

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Libby explaining the features of Whitebeams to assembled SRPG members and friends © Helena Crouch

Thursday 18th June 2026, Cheddar Gorge (VC6)

Leaders: Helena Crouch & Libby Houston

Report: Helena Crouch & Libby Houston

The weather was fine as eighteen members and guests assembled in the car park at Cheddar. Our aim for the day was to introduce participants to some of the rare Whitebeams of Cheddar Gorge and update records for other Cheddar specialities in the area above the gorge on the south side. We set off for the grand ascent, spotting fine flowering spikes of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobancha hederaceae*) as we walked up The Lippiatt. Once all had reached the area at the top of Jacob's Ladder we began recording in earnest.

Long-stalked Crane's-bill (*Geranium columbinum*) was abundant beside the path, its dainty cup-shaped flowers much larger than those of the intermingled Cut-leaved Crane's-bill (*G. dissectum*). Long-stalked Crane's-bill is now Vulnerable on the GB Red List and thus a Rare Plant Register (RPR) species. Stopping beneath a tree beside the path, Libby explained the features which indicated that this was a Common Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*). This species is diploid and

has comparatively thin leaves: held against the sky, light penetrates the whole leaf. The leaves are typically asymmetrical with blunt teeth and many veins; the base of the leaf is usually rounded, not wedge-shaped, which means the veins are curved.

Reaching an area of species-rich calcareous grassland near Pulpit Rock, Libby introduced us to a smart little Round-leaved Whitebeam (*Sorbus eminens*).



Libby explaining distinctive features of *Sorbus eminens* © Helena Crouch

The broad leaves, which can look like table-tennis bats, have fewer veins and are neatly toothed but not lobed. This species is a tetraploid, derived from *S. aria* and *S. porrigentiformis*. As a result, it has thicker leaves: light only penetrates the veins. The fruits were immature, but when ripe they will be red and wider than long. Round-leaved Whitebeam is Cheddar's most frequent rare *Sorbus*, with about 250 trees on wooded and open slopes and bare rock-faces, including several more along our route.

The grassland had been invaded by scrub, which was regrowing after being cut, but we still found Common Rock-rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), Thyme (*Thymus drucei*), Common Eyebright (*Euphrasia nemorosa*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*) and Meadow Oat-grass (*Helictochloa pratensis*). In the past, Cut-leaved Selfheal (*Prunella laciniata*) grew here, but sadly it was last seen in 2009 and we found none. We did, however, find four plants of Hybrid Selfheal (*P. x intermedia*), also last recorded here in 2009. This has the divided leaves of *P. laciniata* but the mauve flowers of the common Selfheal, *P. vulgaris*. The hybrid is fertile and can persist without its rarer parent.



Hybrid Selfheal (*Prunella x intermedia*) with mauve flowers but divided leaves © Fred Rumsey

On the rocky path there were many small patches of Rough Clover (*Trifolium scabrum*), apparently new to the monad. At the large rock outcrops, we recorded

Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*) and Hairy Rock-cress (*Arabis hirsuta*), both RPR species, and a second Round-leaved Whitebeam. We should have seen our first Cheddar Whitebeam (*Sorbus cheddarensis*), an almost cantilevered tree growing parallel to the slope below the rocks, found by Libby in 2006 and noted as healthy only a year ago, but it had since died. Further along, however, we were successfully introduced to Twin Cliffs Whitebeam (*S. eminentoides*) which is endemic to Cheddar Gorge with a total population of 30 trees at most. This species has large broadly elliptic leaves, but larger coarser teeth than *S. eminens*. On nearby rocks, we found Lesser Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum minus*) and Cheddar Bedstraw (*Galium fleurotii*). Although known in Somerset for over 200 years, the taxonomy of the Cheddar Bedstraw has been much disputed: many have considered it indistinguishable from Slender Bedstraw (*G. pumilum*) but Roe, in his Flora of Somerset (1981), treated it as *G. fleurotii*. Recent unpublished DNA analysis showed that it is indeed identical to *G. fleurotii*, which otherwise grows only in France.

With one more Whitebeam to see before lunch, we continued ever upwards. Libby had recently found a previously unknown specimen of English Whitebeam (*Sorbus anglica*) hiding behind a Yew tree near the path. The broad, dark green leaves are distinctly lobed, with feathery intermediate veins between the main veins. It flowers earlier than other species and has small red fruits, a trait inherited from one parent, Rowan (*S. aucuparia*). At least 140 English Whitebeams are known around Cheddar Gorge, where it is the most widely distributed rare *Sorbus*.

We stopped for lunch at a viewpoint off the beaten track, looking out across and down the gorge. A Round-leaved Whitebeam grew from the side of the cliff, but a 4.5m tall upright tree was identified as a probable specimen of the recently described Fay's Whitebeam (*Sorbus fayana*) – an exciting find. The main population of Fay's Whitebeam (15+ plants) grows on the upper south-facing slopes of nearby Burrington Combe, but a large 4-stem coppice on the scree just below our lunch spot has been recorded as likely to belong to this species. [Both trees were confirmed as *S. fayana* by Tim Rich and Libby, during a visit after our meeting].



