

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

1997 Newsletter - re-written by Liz McDonnell in 2017 from paper copies of near-final drafts which were never circulated.

The formation of the Somerset Rare Plants Group was an idea suggested by Liz McDonnell in 1996, just before the publication of the *Atlas Flora of Somerset* (Paul R. Green, Ian P. Green and Geraldine A. Crouch) 1997. The Green twins and a large number of volunteers had collected a huge number of records for the Atlas, on a 2km square basis. To keep up the momentum of recording for Somerset botanists, it was felt that more detailed information could usefully be collected on the rare and scarce species in the county.

An exploratory meeting was held in October 1996 at the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) with interested individuals including staff from SERC, English Nature (EN), Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI), Paul & Ian Green, who are BSBI Vice-County Recorders for North and South Somerset (VC5 & 6), Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) and several local botanists.

There was support for the formation of the Somerset Rare Plants Group and the production of a *Somerset Vascular Plants Red Data Book*. EN, SWT and other organisations require up-to-date vascular plant data on which to base planning application responses and in order to safeguard sites and habitats of conservation interest. There is also a need for details on population increases or decreases in order to assess the rare plant resource of the county.

The Somerset Rare Plants Group was launched in the summer of 1997 with a series of informal field meetings, which were rather unstructured, but served to 'gel' the group and provided an opportunity to gauge the interest in a rare plant project and to stimulate ideas and needs for a future programme. Decisions made during the first year:

- SRPG's remit would be the two BSBI Vice-Counties, VC5 (South Somerset) and VC6 (North Somerset), despite SERC and the Atlas Flora working on the smaller administrative boundary. SRPG would endeavour to extract records for smaller sub-units (local districts, Exmoor National Park (ENP) etc.)
- SRPG would be an independent group and not allied to any existing groups or organisations, but would have links to SERC, Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC) BSBI, EN, Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (SANHS), ENP, Plantlife etc.
- VC Recorders would form the nucleus of the group. Paul & Ian Green currently hold all the records and are in the process of producing the *Atlas Flora of Somerset*. They are to be computerized in the near future and it is anticipated that they will use the database program 'Recorder' to be compatible with SERC.
- SRPG should form a concentration of botanical expertise and attempt to survey and record the rare and scarce plants of Somerset. The group will direct its interests towards those species likely to be included in a County Red Data Book. These would include the vascular plants in Somerset that are of international concern; those on the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) 'short', 'middle' and 'long' lists; Non-BAP Endemics; Non-BAP Red List species; Non-BAP 'Lower Risk' species and other species of National Interest. In addition there are likely to be other local species which would be selected on criteria yet to be nationally agreed.

Six field meetings were held in the first year between June and September to visit sites of rare species in the county and were well attended by potential members of the new botanical group, their friends and colleagues.

Uphill (VC6)

11th June 1997

The coastal limestone cliffs at Uphill were visited to see the small population of Goldilocks Aster (*Aster linosyris*) in one of only two locations in Somerset. This is a Red Data Book species in Britain. The Group recorded damage to the site, as it appeared that some of the plants had been cut and there was evidence of digging into the soil at this location. Two other rare plants were present – Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*) and Honewort (*Trinia glauca*). The general population strength of all the species was recorded and management recommendations discussed. A large amount of French Oat-grass (*Gaudinia fragilis*) was recorded for the first time in the field above. It was growing in species-rich limestone grassland and looked very ‘native’. The EN Conservation Officer for that area, who was present, noted the population details and management recommendations for the SSSI within which they all occur.

Fivehead Arable Fields (VC5)

27th June 1997

This site, consisting of cultivated arable fields was designated as a SSSI for its outstanding arable weed flora. The group made lists of species with frequency ratings for each of the three fields and late sent these to the SWT who own and manage this site. Broad-fruited Cornsalad (*Valerianella rimosa*), a Critically Endangered RDB species, was found occasionally throughout the site. Four Nationally Scarce species were present: Broad-leaved Spurge (*Euphorbia platyphyllos*), Shepherd’s-needle (*Scandix pecten-veneris*), Spreading Hedge-parsley (*Torilis arvensis*) and Slender Tare (*Vicia parviflora*), the latter being very abundant in places.

Berrow Dunes (VC6)

4th July 1997

This site is the home of several rare plants. Round-headed Club-rush (*Scirpoides holoschoenus*) is a very rare plant, found as a native species in only two sites in Britain, Braunton Burrows in North Devon and at Berrow Dunes in Somerset. We recorded one large clump only, about 3m x 3m. Its height and associated species were also noted.

Somerset Rush (*Juncus subulatus*) is a very rare introduction and found nowhere else in Britain. Several members waded through head-high Reed (*Phragmites australis*) to reach this unusual salt-marsh plant from the Mediterranean. Remains of several spikes of Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) were found at the edge of the golf course growing with Great Brome (*Anisantha diandra*). Divided Sedge (*Carex divisa*), at its only remaining Somerset location was recorded with Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) in a damp dune slack west of Berrow Church.

Lynchcombe Nature Reserve, Mendips (VC6)

18th July 1997

This reserve had been recently acquired by SWT. It was not known to have any particularly rare species, but the area was a large area of unimproved grassland, bracken, scrub and woodland. Our group added a few more species to the list which had already been compiled by members of SWT

Landacre Bridge, Exmoor (VC5)

25th July 1997

A small group travelled to the west of the county to try to re-find Oak Fern (*Gymnocarpium dryopteris*) at Landacre Bridge on Exmoor. The steep rocks dominated by Great Woodrush (*Luzula sylvatica*) were searched without success, but several other plants of interest were recorded including Lemon-scented Fern (*Oreopteris limbosperma*), Ivy-leaved Bellflower (*Wahlenbergia hederacea*) and Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*).

Taunton & Bridgwater Canal (VC6)

21st September 1997

The last meeting of the year was spent searching for Cut-grass (*Leersia oryzoides*), which has not been seen since 1992. All the areas where it had been previously been recorded, but no plants were found. It was thought that a further search using a boat next year would be worthwhile.

Two winter meetings were planned, one to plan for next year’s field meetings and the other to invite representatives from other rare plants groups to talk to us about their work.