

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

Saturday 9th July 2022

Witch Lodge Fields, Taunton (VC5)

Leaders: Ellen McDouall and Ann Fells

Report: Ann Fells and Simon Leach

Witch Lodge Fields was first listed as a Local Wildlife Site in 1994, partly in recognition of a population of Duke of Burgundy fritillaries (*Hamearis lucina*) that had been present on the site – they became extinct in the 1980s followed by an unsuccessful re-introduction attempt.

The site is owned by the Forestry Commission, part of a larger area of FC land including Orchard Wood to the west which was visited by SRPG in April 2022. Even though not particularly large, the site manages to straddle three monads: the NE corner of ST2419, the NW corner of ST2519 and the SW corner of ST2520. Soils are slightly base-rich to the south, more neutral to the north.

The site has a rather varied history over the past two centuries. In the 1820s woodland and arable occupied the southern part of the site, with orchard and meadow in the north but by the 1940s the arable and woodland had been replaced by more meadows. More recently trees were planted in small blocks but most of these were cleared in the early 2000s.

Broughton Brook runs south to north through the site, fed by a smaller watercourse crossing the fields

east to west. It is flanked by broadleaved woodland and tufa deposits have been recorded here.

The field visit focussed on four grassland fields: the large 'nursery field' in the west of the site which was an arable field when visited by Liz McDonnell in 1986, more recently purportedly used as a tree nursery then developing in to an impenetrable bramble thicket; two fields in the south and east of the site which have a longer history as grassland although with some areas of plantation, both broadleaved and coniferous; and a long narrow field along the east side of the site which was largely planted with larch in the 1980s but since cleared.

Much of the area which is now grassland was excluded from the original LWS boundary due to the low biodiversity interest of the arable and plantation areas, so part of the aim of the visit was to decide if the LWS boundary should be re-drawn.

The day of the visit was warm and sunny, one of many such days in what turned out to be the driest July on record in southern England. Undeterred by the heat, Team One headed off to the 'nursery field' which, through more recent sympathetic management, has developed into a mosaic of rough grassland, scattered trees and patches of brambly scrub.

The grassland of the 'nursery' has a mildly calcareous 'feel' to it. The soils, presumably calcareous clays of some sort, are for the most part prone to summer drought, but there are also one or two damper, shadier spots close to the stream, and towards the

northern (narrow) end where water seeps from the eastern flank of Orchard Wood. Here you can find Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Square-stalked St John's-wort (*Hypericum tetrapterum*), False Fox-sedge (*Carex otrubae*) and Hard Rush (*Juncus inflexus*). Elsewhere the grassland is much 'drier' in nature, supporting a wide range of summer-flowering herbs such as Stone Parsley (*Sison amonum*), Hairy St John's-wort (*H. hirsutum*), Hoary Ragwort (*Jacobea erucifolia*), Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota* subsp. *carota*) and Upright Hedge-parsley (*Torilis japonica*).

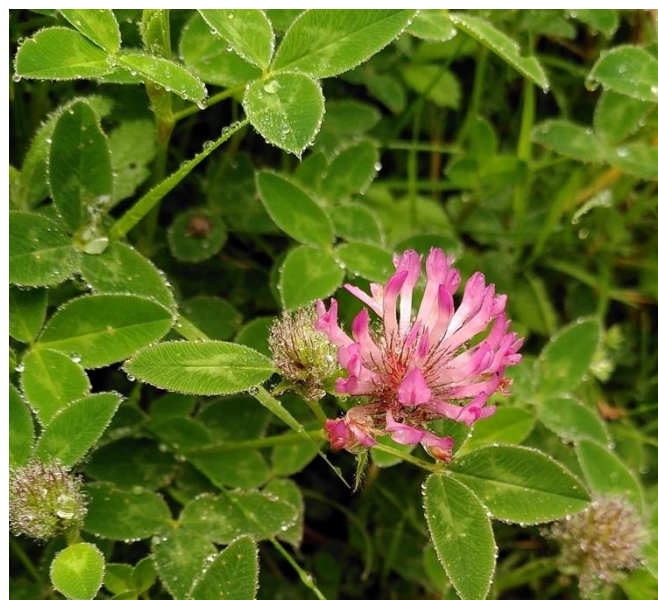
Team 1 was treated to both the pale pink Common Centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*) and its tiny, darker-flowered (and not so common) cousin Lesser Centaury (*C. pulchellum*), amongst a list of highlights that also included Spiked Sedge (*Carex spicata*), a single dinner-plate-sized patch of Dyer's Greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*), several large and imposing (although not yet flowering) plants of Woolly Thistle (*Cirsium eriophorum*), plus (harder-to-spot) Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*), Grass-leaved Vetchling (*Lathyrus nissolia*) and Smooth Tare (*Ervum tetraspermum*).



