

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



## Meeting Report



General view of the Canada Farm peat restoration area showing regrowth of Bog Myrtle and Purple Moor-Grass with Cotton-grass and the surrounding birch and alder woodland © Val Graham

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> July 2025, Shapwick Heath NNR (VC6)**

**Leaders: Helena Crouch & Val Graham**

**Report: Val Graham**

The group met on an overcast, humid day at the Avalon Marshes Centre to explore Natural England's Shapwick Heath NNR, a mosaic of wetland habitats north of Shapwick village.

The extensive lakes and reedbeds in the Avalon Marshes, which are so attractive to birds and visitors alike, are the result of a determined effort in the 1990s to re-use this landscape of peat extraction for nature restoration, in particular to encourage the expansion of the very small Bittern population in Somerset. In this aim it has been very successful with Bitterns and many other bird species new to the area

making a home here. However, the effects of more intensive mechanised peat-digging, modern drainage, agriculture and eutrophication more generally have had a large impact on the habitats and vegetation of the area, some examples of which we saw during our visit.

We set off south along the road and over the South Drain – one of the key waterways in this area and formerly part of the Glastonbury Canal. Next to it is the line of the Glastonbury-Highbridge railway which now forms the main access to the Shapwick Heath and RSPB Ham Wall reserves.

In the water we saw the white flowers of Frogbit (*Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*) and bright blue Water Forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*). Near the bank were the purple heads of Marsh Woundwort (*Stachys palustris*).



From here we walked south and turned right onto the track leading to the western area of the NNR known as Canada Farm. This has never been farmed intensively and has preserved areas of heathland and fen on peat soils.

We entered the peat restoration area north of the track and found five species of rush and a number of sedges: Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*), Common Yellow Sedge (*C. demissa*), Carnation Sedge (*C. panicea*) and Bottle Sedge (*C. rostrata*). The large Great Tussock Sedge (*C. paniculata*) and the elegant Cyperus Sedge (*C. pseudocyperus*) were also present. The lovely Bog Pimpernel (*Lysimachia tenella*) and the round leaves of Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) were creeping under the Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) tussocks, and the scent of Bog Myrtle (*Myrica gale*) was everywhere.



Oblong-leaved Sundew (*Drosera intermedia*) © Helena Crouch

The peat restoration has created sphagnum-filled hollows which have now dried out due to the drought. In these we found splendid examples of fruiting Oblong-leaved Sundew (*Drosera intermedia*) and some rather unhappy-looking Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*). Many-stalked Spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*) is also doing well in these open areas.

The find of the day, by Helena, was not a plant but a fungus, a beautiful blue *Entoloma*. A photo posted on our WhatsApp Group brought Dave Gibbs rushing to the site. A specimen was initially identified by Dave as *E. jennyae*, a species only previously recorded at a few

sites in Ireland, and one site in Cornwall, found in 2023. However a specimen was taken for DNA sequencing, which showed it to be identical to *Entoloma indigoferum*, a rare North American species. Thanks to David Gibbs for identifying it.



*Entoloma indigoferum* growing on peat at Canada Farm © Helena Crouch

After lunch beside the track, we walked back to the road, crossing it to take an attractive path through the woods to join the Sweet Track path. This follows the line of the Neolithic plank walkway found during peat extraction by Ray Sweet in the 1970s. It has been dated to 3,800 BC.

Along this track we saw many large plants of Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*) and extensive patches of Marsh Fern (*Thelypteris palustris*). The former has a short rhizome giving rise to a shuttlecock shape unlike the Marsh Fern fronds which arise from long, creeping rhizomes. We looked closely at the simple twice-pinnate fronds of the Marsh Fern and its separate fertile fronds with narrower pinnae.

The other star fern was the Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*). We saw several enormous individuals with



their characteristic twice-pinnate leaves and withered fertile fronds.



Marsh Fern with its more upright fertile fronds showing their slightly narrower pinnae © Helena Crouch



Members admire a magnificent Royal Fern © Val Graham

A short distance from the northern end of the Sweet Track path we opened a gate into a field dotted with many heads of the fine-leaved umbellifer Milk Parsley (*Thysselinum palustre*). This a fen species with its stronghold in East Anglia, which is increasing here presumably due to the introduction of relatively

nutrient-rich water from the South Drain which is pumped in to preserve the Sweet Track.

From here we entered the “Cotton Grass Field” which is also showing signs of increasing nutrients with Yellow Loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) spreading from the east and tall fen vegetation along the central ditch. This included more Marsh Fern and fine plants of Water Dock (*Rumex hydrolapathum*) in flower. Among the plants we saw many Wasp Spiders (*Argiope bruennichi*) – a relatively new species to Somerset which seems to be thriving here, feeding on grasshoppers and even a dragonfly. In the ditch, which was entirely dry, we saw Marsh Cinquefoil (*Comarum palustre*) and Floating Club-rush (*Eleogiton fluitans*).

After returning to the road, and a discussion about a roadside *Artemisia*, we celebrated our enjoyable day out at the Avalon Marshes café with ice-creams all round.