



Another year gone by and it is time for our Newsletter once more. We hope you will enjoy reading about the meetings which have taken place during the year and that the reports will bring back happy memories if you were able to be present or bring you up to date with our findings if you were not able to come along. Again we would urge you to look at the excellent Website prepared by Christine Loudon, the site address is: <http://www.somersetrareplantsgroup.org.uk>. It includes details of activities past and present, links to other useful sites, current programmes and much more. Helena Crouch is also to be congratulated on the steady work she is putting in on the Rare Plants Register.

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## REPORTS OF MEETINGS, 2009.

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### The AGM Sat. 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2009.

The AGM was held in the Village Hall at Shapwick and twenty people attended.

The financial officer reported that there was £442 in hand in December (which had risen to £546 in January).

The main item for discussion was the level of subscription in view of the fact that extra costs have to be incurred with the hiring of accommodation for winter meetings. It was thought unfair that effectively there is a two-tier subscription rate as those who do attend the winter meetings have to finance the hall hire as well as pay the £5 subscription which could then total £14 annually. It was agreed in principal to raise the annual amount for everyone and two figures were suggested: £8 and £10. History was made as the matter was decided by a vote! It was agreed that the annual subscription should be £8. Steve mentioned that there is a possibility of a venue for next winter as Natural England are opening a study room at a site on The Levels which might be available for SRPG use.

Christine Loudon was thanked for her work on the website and she asked for more photographs of our activities. Next year's programme was discussed and a number of areas for our attention were listed. It was also suggested that we hold a weekend visit to Dorset, staying at Kingcombe Environmental Study Centre, but for the purpose of recording plants on the Somerset side of the border.

Paul Green has invited members to visit Waterford, Ireland and it was suggested that we accept and arrange this for next year 2010. Paul gave the group a copy of his new flora of Waterford to auction for funds, Steve did this and £21 was added to coffers.

It was reported that both Pat Hill-Cottingham and John Keylock had died and members expressed sadness at their loss.

A shared lunch was enjoyed by all and this was followed by a raffle and then a Natural History Quiz in which our knowledge of other branches of nature, ranging from slugs to crested newts, as well as plants was tested. Following the brain-stretching we enjoyed looking at digital photos as well as slides shown by various members.

Jeanne Webb

### Indoor Meeting Sat. 7<sup>th</sup> March, 2009.

About a dozen members gathered at Shapwick Village Hall for the final indoor meeting of the winter season. This proved to be a most interesting day which commenced with Simon Leach giving an illustrated talk about his recent studies of 'Phenology'. This proved to be comparisons of the average flowering times of plants in the Taunton area in which his own observations over three years were compared with those in a paper published in 1947 by W.H.Watson. There were many charts, illustrations and tables illustrating the various ways of making comparisons, but the overall trend seems to be that most plants are occurring about two weeks earlier. It was interesting to learn that a similar trend seems to be observed with insects, which is essential for the pollination of certain species. I wonder if this is a 'chicken or egg' situation – which happens first does the plant flower earlier or the insect emerge earlier?

After a break for lunch, Helena Crouch gave an illustrated update on the work she is doing on the Somerset Rare Plant Register which ideally will finally be published in both book and web form. The list of plants considered for inclusion is 600 and 30 of these had been written up – this clearly shows that more help is required from members – it is a pity there were not a few more present at the meeting.

CJG

## FIELD MEETINGS

### **Exmoor Fern Hunt**

**Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2009.**

The first meeting of the year is normally always well attended and so it proved to be this season. Meeting in the car park in Porlock we set off, recording as we went. Although early in the year there were a number of plants in good flower including *Caltha palustris* (Marsh-marigold) along the stream and the white bells of *Allium triquetrum* (Three-cornered Garlic). Growing at the base of a wall was a good stand of *Fumaria capreolata* (White Ramping-fumitory). We revisited the location for *Melittis melissophyllum* (Bastard Balm), this plant was first visited by SRPG in August 2000. In Hawk Combe we came across the first of our target species *Dryopteris aemula* (Hay-scented Buckler-fern). This was growing along the stream's edge; working our way up the side of the Combe we counted a number of plants. Our goal here was *Hymenophyllum tunbrigense* (Tunbridge Filmy-fern), this was growing on a rock outcrop half-way up the steep combe side.

Retracing our steps, we climbed down one side of Hawkcombe and up the other side. A brilliant display of *Cyclamen repandum* (Spring Sowbread) was our reward for the climb. This plant had become well naturalised in what we presumed to be a old garden. On reaching the road we had good views over Porlock Bay and we started our descent down Porlock Hill. The target species here was *Asplenium obovatum* (Lanceolate Spleenwort), we estimated the population of this fern to be roughly 500 individuals. Goodness knows what the heath and safety committee would say over the number of near misses with the oncoming traffic!

On returning to the village, a small group set off to Alfoxton Wood to record at a second site for Tunbridge Filmy-fern. Excitingly the group also found a new Somerset location for *Trichomanes speciosum* (Killarney Fern). Not bad for the first meeting of the year!

Stephen Parker

### **Dunster Beach**

**Saturday 2 May 2009.**

This was a joint meeting with the Wild Flower Society. The beach at Dunster is well recorded botanically, this allowed us to spend our time recording with the GPS some of the rare and more interesting species. Only a true botanist can appreciate brown mats of the recently dead *Poa bulbosa* (Bulbous Meadow-grass), at least we didn't have to explain why we were on our hands and knees to members of the general public. In front of the famous beach huts and on our hands and knees again we counted the large population

of *Hypochaeris glabra* (Smooth Cat's-ear). But our enthusiasm got the better of us and soon we were literally crawling around the garden of one of the huts. The owners seemed delighted to be told about the wonderful rare species we were finding.

After lunch one of our members was taken ill and with great speed and professional help he was helped by the Ambulance service. Our group continued on to the top of the beach where it borders the Minehead golf course. More small insignificant plants are found here and not only did we have to crawl, we also had to dodge golf balls and the shouts from angry golfers! We did however record a number of interesting species including *Vicia lathyroides* (Spring Vetch) and *Crassula tillaea* (Mossy Stonecrop). No sign could be found of *Silene conica* (Sand Catchfly) but this was recorded later on in the season.

Our return route took us via the beach huts where *Trifolium suffocatum* (Suffocated Clover) was very frequent in the closely mown lawns. At the back of the beach is the wetland area known as the HAWN; recent management work had opened up part of the wetland and a number of small trees of *Salix purpurea* (Purple Willow) were recorded.

Stephen Parker

### **Cheddar Gorge**

**Sunday 17 May 2009.**

It was a dull overcast day when members and fellow botanists (some of whom had come from Oxford and further afield) met in the Reservoir car park part-way up the gorge. As we gathered, a noisy procession of bikers roared down the gorge, many of them wearing huge brassieres over their black leathers or draped over their bikes! We assumed that they were on a charity fun-run and it was not until they had all passed by that we could start our sedate botanical walk down the gorge to see some of the plant specialities. The first stop was to see the Welsh Poppy (*Mecanopsis cambrica*) in the small coach turning place for the open-topped tourist bus. We found a few plants on rock outcrops, but it was not as plentiful as in former years when it grew on the edge of the scree that descends from a small rocky crevice above. This scree cone is now periodically cleared away as a coach hazard, so part of the Welsh Poppy's habitat is removed during this operation. Cheddar Gorge is reputed to be the most easterly edge of its native range.

