

# SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP



**2014 Newsletter**

**Issue no. 15**

*Editor Liz McDonnell*

## Introduction

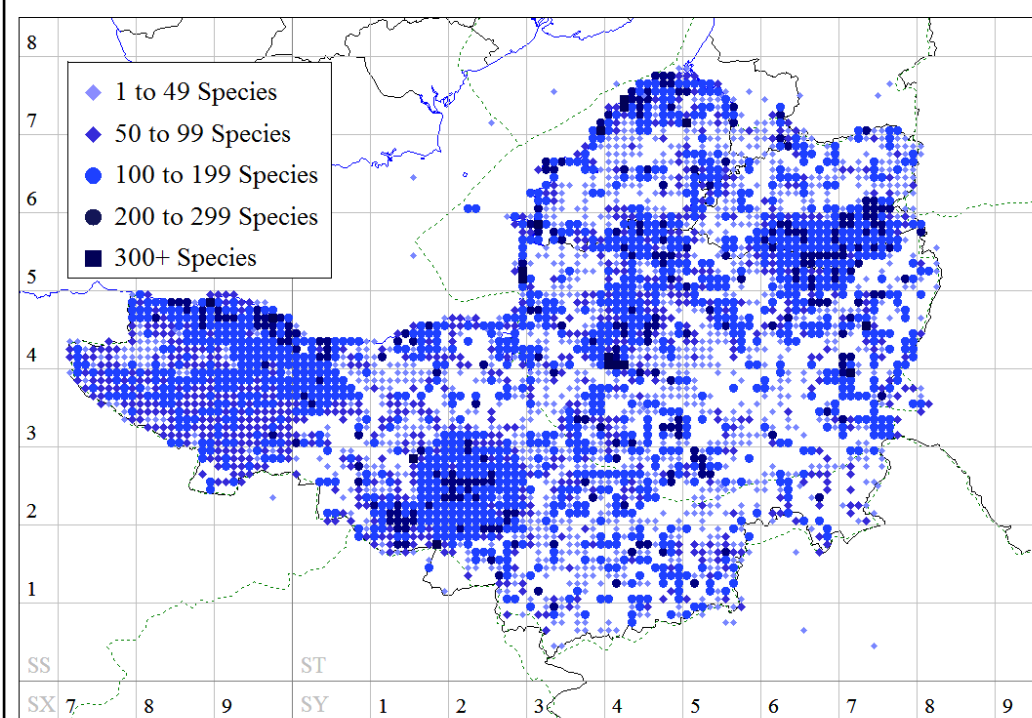
The membership of SRPG is currently standing at 74. We are always looking for people to take an active part in the group and to lead or help lead meetings. For information on subscriptions and membership see the Membership section in the back of the Newsletter.

Visit [www.somersetrareplantsgroup.org.uk](http://www.somersetrareplantsgroup.org.uk) to see the current year's meetings programme, Somerset Rare Plant Register - list of species, criteria for inclusion and written accounts, Newsletter archive and information on SRPG recording.

In 2014 we had 18 field meetings, 10 of them were fully or partially coastal. This fitted in with Natural England undertaking a review of the botanical interest of the Severn Estuary and the SRPG helped to gather records to contribute to this project. We also had meetings to find and monitor the rare and scarce species and general recording meetings, trying to fill in some of the under-recorded areas of the two vice-counties (VC5 South Somerset & VC6 North Somerset).

We are keen to encourage members to either 'adopt' a species or a suite of species (especially those in our Rare Plant Register) or record in their chosen area, whether it is a patch, Parish or tetrad, as we need good coverage of the county. Members of the SRPG currently record at a scale of monad (1km square) level or finer. Six, eight or ten figure grid references are routinely recorded for rarer species. The Mapping program MapMate is used by the Somerset Vice-County Recorders to store, analyse and share data, all records being passed to the BSBI (Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland). MapMate has only been routinely used for Somerset Plant records since the late 1990's and many historical records have yet to be added. The BSBI is committed to a third atlas of the British Flora (Atlas 2020) and there are five more years of recording before the end of the recording period and publication date. SRPG is contributing to that project by sending all records collected from the two vice-counties to the national database. There are opportunity for anyone to join in with this exciting project. The 2015 programme

VC5 and 6 Total Species per Monad 2000 onwards



of field meetings will visit many areas to survey and monitor some of our rare and scarce species and will also take us to under-recorded parts of Somerset. If you would like to help to turn more of this map blue, recording in your adopted patch or adopting species, contact Steve Parker for areas in VC5 or Helena Crouch for VC6 (see page 28 for contact details). We can provide you with SRPG Recording cards.

# Reports of Meetings

## **Annual Members Meeting and AGM Avalon Marshes Centre, Westhay Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2014**

**Report: Liz McDonnell**

Twenty-eight members met for our usual brief AGM and social event, a large turnout on a cold wet winter's day. We started with a cup of coffee and a post-Christmas chat amongst members then Steve Parker chaired the meeting. He gave a brief report of the eighteen field meetings that we held in 2013, with botanical highlights from some of those localities. Anne Cole presented the group's financial accounts and announced that she would like to stand down as Treasurer. We touched on the possible name change for the group, but decided to leave that subject for further discussion at our February meeting. Various news updates were presented, such as the proposed cable car at Cheddar Gorge which has potential to damage excellent species-rich grassland. Simon Leach gave us a progress report on his Taunton Flora project and welcomed help to record in any of the 500 x 500m squares (Simon's chosen recording unit). Helena gave her usual beautifully illustrated presentation of interesting and important records for the year in VC6. After a splendidly varied bring and share lunch, we divided ourselves into two teams for the pumpkin-head botanical quiz, which the VC5 team won.

## **SRPG – where next?**

### **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2014**

**Report: Liz McDonnell**

This was an opportunity for members to contribute to the future direction of the SRPG. There was a brief overview of the development and work of the group over from its beginning in 1996 and lively discussion about where we go from here. There was much interest in the suggestion that the Somerset Rare Plants Group was no longer a suitable name, as we were a recording group of all vascular plants, not just the rarities. Some members felt that the name was rather off-putting and would deter new and inexperienced members from joining, as it gave the im-

pression that it was not a group for beginners. Others were strongly in favour of retaining the name, as we had known it for so long and it distinguished us from Somerset Botany Group, which has a different remit. From this discussion, the decision was made to retain the name, but attach the following strap-line: *Recording all plants growing wild in Somerset, not just the rarities!* We discussed our role of recording and monitoring, computerising the records and submitting them to BSBI to contribute to the National database of plant distribution. The new BSBI Atlas 2020 was mentioned and suggestions were made on how SRPG can contribute to that recording project. Keen members were encouraged to adopt a site/parish or hectad and record regularly throughout the year. Helena gave a progress report on the Rare Plants Register, which is a key target of SRPG. Members made useful suggestions about the frequency, purpose and locations of indoor and field meetings. Requests were made for further workshops, especially for more difficult groups including Crucifers, Brambles and yellow composites. Better partnerships could be fostered with such groups such as the British Plant Gall Society and Plantlife.

## **Meet the Aliens**

### **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2014**

**Report: Steve Parker**

This indoor meeting highlighted the risk to our native plants and animals from invasive species. A key message is: "Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) (pose a significant threat to biodiversity in Britain. Dealing with the problems caused by invasive non-native species costs the British economy in excess of £2 billion annually. Often, the environmental damage they cause is irreversible". The threat from invasive non-native species is particularly high in freshwater ecosystems such as the Somerset Levels. In the past few years a few very invasive species such as Floating Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*) have been found in Somerset. In order to control this risk it is important to react quickly. Once aware of an occurrence, Natural England, Environment Agency and Internal Drainage Boards can actively manage the problem species. Please contact Steve Parker if you come across any invasive species.

# Field Meetings

## Berrow Dunes (VC6)

**Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2014**

**Leaders: Helena Crouch & Simon Leach**

**Report: Simon Leach**

Thirteen members descended on Berrow Dunes for the first of two meetings planned at this site in 2014. A cool and mainly overcast day, this was an early spring visit to catch, in particular, a number of sand dune winter-annuals that may have been under-recorded or overlooked in the recent past.

We concentrated our efforts on 1km square ST2951, with just 144 species recorded since 1999. Within a few hours we had listed 207 species, and the 'all-time' total had risen to a very respectable 300 species! We located populations of a number of our 'target' taxa, including a wide array of spring legumes: Rough Clover (*Trifolium scabrum*), Knotted Clover (*T. striatum*), Slender Trefoil (*T. micranthum*), Suffocated Clover (*T. suffocatum*) and, on one west-facing dune, many flowering plants of Spring Vetch (*Vicia lathyroides*). The vetch had last been reliably recorded from Berrow Dunes in 1989, so this was an especially pleasing record. We were also surprised and delighted by the hundreds of plants of Suffocated Clover growing in short turf alongside a footpath across the golf course; this appeared to be a new location on Berrow for this Nationally Scarce species, and the first record at the site since 1991. Other winter-annuals included Bur Chervil (*Anthriscus caucalis*), Little Mouse-ear (*Cerastium semidecandrum*) and Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*), while we also found several patches of the Nationally Scarce Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*).

We are accustomed to seeing Bulbous Meadow-grass when well past its best, usually as brown or orangey-brown patches that have in the past led some of us to christen it 'Dead Grass', and to wonder whether it *ever* looks alive! But today we experienced it in all its glory, in flower and with the leaves just beginning to turn from yellow-green to that distinctive shade of 'round-up' orange. Some cynics even had to admit, grudgingly,

that at the right time of year 'Dead Grass' can look stunningly beautiful. As one member commented on the day, it was nice – at *last* – to see this grass looking like it was something worth looking at!

On the beach we celebrated Jeanne and Tim's wedding anniversary – they had kindly brought some cake for us all to enjoy – and then we headed into 1km square ST2950, in which only 26 species had been recorded since the Atlas Flora of Somerset. We located 95 taxa there, giving the square an 'all-time' total of 105, and our list today included a number of interesting or unusual species. In the dunes we were surprised to find Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) doing a good job of smothering some large stands of Sea Buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*). Also in the dune scrub we came across single plants of Great Lettuce (*Lactuca virosa*) and Cabbage-palm (*Cordyline australis*), the latter about 1.5m tall and clearly well-established.

We made several new 10km records, although none of them seemed particularly exciting at the time. They included aliens, as one might expect, but there were also a few 'new natives' such as Enchanter's Nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*), Wood Sedge (*Carex sylvatica*) and Wood Dock (*Rumex sanguineus*) along a shady path at the back of the dunes in an area that had become much more overgrown and 'wooded' since the 1990s. It just goes to show how important it is to record everything you come across, and not just the 'target' species.



*Poa bulbosa* at Berrow Dunes showing the typical orangey-brown leaves © Simon Leach



## Clevedon (VC6)

**Sunday 6th April 2014**

**Leaders: Dee Holladay, Clive Lovatt and Liz McDonnell.**

**Report: Clive Lovatt**

This was a joint meeting with the Botany Section of the Bristol Naturalists' Society – hence two VC6 coastal SRPG meetings in an early Spring weekend. The weather report suggested recurrent showers, and indeed 15 minutes before the meeting was due to start, the leaders had to take shelter. Starting from the Miniature Railway Station we initially headed south, up Poet's Walk and round to the church and graveyard and back to the starting point. On the way we saw both subspecies of Celandine (with and without bulbils, respectively *Ficaria verna* ssp. *verna* and *fertilis* respectively) and over the first viewpoint, the small patch of Sea Purslane (*Atriplex portulacoides*) noted in last year's plant records.

