

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



SRPG members on the beach at Berrow Dunes Photo © Helena Crouch

Thursday 15th June 2023, Berrow Dunes (VC6)

Leader: Helena Crouch

Report: Helena Crouch

After a scorching hot day, sixteen members met for this evening meeting to see some of the botanical treasures of Berrow Dunes SSSI. This large sand dune system is the site of Burnham & Berrow Golf Course and is carefully managed under Higher Level Stewardship. Unfortunately, the Course Manager was unable to join us after all, which meant we needed to stick to the footpath, not explore the further reaches of the golf course, and the leader would need to be on High Golfer Alert. In fact, we started by waiting at the edge of the course for three golfers to take their shots, after which one came to ask what we doing, was interested, and told us to make sure we saw all the orchids. We didn't see any other golfers all evening, but we did see four species of orchid.

Immediately after crossing that first fairway, we paused to look at a bank of mature dune grassland

(the leader still on high alert!) Here we found Hare's-foot Clover (*Trifolium arvense*), Hop Trefoil (*T. campestre*) and a small dead brown circle of Suffocated Clover (*T. suffocatum*) which is GB Scarce and a Somerset Rare Plant Register (RPR) species. Nearby were some disintegrating plants of Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*), another RPR species.



Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*) Photo © Simon Leach

Thankfully other species were more impressive! We soon found two more RPR grasses: cute plants of Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*) and attractive swathes of silky Purple Fescue (*Vulpia ciliata* subsp. *ambigua*), another GB Scarce species. Both have restricted distributions in Somerset.

In longer grass, across the path, there were scattered Pyramidal Orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) and the first Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) was spotted: Berrow Dunes is the only site for this orchid in Somerset. We found Bugloss (*Lycopsis arvensis*) and Bur Chervil (*Anthriscus caucalis*), which both have a largely coastal distribution in VC6, and a few plants of Hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*) which is Near Threatened on the GB and England Red Lists, and thus a RPR species.



Hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*) Photo © Karen Andrews

At the edge of the next fairway, attention returned to the frazzled vegetation, as a massive population of Bulbous Meadow-grass was admired, together with a carpet of circular corpses of Suffocated Clover. In grassland north of the path, a smart Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) was still in flower. We studied some Eyebrights: the small flowers, leaf shape, lack of glandular hairs and the fact that the first flowers were at node 10 or above all led us to conclude that they were Common Eyebright (*Euphrasia nemorosa*), another RPR species. Yellow Oat-grass (*Trisetum flavescens*) and Silver Hair-grass (*Aira caryophyllea*) were flowering abundantly, catching the evening sun, and nearby we spotted another rare coastal grass, Dune Fescue (*Vulpia fasciculata*). Like Purple Fescue, this is GB Scarce and a RPR species.

Leaving the dunes, a boardwalk leads seawards across a large reed bed. This added some wetland species to our list, including Sea Clubrush (*Bolboschoenus maritimus*), Cyperus Sedge (*Carex*

pseudocyperus), Marsh Bedstraw (*Galium palustre*), Lesser Water-parsnip (*Berula erecta*), Gypsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*), Skullcap (*Scutellaria galericulata*) and some smart Southern Marsh-orchids (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*).

We emerged onto the beach between large patches of blue-leaved Lyme-grass (*Leymus arenarius*), a RPR species because it is Scarce in VC5. By the path was a patch of Sea Sandwort (*Honckenya peploides*), exactly where some of us had recorded it previously, although not since 2014. This is another RPR species, being Scarce in VC5 and VC6.



SRPG members striding out to the beach Photo © Karen Andrews

At the top of the beach, we found three species typical of sandy foreshores: Prickly Saltwort (*Salsola kali*), Frosted Orache (*Atriplex laciniata*) and Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*). All of these are included in the Somerset Rare Plant Register (RPR): all are rare or scarce in VC5 due to lack of suitable habitat and Prickly Saltwort is also Vulnerable on the GB Red List.



Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*) on the beach Photo © Karen Andrews

Originally, upon learning that we would need to stick to the footpath across the golf course, the ambitious leader had planned a 1km march up the beach, returning by the parallel path to the north. In fact, there had been so much to see just beside the footpath that by the time we reached the beach, the sun was about to set over the sea! The happy band of beach botanists played in the sand, gazed at the sunset, then retraced their steps.



Nicky, Margaret and Jane at Berrow Dunes Photo © Helena Crouch

As we returned to the golf course, we were greeted by a magical display of large yellow flowers: the Fragrant Evening-primrose (*Oenothera stricta*) flowers had all opened! This species is native to Chile, but now found almost worldwide.



Fragrant Evening-primrose flowering at sunset Photo © Helena Crouch

Although we had seen several Lizard Orchids earlier, the most splendid one was seen on our return, and everyone ascended the dune beside the path to examine the spire of long-tailed lizards and to check whether they really do smell of goats.



Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) Photo © Helena Crouch

We had seen some Common Broomrape (*Orobanche minor*) earlier, but on our return we spotted some tall narrow (brown, dry and dead!) spikes just south of the footpath. These were identified as *O. minor* subsp. *minor* var. *compositarum*, which we have found here before, on two previous SRPG meetings, the first in 2009. This variety, as its name suggests, is particularly found on members of the Asteraceae, especially Smooth Hawk's-beard (*Crepis capillaris*). The corollas are held sub-erect rather than horizontal, which is why the flowering spikes appear tall and narrow.

Altogether we recorded 156 species, just along our small transect of the Berrow Dunes SSSI. This included 14 RPR species; there are at least ten further RPR species in other parts of the dunes. It is a very special site and we are grateful to the Course Manager for encouraging SRPG to visit.