

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

Sunday 2nd May 2021 at Clevedon Coast

Leader: Liz McDonnell

Report: Liz McDonnell



Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) on the cliffs. Photo: CML

Bookings for this second field meeting of the year were more than could be accommodated in one small group of six to comply with Covid19 restrictions, so Helena Crouch kindly offered to run a second meeting at the southern end of Clevedon. Her separate report will follow this, as the habitats of our respective meetings were very different. The aim of our meeting was not primarily for recording, as this was done on the reconnaissance visit a couple of weeks prior to the meeting, but for re-acquainting ourselves with some of the plants that we had not seen for a while, separating similar species, looking at details of familiar plants and practising our vegetative ID. It was a bright sunny day, so a perfect day for leisurely plant hunting and the appreciation of getting together again in a beautiful location. We met in Bay Road and set off down to the shore, finding clumps of Summer Snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum* subsp. *pulchellum*) and Italian Lords-and-Ladies (*Arum italicum* subsp. *italicum*) at the top of the path. Both of these are

persistent garden throw-outs. We looked at a mature tree of Italian Alder (*Alnus cordata*) with its newly emerging heart-shaped leaves. Along with many other people, we made our way along the cliff path and down to the beach at Ladye Bay. Although most of our little group were clad in sturdy outdoor clothes as there was still a chill in the air, there were hardy souls in bathing costumes on the stony beach and even swimmers in the grey/brown sea! The tide was high and the little beach was very crowded, so rather than botanise as planned on the cliffs below, we looked at the tufa-encrusted cliff area close to the steps where Hemlock Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*) and Brookweed (*Samolus valerandi*) were taking advantage of the freshwater seepages there. We made a hasty retreat back up to the coastal path above and continued north-east towards Backhill Sands and Margaret's Bay, clogging the narrow path (much to the annoyance of the many walkers) whilst discussing the subtle differences between the stem-leaf auricles of the two common Sowthistles [Prickly (*Sonchus asper*) has rounded auricles and Smooth (*S. oleraceus*) has pointed auricles] or the differences between Common Dog-violet (*Viola riviniana*) and Early Dog-violet (*Viola reichenbachiana*). We entertained the possibility of hybrids between the two, but came to no positive conclusions about this! We found several plants of Three-veined Sandwort (*Moehringia trinervia*) in the wooded part of the footpath and compared it with Common Chickweed (*Stellaria media*). We noted the differences in colour, veins, sepals and petals [entire in Three-veined Sandwort and deeply notched in Common Chickweed] and general 'jizz' – all useful reminders.

Lunchtime was spent on the grassy rocks below the coast path, where fishermen were fishing from the low horizontal rocks. There were many interesting plants here. Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) was frequent in the rough cracks of the conglomerate rocks and some of the plants were fairly large and luxuriant. This little fern is fairly common along this part of the North Somerset coast between Clevedon and Portishead.



Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*). Photo: Karen Andrews

As well as looking at plants, several invertebrates were noted on the cliff path. We saw a Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*), which is always the first blue butterfly of the year. It was warming in the sun and the Pale blue undersides of the wings with small black dots were clearly visible. In the same area, several St Mark's (or Hawthorn) Flies (*Bibio marci*) hovered over the scrub vegetation, their black legs dangling characteristically. We also saw a Tree Bumblebee (*Bombus hypnorum*), which is easily identified by its ginger-coloured thorax. It is the one species that frequently builds its nest above ground, such as in a nest-box or tree cavity (hence its name). It has spread pretty much across the UK after first being discovered in Wiltshire in 2001, having colonised naturally from the continent.

Clive pointed out several tiny flowering/fruitlet plants of Sea Pearlwort (*Sagina maritima*), with their fleshy blunt-tipped leaves on the thin soils of the low cliff ledges. Margaret's photo shows clearly the fat fruitlet heads of this maritime plant in its native habitat before it took to the salted roads!



Sea Pearlwort (*Sagina maritima*). Photo: MW



Brookweed (*Samolus valerandi*) in damp crevices in the maritime rocks. Photo: EJMCD

Other plants here included Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Distant Sedge (*Carex distans*), more Brookweed growing in the damp layers in the rocks and a Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) with round, fleshy leaflets, likely to be var. *maritimus*. We clambered up the steep path back to the coastal path and then shortly climbed more steps up the hill towards the Clevedon Golf course. The wall flora of the Club House included the usual small common ferns, Rustyback (*Asplenium ceterach*), Wall-rue (*A. rotundifolia*) and Maidenhair Spleenwort (*A. trichomanes* subsp. *quadrivalens*) and two Stonecrops – Thick-leaved (*Sedum dasyphyllum*) and Caucasian (*S. spurium*). We walked back through the wooded area of Walton Castle and came across a tiny remnant of limestone grassland beneath Holm Oak (*Quercus ilex*), where a few straggly plants of Salad Burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba* subsp. *sanguisorba*) were just about surviving. We walked back to the cars along Castle Road examining the weeds in the grassy edges and pavements, much to the bafflement of passers-by. At the end of the meeting, we walked along to the Ladye Bay Green Space and sat on the species-rich grassland area with a stunning view out to sea and to the Welsh coast with a cup of tea and slices of cake to mull over our day's botany. We had added a few taxa to the overall list of species recorded in that area, but it had been an enjoyable day out in a spectacular area of coast with interesting and important species noticed, studied and recorded.