

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

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



Meeting Report



Can't you just sense the excitement? Searching for the self-effacing Sand Catchfly (*Silene conica*). Photo © Simon Leach

Sunday 10th May 2026, Minehead to Dunster (VC5)

Leaders: Steve Parker & Simon Leach

Report: Simon Leach

Just 48 hours after David Attenborough's 100th birthday and, following several days of warm spring sunshine, here we all were, fourteen of us in all, getting together for a day at the seaside.

This might sound idyllic, but the temperature had fairly plummeted overnight, with yesterday's balmy weather replaced by a cold, brisk north-westerly wind and a thermometer reading that remained stubbornly at or below 15°C for much of the day. There was a significant wind chill, and one or two of us had clearly

misjudged the conditions, arriving still dressed for yesterday – not least Fred, who had to dash into town to purchase a jumper!

We would spend the whole day recording in two coastal monads, SS9846 and SS9946. Both squares had been well recorded in the past – SS9846, for instance, Steve told us, already had 391 species recorded – so we were unlikely to add much new to the list. But in January, after an absence in VC5 of more than half a century, Steve had found along this coastline a single dead plant of Sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*). So one of our missions for the day was to see if we could find a *living* Sea-holly! And we would also be checking on the Nationally Scarce and GB 'Vulnerable' Sand Catchfly (*Silene conica*), for which Minehead Warren is a renowned stronghold.

We began as we so often do on such occasions, being distracted by the verges and pavement cracks on our way to the official 'start'. On the little roundabout by the golf club we found a sizeable colony of Bird's-foot Clover (*Trifolium ornithopodioides*), while in the vicinity of the golf club car park, and beside an adjoining ditch, we noted large stands of Greek Dock (*Rumex cristatus*), for which the area is well-known.



"The arrow marks the spot!" Searching for Bird's-foot Clover (*Trifolium ornithopodioides*). Photo © Simon Leach

Along the path near the clubhouse and up onto the dunes we spotted Eastern Rocket (*Sisymbrium orientale*), along with our first Bur Chervil (*Anthriscus caucalis*) of the day, as well as plenty of Hare's-Tail (*Lagurus ovatus*), a grass with great *chutzpah* that has undergone an astonishing spread along the dunes between Minehead and Dunster beach – certainly it's far more abundant here now than twenty or thirty years ago.

The frontal dunes here are predominantly Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) with patches of Lyme-grass (*Leymus arenarius*), but the path, for the most part, is hemmed in by the golf club fence on one side and a narrow band of dune scrub on the other, in which we noted much Sea-buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*) and Tamarisk (*Tamarix gallica*), as well as Duke of Argyll's Teaplat (*Lycium barbarum*) and brambles which included at least one we could identify – Dewberry (*Rubus caesius*) – plus White-ramping Fumitory (*Fumaria capreolata* subsp. *babingtonii*), the yellow-flowered 'var. *citrina*' of Stinking Iris (*Iris foetidissima*), and Small Nettle (*Urtica urens*), a species assessed as 'Near Threatened' in the GB Red List.

And then, a quick scan of the dune face produced another Red-listed plant, the 'Vulnerable' Saltwort (*Salsola kali*), rapidly followed by the species we'd most wanted to see: *Eryngium maritimum*! A single large, grey, prickly beast, to which we all paid our respects before continuing on our way.



Sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) alive and well in SS9846. Photo © Simon Leach

The golf course 'rough' between the fence-line and the fairway was seemingly dominated, for the most part, by *Lagurus*, but we did also see many plants of Hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*) – 'Near Threatened' in the England Red List – while in shorter turf and patches of open sand there were scattered plants of the likewise 'Near Threatened' Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*). Open sandy or stony ground, especially close to the path where the vegetation had obviously been kept short by trampling, produced a familiar array of interesting species, several of which are listed as 'threatened' in either the (2014) England Red List or the new (2025) edition of the GB Red List,



Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*). Photo © Simon Leach

or otherwise included in the county Rare Plant Register, e.g. Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*), Hare's-foot Clover (*T. arvense*), Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*), Silver Hair-grass (*Aira caryophyllea*) and Early Hair-grass (*Aira praecox*).

During our lunch stop, hunkered down behind the dune ridge out of the wind, we noted one of several colonies of Bladder Campion (*Silene vulgaris*) – surprisingly, perhaps, listed as 'Vulnerable' in the GB Red List – along with the Nationally Scarce but often overlooked sand-dune subspecies of Soft-brome (*Bromus hordeaceus* subsp. *thominei*). This proved to be a first record for Minehead Dunes and just the second for VC5, the only previous having been Liz McDonnell's at Wall Common in 2002.

And then, after lunch, we made our way along the strip of 'rough' between the edge of the fairway and the top of the shore where we searched for our other main target of the day, *Silene conica*. We knew where to look, more or less, but this tiny catchfly was doing its best to make itself invisible. Eventually, though, we were rewarded: first a single non-flowering shoot (woo-hoo!), then one in flower (yikes!), then another (yippee!), then five more plants (all vegetative), then six more – so maybe around 14 plants in all? By the time we finished we'd become almost blasé.

At this point, we decided to turn back towards Minehead. But Kate, who had parked at Dunster beach rather than in Minehead, continued onwards along the footpath, later reporting that she had stumbled upon another colony of 21 catchflies in the process. By the end of the day our list for the first monad, SS9846, had reached about 100 species, not bad at all given the relatively narrow range of habitats explored.

And it was a day during which there was not, as far as I can recall, a single mention of dandelions. Except when a few of us had been having a morning cuppa in the station café in Minehead, and one of our number (well, me actually) had his head turned by a tablecloth.



A tablecloth in the café at the railway station in Minehead. Photo © Simon Leach

It could so easily have been the highlight of the day. Except it wasn't.