

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report

**Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2022, Winter Twigs Meeting, Taunton (VC5)**

Leaders: Simon Leach & Steve Parker

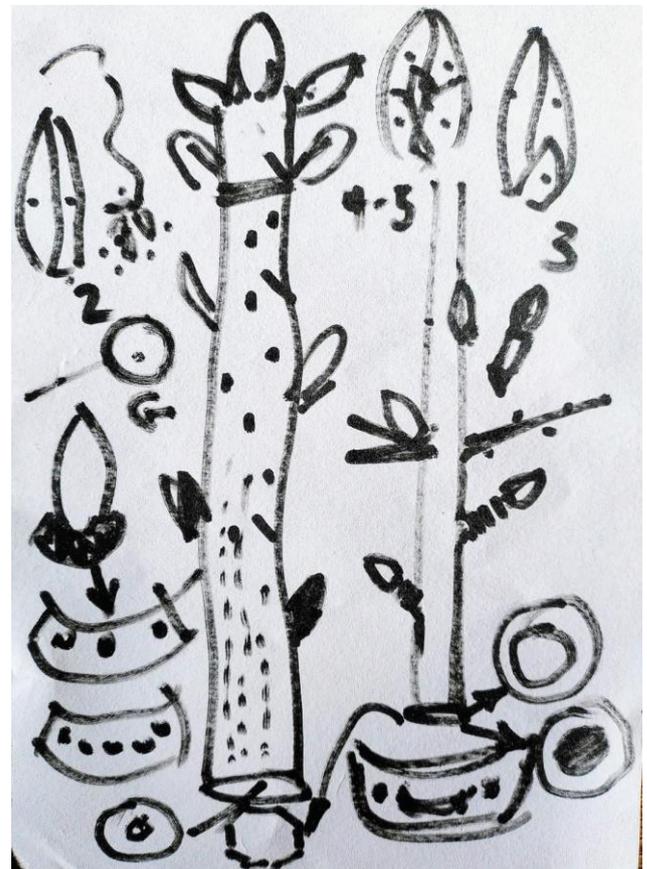
Report: Simon Leach

This meeting should have happened on 19<sup>th</sup> February, but it was postponed due to a tree-battering storm named Eunice, one of the fiercest to hit these islands since the 'Great Storm' of 1987. A wind speed of 122 mph was logged on the Isle of Wight – the strongest gust ever recorded in England. Unfortunately, several folk who were down to come the previous week couldn't make the new date, but there were still nine of us, including several from far-flung corners of the county – from Paulton to Porlock – and even one from Wiltshire!

The purpose of the day was to become familiar with the winter twigs of a range of common trees and shrubs, including both native and introduced species. In the two weeks leading up to this training day, Simon had posted daily pictures of twigs on the SRPG WhatsApp Group for people to have a go at identifying. The idea, really, was mainly to have a bit of fun, but some useful learning took place too – not least for Simon, who began this whole exercise as an out-and-out twig 'novice', but ended up being, if not an 'expert', then at least a twig *enthusiast*. Yes, twigs really *can* be fun! And one pleasure is discovering that, with a bit of effort and close observation, you can still put names to trees and shrubs even when they seem to be doing their utmost to remain incognito.

At the start of the day, in the Silk Mills Park-and-Ride car park, we quickly went through some of the basics of twig identification and the various terms used to describe a twig's form and behaviour, its arrangement of buds, the difference between thorns, spines and prickles, the importance of bud scales and lenticels, leaf scars and bundle scars, woody spurs, etc. Simon had hurriedly drawn a not

very helpful sketch to illustrate a few key points, while in the boot of his car there was assembled a large reference collection of twigs which helped to highlight how different and distinctive so many twigs could be – as well as indicating the scale of the challenge ahead of us...



Simon's "not very helpful sketch". Image © Simon Leach

To set the ball rolling, we passed round some twigs of a tree species that all of us were confident we knew: Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). The twigs, with those lovely big black buds arranged in opposite pairs, were unmistakable. Yet, apart from those buds, few of us could have reeled off many of the other characteristics of an Ash twig: not just the buds,

arranged in *opposite* and *decussate* pairs and with striking *black or chocolate-brown bud scales*, but also the lack of an *interpetiolar ridge*, the greyish-olive green coloration to the bark, the crescent-shaped *leaf scars*, the numerous *bundle scars*, etc. Steve and Helena took us through the key in John Poland's *Field Key to Winter Twigs* and it quickly became clear that there's far more to an Ash twig than meets the eye!



*The mobile 'library' of twigs in the boot of Simon's car. Photo © Simon Leach*

Having cut our teeth, so to speak, on Ash, we made our way at snail's pace through the car park, picking up Field Maple (*Acer campestre*) along the way, followed by Common Lime (*Tilia x europaea*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), planted Red-osier Dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) and Smoke-tree (*Cotinus coggygria*). The last of these had even the gardeners amongst us stumped – but it was convincingly identified (with the aid of Poland's key) by the strange arrangement of buds, the colour and *stickiness* of the bark, the *orange* lenticels, and the *orange* pith that (eyes shut and with a little imagination) smelled of soap.

