

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report

**Saturday 20th January 2024, AGM & Social,
Shapwick**

Leader: Steve Parker

Report: Karen Andrews



Members at the SRPG's 2024 AGM. © Karen Andrews

Steve opened the AGM by highlighting that it was the first in-person AGM for 4 whole years! As a result, there were lots of new members present who had never experienced an SRPG AGM and social event before. SRPG AGMs had always given an opportunity to socialise, share lunch and ideas. Steve promised to keep the AGM formalities to an absolute minimum.

Steve thanked all leaders and co-leaders who had made the year's extensive programme of field meetings possible. These had taken place in a wide range of habitats. There had also been good training events like the John Poland vegetative plant identification workshop, the aquatics workshop with Nick Stewart and the fern workshop with Fred Rumsey. The anniversary conference was also excellent. Steve stressed that it is not a big task to lead a field meeting. It is not necessary to be a nationally recognised botanist to lead one.

Steve announced that Graham Lavender is standing down as the Meeting Secretary. This task used to be

run by a sub-committee, meeting at Liz McDonnell's house, poring over maps to decide where to go on field meetings. Since that time, membership has skyrocketed.

Val Graham was thanked warmly for his work on the website. A show of hands revealed how many members participated in the WhatsApp group. There followed a discussion about whether there should be a division into separate groups led by Christine and Nicky. Had the WhatsApp group become too general? In the past week alone, the subjects had ranged from galls to polar bears! The consensus in the room was that the group should remain together. The diversity of posts was seen as an enjoyable feature of the group.

Steve queried whether members would find anything else useful. Would a YouTube channel be of interest? Next, he called for a shout-out for the fantastic newsletter with an insistence that a thank you to Karen be minuted. A limited number of newsletters can be printed in full colour if members ask Helena Crouch.

Helena is also responsible for creating the 'never-ending' list of our new and interesting plant records of the past year that appears in the newsletter. It is also published in the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History (SANHS) Proceedings <https://sanhs.org/digital-proceedings/>. This annual journal was first published in 1849. Simon explained that it contains a section on Somerset ecology, covering everything from vascular plants to plant galls, to arachnids and birds, etc. The 166th edition had just been published.

Ellen McDouall, Membership Secretary, discussed the growing trends in our membership. She displayed a map on showing the home locations of our members

inside and outside the county and length of membership. Figures now stand at 115, with 2 new members having joined already in the new year. There is a growing trend for lots of Natural England and other advisors and young consultants to join the SRPG.

Next, Steve turned to the subject of the Group's finances. Supreme difficulties with Barclays Bank could be traced back two years to the time when Clive Lovatt stepped down as Treasurer. The loss of both Clive and Liz created an horrendous issue with the bank over signatories. The 18-month saga was further compounded by the bank's inability to trace Steve. After six months of wrangling and a rapid increase in grey hairs, Steve finally managed to convince the bank of his identity in a 4-hour visit to the Bridgwater branch. There was a complaint that the AGM minutes for last year were not signed. Steve asked to make a complaint to a superior, who when he checked, could not see anything wrong. It turned out that the bank had been trying to send statements to Clive's old address.

There are now 3 signatories to the account: Helena, Simon and Steve. Bank statements are arriving every quarter. Steve asked the membership if the Group should change banks. A discussion ensued. Halifax and Nationwide do not like little group accounts. Lloyds seemed to be the only alternative. A change of bank would be one of the first new items for the new committee to consider. Helena stated that ethical banks she had researched will not take on small groups.

The accounts were available for all to consult on the day. The Group is in a strong financial position. The membership fee will remain £10. Many have already paid. Members have the option to pay by cash, cheque or direct debit. The accounts were duly approved.

With access to the bank account now sorted, the timing was perfect to introduce a new Treasurer. It was proposed that Anna Mullett become the new Treasurer. She was duly elected to the role.

Next, Steve explained that the Chair is not elected but chosen by the committee. Although stepping down as Chair, Steve will continue to serve on the committee

as one of the Vice-county Recorders along with Simon and Helena. In the next year, the Group will have two chairs. Ellen and Helena agreed to take on the role jointly going forward. The previous year's minutes were agreed.

With the formalities over, Fred Rumsey introduced the photo competition. The competing photos were split into 3 groups: Somerset Rare Plant Register, non-rare plant register and meeting photos. Fred asked members to vote for the best photo in each category and the best overall photo. There were 38 entries in 3 categories and members could vote for 2 in each category.

Steve then summarised the recording year in VC5. Unfortunately, a bad fall placed Steve out of action for two months. This resulted in the lowest number of VC5 records entering the BSBI database in years. There were 10,000 records. The peak was in 2020 with 40,000 records. Steve presented recording efforts per monad since 2000. Few sites were recorded in the Quantocks. Shortage of parking and busy lives play their part. We are not good at the crossover points with VC3 in Devon and VC9 in Dorset.

John was declared the star recorder of the year. Steve highlighted some of the year's wonderful records. Invariably, Ian and Paul Green make new discoveries when they visit Somerset. They found 5 new rarities. Fred seems to specialise in strange aliens and garden centres. Inputting his data can drive a poor recorder mad. Graham Lavender contributed some unusual plants. A long list came from Simon and Steve. Simon mentioned 3 new Dandelion species for VC5 and one for VC6.

