

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report



Kennet & Avon Canal, Bathwick Photo © Helena Crouch

**Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2022, Bath (VC6)**

**Leader: Helena Crouch**

**Report: Helena Crouch**

After a stormy night, a forecast for torrential rain, and with more than half the booked participants dropping out at the last minute, a despondent leader arrived in Bath in full waterproofs. The three remaining brave explorers assembled by the river in glorious sunshine, and waterproofs were soon discarded. This walk had originally been planned for the following weekend, searching for plants in flower, contributing to a Last Week Hunt for Wild Flower Society members; however, the date had to change due to other commitments. We could not help noticing the large number of species still in flower though. On the edge of the riverside path, by railings, we saw several plants of Musk Stork's-bill (*Erodium moschatum*) still flowering. This species was included on the Somerset

Rare Plant Register for a while but has spread dramatically on verges in urban situations and has now dropped off the list.



Musk Stork's-bill in flower by the River Avon Photo © Helena Crouch

We set off alongside the river, heading east towards the bus station, soon crossing the river and

descending to the relatively quiet path along the south bank. Here we studied Oxford Ragwort (*Senecio squalidus*), which has hairless leaves and bright yellow flowers, with all involucre bracts conspicuously black-tipped.



Involucre bracts of Oxford Ragwort Photo © Karen Andrews

For a long stretch, the riverbanks were lined with sheet metal piling, so there was almost no riverine vegetation. At Widcombe Lock, we left the river and followed the Kennet & Avon Canal instead. We admired the hanging gardens on the lock gates of Bath Deep Lock (the second deepest lock in the country), recording Skullcap (*Scutellaria galericulata*) and Mexican Fleabane (*Erigeron karvinskianus*) here.

On stonework at the edge of the canal, we saw the almost unrecognisable remains of Orange Balsam (*Impatiens capensis*), recorded here earlier in the year, and also the last few flowers of Beggarticks (*Bidens frondosa*). We examined the achenes to check the direction of bristles: those on the awns point backwards, but those on the body of the achene are directed forwards.



*Carex x boeninghausiana* and a greedy swan Photo © Helena Crouch

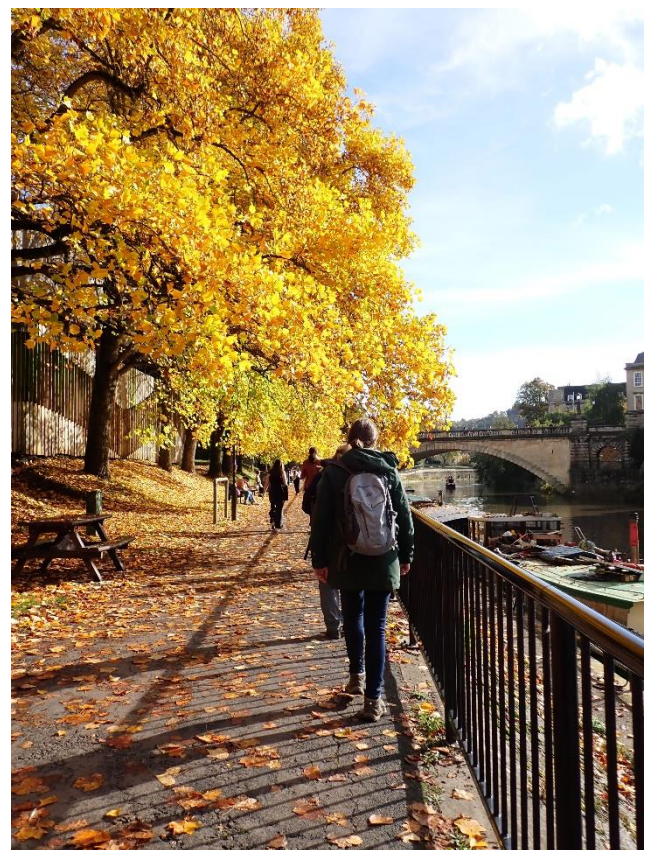
Further along, we admired a single clump of a fine-leaved sedge growing at the edge of the canal. This was found by Alex Lockton in 2021 and confirmed as *Carex x boeninghausiana*, the hybrid between

Remote Sedge (*C. remota*) and Greater Tussock-sedge (*C. paniculata*), the only known clump in VC6. A swan immediately arrived and began to peck at the precious sedge – we distracted him with grass!