Walking further down the gorge to Horseshoe Bend, we recorded Scurvy-grass where it has long been known to occur (Sole first recorded it here in 1791). *Cochleria pyrenaica* ssp. *alpina* (taxonomy of the Cheddar population currently unclear and needs further work) was plentiful and

flowering profusely on rock ledges on the vertical cliffs. We searched for it along the roadsides where it was formerly very abundant, but found none at ground level as most of the verges have had soil bunds constructed at the base of the cliffs. We understand this to be to catch falling rocks or to prevent cars from parking on the dangerous bend, but it appears to have been the reason for a decline in the population here. Other cliff dwellers recorded on the steep cliffs were Lesser Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum minus* ssp. *minus*), Orpine (*Sedum telephium*), and Slender Bedstraw (*Galium pumilum*). In a small grassy recess by the side of the road lower down the gorge, we found a very small population of Little Robin (*Geranium purpureum*). Three flowers only were picked out from amongst the larger flowered Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*).

At the back of the main coach park, just above the tourist shops and Show Caves, Narrow-leaved Bitter-cress (*Cardamine impatiens*) was plentiful in a small damp area of bare soil. We also found a few plants on the opposite side of the road, the first time it has been recorded on the north side of the gorge. The rain got heavier as the morning progressed, so we took shelter in a small café taking up all the seats. We steamed up their windows and dripped water on their floor whilst we had coffee & snacks, then went out to continue our botanical searches. We borrowed a ladder to climb up to a small ledge behind the café, to see if the Bloody Crane's-bill (*Geranium sanguineum*) was still present. Privet scrub had been cut back, but there was no trace of the crane's-bill. Only one small dead spike of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobancha hederæ*) was found in an area where there once were dozens of spikes. Heavy rain curtailed the field visit, but we showed Cheddar Pink (*Dianthus gratianopolitanus*) to one of our visiting botanists by scrambling up the cliffs on the north side of the gorge. It was too early for flowering, but the few clumps we found seemed healthy. Two of us continued to botanise when the rest of the party had departed, visiting Ram's Cliff to see large clumps of Cheddar Pink growing in profusion on low vertical cliffs away from the main gorge, and a small dewpond at Wellington Farm where Thread-leaved Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus trichophyllus*) and Small Sweet-grass (*Glyceria declinata*) were present. Despite the rain, this was a good meeting, but it seems clear that some of the rare species are under threat from various operations in this very heavily used tourist honeypot.

Liz McDonnell

#### **Watchet to Doniford, Saturday 30 May 2009.**

We couldn't have timed it better: the warmest day of the year so far (26°C), and eight hours of

unbroken sunshine! This trip to the seaside was planned very much as a sequel to last year's walk from Blue Anchor to Dunster, most of us catching the steam train at Bishops Lydeard, and with Jeanne Webb joining us at Williton for the last leg of the journey out to Watchet. Jeanne had worked out our route for the day – no point leaving this job to the leader, especially after last year's steam fiasco – including a colony of Bithynian Vetch (*Vicia bithynica*), a 'Rare Plants Register' species which Jeanne had discovered at Doniford earlier in the spring. Apart from this, our aim was to complete 1km record cards for ST0743 and ST0843, plus a brief foray into ST0943 before picking up a return train from Doniford Halt.

To start with, as always, we seemed to make painfully slow progress – but there was a lot to record, and some of the plants were unfamiliar to us. The cliffs above the harbour were brightly coloured with some lovely patches of Kidney-vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) and Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*), along with Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*) and several exotic shrubs – obviously planted – including Escallonia (*Escallonia macrantha*), Shrubby Orache (*Atriplex halimus*) and Broad-leaved Oleaster (*Eleagnus macrophylla*). We were able to identify these shrubs by leaf alone, thanks to John Poland's excellent new *Vegetative Key to the British Flora* – the first time that some of us had had the opportunity to use it 'in anger'.

We took the steep path up on to the clifftop, and where it gets 'squeezed' between the cliffs on one side and the railway on the other we were delighted to find a tiny patch of path-side *Vicia bithynica*. This was a new site to Jeanne, and quite possibly the first ever record of this species in ST0743.

We then descended into Helwell Bay, noting an abundance of Pale Flax (*Linum bienne*) by the cliff path, and walked along the shore to Doniford, recording as we went. There was much 'non-botany' to distract us: rock strata forming an impressive succession of terraced pavements, in places thick with ammonites, and House Martins gathering mud from the oozing clay cliffs behind. On the cliffs, with the aid of Rose Murphy's new handbook, some of us pondered over fumitories and successfully identified Common Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria muralis* ssp. *boraiei*), White Ramping-fumitory (*F. capreolata* ssp. *babingtonii*) and Common Fumitory (*F. officinalis* ssp. *officinalis*); while further east, but still in ST0873, we stumbled upon a large colony of Grass-leaved Vetchling (*Lathyrus nissolia*).

Lastly, we were led by Jeanne to another, much bigger, patch of *V. bithynica*, growing at the western end of ST0943 on a grassy bank close to where 'The Swill' reaches the sea. We also saw

Yellow-horned Poppy (*Glaucium flavum*) here, and were tempted to continue eastwards along the shore – but thought better of it, instead heading inland to ‘Doniford Halt’ to await our train. On a grassy bank beside the path to the station we found Common Broomrape (*Orobanche minor*), while planted close to the northern/western end of the platform we saw a single fine specimen of New Zealand Holly (*Olearia macrodonta*) – obviously planted, and ridiculously easy to identify using *The Vegetative Key*.

We ended the day thirsty and weary from the heat, but with decent lists for at least two of the three 1km squares we had visited. Our day of steam had been great fun, and it was a particular pleasure to see *V. bithynica* in two new stations (no pun intended). A special thanks to Jeanne for making my role as ‘leader’, not for the first time, entirely superfluous!

Simon Leach

### **Merryfield Airfield Sunday 7 June, 2009.**

What a wonderful day! This MoD site is a difficult place to access, very much off the beaten track, but several natural historians including James McGill, our guide for the day, have been recording the wildlife here for many years. As a result, this is, for example, one of the richest sites for Lepidoptera in the county. The aim of our visit was to compile an up-to-date list of vascular plants for the site, and in particular to check on the locations of some of the ‘target’ species to be featured in our county Rare Plants Register.

The day got off to an unusual start. Before we could begin recording we first had a hair-raising drive (reminiscent of *Top Gear*) across the airfield to our ‘target’ area: an extensive block of semi-natural grassland, scrub and secondary woodland in 1km squares ST3319 and ST3419. Then, no sooner had we begun our recording than we stumbled into the middle of a group of camouflaged young men on army training manoeuvres; it wasn’t clear who was more surprised, us or them!

