



Meeting Report



House Lake, Otterhead Lakes Local Nature Reserve. Photo © Karen Andrews

**Sunday 23rd July 2023, Otterhead Lakes
Local Nature Reserve (VC5 & VC3)**

Leader: Steve Parker

Report: Simon Leach

The heatwave in Europe continued, and wildfires raged across great swathes of the Mediterranean, but closer to home the extraordinarily dry and sunny late spring/early summer had fizzled away – thanks to a shift in the jet stream – to something much damper and less hot.

So while the day dawned fine and sunny, by mid-morning it had settled into a hotchpotch of sunshine and showers. At least we weren't in Manchester, where the final day of the crucial 4th Test against the Australians was completely washed out, the match doomed to end in a sodden draw.

Anyway, doing our best to push the cricket to the backs of our minds, nine of us gathered at Otterhead Lakes, in the car park beside the lodge. Here we were introduced to John Godsmark, a member of the Otterhead Estate Trust which leases the Local Nature Reserve area from Wessex Water. John briefly explained the history and management of the site, then joined us for the rest of the morning as we slowly made our way around the 'House Lake' – heading down the main drive to the little bridge at the southern end of the lake, then across a flat terrace on the side of the lake where Otterhead House used to stand – a grand residence of which now almost nothing remains.

In its heyday the estate included a flight of seven lakes and a complex network of leats, weirs, and pumps. Just two lakes survive, House Lake and, at the southern end of the site, Royston Lake. Today,

the reserve holds an interesting range of habitats: there's the River Otter itself – here little more than a swift-flowing stream – the two lakes, a varied mixture of marginal swamp vegetation, alder-willow carr, wet woodland, and one or two small pockets of bracken and unimproved grassland. Adjoining the reserve there are also blocks of mainly coniferous valley-side woodland on land leased to, and managed by, the Forestry Commission.

Keeping a list of what we found on the reserve wasn't straightforward. While our recording was helpfully confined to a single monad, ST2213, we realised that both the monad and the site inconveniently straddled two vice-counties, VC5 (South Somerset) and VC3 (South Devon) – with the course of the River Otter here marking the old boundary between Somerset and Devon. So, for purposes of botanical recording, we would have to keep two lists rather than one!

Botanical highlights of the stroll around House Lake included Hard Shield-fern (*Polystichum aculeatum*) in VC5 and a single large clump of Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) in VC3. There were lowlights too, the main one being New Zealand Pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*) which seemed to be dominating large areas of the lake on both sides of the vice-county boundary! Steve, using a grapnel, also hauled in some Nuttall's Pondweed (*Elodea nuttallii*), just inside Devon, but surely on the Somerset side of the border too.



Karen admiring the Royal Fern. Photo © Simon Leach

Around the site of the 'big house' we recorded various now-wild garden relics including 'Irish' Yew (*Taxus baccata*), Mock-orange (*Philadelphus*

coronarius), and Elecampane (*Inula helenium*). Beside the lake a small stand of Japanese Knotweed turned out on closer inspection to be the (probably under-recorded) hybrid between 'Japanese' and 'Giant', *Reynoutria x bohemica* – having much larger leaves than *R. japonica*, and with truncate rather than the markedly cordate leaf bases of *R. sachalinensis*.



Elecampane (*Inula helenium*) close to the site of the former Otterhead House. Photo © Karen Andrews

We stopped for lunch overlooking the northern end of the lake, before heading into an area of swampy carr-woodland where we saw what we thought was evidence of beaver activity, the site having been colonised in the last few years by beavers moving upstream from introduction sites further down the Otter in Devon. This was also where we saw the Royal Fern.



Evidence of beaver activity? What looked like a dam near the southern end of House Lake. Photo © Simon Leach

Non-botanical highlights included abundant ‘mop-head’ galls on *Dryopteris filix-mas* and *dilatata* caused by the midge *Chirosia betuleti*, a Golden-ringed Dragonfly (*Cordulegaster boltonii*), and amongst a wide range of butterflies a single Fritillary, probably Silver-washed (*Argynnis paphia*). We saw Common Red Soldier Beetle (*Rhagonycha fulva*) too, which is also known – for good reason – as the ‘hogweed bonking beetle’.

In the afternoon we walked along the streamside path down to Royston Lake, then up the slope and back through stands of conifers and the mainly bracken-covered Lower Cleeve. Beside the bottom path in patches of soggy ground we spotted lots of Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage (*Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*), as well as several plants of Smooth-stalked Sedge (*Carex laevigata*) which, along with Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*), seemed to be new for the monad; we also saw lots of froglets (*Rana temporaria*) crawling through Toad Rush (*Juncus bufonius*), newly emerged summer-generation Brimstones (*Gonepteryx rhamni*), and strange swellings in the umbels of Hemlock Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*) caused by the midge *Lasioptera carophila* – just the fourth record for this gall in Somerset, and the first on *Oenanthe*, the others being on Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*). And let’s not forget the leaf galls on Greater Stitchwort (*Stellaria holostea*) caused by the aphid *Brachycolus stellariae*.



Lasioptera carophila galls on Hemlock Water-dropwort.
Photo © Simon Leach

In all, we recorded 104 vascular plant species in the VC5 portion of the monad, and more than 150 across the border in VC3, including many that were seemingly new for the square. So it proved to be a very worthwhile day’s recording, and a splendid way to keep one’s mind off the weather in Manchester.

Our thanks to John Godsmark for acting as our host, and to Steve for leading on the day.