We followed the towpath past Sydney Wharf, disappointed by the absence of aquatic plants, which is the result of the busy boat traffic. The canal passes through a tunnel beneath Cleveland House, an impressive Georgian building astride a bridge. The tunnel roof is adorned with festooning Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*). Further plants grow outside the tunnel, on the stonework of the bridge.

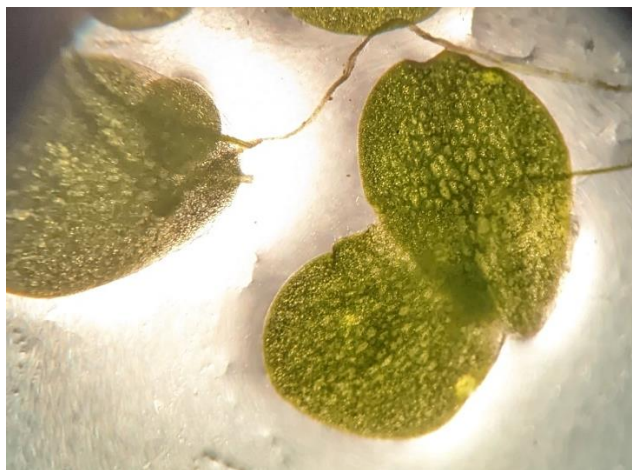
The planned destination for lunch was Sydney Gardens, where we came upon Morris dancers, donkey rides and a stilt-walker! Lunch was partaken to the accompaniment of a string trio on the lawns. Refreshed, we left the canal and walked along Great Pulteney Street towards the river. In Laura Place, we checked on Ribbon Fern (*Pteris cretica*) in a basement: this alien fern has been known here sporadically since 2007. A single large plant was present.

The small dock at the river's edge near Pulteney Weir was filled with nettles, but alas no Greater Dodder was seen. We admired the planted row of Tulip Trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), in beautiful autumn colours.



Botanists and Tulip Trees by the River Avon Photo © Karen Andrews

The river continued to be disappointingly devoid of aquatics, but eventually we spotted some duckweeds. The grapnel was immediately put into operation and duckweeds were duly caught. The flat fronds were identified as Fat Duckweed (*Lemna gibba*) from the frond shape – widest near the apex – and the presence of large air spaces in the centre of the frond.



Fronds of flat Fat Duckweed from the River Avon showing the large air-spaces in the centre and typical frond shape Photo © Helena Crouch

On a grass verge, we were surprised to find a substantial patch of Sweet Violet (*Viola odorata*) with several plants in flower.



Sweet Violet in flower in Bath Photo © Helena Crouch

Nearby was a large rosette of Great Lettuce (*Lactuca virosa*). Like Musk Stork's-bill, this species was formerly on the Somerset Rare Plant Register but has spread very dramatically in the last fifteen years and no longer qualifies for inclusion. Across the river, on the steep bank below the station car park, a large self-sown Fig (*Ficus carica*) was aglow, with bright yellow autumn colours.

Returning to our start point, opposite Camden Mill, there was time for a sortie west along the riverbank. A single plant of Corky-fruited Water-dropwort

(*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*) was spotted on a verge and in a damp depression we found our first rush of the day, Hard Rush (*Juncus inflexus*), with Amphibious Bistort (*Persicaria amphibia*) and Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*), still providing a sunny splash of colour.



Tansy by the River Avon in Bath Photo © Karen Andrews

Now reduced to a party of two, we continued along the riverside walk, recording a self-sown Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) in flower, seemingly new to Bath, and a row of seedlings of Shaggy Soldier (*Galinsoga quadriradiata*). This is another species which has spread considerably in VC6 since 2000, particularly in towns.

The final target for the day was a patch of Toothed Medick (*Medicago polymorpha*), first found here in 2000 by Rob Randall on a bank by the riverside path. This annual of open sandy habitats by the coast is regarded as a casual when found inland and mapped as an alien in Bath. In the past, this species often arose from wool shoddy, which explains its appearance in 2008 at the Morlands sheepskin factory site in Glastonbury. Its origin in Bath, however, is unknown; having persisted for 22 years on this small bank though, it can hardly be considered a "casual". We found several young plants, some just beginning to flower. Like many annuals, they had probably germinated in response to the arrival of rain following the dry summer, then thrived during the unseasonably high temperatures this autumn.

We had also benefitted from the unexpectedly warm, dry weather, but as we studied our final plant, rain arrived. Considering the forecast, we had been incredibly lucky. We had seen many species in flower, some interesting Bath aliens, and several Rare Plant Register species.