

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report



**Thursday 2nd May 2024, Bab Cary Meadows (VC6)**

**Leader: Fred Rumsey**

**Report: Fred Rumsey & Helena Crouch**

Nine members met on a rather dull afternoon to visit Somerset Wildlife Trust's Bab Cary Meadows reserve, the meeting timed for us to witness the spectacle of the impressive Green-winged Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*) population in flower. Notified as an SSSI in 1988, 8 of the 9 fields, (12 ha in total) have been owned and managed by SWT since 1999. These traditional hay meadows lie alongside the River Cary and may have formed part of a catch meadow system, with ridge and furrow features evidence of medieval arable strip farming. The site has benefited from regular survey visits by the Somerset Botany Group in recent years, helping the Trust to fine tune its management. Our focus for the evening was the appreciation of the floral display, although we did make some detailed and useful records.

It had been a very wet spring, and downpours were still commonplace: there had been a deluge the night before the meeting. Consequently, access to the site down North Street, perfectly dry when pre-walked by

the leader two days before, now threatened even the welly wearers with wet feet!

Having crossed the flood, it was interesting to see the different character and composition of the vegetation from field to field, the result of underlying geology, hydrology and past management. Part of the delight of the site is that as you stray further from habitation each field seems to be better than the last, the carpets of Green-winged Orchids in their many colour forms and the abundant Cowslips (*Primula veris*) becoming ever denser. That is until you reach the margins of the reserve and are met by the surrounding sea of dark-green intensive agriculture. A stark reminder of the island-like nature (and vulnerability) of these protected sites.

Another of the delights of these unimproved neutral wet meadows is Adder's-tongue fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*). Previous surveyors had recorded this species in the low-lying part of the eastern field, in a discreet area in front of the tree in the above photo. However, perhaps because of the very wet spring, this distinctive but easily overlooked little fern was found at a range of sites, being recorded in five different 6-figure grid references, in two different fields, and in unprecedented numbers.



Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) in abundance. © Fred Rumsey

The group was able to practice vegetative identification of other axiophytes (AKA squeaky plants), indicative of quality habitat and thus increasingly nationally threatened. Pepper-saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*) was distinguished from Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*) by its purple hydathodes and stomata only on the under-surface of the leaf. In the corner of one field, we also found the distinctive serrated-edged foliage of Saw-wort (*Serratula tinctoria*).

One of the most colourful floral displays was that of the Wild Turnip or Bargeman's Cabbage (*Brassica rapa* subsp. *campestris*), providing a golden margin to the southernmost fields alongside the River Cary. The open flowers overtop the buds, which distinguishes it from Oil-seed Rape (*Brassica napus*).



Bargeman's Cabbage (*Brassica rapa* subsp. *campestris*). © Helena Crouch

The spectacular star plants of the evening though were the Green-winged Orchids. The reason for its

common name is most obviously apparent when looking at the white and paler pink pigmented forms of the plant. This charming orchid is Vulnerable on the England Red List, having declined dramatically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to "improvement" of pasture. It is now mostly found in protected sites, like Babcary Meadows, which are managed appropriately for this species. There are indications that the considerable decline has now bottomed out. We can only hope and continue to manage the protected sites in which it thrives.



Green wings apparent on a pale form of the eponymous orchid. © Fred Rumsey

Having circumnavigated the reserve, our happy band finally beat a dry retreat, on an alternative permissive path through a neighbouring garden, and adjourned to the local hostelry which had very kindly allowed us to park. We are grateful to all who came and made this such a pleasant evening's ramble and to the Red Lion, Babcary for allowing us use of their car park on what was obviously a busy quiz night.