

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report



SRPG members and strandline colonists at Sand Bay Photo © Helena Crouch

**Thursday 22nd June 2023, Sand Bay (VC6)**

**Leaders: Helena Crouch & Margaret Webster**

**Report: Helena Crouch**

The weather was perfect for a day at the beach, dry and sunny with a refreshing breeze, as nine members and guests met in the middle car park at Sand Bay. Margaret and I had explored the southern end of the bay the previous week, finding a depressing number of invasive aliens, so we set off northwards instead, to see a better range of native coastal plants. On the bank opposite the car park was a large patch of Compact Brome (*Anisantha madritensis*) which appears to be spreading in the north of Somerset. We headed to the beach, where there was a marked linear strip of strandline colonists: Prickly Saltwort (*Salsola kali*), Frosted Orache (*Atriplex laciniata*), Grass-leaved Orache (*Atriplex littoralis*) 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.

On the fore-dunes we saw Sea Spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*) and Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*), both widespread coastal plants, but both also RPR species in Somerset, because they are scarce in VC5.



Pam, Margaret and Maria studying Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*)  
Photo © Helena Crouch

At the top of the beach was a large patch of Sea Sandwort (*Honckenia peploides*), yet another RPR species, scarce in both vice-counties. We studied the tiny green flowers at the tips of shoots. Like Prickly Saltwort, this species can re-grow when inundated with sand, aiding the stabilisation of fore-dunes.



Sea Sandwort (*Honckenia peploides*) in flower Photo © Helena Crouch

The seaward side of the dunes was dominated by Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*), Sand Couch (*Elymus junceiformis*), Sea Couch (*Elymus atherica*) and also the large blue-leaved Lyme Grass (*Leymus arenarius*), another RPR species because it is scarce in VC5. These all have extensive root systems and creeping rhizomes which aid dune stabilisation. A study of the Sea Couch left us uneasy about its identification following suggestions that much of it may in fact be *Elymus x drucei*, the hybrid with Common Couch. [An investigation to be continued ...]

We stopped for lunch at the northern edge of the beach, before venturing onto the extensive saltmarsh. Long-bracted Sedge (*Carex extensa*) was immediately found, yet another species which is rare in VC5 (but not in VC6) and thus included in the RPR. Sea-milkwort (*Lysimachia maritima*) was flowering abundantly.



Sea-milkwort (*Lysimachia maritima*) Photo © Helena Crouch

Saltmarsh Rush (*Juncus gerardii*) was also just flowering, with glistening stigmas, variously likened to pink pipe-cleaners, or coral.



Pink stigmas of Saltmarsh Rush (*Juncus gerardii*) Photo © Fred Rumsey

Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) was occasional on the saltmarsh, as was Common Sea-lavender (*Limonium vulgare*), which is Near Threatened on the England Red List, and thus yet another RPR species. There were great patches of a Glasswort (*Salicornia* sp.), not yet flowering, hence unidentifiable, but absolutely delicious (and another RPR taxon, whichever species).

Towards the back of the saltmarsh, there were yet more RPR species. Several clumps of Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*) were just beginning to flower, whilst in a damp area beside some alders, there are now too many Marsh-mallow (*Althaea officinalis*) plants to count! Distant Sedge (*Carex distans*) was found here too, and a patch of Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) was spotted at the edge of the path.

On the path, we found some small curved Hard-grass (*Parapholis*) plants, not quite in flower, very close to a former site of the rarer species, Curved Hard-grass (*Parapholis incurva*). A specimen, taken home and put in a vase, produced anthers a week later; however, these were 2mm long, too large to be *Parapholis incurva*. The plants were thus curved specimens of the common Hard-grass (*Parapholis strigosa*): a return visit is needed.



Markedly curved Hard-grass (*Parapholis strigosa*), not Curved Hard-grass (*P. incurva*) Photo © Helena Crouch

We had greater success with Bird's-foot Clover (*Trifolium ornithopodioides*), first found here in 2022. After finding a few dead brown rosettes on the path, we spotted some large lush flowering plants at the path edge. This species is scarce in VC6, thus is included in the RPR. It was growing with Hop Trefoil (*T. campestre*) and Hare's-foot Clover (*T. arvense*).



The toothed leaves and tiny pink flower of Bird's-foot Clover (*Trifolium ornithopodioides*) Photo © Helena Crouch

Nearby on the path, Margaret identified the remains of Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*), exactly where she first found it in 2014. This diminutive early-flowering grass is scarce in both VC5 and VC6, and thus another RPR species. Two broomrape species were spotted almost simultaneously: on ivy at the back of the dunes were spikes of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobancha hederaceae*), whilst on the dunes we saw Common Broomrape (*O. minor*), both confirmed by Fred Rumsey, the former a RPR species.

The large Spanish-dagger (*Yucca gloriosa*), known here since 2011, had clearly flowered, but has not

spread, unlike Japanese Rose (*Rosa rugosa*) and Sea Buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*) which have swamped vast tracts of the dunes, particularly at the south end of the bay, suppressing the native flora of this SSSI. Another species which has spread astonishingly is the rather cute grass, Hare's-tail (*Lagurus ovatus*). This is likely to be having a deleterious impact on small native grasses, such as Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*) which is Near Threatened on the England Red List, and a RPR species. In places, this grows abundantly on the mature dunes.



Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*) Photo © Fred Rumsey

By now we were in sight of the tea rooms: as arranged, I phoned ahead to alert them to our imminent arrival. It still took another half an hour to get there! At the back of the dunes, we recorded two more RPR species: Wild Clary (*Salvia verbenaca*) and Hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*), both Near Threatened on the England Red List. Eventually we were rewarded with tea or ice creams. It had been an excellent day. We recorded 125 species in just a short stretch of beach, dunes and saltmarsh, 21 of which are included in the Somerset Rare Plant Register.