Returning to the botany, almost the first plant we set eyes on was a Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) – a good omen. We then headed off down a track, the verges of which seemed to be particularly species-rich, including surprising quantities of Dyer’s Greenweed (*Genista tinctoria*). Several rare invertebrates depend on this species at Merryfield. Two moth species had been recorded here for the first time this year: first, in early April ‘Greenweed Tortrix’ (*Grapholita lathyрана*) had been found flying in afternoon sunshine over a meadow area with abundant *G. tinctoria*. Just one other colony of this species is known in Britain, at West Bexington in Dorset. Then in May, while

searching for *Grapholita* caterpillars, several larvae of ‘Greenweed Flatbody’ (*Agonopterix atomella*) were discovered. One adult was reared in captivity to confirm the identification. This species used to be more widespread, but there are currently only about six known British localities. Finally, a couple of months after our visit several adult Greenweed Weevils (*Exapion difficile*) were swept from seed-bearing *G. tinctoria* plants – a first record for Somerset.

With all these invertebrates to contend with, and cuckoos and nightingales ringing in our ears – plus the worry of being unwittingly caught in the cross-fire – it was hard for some of us to really concentrate on the plants. But we were soon enjoying the first of a scattering of Greater Butterfly-orchids (*Platanthera chlorantha*), one of our ‘target’ species and ‘Near Threatened’ on the GB *Red List*. In all we found at least 30 flowering spikes of the orchid in 10 locations, growing either in scrub woodland or out in the open on species-rich track verges and in the *Genista* meadow. Amongst the other species of interest in the meadow were patches of Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*) and scattered plants of Pepper-saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*), Southern Marsh-orchid (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*) and Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*). On *C. dissectum* we were pleased to see Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet moths (*Zygaena loniceræ*) accompanied, appropriately enough, by the Burnet Companion (*Euclidia glyphica*). And in neighbouring Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) bushes James showed us larval webs of the Small Eggar (*Eriogaster lanestris*).

Late in the afternoon, we hurtled across to the other side of the airfield, Helena’s old ‘mini’ surprising everyone as it effortlessly reached 100 mph (or so it seemed), before screeching to a halt within a stone’s throw of some rough grassland in 1km square ST3418. Here we found small colonies of two more of our ‘target’ species, Slender Tare (*Vicia parviflora*) and Yellow Vetchling (*Lathyrus aphaca*) – both ‘Vulnerable’ on the GB *Red List* – along with a nice ‘show’ of flowering Grass-leaved Vetchling (*Lathyrus nissolia*).

An excellent end to a splendid day spent watching insects, dodging imaginary snipers’ bullets, and driving dangerously – oh yes, and recording a few plants too. We were, in fact, greatly impressed by the botanical richness of the place, and were astonished to learn that the airfield perimeter has, as yet, no formal conservation designation. In recent years the wildlife here has survived more by luck than judgement, James told us; and following our visit, we were appalled to learn that in early September

spilt grain had been dumped on part of the *Genista* meadow, which thankfully the MoD subsequently promised to remove. We hope that, under the watchful eye of James and others like him, this site will get the recognition, protection and management it deserves. It is an extraordinary place, supporting a hugely interesting fauna and flora. We thank the MoD for permission to visit it, and James for sharing it with us.

Simon J. Leach

### **Southlake Moor**

**Saturday, 20 June, 2009.**

This was advertised as a chance for the general public to visit Southlake Moor. The moor is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, part of the Somerset Levels and Moors National Nature Reserve a Ramsar site and a Special Protection Area and is probably of international importance for its landscape and archaeology. It is a most important site with a wide range of nationally rare, scarce and red list plants, not to mention a few European protected species of mammal and a large population of water voles. People would flock to the site to see all of this, but NOT on the day of our visit. In fact only Simon Leach and I turned up! We did walk along the road and recorded a 1KM square. Our best find was a small population of *Typha angustifolia* (Lesser Bulrush) growing in an abandoned drinking trough and a single plant of *Anacamptis pyramidalis* (Pyramidal Orchid) growing on the bank of the River Parrett. So not a complete waste of time!

Stephen Parker

### **Berrow Dunes**

**Thursday, 25 June 2009**

It had been a fine day, but as twelve members headed for Berrow Dunes, the sky became a strange oppressive yellow and those arriving from the south warned of approaching storms. Bob Corns, from Natural England, had kindly agreed to lead an evening walk at Berrow Dunes, to show us the treasures of this SSSI without troubling those using the golf course. Golfers were not a problem, but some members wished they had brought a coat!

Before we set off, we checked the strange Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera* var. *belgarum*), which was first found at Berrow in 2007. One specimen was seen by the track running north from the church. By the time we arrived at the small pond west of the church, thunder was rumbling ominously. Bob took us to see a fantastic stand of Marsh Helleborines (*Epipactis palustris*) just coming into flower in damp grassland north of the pond. We counted just over one hundred flowering spikes, but it was becoming difficult to

concentrate as we watched fork lightning, first out to sea, then suddenly behind us over the church. Two members turned back; the rest tried to brave the sudden torrential rain, but soon took refuge, huddled together in a pillbox for a while.

One of the treasures of Berrow Dunes was Somerset Rush (*Juncus subulatus*), once so abundant that it was visible on aerial photographs. There have been no records since the SRPG meeting in 1997 and the drainage of the reed bed has changed. Although he had no coat, Bob did have wellingtons and bravely volunteered to cross the ditch and search the reed bed, encouraged by ten increasingly drenched spectators. A large patch of Narrow-leaved Everlasting-pea (*Lathyrus sylvestris*) was admired on the edge of the reed bed, the first record of this species here for this decade. Sadly, no Somerset Rush was found and wellingtons proved inadequate for the ditch after all.

Undaunted, we set off to see the Lizard Orchids (*Himantoglossum hircinum*). They seemed a little stunted, and were just passing their peak, but were still a splendid sight to lift the soggy spirits. As we headed back to our cars, it stopped raining! I had been asked to look out for a particularly upright form of Common Broomrape (*Orobanche minor* subsp. *minor* var. *compositarum*), needed for a research project, and was delighted to find several spikes. J.E. Lousley may have seen this on "sandhills at Berrow" in 1928, although he erroneously called it *O. picridis*, but there have been no other records for Somerset. Although our plans for a long balmy summer's evening walk went awry, some super plants were seen and quality records made. Our grateful thanks to Bob for a brilliant evening.

Helena Crouch

### **Godney Moor**

**Sunday, 28 June, 2009.**

Eight members started at the village hall for the circular walk around the lanes and footpaths at Godney. This was a meeting to botanise in an under-recorded area of Somerset and we recorded in four 1km squares on our visit. All the fields that we crossed were improved and species-poor. The main interest was in the ditches where species such as Fennel Pondweed (*Potamogeton pectinatus*), Whorl-grass (*Catabrosa aquatica*) and Horned Pondweed (*Zannichellia palustris* ssp. *palustris*), Water-plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*), Nuttall's Pondweed (*Elodea nuttallii*), Greater Duckweed (*Spirodela polyrhiza*), and Fat Duckweed (*Lemna gibba*) were found.

