

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report



**Saturday 27th July 2024, Collard Hill (VC6)**

**Leader: Fred Rumsey**

**Report: Fred Rumsey & Helena Crouch**

On a fine day, thirteen members assembled in the car park on Ivy Thorn Hill. Although in the same monad (ST4834) as our main target for the day, Collard Hill, a separate recording card was kept for this discrete unit. The aim of the meeting was to introduce members to some of the later summer flowers of these calcareous Polden grasslands. Almost immediately we encountered tall, large-flowered Eyebrights: from the broad leaves and short glands we confidently identified these as Arctic Eyebright (*Euphrasia arctica*), a species not previously recorded in the area. Also frequent under grass on barer soils were the small pink stars of Lesser Centaury (*Centaureum pulchellum*), which became one of the plants of the day, seen in all areas and both monads. This diminutive species appears to have declined in Somerset since publication of the last Flora, but the

Poldens remain a stronghold; this year's weather would seem to have suited this annual species. In grassland glades the mortal remains of orchids were examined, including Greater Butterfly Orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*), dozens of which had been flowering a month earlier. Even though this is a reasonably well recorded area, by the time the group had reached the busy road junction, 21 species had been added to the monad.

Once safely across the junction, a new card was started, for Collard Hill itself. The triangle of grassland in front of the gate to the reserve rewarded us with Pepper Saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*), a "tetrad smartie" (first record for the tetrad since pre-2000) for this declining species. On the edge of the road, we were surprised to find Round-leaved Fluellen (*Kickxia spuria*), an arable weed new to the monad. Once inside the reserve, the well-worn grassy track ascending the hill was seen to be studded by the blushing pink flowerheads and fluffy globular fruiting heads of Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*),

which rather surprisingly, considering the number of visitors to Collard Hill, was also a tetrad smartie. The grassland alongside the main ridge path is not particularly species rich, so we soon plunged down the steep south-facing terraced side of the hill. Here, on the barer ground by the tracks along the contours, we found many typical species of calcareous grassland, including Small Scabious (*Scabiosa columbaria*), Common Rock-rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*), Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus drucei*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Meadow Oat-grass (*Helictochloa pratensis*), Dwarf Thistle (*Cirsium acaule*), Carline Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*) and the handsome, architectural Woolly Thistle (*Cirsium eriophorum*). We also found Squinancywort (*Asperula cynanchica*), surprisingly new to the monad, and Heath Grass (*Danthonia decumbens*), another species which appears to have declined in Somerset. The group made their way to higher ground for lunch with spectacular views across south Somerset.



Clustered Bellflower (*Campanula glomerata*). © Helena Crouch

Replenished, we set off in search of Clustered Bellflower (*Campanula glomerata*), found nearby in 2023 by our member Pat Steele: to our delight we again found a splendid plant. We then headed to the sheltered steep eastern slope, which is favoured by Large Blues and lepidopterists and largely lies in the adjacent monad (ST4833). Our next goal was Nit Grass (*Gastridium ventricosum*), seen on this slope in 2023. Of contentious status, this Nationally Scarce species is a feature of scuffed bare ground on sunny Polden

slopes. In 2023 it had an *annuus mirabilis*, present in huge quantities on ground laid bare by parching, both here and elsewhere. In this wet year we struggled to find our first plants, but eventually saw them in both monads. The cigar-like shape of the ripe panicle and the shining “nits” made by the swollen glume bases were distinctive once seen and this species was eventually found in several spots.



The nitty panicle of *Gastridium ventricosum*. © Fred Rumsey

On the small area of steep south-facing slope at the southern end of the site (in ST4833) we recorded 82 species including a rather vexing Eyebright. The leader was reluctant to name this in the field, although a tentative suggestion of *Euphrasia nemorosa* x *E. confusa* was reached; specimens were collected for subsequent determination.

We returned to the car park across Ivy Thorn Hill through woodland and glades on the south side of the road, pleased to find a large colony of Common Gromwell (*Lithospermum officinale*). Some interesting additions and many useful records were made. We also updated records for several Rare Plant Register species and had a good day with great views.