

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Photo © Val Graham

Saturday 2nd July 2023 Quantock Mires, Beacon Hill and Weacombe, near West Quantoxhead (VC5)

Leaders: Steve Parker & Helena Crouch

Report: Fred Rumsey

A large group assembled at the Staple Plain car park for this the first of two planned visits to investigate mire vegetation in this part of the Quantocks.

One group went with Steve to explore the woodland and slopes around Staple Plantation in the monad ST1141, while Helena led our group uphill into ST1240. Our primary goal was to check on Cowberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) at its only Somerset site, where first discovered in 1917, but we were also keen to check on the survival of a suite of species associated with the small seepages and rills in Weacombe. Striking up the track from the carpark

we almost immediately came upon impressive stands of the holoparasite Common Dodder (*Cuscuta epithymum*) forming pink twined masses over Western Gorse and Bell Heather bushes on both sides of the track. The knots of clustered pink star-like flowers of this declining vulnerable (VU)* species



Common Dodder (*Cuscuta epithymum*) . Photo© Fred Rumsey

provided a real spectacle. (*See the introduction of the RPR on the website for definitions).

As we climbed higher the view back westwards became ever more impressive and the dominance of Bracken all the more ominously obvious.



Bell heather, bracken encroachment and a grand vista.
Photo © Val Graham

Glorious purple patches of the England Near Threatened (NT) Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) still studded some of the upper slopes, set in an agitated tide of the metallic-sheened flower heads of the fine blue-grey tussocky grass Bristle Bent (*Agrostis curtisii*). Together these locally dominated the drier banks of the gravelly-sandy, well worn track, the grassy green central stripe of which yielded up several small treasures, such as Sand Spurrey (*Spergularia rubra*).



Spergularia rubra (Sand Spurrey). Photo© Fred Rumsey

The parched grassy track edges also had the tough unpalatable Mat Grass (*Nardus stricta*), a common indicator of over-grazing in upland Britain, but a Near Threatened and declining species in the under-grazed, nutrient soaked lowlands. Both it and the *Agrostis* are Not Scarce in VC.5 but lack suitable habitat and are Scarce and Rare respectively in VC.6.

Heading northwards off the path towards the head of Herridge and Gay's House Combes we were fortunate that John Poingdestre was with us, as he had been the last to make a record of our target here, the Cowberry, some five years previously.



John leading us to berried treasure. Photo© Fred Rumsey

Fortunately, his memory of the landscape and vegetation features was good. Amongst the locally dominant Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), we soon began to find patches of the Cowberry with its leathery obtuse leaves and reddish-maroon ripening fruit.



Cowberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) in fruit. Photo© Fred Rumsey

This seemed like a good place to take lunch before we attempted to map the extent of the *Vaccinium*'s spread. Although the writer at least chose an unfortunately Tick-rich tussock to perch on. Try as we might we could not find the plant beyond the confines of a single 100m square although it was widely distributed within that and appeared to be under no current threat.

That mission completed, we made our way back over into the head of Weacombe to look for some of the local treasures of open, mire and poached acid-ground habitats. Some records had been made in the monad on an SRPG meeting in 2015 but we lacked more recent finds of RPR species such as the Nationally Scarce Cornish Moneywort (*Sibthorpia europaea*), particularly in the adjacent monad which was to be the target of a return visit in September (see the Meeting Report by Simon).

The very small pockets of mire vegetation associated with seepage lines had to be hunted down through head-high Bracken. Every opportunity had to be

taken to get down to the small streams and runnels in the valley bottom, the fringing vegetation of which, where less dense, gave us the best chance to locate our target species. In the end four records were made of *Sibthorpia*, mostly in areas where it had also been seen in 2015, but it was only in very small quantity and easily missed.



Sibthorpia europaea (Cornish Moneywort). Photo © Fred Rumsey

Other Rare Plant Register species seen in the poached muddy mires included the England VU Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvatica*) and Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*) and the NT Star Sedge (*Carex echinata*), one of 9 sedges seen, Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*) and Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*). The last was often found closely associated with the *Sibthorpia*, posing a challenge to differentiate the pennies from the money. The Leafy Rush (*Juncus foliosus*), characteristic of this habitat and perhaps still overlooked in the county, was also a nice find. Despite much hopeful searching on this occasion no Sundew (*Drosera*) was seen, although it is known just to the east in Sheppards Combe. Indeed, no carnivorous plants were found. The lower portion of Weacombe had once supported the last known Common Butterwort (*Pinguicula vulgaris*) plants in Somerset, but 50 years on there seemed little hope of its survival. We however hoped that our September return might be rewarded, if not with that but with other RPR species. The extent of the area of mire is now very restricted and we believed had declined since our last visit eight years before. The dominance of Bracken on the slopes and bramble covered scrub by the stream margins cries out for more active management if the local botanical interest is to be maintained.

Descending the combe we were mindful of the approaching monad boundary. The Bracken induced depression was heightened by the realisation of just how steep was the track to get back up to the cars!

The top finally and breathlessly attained we could catch up with the remainder of the Plantation group and report back to Steve on our findings. It was certainly a day of highs – and lows, but a great time was had by all and we looked forwards to the return visit.



Agrostis curtisii (Bristle Bent). Photo ©Fred Rumsey