

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Birnbeck Pier, Weston-super-Mare. Photo: EJMCD

Saturday 30th October 2021

Weston-super-Mare

Leaders: Liz McDonnell & Helena Crouch

Report: Liz McDonnell & Helena Crouch

The aim of the meetings held over this weekend was to record plants in flower to coincide with the Wild Flower Society's Autumn Week Hunt (recording plants in flower in the last seven days of October). Twelve members met at the western promontory of Weston-Super-Mare. As there were so many of us, we decided to form two groups and Helena took a party further south to the Knightstone area to plant hunt in the separate monad of ST3161. Liz's group started in the car park of the old Birnbeck Pier. This structure is now sadly derelict, but the blocked-off approach road is a wonderfully scruffy area full of an interesting mixture of wild, planted, and self-sown

plants irresistible to the field botanist. Although the aim was to find as many plants as possible in flower, we could not miss the opportunity of recording all of the species that we encountered (apart from those which had been obviously planted in the gardens and municipal flower beds). The Birnbeck group fossicked amongst the drinks cans and other detritus to find Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) still with a few flowers visible amongst the fruits. We wandered down towards the old booking office and the remains of Hard-grass (*Parapholis strigosa*) were clearly visible as clumps of pale brown stiff stalks amongst the green leaves of other pavement plants. This is an annual species and most of the fruiting segments of the spike had broken off and had dispersed to germinate again in this rather unusual urban habitat (although the coastal rocks were only a few metres away over the sea wall). There were several large dense clumps of Rock Sea-spurrey

(*Spergularia rupicola*) by the old booking office and at the base of the heavily graffitied fence. We eventually found a couple of flowers to add to our growing list of flowering plants. Several clumps of False Fox-sedge (*Carex otrubae*) were growing in a shady damp area and one large clump of Long-bracted Sedge (*Carex extensa*) was found between the wall and tarmac on the promenade – far from its favoured saltmarsh habitat. We puzzled over rosettes of Teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*) and Prickly Oxtongue (*Helminthotheca echioides*), trying to spot the different prickly characteristics of each – not easy! Having spent far too long in the car park, we made our way up to the municipal park of Prince Consort Gardens. Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*) was occasional on the limestone rock outcrops and self-sown in the flower beds and we found a few rather bedraggled flowers still persisting. Annual Wall-rocket (*Diplotaxis muralis*) was frequent as a pavement weed and still widely flowering. We had lunch in the ornate Victorian shelter as the rain swept in from the sea and were horrified to see that Hottentot-fig (*Carpobrotus edulis*) had been planted in the gardens.



Hottentot-fig in one of the flower beds. Photo: EJMCD

This is a large spreading South African succulent and is listed under Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 which states that it is an offence to plant it or allow it to spread onto adjacent land or into the wild. We removed a large clump but

found that it had been planted in other areas of the garden. (Liz later contacted the Parks and Open Spaces department of North Somerset Council to report this offence. At the time of writing, no response has been received). This municipal open space is managed and maintained by 'Friends of Prince Consort Gardens' and an attempt had been made to establish wildflowers in a strip of land along the eastern railings. Here we found plants including Fodder Burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba* subsp. *balearicum*), Bladder Campion (*Silene vulgaris*), Corn Marigold (*Glebionis segetum*) and Purple Viper's-bugloss (*Echium plantagineum*) – the latter two still in flower. We suspected that the two ponds had been planted up with native aquatic species, but as there were several non-natives there too, it was difficult to know which ones should be recorded. However, we did what we could and recorded species such as Branched Bur-reed (*Sparganium erectum*), Fool's-water-cress (*Helosciadium nodiflorum*), Spiked Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*) and a few strands of Ivy-leaved Duckweed (*Lemna trisulca*). One spike of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobanche hederæ*) was found on ivy-clothed rocks amongst the rockery plants and succulents. We made our way back to the car park and completed our day's botanising. The count-up at the end of the day revealed that Liz's group had recorded 54 species in flower and had added a further 34 to the monad total, which for a late October date was encouraging.

Meanwhile Helena's group of five headed for Knightstone to record in the coastal monad stretching from the Marine Lake to the Sea Lawns, over half of which is sea! We recorded Southern Polypody (*Polypodium cambricum*) on the way: only the second recent record for the hectad. In paving by the Marine Lake, we were dismayed to find Hottentot Fig (*Carpobrotus edulis*) spreading from nearby planters. Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) was found in flower and Lesser Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia marina*) was growing in the pavement. Against the low wall surrounding Knightstone, a smart vegetative garden Sea Holly was spotted: the parent plants were soon tracked down, in a flowerbed, and identified as Variable-leaved Sea Holly (*Eryngium variifolium*), a new vice-county record. A second self-sown plant was found, in fruit, under a boat against the sea wall! Meanwhile in the flower-bed we found Sea Fern-grass (*Catapodium marinum*).



Variable-leaved Sea Holly (*Eryngium variifolium*) at base of a low wall. Photo HJC

In a street, two saplings of Tree-of-Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) were found, self-sown from a tree in the adjacent park; this was also the source of a small self-sown Cider Gum (*Eucalyptus gunnii*), another new vice-county record.

Exploring the playground, one plant of Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*) was discovered, growing in a cell of some plastic grass mat.



Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*). Photo: HJC

In VC6, this species is restricted to Berrow Dunes, Sand Point, and the Beach Lawns of Weston-super-Mare: our plant was nearly 1km north of plants on the Beach Lawns. We made our way through a car park, recording Ivy Broomrape (*Orobanche hederaceae*) under some trees, and headed for the churchyard of St John the Baptist. The species-rich turf included Hoary Plantain (*Plantago media*), Ox-eye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), Lesser Hawkbit (*Leontodon saxatile*), Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Pilosella officinarum*) and many plants of Wild Clary (*Salvia verbenaca*).

We reached the tranquil Victorian pleasure grounds of Grove Park in time for lunch. Giant Viper's-bugloss (*Echium pininana*) is naturalised here, with hundreds of plants self-sown along the edges of paths and borders. We recorded Rigid Hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) and Spiked Milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*) in the pond. After lunch we made our way back to the seafront, finding self-sown Cabbage-palms (*Cordyline australis*) growing in the pavement, and a smart clump of Silver Ragwort (*Jacobaea maritima*, formerly *Senecio cinerea*) nearby, at the foot of a lamp-post. This is abundant on the seafront rockeries, where the hybrid with Common Ragwort, *J. x albescens*, was also recorded.



Silver Ragwort (*Jacobaea maritima*) on the pavement at the base of a lamp-post. Photo: HJC

In the extreme south of our target monad, we reached the Beach Lawns. Here we found Toothed Medick (*Medicago polymorpha*) in flower, Bermuda-grass (*Cynodon dactylon*) and a small clump of Rescue Brome (*Ceratochloa cathartica*).



Toothed Medick (*Medicago polymorpha*) at the edge of the Beach Lawns. Photo: HJC

On a damp area, we were surprised to find a large clump of Hard Rush (*Juncus inflexus*) and one plant of Gypsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*). Heading back through town, we found distinctively pale plants of Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*) around the base of a street tree and a few plants of Fiddle Dock (*Rumex pulcher*) in a lawn behind the Winter Gardens. Musk Stork's-bill (*Erodium moschatum*) was in flower on a verge in the nearby Town Square.

Altogether, we recorded 194 species, taking the post-2000 total to 243 in our target monad, which is pleasing, especially since more than half of the 1km square is in the sea! We found 64 species in flower.