As the weather had become fine again we headed north along the Esplanade. Musk Stork's-bill (*Erodium moschatum*) was flowering near two of the 'flower' beds (mostly with ornamental grasses, a sedge and a woodrush) which occasionally seem to 'leak' unidentified seedlings. The verges below the Esplanade had recently been sprayed, so that there was a brown line into the distance and none of the expected coastal winter annuals. At the bandstand a pansy (*Viola x wittrockiana*) had escaped onto the stone steps. Below benches and in the adjacent turf we could recognise Lesser Chickweed (*Stellaria pallida*).

As promised, by the boat club we looked at Pearlworts. Procumbent Pearlwort (*Sagina procumbens*) has leaves with long points visible with a good lens. Sea Pearlwort (*S. maritima*) doesn't, and has shorter fleshy leaves and flowers earlier. We agreed we had it, small prostrate plants in bud amongst the brick paving. By then though, it was time for tea and cake and more jolly conversation.

## Nunney Combe, Nr Frome (VC6)

**Sunday 27th April 2014**

**Leader and report by Gill Read**

This was a joint meeting with the Wild Flower Society and nine members from both groups braved a very wet day to walk along the Nunney Brook. A new member had requested a list of

plants that might be seen to enable him to look them up before the meeting. The recce was done on a similarly wet day and from this earlier visit 125 common species were recorded and 13 more uncommon plants. I proceeded to type the names of these to send out. My computer thought it was cleverer than me and helpfully corrected the spellings. *Quercus robur* became Q. Rubber; *alternifolium*, alter idolise; *affinis*, affinity; *Festuca gigantea*, Festival gigantic and *Germander*, germs dear! Maybe a warning, as I certainly needed to wash my hands after dabbling in the castle moat! Solomon's-seal (*Polygonatum multiflorum*) was just showing little bell buds and behind it one clump of Star-of-Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum* subsp. *campestre*). Proceeding along a very wet and slippery path we next looked at the hybrid fern *Polystichum x bicknellii* the cross between the Soft Shield-fern (*P. setiferum*) and Hard Shield-fern (*P. aculeatum*). Of course this caused a lot of looking and debating! Tuberous Comfrey (*Symphytum tuberosum*) was the next plant of interest, spreading fast along both sides of the brook. Giant Hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) was easy to spot, but not quite in flower.

A very wet picnic by a swollen brook and very noisy waterfall was taken when the sun popped out for just a moment! We spent a while recording in an adjacent 1km square which had very few recent records and found another site for Tuberous Comfrey before returning along the same slippery path to find yet more Star-of-Bethlehem by the stream. Monk's-hood



**Large clump of Tuberous Comfrey (*Symphytum tuberosum*) by Nunney Brook ©Liz McDonnell**

(*Aconitum napellus*) was the next plant to have survived the rushing waters of the winter and is hanging on at the bottom of a tree stump on the water's edge. We left the brook to walk along the side roads back to the village. On the wall of the Manor we could see leaves of *Hieracium sp.*, a plant that a few years ago could only be found in one place in Mells. It must like the area as it has spread widely in Mells and is now establishing itself in other villages! The sun shone when we reached the castle, where in the moat we found Rigid Hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*) and Curly Waterweed (*Lagarosiphon major*). Tea in the Nunney cafe was appreciated. The dark chocolate and beetroot brownies were almost worth getting so wet for.

## Cadbury Camp (VC5)

**Saturday 10th May 2014**

**Leader & report: Steve Parker**

Cadbury Camp has been visited by the Somerset Rare Plants Group in 2000 and 2005. The hill fort supports a very large colony of Meadow Saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*). From the records collected on our previous visits we concluded that the Meadow Saxifrage population is stable, both at the entrance and on the ramparts.

While scrambling over the ramparts, Ellen McDouall found an unusual looking Selfheal. The general consensus within the group was that the plant was either Cut-leaved Selfheal (*Prunella laciniata*) or the hybrid. It was decided that a return visit was required to confirm the record. A second location for the plant was found on the adjacent hillside in the afternoon. In July Simon



Meadow Saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*) on the ramparts of Cadbury Camp ©Ian Salmon

Leach re-visited the site and confirmed the plant to be Hybrid Selfheal (*P. laciniata x vulgaris*). This was a new record for VC5.



*Prunella laciniata x vulgaris (P x intermedia)* on the ramparts of Cadbury Camp © Simon Leach

After lunch we visited a second location for Meadow Saxifrage, this smaller population under beech trees was on the western edge of Crane Covert. The location had not been visited since recording for the Atlas Flora of Somerset. Making our way to a small quarry area on the top of Littleton Hill, we searched an area of calcareous grassland. Here the group found small populations of Horseshoe Vetch (*Hippocrepis comosa*), Hairy Rock-cress (*Arabis hirsuta*) and Clustered Bellflower (*Campanula glomerata*). We would have spent more time here but high winds made recording very difficult. Walking back via South Cadbury village we recorded a number of garden escapes including Annual Marguerite (*Mauranthemum paludosum*) - a second record for VC5, and Fringecups (*Tellima grandiflora*).



## Highbridge (VC6)

Sunday 18th May 2014

Leaders: Liz McDonnell & Clive Lovatt

Report: Liz McDonnell

The purpose of this meeting was to survey an under-recorded area of ST34, a 10km square that I had adopted for my recording effort in 2014. We had planned to split into groups to cover more ground, but as the number of members attending the meeting was low, we stayed as one small group and treated it as an ideal plant identification session. As we met in the municipal car park, the obvious place to start recording was the car park itself - a favourite habitat for some botanists! Here we found a number of common pavement weeds including Fern-grass (*Catapodium rigidum*) and Common Whitlow-grass (*Erophila verna*). We walked eastwards and on the grassy embankment near the railway line found Narrow-leaved Meadow-grass (*Poa angustifolia*) with its long and very narrow, tightly folded leaves. We recorded in the streets, the scruffy areas behind houses and at the railway station, then moved to the adjacent 1km square to the west. Here we encountered estuarine habitats along the Brue Pill. Several clumps of the Nationally Scarce Bulbous Foxtail (*Alopecurus bulbosus*) were found near the sewage pumping station near New Clyce Bridge and when walking on the saltmarsh, several other species of interest were growing near the sea bank including Nationally Scarce Sea Clover (*Trifolium squamosum*), Parsley Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe lachenalii*) and Corn Parsley (*Petroselinum segetum*) a few plants of which were growing on the landward side of the sea wall. In one of the pools beside the pill, Fennel Pondweed (*Potamogeton pectinatus*) was abundant. This is a common aquatic species in brackish pools in saltmarsh and by the sea. Soft Comfrey (*Symphytum orientale*) and one flowering plant of Rosy Garlic (*Allium roseum*) were found at the entrance to Apex Gardens. Walking back to the cars, we recorded Yellow-juiced Poppy (*Papaver lecoquii*) and Narrow-leaved Pepperwort (*Lepidium ruderale*) on a building site, both being plants of disturbed habitats. This was a good training day and we recorded a high number of taxa, boosting the totals for two tetrads.

## Nether Stowey (VC5)

Sunday 25th May 2014

Leaders: Steve Parker & Simon Leach

Report: Steve Parker

Seven members of the SRPG gathered in Nether Stowey village to do a bit of 'square bashing'. After recording street weeds such as Three-cornered Leek (*Allium triquetrum*) and Ground-elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*) in the built-up



Ian Salmon & Graham Lavender on Nether Stowey Castle  
©Helena Crouch

area we moved out of the village and in a damp grassy area a single plant of *Juncus x diffusus* (*J. effusus x inflexus*) was discovered. We walked along a lane towards Stowey Castle. The castle consists of the ruins of an early motte and bailey structure; the steep grassy ramparts have an interesting flora of common herbs. The thinner soils have a good colony of Slender Trefoil (*Trifolium micranthum*) and Knotted Clover (*Trifolium striatum*) with Fern-grass (*Catapodium rigidum*) in the old stonework. From the castle we moved to a second 1km square and recorded along the margin of and arable field, narrow lanes and the churchyard in Over Stowey. The churchyard was semi-wild with a good naturalised population of Spring Sowbread (*Cyclamen repandum*). On our return to Nether Stowey a small population of Perennial Cornflower (*Centaurea montana*) was found. During the day's recording we added 377 plant records for the tetrad.

## Middle Hope (VC6)

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2014**

**Leaders: Helena Crouch & Margaret Webster**

**Report: Helena Crouch**

Eleven members of Somerset Rare Plants Group, Bristol Naturalists' Society, two children and one dog assembled for this joint meeting to explore Middle Hope. This coastal area is owned by the National Trust and lies between Sand Point and St Thomas's Head. In woodland above the car park, we stopped to admire splendid spikes of Ivy Broomrape (*Orobanche hederæ*). This species is quite a feature of the North Somerset coast, but is Scarce in VC5, thus qualifying for inclusion in the Rare Plant Register. On rocks at the edge of the path, Common Calamint (*Clinopodium ascendens*) was an unfamiliar species for some: it is uncommon in parts of Somerset.

As we reached the first of several rocky outcrops, a sudden downpour caused our youngest members to turn back without even a glimpse of the sea. Knotted Clover (*Trifolium striatum*) was found in abundance here and in other sites along the coast; Rough Clover (*T. scabrum*) was also seen here and on one other rock outcrop later in the day. This has a more restricted distribution in



SRPG members on rocks at Middle Hope before the rains  
©Helena Crouch

Somerset and is distinguished from the former species by having white (not pink) flowers and secondary veins which are curved and noticeably thickened towards the leaf margin.

At the coastal edge we saw Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*) and Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*), the

last of which had not been recorded in this 1km square since 1998! A few intrepid members clambered down cliffs to explore lower rocks, finding Saltmarsh Rush (*Juncus gerardii*) new to the 1km square on a damp ledge. By lunchtime, two more members had departed; those remaining had a gloriously sunny picnic sitting on rocks at the edge of the bay beneath another patch of *Orobanche hederæ*. A huge Sea Slater (*Ligia oceanica*) came to join us.

Continuing along the coast, we recorded Fiddle Dock (*Rumex pulcher*) on rocks by the bay and Slender Trefoil (*Trifolium micranthum*) on another species-rich rocky outcrop, together with Western Eyebright (*Euphrasia tetraquetra*). For many, the star plant of the day was Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*). We counted 21 plants along a small path, most in full flower. Henbane has been known in this area for over a century, but this was the finest display for several years. Another target of the day was Cheddar Pink (*Dianthus gratianopolitanus*), discovered in 2013 by NT Biological Survey Team. There are about a hundred rosettes in a discrete patch, growing in a cleft of a south-facing rock outcrop. Members' views were sought on whether they considered this has been deliberately planted or had arrived naturally, perhaps as seed from the well-established population at Sand Point: the discussion was inconclusive and was cut short by the arrival of torrential rain. The downpour became relentless, so we returned to the car park, whereupon it stopped raining just as an extra member turned up to join us. In compensation we had a brief walk on the beach of Sand Bay, drying out, revising saltmarsh species and viewing the Wild Leek (*Allium ampeloprasum* var. *ampeloprasum*) which appeared there in 2013. It was good to finish the day with some bonus species.

## Manor Farm, Langridge

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014**

**Leaders Helena Crouch & Donald Macintyre**

**Report: Helena Crouch**

On a glorious summer's day, five members and a guest visited Manor Farm on the hills above Bath, where the owner Donald MacIntyre grows crops of wild flowers for their seeds. Over coffee in the garden, Donald told us about the history of the farm and his business, Emorsgate Seeds.



