SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP
Recording all plants growing wild in Somerset, not just the rarities

Meeting Report



SRPG members busy collecting and identifying aquatic plants © Helena Crouch

Sunday 13th September 2026, Aquatic Plants Workshop, Southlake Moor (VC6)

Leaders: Nick Stewart & Helena Crouch

Report: Helena Crouch

Following the success of our Aquatic Plants Workshop in 2023, Nick Stewart kindly agreed to run another one, again at Southlake Moor, part of the Somerset Wetlands NNR. This time we accessed the moor from the east, with an ulterior motive of seeking Greater Water-parsnip (*Sium latifolium*) at a site where it had not been recorded for over ten years.

The weather was kind as 22 of us assembled in the small car park beside the Sowy River at Pathe. After a health and safety briefing, Nick explained the identification challenges posed by aquatic plants. There are aquatic species in many different families, but the plants are often shy flowerers which limits the features available for identification. In addition, aquatic plants are plastic, often appearing completely different according to factors such as water depth and flow rate. It is helpful to divide them into groups which reflect their growth habit. Nick has developed keys which begin by assigning a plant to one of seven groups:

- Spiky rosettes
- Stringy plants
- Feathery plants
- Strappy plants
- Plants with floating leaves
- Plants with flat underwater leaves
- Everything else!

After a false start due to closure of the drove for work, we reached the moor and ditch dabbling began in earnest. We soon found Nuttall's Waterweed (*Elodea nuttallii*), a non-native submerged plant which can dominate a watercourse. We fished out Frogbit (*Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*), which is Vulnerable on both the GB and England Red Lists. The shiny rounded kidney-shaped leaves float on the surface of the water, attached below the surface to long runners. Even without flowers, this species is easily identified, unlike the smaller floating plants we studied next.

Members were introduced to several common species of duckweed. The largest, Greater Duckweed (*Spirodela polyrhiza*) is easily identified by its red undersides and multiple roots. Later we saw Ivy-leaved Duckweed (*Lemna trisulca*) which is also unmistakeable, having strings of fronds which float just below the surface of the water. However other species of *Lemna* are more troublesome: with no flowers or leaves (the fronds are modified stems) there are few useful features. We found Least Duckweed (*L. minuta*) with thin translucent fronds which appear greyish green, and Common Duckweed (*L. minor*) with brighter green fronds. During the day we found no swollen Fat Duckweed (*L. gibba*) but Nick explained that there is now much confusion over "Flat Fat Duckweed", whilst a hybrid between *L. minor* and *L. gibba* has recently been described. We moved on!

The marginal vegetation of ditches included several species of interest. Arrowhead (*Sagittaria sagittifolia*), Water-plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*), Inland Club-rush (*Bolboschoenus laticarpus*) and Flowering-rush (*Butomus umbellatus*) were soon recorded, and we were pleased to find Trifid Bur-marigold (*Bidens tripartita*) and Nodding Bur-marigold (*B. cernua*), both now Vulnerable on the GB Red List. Although we had not gone far, we stopped for lunch near the junction of Straight Drove and Black Drove.

A dip in the ditch here yielded two feathery aquatic species. The first, a water-milfoil was determined as Whorled Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum verticillatum*) by the presence of a turion. These club-shaped structures are overwintering buds from which new plants grow the following year: this is the only species of *Myriophyllum* to bear turions.



A small gherkin-like turion on Whorled Water-milfoil © Helena Crouch

The other feathery specimen was a small vegetative shoot of Water-violet (*Hottonia palustris*). This species is Vulnerable on the new GB Red List; Whorled Water-milfoil is Endangered.

Heading south, we focused on our secondary motive of searching for Greater Water-parsnip at a site where it had last been recorded in 2015 in a worryingly dry ditch. Once again, the ditch was completely dry, but astonishingly we found four vegetative plants of Greater Water-parsnip on the banks.



Leaves of Greater Water-parsnip amongst Silverweed © Helena Crouch

At the end of the dry ditch, a flowering plant of Common Comfrey attracted our attention. The pale creamy-white flowers were consistently less than 16mm long, making this *Symphytum officinale* subsp. *bohemicum*, apparently new to the hectad.



Symphytum officinale subsp. bohemicum © Alastair Stevenson

Returning to water-filled ditches, we found our first and only specimen of a Pondweed, with skinny leaves and stipules. Nick explained that there are about ten

species of *Potamogeton* with narrow leaves in Britain and Ireland. Two of these (now *Stuckenia*) are characterised by having a sheathing base to the leaf; four have leaves over 2mm wide; four have leaves less than 2mm wide. Of the latter group, two species have a pointed tip to their leaves, two have a blunt tip. The acute leaves with wide midribs made our specimen Hair-like Pondweed (*Potamogeton trichoides*).

The ditches at the south edge of the moor seemed less productive so we headed back and turned left along Black Drove. The first stonewort (charophyte) was found: these are large complex vascular algae. It was identified as Common Stonewort (*Chara vulgaris*). Another thrilling find was a plant of Rigid Hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) bearing a fruit.



Fruit of Rigid Hornwort © Alastair Stevenson

Rigid Hornwort has unisexual flowers at different nodes; each female flower has a unilocular ovary. The persistent style forms the “horn” of the capsule but there are also two smaller spines at the base of the fruit. This species usually spreads by vegetative reproduction: fruits are uncommon.

On the south side of Black Drove, we recorded a small patch of Marsh Stitchwort (*Stellaria palustris*), with distinctive greyish leaves. This species is now Endangered on the GB Red List and has declined in Somerset; some members had not seen it before. Nearby we found a small patch of Yellow Loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) and many young leaves of Tubular Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe fistulosa*) together with a dead fruiting spike, yet another species which is now Endangered on the GB Red List. We also recorded more Inland Club-rush (*Bolboschoenus laticarpus*). The nutlets of this species differ from those of Sea Club-rush (*B. maritimus*): they are paler brown and perianth bristles are retained around the nutlets when they fall. Ideally a nutlet should be sliced to confirm the species: in *B. laticarpus* the exocarp is thinner than the mesocarp whereas in *B. maritimus* the exocarp is composed of tall thin cells and is thicker than the mesocarp.

Across the ditch on the north side of the drove, a small clump of another Club-rush was spotted, partially munched by cattle. The remains of a fruiting spike were examined and glumes were found to be minutely papillose, covered with small brown bumps. This feature, together with the glaucous stems, indicated that it was Grey Club-rush (*Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani*). This species has several sites on the Levels but amazingly this was the first record for Southlake Moor. There is always something new to find, even in well-recorded sites!

It had been a successful day with a good variety of aquatic species seen. We had made records for fourteen Rare Plant Register species. All were very grateful to Nick for his patient tuition and for sharing his considerable knowledge of aquatic plants. Thanks also to Natural England for allowing us to visit Southlake Moor.

Nick’s keys are available on the BSBI website:

https://bsbi.org/learn/resources/identification-guides/aquatic-plant-vegetative-identification

There are also links to several webinars focusing on aquatic plants by Nick and others on the BSBI website, particularly on the Targeted Aquatic Plants Project page:

https://bsbi.org/take-part/projects/aquatic-plant