

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Searching for flowers alongside the Brue Estuary © Steve Parker

Saturday 31st December 2023, New Year Plant Hunt, Burnham-on-Sea (VC6)

Leader: Helena Crouch

Report: Helena Crouch

With forecasts of heavy rain and strong winds, fifteen brave members met at Apex Park in Burnham-on-Sea to participate in the annual New Year Plant Hunt (NYPH) run by the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland (BSBI). The rules are simple: find as many “wild” plants in flower as possible, in a maximum of three hours. Recent storms had left Somerset bleak and water-logged, so we began with low expectations; however, a scout around the car park yielded thirteen species in flower, including Daisy (*Bellis perennis*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum* agg.), Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) and Annual Meadow-grass (*Poa annua*) which are the four most commonly found species in the NYPH.

We set off through the park towards the Brue Estuary. On Butcher’s-broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*) we found a

tiny green flower, borne on the surface of a “cladode”, the leaf-like flattened stem. Enthusiastic plant-hunters ranged around the edges of the park, getting mixed up with the large numbers of dog-walkers, but by the time we left the park we had recorded an impressive 25 species in flower. These included Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Celandine (*Ficaria verna*), Ox-eye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), Musk Stork’s-bill (*Erodium moschatum*) and Sea Radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum* subsp. *maritimus*).



Steve bearing a precious flower! © Val Graham



Ellen checking for stamens on Hedge Bedstraw © Karen Andrews

Emerging from the park onto the coastal path along the Brue Estuary, we were immediately buffeted by strong winds. The saltmarsh was bleak, the path had been cleared of weeds and the edges strimmed, but the estuarine views were remarkably fine!



The base of the wall had been swept clear of plants ... but Andrew found treasures on the other side! © Karen Andrews

We added nine species, including Sea Aster (*Tripolium pannonicum*), Wall Speedwell (*Veronica arvensis*) and Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites pyrenaicus*), but our most exciting find of the day was not in flower!



Yellow Horned-poppy by the River Brue © Helena Crouch

On piles of sand and stone chippings by the boat quay, an over-excited and squeaky leader spotted a single plant of Yellow Horned-poppy (*Glaucium flavum*). This Rare Plant Register species, Near Threatened on the England Red List and Rare in VC6, was last recorded at Burnham-on-Sea by Robert Cropper in 1981.

Heading north along the South Esplanade, we found Field Madder (*Sherardia arvensis*), Spotted Medick (*Medicago arabica*) and Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) in flower in short turf along the verge. With the threatened rain still remarkably absent, despite the disappearance of Exmoor, the hunt was paused and we hunkered down in the shelter of the sea wall for lunch.



SRPG members relaxing momentarily over lunch © Nicky Hodges

Refreshed after a chilly New Year's Eve picnic, we ventured forth again, soon finding Sun Spurge (*Euphorbia helioscopia*), Lesser Swine-cress (*Lepidium didymium*), Common Whitlowgrass (*Erophila verna*) and Ivy-leaved Toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*).



Ivy-leaved Toadflax on a wall © Karen Andrews

The rain swept in, with a brief hailstorm, but the flower-hunters continued, unfazed. Heading for St Andrew's church along the botanical desert of the High Street, Pellitory-of-the-wall (*Parietaria judaica*) was spotted in a yard, its tiny pink flowers visible with a hand lens. The churchyard was disappointingly neat and tidy, although we found Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), Ivy-leaved Speedwell (*Veronica hederifolia*) and Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*). In the adjacent Marine Cove Gardens there were dainty pink flowers of Common Stork's-bill (*Erodium cicutarium*). By the church, a single plant of Guernsey Fleabane (*Erigeron sumatrensis*) was spotted behind railings. Just outside the churchyard, we found Bilbao's Fleabane (*E. floribundus*) with smaller capitula lacking the dense bristly hairs of the former species.



Pot Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) on a wall © Helena Crouch

Our next destination was the cemetery. We added a few species on the way, including Sweet Violet (*Viola odorata*) and Mexican Fleabane (*Erigeron karvinskianus*), and found a smart Pot Marigold on a wall! The cemetery itself was very tidy but tiny flowers were discovered on a Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*).



A single open flower on Holly © Karen Andrews

Honesty (*Lunaria annua*), Trailing Bellflower (*Campanula poscharskyana*) and Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*) were found at the edges of the cemetery.

With time running out, and the threatened storm still holding off, we headed back towards Apex Park, scouring walls, verges and any scruffy edges in our desperate hunt for flowers. We found Fat-hen (*Chenopodium album*) and Knotgrass (*Polygonum aviculare*) by a busy road, and Water Bent (*Polypogon viridis*) on a pavement, but the hundreds of plants of Alexanders had only a few tightly closed buds.

To great excitement, two tiny flowers were discovered on Small-flowered Crane's-bill (*Geranium pusillum*) on the edge of the kerb. The petioles of this species have very short (0.1-0.2mm) patent (spreading) hairs, whereas those of Cut-leaved Crane's-bill (*G. dissectum*) are longer (0.3-0.6mm) and retrorse (pointing downwards). Dove's-foot Crane's-bill (*G. molle*) has a mixture of short glandular hairs, medium hairs and long wispy hairs.



Small-flowered Crane's-bill © Karen Andrews

Pineappleweed (*Matricaria discoidea*) and Love-in-a-Mist (*Nigella damascena*) were added just before time was called. Our final total was 75 species, which far exceeded our expectations, as did the clemency of the weather. The four days of New Year Plant Hunts across Britain and Ireland, generated over 2000 lists: SRPG's was the sixth longest! The following day, however, our total was soundly surpassed by Simon, who found 81 species in flower in Taunton. It will be VC5's turn to host the SRPG NYPH next year ...