The morning was spent in arable fields, where the crop plants are sown in rows, with blocks of different species in each field. We soon found Dwarf Spurge (*Euphorbia exigua*), Sharp-leaved



Fred, Ian and Steve admiring the *Orobanche elatior* in the species-rich grassland at Langridge Farm ©Helena Crouch

Fluellen (*Kickxia elatine*) and Round-leaved Fluellen (*K. spuria*). The variety of crops over the years has meant that some locally native species growing as weeds, for example Wild Mignonette (*Reseda lutea*), are possibly crop residues, which introduced a whole new complication to recording. The Home Field supports a fantastic display of orchids growing amongst a pretty crop of Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*). We found Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) in abundance, occasional *D. x grandis* (*D. fuchsii* x *praetermissa*) and hundreds of Bee Orchids (*Ophrys apifera*), many with unusual markings. Some of these were perhaps referable to var. *belgarum*, yet others were strange aberrant intermediates, suggesting that the various plants described for their different markings and flower forms should not necessarily be ascribed varietal status. Orchids have found their own way to these fields, as have broomrapes. We saw several spikes of Common Broomrape (*Orobanche minor*), but a taller spike caught our attention. This was confidently identified as Knapweed Broomrape (*Orobanche elatior*), which has only one other site in Somerset.

It was formerly known from the oolite above Weston, nearby, until perhaps 1941, but ours is the first record for the eastern half of VC6 since then. Another good find at the edge of the next arable field was some huge fronds of Adder's-

tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*). After lunch in welcome shade, we explored some of the glorious semi-natural grassland on steep south-facing slopes. Donald showed us where he has found Cut-leaved Selfheal (*Prunella laciniata*) regularly since he first discovered it in 2000: between us we found six plants, together with five plants of the hybrid *Prunella x intermedia*, not previously recorded here. All were growing in shallow soil on the most directly south-facing part of the species-rich hillside. Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*) was recorded nearby and Common Eyebright (*Euphrasia nemorosa*). There was nothing to suggest that *Prunella laciniata* is not native here, apart from its recent date of discovery.

We returned via another arable field, where we recorded *Euphorbia exigua* again, in a different 1km square. Nettle-leaved Bellflower (*Campanula trachelium*) was growing here as a crop residue, amongst a swathe of willowherbs. We recorded four species growing together: Great Willowherb (*Epilobium hirsutum*), Hoary Willowherb (*E. parviflorum*), Square-stalked Willowherb (*E. tetragonum*) and American Willowherb (*E. ciliatum*) and found two plants which were clearly the hybrid *E. x floridulum* (*E. parviflorum* x *ciliatum*). This is only the third record for Somerset and the first since 1991. We returned to the farm for tea and cake in the garden: a luxurious finish to a brilliant day.

## Walton Common (VC6)

**Saturday 21st June 2014.**

**Leaders: Rob Randall and SRPG group members.**

**Report: Clive Lovatt**

This was a joint meeting with the Botany Section of the Bristol Naturalists' Society and a follow-up of Rob Randall's March 2014 BNS lecture on the identification of roses and his report on the distribution of Small-leaved Sweet-briar (*Rosa agrestis*) in VC6 in last year's SRPG Newsletter (2013). Several members met on the roadside in Walton in Gordano and walked up to Walton Hill, an ungrazed scrubby hillside with small areas of remnant species-rich grassland. Rob showed us the difference between the rare Small-leaved Sweet-briar (*Rosa agrestis*) with its glabrous pedicels and somewhat kite-shaped leaves and the Small-flowered Sweet-briar (*Rosa micrantha*) which is a weaker plant with glandular pedicels.



There are a handful of confirmed plants of *Rosa agrestis* on Walton Common. Thanks to Rob, we probably now have more Somerset botanists who can identify this rare species than we ever had.

It was very hot on the common but we managed to lunch in the shade. After lunch we moved on to the nearby slopes running down to the sea cliffs, where there are some marshy spots where springs emerge and Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*) occurs. Two exciting new plants were added. Mark Kitchen spotted the diminutive Chaffweed (*Centunculus minimus*), which (as *Anagallis minima*) is marked in the *Flora of the Bristol Region* (2000) as last seen in the former county of Avon in 1915. (In fact it was known in Leigh Woods as late as 1919, apparently above Paradise Bottom.) In this same flush, Liz McDonnell found Leafy Rush (*Juncus foliosus*), the broad-leaved segregate of Toad Rush. What a wonderful meeting it was. Two members saw plants they admitted they never expected to see in their lifetime - no matter that it might have been qualified by 'in N. Somerset'. Good company, good weather and some really good plants!



Chaffweed (*Centunculus minimus*) in a small flush in a field near the sea ©Mark Kitchen

## **Berrow Dunes (VC6)**

**Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2014**

**Leaders: Bob Corns & Helena Crouch**

**Report: Helena Crouch**

Despite the atrocious weather for our last evening visit to Berrow Dunes in 2009, Bob Corns from Natural England kindly agreed to lead another evening walk for us. A turn-out of nineteen members indicated the appeal of this site, which

is home to a stunning array of rare plants. On our first walk of this year in April we concentrated on early species in the southern part of the SSSI; on this walk we targeted some of the rare plants of the central part.

On the green in front of the church, stripping of turf has created areas of reduced competition, allowing two of Somerset's rarest species to thrive: Variegated Horsetail (*Equisetum variegatum*) and Slender Club-rush (*Isolepis cernua*). Both species were found in abundance on one of the stripped areas. At the edge of the golf course, we puzzled over a pansy, tentatively identifying it as *Viola x contempta*, the hybrid between Field Pansy (*V. arvensis*) and Wild Pansy (*V. tricolor*), both of which have been recorded on the dunes. Some white-flowered Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*) was another interesting find. We crossed the fairways safely to see the next rare treasure: a fantastic display of Marsh Helleborines (*Epipactis palustris*) in damp grassland. Attempting a population count, we decided that 2500 flowering plants was a conservative estimate. This beautiful orchid is found at only four other sites in Somerset. In a nearby reed-bed, we checked on a species which, as a native, is found only here and at one other site in Britain: Round-headed Club-rush (*Scirpoides holoschoenus*). The patch was considered to be stable, at about 4m in diameter. Around a small adjacent pond, the tall and dainty Divided Sedge (*Carex divisa*) was much admired, growing at its only Somerset site. An introduced alien, Pickerelweed (*Pontederia cordata*), growing nearby at the edge of the pond, was new to some members. Its spread is being monitored.

Taking the footpath to the sea, we paused beside a reed-bed to see another rare species, Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*), found at five sites in VC6 but absent from VC5. Amongst the reeds, we also found Parsley Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe lachenalii*), but despite many recent searches, it seems that Sharp Rush (*Juncus acutus*), which grew here and at other spots nearby, has been lost from the SSSI. Earlier this year, the path was impassable due to flooding: it appears likely that *Juncus acutus* has drowned here at its only Somerset site. Approaching the beach, we admired a large patch of Lyme-grass (*Leymus arenarius*) which is rare in VC5. A long walk southwards



**Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) at Berrow ©Simon Leach**

along the beach enabled members to see several other rare plants of Somerset. On the dunes, we found Dune Fescue (*Vulpia fasciculata*) and Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*). Strandline species included Prickly Saltwort (*Salsola kali* subsp. *kali*), Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*) and a single plant of Sea-purslane (*Atriplex portulacoides*), all Rare Plant Register species. Members were more surprised to find Marsh Woundwort (*Stachys palustris*), Celery-leaved Buttercup (*Ranunculus sceleratus*), Gypsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*), Trifid Bur-marigold (*Bidens tripartita*) and a Tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*) on the beach.

Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*) had been a promised target and we were not disappointed. Although just past their best and a bit shorter than usual, they are still dramatically impressive orchids. Records were made for 24 plants, all north of the main colony, and a happy recorder found one slightly further north than on previous occasions, which suggests that they are still spreading. It was dark by the time weary botanists returned to the church, but it had been a brilliant introduction to some of the rare plants of Berrow Dunes.

## **Eastfield LNR, High Ham (VC6)**

**Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

**Leaders: Liz McDonnell & John Poingdestre**

**Report: Liz McDonnell**

On a fine sunny day, twelve members met at the entrance to Eastfield Local Nature Reserve. We were accompanied by two local farmers who manage the adjacent fields and who have known this site for many years. The top flattish part of the reserve was a very tall, but flattened sward of semi-improved grassland. As we dropped down to the steeper slopes below, the grassland was more species-rich and had a neutral to calcareous association of plants including Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), Upright Brome (*Bromopsis erecta*), Pepper Saxifrage (*Silaum silaus*), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*) and Cowslip (*Primula veris*). Several plants of Lesser Centaury (*Centaureum pulchellum*) were found in a rabbit-grazed area amongst scrub. There are several springs that arise on the slopes of this Lias limestone hillside. These damp areas are now very overgrown with Hard Rush (*Juncus inflexus*), but we found a few species of interest including Brookweed (*Samolus valerandi*), Plicate Sweet-grass (*Glyceria notata*), Marsh Bedstraw (*Galium palustre*) and Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*). Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*) was abundant on some of the lower slopes and we found occasional plants of Burnet Saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*). Lunch was taken on one of the steep terraces, below which was one of the most species-rich parts of the reserve. Rabbit grazing had kept the sward short and species such as Wild Clary (*Salvia verbenaca*), Restharrow (*Ononis repens*), Glaucous sedge (*Carex flacca*), Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*), Meadow Oat-grass (*Helictotrichon pratense*) and Yellow-wort (*Blacksonia perfoliata*) were frequent. As a local nature reserve, the site is managed by South Somerset District Council, but Butterfly Conservation are interested in the site, as it has potential for the reintroduction of the Large Blue Butterfly. Thyme plants have been planted on one of the lower terraces, but the sward is currently undergrazed and too tall and coarse for the thyme plants to thrive. Scrub is encroaching from the edges and is developing along the steeper slopes. Here we found Purging Buckthorn (*Rhamnus ca-*



*tharticus*), Wayfaring-tree (*Viburnum lantanus*) and Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*). Walking back along the top of the site, Fiddle Dock (*Rumex pulcher*) was frequent in the tall grassland and several plants of Corn Parsley (*Petroselinum segetum*) were found on a scrubby slope. This Local Nature Reserve has a variety of habitats and is of considerable biological interest, but members who were familiar with the area considered that the under-grazing and scrub encroachment were causing the decline in botanical diversity at this site. A few weeks later, I met up with Butterfly conservation at Eastfield to discuss grazing requirements and scrub clearance that would enhance the grassland diversity, and improve its suitability as a site for the Large Blue Butterfly.

## **Lilstock Pill (VC 5)**

**Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

**Leaders: Ro FitzGerald & Simon Leach**

**Report: Simon Leach**

This was billed as a joint meeting with the Wild Flower Society. Those attending included several card-carrying WFS members of the SRPG, plus several from further afield. Rain threatened at the start of the day, but it soon cleared to a sunny, stiflingly hot and muggy afternoon. Our aim was to search for one or two target coastal species close to the shore, and then after lunch investigate the arable 'weed' flora of coastal fields between the Pill and Hinkley Point.

On the coast we soon located a thriving population of the Nationally Scarce and Vulnerable Slender Hare's-ear (*Bupleurum tenuissimum*); with the benefit of many pairs of eyes we counted 148 plants. This appears to be the first record of Slender Hare's-ear from this site since the turn of the millennium. Known here from the 1970s to about 2000 (for what may have been the most recent record, see SRPG Newsletter No. 1, p. 4), it had been feared lost when an old harbour embankment became scrubbed up.

