

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

2000 Newsletter

Issue no. 1

December 2000

The Somerset Rare Plants Group is an independent group with links to other environmental and wildlife organizations, whose main aim is to take an active role in vascular plant conservation. Priority is given to species of international and national concern, which occur in the botanical vice-counties, South Somerset (v-c 5) and North Somerset (v-c 6). Other species of local rarity are also included. The sites and habitats of Somerset rare plants are visited, and populations of the priority species are surveyed and assessed for their strength, health and vulnerability. Any threats are reported to the relevant conservation organizations.

REPORTS OF 2000 MEETINGS

19 February – Members meeting

13 members met at English Nature's office at Roughmoor for the first meeting of the year. This was an informal occasion for a chat, a buffet lunch, a quiz, a 'swap' raffle and a slide presentation by Steve Parker on the work that English Nature has undertaken as a direct result of survey or monitoring by the Somerset Rare Plants Group.

Liz McDonnell

15 March – Bristol City Museum Herbarium

Three members were welcomed by Sam Hallet, Natural History Curator, who showed us the large collection of dried plants in their care. The herbarium includes specimens collected by J W White, C I & N Y Sandwith, I W Evans and H S Thompson. Members examined specimens of some of the species on the SRPG priority list, including *Sium latifolium*, *Galeopsis angustifolia*, *Juncus compressus* and *Lepidium latifolium*,

Liz McDonnell

25 March - Stoke St Michael

Leader: - Ian Green

About a dozen members gathered for the first outdoor meeting of the season. The purpose of this trip was to check on the three Somerset sites of *Gagea lutea* (Yellow Star-of-Bethlehem). We were glad to find lots of the plants were flowering nicely at the Stocker Hole site but only about ten were in leaf at Bonnyleigh Wood and about seven in leaf at Murder Combe where it is thought they are too overshadowed to flower. *Draba muralis* (Wall Whitlow-grass) was also seen - doing well near Finger Farm

Ian Green

8 April - Willet Tower.

Leader: - Ian Green

It was a fine sunny day so perhaps surprising that just six members attended this meeting to see the only current Somerset site for *Teesdalia nudicaulis* (Shepherd's Cress). However, there was plenty of the cress in flower on the slope up to the Tower. This was followed by a trip to Broad Oak Wood where we had lunch and then made an un-successful search for *Viola lactea* (Pale Dog-violet) which was recorded here by Marshall in 1910 and re-found in 1991.

Ian Green

7 May – Cadbury Castle

Leader: - Ian Green

The purpose of this meeting was to record the locations and abundance of *Saxifraga granulata* (Meadow Saxifrage) on the ramparts of Cadbury Castle. Thousands of plants were found on two areas of the hill fort. One of these was on grassy banks of open wooded slopes, the other, on the short grazed grassland of the inner ramparts, was a previously unrecorded location. Other plants of interest recorded on Cadbury Castle included *Verbascum virgatum* (Twiggy Mullein), *Ranunculus parviflorus* (Small-flowered Buttercup) and *Cynoglossum officinale* (Hounds-tongue). A few members traveled to the nearby site at Chapel Cross to see one of the most threatened native plant species in Somerset. Only three non-flowering plants of *Pimpinella major* (Greater Burnet Saxifrage) were recorded on the road verge at this, its only, Somerset site. Erosion of the grassy edge by vehicles is seriously threatening this small colony.

Liz McDonnell

20 May, 2000 - Sand Point & Middlehope

Leader: - Steve Parker

The SRPG visit to Sand Point was at the request of English Nature, who have concerns over the management of the beach. The area is of interest for the plants of the dunes and the ungrazed saltmarsh.

Both habitats can be damaged by beach cleaning. On the saltmarsh a good population of *Carex extensa* (Long-bracted Sedge) was found together with a few specimens of *Limonium binervosum* (Rock Sea-lavender). The Sea-lavender was also recorded in good numbers on the limestone of Sand Point. Here we also found a large population of *Orobanche hederæ* (Ivy Broomrape), a Nationally Scarce plant that is common along this part of the Severn Estuary. Walking on to Sand Point or Middle Hope as it is also known, the species rich limestone grassland was almost white in parts with *Trinia glauca* (Honewort) one of the specialist plants of the Mendips.