The River Sheppey is a fairly swiftly-flowing water-body with a slightly different aquatic flora. Here Unbranched Bur-reed (*Sparganium emersum*) was recorded, even though it was not

flowering. Other plants from the river included Gypsywort (*Lycopsis europaeus*) and Curled Pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*). An area where soil had been dumped provided several casual records such as Oriental Poppy (*Papaver orientalis*), Purple Crane's-bill (*Geranium x magnificentum*), Upright Yellow-sorrel (*Oxalis stricta*) and a garden *Euphorbia* sp. (as yet unnamed). One plant of Common Evening-primrose (*Oenothera biennis*) was recorded by the entrance to the village Hall. The afternoon concluded with tea and cakes in the garden at Annie's Tearoom, Godney.

Liz McDonnell

### **Milton Hill, Wells**

**Sunday, 19 July, 2009.**

Eight members and friends met in Ash Lane to walk the footpaths around Milton Hill in an under-recorded part of the county. This was a general recording meeting. We walked north up a narrow lane to a small area of common land. Although this was neglected and badly in need of cutting and grazing, there were several species of interest including Upright Brome (*Bromopsis erecta*), Common Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*), Salad Burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*) and Downy Oat-grass (*Helictotrichon pubescens*). The rain fell as we made our way to the woodland on Milton Hill. This is an Ash/Field Maple ancient woodland with species including Sweet Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) and Wood Millet (*Milium effusum*). Part of this hillside has been quarried away leaving the huge disused and inaccessible Underwood Quarry. The smaller quarry to the north-west has cut through the hillside leaving a narrow gash which can be clearly seen from the Wells to Wedmore road. We explored this 'split rock quarry' which is now overgrown with trees and scrub, but which has a flat grassy level floor through which a path runs. Nettle-leaved Bellflower (*Campanula trachelium*) was growing on the vertical cliff faces. Whilst eating our lunch, we recorded Common Stork's-bill (*Erodium cicutarium*), Squirreltail Fescue (*Vulpia bromoides*), Field Madder (*Sherardia arvensis*) and Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*). Spurge-laurel (*Daphne laureola*) was abundant in the shady areas here. From the quarry we walked up to Arthur's Point finding species-rich grassland on the way down. Here was Common Rockrose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), Hoary Plantain (*Plantago media*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Crested Hair-grass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and Quaking-grass (*Briza media*). We made our way back along Lime Kiln Lane recording a variety of hedgerow species. We found one specimen of Common Gromwell

(*Lithospermum officinale*) and several plants of Musk-mallow (*Malva moschata*), a few of which were white as well as the more usual pink. There was a magnificent specimen of black-flowered Hollyhock growing amongst the Buddleja and Wild Clematis at the edge of the old quarry track. Rain curtailed the day, but we recorded in four different 1km squares to add to our Somerset database.

Liz McDonnell

### **Shapwick Heath NNR,**

**Wednesday, 29 July, 2009.**

On what seemed like the wettest day of the summer, four of us gathered at Shapwick Heath NNR to monitor some recently introduced populations of Greater Water-parsnip (*Sium latifolium*). This 'Endangered' UKBAP species became extinct at Shapwick in the early 1990s. A decision was made to attempt to re-introduce it to the NNR, and on 1 December 2008 153 young plants were 'released' into the wild, having been grown from seed at Bristol Zoo from material gathered at Southlake Moor SSSI. In all, twenty *Sium* plants were planted at each of seven sites, and thirteen at an eighth site. Our purpose today was to revisit these sites to record how many of these plants had survived their first eight months in the wild.

It was a dismal day, in more ways than one, and we were disappointed that we only managed to re-locate four plants – three of them at The Roughet ('Site 4'), and one in a ditch to the south of this, close to the line of the Sweet Track ('Site 3'). We also located six plants (from the same cultivated stock) in a ditch on the neighbouring Hawk and Owl Trust nature reserve. These were planted out in the spring, apparently, and so avoided the mid-winter 'freeze' – which could explain their apparently better survival.

As a change from *Sium* hunting, we briefly visited an area of 'mire' from which scrub had been cleared and where low-level grazing by cattle is being used to maintain the open conditions. Bog Myrtle (*Myrica gale*) is abundant in this area, and we saw thriving colonies of Oblong-leaved Sundew (*Drosera intermedia*), one of our 'target' species for the Rare Plants Register and restricted as a Somerset plant to this particular corner of the Levels and Moors. And then, to our amazement, in the middle of it all, we found a tiny patch of White Beak-sedge (*Rhynchospora alba*) – the first record at Shapwick, and for VC6, since 1976; and a return from the buried seed-bank, perhaps? We celebrated with mugs of tea as we tried to dry out back at the NNR office.

In the afternoon, Steve and I quickly visited a 'string' of *Sium* introduction sites alongside the

route of the Discovery Trail at the eastern end of the NNR. These had been planted out in May by volunteers using 'surplus' plants left over from the earlier plantings. Here, in another torrential downpour, we were pleased to find 25 plants at six locations. It was an upbeat end to a sodden day.

Simon J. Leach

### **Bridgwater Bay**

**Saturday, 15 August, 2009.**

Climate change and Sea level rise are real issues for the people of Somerset. Bridgwater Bay is in the front line: it is no longer financially possible to defend this area of land so in the very near future the sea defences will be removed and the sea will take back the land. As yet, we don't know what effect this will have on the plants of the area. This meeting was to make sure our records were as up-to-date as possible, so we can understand better what is at risk.

Our first target species *Althaea officinalis* (Marsh-mallow) has been known in the location for at least a quarter of a century and as leader, I was fully confident of finding it without a problem, I had after all recorded the plant in 1998. None the less, it still took the party a good 15 minutes to find the single specimen in the reed bed, we had walked past it at first, then been distracted by other plants. But find it we did and so we moved further along the beach to discover *Atriplex portulacoides* (Sea-purslane), never very common in Somerset. We found a small patch on the beach near the bird hides. On the extensive stands of *Elytrigia atherica* (sea couch) we noticed an infestation of *Claviceps purpurea* (ergot) in the seed heads. Walking across the cracked mud polygons of one of the pools we recorded good numbers of *Parapholis strigosa* (Hard-grass). A small pond near the tower hide was partially covered with *Ranunculus baudotii* (Brackish Water-crowfoot).

On returning to the small car park we drove the short distance to Wall Common. Here *Glaucium flavum* (Yellow Horned-poppy) was frequent along the shingle ridge while in the trampled pathway a good number of patches of *Trifolium striatum* (Knotted Clover) were found. *Marrubium vulgare* (White Horehound) was scattered on Wall Common and the shingle ridge. This area was also found to support a large population of *Bupleurum tenuissimum* (Slender Hare's-ear). This common is one of the areas that may suffer when the tide comes in; only time will tell.