We saw plenty of Sea Barley (*Hordeum marinum*) too, growing on the coastal path at the back of the shingle beach – again well in excess of 100 plants. This is another Nationally Scarce and Vulnerable species, and we were lucky enough to be able to compare it with Wall Barley (*H. murinum*) and Meadow Barley (*H. secalinum*), both of

which were located growing in the same area. Corn Parsley (*Petroselinum segetum*) was also found, and was a suitable lead-in to the rest of the day which would be spent in search of arable 'weeds'.

Lilstock sits on the Lias, a rock formation producing a range of calcareous clay soils that – here as elsewhere – frequently support a surprisingly rich arable flora. The quality of Lilstock's cornfields has only been realised in the last few years as a result of Ro's intensive surveys in the area. The array of species is quite remarkable. We saw (and smelt) lots of Stinking Chamomile (*Anthemis cotula*), a declining widespread species listed as Vulnerable in both the GB and England Red Lists, along with Dwarf Spurge (*Euphorbia exigua*), Vulnerable in the England Red List, both sharp- and round-leaved fluellens – *Kickxia elatine* and *K. spuria* – Lesser Centaury (*Centaurea pulchellum*), Black-bindweed (*Fallopia convolvulus*) and Knotted Hedge-parsley (*Torilis nodosa*). We also located a single rather miserable specimen of the much scarcer (and Endangered) Spreading Hedge-parsley (*Torilis arvensis*). In one field there were several plants of Field Pepperwort (*Lepidium campestre*), a very local species in Somerset, and growing here at the western edge of its range in the county.

Amongst the legumes, we enjoyed several Nationally Scarce and/or Red-listed species. On a 'green lane' we stumbled upon a small patch of Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) – listed as Vulnerable in the England Red List, and so a new species on our 'target' list for the Somerset Rare Plant Register. There was much debate about how to reliably distinguish between the Nationally Scarce – and Vulnerable – Slender Tare (*Vicia parviflora*) and its commoner look-alike Smooth Tare (*Vicia tetrasperma*). Later in the day we found two more of our 'target' species: Bythinian Vetch (*Vicia bythinica*) and Yellow Vetchling (*Lathyrus aphaca*), the latter in considerable quantity along several field margins and confirming that the Lilstock area is an important county stronghold for this species. Just as we were starting to flag in the heat, Ro conjured up another Nationally Scarce legume – a small colony of Sea Clover (*Trifolium squamosum*) flowering nicely and growing happily but very unusually, in the corner of a wheat field.

## Willow & Poplar Workshops

**Sunday 3rd August 2014**

### Willow Workshop

**Leader and report: Jeanne Webb**

The willow workshop took place on a hot August day and as suggested, fresh specimens were brought in - these were passed around the table and possible identifications discussed. Some of the specimens were found to be differing examples of the ubiquitous Rusty Willow (*Salix cinerea* ssp. *oleifolia*) which has many variants and a huge range of leaf measurements causing much confusion when placed alongside 'normal' *Salix cinerea*. I had put together some photos of local willows to help with identifying the unusual ones and I had found some new records for our area and all these were shown on the presentation. Another interesting subject for discussion was the correct identification of the many examples of Weeping Willow which usually go unrecorded or are sometimes incorrectly named. I brought along some of the herbarium specimens which I have been making of all the Somerset willows for my collection of every species currently recorded in Somerset. There are approximately 24 and I have 3 more to collect to complete the record and I hope these can eventually be used as a SRPG resource.

The sun turned to rain as we walked the verges, hedges and droves close to the Centre to try to identify all that we had been looking at - a rich variety in Sedgemoor's wetlands.

### Poplar Workshop

**Leader & report: Ian Salmon**

Between Jeanne's presentation and the practical workshop, I gave a brief talk on Poplars outlining the various sections of the genus and focusing on two areas that I am particularly interested in: Identifying individual clones of hybrid Black Poplar (*P. x canadensis*) and updating records of Native Black Poplar (*P. nigra* ssp. *betulifolia*) in Somerset.

I explained how I have made some progress with the characteristics of hybrid black poplars listed in Stace on a small sample of trees near to my home. However, monitoring the leafing dates for the trees has not yet been undertaken, and as this appears to be a key identification feature,

this will be carried out on a larger sample the following Spring.

My interest in native Black Poplars grew from coming across specimens when surveying electricity lines in the Taunton area. I began to list the ones that I found and following suggestions from friends, ended up with a personal list of over 200. Comparing my list with the BSBI database I realised that most of the records in the system were pre-2000 and that I may have found some previously unrecorded trees. I ended by showing some photographs of trees that had been lost during the winter of 2013/14 to illustrate the importance of recording the remaining mature specimens before they disappear.

## Exmoor Weekend (VC5)

**Saturday, Sunday 16th/17th August 2014**

**Leader & report: Steve Parker**

This was a two day meeting held jointly with BSBI members; the first day of the meeting was to shores of Wimbleball Lake. Visited by the SRPG in 2013 the site as such is relatively well recorded. Despite this we added recent records for Pond Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus peltatus*) the first record for the reservoir since 2003 and Intermediate Lady's-mantle (*Alchemilla xanthochlora*) a first record for the area since the publication of the Atlas Flora of Somerset (1997). The draw down zone is infested with New Zealand Pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*), however Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) is still managing to survive on the shore. On the second day the first visit was to Haddon Hill which is part of South Exmoor Site of Special Scientific Interest. The moorland was



**Bog Bilberry (*Vaccinium uliginosum*) on Haddon Hill**

©Helena Crouch



looking at it's best with Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) and Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*) in full flower. The mires on Haddon Hill are the only known location for Bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*) on Exmoor moorland. Other interesting species include Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum* subsp. *nigrum*) and Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), but the plant most people want to see was Bog Bilberry (*Vaccinium uliginosum*). This location is the most southerly site for Bog Bilberry in the British Isles. Close by is another surprising plant, the North American alien Blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), first found here in August 2006 by Jeanne and Tim Webb. The group also admired the large stand of Checkerberry (*Gaultheria procumbens*) which continues to spread through the moorland vegetation.

Our next site was Briggins Moor SSSI. This is a mire site with Saw-wort (*Serratula tinctoria*), Sneezewort (*Achillea ptarmica*), Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvatica*), Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*), Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*), and Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*). The site had been well grazed so much of the plant recording was mainly by means of vegetative identification. A new species for the site was Ivy-leaved Bellflower (*Wahlenbergia hederacea*). A most enjoyable weekend meeting that produced a long list of species for our Atlas 2020 records.

## Portishead (VC6)

**Sunday 7th September 2014**

**Leaders: Clive Lovatt & Liz McDonnell**

**Report: Clive Lovatt**

The combination of BNS botanists and Somerset Rare Plants Group members (and the promise of a day on the coast in delightful weather) gave us a good group of 15, including BSBI vice county recorders for all of Somerset and Gloucestershire. We started off with *Carex comans*, a brown-leaved sedge from New Zealand by a drain. It seems to jump out of dry gardens very quickly and occurs in several places around Portishead. We then explored the marsh and a large clump of another increasing plant, Sea purslane (*Atriplex portulacoides*) was found, apparently new to this marsh. Samphires (*Salicornia* species) drew our attention and with a good lens we could see they were flowering. They are a difficult group but

even to the previously uninitiated Long-spiked Glasswort (*Salicornia dolichostachya*) ['doli' for short] with its long dull grey-green 'branches' seemed distinct and easy to recognise at a glance. Mark Kitchen thought we had both Purple Glasswort (*S. ramosissima*) and Common Glasswort (*S. europaea*) but perhaps it was a bit early for the somewhat diagnostic colours to be properly developed.

Above the shingle near the Lido *Rumex crispus* ssp *littoreus* was pointed out. This type of Curled Dock has tubercles on all three valves and fleshy somewhat glaucous leaves, and is up to a metre high, with a flowering stalk almost hidden by the fruits. It occurs wherever there is shingle along the N. Somerset coast, although there are puzzling taller plants as well on the cliffs and upper saltmarshes.

Common Sea-lavender, (*Limonium vulgare*), is quite plentiful in the upper marsh but according to White (*Flora of Bristol* 1912) and Roe (*Flora of Somerset* 1981) it was no longer to be found at Portishead. When did it re-colonise? After lunch a Sea-lavender was found on the rocks of Portishead Point. Initially it was presumed to be Rock Sea-lavender which is recorded there in the *Flora of the Bristol Region* and which I noted down in 2002. However, on closer inspection there was some doubt and Helena Crouch and I now believe it is the Common Sea-lavender, out of its marsh habitat.



**Common Sea-lavender (*Limonium vulgare*) in an unusual rocky habitat Portishead Point ©Helena Crouch**

We then split into an urban group under Steve Parker and a more traditional band with Liz McDonnell and Helena Crouch, who recorded in

the woods. After meeting up for refreshment at the convenient cafe, four of us went on to look at the recently described *Sorbus richii* (see Helena Crouch's note further in the Newsletter). The type tree had already lost its leaves so we went for one Liz and I had noted a year ago, near the pier. We were worried to see the development of the RNL boathouse and landing stage, and to find construction vehicles parked a few yards away from the Whitebeam, but here the tree was still leafy and in reasonable fruit, so all went away satisfied.

## Porlock Weir (VC5)

**Saturday 20th September 2014**

**Leader & report: Steve Parker**

The aim of this meeting was to update the species list for Porlock Marsh. This part of Somerset has significantly changed following a storm in October 1996 which breached the Porlock shingle ridge. Gone are the neutral meadows, hedgerows and woodland to be replaced with an expanse of saltmarsh dominated by Sea-purslane (*Atriplex portulacoides*). The meeting produced a new VC5 record with Yellow Glasswort (*Salicornia fragilis*) which was recorded in two monads. Three other Glassworts were recorded in the marsh, the other species being Long-spiked Glasswort (*Salicornia dolichostachya*), Common Glasswort (*Salicornia europaea*), and Purple Glasswort (*Salicornia ramosissima*). There was much debate over which taxon of *Spartina* was present on the new marsh. The Atlas Flora of Somerset records *Spartina X townsendii* in small quantity on the mud-flats at Porlock Weir (SS84T and U). Due to the difficulty in identification, it was agreed that

samples for the marsh should be sent for determination by a national referee.

Lunch was taken on the higher ground by an old ruin, this old building is the location of Babington's Leek (*Allium ampeloprasum* var. *babingtonii*), which seems to be doing well. The SS8748 monad is mostly sea, with only a few square metres of shingle. This supports a total of 11 vascular plant species and is probably the monad with the smallest species list in Somerset. Returning to Porlock Weir village a range of non-native species were seen including Hairy Finger-grass (*Digitaria sanguinalis*) and Yellow Bristle-grass (*Setaria pumila*). A good meeting with a mix of new natives and alien species recorded.

## 'Square-bashing' near Bishop's Lydeard (VC5)

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2014**

**Leaders Simon Leach & Ian Salmon**

**Report by Simon Leach**

Eleven members met at Bishop's Lydeard station, then split into four recording groups, each group armed with maps and recording cards and a list of 'quartads' (½-km squares) to be covered during the day. Between us we drew up species lists for eleven previously under-recorded quartads in five 1-km squares, mainly in the area to the east and south of Bishop's Lydeard, towards Norton Camp and Cotford St Luke.

A little friendly competition never hurts, so there were prizes of chocolates for the most species recorded and – given this was the last week of October – a special prize for the most found in flower.

Ro Fitzgerald and Chris Loudon concentrated on three quartads within square ST1626, adding a total of 134 new species-records. They found several unusual species: perhaps the highlight of the day was their discovery of Slender Mugwort (*Artemisia biennis*) on the road verge between Norton Fitzwarren and Hillcommon – only the second recent record of this species in the Taunton area, and a real rarity in VC5. They also located two new western outliers for Round-leaved Crane's-bill (*Geranium rotundifolium*), a local species in and around Taunton but possibly spreading.