Steve Parker

28 May - Comwich & Cannington

Leaders: - Simon Leach & Ian Green

The Comwich Common area has some very interesting coastal grassland and the area produced a good species list, with many rare species. One of the first plants seen was *Medicago polymorpha* (Toothed Medick), this was a new record for the area. Ian Green showed the party the differences between *Alopecurus bulbosus* (Bulbous Fox-tail) and the hybrid with Marsh Foxtail, *A. x plettkei*. The former being found in very large numbers in the Comwich cricket ground. *Puccinellia distans* (Reflexed Saltmarsh-grass) and *Bupleurum tenuissimum* (Slender Hare's-ear) were also found. The children's play area was inches deep in rainwater and the grass was too long, but we did manage to find one non-flowering plant of the *Trifolium resupinatum* (Reversed Clover). In the afternoon the party reassembled at Cannington Park, where we searched the *Arabis scabra* (Bristol Rockcress) introduction site. One keen-eyed member of the party managed to spot one or two examples of this very rare species which was introduced here c1920. Moving toward the hill fort area a large population of *Silybum marianum* (Milk Thistle) was much in evidence. On the opposite side of the hill a wooded area produced a smallish stand of *Helleborus viridis* (Green Hellebore) but how long this site can survive the quarry work is hard to tell.

Steve Parker

10 June – Breach Wood and Aller

Leaders: Tom Marlow & Fleming Ulf-Hansen

Tom Marlow led members to the area in Breach Wood, Aller, where he had found *Althaea hirsuta* (Hairy Mallow) beside a newly created forestry track in 1992. Despite careful searching along both sides of the track, no plants were recorded. After lunch,

Fleming Ulf-Hansen from English Nature took us to the main Somerset site for Hairy Mallow at Aller Hill, about 1.5km from the Breach Wood site. Thousands of plants were seen in two areas of the SSSI. Fleming explained about the program of monitoring being undertaken with Plantlife, for this very rare RDB

species. Large clumps of *Astragalus glycyphyllos* (Wild Liquorice) were present in a nearby area, recently cleared of scrub.

Liz McDonnell

18 June – Mascalls Wood, Cheddar

Leaders: Liz McDonnell and Anne Cole

Wendy Barritt, the Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserve Manager for Mascalls Wood, welcomed six members for a visit to the woodland and the adjoining old strawberry fields. A small colony of *Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum* (Purple Gromwell) is present at the southern edge of the wood. Only one flowering plant was recorded here, amongst about 200 straggly shoots. It was suggested that excessive shading was preventing this species from flourishing here.

In the adjoining old Strawberry fields, a large population (estimated at about 5,000 – 10,000 plants) of *Lathyrus aphaca* (Yellow Vetchling) was recorded, scrambling amongst the tall, un-grazed grassland and scrub. *Lathyrus tuberosus* (Tuberous Pea), which is a very rare introduction in Somerset, has been known in this area since 1929. A healthy population is present at the edge of a thicket of Blackthorn scrub. Unfortunately we were too early to see the beautiful red flowers of this species.

Liz McDonnell

1 July – Harptree Combe

Leader: - Steve Parker

This deeply cut combe produced a good range of shade loving and wetland ferns and flowering plants. The meeting was organised in order to monitor the population of *Campanula patula* (Spreading Bellflower). On the old castle site only two specimens of this attractive plant could be found growing in rank grassland. Within the combe, *Dipsacus pilosus* (Small Teasel) was found in smallish numbers growing amongst tall herbs along the stream. A Hawkweed found growing abundantly on the stone support of the overhead pipeline, was later confirmed as *Hieracium trichocaulon*, a rare Hawkweed in v-c 6, first found at this location in 1917 by B W Tucker.

Steve Parker

9 July – St Catherine's Valley & Marshfield

Leader: Phil Quinn

Astute geographers amongst you will notice that this meeting was held in VC34 (South Gloucestershire)! On a very wet and windy day three members went in search of *Tetragonolobus maritimus* (Dragon's-teeth) at the northern end of St Catherine's Valley SSSI. After much searching, and enjoying the rich calcareous sward, the colony was located. None of those present had seen this species before and whilst searching there was much debate over large specimens of *Lotus corniculatus*, but once the *Tetragonolobus* was found, there was absolutely no comparison with smaller yellow-flowered legumes. Approximately 200 plants were recorded, but concern was felt that the area was being severely impacted by scrub invasion.