Common Centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*). Photo © Ann Fells

On the herepath along the west edge of the site several species not seen elsewhere were recorded such as Zigzag Clover (*Trifolium medium*), Quaking Grass (*Briza media*) and Betony (*Betonica officinalis*).

The hedgerow along the site's western rim is species-rich, with 11 woody species recorded along a single 30-metre length, including a notable abundance of Wayfaring-tree (*Viburnum lantana*), the leaves of which were occasionally covered in a smattering of 'pouch galls' caused by a gall-midge *Eriophyes viburni*.



Zigzag Clover (*Trifolium medium*). Photo ©Simon Leach

Team Two took off up the east side of the site. The southernmost meadow was moderately species-rich and fairly uniform until reaching the north end where the vegetation became more herb-rich and species-rich, predominantly a fairly dry, slightly calcareous vegetation with Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*), Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*) and Meadow Vetchling (*Lathyrus pratensis*). Within this was a damper area with abundant Hard Rush (*Juncus inflexus*) and a variety of herbs of damp soils at lower frequency such as Meadowsweet and Brooklime (*Veronica beccabunga*) – this area is actually the highest point of the meadow.

Whilst on lunch break, we encountered two women in hazmat suits who were recording butterflies – who knew butterfly recording could be so dangerous! There were undoubtedly a lot of butterflies about with no less than 10 species recorded, including large

numbers of Marbled Whites (*Melanargia galathea*) and Ringlets (*Aphantopus hyperantus*), newly emerged Gatekeepers (*Pyronia tithonus*) and Small Skippers (*Thymelicus silvestris*), and several Silver-washed Fritillaries (*Argynnis paphia*) patrolling the woodland edge. As you'd expect, there were Six-spot Burnet moths (*Zygaena filipendulae*), and Team One enjoyed testing their hearing with the high-pitched electrical buzz of Roesel's Bush-crickets (*Metrioptera roeselii*). Brown Hairstreaks (*Thecla betulae*) have been seen here too, later in the summer.



Middle meadow, west Witch Lodge Fields. Photo © Ann Fells

After lunch, Team Two moved to the middle meadow, a beautiful sight with Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) and Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) – these are expanding through the site recently. Also indicative of the base-rich soils here were Fairy Flax, Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*), Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*), Lesser Hawkbit (*L. saxatilis*) and Wild Basil (*Clinopodium vulgare*). Lesser Centaury (*C. pulchellum*) and Dyer's Greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*) were also recorded here.

Moving north through this meadow the vegetation became more dominated by coarse-leaved grasses and less species-rich – in particular in the loss of species associated with base-rich grassland. By now the shadows were starting to lengthen so the third (northern) meadow was a bit more of a whistle-stop tour but we had already seen the best – the plantation history of this field, actually a series of small fenced units, is still evident in a paucity of herb-diversity but it will be interesting to see how it develops in the future.



Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) at Witch Lodge Fields shortly before the meeting. Photo ©Simon Leach

Other species known to be present on the site include Small-flowered Buttercup (*Ranunculus parviflorus*), recorded in the driest patches of grassland in the spring. Its absence, and that of Brown Hairstreaks, served to emphasize the fact that you can't easily appreciate the full value of a place on the strength of one visit alone.