Helena Crouch, John Poigndestre and Ian Salmon



SRPG members walking back across the Sea Purslane-dominated saltmarsh ©Helena Crouch



worked intensively at two under-recorded quartads in square ST1930, in the vicinity of Cushuish and Fennington. They managed to add an impressive 178 new species-records (83 to one quartad, 95 to the other), including new localities for the locally scarce Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) and Wood Meadow-grass (*Poa nemoralis*).

Ellen McDouall, Kate Jefferies and Simon Leach looked at a couple of previously under-worked quartads in ST1928, plus one quartad in ST1927. They added 207 new species-records, including several surprisingly good stubble fields with Sharp-leaved Fluellen (*Kickxia elatine*) and, late in the day, a few plants of Thorn-apple (*Datura stramonium*) in a field border to the north of Higher Illbeare.

Two further quartads within square ST1927 were investigated by Liz McDonnell, Clive Lovatt and Graham Lavender, along with a badly under-recorded quartad in ST2027. The list for the last of these comprised just 27 species, but by the end of the day it had rocketed up to 141! They added a total of 219 new species-records across the three quartads, including Sharp-leaved Fluellen, Field Woundwort (*Stachys arvensis*) – a Rare Plant Register species – and the widespread (but badly under-recorded) hybrid dock *Rumex x pratensis*.

The records gathered add greatly to our knowledge of the distribution of species in the ‘north-west’ quarter of the area being mapped for the forthcoming Taunton Flora. We accumulated a grand total of 738 new species-records, each one a gap-filling ‘dot’ on a species distribution-map. At the start of the day most of the ½-km squares we visited had fewer than 50 species recorded; by tea-time all but one held in excess of 80 species, with six containing more than 100 species. An excellent effort, showing how much can be gained, even so late in the season, by splitting into small sub-groups and fanning out across the countryside – and a useful model, perhaps, for how our group could tackle some under-worked hectads for the next national Atlas.

We ended the day in the café on the station platform at Bishop’s Lydeard, drinking tea, exchanging lists, telling one another about our most exciting finds, and showing specimens of plants still to be identified. It was a happy ending to our last meeting of the year, although there

was enthusiastic talk of the possibility of another meeting being arranged between Christmas and New Year – maybe to Minehead on the steam train?

## Mid-winter in Minehead (VC5)

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> December 2014**

**Report by Simon Leach**

Eleven members, family and friends caught the 10.25 steam train from Bishop’s Lydeard to Minehead, where they were met on the station platform by Jeanne, Ro and Graham. This was the third of our (now annual) field meetings between Christmas and New Year. It was a cold, crisp day, with a biting wind, but many people were out enjoying the mid-winter sunshine. As we strolled along the seafront we got one or two quizzical looks, and several folk asked us what we were up to. It is easy to forget how strange we must appear, walking in directions that are rarely straight and staring intently at flower-beds, pavement cracks and garden walls – even peering *over* garden walls – and calling out strange and seemingly meaningless phrases like “Raph! Raph!” and “Ag! Stol!” while one particularly sad individual scrawls an undecipherable list in a little red and black notebook... How weird is *that*?

Anyway, weird or not, our aim for the day was to see how many species we could find in flower, while also doing some general recording in the 1km square around the old harbour. On the beach close to the station we saw lots of flowering Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*), as well as several shoots of Sea Couch (*Elytrigia atherica*) still in flower and patches of “Raph! Raph!” – Sea Radish (*Raphanus raphanistrum* subsp. *maritimus*).

We stopped for lunch in the shelter of the harbour wall, with the score on 37; perhaps the most exciting find of the morning had been a single tiny plant of flowering Navelwort (*Umbilicus rupestris*). After lunch we headed inland in search of street weeds. Minehead, it turns out, is a remarkably well tended place, its parks immaculate and its streets with far fewer ‘weeds’ than one would expect to find in, say, Taunton or Yeovil. But we did come across several slivers of waste ground, and one or two back-streets with weedy kerbs and pavements.

With just 15 minutes to go before we were due to all meet up for tea at the station cafe, we were still about ten short of our previous highest mid-winter total of 65, from two years ago when we visited the dunes at Dunster. Luckily, the verges of a footpath near the station car park proved especially productive, with Large Bindweed (*Calystegia silvatica*), Stone Parsley (*Sison amomum*) and Common Ramping-fumitory (*Fumaria muralis* subsp. *boraei*) amongst a flurry of late finds that brought the total to 64. Possibly the star plant of the day came with five minutes left, and just as the man with the notebook trod in something dog-related. No-one could put a name to it – the plant, that is – and so Clive and Steve took specimens away for later determination: it turned out to be Niger (*Guizottia abyssinica*), only the third record of it in VC5 in almost twenty years. We also found a bright yellow stem-gall on Annual Mercury (*Mercurialis annua*), which was probably caused by a rust, *Melampsora populnea* – the second record for VC5 of a species that usually galls Dog's Mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*) rather than Annual Mercury.

With Thale-cress (*Arabidopsis thaliana*) we surpassed our previous highest total, and by the time we reached the station café we had reached 67. The light was now failing, most of us had called 'time', but Ro dashed off to take a quick look at a few road verges, roundabouts and rough ground around the hospital. An excited email later the same evening reported a further 18 species, including such roadside delights as Fodder Burnet (*Poterium sanguisorba* subsp. *balnearicum*) and Prickly Oxtongue (*Helminthotheca echinoides*). Well done Ro! Our end-of-day total of 85 will be hard to beat...

Apart from the fun of finding things in flower, it is worth noting that our general recording for the day added 19 new species for the 'harbour' 1km square, and 11 new tetrad records – a pretty good effort for a mid-winter walk in one of the best recorded squares in the county. Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) and Sea Pearlwort (*Sagina maritima*) were both seemingly 'new' for Minehead – the first in flower, the second not. We debated whether or not the two little Thrift plants could have been 'native'; the consensus was that this species had probably been intro-

duced to gardens nearby, from where it had escaped and become self-sown. Our plants were, in any case, growing on the stony edge of a seafront flower-bed.

On the return trip botanising was out of the question, as it was dark, but that didn't stop us *talking* about botany – and eating more of Liz's excellent date slices. Somewhere between Crowcombe and Bishop's Lydeard the train ground to a halt as, like the rest of us, it had (quite literally) run out of steam. By six o'clock, when we got back to our cars, the temperature was already down to -2°C. It was destined to be, in Taunton at any rate, the coldest night of the year – a teeth-chattering end to a most enjoyable day.

## Botany Articles

### Boxing Day 2014 recording

Liz McDonnell

Ro FitzGerald and I had made a plan. We would meet to share a post-Christmas lunch, exchange presents and if the weather allowed, do a little winter plant hunting and count the number of species in flower. The weather did not look promising as I drove to Lillstock, but after a lovely meal and a chat around the woodburner we set off, when the drizzle had cleared, to Fairfield Estate where we had permission to survey land not usually open to the public. Soon after we got out of the car, we found new rosettes of Stone Parsley (*Sison amomum*) and one stunted damaged plant was still in flower. We made our way through the farmyard and across fields to the mixed woodland of Fairfield Plantation. The ground flora is species-poor and dominated by ivy with a few ferns including Male Fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*) and Broad Buckler-fern (*Dryopteris dilatata*), but at the edge of the wood, we found a large bush of Spurge-laurel (*Daphne laureola*) with a few florets already open. We walked back through the woods through extensive clumps of Snowdrops, some of which were already in bud. The cobbled kitchen garden was a good source of flowering plants – including Thale Cress (*Arabidopsis thaliana*),



Shepherd's-purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*), Petty Spurge (*Euphorbia peplus*), Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*), Field Forget-me-not (*Myosotis arvensis*) and Grey Field-speedwell (*Veronica polita*). As the afternoon light was fading, we found thousands of Parsley-piert (*Aphanes arvensis* agg.) seedlings on the gravel drive, but despite searching well, no flowering plants were found. Common Whitlowgrass (*Erophila verna*) and Sticky Mouse-ear (*Cerastium glomeratum*), both in flower, completed our recording afternoon. Overall, we had recorded 120 taxa, 22 of them in flower. Not a bad effort for an hour and a half in low light of a mid-winter's day.

## Somerset's last unexplored botanical wilderness?

### Graham Lavender

In the winter of 2013 I was casting around for what was to be my first full year of recording with SRPG. A purchase of *The Flora of Somerset* by R.G.B. Roe inspired me with his introduction in which he described the cliffs from Porlock to the Devon border as comprised of "inaccessible beaches" and further on he identifies Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) as "rare and only in a few spots on this stretch of coast". This was a challenge, and after a talk with Caroline Giddens (Exmoor Natural History Society and SRPG) it was clear that there was an under-recorded area on my doorstep.

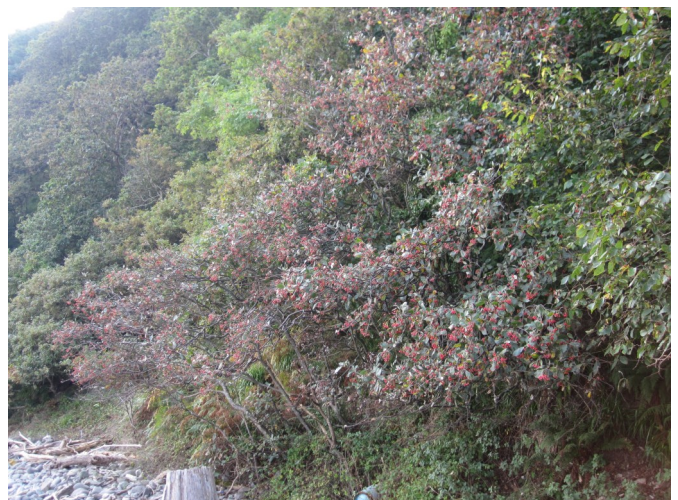
The beaches are indeed difficult but the real problem is the crumbling unstable cliffs which limit access to only the last few feet of cliff before the beach and even then I have seen one landslide and experienced a rain of rocks from deer high up on the cliffs. There are six complete monads of cliff along this stretch with a number of rocky outcrops which can only be passed at low tide, the first two monads were by comparison relatively easy, getting past Ivy Stone rock the biggest hurdle but this led to some of the best discoveries.

Waiting for low tide to pass The Ivy Stone, I noted some 30ft up a vetch but needed a closer look to identify it, climbing up and with some searching it was easily possible to identify Wood Vetch (*Vicia sylvatica*) in flower but the real surprise was looking back to find a way back down, on a bare rock invisible from the beach below, were

five plants of Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*). Rock Sea-spurrey was subsequently found in three other locations at up to 900 metres apart but all in the same monad.

A challenge next year is to locate it in other monads. Currently I have found Wood Vetch in three out of six monads, often in abundance. Sea spleenwort was found in all six monads, with up to sixty plants in some locations. Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) is extremely abundant here and there are two gulleys where Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) grows in excess of 100 specimens. This orchid is not uncommon in Somerset generally, but a rare plant on Exmoor. Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*) is unusually abundant here as, with Carlina thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*), it is rare on the acid soils of Exmoor. Both were found in two monads. Although I was focusing largely just on the bottom of the cliff face, one tree was accessible, a Whitebeam, later identified as *Sorbus margaretae* by Dr Hugh McAllister, Liverpool University. In September the red berries of Whitebeam are easy to spot high on the cliffs but almost impossible to reach.