Stephen Parker

### **Avon Gorge**

**Saturday, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2009.**

This was planned as a tour of the five new *Sorbus* taxa in the Avon Gorge and, appropriately enough five of us met up for the excursion. While examples of nearly all previously known Avon Gorge taxa, native and alien, can be seen on the Leigh Woods side from safely level paths, three of the four new hybrids are single specimens, one-offs: if you want to see them you have to be prepared to leave the beaten track.

We set off easily via the planted *Sorbus*es on The Plain and the dramatic trees at Stokeleigh Camp viewpoint that frame the prospect of St Vincent's Rocks and the Bridge – and a distant but definite view across the Avon of *S. x robertsonii* (Robertson's Whitebeam) below the Great Fault. This single hybrid of *S. eminens* (Round-leaved Whitebeam) x *S. aria* (Common Whitebeam) was discovered by Ashley Robertson in 2007 during his research into *Sorbus* DNA at the University of Bristol, and named in his honour. It may well occur in Cheddar and the Wye Valley as well as elsewhere here, but this is the only one so far to be established.

Further round the hill-fort edge are nine *S. porrigentiformis* (Grey-leaved Whitebeam), probably planted. This small tree is a key player in *Sorbus* evolution: Dr Robertson's research showed that *S. eminens*, the new *S. leighensis* (Leigh Woods Whitebeam), *S. whiteana* (White's Whitebeam) and *S. wilmottiana* (Wilmott's Whitebeam) had all arisen from hybridisation between *S. aria* and *S. porrigentiformis*, as well as hybrids *S. x robertsonii* and *S. x avonensis* (Avon Whitebeam) [sic].

*Sorbus x proctoriana* (Proctor's Rowan), the *S. aucuparia* x *S. scalaris* hybrid, grows fairly accessibly just over the top edge of Quarry 2. *Sorbus aucuparia* has 13-17 free leaflets, *S. scalaris* (an ornamental tree from China) from 21 to 33: Proctor's Rowan is satisfyingly intermediate, with 19-21 leaflets, dark green above and "strongly greyish-green" below. The location of its garden parent is not known.

We descended to river level via Lily Point, past the site of abundant wild *Convallaria majalis* (Lily of the Valley), with a brief diversion to a small slope in Quarry 2 where *Polygonatum odoratum* (Angular Solomon's Seal) flowers reliably in May. The most accessible *S. leighensis* is by the river opposite the quarry entrance. Southwards, overhanging the towpath near Nightingale Valley, a *S. x avonensis* had been discovered by chance in 2004 by Ashley Robertson and Tim Rich sampling a *S. bristoliensis* (Bristol Whitebeam) and, as they thought, a nearby *S. aria* for DNA research. Its DNA, however, matched that of the type *S. x*



*avonensis* on St Vincent's Rocks South – and maybe other similar trees here and elsewhere in vcs 6 and 34. More work is needed here, not least to establish whether this is a species rather than occasional hybrid. It seems easily confused with *S. leighensis*, especially with shade-leaf samples.

One taxon to go – the pièce de resistance, dare I say?: the *S. bristoliensis* x *S. aria* hybrid, *S. x houstoniae* (Houston's Whitebeam), which does seem, alas, to be a one-off sterile hybrid. Its leaves are sharp-lobed like those of *S. bristoliensis*, but noticeably [sic] wider and more tomentose. About 5m down a vertical face on the broken cliffs below the viewpoint, c. 10m above the cliff base, it's best seen from the wide ledge above it, only reachable via a choice of 2 slithery scrambles down or, today, across steep, earthy, wooded slopes. A handline covered a bad step down the roots of an ash – and all the party made it. Surprisingly, everyone got back safely to the top though the (direct) path was strenuous. More surprisingly, those who looked seriously weary turned up the following week to tackle the higher slopes of Cheddar.

L. Houston

### **Cheddar Gorge**

#### **Sunday, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2009.**

Fifteen of us met on a sunny Sunday morning, some from as far away as Essex and Lincoln, principally to visit the 3 new whitebeams of Cheddar. *Sorbus cheddarensis* (Cheddar Whitebeam), *S. eminentoides* (Twin Cliffs Whitebeam) and *S. rupicoloides* (Gough's Rock Whitebeam) were first found when I was surveying the Gorge in 2005 for the National Trust (*S. cheddarensis*) and in 2006 for Cheddar Caves and Gorge and the Longleat estate; their descriptions were published in *Watsonia* 27 in August 2009.

At least 19 *S. cheddarensis* had been recorded, widely scattered but still all but one on the north (NT) side. The 15 *S. eminentoides* were all on the south side, on the cliffs and slopes above Gough's and Long Hole Caves at the west end of the Gorge; the 13 *S. rupicoloides*, again on the south side, were mostly in a much more concentrated cluster above Gough's Cave.

We set out straightaway for the cliff-top path on south side, heading west to picnic above the Pinnacles where we made a brief abortive search for the foliose lichen *Solorina saccata*. I had recorded six *S. eminentoides* trees within easy reach of the path, and tree No.1989 of the 2006 survey was refound without difficulty near the edge of a woodland patch with several large yews. Almost immediately another one was found in the same patch close by, I think by Mark Kitchen – who then discovered what seemed unarguably to be an unsuspected *S. cheddarensis* a few metres

away. Nearer Jacob's Ladder, after a short unsuccessful hunt for *Prunella laciniata* (Cut-leaved Self Heal) at its known site, a weirdly cantilevered tree I had been uncertain about in 2006 again seemed very clearly to be *S. cheddarensis*. Both new records were in shade with leaf-characters modified.

After we descended Jacobs Ladder, officials of Cheddar Caves and Gorge very kindly allowed us to go up the old steps by the Rock-Sport hut for a close view of the only fairly accessible *S. rupicoloides*; we had to go up in twos, like pilgrims, the pavement having been blocked off with cones. The holotypes of both *S. eminentoides* and *S. rupicoloides* are on the cliffs above, to which access is both hazardous and restricted due to the dangers to the public below from falling rocks. At present the more accessible examples of each are shaded, and mostly non-flowering/fruited. In contrast, the holotype of *S. cheddarensis* is easily seen and easily accessed (from behind), above Arch Rock on the low top of Horseshoe Bend. Though a rather scrappy coppice, it had been chosen because of its conspicuous position; there are much healthier-looking Cheddar Whitebeam maidens in the species!

Altogether it was a very successful day. It was the first time I had tried leading a walk round Cheddar's whitebeams: not only were all the new species comfortably accessed, but their numbers were increased. The two new *S. cheddarensis* took the total population to 21+ and, more excitingly, the population of the south side to three; and the total population of *S. eminentoides* now stands at 16. It was a shame people didn't linger so much over the several beautiful *S. eminens* and *S. anglica* trees along the way!

