nd, when David Re. had Ivy flowers opening in his garden at Alford, as did Karen N at Cocklake (near Wedmore). And then on Monday, 24th, there were sightings of it from Felton Common (Margaret), Draycott Sleights (Georgina) and Henlade (me).

So, there you have it: the last first flowering of spring! From now on, then, the steady descent towards winter, at which point, with the Ivy still blossoming, we'll begin again to seek out the first signs of spring. Which begs the question: does Ivy represent the last first flowering of the spring just finished? Or, could it be the *first* first flowering of the spring to come? Or might we allow it to be *both* these things, acting as a kind of bridge between the end of one spring and the start of the next? *Tail End Charlie* and *harbinger* rolled into one...

Tim Dee, you'll remember, made the case for there being just two seasons: spring and autumn. He imagines the year to be in two halves:

“... a coming, spring, and a going, autumn; six months forward before six months back, six months up before six down, ... six greening months before six browning, six growing before six dying; in autumn things fall apart, in spring things come together ...”

Yet, to counter that notion, one might argue that even in spring, amidst all the ‘comings’, there are also ‘goings’. During May, for instance, when spring is at full throttle, Lesser Celandine, *Ficaria verna*, is already beginning its *browning*, its *falling apart*, as it dissolves back into the soil, ready for its long summer hibernation. Just as, later in the year, on the cusp between summer and autumn, there is still an inkling of spring to be had—as this week’s just-flowering Ivy makes plain.

Over the last few weeks I’ve been fretting about spring’s imminent demise, yet now I’m beginning to see that *every* season has a touch of spring about it. You just have to locate it, and see it for what it is. This year’s Ivy will still be blossoming when next spring’s Spurge-laurel, *Daphne laureola*, begins to flower around Christmas time, followed by Hazel, *Corylus avellana*, not long after that. Dog’s Mercury, *Mercurialis perennis*, I have seen flowering before the end of November, Sweet Violet, *Viola odorata*, occasionally as early as October. If spring (the season) were another sort of spring, a *watery* spring, it would gush madly between February and the middle of June, then reduce to a trickle in late summer and autumn, but at no time of the year would it dry up completely. And so each first flowering becomes a harbinger of the next, and the next, and the next, and together they help to pull us through the year. Until we reach Ivy: and then, after the briefest of lulls—or maybe no lull at all—it starts all over again...

* * *

This year’s first-flowerings project was conceived as just one way of helping to keep people’s spirits up—not least my own—through a uniquely difficult and troubling time. It would give us reasons to be in contact with one another, to keep us ‘doing botany’ when this perhaps wouldn’t have been uppermost in our minds; a collective endeavour to stay sane, a distraction but also a focus; something that any of us could take part in, if we chose to, whatever our circumstances, and however socially-distanced and tied to home we needed to be.

If nothing else, it presented, during lockdown, an opportunity to see things, to *appreciate* things, and

to tell each other *about* things that we might otherwise have overlooked or presumed to be not noteworthy. For a few weeks our lives slowed to a near-standstill, just as spring’s trot turned into a gallop. Trying to keep up with it, to stay on its tail, became part of the fun.

Thanks, everyone, for the records you’ve sent in through the year. And for your emails, texts, WhatsApps, and photos—all of them very much appreciated. Oh, and do keep a note, if you can, of when you see your first Spurge-laurel, Hazel, Lesser Celandine...!

Roll on spring!



Ivy, *Hedera helix* 24/08/20.

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Simon’s article providing a summary of the year as a whole can be found in the Articles section of the Newsletter.