In the afternoon a short trip was made to Rushmead Farm, Marshfield at the invitation of Mr Steve Pomeroy. Avon Wildlife Trust surveys had identified this area as a key locality for rare arable weeds. The three members were treated to a superb arable weed assemblage which included *Legousia hybrida* (Venus's-looking-glass), *Silene noctiflora* (Night-flowering Catchfly), *Lithospermum arvense* (Field Gromwell), *Stachys arvensis* (Field Woundwort) – possible first record for South Gloucestershire and a very unusual find on Cotswold rubble. Other species here were *Kickxia spuria* (Round-leaved Fluellen), *Euphorbia exigua* (Dwarf Spurge), *Chaenorhinum minus* (Small Toadflax) and *Papaver dubium* (Long-headed Poppy) ssp. *lecoqii*, as well as a suite of the commoner arable species. *Arrhenatherum elatius* (False Oat-grass) var. *bulbosum*, a rarely recorded species in 'Avon', is a serious weed on this farm.

Phil Quinn

15 July - Ash Priors Common.

Leaders: - Liz McDonnell & Barbara Collier
Barbara Collier, from Taunton Deane District Council, lead members around the woodland, scrub, heath and grassland habitats of this interesting piece of common land. The main purpose of the meeting was to search for *Chamaemelum nobile* (Chamomile). Despite careful systematic searching in the area where it had previously been recorded, no plants were found. There was great interest in the species-rich grassland at the western end of the common and much discussion regarding the NVC communities here. A quadrat was recorded by several members, and U4 *Festuca ovina-Agrostis capillaris-Galium saxatile* grassland was agreed on. Several clumps of *Agrostis curtisii* (Bristle Bent) were recorded in an area of acid grassland and remnant heath. This is the first time this species has been recorded at Ash Priors Common.

Liz McDonnell

22 July – Steepholm

This meeting was cancelled due to insufficient places on the boat from Weston-super-Mare.

12 August - Porlock

Leader: - Caroline Giddens

The weather was fine and things got off to a good start when Ian Green spotted *Bromus secalinus* (Rye Brome) in a cornfield beside the track to Porlock Marsh. This rare introduction was subsequently found in most of the adjoining cornfields. Since the shingle ridge, which holds back the tide, has been breached, the vegetation on the marsh has undergone great change and the area is rapidly becoming saltmarsh. This gives cause for concern over the continued existence of *Allium ampeloprasum* var. *Babingtonii* (Babington's Leek) however, it was found to be flourishing at present with over 100 flowering heads. Nearby, *Allium carinatum* (Keeled Garlic) was found. A great surprise was the discovery of a new site for the yellow-flowered form of *Verbascum lychnitis* (White Mullein). There were 8 plants. This was about half a mile from its Allerford/Bossington site, which was visited by the SRPG in 1998. Other plants of interest seen were *Trifolium subterranean* (Subterranean Clover), *Parapholis strigosa* (Sea Hardgrass), *Erodium moschatum* (Musk Stork's-bill) and *Misopates orontium* (Weasel's-snout). Specimens of *Parapholis* which resembled *P. incurva* (Curved Hardgrass) were collected for further examination, but unfortunately were all later determined as *P. strigosa* by T. Cope of Kew. Clouded Yellow butterflies and Wimbrel gave added interest. After a picnic lunch we drove to Hawkcombe to see *Hymenophyllum tunbrigense* (Tunbridge Filmy-fern). A scramble brought us to the site where it was considered that the plant had increased. One plant of *Melittis melissophyllum* (Bastard Balm) brought the day to a satisfactory close but I often wonder if the large trout we saw lurking in a drainpipe under the road is still there or whether any of the 'locals' have made a meal of him!

Caroline Giddens

20 August - Southlake Moor

Leader: - Steve Parker

Sium latifolium (Greater Water-parsnip) is a BAP species, last year the SRPG visited Southlake Moor in order to record the distribution of the plant across the moor. This year's visit was undertaken in order to monitor the population and look at how the plant had responded to ditch cleaning. A good number of plants were recorded in the ditch in question, but all agreed that the ditch seemed to have been over cleaned by contractors working for English Nature.

