

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report

**Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022, Wick Moor, Stolford**

**Leaders: Ro FitzGerald & Graham Lavender**

**Report: Ro FitzGerald**

Meetings are always governed by uncertainty, notably weather conditions, but this one seemed to have an unfair ration of worries leading up to it! As it really was planned as a workshop to look at small details of very small plants in the field, it was necessary to limit numbers so that everyone could see properly. This meant we had to disappoint quite a few late applicants which is always horrid. The weather was key as well, not just in case it was bad on the day but because by late May the Somerset coast was becoming extremely parched after the unusually dry spring. Annual clovers are in their main growth in this period and may become very shrivelled or abort altogether (as many annuals can, relying on their seed bank for the next year).

We had to hold onto the knowledge that this is a superb site, so something would be interesting whatever happened! And we were lucky – the clovers were struggling but identifiable, and we managed to see almost the full list of the *Trifolium* species known here. Wick Moor is an excellent example of sub-maritime grassland, a habitat which is becoming frighteningly rare, threatened by drainage, development, and modern agricultural 'improvement'. Here the area of grassland lies slightly lower than the shingle bar and is divided by rhynes. Some compartments are sporadically grazed by sheep or cattle. It is a notable site for the specialist grass Bulbous Foxtail (*Alopecurus bulbosus*) whose 'bulbs' can survive total immersion in sea water if floods are occasional. The hybrid with *A. geniculatus* (*A. x plettkei*) has been seen here. 22nd May is peak flowering for Bulbous Foxtail and although rather stunted in this dry year with careful

looking many heads with their pale brownish anthers could be seen.

The clovers in their droughted state had to be searched for, but with 13 pairs of sharp eyes enough were located. In the first few yards after walking from the car park we could settle to a common but quite difficult puzzle – telling Rough Clover (*Trifolium scabrum*) from Knotted Clover (*T. striatum*). When both are in good condition and flowering this is relatively easy, *T. scabrum* is always procumbent and mat-like, close to the ground, its flowers always white - the ovoid head of calyces becoming almost prickly as it matures. *T. striatum* is a softer plant, rather more sprawling, often growing a little tangled among other plants. The heads are more oblong with usually pinkish flowers (more like a pale, miniature Red Clover). But in drought conditions with absolute minimum growth the split needed close attention! Stipules (always useful in clover ID) were carefully examined, and the leaflet veins are key as those of *T. scabrum* are thickened at the ends – this shows up with a lens and the leaf held up against the light.



Getting down to work © Ro FitzGerald

Plenty of the scarce coastal species Sea Clover (*T. squamosum*) was found, mostly on the banks sloping from the shingle bar down into the grassland, and tiny plants of Bird's-foot Clover (*T. ornithopodioides*) occurred in several places up on the trackway. This was flourishing on this poor and battered substrate, and we could see plenty of the minute single florets, often barely 5mm long. In the grassland, enjoying rather damper conditions, Strawberry Clover (*T. fragiferum*) was abundant, its leaves quite like those of White Clover (*T. repens*), but always without any 'watermark' on the leaflet, and often a glaucous green. Again, when in doubt, it's useful to look at both stipules and leaflet veins.

Clover hunting requires close attention to the ground, so it was very pleasant to find a gorgeous display of a much more visible plant Hairy Buttercup (*Ranunculus sardous*) which has notably shiny petals. This is another specialist in its typical habitat – the plants were growing thickly along a winter-wet hollow where the water must have prevented grass growth long enough for the buttercups, which like bare or disturbed habitat, to become well established. Sub-maritime grazing fields are ideal for this species as they often have wet hollows in winter. The batrachian Brackish Water-crowfoot (*R. baudotii*) was also seen although in the dry weather plants were in poor condition.



Hairy Buttercup (*Ranunculus sardous*) © Val Graham

Altogether this was a very enjoyable meeting. Enough of the clovers were seen to make the identification exercise worthwhile and the abundance of the Hairy Buttercup and Bulbous Foxtail (which had plenty of its common relative Marsh Foxtail (*A. geniculatus*) with its characteristic 'kneeling' habit to compare it with) was exhilarating. There was some interest in the rhynes even though it was early in the season for aquatics, and on the shingle bar popular seaside plants such as Horned Poppy (*Glaucium flavum*) and Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) were present. A Sea-lavender (*Limonium procerum*) was seen in flower, and another nose-down-with-lens session confirmed Sea Mouse-ear (*Cerastium diffusum*). The leaders felt that keeping to a small group in a site where it was easy to carry books (flat going, near the car park) worked as intended; the weather was ideal; and this part of the coast is remarkable as we were botanising almost under the shadow of Hinkley Point Power Station while looking at a long-traditional land use which, with the maritime influence, has produced a rich and unusual plant community – a remarkable coincidence of Old and New!



Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station © Val Graham