The newly found *Sorbus fayana* © Libby Houston

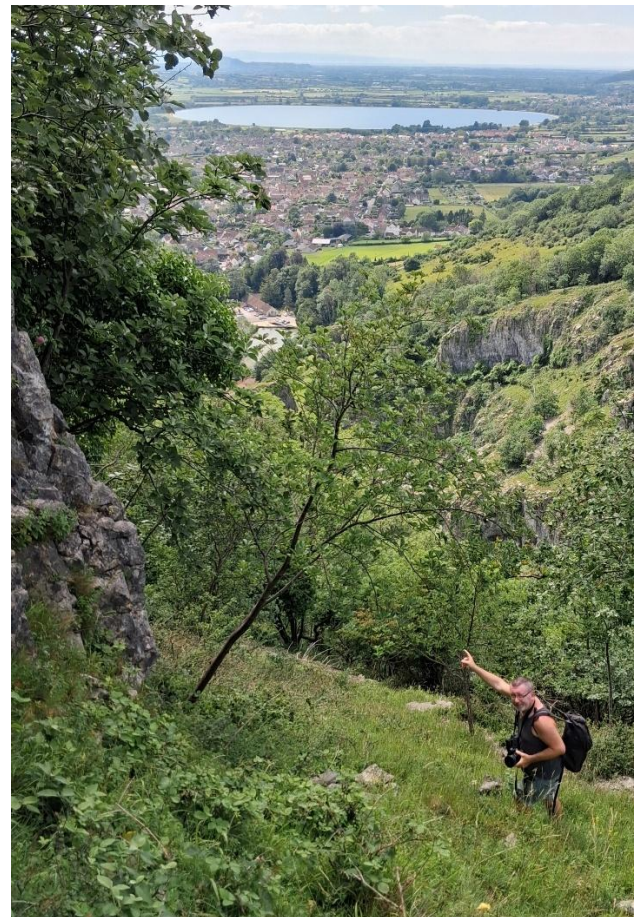
Having seen five Whitebeam species already, our priority after lunch was the promised Cheddar Pink, for which we headed to High Rock. Sadly, by the main path, we passed another Cheddar Whitebeam which had died since last summer. With two trees unexpectedly found dead, not to mention the lost type tree which featured on the cover of the original BSBI *Sorbus* handbook, a complete resurvey of this Critically Endangered species has become quite urgent. Thankfully, on clifftops around High Rock, we were delighted to find several pinks in flower, exquisitely clove-scented.



Cheddar Pink (*Dianthus gratianopolitanus*) © Alastair Stevenson

Rock Stonecrop (*Petrosedum forsterianum*) was also found along the tops of cliffs, with abundant yellow flowers, as was Goldenrod (*Solidago virgaurea*) which is now Vulnerable on the GB Red List, its geographical range having decreased. Silver Hair-grass (*Aira caryophyllea*) is also Vulnerable, whilst Crested Hair-grass (*Koeleria macrantha*) is Near Threatened: both were flowering prettily on rock outcrops.

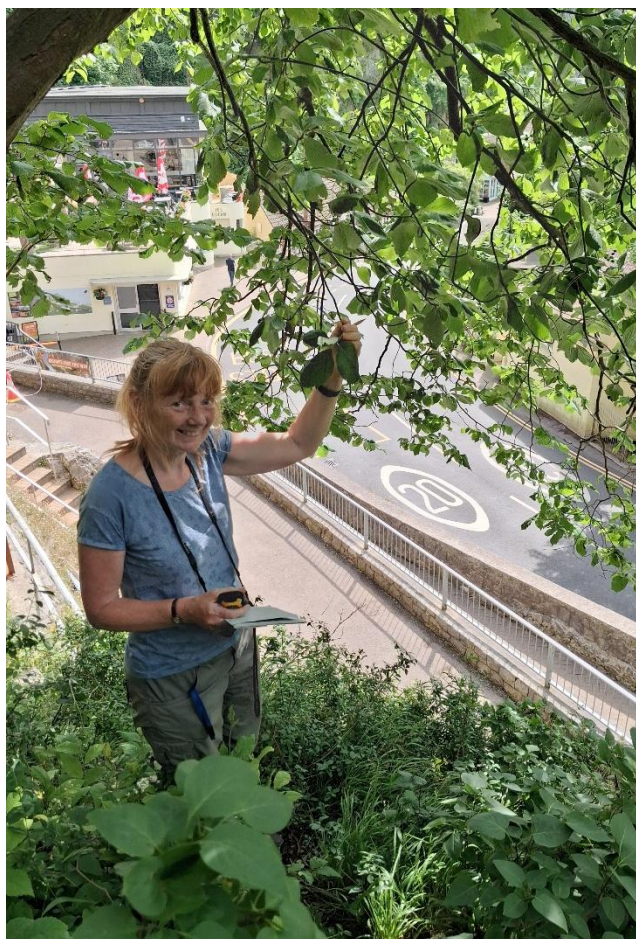
Although there was still so much to explore above the gorge, we prudently turned back to allow time for another Whitebeam or two. Several members disappeared down a steep slope in pursuit of Libby to view the one confirmed specimen of a new *Sorbus* species, still awaiting a targeted survey and as yet undescribed.



The new Whitebeam at Cheddar Gorge © Libby Houston

Meanwhile others explored the small area of limestone heath, finding Slender St John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*), Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*), Heath Speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*), Heath Milkwort (*Polygala serpyllifolia*) and Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*).

We descended into the gorge via the 274 steps of Jacob's Ladder. Some members departed, but nine accompanied Libby up the gorge to view the only easily accessible Gough's Rock Whitebeam (*Sorbus rupicoloides*) which grows on rocks above the raised pavement near the cave offices. The pavement had been closed to pedestrians for their safety while we scrambled up to view our single tree.



Helena and Gough's Rock Whitebeam (*S. rupicoloides*) © Libby Houston

This species is characterised by its narrow obovate leaves which are dark green above. *S. rupicoloides* has the most localised distribution and smallest number of individuals (18 at most) of the Cheddar endemics: all the other trees are high up on the level above.

It was hot in the gorge, so the meeting ended with ice creams in a shaded garden. We had made over 250 records and updated records for 34 Rare Plant Register species. It had been a brilliant day.