

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

Sunday 19th February 2023, 'A Day of Twigs' at Shapwick and the Avalon Marshes Centre (VC6)

Leader: Steve Parker *et al.*

Report: Simon Leach

After last year's successful twigs training day in Taunton, we thought we'd give it another go, this time in VC6. The training came in two halves, the first half taking about 10 days while the second was over in less than four hours.

The first bit, like last year, involved daily 'twiggles' on the SRPG WhatsApp Group. Pictures of twigs were posted each morning at breakfast time, then anyone who fancied having a go at identifying them had until one o'clock, when people could post their thoughts and exchange views as to what that day's twiggle might be.

The first twiggle, on 8th February, was Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) which, we all agreed, was really rather easy, whereas the last one, on the 18th – Smoke-tree (*Cotinus coggygria*) – was *much* more challenging. Along the way we would be able to compare Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) with Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*), the two alders *Alnus glutinosa* and *A. cordata*, Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*) and Pedunculate Oak (*Q. robur*), Guelder-rose (*Viburnum opulus*) and Wayfaring-tree (*V. lantana*), Privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*) and Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), and many more besides. We also included a few less common things like Black Poplar (*Populus nigra* subsp. *betulifolia*) and Wild Service-tree (*Sorbus torminalis*). Some we struggled with, but others, like Horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), were (literally) a walk in the park! These daily teasers produced a lot of twig-related

banter and some really corny jokes too. As Fred said: "Great to see so many *budding* comedians." (Groan.)



One of the daily 'TWIGGLES', this one comparing Sycamore and Norway Maple. Photo © Simon Leach

As for the training day itself, around twenty of us gathered at the Avalon Marshes Centre on a gloriously sunny late winter's day. Outside, near the tea stall, we pulled together a couple of picnic benches, and then gathered round as Steve, with help from Helena and others, gave us a general

introduction to twig morphology and the sorts of features to look for when trying to identify deciduous trees and shrubs with their leaves missing. We were then given the opportunity to take a few twigs through the keys together, using both John Poland's excellent and comprehensive '*Field Guide to Winter Twigs*' (2018) and the Field Studies Council's AIDGAP guide to '*broad-leaved trees and shrubs in winter*' (May & Panter 2012/16).

Like last year, we began with Ash, immediately recognisable by its gorgeous black buds. But we were also encouraged to look at some less obvious features: the distinctive grey or olive-green colour to the bark, the *arrangement* of the buds (opposite and decussate), the crescent-shaped leaf scars, the numerous *bundle-scars*, the lack of an *interpetiolar ridge*, and so on.



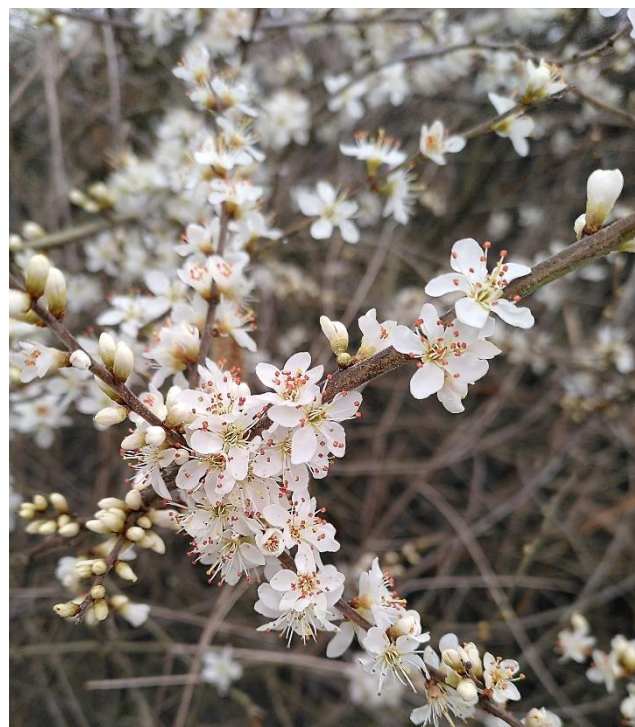
Admiring *Frangula alnus*. Photo © Simon Leach

We spent the first half-hour or more dividing up bundles of twigs so we could all have a go at keying out a variety of different species. After that we ventured out onto the nature reserve where an easy stroll allowed us to see a wide range of species 'in the flesh', including quite a few that hadn't featured in the daily twiggles, like Sallow (*Salix cinerea*), Goat Willow (*S. caprea*), Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and Birch (*Betula* spp). Perhaps the most exciting find of the day, though, was Alder-buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*) – which we would probably have missed entirely had we not been in 'twigs' mode.

It was an excellent meeting, with many thanks to Steve and to all those who contributed on the day. In the weeks that followed, the WhatsApp group

continued to ping with twig-related posts; but with a growing sense of relief, too, as the trees came into leaf and catkin, and the shrubs began to blossom. Even in flower, though, there was still room for debate about how to tell apart Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) from Cherry Plum (*P. cerasifera*). And what about *P. x fruticans*, the hybrid between Blackthorn and Wild Plum (*P. domestica*)?

Really, you know, there's no end to it; and so, in a year's time we'll likely decide to hold another one of these training workshops, and TWIGGLE will no doubt raise its ugly head once more. Lifelong learning, I think they call it.



Blackthorn – probably! – flowering nicely a couple of weeks after our 'day of twigs'. Photo © Simon Leach