Danish Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia danica*) is fairly common but Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*) is present in very small quantities in two monads. The Ivy Stone area has so far produced the most species, 139 within its monad, and just 89 for a monad past the Ivy Stone due to reduced accessibility. 2014 for me scratched the surface of this area and there must be more to find in 2015 I am certain.



*Sorbus margaretae* at the base of cliffs, west of Porlock Weir ©Graham Lavender

## Look out for those cameras – a cautionary tale!

**Liz McDonnell**

It was May Bank Holiday and Clive Lovatt and I had planned to do a whole day's plant recording, but where to go? It was sunny and warm, so coastal botany was far more attractive than 'square bashing' in ST34! With packed lunches, flasks of coffee and a field bag full of recording cards, ID books, lenses and the all-important GPS, we set off for Clevedon.

We soon reached the northbound M5 Sedgemoor Services and Clive was keen to stop and re-find some unusual plants that he had briefly seen before. While I stopped to have my first coffee of the day, Clive disappeared and before long had located Sea Pearlwort (*Sagina maritima*) and Soft Clover (*Trifolium striatum*) at the edge of the lorry park. He urged me to join him in further rare plant searches, so I got out a SRPG recording card and proceeded to make a list of all the plants that we found in this under-recorded 1km square, recording the most important species to 8-fig grid references.

We found Sea Pearlwort in three different locations, in bare trampled, muddy soil and lorry ruts. The tightly mown verges supported Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*), Small-flowered Buttercup (*Ranunculus parviflorus*) and Knotted Hedge-parsley (*Torilis nodosa*). We found Bee orchids (*Ophrys apifera*) on tightly rabbit-grazed grassland where the slip road enters the service station and several tall, leggy plants of Early Meadow-grass (*Poa infirma*) under trees at the edge of the car park. There was much of interest amongst the trees, around the buildings, car parks and in the species-rich grassland. By the time we had got back to the car to continue on our way to Clevedon, I realized that we had overstayed our free two-hour car parking time. However, I thought nothing of it, as I hadn't seen a car park attendant and had no idea that we were being monitored! It was not until a week later when I had letter from a car park management company with a parking fine of £100 that the penny finally dropped – we were photographed on the way in and again on the way out of the services and they sent me photos of my car to prove it! The parking charge was reduced to £60 on rapid payment, but although we

had recorded over 140 taxa including two Rare Plant Register species, it was a high cost for a few hours plant recording. So look out for those cameras – you are being watched!

## Collecting seed for the Millennium Seed Bank

**Liz McDonnell**

The Millennium Seed Bank, Kew was established in 2000 with the aim of collecting seed from plants worldwide for research and conservation. As a past collector of UK native seed for this project, I receive occasional lists of species that are still required for the UK collections. These include species that are as yet completely missing from their seed bank and those for which they have a very small or inadequate number of seeds in the collection. Soft Sedge (*Carex montana*) was a species that was missing from the seed bank and as we have a large population in Somerset it was one that I decided to collect in 2014.

On a SRPG field meeting at Yoxter Ranges in July 2013, I attempted to collect seed, but the optimum time for this had passed and nearly all the seed had fallen from the fruits. I calculated that a suitable collection date for the following year would be the first week of June. I contacted Kate Lawrence from Chancellor's Farm, Priddy who arranged permission from the MOD and a suitable day on which firing would not take place, so that we could safely access the site for several hours.

On a fine day on 2nd June, Kate and I packed up our collecting equipment – plastic containers, scissors, GPS and recording forms and walked up to the undulating terrain of the Yoxter Ranges to find locations where the Soft Sedge was abundant. There are thousands or even millions of plants covering large areas of firing range and we found that we had come at the optimum time for collecting the seeds, as they were fat and ripe, but were still attached to the seed head, so the complete head could be cut from the long slender stems without seeds falling into the grass. The fruiting heads of Soft Sedge have between 5 and 10 seeds each and as Kew's strict rules restrict collection of more than 20% of the viable seed available on the day of collection, it took many hours to attempt to comply with Kew's ideal minimum number of seeds. Of course at the





Liz collecting *Carex montana* seed at Yoxter Ranges, on the Mendip Hills ©Kate Lawrence

time, we had no idea of the exact number that we had collected, but we just continued to collect seed heads until drizzle stopped our activities. When I got home, I tipped the collected stems on to large sheets of newspaper and dried them overnight, before packing them up in calico bags together with their unique reference number and sending them by first class post to Wakehurst Place, Surrey. Here they were processed by their specialist staff - separated from the seed heads, cleaned, counted and then placed in the deep freeze seed bank to be stored at -2° for posterity. Kew informed me later that we had collected 6568 seeds of *Carex montana* on that day.

On 7th July I was parking my car in the local hardware shop car park and noticed that there were many large seeding plants of Wall Lettuce (*Mycelis muralis*) in the adjoining wasteland. I remembered that this was one of the plants in the seed bank with an inadequate collection, so I gathered as many plants as I could (remembering the 20% rule) and sent these off too for the collection. 2331 seeds of this species were added to the Millennium Seed Bank.

### **‘Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do...’**

**Ro FitzGerald**

We are all botanical detectives on occasion, searching for clues about why plants are where they are, or how they might have come to a location. Working on rare species in Ireland gave me a particularly strong belief in the importance of the human factor in plant distribution – the Irish flora is small but quirky, and can only be explained in terms of introductions from the time that the last ice left the Limerick Line until now.

Often we know plants are aliens, but their immediate origin may be obscure, or at best might be attributed to some general vector such as shoddy (formerly), railways, bird seed... It's rare to be able to record a clear story to account for an odd record.

In early October rumours were circulating about attractive shows of yellow composites at the new Steart Marshes wetland reserve. Obviously there has been considerable disturbance and earth movement on the site, and the most likely answer seemed to be that Corn Marigold (*Glebionis segetum*) known from the neutral soils near the R. Parrett, had been stirred up. I had been boycotting the reserve as I'm not a fan of Managed Retreat, and feared for the precious sub-maritime grassland species of the Steart peninsula, such as Bulbous Foxtail (*Alopecurus bulbosus*) and Slender Hare's-ear (*Bupleurum tenuissimum*), but this rumour sounded interesting, so I agreed to go with Liz to make a dutiful check-up. We stumbled on quite a strange saga, which could be revealed in detail thanks to the good filing system and helpful kindness of the reserve manager Tim McGrath, because what we found were well-established communities of real aliens – never a Corn Marigold among them – but Tim could tell us why they were there, and how long it was since their introduction. The most prominent species was Yellow Chamomile (*Anthemis tinctoria*), a substantial perennial long familiar in horticulture (the pale selections 'E.C.Buxton' and 'Sauce Hollandaise' are very popular). This was producing the lavish display of the big yellow daisies which had started the rumours. With this were the common ruderals Scented Mayweed (*Matricaria chamomilla*) and Scentless Mayweed (*Tripleurospermum inodorum*), but also a larger, more handsome white daisy. This got us quite revved up because it looked remarkably like the very rare arable weed Corn Chamomile (*Anthemis arvensis*). This barely has a Somerset distribution at all – 4 records only in the 1997 *Atlas Flora*, all casual appearances and none near Bridgwater – so appearing from a disturbed seed-bank seemed very unlikely, so its presence here would have been hard to explain. However, consultation with the Green twins (of course !) directed us to another alien daisy Austrian Chamomile (*Anthemis austriaca*). They are very similar,

but usefully can be distinguished by touch ! When the heads are ripening, the 'receptacular scales' of the Austrian species become stiff and prickly, easy to feel. This plant seems to be spreading in Britain, and Paul Green reports it as a grass-seed and road verge alien in Co Wexford.

These handsome plants were accompanied by a few relics of what we soon guessed must have been a 'wild flower' seed sowing (an odd Cornflower, a few plants of Purple Viper's-bugloss (*Echium plantagineum*) and a suspiciously huge variant of Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*). This ensemble made the seed-packet theory look plausible, but interestingly there was also abundant Corn Parsley (*Petroselinum segetum*). This is a perfectly respectable arable weed, always notable but quite characteristic of cultivated land on the coastal lias west of here, and seems likely to have come from a Steart seed-bank.

At this stage the story involved guesses and possibilities, but then Tim's files came into their own. There had been a sowing 'a few years ago' (probably three years) of the most exotic mixtures. 'Golden Summer' had included the Yellow Chamomile, though companions like Gaillardias and Sunflowers have not persisted, and ironically Corn Marigolds have also vanished. 'Contrasting Annuals', red, blue and yellow, are survived only by the one Cornflower, and sadly the Viper's-bugloss seems to be the only relic of 'Purple Glade'. I would love to have seen Spiked Speedwell (*Veronica spicata*) and Alpine Forget-me-not (*Myosotis alpestris*) flourishing at Steart!

The 'daisy' area is round the car park and toilets, on disturbed ground with almost no grass vegetation. At the time of our visit it had been dry, and there was plenty of bare earth. The Chamomiles are thoroughly well-established, and even if their origin is not botanically PC, it will be interesting to see what happens if the ground is left for say, another three years. Iconic flowers such as Snowdrops and Fritillaries are neophytes too, after all, so it's fun to speculate that Liz and I may have seen the early stages of a long story. I'd like to see the area left, an experiment in naturalisation of some very decorative flowers, which we saw attracting many butterflies and other insects to their nectar and pollen at a time in autumn when food sources are declining in the wider countryside.

There was nearly a sad footnote to our part in the story. I returned a few weeks later to collect a convincingly prickly head of *A. austriaca* to confirm the determination, to be told by Tim that a volunteer had just strimmed the area! Yes, tidiness beating down biodiversity! Yes, hacking down flowers on a nature reserve! Oh dear, oh dear... However, I'd phoned to say I was coming just in time so some of the area was uncut, and I can report that a December visit (for actual bird watching!) showed the daisy show to be holding its own with plants in bud, flower, and strong new growth, this vigour satisfyingly shared by the plentiful Corn Parsley.

In the days when many friends threw dried yarrow stalks daily to read the prognostications of the I Ching, there was a good reading which just said 'No Blame'. This is how I like to read stories of alien plant introductions. Of course, some can go bad, but others can enrich poor, disturbed habitat and benefit other creatures. I decided to write this story firstly because it interested and intrigued me, but also in case it is the first stage of a longer tale of Chamomiles in Somerset.

## Coastal Rare Plant Survey 2014

**Helena Crouch**

During the summer of 2014, an intensive survey of the flora of much of the coastline of the Bridgwater Bay SSSI and part of the Severn Estuary SSSI was undertaken. Although Helena Crouch and John Poingdestre were contracted by Natural England to carry out this survey, a huge contribution was also made voluntarily by members of SRPG. Liz McDonnell and Clive Lovatt took on recording of the coast from Clevedon to Portishead. Margaret Webster, Ian Salmon, Fred Rumsey, Gill Read, Liz McDonnell and Jennifer Crouch each accompanied Helena on different days as invaluable co-recorders. Other members of SRPG and also Bristol Naturalists' Society contributed records during coastal field meetings in 2014. During visits to Steep Holm and Stert Island, Steve Parker, Bob Corns and Colin Leppard of Natural England also assisted with recording.

The area surveyed included the Bridgwater Bay SSSI from Comwich around the estuaries of the Parrett and Brue and along the coast towards Brean Down, plus Stert Island, and that part of the Severn Estuary SSSI between Brean Down

and the mouth of the River Avon. This area encompasses six other SSSIs: Berrow Dunes, Brean Down, Ellenborough Park West, Middle Hope, Steep Holm and Uphill Cliff. Most of this stretch of coast was visited during 2014, with the exception of a few sites which had recently been well-recorded.

