SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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

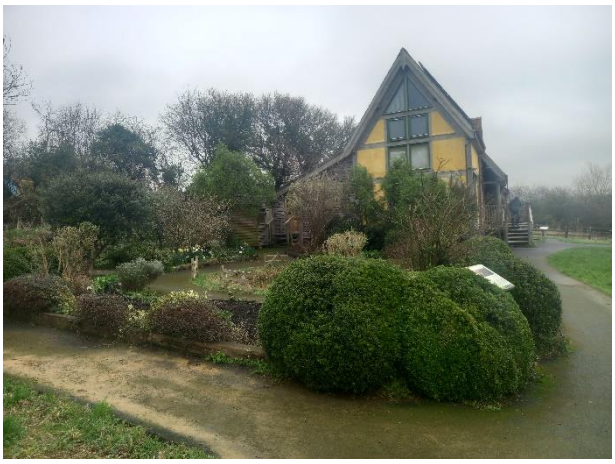
Meeting Report

Saturday 17th February 2024, Winter Twigs Workshop, Carymoor Environmental Centre, (VC6)

Leaders: Simon Leach & Steve Parker

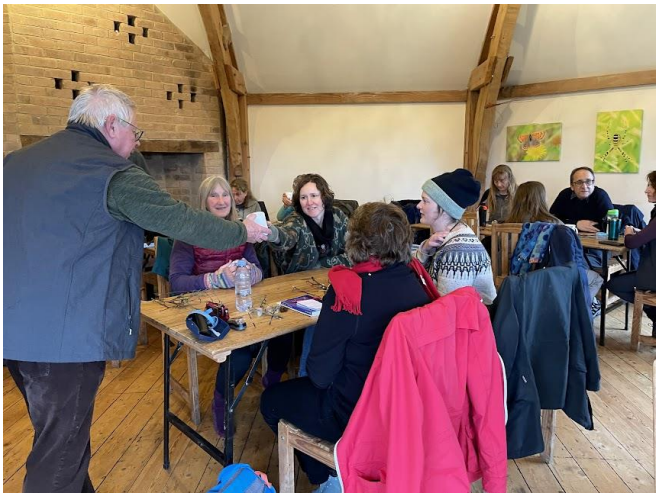
Report: Nicky Davies & Nicky Hodges

February saw The Somerset Rare Plants Group receiving a warm welcome from Adam, Neil, and Chrissie at the Carymoor Environmental Centre. This winter meeting had another fantastic turn out with 19 attendees in total, including some new SPRG members.



Carymoor Environmental Centre: Designed by local architect James Godden, the building is designed to demonstrate a range of sustainable features, such as solar hot water, photovoltaic shingles, and locally sourced materials © Nicky Davies

The Carymoor Environmental Centre is managed by the Carymoor Environmental Trust. Set up in 1996 the Trust has overseen the conversion of an open landfill site into 'an oasis of wildlife habitats in a landscape dominated by intensively farmed land'. The conversion was experimental and saw the capping of the landfill with 1m of clay on which wildflower meadows, ponds, and hedgerows were created along with orchards cultivating 38 rare and traditional Somerset varieties of apple. The lovely Small Blue Butterfly (*Cupido minimus*) has been seen within the created calcareous grassland and 29 of the UK's butterfly species have been recorded here. The site's Wildflower Collection contains around 450 species of plant species including rarities like Starved Wood-sedge (*Carex depauperata*) and White Rock-rose (*Helianthemum apenninum*). The Trust's conservation work continues to expand - in 2022 it was awarded £96,000 to create new woodland and scrub habitat for nightingales.



Winter Twig Workshop inside Carymoor Environmental Centre © Nicky Hodges

The winter twig identification workshop began with Steve Parker giving an overview of the characteristic features of a twig using the FSC Winter Trees Field Key (Dominic Price & Leif Bersweden, 2013, 2023). Were buds opposite, alternate or spiralling on the stem? Were the bud scales sticky, hairy or did the edge of the leaf bud have cilia (a row of tiny hairs)? How many vascular bundles did the leaf scar have? With the absence of the clues and cues of a winter tree or shrub in situ, twig identification could be more tricky than expected for some.

Heading outside to the tree trail and using John Poland's The Field Key to Winter Twigs (2020), we puzzled over the difference between a thorn (short modified branchlet with a sharp hard point, usually above a leaf scar or at the end of a short branch) a spine (a stiff sharp point originating as a modified leaf, stem or stipule, usually below a leaf scar or bud) or a prickle (hard sharp pointed along the internode of a stem) but were distracted by a minute female Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) flower and the reflexed sepals of the early flowering Cherry Plum (*Prunus cerasifera*), distinguishing it from the spreading sepals of Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) - a useful ID tip as the flowering periods of these related shrubs overlap a little.

