

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

Saturday 29th April 2023, Thurlbear Wood and Quarrylands (VC5)

Leader and Report: Simon Leach

The third in our series of springtime woodland meetings but, unlike the other two, this was an afternoon affair, starting at 2 pm. It was also being held as a joint meeting with the Natural History Section of the Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society.

The turnout is excellent: there are 19 of us in all, including members of both SRPG and SANHS along with several friends and family. And the weather gods treat us kindly too: an overcast morning has given way to a warm, sunny afternoon.

The meeting has been billed as a woodland walk concentrating on 'first flowerings', spring woodland flora, butterflies and birdsong. Botanically, this is an opportunity to re-acquaint ourselves with a whole range of common and not-so-common species after a long winter stuck indoors. It's definitely *not* a day for square-bashing.

We gather in the lane, then enter the wood through a kissing gate, and immediately grind to a halt to admire the Wood Melick (*Melica uniflora*), which began flowering here just 10 days ago, and then Dog's Mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*), that's been in flower since the last week of January. We mention the fact that Dog's Mercury is dioecious, having male and female flowers on separate plants. And then we turn our attention to the Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), and we note the differences between 'proper job' native Bluebells, Spanish Bluebells (*H. hispanica*) and the hybrid between the two (*H. x massartiana*). Our timing couldn't be better: the

Bluebells are looking spectacular and, for Thurlbear at least, this is the week of 'peak Bluebell'.

Our snail's pace continues as we notice Lesser Celandines (*Ficaria verna*), which have been flowering since almost the start of the year; and then we see that some of the Dog's Mercury is being galled by 'Mercury Rust' (*Melampsora populnea*).



'Peak Bluebell' at Thurlbear Wood. Photo © Simon Leach

And look! Here's Goldilocks Buttercup (*Ranunculus auricomus*), with its characteristically variable but rather scruffy unequal-petalled flowers. We talk about how there are actually more than 50 named species of Goldilocks Buttercup species in Britain, and probably several hundred more still to be named

if only someone could resolve to make this their life's work. We wonder, if someone *did* get round to naming them all, would Thurlbear Wood have its very own species? And what might they call it? Perhaps it could celebrate the memory of Ernest Neal, the Taunton schoolmaster who wrote the famous New Naturalist monograph on badgers (1948), who was deeply involved in the early days of the Somerset Wildlife Trust, and we suspect also the declaration of this wood as an SWT Nature Reserve in the 1970s. He used to bring his students here on field trips – one of them is even in our party today – and Thurlbear Wood features prominently in his classic introductory text on 'Woodland Ecology', first published by Heinemann in the 1953. How would he react to having such a woodland buttercup named in his honour?

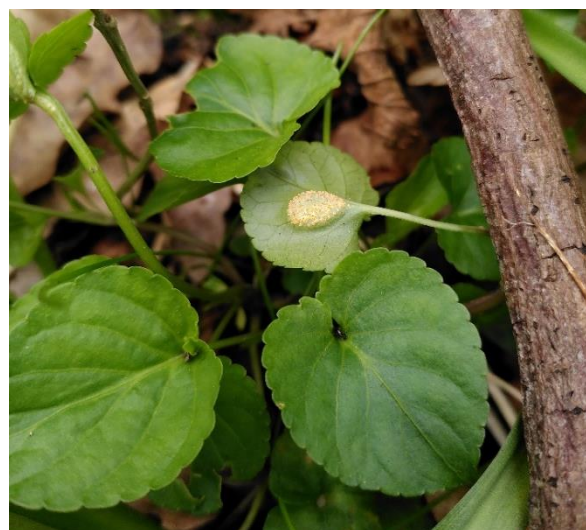
We slowly inch our way along the path. We see plenty of Early Dog-violet (*Viola reichenbachiana*), flowering since 20th February and already going over; but there's Common Dog-violet (*V. riviniana*) too, much later into flower, this spring beginning on 3rd April. Let's also note the way in which the footpath here is fringed with Sweet Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*) and Wood-sedge (*Carex sylvatica*), both flowering nicely, and the early shoots of Enchanter's-nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*), one of the latest woodland herbs to come into bloom, maybe not until late May or early June.

And now here's Pendulous Sedge (*Carex pendula*), and we talk about how this kind of woodland is exactly the right sort of habitat for this species, but how it's also spread into other places from gardens, meaning that the 'native/alien' status of many records is uncertain. What about these Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) bushes? They've only been in leaf for a couple of weeks, yet are already sporting leaf-roll galls caused by the mite *Stenacis euonymi* (= *Eriophyes convolvens*). And then at our feet we notice first-flowering Yellow Archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum*) – not to be confused with the garden version with whitish blotches on the leaves called subsp. *argentatum*, which you tend to find in scrappier woods, often those close to human habitation, or along woodland edges and lane banks where it grows in place of the native subspecies.



First-flowering Yellow Archangel. Photo © Simon Leach

Come on, let's walk on a bit! But then again, let's not! Instead, we are distracted by a Stinking Iris (*Iris foetidissima*) and its rust, *Puccinia iridis*. Why does each species seem to have its own rust? Even the Dog-violets have one, called – yes, you've guessed it – *Puccinia violae*. And if a plant escapes being 'rusted' or 'galled' then its leaves may well have been 'mined', like the Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) just there, next to the Spindle, which has been attacked by a little fly called, appropriately enough, the Holly Leaf Miner (*Phytomyza ilicis*).