Populations of "rare" plants were recorded in detail, usually with 8-figure grid references. Rare plants are those included in the Somerset Rare Plant Register (RPR) or in the Vascular Plant Assemblage (VPA) of one of the SSSIs listed above. The output of the project for NE was a large spreadsheet, collating 1,825 recent records of rare plants; however in the course of the project, over 11,000 records were collected and added to our Somerset database and thence to the database of the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland. As a result, many coastal species are now well-recorded in Somerset and nine have been removed from the RPR as they have been found in more sites than qualify for inclusion.

An exciting part of the project was that permission was arranged for us to record in areas for which there is no public access. Every landowner we met was welcoming, some offered parking and one even phoned me to check we were alright because he heard a helicopter circling overhead. (We were fine!) A great many significant records were made: this report can only highlight a few.

Our first SRPG meeting of 2014 contributed several significant records to the survey. In particular, we found Spring Vetch (*Vicia lathyroides*), Bulbous Meadow-grass (*Poa bulbosa*) and Suffocated Clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*), making the first records for those species at Berrow Dunes since publication of the Atlas Flora of Somerset.

A species which was found in greater abundance than I ever imagined was Sea Clover (*Trifolium squamosum*). Prior to this survey, I had only seen it rarely and at one of the sites I knew, Walborough Saltmarsh, it has dwindled alarmingly; however Margaret and I will struggle to think of this as a rare plant now, after recording thousands of plants along the sea wall of the Banwell Estuary and finding a smart population of 50 plants in the car park at Hucker's Bow. The Axe Estuary is also home to a sizeable population which was dili-

gently recorded with Ian (W side) and Gill (E side). Gill and I even found some in the corner of an arable field by the sewage works carpark. Meanwhile John recorded this species at many sites around the Parrett Estuary. Although not Scarce in VC5 or VC6, *T. squamosum* is GB Scarce, so remains on the RPR. Another species which I now struggle to regard as a rare plant is Sea Wormwood (*Artemisia maritima*). Ian and I found it in abundance along the Axe Estuary, usually along the edges of low mud banks on the saltmarsh. Along the Yeo Estuary, Liz and I recorded swathes of it on the north side, Margaret and I found it scattered along the south side and Jenny and I recorded a luxuriant patch on the stonework of the sea wall at the mouth of the estuary. These are mostly sites to which there is currently no public access.

One species which appears to have declined in VC6 is Sea Barley (*Hordeum marinum*). North of the River Brue, Ian and I discovered a small population in the Axe Estuary, with a few plants on the Brean Cross Sluice; I also found a small patch at Uphill. We found none on the sea walls and saltmarshes of Woodspring Bay and at Portbury Docks, where once it was found in several locations, there appeared to be no suitable habitat at all. Around the estuary of the Parrett, however, John made many records for this species: The Bridgwater Bay SSSI appears to be its stronghold in Somerset.

I made four visits to Brean Down, which was really not enough. One of my most exciting records of the year was the rediscovery, with Fred, of Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) on the north side of Brean Down. It was last seen on Brean Down in 1894. We found three plants in one spot: there may be other sites further west, but I worried about the tide, so we scaled the north side of Brean Down, through horrid brambles. We made a similar visit at low tide to the south side of Brean Down to find Goldilocks Aster (*Aster linosyris*), which is thriving on inaccessible ledges. The population appears to be stable, at about 500 flowering spikes. Again it seemed more prudent to scale the side of Brean Down than to return across slippery rocks racing an incoming tide!

On another visit to Brean Down, Fred and I found Rock Sea-lavender (*Limonium procerum* subsp.



*procerum*) near the fort, where it was last recorded in 1989. We also discovered massive populations of Sea Stork's-bill (*Erodium maritimum*) around the fort and the barracks: this species has now been recorded in enough sites to drop off the RPR. At the point of Brean Down, we recorded Sea Pearlwort (*Sagina maritima*), which a year ago had only one recent record for VC6 and was considered Scarce. Clive took this species to heart last year and, together with Liz, he made so many new records in 2014 that we have been able to drop this species from the RPR as well.

Liz and I spent a long (mostly wet) day on Steep Holm, recording all day, meeting up periodically with Steve and Colin who were making an assessment of the SSSI. For me, the highlight was Golden-samphire (*Inula crithmoides*), which we were pleased to find at both its known sites. We made many good records, as did Clive when he visited earlier in the year with Bristol Naturalists' Society. Ian and I also had an adventurous trip to Stert Island, walking out across the mudflats at low tide with Steve and Bob, but we only had time to make a few rare plant records before the tide



Helena and *Inula crithmoides* at Searchlight Post, Steephelm ©Liz McDonnell

turned. We hope to return one day ... by boat! One of our best records was for Beaked Tasselweed (*Ruppia maritima*), which Ian and I discovered in abundance in two pools near Burnham-on-Sea sewage works. This was the first record for VC6 since 1991 and a new hectad record. In Somerset this species is restricted to a few coastal sites around the Bridgwater Bay SSSI. Meanwhile, south of the Brue Estuary, John

found Rootless Duckweed (*Wolffia arrhiza*) in two pools. This species is included on the citation sheet and in the VPA of the Bridgwater Bay SSSI, yet these were the first records for the area since publication of the Atlas Flora of Somerset and appear to be new sites.

The news of coastal rare plants is not all positive. At Steart we failed to find the single plant of Marsh-mallow (*Althaea officinalis*), last recorded in 2012. It was noted then that it was in danger of being swamped by reeds: that appears to have happened. This species is perhaps now extinct in VC5. Steve and Bob spent a gruelling few hours searching the reedbed at Berrow for Somerset Rush (*Juncus subulatus*), last seen in 1997, with no success. The habitat has changed from a brackish marsh to a reedbed and that species may now be extinct in Somerset. We also failed to find any plants of Sharp Rush (*Juncus acutus*) at Berrow Dunes despite several searches; it was last seen in 2009 and is now feared lost. Some other species we failed to find may simply have been overlooked: many more SRPG trips to the seaside are definitely essential!

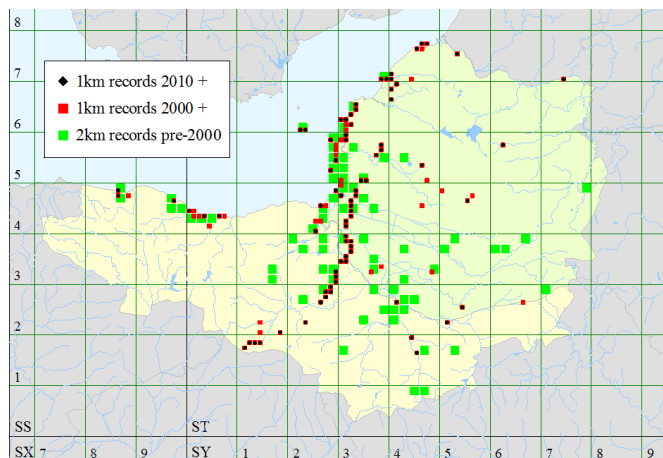
## The recent spread of Tree-mallow (*Malva arborea*) along major trunk roads in Somerset

**Simon Leach**

In 2014 several SRPG members began to notice an abundance of Tree-mallow (*Malva arborea*) along parts of the M5. Between September and December 2014 I had to make several trips up and down the M5 and along the A303 and several other trunk roads in Somerset, so thought I'd have a go at mapping the mallow's whereabouts at 1km-square resolution. As my journeys also took me as far as Plymouth, Kendal, Newcastle, Marlborough and Reading, I was also able to check out the motorway network more widely, to get a feel for the extent that Tree-mallow may be spreading elsewhere.

All Somerset records of Tree-mallow on Map-Mate (as at 9<sup>th</sup> February 2015) are shown in the attached map (see over). You can clearly see the route of the M5 by its 'ribbon' of red-and-black dots. I located the species in a total of 38 1km squares on the M5; while eleven (29%) of these lay within tetrads with previous (pre-2000) records, 27 (71%) occurred in 18 new tetrads. Even

the shortest journey along this motorway now seems to be enlivened by the sight of Tree-mallows! In contrast, the species is (so far) much less in evidence along the A303, with just three 1km squares recorded, all of them in new tetrads.



**Distribution of Tree Mallow (*Malva arborea*) in Somerset from MapMate, January 2015 ©Simon Leach**

It is worth comparing the plant's current 1km-resolution distribution in the county – the red and black dots in the above map – with its pre-2000 (i.e. Atlas Flora of Somerset) tetrad distribution – the green squares. The spread of Tree-mallow along the M5, in particular, seems to be a new phenomenon, but there is a wide scatter of old inland tetrad records away from the M5 for which post-2000 records are currently lacking.

Could it still occur in some of these tetrads? One suspects that it may have been lost from many: as Green *et al.* (Atlas Flora of Somerset) pointed out, its "inland records are usually casuals that persist for just a few seasons". It will be interesting to see whether this holds true with respect to the M5 records; many of these refer to isolated singletons, but some, especially those between junctions 22 and 25, now consist of 'crowds' of a dozen or more plants.

Beyond Somerset, I have seen Tree-mallow in Devon in 16 places on the M5, and at two locations on the A38 between the M5 and Haldon Hill. Northwards, in Gloucestershire, it occurs very sparsely along the M5 (about six locations noted so far); but it seems to peter out to the north of Tewksbury, with no sightings, for instance, on the M42 around Birmingham, and only a couple of plants seen between Birmingham and the Gloucestershire border. Likewise, I have seen

just a handful of plants on the M4. So at the moment, its motorway occurrences seem to be something of a Somerset-Devon speciality.

Andrew Malloch (in *Scarce Plants* 1994) noted that the Tree-mallow's coastal and mainly south-westerly distribution is connected to its extreme sensitivity to frost. A temperature of -5°C for just three hours is sufficient to kill – not damage, but *kill* – even well-established, mature plants. He also pointed out that germination and seedling establishment requires open, *moist* conditions and (perhaps surprisingly) relatively *low* levels of soil salinity. This suggests that many inland colonies spotted in 2014 may have only become established thanks to the unusually mild (and wet) autumn, winter and spring of 2013-14 – with relatively little use of de-icing salt – and then another record-breaking warm autumn and early winter 2014-15. It will be interesting to see if these inland populations manage to survive the occasional hard frosts of recent weeks.

## Little Laughs

### Ro FitzGerald

We all enjoy our botany, have cheerful and chatty times when we're together, and can calmly shrug off outside jibes about photos with nothing but bottoms, but really funny moments are perhaps rarer.

Liz and I have been poking about in our botanical memory banks, and looking for precious stories as well as physical archive material such as photographs – all things which can so easily be lost. I'd like to offer an annual Prize for a truly comic story from the botany year (or past years) – cheering notes to add to website or Newsletter.

One from my trivia-packed mind:

Myself, searching the new banks round the Morrisons monster depot in Bridgwater and holding a bunch of dreary chenopods to identify, being questioned by East European workmen changing shift about *WHAT* I was doing! Recording a 1km grid square seemed impossible to explain, given language difficulties, so smiling wildly I tried to mime 'collecting food for my tame rabbit'. Standing knee deep in weeds, with my fingers stuck up like ears, and jaws busily nibbling on nothing, I think I made their day, though I blush to remember!