Poland's guide proved to be enormously helpful but also, just occasionally, deeply frustrating. Using the

keys, you sometimes find yourself at tricky forks in the road, where either way looks equally im/plausible: while one option suggests that your twigs could be '*usually hairy*', the other indicates that they might be better described as '*frequently hairless*'. And so, you hover between these two alternatives, unsure which way to jump. Occasionally we resorted to working backwards through the key, starting where we'd expected to finish, and eventually, after much head-scratching, discovering where it was that we must have gone wrong!

'Poland' covers a huge range of species, so the keys are quite complex in places, and the descriptions are very full. His guide includes more Maples (*Acer* spp.) than you could reasonably expect to find in a medium-sized botanic garden, let alone a patch of typically English countryside on the edge of a typically English town. So, a few times we chose to use the more straightforward Field Studies Council guides to twigs, with their much smaller number of (mainly commonly encountered) species.

Anyway, after our minor triumph with *Cotinus*, we headed along the edge of Silk Mills Road, noting blossoming Cherry-plum (*Prunus cerasifera*) and discussing how best to distinguish it from Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*). Onto the back lane to Bishop's Hull we keyed out twigs of Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), and noted some fine corky-barked English Elm (*Ulmus procera*), close to some equally corky Field Maple. Telling the two apart could be tricky – each one as corky as the other – except that, helpfully, Elm buds are *alternate*, whereas Field Maple buds are *opposite*. Easy once you know, less easy when you don't!

We saw roadside/streamside Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) too, and Steve pointed out some 'big bud galls' caused by the gall mite *Phytoptus avellanae*. With its zig-zag branching and alternate buds, we might have toyed for a moment with the notion that this could have been something like a Wych Elm (*Ulmus glabra*), but the sight of that gall – screaming "HAZEL!" – would have quickly changed our minds. (The catkins would have been a bit of a giveaway too!)

We then progressed into Netherclay Wood, a 'local nature reserve' comprising mainly field hedgerows and blocks of woodland planted about twenty years ago on former agricultural land. We were immediately faced with an array of new species, including no fewer than four common opposite-budded shrubs: Common Dogwood (*Cornus*

*sanguinea*), Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*), Guelderrose (*Viburnum opulus*), and Wayfaring-tree (*V. lantana*). Having successfully worked the *Viburnum* species through the keys we decided it was lunchtime.



In Netherclay Wood, working through the keys...  
Photo © Steve Parker

After the break, Jeanne and Graham made their way back to the cars, while the rest of us headed for the riverbank, noticing Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*), Wild Cherry (*Prunus avium*), and (nicely galled) Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) along the way. We also examined a cluster of newly planted – and helpfully labelled! – Apples. Beside the river we spent time with Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and Crackwillow (*Salix x fragilis*), before keying out some twigs of Aspen (*Populus tremula*). Further along, we noted a young Small-leaved Lime (*Tilia cordata*), before one final drum roll had us admiring a particularly fine old riverbank Black-poplar (*Populus nigra* subsp. *betulifolia*), the last survivor of a group of three such trees – the other two having fallen down some years ago.

On our way back to the car park we learnt how to distinguish between the twigs of native ssp *betulifolia* and introduced Lombardy-poplar (*P. nigra* 'Italica'), Plantier's Poplar (*P. nigra* 'Plantierensis') and Hybrid Black-poplar (*P. x canadensis*). And, just as we thought we were finished, we came across the much-planted yellow variant of the usually red *Cornus sericea*, called 'Flaviramea' – the third and last Dogwood of the day.



The grand old native Black Poplar, beside the River Tone at Netherclay. Photo © Steve Parker

Our day of twigs was a welcome distraction, for a while, from the awfulness of the war in Ukraine. The Russian invasion had begun just two days before we met. Several members had posted 'good luck' messages on the SRPG WhatsApp group, expressing the hope that our twigs day would go well. One of these messages was from Clive: "Have a twigging good day", he wrote. Now, as we cobble together this report less than a week later, it's hard to come to terms with the fact that Clive is no longer with us. He was a dear man, kind-hearted, gentle, patient, generous, and incredibly knowledgeable. And his wisdom, always lightly worn, would more than likely be served up with a hint of mischief and fun.

So yes, we did indeed have a "twigging good day" – but tinged now with a much sharper sense of loss and sadness.

#### References

- May, A. & Panter, J. (2012/16), *A guide to the identification of deciduous broad-leaved trees and shrubs in winter*. FSC Publications.
- Poland, J. (2018), *The Field Key to Winter Twigs*, privately publ. in association with BSBI.
- Price, D. & Bersweden, L. (2013), *Winter Trees: a photographic guide to common trees and shrubs*, FSC Publications.