

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Val, Jane, Sam, Barbra and Dave by the Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) in King's Wood Warren. © Helena Crouch

Friday 20th September 2024, Jack's Castle Plantation and King's Wood Warren (VC6)

Leader: Helena Crouch

Report: Helena Crouch

Seven members met in the car park for Alfred's Tower on a fine autumnal morning. We were joined by the BSBI England Officer, Sam Thomas. We set off through Jack's Castle Plantation, part of the Stourhead (Western) Estate, finding Pill Sedge (*Carex pilulifera*) under some old Beech trees. This woodland is actively managed for timber, with a variety of conifer and broadleaved tree species planted. There were many self-sown conifer saplings, which presented an opportunity to learn some commonly planted species. We recorded Western Red-cedar (*Thuja plicata*), Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*),

Western Hemlock-spruce (*Tsuga heterophylla*), Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*), Sitka Spruce (*P. sitchensis*), Japanese Larch (*Larix kaempferi*) and Lawson's Cypress (*Cupressus lawsoniana*).

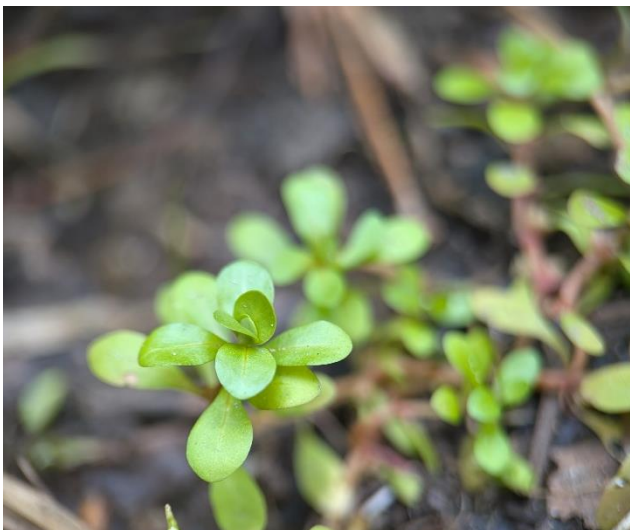
On the track to Jack's Castle, we stopped to examine a Rush, seen here a few weeks earlier during a pre-walk, tentatively identified then as Lax-flowered Rush (*Juncus anthelatus*), later confirmed from a specimen. This species resembles Slender Rush (*J. tenuis*) but has a more diffuse inflorescence which is about 15cm long, with many flowers borne singly. The capsules of *J. anthelatus* are no more than twice as long as wide and less than three-quarters the length of the tepals: those of *J. tenuis* are nearly three times as long as wide and are over three-quarters the length of the tepals. Both species are neophytes, native to North America. Lax-flowered Rush is new to Somerset.



The diffuse inflorescence of *Juncus anthelatus*. © Helena Crouch

Continuing along the woodland track, we found several species characteristic of acidic soils, including Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*), Slender St John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*) and Green-ribbed Sedge (*Carex binervis*). Jack's Castle is an impressive mound, but not a castle! It is an ancient Bronze Age bell barrow, built on the summit of the hill between 1500 and 1100 BC (and thus higher and considerably older than the more prominent Alfred's Tower!) The barrow has recently been cleared and on its side we admired Climbing Corydalis (*Ceratocarpus claviculata*), which frequently appears in clearings in this area.

On the damp track leading north from Jack's Castle, we found patches of Common Water-starwort (*Callitriche stagnalis*), Toad Rush (*Juncus bufonius*) and a single plant of Water-purslane (*Lythrum portula*) which was a new species for some members. In VC6 this species is almost confined to the Lower Greensand ridge at the eastern border and acidic parts of the Mendips. Amazingly, Sarah showed us this species on her arm, part of a complex and stunning tattoo!



Water-purslane in Jack's Castle Plantation. © Sarah Shuttleworth

Although much of the woodland is recent plantation, there are some splendid Beech trees, one of which had lost a large limb. A notice beside it explained that this was a valuable habitat. Beautiful Porcelain Fungi (*Oudemansiella mucida*) were erupting from this.

We headed down the steep north-facing slope into King's Wood Warren, an older plantation woodland. Here we found Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*) and False Fox-sedge (*Carex otrubae*) on the damp path edges, and Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) on the dry bank above. We had lunch in the sun, on a bank by the track.

Two of the group had to leave after lunch, but the rest continued, with thunder rumbling in the distance, the threatened storm approaching! By the track, we puzzled over a large patch of mint. Like Corn Mint (*Mentha arvensis*), the flowers were arranged in whorls subtended by leaf-like bracts, but the scent was wrong, and the leaves looked more like Water Mint (*M. aquatica*). A specimen examined later was found to have no seeds at all and keyed neatly to the hybrid Whorled Mint (*M. x verticillata*).

We stopped to admire the extraordinary find which Gill had made when she and I checked the route: a single plant of Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) on the bank of the track. It seems most likely that this arose from a spore from plants known by the lake at nearly Stourhead gardens rather than a distant native plant!



The twice-pinnate frond of Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) in King's Wood Warren. © Helena Crouch

With thunder crashing, we headed back up the road, sheltered from the heavy rain by large beeches, and finished the meeting with a cup of tea or an ice cream, standing under a tree together in pouring rain!