

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Setting off past Alfred's Tower. Photo: Karen Andrews

Sunday 5th July 2021 Hilcombe Hanging and Beaumont's Wood (VC6)

Leader: Helena Crouch

Report: Fred Rumsey and Helena Crouch

A group of nine assembled to explore some of the woodlands of the Stourhead (Western) Estate, close to Alfred's Tower, at the far southeast corner of Somerset. This area, which is not part of the National Trust holdings, is largely managed as continuous woodland cover. It sits on Lower Greensand, providing a habitat for calcifuges which are scarce in this predominantly base-rich vice-county. It thus shows similarities with the Blackdowns and Quantocks although lacking the species-rich mires which those areas still just about support. The car park where we met is in Wiltshire, necessitating a short walk through grassland dotted

with Common Spotted Orchids (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), past the impressive Alfred's Tower, to reach VC6 and our target monad. One of the area's great specialities, Climbing Corydalis (*Ceratocapnos claviculata*), was found almost immediately.



Climbing Corydalis (*Ceratocapnos claviculata*), the Plant of the Day. Photo: Will Eden

This delicate scrambling plant was seen repeatedly throughout the day, often in abundance, wherever there had been felling and the canopy had been opened in the drier acidic areas.

The variety of habitats, with drier, more acidic upper slopes above Hilcombe Hanging, broad rides and trackways, and damper, more neutral areas of Beaumont's Wood below, gave us a good chance to see and compare different species of sedges. We found two acid-loving species: Green-ribbed Sedge (*Carex binervis*), with its dead foliage of a characteristic colour and inflorescences like garden gnomes fishing rods, and the smaller dense swirly mats of Pill Sedge (*Carex pilulifera*). In all, eight species of sedge were seen, the most exciting being Smooth-stalked Sedge (*Carex laevigata*), new to the monad (and indeed the tetrad), in a damp more clayey runnel nearer the base of the slope. Like Climbing Corydalis, this was formerly considered Scarce in VC6 but has recently been found at several new sites and no longer warrants inclusion in the Rare Plant Register.

In surprisingly tall vegetation at the edge of the ride above Hilcombe Hanging, we found Trailing St John's-wort (*Hypericum humifusum*), growing conveniently close to Slender St John's-wort (*H. pulchrum*) with which it can be confused. We stopped and keyed it out using different field-guides, noting the unequal sepals of *H. humifusum*.



Trailing St John's-wort (*Hypericum humifusum*), with unequal sepals. Photo: Will Eden

This species has leaves with perforations and black dots around the edges, whereas *H. pulchrum* has the perforations but lacks the black dots. In damp areas,

we later found Square-stalked St John's-wort (*H. tetrapterum*), which also has perforations and black dots, as of course does Perforate St John's-wort (*H. perforatum*), which we did not see. Trailing St John's-wort was new to the monad. We only saw the one small plant all day, and one clump of Slender St John's-wort.



Trailing St John's-wort (*Hypericum humifusum*) is run through the keys. Photo: FJR

At the edge of the open, often damp, rather sandy trackways we found luxuriant clumps of Bristle Club-rush (*Isolepis setacea*), also new to the monad, and a range of rushes, the most common being Toad Rush (*Juncus bufonius*), often accompanied by very small examples of Bulbous Rush (*J. bulbosus*). During the day we also recorded Soft Rush (*J. effusus*), Compact Rush (*J. conglomeratus*) and both Jointed Rush (*J. articulatus*) and Sharp-flowered Rush (*J. acutiflorus*) which is also jointed!



Bristle Club-rush (*Isolepis setacea*). Photo: Sam Braine

The salient features of some commonly planted conifers were demonstrated by Helena, with Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), Western Hemlock-spruce (*Tsuga heterophylla*) and the pineapple-scented

Western Red-cedar (*Thuja plicata*) all regenerating; some pines and a larch were too small to name.

Another species new to the monad was Trailing Tormentil (*Potentilla anglica*), found on the centre of a grassy damp ride, its flowers having 4 or 5 petals.



Trailing Tormentil (*Potentilla anglica*), bearing flowers with four or five petals, on a woodland ride. Photo: FJR

During the day we also recorded Tormentil (*P. erecta*), which always has 4 petals, and Creeping Cinquefoil (*P. reptans*), Barren Strawberry (*P. sterilis*) and Silverweed (*P. anserina*), which have flowers with 5 petals. Care was taken to check that the trailing plants on the ride were forming lots of good seed, since Stace cautions that it is over-recorded for the Hybrid Cinquefoil (*P. x mixta*).

The forecast has been horrid but we were lucky that the majority of the day (especially our lunch stop!) was rain-free. The splendid views out to the west alerted us to more incoming squalls and a sensible halt to the day's exploring was called. We recorded 178 species, 28 of them new to the monad which took its post-2000 total up to a respectable 240. It had been a very enjoyable meeting with a good element of education as we puzzled over specimens together.