

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report



Admiring Green-winged Orchids in Three-cornered Field. Photo © Simon Leach

**Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2023, Barrington Hill National Nature Reserve (VC5)**

### **Leader and Report: Simon Leach**

Nine of us assembled for this evening meeting, held in glorious sunshine on the cusp – as it turned out – of a prolonged period of dry, sunny weather lasting well into June. The purpose of the meeting was twofold: first, the serious bit, was to monitor (or at least to marvel at) the populations of Green-winged Orchids (*Anacamptis morio*) for which the NNR is renowned; second, the icing on the cake, to hear nightingales singing – this being one of very few remaining sites in VC5 where the species has bred in recent years.

Barrington Hill NNR comprises four hay-meadows – Hilly Field, Three-cornered Field, Clover Ground, and

‘Shed Ground’ – overlying calcareous clays close to the northern edge of the Blackdown Hills, roughly midway between Ashill and Curland. The NNR totals 16.1 ha, with each field contributing approximately one-quarter of this area.

For the serious bit (the orchids) the leader had optimistically worked out random number co-ordinates for 5x5m plots in each field, 20 plots per field. The idea, though probably not a very good one, was that we might be able to extrapolate from the numbers of orchids counted in the plots to produce a rough estimate for the population in each field and across the site as a whole.

So, we set to our task in ‘Hilly Field’, one of us pacing out the randomly located plots, the rest of us splitting into 4 pairs, each pair counting the number of flowering ‘Green-wings’ in five of the plots. The



plan worked – after a fashion – and we progressed slowly across the field, zigzagging up and down the slope to locate our plots; but by the end the leader, at least, was knackered! Anyway, we counted a total of 554 flowering spikes in the plots, an average of 27.7 flowering spikes/plot, but the range was huge: three of the plots had zero orchids, while one had more than 100! Yet 1.1 spikes/square metre seemed to be entirely plausible. And with the field previously estimated to measure very roughly 220 x 150 paces, and assuming one ‘pace’ equates to approximately one metre, this would give a ballpark estimate of 36,300 flowering spikes for the field as a whole! We could have debated the accuracy of this estimate long into the night – but at least we were able to agree that there were a lot of orchids!

So, we moved on to the second field, ‘Three-cornered field’, and there were ‘Green-wings’ *everywhere*, a great purple haze of orchids. Enough orchids to make you dizzy at the thought of having to count them... And here it was that we decided, reluctantly, to adopt a change of tactic. We lay in the grass for a while, ate our packed teas, and chattered away while listening out (unsuccessfully) for nightingales – and then resolved that for the rest of the evening we would concentrate on *marvelling* rather than *monitoring*!



The NNR is notable for its huge population of Green-winged Orchids. Photo © Simon Leach

Thus, we shifted into ‘square-bashing mode’, aware that the four fields also (would you believe it?) straddled four 1-km squares (monads). This at least allowed us to spend some time appreciating the flora more generally, rather than being overly fixated on the ‘Green-wings’.

The meadows are for the most part a classic MG5 *Cynosurus cristatus*-*Centaurea nigra* grassland, probably MG5a (*Lathyrus pratensis* sub-community); they are all fairly species rich – ‘Shed Ground’ is the least rich, although much nicer now than it was thirty years ago – with an abundance of mostly common broad-leaved herbs but also a sprinkling of quality species like Pepper-saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*), Adder’s-tongue Fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) and, in ‘Clover Ground’, several large patches of Dyer’s Greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*).



Adder’s-tongue Fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) was seen in all the fields but was especially abundant in Clover Ground. Photo © Simon Leach

The star plant, though, would have to be French Oat-grass (*Gaudinia fragilis*), for which Somerset is a key stronghold. Nationally Scarce and arguably native in Britain, it is an important constituent of the sward at Barrington Hill and was a major factor behind the site’s declaration as an NNR in 1987.

Despite the close attention these fields have received from botanists over the years, we still conjured up a few new species in each monad. In ST3017, for instance, we added nine species to those recorded on MapMate, including Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), Lesser Hawkbit

(*Leontodon saxatilis*), Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*) and Meadow Fescue (*Schedonorus pratensis*).

In all four monads we also recorded, for the first time, the dandelion *Taraxacum nordstedtii*, a rather attractive and not uncommon species of usually dampish grassland, its capitula (flower-heads) with erect/appressed involucre bracts and striking puce-coloured ligule stripes.

We completed our circumnavigation of the NNR just as the sun dipped below the horizon. Still no nightingales, unfortunately - just blackbirds, blackcaps, and robins. But we certainly saw plenty of Green-winged Orchids – although how many exactly, we can't honestly say!



Barrington Hill NNR. Photo © Simon Leach

[Regarding the nightingales: later in the summer we were told that nightingales had apparently failed to return to Barrington Hill this year, and there's a real worry now that they might have gone from the site, just as eight to ten years ago they vanished from Thurlbear Wood.]