

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

Saturday 10th April 2022, Orchard Wood (VC5)

Leaders: Ann Fells and Ellen McDouall

Report: Ellen McDouall

First, this is an object lesson in how not to report on a meeting. My excuses? I'd only attended two meetings since 2019 and the pleasure of being out in an unlimited group of friends must have put some of my leader responsibilities out of my head. I managed the health & safety, who was coming and so on, but as for making notes about the highlights – no.

So far, an awful lot about me and not a lot about Orchard Wood.

This was to be the first of two SRPG visits in 2022 to this corner of the Blackdown Hills, and it was one of the meetings included in the 2020 programme that had to be shelved because of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Orchard Wood is a Local Wildlife Site and Ancient Woodland near Corfe in VC5. Although well known to several SRPG members, the site has not been recorded in a systematic way and Ann Fells, the SERC Ecologist, asked SRPG if they could help. So the objective of the day was to complete a Local Wildlife Site survey, requiring a complete species list with species abundances and a map of the habitats.

After an early frost, we had a dry, mainly sunny day for our first field meeting of the spring.

The wood covers a steep hill, converted to a hill fort in the Iron Age and lies across four monads, so the twelve of us split into three groups to achieve the day's aims. Here grateful thanks are due to Simon, who took one group to record the east half in ST2520 and this report relies heavily on his exemplary account of his part. I went with a second group to record the west half and Ann took the third to map the whole site.

The mappers were trying to identify habitat variations such as different dominant tree, understorey and ground flora species or clear differences in structure

- were all the areas about the same age or did any parts seem to be managed differently? Was there a well-defined understorey or not and were there open spaces?

Simon's account of his group's day is as follows:

My group, the one, recording the eastern flank of the wood, stayed mainly in ST2520, apart from a short stint in the NW corner of ST2519 at the start of the day. Beneath a mixed oak-ash-hazel canopy in which the abundance of Small-leaved Lime (*Tilia cordata*) is a notable feature, we saw a good range of woodland herbs including Ramsons (*Allium ursinum*), Wood Anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*), Wood Spurge (*Euphorbia amygdaloides*), Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), Yellow Archangel (*Lamiastrum galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum*), Southern Woodrush (*Luzula forsteri*), Hairy Woodrush (*L. pilosa*), Wood Melick (*Melica uniflora*), Dog's-mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*) and Wood Speedwell (*Veronica montana*). Beside one of the main forest tracks we also saw a good colony of Bitter-vetch (*Lathyrus linifolius*), while close to the edge of the wood where the track joins the 'herepath' we noted several clumps of False Oxlip (*Primula vulgaris* x *veris*).

We struggled to find just one solitary Early Purple-orchid (*Orchis mascula*) while, very curiously, there was no sign at all of Goldilocks Buttercup (*Ranunculus auricomus*), Sanicle (*Sanicula europaea*), Red Campion (*Silene dioica*) or Pignut (*Conopodium majus*) – all of these being frequent components of the ground flora in nearby Thurlbear and/or Adcombe Woods. Less surprisingly, perhaps, there was also no Herb Paris (*Paris quadrifolia*), which is one of the star plants of Adcombe Wood. But we did see several Spurge-laurels (*Daphne laureola*), a plant that seems to be especially frequent close to the 'herepath' that runs along the wood's eastern edge. Here, too, we noted plenty of Wayfaring-tree (*Viburnum lantana*), Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) and Wild Madder (*Rubia peregrina*), along with some nice grassland species such as Betony (*Betonica*

officinalis), Zigzag Clover (*Trifolium medium*) and Salad Burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba* subsp. *sanguisorba*).

In our main monad, ST2520, we recorded 130 species – a good haul, we thought, for so early in the season. The tiny patch of Orchard Wood lying within ST2519 produced a list of 53 species. Simon Leach

Meanwhile, the west side group quickly collected a nice selection of woodland ground flora species in ST2419 including Wood Spurge (*Euphorbia amygdaloides*) and Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*) along with Spurge Laurel (*Daphne laureola*) and Wild Service-tree (*Sorbus torminalis*). The latter found, not by our expert winter twig identification, but from some remaining fallen leaves. Just as we had fairly settled into an expectation of a calcareous bias to the site, we found Southern Wood-rush (*Luzula forsteri*), Bitter-vetch (*Lathyrus linifolius*) and Slender St John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*), all more indicative of acid soils. So all options open. We zig-zagged our way up and down the side of the hill, making a good collection of woodland grasses: Wood Melick (*Melica uniflora*), Wood Meadow-grass (*Poa nemoralis*) and Wood Millet (*Milium effusum*). In a visit to the bottom of the hill we made our best find of the day, a good colony of Thin-spiked Wood-sedge (*Carex strigosa*) on an old track (why is it so often found on wood tracks – does anyone have an idea?)

A near-vertical scramble from bottom to top took us over the ramparts to the level centre of the hill fort and here we found the abundant Ramsons and Bluebells not seen on the sides.

Our totals for the day were 51 species in ST2419 and 82 in ST2420, 133 in all.



The mapping group admiring a coppiced Lime tree. Photo © Ann Fells

Although the west side of the hill was sunnier and warmer than the east, the species lists for both were remarkably similar, as were Simon's observations of the plants that were unexpectedly rare or absent. The grassland herbs we found suggest a more open mosaic of habitats in the past.

So that was the meeting as far as I remember it and I hope others vaguely recognise the event they attended!