

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



The Hunt begins: Team VC5 and Team VC6 ready to start the clock and seek flowers in the rain Photo by anonymous bypasser

Saturday 31st December 2022, Bridgwater New Year Plant Hunt (VC5 & VC6)

Leaders: Steve Parker & Helena Crouch

Report: Helena Crouch & Steve Parker

It is now traditional for SRPG to participate in the New Year Plant Hunt (NYPH) organised by the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (BSBI). This year we chose to revisit Bridgwater, a low altitude, almost coastal, urban location, with the added bonus of sitting astride the vice-county boundary, thus allowing us all to meet up, but then to split into smaller teams for a more concentrated (maybe competitive) search in each VC, reconvening at the end to compare lists. The rules of the BSBI NYPH are simple: find as many species in flower as possible within a 3 hour search. Different teams cannot combine lists when inputting them to the NYPH website, but it is interesting to note how many species we found altogether.

The forecast for the day was foul, with a Yellow Warning of rain, which put off a few members; nine of us met on the Town Bridge, and one more joined the VC6 team as we set off. The hunt was on!

Once over half-way across the bridge, Team VC6 found their first flowers, Annual Meadow-grass (*Poa annua*) and Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*), both consistently in the Top Five species found each year during the NYPH. A patch of unmown amenity grassland outside Asda provided an exciting bounty of flowers, including Daisy (*Bellis perennis*) and Dandelion (*Taraxacum* sp), two of the other NYPH Top Five species: we found the fifth, Smooth Sow-thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*) as our last species! In minutes, we reached ten species, additions including Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Hoary Mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*), Red Dead-nettle (*Lamium purpureum*), Sun Spurge and Petty Spurge (*Euphorbia helioscopia* and *E. peplus*) and abundant Annual Mercury (*Mercurialis annua*). More exciting was a

single plant of Common Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria muralis*).



Flowers of Common Ramping-fumitory Photo © Karen Andrews

Verges around Asda yielded a few more species, including Oxford Ragwort (*Senecio squalidus*) and White Dead-nettle (*Lamium album*), but eventually we headed south towards older streets. Along a weedy back alley, we found a splendid Fool's-parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*) in flower, and close examination under hand lenses confirmed that Bilbao's Fleabane (*Erigeron floribundus*) was also in flower: we had already found Guernsey Fleabane (*E. sumatrensis*).



The stunning flowers of Bilbao's Fleabane Photo © Karen Andrews

Inspired by these, we continued along the seedy back-alley, finding nothing else in flower, then headed for the churchyard of St John the Baptist. Here we met the vicar, who remembered the SRPG visiting in the previous year! She was pleased that we found a Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) and Cow Parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*); we also spotted Wood

Avens (*Geum urbanum*) as we left, taking our total up to a promising 27 species in flower by half-time.

We headed for the station, along streets of Victorian terraces, both of which proved disastrously devoid of flowers, with only three more species added. The rain set in, as did hunger, and in desperation we headed for Eastover Park. Alas there was no shelter, and almost no flowers, until a cheerful Celandine (*Ficaria verna*) revived us and we entered the adjacent industrial park. Amazingly, while others perused the verges, the starving leader found the perfect place for lunch! Seats would have been a bonus, but hey! it was dry!



Karen, Val, Fred and John relaxing in The Lunch Shack
Photo © Helena Crouch

Refreshed (but still wet), we re-started our clock and set out to get wetter. In a yard, Fred found a few bedraggled heads of Annual Beard-grass (*Polypogon viridis*), alas not in flower but a good record. This species has spread considerably in the last 20 years, although not as dramatically as the related Water Bent (*P. viridis*), which we had found in flower before lunch. We considered the path beside the River Parrett, but it looked bleak! On the ramp up to it though, was a carpet of a slightly yellow little grass. A specimen collected had tiny pollen, and was thus confirmed as Early Meadow-grass (*Poa infirma*), another species which has expanded its range very considerably in recent years. A chickweed hurriedly grabbed with it turned out to be Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*), with no petals, another characteristic weed of paving. Opting to explore the industrial estate, John and I were approached by two men who came out of a yard asking the inevitable question! They were genuinely interested and invited us into their yard to see their own exciting plant. We were surprised when this turned out to be a huge dead fruiting specimen of Thorn-

apple (*Datura stramonium*), the first post-2000 record for this species in the hectad!

We finally found Ivy (*Hedera helix*) in flower, and a few plants of Narrow-leaved Ragwort (*Senecio inaequidens*); we found masses more as we headed towards the river along a newly constructed road.



Narrow-leaved Ragwort Photo © Helena Crouch

More excitingly, we found two plants of Cut-leaved Dead-nettle (*Lamium hybridum*) in flower. Near the bridge we added Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) and a bedraggled Ox-eye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*). We were also feeling rather bedraggled by now, so opted for a quick march back along the riverside path, adding Hemlock (*Heracleum sphondylium*) to our list before our three hours was up. We had seen a total of 51 species in flower.

Meanwhile, the VC5 Team headed towards Blake Gardens a small urban park alongside the river Parrett, peering over the sea wall we spotted Sea Aster (*Tripolium pannocium*) with one rather miserable looking flower still clinging on. The rest of the park however proved somewhat disappointing so we made our way through the streets to main shopping area, noting a few common species on the way. Arriving back at the starting point of the walk the small VC5 part were rewarded with some colourful garden plants that escaped from hanging baskets and plants along West quay, on the wall was Fern-leaved Beggarticks (*Bidens ferulifolia*) and French Marigold (*Tagetes patula*). By now the rain

was making recording rather difficult and my paper notes started to disintegrate. At around one o'clock the group sheltered to have their lunch by Bridgwater Marina, this is normally an area for uncommon aliens however recent cold weather had killed many of these. Growing from the walls were Mexican Fleabane (*Erigeron karvinskianus*), Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*) with Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*).



Soaking wet but still smiling in Blakes Gardens © Steve Parker

A straggling yellow composite was soon identified as Hoary Mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*) a plant which appears to be increasing in the Bridgwater area. From the Marina we headed back in to town and past the newly built cinema (once an interesting building site colonised by plants) and to St Mary's Churchyard, which delivered no new species. Our last plant to add to the list was Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*). Now thoroughly soaked through we returned to the meeting point to check and compare notes with the VC6 team. Once all the data had been collated the VC5 team had recorded 44 plants in flower, the 16th longest list submitted to BSBI. The VC6 team recorded 51 species, the tenth longest list.