Puccinia violae on a Dog-violet leaf. Photo © Simon Leach

And then we see Bush-vetch (*Vicia sepium*) just coming into flower, and Wood Speedwell (*Veronica montana*) not quite flowering yet, and Pignut (*Conopodium majus*) still maybe two to three weeks away.

Right, come on then! So we press on a few paces where we spot some flowering Barren Strawberry (*Potentilla sterilis*), and consider how we might tell it apart from Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*). And then we marvel at Wood-spurge (*Euphorbia amygdaloides*) which began flowering on the same day as Bluebell this year – see those gorgeous lemon-yellow flowers! And in amongst the Ivy (*Hedera helix*) there's a patch of Wood Anemones (*Anemone nemorosa*) and note the Wood Millet (*Milium effusum*) too! All these plants with 'wood' in their names, and we wonder which ones might be the best indicators of 'ancient woodland'. Certainly not Wood Dock (*Rumex sanguineus*) which turns up in all sorts of habitats.

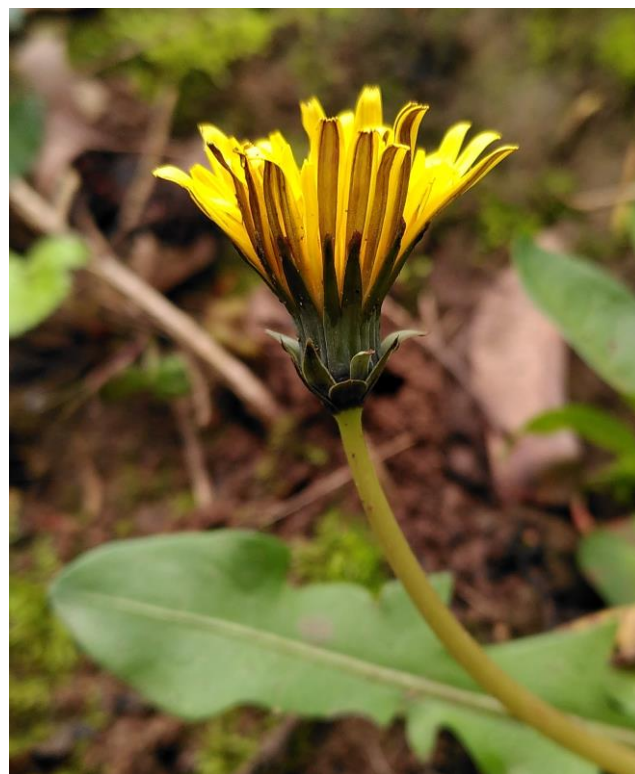
Would you believe it? We've been on the trail for nearly an hour and have advanced into the wood by maybe a couple of hundred metres. How time flies: but our leader is starting to get just a touch agitated, worrying that we might not be moving quite fast enough. But there's so much to see! If there's a problem, then maybe it's not so much about the pace we're walking at but the unrealistic length of the intended route?

And so we dawdle purposefully on, before cutting through to 'The Quarrylands', where we learn a little about the history of the place and how it nearly became the site of a 'borstal' for young offenders. Fortunately the plan was shelved, and so we still have this precious outlier of limestone grassland and scrub to enjoy – an important site for butterflies as well as plants, and managed for a while as a nature reserve by Butterfly Conservation.

At this point the leader can't stop himself, and he starts rambling on about dandelions. We see *Taraxacum amicum*, a recently described species that, so far, only seems to occur in Somerset. In the short calcareous grassland we also see a couple of tiny Erythrosperms, *T. argutum* and *T. oxoniense*. And then, in passing, we note Common Rock-rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), Ploughman's Spikenard (*Inula conyza*), Heath Speedwell (*Veronica*

officinalis), Hairy Violet (*Viola hirta*), Bugle (*Ajuga reptans*), and abundant Stemless Thistle (*Cirsium acaule*). And much else besides.

We search unsuccessfully for Early Gentian (*Gentianella amarella* subsp. *anglica*), a plant that some of us had seen in this very spot a year ago on another SANHS walk. But farther along the path we make up for the lack of gentians by finding another dandelion, this time a really special one called *Taraxacum lambinonii* – a mainland European species that was recorded for the first time in Britain, here at Thurlbear, in 2021. Jeanne Webb subsequently had it at a second locality in the west of the county, while Tim Rich found it in an old quarry in Sussex. Just the three sites, so far, in Britain, but the Quarrylands plants were the first!



Taraxacum amicum. Photo © Simon Leach

We are running out of time. A few of the party have gone ahead, back into the wood, in the hope of seeing Wild Service Tree (*Sorbus torminalis*), but the rest of us are so far behind we decide to cut our losses and track back across the Quarrylands to the cars.

Had we progressed more quickly we could have seen St George's Mushrooms (*Calocybe gambosa*) in the

ant-hill glade; learnt how to tell the difference between the two woodrushes, Hairy (*Luzula pilosa*) and Southern (*Luzula forsteri*), and between the songs of Blackcap and Garden Warbler; and maybe we'd have notched up a hornets' nest and some Early-purple Orchids (*Orchis mascula*) and False Oxlips (*Primula x polyantha*). And goodness knows what else.

But surely, when all said and done, isn't it better to get somewhere slowly than nowhere fast?



Ajuga reptans. Photo © Simon Leach