

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report

**Saturday 3rd August 2024, Sedges Workshop,  
Avalon Marshes Centre (VC6)**

**Leader: Fred Rumsey**

**Report: Ellen McDouall**

Twelve of us were the lucky ones to collect at the Avalon Marshes Centre for Fred's Sedges workshop, numbers being necessarily limited by the venue and the leader working solo.

We were greeted by tables of green – pots of sedges of all descriptions covering the tables.

We started with the basics, the best keys to use, what makes a sedge a sedge and the classifications within the genus *Carex*. For the most part, these turned out to be quite logical (you can tell I have little faith that taxonomy will make things simple). Sedges are broadly grouped by those that have multiple spikes with mixed male and female flowers (subgenus *Vignea*), multiple spikes with male and female separate (subgenus *Carex*), and single spiked (subgenus *Psyllophora*). Oh, and the rare, montane ones we needn't worry about as long as we stick to our local patch – an incentive not to travel too far!

So far, so good.

Next, where to start on the ID journey.

The first "cut" can be made by habitat as many, if not most, sedges are fairly specific in their preferences for soil type, position in shade or sun and hydrology. After that there are a range of vegetative characters that can be a short-cut to small groups of species. Each of these was illustrated by photos and live plant material so we could compare the "not like that, like this" characters side by side. This section taught us the need to collect as complete a sample as possible, right down to the top of the root.

Finally, to the flowers. First rule – don't even try with immature flower spikes. It's tips like these that can save the beginner so many hours of fruitless keying out.

As with the vegetative characters, each part of a sedge flower structure was covered and demonstrated clearly with the material at hand. I never knew before that utricles (the "skin" covering the ovary) are in fact modified glumes.

Equipped with the tools needed to ID sedges, we moved on to the sedges of Somerset and adjoining counties. It turns out that we are blessed with 47 of the 80+ UK species which, along with 2 aliens and 6 hybrids and a further 3 species in neighbouring counties, give the SRPG plenty of variety to practice our skills on. We learned that this diversity includes real rarities and regional specialities: Soft-leaved Sedge (*C. montana*), Dwarf Sedge (*C. humilis*) and the nationally rare Starved Wood-sedge (*C. depauperata*). Again, we were able to turn to the splendid collection of live material to examine examples.



Some of the sedges and some of the attendees © Steve Parker

Finally, Fred gave us a view of some of the rare and wonderful sedges we could find, should we go beyond our local patch.

After lunch came the crunch: “Common Confusions”.

Here the live plant material made all the difference to learning, for example literally getting a feel for the soft, grassy leaves of *C. montana*. We started simple: the differences between Glaucous Sedge (*C. flacca*) and Carnation Sedge (*C. panicea*); compared Spring Sedge (*C. caryophylla*), Pill Sedge (*C. pilulifera*) and Soft-leaved Sedge, covered the issues of Greater and Lesser Pond Sedges (*C. riparia* and *C. acutiformis*), discussed Smooth-stalked Sedge (*C. laevigata*) versus Green-ribbed Sedge (*C. binervis*) and Pendulous Sedge (*C. pendula*). By the end of the afternoon, we were confident enough to start tackling the yellow and spiked sedge groups, the latter considered by Fred to be the most challenging. I at least am now quite sure I almost certainly won't be looking at Large Yellow Sedge (*C. flava*) and know how to check my Common Yellow Sedge (*C. demissa*) is neither Small-fruited Yellow-sedge (*C. viridula*) or Long-stalked Yellow-sedge (*C. lepidocarpa*). Look for a gap between the female spikes and the male spike. Female spikes clustered at the base of the male spike separates Small-flowered and Large. Then check the orientation of the utricle beak – straight (Common) or bent (Long-stalked). And there you are. Well it works on the page – time will tell if it works in the field or if I will be bombarding Fred with crumpled samples and asking for help again.

Thanks are due, first and foremost, to Fred who put so much work into the day and who led us on a really accessible, informative and useful journey into the subject of sedges that was rewarding for everyone whatever their previous knowledge.

Thanks to both Fred and Helena for making their sedge collections available to the group. These made the day so much more than a just another presentation. If Helena cares to divulge what she feeds her plants, many of us would be glad of the tip. We none of us had seen two-foot tall Glaucous Sedge before.

Finally, thanks to Natural England for allowing us use of the meeting rooms at the Avalon Marshes Centre.

Fred's presentation and other material will be circulated to members, which will hopefully mitigate having to limit numbers to the over-subscribed workshop. Apologies to those who had to be turned away. We hope to run more similar events.



Up close & personal with the biggest *Carex flacca* ever seen. © Steve Parker