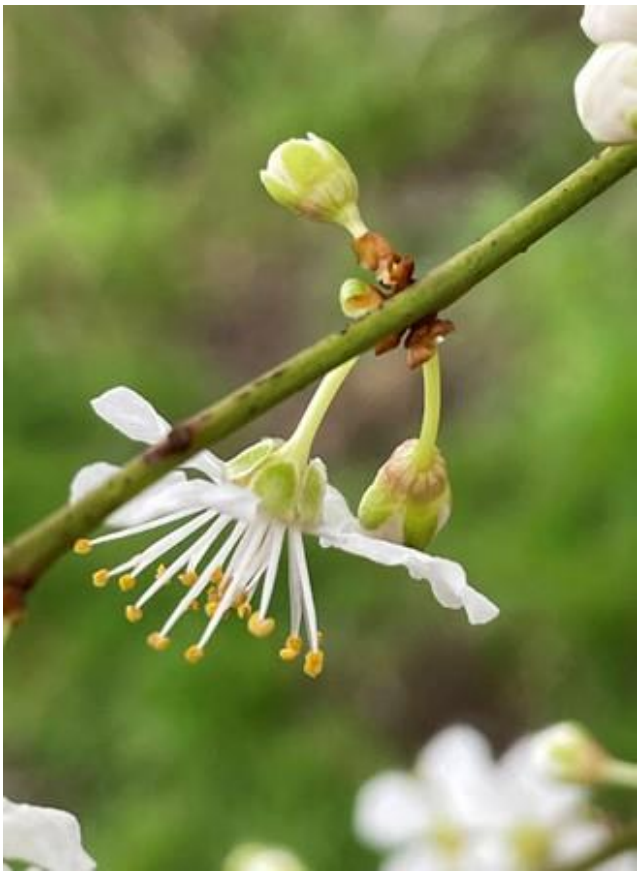
Female flower of Hazel © Nicky Hodges

As we headed back down the hill for lunch in the centre building, we were able to cut samples from a selection of trees to key out.

Lunchtime was a sociable opportunity to warm up and regather our energies. A few stayed behind to key out their morning finds and label them up as a personal reference set.

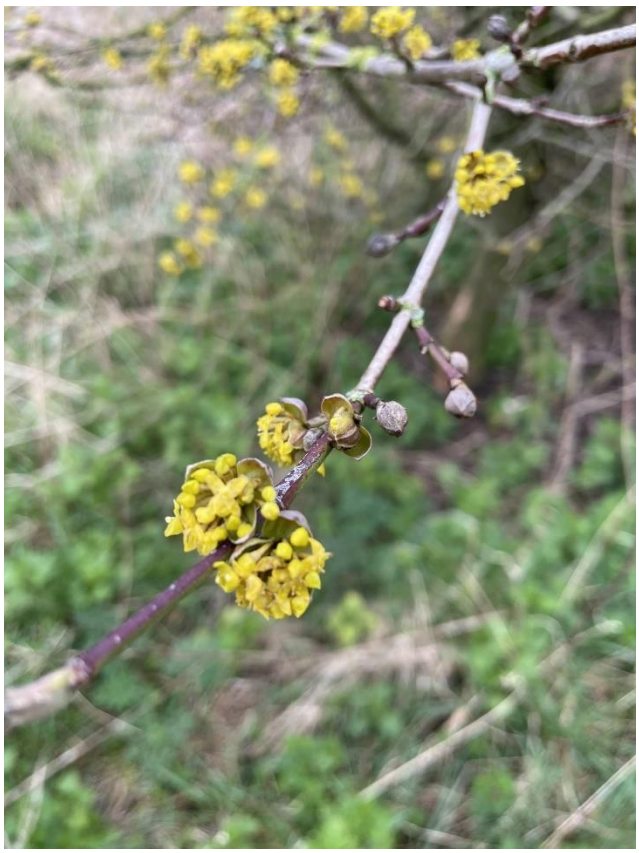
Back out on the tree trail, we marched on past a line of willows, one of the trickier groups to key out, instead attending to the badger snuffle holes along the path. We'd already contemplated a *Tilia* in the morning, though the more experienced had kept quiet about the characteristic dense epicormic shoots at the base until we'd arrived at Common lime *Tilia x europaea.*

At the top of the trail, we stopped at a tree with an attractive pyramidal shape, woody 'cones' and stalked buds with 2-3 scales. The 'cones' (actually a female catkin) looked like oversized versions of those found on the native Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*). This Italian Alder (*Alnus cordata*) had larger and rounder stalked buds compared to the club-shaped buds of Alder.



Cherry plum flower showing the reflexed sepals © Nicky Hodges

We continued on, noting the clusters of buds at the tips of Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) twigs, admiring a Service-tree (*Sorbus domestica*). The wafting smells from the tip ushered us back towards the centre past trees already in blossom including Cornelian-cherry (*Cornus mas*) with its bright yellow flowers.



Cornelian-cherry flowers © Nicky Hodges

At the centre, we thanked our hosts and headed home, with further twigs to practice keying out. Hopefully, most heeded Mr Poland's advice to store their twig collection in the fridge or freezer so that characters important for ID purposes are retained. It is all too easy to bring home a little pile with the best of intentions but then find they are only fit for the hibernaculum.