

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Backwell Lake Photo © Helena Crouch

Sunday 27th August 2022, Backwell Lake and Nailsea (VC6)

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Report: Fred Rumsey & Helena Crouch

On a finer day than had been forecast, 21 attendees assembled at Backwell Lake, including members of SRPG and Bristol Naturalists' Society and guests. This Wessex Water site, built as a balancing pond in the 1970s, has been a Local Nature Reserve since 1990. The lake is circumnavigated by an easy and level 0.8km path, although this took the group rather longer to complete than the 10 minutes suggested by the website!

At the lake margin, participants were introduced to Sweet Flag (*Acorus calamus*) distinguished by its distinctively transversely wrinkled leaves. The pond surface, where it was accessible, was well covered by

particularly robust Greater Duckweed (*Spirodela polyrhiza*). Attempts to sample the submerged plants were disappointingly thwarted by inquisitive cygnets: the only species retrieved was Rigid Hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*). The vegetative shoots of Amphibious Bistort (*Persicaria amphibia*) were frequent around the margins of the lake; we were pleased to see it flowering as a floating aquatic.



Amphibious Bistort (*Persicaria amphibia*) Photo: Helena Crouch

Most of the lake shore is inaccessible due to dense vegetation, but even from a distance it was possible to see the difference between the two native species of Reedmace (*Typha latifolia* and *T. angustifolia*). At one accessible area of shore, we found a patch of Marsh Horsetail (*Equisetum palustre*) and a few plants of Marsh Ragwort (*Jacobaea aquatica*), a Rare Plant Register species as it is Near Threatened on the England Red List. We also heard a Water Rail, squealing like a piglet!

Many of the trees and shrubs were obviously planted, but this gave the opportunity to study identification features of various native species and their alien relatives. Both native Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and the introduced Grey Alder (*Alnus incana*) were heavily infested with Alder Leaf Beetle (*Agelastica alni*). Purple Willow (*Salix purpurea*), with its near opposite leaves, was almost certainly planted, but there was some debate over whether a large bush of Alder Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*) by the lakeside might be a natural occurrence.

The grasslands fringing the circular path were surprisingly species-rich and had impressively large examples of the root-parasite Red Bartsia (*Odontites vernus*). Two plants of Broad-leaved Helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*) were found, both past their best, as well as the mortal remains of now indeterminable Dactylorchids. A colourful patch of Fleabane (*Pulicaria dysenterica*) was attracting several butterflies, including Small Copper, Common Blue and Brown Argus. In a damp area, a tiny patch of Bristle Club-rush (*Isolepis setacea*) was a new species for several people; it was the first record of this species in the hectad (ST46) since 1998.

By lunchtime, we had still not made it round the lake. Participants rebelled and sat down in the shade for much-needed refreshment. Upon our return to the carpark, we bid farewell to many of the group. The remaining stalwarts had been promised one of Somerset's rarest plants, Copse Bindweed (*Fallopia dumetorum*), and set off on a lengthy expedition along The Nailsea Round, making many interesting records on the way.

A target at Nailsea and Backwell Railway Station was Rough Hawk's-beard (*Crepis biennis*), an uncommon species in Somerset, known here since 1900 when it was found by Miss Roper on a "Railway embankment near Nailsea". An increasingly giggly group of botanists explored the Pick-up Point and disappeared behind the bike sheds, and were finally rewarded

with some plants still in flower on the steep bank beside the path to the platform.



Rough Hawk's-beard by Nailsea and Backwell station Photo: Fred Rumsey

Following the track beside the railway, we recorded more garden escapes and some common woodland ferns, then headed northwest across a damp rushy field. The footpath crossed a small brook, where we recorded Brooklime (*Veronica beccabunga*) and Stream Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus penicillatus*) and compared Water-cress (*Nasturtium officinale*) and Fool's-water-cress (*Helosciadium nodiflorum*). Entering some paddocks, time was spent examining a *Potentilla* with a mixture of 4- and 5-petalled flowers: the lack of well-developed achenes indicated that it was the hybrid, *P. x mixta*. By a soil heap, we found a single plant of Small-flowered Cranes-bill (*Geranium pusillum*).

Leaving our target monad, we continued along The Nailsea Round, marching uphill and along a track bordering playing fields and housing, amongst a sea of Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*). Finally, we reached our destination and found six plants of Copse Bindweed (*Fallopia dumetorum*).



Copse Bindweed sprawling over Bracken Photo © Helena Crouch

This Vulnerable species was first found here in 2016 by Liz McDonnell and Clive Lovatt. It had only ever been found once before in Somerset, near Keynsham in 1836, so this was an amazing discovery. Surprisingly it has persisted at this site amongst dense waist-high bracken: this annual twining member of the dock family usually germinates in response to disturbance, for example by coppicing or tree-fall.

The satisfied weary botanists took the most direct route back to the original monad and resumed recording, indulging in some extreme urban botany, examining front lawns and pavement edges. We recorded Musk Stork's-bill (*Erodium moschatum*), which seems to be increasing in this roadside lawn habitat, and found the smallest flowering Butterfly-bush (*Buddleja davidii*) that anyone had ever seen, emerging between paving and less than 5cm tall!



The smallest flowering Butterfly-bush in the world, on a kerb edge in The Perrings, Nailsea Photo © Helena Crouch

Close by, tinier still, and also emerging from between paving slabs was possibly the find of the day, Four-leaved Allseed (*Polycarpon tetraphyllum*).



Four-leaved Allseed (*Polycarpon tetraphyllum*) Photo © Helena Crouch

Long known as a native near Portland and in Cornwall, this Mediterranean species is rapidly increasing in urban areas elsewhere in southern England. In

Somerset it was first discovered in the Weston-super-Mare area by Rupert Higgins in 1997, and has recently also been found in Bath.

We descended the grassy slope below The Perrings, re-finding Common Restharrow (*Ononis repens*) which Liz and Clive had previously recorded here. An attractive large Oak tree was much admired. It resembled the more commonly planted Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*), but was clearly not that species. It was later identified as a Pin Oak (*Quercus palustris*), a fast-growing and pollution tolerant tree.



Pin Oak (*Quercus palustris*) Photo © Fred Rumsey

An exhausted but happy group finally returned to Backwell Lake along a shady path, past a small patch of Wood Melick (*Melica uniflora*), adding a few more species to the card. We had recorded 274 species in a single monad, taking the total for that square to an impressive 450 species, which is currently the highest monad total in VC6.