

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



White Rock-rose (*Helianthemum apenninum*) on Brean Down. © Helena Crouch

Saturday 6th April 2024, Brean Down (VC6)

Leaders: Helena Crouch & Margaret Webster

Report: Helena Crouch

As Storm Kathleen raged across Ireland and western Britain, eighteen members assembled in the car park at Brean Down. A slow ascent via the track sheltered us from the worst of the wind and provided plenty of botanical interest. Vegetative plants of Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) were spotted near the bottom of the hill, and dead spikes of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobanche hederæ*) on the bank. Rock outcrops supported miniature gardens, with treasures such as Early Forget-me-not (*Myosotis ramosissima*), Rue-leaved Saxifrage (*Saxifraga tridactylites*) and Fern-grass (*Catapodium rigidum*).

At the top, we searched for White Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) where a single plant was seen in 2017, but alas in vain. Heading east, Small-leaved Buttercup (*Ranunculus parviflorus*) was spotted on thin soil on the ridge. In a small hollow, we saw the

first Slender Thistle (*Carduus tenuiflorus*), whilst a smart Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) rosette was seen on rock outcrops nearby. Heading west again, keeping to the sheltered north side of the ridge, a small gravelly area beside the Military Road proved exciting: here we found Sea Stork's-bill (*Erodium maritimum*) and Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*).



SRPG members hunker down to study Sea Stork's-bill and Bulbous Meadow-grass. © Karen Andrews

Whilst on the relatively sheltered north side of the ridge, it seemed wise to have lunch, with great views across Weston Bay. Fortified, we braved a look at some rock outcrops on the southern side, where those who could bear the gale-force wind saw Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*), with its characteristic fibrous leaf-bases.



Fibrous leaf-sheaths of Somerset Hair-grass. © Nicky Hodges

Nearby we discovered Dwarf Sedge (*Carex humilis*) in flower, and after examining many tiny plants we found convincing specimens of Little Mouse-ear (*Cerastium semidecandrum*), with broad silvery margins to the bracts. We also saw tiny plants of Dwarf Mouse-ear (*Cerastium pumilum*), although the first ones found seemed to consist of little more than a flower! Later we found larger plants, with bracts which have narrow silvery margins. We also saw patches of the more abundant Sea Mouse-ear (*Cerastium diffusum*) which has only four petals.

On the south-facing slopes, White Rock-rose (*Helianthemum apenninum*) was just coming into flower. As a native, this nationally rare and Vulnerable species is only otherwise found at nearby Purn Hill and at a few sites on the Torbay Limestones of South Devon; however, on Brean Down it is gloriously abundant on the southern slopes and cliffs. A yellow-green patch of tiny plants caused us to drop to the ground again – with great relief since it was so difficult to stand in the wind! This was Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*), an inconspicuous short-lived

annual, formerly largely a coastal species in Somerset but increasingly found inland on road verges.

To the north of some steps on the ridge, we encountered an area of limestone heath, with patches of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and Heath Speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*). There were scattered plants of Pale St John's-wort (*Hypericum montanum*), which is Near Threatened on the GB Red List, and a sharp-eyed member spotted a few leaves of Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*). It was here that the tiny fern Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*) had last been seen in 2011, so all members sank thankfully to their knees once again and the search began. To our delight, we found four tiny fronds: a new species for some members and definitely the highlight of the day.



Diminutive Moonwort on the ridge of Brean Down. © Nicky Hodges

Beside the steps were many more plants of Sea Stork's-bill and Small-flowered Buttercup. Here we also found vegetative patches of Bird's-foot Clover (*Trifolium ornithopodioides*) which is scarce in VC6.

Exhilarated by our finds, we headed slowly back, bravely descending the steps on the south side, admiring large plants of Knotted Hedge-parsley (*Torilis nodosus*) on the steps, and many flowering plants of White Rock-rose whilst clinging to the railings. Fortunately, we made it down before the tea shop closed: a break from the wind was very welcome. We had recorded 175 species in our target monad and had a great day despite the forecast.