Steve ventured out with RoAM, the Recorders of the Avalon Marshes. Most of their visits are in VC6 but include Steart which would merit an SRPG visit. The big find was *Tragopogon pratensis* subsp. *pratensis* – a first record since 1945. The find of Hairy Buttercup (*Ranunculus sardous*) shows that the site is changing a lot and that we need to record there more.

Another VC5 group call themselves the STOIICS. Chris explained that this is based on the grid reference ST02.

Ian shared Snake's head Iris (*Iris* or *Hermodactylus tuberosus*) on the What's-App group. This Iris has

been in the same location beside a lamppost for 100 years.

The Wild Flower Society found the tall grass *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* this year – only the second record for Britain. Meanwhile, Steve Little found Pink or Hirsute Garlic (*Allium trifoliatum*) in a bramble patch.

Steve ran through some of the outstanding events of the year and mentioned some of the exciting tree and vegetative identification events that were soon coming up. Steve finished by thanking everyone for the brilliant conference held in VC5 and the records submitted. The aim is for many more records in 2024. He ended by mentioning Fred and Helena's invitation to Steep Holm in VC6.

The proceedings broke for lunch. Lunch was a wide range of shared food brought in by members. Many of the healthy and indulgent contributions had been baked by members themselves. As ever for an SRPG meeting, there was no shortage of cake. Members also grabbed the opportunity to catch up with others after the long winter break and to vote on the photo competition.

After lunch, Helena presented some of the botanical highlights of 2023 in VC6. The end of Steve's presentation neatly led into Helena's highlight of her Steep Holm visit with Fred. She described zooming across by boat in the spray to land on the beach. They spent 12 hours on the island before the return trip.

Following Helena's presentation for BSBI on Aliens of Somerset, Ian Benallick corrected Rob Randall's Royal Crescent garden escapee of Violet Cress (*Cochlearia acaulis*) to Corsican Mint, (*Mentha requienii*). It smelt of mint when revisited.

The Vegetative Key Workshop with John Poland was a great success. Some 36 members attended.

It has been unlucky year for Somerset's recorders. Helena fractured her arm just before the Nunney walk. She thanked everyone for all the lifts while she was unable to drive.

Exciting finds included firsts for Cam Valley of Common Cudweed (*Filago germanica*) on old coal tips at Haydon Batch and Lesser Water-parsnip (*Berula erecta*) at Paulton and Timsbury Basins. Such

discoveries demonstrate how important it is to keep looking and to return to well-recorded sites.

John found 16 plants of Prickly Poppy (*Roemeria argemone*) on Somerton Moor. This was the first record for Somerset since 1992.

Nettle-leaved Goosefoot (*Chenopodium murale*) had found a home in an upturned cannon in the gun emplacements on Steep Holm. It had last been recorded there in 2006.

One of the best field meetings of the year was led by Nick Stewart at Southlake Moor. Finds included Tassel Stonewort (*Tolypella prolifera*) that had not been seen since 2006. The large population of Greater Water-parsnip (*Sium latifolium*) was also a highlight of the meeting.

Other VC6 discoveries included Caucasian Germander (*Teucrium hircanicum*). Small Lovegrass (*Eragrostis minor*) turned up in Somerton. Fred reported that it was new to Somerset until killed by weedkiller shortly afterwards. Terrestrial Water-starwort (*Callitriche terrestris*) appeared in paving in a garden centre. Valdivia Duckweed (*Lemna valdiviana*) is creeping out into the wild. It was discovered in a trough at Catcott, a lake at Westhay and a ditch at Vole. A housing estate in Bath, produced the third record for VC6 and Somerset of Martin's Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria reuteri*). Meanwhile, Limestone Fern (*Gymnocarpium robertianum*) had taken up residence in a drain in Bath.

Helena displayed blue maps to show how many more records we now have. The white spaces are more filled in and squares are darker. The big gap remains south of Wincanton – a challenge to tackle in 2024.



Entries in the 2024 photo competition. © Karen Andrews

Fred announced the winners and runners-up in the photo competition in reverse order.

Rare Plant Register Species

1st – *Hyoscyamus niger* - Helena Crouch

2nd – *Dipsacus pilosus* – Simon Leach

Non-rare Plant Register Species

1st – *Myosotis discolor* – Fred Rumsey

2nd – *Sagittaria sagittifolia* – Karen Andrews

Meetings

1st – Sunset at Berrow – Helena Crouch

2nd – Helena pushing Nick into the water – Karen Andrews

Overall winner: Sunset at Berrow – Helena Crouch

Next came the celebrated, challenging and long-awaited quiz courtesy of Steve. The quiz had been running for 24 years until stopped by COVID. VC5 (plus a few strays) were pitted against VC6. The questions favoured allrounders rather than pure botanists. Do you know your fungi, butterflies and plant galls? Botanical species were described with nicknames. Do you recognise Goosey Gander, Adder's Meat, Fly Trap, Squatmore, Small Frog's Lettuce and Billy Beatie?

A further challenge was recognising fellow members as pumpkin heads. Some members couldn't even recognise themselves. There was much laughter and puzzlement.

VC5 and VC6 were fiercely competitive. Aspersions were cast over VC6 powers of arithmetic. There were calls for a steward's enquiry. However, all was resolved amicably in the end with VC6 declared the winners ... by a narrow margin.