

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Summer solstice at Berrow Dunes. © Liz Downey

Thursday 20th June 2024, Berrow Dunes (VC6)
Leaders: Helena Crouch & Richard Whyman
Report: Fred Rumsey & Helena Crouch

A group of 14 members met in glorious sunshine, making the most of the summer solstice to view the botanical treasures of Burnham & Berrow Golf Course. Through kind invitation by the Head Greenkeeper, Richard Whyman, this evening visit was arranged to give members the opportunity to see the Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) at its only site in Somerset, as well as a range of other rare coastal species for which Berrow Dunes SSSI is notified. The golf course forms the greater part of the SSSI: Richard explained the management work that is undertaken to protect the rare species, increase biodiversity and improve sustainability in this fragile and very dynamic habitat. For this visit we concentrated on the southern part of the golf course, following a similar path to the route taken in 2018. We soon found our first target species.

Some of the Lizard Orchids were past their best, but others were at their peak giving us the chance to

appreciate the curious twisty-lipped flowers with their strong goat scent. Disappointingly numbers were significantly down this year.



Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*). ©Fred Rumsey

Many of the site's treasures are plants of open communities on the well-drained sandy soils which by mid-summer are parched. We became experts at appreciating the distinctive tones and textures of the mortal remains of some rare and unusual species. We found coppery swathes of the small annual grass Bearded Fescue (*Vulpia ciliata* subsp. *ambigua*) at the edges of the fairways. This species was first found at Berrow Dunes in 1960; this remains its only site in VC6.



Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*). © Helena Crouch

On a particularly dry track, Richard looked on with amusement as botanists fell to their knees to study tiny clovers. Helena explained the distinguishing features of Rough Clover (*Trifolium scabrum*), with its scabby vein endings and, distinctive small patches of the much rarer Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*), with clustered mossy calyces and long-petioled leaves. In Somerset this species is Rare in both VC5 and VC6, restricted to a few coastal sites.

Nearby, Fred pointed out Bulbous Meadow-Grass (*Poa bulbosa*), which is definitely easier to spot when dying back and turning orange, or indeed when dead and dried and demonstrating its small bulbous shoot bases. We later found this species further south, on a path north of the clubhouse, a new monad spot for this Rare Plant Register (RPR) species which is Scarce in VC5 and VC6. In a nearby hollow, we found Bur Chervil (*Anthriscus caucalis*), Bugloss (*Anchusa arvensis*) and Hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*).



Bulbous Meadow-Grass (*Poa bulbosa*). © Fred Rumsey

Heading south we explored damp fringes of the golf course, studded with Marsh and Spotted Orchids (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa* and *D. fuchsii*) and a small Club-rush (*Isolepis* sp.) too immature for confident identification. Crossing back across some higher dunes into another monad, we found two more small annual grasses, Dune Fescue (*Vulpia fasciculata*) and Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*), both RPR species. A star find of the evening was Sea Bindweed (*Calystegia soldanella*), persisting on two dunes, last recorded in this monad in 1991. It was flowering well, the big pink trumpets closed for the night. Sadly, the small damp hollow, where in 2018 we discovered Small-fruited Yellow-sedge (*Carex viridula*), was a deep pond this year! We also failed to re-find the small population of Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) seen in 2018, perhaps also due to persistent excessive water. Every year has different highlights.

The weary group made their way back northwards, revelling in the glorious golden glow of the longest day. Jewel-like were the flowers of Pyramidal Orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) and the Evening Primroses which, living up to their name, had opened as our journey progressed. A pale form of Fragrant Evening-primrose (*Oenothera stricta*) was particularly admired. We certainly made the most of the longest day: thanks to Helena for arranging and leading and to Richard and the Golf Club for allowing us access.