

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report

**Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> March 2022, Recording and Mapping meeting. The Pavilion, Shapwick.**

**Report: Talk reports by the speakers, compiled by Ellen McDouall.**

Oh my! The daring! The difference! Our FIRST indoor meeting since the first Covid 19 lockdown, two whole years previously.

Yes, this was a momentous day and care had gone into the planning. Liz McDonnell had found us a new venue in the Shapwick Cricket Club pavilion, just down the road from our old, but too small, room at the Avalon Marshes Centre. The pavilion was excellent. Very new, spacious, well-equipped - and lots of windows to open. With this encouragement around twenty members attended to learn all that is needed to become the perfect recorder.

Unfortunately, all the care in the world could not prevent illness and amongst others two of the speakers, Steve Parker and Liz McDonnell, could not attend. Grateful thanks go to Simon Leach who delivered Steve's talk.

### **General principles of recording**

Simon presented Steve Parker's introduction to everything a botanical recorder needs to know. He gave a run-through of all the principles and basic skills including the differences between recording specific sites and monads, the use of maps, how to read a grid reference, the use of centroids, and SSSI and LWS boundaries. Having covered the technical side, he went on to outline some of a recorder's responsibilities - code of conduct, access etc. and suggested some helpful tools such as GPS and phone for accurate grid references.

### **BSBI referees and herbaria**

Graham Lavender took us through further stages that may be needed when recording flora: when extra detail is needed on the recording card, if and when voucher specimens should be collected, when to consult a referee and when to deposit a specimen in the herbarium. He challenged us with worked examples, some taken from the Taunton herbarium, which also served to illustrate the hugely valuable resource that this and all herbaria provide in holding lectotype specimens that define a species, validating records and giving historical perspective to species distributions.

We were encouraged to approach the BSBI referees, including a beginners' referee, with our problem identifications. This resource is properly only available to BSBI members, but the relevant VC recorders and other SRPG members also belong to BSBI and can help.

Special thanks were given to Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society for its support of Taunton Herbarium. Also, thanks to SRPG volunteers without whom Taunton herbarium would not exist.

### **Computer applications supporting ID and recording**

Val presented a quick summary of the sort of computer applications (apps in the modern jargon) that can help to identify plants and support the entry and sharing of biological records.

Several plant ID apps were brought before us for consideration. These attempt to identify plants based on photographs, typically using a smartphone. They use sophisticated machine-learning techniques to suggest possible identifications, based on thousands of previous successful identifications.

They can work very well, but equally they can mislead the unwary.

Google Lens – available on all Android smartphones – attempts to identify anything at all that you photograph, including plants, and does seem to come up with reasonable answers most of the time.

iNaturalist was developed in California. A UK version was released last year in partnership with the Biological Records Centre and the NBN Trust. It is aimed at the general public who have an interest in identifying plants and animals. It can be used to record sightings and it will offer suggestions for identifications based on photographs. There is a related, simplified, variant called Seek which is being aimed at the relatively inexperienced with competitions and games. The latter is being promoted by SWT as part of their Wilder Somerset campaign as a way to draw the wider public into identifying and sharing wildlife sightings.

The bottom line with identification apps is 1) they can certainly help with unfamiliar plants and/or a brain freeze 2) they are likely to get better and better as they will have more and more data to work with and improved learning algorithms 3) they are not perfect so always check the identification in the traditional way.

### Plant identification



Having been brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> century for identification, Val did the same for recording. Is the familiar recording card destined to be just a memory? He took us through iRecord and iNaturalistUK, showing how the process works from field observation to validated record. iRecord is designed to be the standard application for all biological recording, was designed in consultation with many national recording schemes, including BSBI, and will ultimately replace MapMate.

Pros: direct entry to the app removes the need to enter records later either by the observer or the VCR, spreading the load of data entry. There would also be no need to re-format spreadsheet data into the form needed for MapMate. Younger “digital natives” wouldn’t want to do it any other way!

Cons: Disruption to well-established ways of working. Reliable and timely data transfer appears problematical with a backlog of 20,000 plant records awaiting verification in April 2021. There is also a possible loss of contextual information.

### BSBI Distribution Database (DDb)

After lunch which we were able to enjoy outdoors, gently botanising over the disturbed ground around the new pavilion building, Helena took us through the DDb. For those of us (including me) who are very familiar with the initials but only a very hazy idea of their meaning, this was illuminating.

Helena gave a simple introduction to the BSBI’s Distribution Database (DDb), after explaining the numerous sources and destinations of plant records in Somerset. In many cases, it is still best to ask the Somerset Vice-County Recorders (VCRs) for details of records, but in some cases a look at the DDb may be sufficient. Distribution maps for all species are freely available to anyone at tetrad level (eventually to be at monad level for Somerset and some other areas); Helena showed members how to search for a map and zoom in to see the local distribution. Another feature available to all is a list of species recorded in a tetrad, which can be ordered by date-class to see a list of species not seen since, say, 2000. A preview of how maps and such lists will look at monad level was demonstrated. Finally, it was stressed that any recorder who contributes records regularly is welcome to ask their local VCR to support an application for full access to the DDb. Helena finished by reminding members that all the Rare Plant Register (RPR) accounts which she has written (over 200 species) are freely available on our own SRPG website and many of these contain detailed records too.