L. Houston

### **Blackdown Hills**

#### **Saturday/Sunday 19-20<sup>th</sup> September, 2009.**

This was a wild Flower Society Meeting to which SRPG were invited to come along. The full report of the meeting will be published in the WFS Magazine, here is a short extract ....

"Most valuably, on Day 3 we were joined by two members of the Somerset Rare Plants Group, one of whom did some serious recording along the way, while the other was in the team managing the Neroche Project. She explained how large tracts of mire had been lost due to the planting of conifers, and these were now being cleared in the hope of restoring the bogland. Steve showed us a list of species that it is hoped will reappear, such as *Eriophorum gracile* (Slender cottongrass) and *Drosera intermedia* (Oblong-leaved Sundew).



“Although we did not find these or other lost species in the newly re-establishing bogs, the act of taking part in a search with experts for a serious purpose was in itself a valuable experience. There were, however, noteworthy finds such as *Stellaria uliginosa* (Bog stitchwort), *Viola palustris* (Marsh violet – leaves only), *Pinguicula lusitanica* (Pale butterwort), and *Scutellaria minor* (Lesser skullcap).”

Stephen Parker

### **Dunball Wharf Sunday, 18 October 2009**

On a fine autumn day, twelve members assembled for a walk alongside the River Parrett. We set off through the industrial estate around Dunball Wharf, finding an interesting rose beside the entrance. This was later identified as Sweet-briar (*Rosa rubiginosa*) and was a new 10km square record for this uncommon species. Some members could not bear to watch as one peered gingerly over the edge of the wharf to record species growing in the stonework, including our only Hart’s-tongue (*Phyllitis scolopendrium*) and Gypsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*) of the day. A single plant of Small-flowered Crane’s-bill (*Geranium pusillum*) was a nice find on some waste ground, with Weld (*Reseda luteola*), Guernsey Fleabane (*Conyza sumatrensis*) and Water Bent (*Polypogon viridis*) nearby. More impressive was a tall stately Dark Mullein (*Verbascum nigrum*) flowering on a pile of sand amongst dead stalks of Black Mustard (*Brassica nigra*).

Having exhausted the delights of industrial wasteland, we set off along the riverside path, with the promise of lunch once a target species had been found. Simon was soon prostrate in a grassy hollow, searching for Bulbous Foxtail (*Alopecurus bulbosus*), which he found. It was not exactly at its best, but the bulbs were convincing and our first target species was recorded. Lunch was taken sitting on a low sea wall, which seemed just the habitat for Sea Clover (*Trifolium squamosum*). One tiny plant was discovered in fruit: another target species found. A Clouded Yellow butterfly flew over – the first of the year for many of us. We continued to see the same limited suite of saltmarsh species, but entering a new 1km square, another of our target species was discovered: Sea Barley (*Hordeum marinum*). Although also past its best, it could be clearly distinguished from nearby Meadow Barley (*H. secalinum*). We recorded Common Cord-grass (*Spartina anglica*) in a new 10km square, which suggests that it is spreading inland up the Parrett estuary.

With excitement, we soon entered a third 1km square, which apparently had no previous VC6

records, most of the square being across the river (in VC5). A single plant of Pepper-saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*) was a good find, followed by a large patch of (somewhat dead) Corn Parsley (*Petroselinum segetum*). It was a good opportunity to revise these uncommon umbellifers. We also saw Stone Parsley (*Sison amomum*). As we neared the edge of the square, a small squeak heralded the discovery of our final target species: Sea Wormwood (*Seriphidium maritimum*). Three patches were seen, the best on old brickwork on the sea wall. An impressive 106 species were recorded in this small section of uncharted territory. Returning to our cars, some members lingered on the central reservation of the A38 to see Narrow-leaved Pepperwort (*Lepidium ruderale*). In keeping with some of the other treasures of the day, it was distinctly dead, but an exciting find nonetheless and a new species for some of us. Despite the unassuming appearance of the area and the late season, this was a good walk with several records of rare species updated.

Helena Crouch

### **Avon Gorge Saturday, 31 October, 2009.**

This was the last field meeting of 2009. A return to a familiar place for many of the SRPG. We were also joined by a few WFS members on their last day hunt. From the parking place we made our way down a very slippery Nightingale Valley to the Avon footpath. Heading towards Bristol, we recorded a good number of late flowering species. After lunch we visited a few of the quarries. Libby Houston was kind enough to give an impromptu lecture on the recent work she and others have carried out on the Sorbus species of the Gorge. (I was told later that Libby continued on after we had turned round and went back to our cars, and she botanised until dark).

Stephen Parker

### **SANHS Associated Societies AGM Saturday, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

This year SRPG and SIG (Somerset Invertebrates Group) offered to host this meeting, which was held in the new Lifelong Learning Centre at the Peat Moors Visitor Centre at Shapwick. SRPG and SIG displayed photos or information about their groups. The meeting was chaired by Chris Sidaway and after the AGM, he introduced the two speakers of the day. Steve Parker had prepared a talk on the history of Shapwick SSSI & NNR, but as he was not able to attend the meeting, Simon Leach gave the richly illustrated presentation. Steve had searched the Natural England library and files for information including old photos of the reserve and of the

people who helped to secure the remnant heath and worked-out peat voids as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserve. Francis Farr-Cox's subject for a talk was LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) which is a method of detecting tiny and subtle differences in land height. He produced amazing 'photos' of the Somerset Levels which showed clearly old watercourses and field patterns beneath the current field pattern. The Somerset archaeologists are studying these in great detail as they are a new source of valuable information regarding the history of the Somerset countryside. We were taken on a short walk to see the site of the earliest prehistoric trackway which was found by peat cutters at Shapwick, then looked briefly at several of the rare plants of Shapwick Heath including Marsh Fern (*Thelypteris palustris*), Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*), Milk Parsley (*Peucedanum palustre*) and Great Water-dock (*Rumex hydrolapathum*). At the end of the afternoon, most of the members took the opportunity for a last look at the Peat Moors Centre, which is due to close for the last time at the end of October 2009. Somerset County Council has withdrawn funding for this interesting and educational centre, despite a long campaign to save it.

Liz McDonnell

## PLANT NOTES 2009

### NEW SOMERSET PLANT RECORDS

The following have been recorded new for Somerset for 2009 unless stated otherwise:

***Armeria alliacea*** – Taunton (ST236244), 15 June, single plant in pavement outside 13 Trinity Street, self-sown from plant in adjoining garden, Simon J. Leach, VC5. Plant later destroyed when off-road parking bay was resurfaced.

***Cotoneaster atropurpureus*** (Purple-flowered Cotoneaster) – Taunton (ST21702608), 17 January, single bush self-sown on top of wall, Paul R. Green, VC5.

***Cyrtomium fortunei*** (Fortune's Holly-fern) – Ashton Court Estate, Bristol (ST55657205), 26 June, c. 100 plants over an area 10 x 20m on wooded slope in the Summerhouse Plantation, Richard Bland (det. Helena J. Crouch), VC6.

