

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

Saturday 6th May 2023, Ebbor Gorge (VC6)

Leaders: Helena Crouch & Ellen McDouall

Report: Helena Crouch

After months of intensive planning, Ebbor Day (aka Coronation Day) dawned alarmingly wet. Undaunted, eighteen brave botanists assembled under the convenient shelter by the car park at Ebbor Gorge NNR. We made a few records from the comfort of our dry sanctuary, including Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*) which was surprisingly new to the monad, and our first patch of Goldilocks Buttercup (*Ranunculus auricomus*). After copious warnings about slippery rocky paths from an uncharacteristically cautious leader, we ventured forth.

Ebbor Gorge NNR was designated as an SSSI in 1952, is owned by the National Trust, and is managed by Natural England. The site consists of a steep-sided ravine cut into the Carboniferous Limestone of the Mendips, with glorious ancient woodland, rock outcrops, calcareous grassland and a small area of limestone heath. The path from the car park descends steeply through woodland via about a million steps.



Setting off, recording, in rather grim weather Photo © Karen Andrews

Here we saw many Ancient Woodland Indicators, including two grasses, Wood Melick (*Melica uniflora*) and Wood Millet (*Milium effusum*), Wood Anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*), Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), Wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*) and also Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage (*Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*) and Yellow Archangel (*Lamiastrum galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum*). We studied the emerging ferns, finding Male-fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*), Golden Scaly Male-fern (*D. affinis*), Borrer's Scaly Male-fern (*D. borrieri*) Broad Buckler-fern (*D. dilatata*), Lady-fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), Soft Shield-fern (*Polystichum setiferum*), Hart's-tongue (*Asplenium scolopendrium*) and Intermediate Polypody (*Polypodium interjectum*).



Ellen, Josh and Kurt share ID skills as rain eases Photo © Karen Andrews

At the bottom of the slope there are two meadows, with Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) already tall, and much Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*). We admired Marsh Marigolds (*Caltha palustris*) from afar, followed the path over the stream, and marvelled at the circle of handsome mature Hornbeams (*Carpinus betulus*) guarded by a fearsome bear. The path continues downhill, then turns left

and leads uphill to the gorge. By the time we reached the gorge, the rain had stopped.

After admiring patches of Southern Polypody (*Polypodium cambricum*) on rocks at the entrance to the gorge, the ascent began: fortunately, there was plenty of interest to necessitate frequent pauses! We were pleased to find several plants of Hairy Rock-cress (*Arabis hirsuta*) in flower on the path, the first record for this species at Ebbor Gorge since 2009. This is a Rare Plant Register species, being Near Threatened on the England Red List. A large patch of ivy by the path, with large shallowly-lobed leaves, was found to be Atlantic Ivy (*Hedera hibernica*), with the stellate hairs appressed to the surface of the young leaves (flattened spiders). A single underwhelming vegetative plant of Nettle-leaved Bellflower (*Campanula trachelium*) was growing from the rocks: later a more splendid plant was found. This species is also included in the Somerset RPR, because it is Rare in VC5.

Once we emerged from the top of the gorge, all minds were focused on lunch. A short stroll brought us to the Viewpoint, an amusing misnomer on this occasion due to dense cloud. Surprisingly we had the whole place to ourselves as we sat watching an ever-changing scene, with little sectors of the view appearing then vanishing in the cloud.

Refreshed, we found that despite its scuffed appearance, the grassland at the viewpoint still had many species of calcareous grassland, including Thyme (*Thymus drucei*), Common Rock-rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), Upright Brome (*Bromopsis erecta*), Parsley-piert (*Aphanes arvensis*), Crested Hair-grass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and Ploughman's-spikenard (*Inula conyzae*).

Leaving the Viewpoint, we headed east (and uphill again) to visit the area of limestone heath at the edge of the NNR. Beside the path, we found four shoots of Common Gromwell (*Lithospermum officinale*), new to the monad. Common Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and Bracken indicated the area of heath, however brambles precluded easy access. Making our way around the scrub, we reached some glorious limestone rock outcrops, with abundant Common Stork's-bill (*Erodium cicutarium*), a patch of Rue-leaved Saxifrage (*Saxifraga tridactylites*), tufts of Silver Hair-grass (*Aira caryophylla*), Spring Cinquefoil (*Potentilla verna*) and a tiny patch of Knotted Clover (*Trifolium striatum*) which was new to the monad. Beside the rock outcrops was a patch of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*)

and Betony (*Betonica officinalis*), but sadly no sign of the Heath Dog-violets seen here in 2016. Some splendid Early-purple Orchids (*Orchis mascula*) were admired before we retraced our steps through the brambles and back towards the viewpoint to begin a long descent down another million steps.



Examining tiny plants on the rock outcrops Photo © Val Graham

Some respite was provided by a detour to the strip of calcareous grassland above the side of the gorge, where we searched unsuccessfully for Cheddar Bedstraw (*Galium fleurotii*), still currently recorded as Slender Bedstraw (*Galium pumilum*) but now known to be distinct from this. None was found, but we did add Small Scabious (*Scabiosa columbaria*) and Greater Knapweed (*Centaurea scabiosa*) to our list, and far below us in the gorge we spotted my daughter and her dog Cassie, who came to join us as we continued down the endless steps.

Beside the return path to the car park (uphill again), we stopped to admire a large Wild Service-tree (*Sorbus torminalis*). Thankfully eighteen botanists returned, probably drier than they set out. We recorded 197 species and added 18 species to the records for the NNR, updating records for several RPR species.