One plant (another BAP species) that had benefited from ditch cleaning was *Tolypella prolifera* (a stonewort). This has been recorded in many places on Southlake this year. After lunch the group moved on to Shapwick Heath NNR to search for *Sium latifolium* but with no success. We did however find *Rumex palustris* (Marsh Dock) and *R. Maritimus* (Golden Dock) growing on old peat workings. Ian Green took a sample of a *Potamogeton*, which he later confirmed as *P. coloratus* (Fen Pondweed), a first record for the peat moors for many years.

Steve Parker

27 August - Pinkworthy Pond

Leaders: - Caroline Giddens & Ian Green
Five members met at Pinkery Farm Exploration Centre for a visit to Pinkworthy Pond, Exmoor. A boggy area next to the path gave the group a chance to examine *Juncus foliosus* (Leafy Toadrush) and *Ranunculus omiophyllus* (Round-leaved Crowfoot). The aim of the meeting was to survey *Sparganium natans* (Least Bur-reed), first found at Pinkworthy Pond in 1993, one of two sites for it in Somerset. It was very pleasing to see that *S. natans* had increased considerably. We also studied the differences between *Sparganium emersum* (Unbranched Bur-reed) and *S. erectum* ssp *neglectum* (Branched Bur-reed), the latter being a new species for the pond. After lunch the group headed for Ruckham Combe to survey the *Hurperzia selago* (Fir Clubmoss) where 46 specimens were counted. When found at this site in 1994, only 4 were seen.

Paul Green

10 September – Pill, Avonmouth

Leader: - Simon Leach
Seven members started the visit to the saltmarsh near the M5 Avonmouth Bridge, at the edge of the urban fringe at Pill. The saltmarsh bordering the River Avon here is dominated by tall stands of *Elytrigia atherica* (Sea Couch). The group spent much time observing many individuals of the rare straw-coloured (Lesser Marsh Grasshopper), whose favoured habitat is ungrazed brackish marsh. Frequent species in this saltmarsh included *Aster tripolium* (Sea Aster), *Apium graveolens* (Wild Celery), *Suaeda maritima* (Annual Sea-blite), *Beta vulgaris* ssp. *maritima* (Sea Beet) and *Glaux maritima* (Sea Milkwort). 20 - 50 small plants of *Puccinellia rupestris* (Stiff Saltmarsh-grass) were recorded in an open brackish seepage area between a pylon and the sluice gate, and nearby, about 72 *Bupleurum tenuissimum* (Slender Hare's-ear).

Liz McDonnell

24 September – Wall Common

Leader: - Ro FitzGerald

The purpose of the visit was to try to re-find *Atriplex longipes* (Long-stalked Orache) which was recorded for the first time in South Somerset by Ro FitzGerald in 1988. 10 members met on a wet and windy day and were surprised by the incongruity of two camels, complete with ornate saddles and hangings, being unloaded from a horse-box in the car park by the trig point! Hundreds of clumps of *Carex distans* (Distant Sedge) were recorded along the ditch near the main track. Other species in this area associated with the track side or shingle bank included *Bupleurum tenuissimum*, *Hordeum marinum* (Sea Barley), *Marrubium vulgare* (White Horehound), *Glaucium flavum* (Yellow-horned Poppy) and *Juncus ambiguus* (Frog Rush). Several plants of *Atriplex* sp. found amongst tall vegetation by the ditch, which had large bracts and long stalks, were examined and discussed at length. Specimens taken for later determination were confirmed as *Atriplex x gustafssoniana* the hybrid between *A. prostrata* and *A. longipes*. This is a new species for Somerset.

After a welcome respite from the weather at Ro FitzGerald's, the party walked down to the coast at Lilstock, where a few individuals of *Bupleurum tenuissimum*, and many hundreds of plants of *Hordeum marinum* were recorded.

Liz McDonnell

8 October 2000, Cheddar Wood

Leader: - Liz McDonnell

The last field meeting of the season was to show members the three sites for *Carex depauperata* (Starved Wood-sedge) in or near Cheddar Wood. An attempt was made to monitor the populations at the original native location, the 1977 introduction site, and the 1988 re-enforcement site. It was doing very well at the original site, with over 50 large fruiting clumps. A few fruiting plants were also present at the other two non-native sites nearby.

Liz McDonnell

Contacts: Liz McDonnell 01823 285533 (work)
01934 712649(home)
Steve Parker 01823 283211 (work)
01823 666006