***Elaeagnus umbellata*** (Spreading Oleaster) - Sand Bay (ST33086412), 7 September, two plants on seaward side of fence at top of dunes, SE of "Danger Sinking Mud" sign, Helena J. Crouch and Margaret Webster, VC6.

***Polystichum tsus-simense*** (Korean Rock-fern) – Bath (ST74796544), 22 May, one plant in

basement of 26 Rivers Street, Helena J. Crouch and Fred Rumsey, VC6.

***Pontederia cordata*** (Pickerelweed) – Berrow Dunes (ST29195244), Sept., three or four plants at edge of pond on golf course, R.G. Corns (det. Stephen J. Parker), VC6. Possibly planted.

***Pteris nipponica*** (Table Fern) – Bath (ST75006453), 18 Dec 2008, five young plants in basement between 34 and 35 St James' Parade, Helena J. Crouch and Fred Rumsey, VC6.

***Pteris umbrosa*** (Jungle Brake) – Bath (ST74796544), 17 Mar., one plant in basement of 26 Rivers Street, Mark A.R. Kitchen and Clare Kitchen (det. Fred Rumsey), VC6.

***Smilax aspera*** (Common Smilax) – Cannington (ST28553955), 29 May, growing out of a wall, Stephen J. Parker (conf. Paul R. Green), VC5.

***Trapa natans*** (Water Chestnut) – Bridgwater (ST312359), 7 November, one plant at edge of Bridgwater & Taunton Canal close to houses, Simon J. Leach and Stephen J. Parker, VC5. With *Eichhornia crassipes* and *Pistia stratiotes*; possibly planted.

### NEW VICE-COUNTY RECORDS

***Arum italicum x maculatum*** (Hybrid Lords-and-Ladies) – Chilton Priory (ST37333898), 15 January, patch on E verge of Priory Road, with *A. italicum*, Ian P. Green and Paul R. Green, VC6. This is the third record for Somerset and believed to be the first for VC6 (although there are two records on the NBN, supplied by BRERC, both made in 1998 but not reported in *The Flora of the Bristol Region*).

***Callitriche brutia*** var *brutia* (Pedunculate Water-starwort) – Priddy (ST521522), 12 June, small amount on mud at edge of more northerly of two small ponds, Fred Rumsey, VC6.

***Cordyline australis*** (Cabbage-palm) - Sand Bay (ST33126440), 7 September, two plants at top of dunes, on seaward side of fence opposite bus-stop, Helena J. Crouch and Margaret Webster, VC6.

***Pistia stratiotes*** (Water Lettuce) – North Newton (ST305314), 2009, in Bridgwater & Taunton Canal at King's Lock, where it is reported to have been for last 4 years, Environment Agency, VC5.

***Eichhornia crassipes*** (Water Hyacinth) – Dunball (ST3140), Oct., many plants scattered along margins of King's Sedgemoor Drain from A38 bridge (ST311408) to M5 bridge (ST314410), Environment Agency, VC6.

### OTHER INTERESTING SOMERSET RECORDS IN 2009

***Agrostemma githago*** (Corncockle) – Yeovil (ST577173), 14 June, about thirty plants on made-up ground with imported soil and stone material,

Robert Osborn, VC5. First record for VC5 since publication of *The Atlas Flora of Somerset*.

*Anisantha tectorum* (Drooping Brome) - Minehead Golf Course (SS9846), 29 May, many plants, Stephen J. Parker, VC5. Third record for VC5.

*Coriandrum sativum* (Coriander) - Regil (ST53726192), 27 October, on a heap of earth and rubble at edge of a field, Margaret Webster, VC6. First record for VC6 since 1979.

*Cotoneaster salicifolius* (Willow-leaved Cotoneaster) - Coker Hill Bridge (ST50411343), 19 January, good-sized tree growing on top of road bank by bridge, Ian P. Green and Paul R. Green, VC5. Second record for VC5, the first being on the BSBI Vascular Plant Database for SS84, recorded in 1996.

*Cotoneaster sternianus* (Stern's Cotoneaster) - West Coker (ST5113), 18 January 2009, large bush self-sown at base of wall, Paul R. Green, VC5. Second record for VC5.

*Crocasmia pottsii* (Pott's Montbretia) - Landacre Bridge (SS814362), 11 September, abundant on banks of River Barle, Helena J. Crouch and Fred Rumsey, VC5. Second record for VC5 and county, but it is likely that other plants alongside R. Barle are also this species, not *C. x crocosmiiflora*.

*Cyperus involucratus* - Wellington (ST12922078), 18 September, one plant in a pond at The Basins, Stephen J. Parker and Wild Flower Society, VC5. Second record for VC5, presumably planted.

*Cyrtomium fortunei* (Fortune's Holly-fern) - Bath (ST75006453), 10 Nov., one plant in basement between 34 and 35 St James' Parade, Helena J. Crouch and Fred Rumsey, VC6. Second record for VC6.

*Glaucium flavum* (Yellow Horned-poppy) - Brean Down (ST295587), 14 December 2008, forty to fifty plants or clumps, some of which have flowered, on sandy slope behind the bird garden, Robert S. Cropper, VC6. Third site found in VC6 in 2008, following a period of no records since 1992.

*Isolepis cernua* (Slender Club-rush) - Walton Moor (ST43347262), 1 October, six plants on bare mud beside ditch, Helena J. Crouch and Fred Rumsey, VC6. First record for this area since 1997; now only known from one other site in VC6.

*Lathraea clandestina* (Purple Toothwort) - Muchelney (ST434234), 5 June, naturalised at the John Leach Pottery, John Poingdestre, VC5. Third record for VC5.

*Lonicera x purpusii* (*L. fragrantissima* x *standishii*) - Wellington (ST14251991), 18 January. One plant in hedgerow surrounding playing field at junction of Webbers Close and

Hoyles Road, Stephen J. Parker, VC5. Second record for VC5 but probably planted.

*Orobanche minor* var. *compositarum* - Berrow Dunes (ST29525204), 25 June, four spikes beside gravel path S of church, Somerset Rare Plants Group, VC6. Also in two other locations on Berrow Dunes: (ST29685160) one spike on golf course just E of "3" sign; (ST29605173) eight spikes on slope above golf course. First records for VC6 and county since 1923. (See also Plant Notes).

*Pistia stratiotes* (Water Lettuce) - Bridgwater & Taunton Canal (ST316317), 26/27 September, patch in the canal at Standard's Lock, Hannah Gibbons, VC5. Second record for VC5. Also Bridgwater (ST312349 to ST297365), 7 November, about 50 plants scattered along c. 2km of the canal in four 1km squares, Simon J. Leach and Stephen J. Parker, VC5. Third and subsequent records for VC5. Also Dunball (ST3140), Oct., many plants scattered along margins of King's Sedgemoor Drain from A38 bridge (ST311408) to M5 bridge (ST314410), Environment Agency, VC6. Second record for VC6.