## Highlights of South Somerset recording in 2021

Graham took to PowerPoint again to give us the annual update of recording in VC5. Top of the list and new to VC5 was *Equisetum variegatum* followed by *Hieracium eustomon* last seen in the location in 1908, though seeing the rock it was living on, perhaps this is not so surprising.



Next was *Groenlandia densa*, another national and VC5 rarity, though not scarce on the Levels of VC6. A cluster of hybrids included *Sagina x micrantha* (*S. subulata x procumbens*), found with both its parents at the North Hill meeting in June and *Heracleum sphondylium x H. mantegazzianum* found in Minehead and identified by its intermediate characters. Even Graham, a dedicated collector of voucher specimens, declined to collect this one. Another voucherless specimen was the tiny and single plant of *Arenaria serpyllifolia* ssp. *lloydii*, on the Somerset Rare Plant Register and believed to be rare if not lost, having not been seen since at least 1968.

Having done his duty to the wider flora of VC5, Graham enthusiastically moved on to dandelions with no fewer than four new species for Somerset found in 2021: *Taraxacum inopinatum*, *T. subnaevosum*, *T. lambinonii* and *T. wallonicum*.

Chief *Taraxacum* recorders were, you will not be surprised to learn, Jeanne Webb, Simon Leach and Graham Lavender. There is room for other enthusiasts to make yet more new records in this large and absorbing group.

Seven non-natives of interest were shown and finally a cluster of six sub-species including *Urtica dioica*

subsp. *galeopsifolia* and *Hypochaeris radicata* subsp. *ericetorum*.

## Highlights of North Somerset recording in 2021

Helena began by alerting members to the shocking discovery that there may be more than one species of Rootless Duckweed (*Wolffia*) in Somerset! Richard Lansdown recorded *W. columbiana* in VC6 in 2021 and expects it to be more widespread. A considerably prettier discovery was Night-flowering Catchfly (*Silene noctiflora*) which appeared in a garden border, the first record for Somerset since 1991. At Chew Valley Lake, its only site, Mudwort (*Limosella aquatica*) was found in a new monad. Members of Somerset Botany Group found Lesser Skullcap (*Scutellaria minor*) at Street Heath, which turned out to be the first record for the Peat Moors since 1822! This species is no longer a RPR species. At Rodney Stoke NNR, Andrew and Georgina found Rough Mallow (*Malva setigera*), a Schedule 8 species, new to the Mendip Hills. As always, in 2021 a few alien plants were found new to VC6, or indeed Somerset. Moroccan Eryngo (*Eryngium variifolium*) was recorded during the SRPG meeting at Weston-super-Mare and the dainty pink Cowherb (*Vaccaria hispanica*) was recorded on a soil heap in a field, both new to Somerset. After briefly mentioning the SWT Wilder Churches surveys which several members had been involved in, Helena finished with the latest "blue map" (and some earlier ones for comparison), showing the impressive increase in density of species recorded per monad across Somerset.

## A dandelion update

The meeting concluded in high spirits with Simon giving an entertaining talk, of which I can only give brief outline, and presentation of the Dandelion Cup.



Recording dandelions is an absorbing activity for those who indulge in it, but apparently the parameters differ depending on your authority and date of publication. Work on this group over the years has increased the number of recognised species from 132 in 1972 (Watsonia) to 235 in 1997 (BSBI handbook Dandelions of GB & Ireland) and reaching 244 in 2021 with the publication of the Field Handbook to British and Irish Dandelions. There is apparently still a great deal of debate over what *does* constitute a *Taraxacum* species and the number could range from around fifty to over a thousand.

In Somerset, the number of species recorded has shown a substantial increase since identification training was given in 2015 during the BSBI Dandelion Workshop. The number of species in Somerset has risen from 35 in 1981 to 170 in 2021, although recording efforts in VC5 have contributed most to this growth, with 157 species recorded in VC5 by 2021. By comparison, the number of species recorded in VC6 has pretty much flat-lined since the 2015 surge, with the total having reached 93 in 2021, although this is a great improvement on the pre-workshop level.

Simon reviewed Graham's account of notable species recently found in Somerset adding *Taraxacum speciosiflorum* to the list, going on to remind us just how easy dandelions are to find and the diversity that is under our noses. By way of illustration, Simon had three species in his tarmac drive, seven on his concrete front path and twenty-five in the back garden. There is a checklist of dandelions on the SRPG website and an excellent (and expanding) reference collection in the Somerset Herbarium in Taunton. 146 species are represented there with at least fifteen more waiting to be added from a 2020-2021 backlog.

The meeting was concluded with the presentation of the Dandelion Cup for dandelion recording in 2021. The scoring system was explained and is based on numbers of species found that are either new to science, new to England/Great Britain, Somerset, the VC or hectad with weighting given to each level. "New to Science" gets 500 points while "new to hectad" gets just 5.

There were three contenders, Simon (185) Jeanne (225) and Graham (385) and so Graham was duly awarded the cup with all our congratulations.



Thanks were given to all the speakers for leading us so well through the recording process and illustrating the value of all our efforts.