*Rhynchospora alba* (White Beak-sedge) - Shapwick Heath (ST41554090), 29 July, seven plants flowering in middle of field at Canada Lows, Helena J. Crouch, Simon J. Leach, Stephen J. Parker and Gill Read, VC6. First record for VC6 since 1976.

*Solanum rugosum* (Buffalo-bur) - Taunton (ST206260), 3 September, disturbed ground by new roundabout, Mrs Frances Waddy (det. Helena J. Crouch), VC5. Second record for VC5.

*Valerianella dentata* (Narrow-fruited Cornsalad) - Somerton (ST484265), 30 September, six plants in fruit in corner of arable field beside Watt's Quarry Lane, John Poingdestre, VC6. First record for this Endangered species in VC6 since 1998.

*Xanthium spinosum* (Spiny Cocklebur) - Paulton (ST656568), 20 August, one plant appeared in garden of 4 Gregory's Tynning, almost certainly arriving with birdseed, Roger Oliver (det. Helena J. Crouch), VC6. First record for VC6 since 1932.

## **OROBANCHE MINOR**

### **var. COMPOSITARUM IN SOMERSET**

Common Broomrape (*Orobanche minor*) is currently regarded as having two distinct subspecies, subsp. *minor* and subsp. *maritima*, the former with two varieties recognised in Britain: var. *minor* and var. *compositarum*. A third variety, var. *flava*, which apparently only differs in its lack of purple pigmentation, may best be considered a forma. Some yellow plants, such as those at Newport Docks, are closer to subsp. *maritima* in some characters and may be evidence of hybridisation between different races of *O. minor* (Thorogood et al., 2009). One of the targets

of our walk at Berrow Dunes on 25 June was *Orobanche minor* var. *compositarum*, needed for research on the species by Chris Thorogood at the University of Bristol. A total of 13 spikes were found, in three sites on the dunes.

*O. minor* var. *compositarum* Pugsley was first described in 1940, distinguished from typical *O. minor* by its usually denser inflorescence of paler sub-erect, narrower (3-4 mm) and more glabrous corollas. This variety usually grows on *Crepis capillaris* or *Hypochaeris radicata*; because of the similarity in host, pale flowers and hairy filaments, it has often been mistaken for the extremely rare *O. picridis*. Most specimens seen of this under-recorded variety, which is apparently endemic (although the species itself is of questionable native status!) have been from the sandy soils of East Anglia and ecologically similar areas in Surrey. There have been few recent records nationally and many of those may in fact be other somewhat atypical forms of *O. minor* showing some, but not all, of the distinctive characters, for example sub-erect corollas – a feature which occurs to an extent in all fruiting plants of this species. An attempt by Chris Thorogood to re-find material for molecular study in eastern England in 2009, funded by the BSBI, proved unsuccessful. This made the Somerset discovery all the more important.

In his description, Pugsley (1940) cited a range of specimens in addition to those listed as types. Within this list he mentions plants from “about Brean, north Somerset”. Herb. Pugsley is now in **BM** and a single herbarium sheet bears three different collections, all from the same area. The earliest was collected by H.W. Pugsley himself from “Sandhills, Berrow, Som.” on 8 July 1897 and is clearly var. *compositarum*. Two specimens, one of which has the typical dense, narrow, rather erect corollas of this variety, were collected by J.E. Lousley from “Sandhills, near Berrow, V.C.6” on 3 August 1923. The third specimen, found “On *Hypochaeris radicata*, Burnham Sandhills, north Somerset” on 30 June 1935, lacks the distinctively upright corollas and is not convincing material of this taxon.

The only past records of this taxon in Somerset are those mentioned above; it receives no mention in the floras. Thus our record was the first unequivocal one since 1923 for a broomrape which, in Somerset, has only ever been found on a short stretch of the coast.

Helena Crouch and Fred Rumsey

Pugsley, H.W. (1940). Notes on *Orobanche* L. *Journal of Botany (London)* **78**: 105-116.

Thorogood, C.J., Rumsey, F.J., Harris, S.A. & Hiscock, S.J. (2009). Gene flow between alien and native races of the holoparasitic angiosperm *Orobanche minor* (Orobanchaceae). *Plant Systematics & Evolution* **282**: 31-42.

## **A NEW POPULATION OF CHEDDAR PINK**

*Dianthus gratianopolitanus* (Cheddar Pink) is the most famous of the few species found only in Somerset. It is the botanical emblem of Somerset, voted the county flower, used for the logo of Somerset Rare Plants Group and Somerset Botany Group, and is very pretty with a glorious scent. Amazingly, this species was found at Gorge a completely new site this year, away

from Cheddar. Known in the Cheddar area for over 300 years, it has a few outlying sites. At Sand Point it is known to be introduced and almost certainly also at Brean Down. It was thought to be an introduction on high rocks at Brockley Combe, where it has not persisted. Populations at Draycott Sleights and Rookham, known for over 100 years and 50 years respectively, have been variously considered to be introductions and hybrids. The newly found population lies between these two sites. Next year, Cheddar Pink populations are to be sampled under licence, to be included in a molecular analysis of this species in its European context. For us, this will be particularly interesting with regard to those populations whose legitimacy has been doubted. The discovery of this completely new population, which could provide a geographical link between other outlying sites, could not be more timely.

Helena Crouch

## **Indoor meeting – Fern Workshop Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

The first of this winter’s meetings was held in our new venue at the Lifelong Learning Centre at Shapwick NNR. Dr Fred Rumsey from the Natural History Museum, who is also a member offered to lead the meeting and was an expert guide to the 74 ferns, horsetails and clubmosses which have been recorded in Vice-counties 5 & 6. Of these, 10 have not been recently recorded in Somerset and are thought to be extinct, and 15 are non-natives or introductions. Fred and other members brought fresh fronds or potted up samples of many of the taxa found in the county, so that we could examine the differences between similar species. Fred explained the taxonomic problems relating to certain groups of ferns, introducing the term *apogamous* to describe the development of an embryo without fertilization; especially the development in some ferns of a sporophyte from the gametophyte without fertilization. We looked at fresh specimens of several species that Fred and Helena have recorded recently in basements in Bath including *Adiantum raddianum*, *Pteris multifida* and *Pteris cretica*. Fred brought beautiful herbarium specimens of nearly all the taxa likely to be found in the county and showed us a selection of useful identification guides. I was particularly taken with a large format handbook to the ferns of France & Western Europe, which has excellent colour photos – *Les Fougères et plantes alliées de France et d’Europe occidentale* by Remy Prelli (2001). The text is in French, but is useable by non-linguists too. This is a book to be recommended for all serious fern enthusiasts.

Liz McDonnell

**Congratulations to our members Mark and Clare Kitchen** who were presented with the Armstrong Award from the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust in December 2008. This was in recognition of their contribution of around 400,000 plant records to GCER. We add congratulations from SRPG.  
**SRPG Contacts: Liz McDonnell and Steve Parker.** Please use the contacts link from any webpage for more information.