# 2014 Plant Records

## Compiled by Helena Crouch

Thank you to everyone who has contributed records for this list, and indeed to all who have made any records this year, whether they appear here or not. Every record is valuable and there have been far more interesting records this year than can be listed here. As usual, most new Somerset/Vice-County records in 2014 were for alien species; however there are a few native taxa new to each VC. In addition, there have been some other very significant records made for Rare Plant Register (RPR) species, some of which are listed in the third section; several of these were feared to be lost from one VC or indeed Somerset. All records below are for 2014 unless otherwise stated. Those marked with an asterisk are neophytes (recent introductions). Recorders and referees whose names appear more than once have been abbreviated as follows:

BNS	Bristol Naturalists' Society
SRPG	Somerset Rare Plants Group
HJC	Helena Crouch
RFitzG	Ro FitzGerald
DG	Dave Gibbs
IPG	Ian Green
PRG	Paul Green
SJL	Simon Leach
CML	Clive Lovatt
DJMcC	David McCosh
EJMcD	Liz McDonnell
CM	Chris Metherell
SJP	Steve Parker
JP	John Poingdestre
TCGR	Tim Rich
FJR	Fred Rumsey
IS	Ian Salmon
MAW	Margaret Webster

Reference is made to the most recent floras for our area; these are abbreviated as follows:

Green, I.P., Higgins, R.J., Kitchen, C. & Kitchen, M.A.R. (2000). *The Flora of the Bristol Region*. Newbury: Pisces Press: *FBR*

Green, P.R., Green, I.P. & Crouch, G.A. (1997). *The Atlas Flora of Somerset*. Wayford and Yeovil: privately published: *AFS*

## NEW SOMERSET RECORDS

\* *Agrostis castellana* (Highland Bent) – Walton-in-Gordano (ST424741), 20 Jun, on roadside verge, CML & EJMcD (conf. Tom Cope), VC6.

*Calystegia sepium* subsp. *roseata* – Tarr's Farm (ST313548), 14 Sep, lots in roadside hedge just west of Tarr's Farm (also in at least one other location in the monad), PRG; Wick Road (ST319544), 20 Sep, large patch clambering up hedgerow on S side of road, at bend in road, HJC & FJR, both VC6.

\* *Dryopteris cycadina* (Shaggy Wood-fern) – Dulcote (ST56154445), 5 Dec, one mature plant in scrub on E side of junction between cycle route and lane, to S of A371, HJC & FJR, VC6.

\* *Dryopteris erythrosora* (Japanese Shield-fern) – Dulcote (ST56164445), 5 Dec, one plant in scrub by fence alongside cycle route, just S of bridge under A371, HJC & FJR, VC6.

\* *Dryopteris remota* (Scaly Buckler-fern) – Dulcote (ST56154445), 5 Dec, one mature plant in scrub on E side of junction between cycle route and lane, to S of A371, HJC & FJR, VC6. Growing with *Dryopteris cycadina* and therefore believed to be a garden escape. First record for England.

\* *Inula hookeri* (Hooker's Fleabane) – Westbury Quarry (ST505503), 15 Jul, large patch on pile of spoil near site office, HJC & MAW, VC6.

\* *Limonium platyphyllum* (Statice) – Street (ST48163702), 6 Jul, one plant at S edge of central reservation of A39 just E of traffic lights, HJC (conf. FJR), VC6.

\* *Pittosporum crassifolium* (Karo) – Shepton Beauchamp (ST40251725), 7 May, small plant between base of wall and pavement, JP, VC5.

*Sorbus richii* (Rich's Whitebeam) – see Plant Note (on page 28 below).

\* *Symphytum x hidcotense* 'Hidcote Pink' – Has-sage (ST75815609), 16 May, large patch at side of track, just S of Hassage Wood, HJC & FJR, VC6.

\* *Viburnum plicatum* (Japanese Snowball-bush) – Nunney Combe (ST7346), 23 Apr, one mature plant beside stream, HJC & Gillian H. Read, VC6.



## NEW VICE-COUNTY RECORDS

***Atriplex* x *gustafssoniana*** (*A. longipes* x *prostrata*) – Sand Bay (ST33046577), 14 Sep, several plants with both parents, PRG, VC6.

***Catapodium rigidum*** subsp. ***majus*** (Fern-grass) – Taunton (ST234241 to ST236242), 22 and 23 May, in pavement and along wall bases on N side of Holway Avenue; (ST236243), 22 May, South Street, by junction with Trinity Road, SJL, all VC5. Known from Holway Avenue for at least the last eight years, but only determined as this subspecies in 2014.

\* ***Nassella tenuissima*** (Argentine Needle-grass) – Minehead (SS97424637), 28 Dec, cracks in pavement close to railway station, CML & SRPG, VC5.

***Oenothera* x *fallax*** (*O. glazioviana* x *biennis*) – Keyford Roundabout (ST554139), 12 Nov, east road bank and by pub, IPG, VC5.

***Prunella* x *intermedia*** (*P. laciniata* x *vulgaris*) – Cadbury Castle (ST62972506, ST62972507, ST62982505 - ST62992506), 10 May, 15 plants on ramparts of castle, SRPG (spotted by Ellen McDouall and conf. in flower on 7 Jul by SJL when further colonies were found nearby, at least 50 plants in all); also in neighbouring monad (ST63592518), 10 May, a few plants, SRPG, VC5.

***Salicornia fragilis*** (Yellow Glasswort) – Porlock Marsh (SS8847479) and West Porlock (SS87894749), 20 Sep, on saltmarsh, SRPG (det. FJR), VC5.

## OTHER INTERESTING RECORDS

***Althaea officinalis*** (Marsh-mallow) – Woodspring Bay (ST38686970), 18 Jul, one plant with seven flowering stems, with *Oenanthe crocata*, at back of narrow strip of saltmarsh, CML & EJMCD, VC6. New site for Nationally Scarce plant.

\* ***Anthemis tinctoria*** (Yellow Chamomile) – Rhode Lane, Durleigh (ST26973521), 13 Oct, large well-established clump on grassy road verge away from houses, RFitzG, VC5. Fifth record for VC5 and first since AFS.

\* ***Artemisia biennis*** (Slender Mugwort) – B3227 E of Hillcommon (ST1626), 26 Oct, in gutter on S side of road, RFitzG & Christine Loudon, VC5. Fifth record for VC5 and second since AFS.



Marsh-mallow (*Althaea officinalis*) at Woodspring Bay  
©Liz McDonnell

***Arum italicum* x *maculatum*** – Portishead (ST44107589), 5 May, a clump between pavement and garden in Hillside Road, CML & EJMCD, VC6. Second record for VC6 and fourth for Somerset.

***Asplenium marinum*** (Sea Spleenwort) – Brean Down (ST29815897), 11 Jul, three plants in crevices high on W-facing cliff above slipped bedding planes, on N side of Brean Down, HJC & FJR, VC6. First record for Brean Down and hectad since before 1912.

***Atriplex longipes*** (Long-stalked Orache) – Sand Bay (ST33046577), 14 Sep, one amongst vegetation on saltmarsh, PRG, VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since FBR/AFS.

\* ***Bidens frondosa*** (Beggarticks) – Avon Towpath (ST548754), 24 Jul, one plant beside the towpath 100m beyond river light, CML, VC6. Second record for VC6.

***Callitriche brutia*** (Pedunculate Water-starwort) – Yoxter Ranges (ST53035385), 2 Jun, in unfenced pond, EJMCD, VC6. Second record for VC6.

***Camelina sativa*** (Gold-of-pleasure) – near Seavington St Michael (ST41501443), 23 Jul, on margin of flax field, JP (conf. TCGR), VC5, fourth record for VC5 and first since 1938; Pawlett (ST30294249), 23 Aug, one plant in flower/fruit

beneath hedge on W side of A38, JP (conf. TCGR), VC6. Second post-2000 record for VC6.

\* *Carex comans* (New Zealand Hair-sedge) – Portishead (ST46237700), 7 Sep, one plant at edge of road beside a drain, self-seeded from adjacent garden, BNS & SRPG, VC6. Third record for VC6 and Somerset.

*Catapodium rigidum* subsp. *majus* (Fern-grass) – Burnham-on-Sea (ST3049), 5 Apr, PRG, CML & EJMCD; Anchor Head, Weston-super-Mare (ST30966227), 13 Apr, two plants in pavement and edge of municipal park, CML & EJMCD; Weston-super-Mare (ST32326196, ST32496166), 7 May, many large plants in pavement cracks, EJMCD, all VC6. Third and subsequent records for VC6.

*Centunculus minimus* (Chaffweed) – Walton-in-Gordano (ST42167394 and ST42217396), 21 Jun, many tiny plants in small flushes to the east and west (respectively) of footpath to the sea, SRPG & BNS (spotted by Mark A.R. Kitchen), VC6. First record for VC6 since 1951 and first for Somerset since AFS.

\* *Cotoneaster lacteus* (Late Cotoneaster) – Radstock (ST6954), 23 Aug, one shrub in fruit on disused railway sidings, DG, VC6. Second record for VC6.

\* *Cyrtomium fortunei* (Fortune's Holly-fern) – Rode (ST80535394), 8 Mar, one plant down a drain in Nutts Lane, on W side of lane, HJC & Jim Crouch (conf. FJR); Portishead (ST4776), Apr, one plant on harbour wall, W side of marina, CML; Portishead (ST445759 and ST445760), 5 May, two small plants self-sown beside footpath steps in Kingsway, CML & EJMCD, VC6. Third, fourth and fifth records for VC6 and Somerset.

\* *Echinochloa esculenta* (Japanese Millet) – Walton-in-Gordano (ST42697431), 24 Aug, one plant in waste ground, perhaps from bird seed, CML & EJMCD, VC6. First record for VC6 since 1984.

\* *Echium pininana* (Giant Viper's-bugloss) – M5 Junction 20, Clevedon (ST407704), 27 Nov, a single plant on W side of central reservation opposite start of exit slip road, SJL, VC6. Second record for VC6.

*Epilobium* x *floridulum* (*E. parviflorum* x *ciliatum*) – Manor Farm, Langridge (ST74046995), 19 Jun, two plants in arable field with both parents,

SRPG, VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since AFS.

*Epilobium* x *limosum* (*E. parviflorum* x *montanum*) – Woodhill Bay, Portishead (ST46267707), 7 Sep, one plant growing from wall of esplanade, BNS & SRPG, VC6. First record for VC6 since AFS.

*Euphrasia officinalis* subsp. *anglica* x *arctica* – Ashcott Plot (ST44183911, ST44213908), 29 Aug, in grazed grassland just inside gate and several tall plants in species-rich hay meadow to E, HJC & FJR (conf. CM, specimen in Herb HJC), VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since 1956.

*Euphrasia arctica* x *nemorosa* – Stockhill (ST553509), 4 Jul 2012, many plants beside broad forest ride, HJC (det. CM, specimen in Herb HJC); Manor Farm, Langridge (ST73877007), 19 Jun, FJR, VC6. First and second records for VC6 and Somerset since 1912.

*Gentianella anglica* (Early Gentian) – Thurlbear Quarrylands (ST2720), 6 Jun 2006, Keith Gould, VC5. First record for VC5 and Somerset since 1999. [Record submitted following the statement in last year's report that the 2013 record from Hatch Hill (VC6) was the "first ... for Somerset since 1999". The Hatch Hill record was the first for VC6 since 1998 and the first for Somerset since 2006.]

\* *Guizotia abyssinica* (Niger) – Minehead (SS97664615), 28 Dec, one plant in small area of rough ground on industrial estate, SRPG (det. CML), VC5. Fifth record for VC5.

\* *Heuchera sanguinea* (Coralbells) – Redhill (ST513639), 21 May, one clump naturalised on top of wall in Kingdown Road opposite the Bungalow Inn, MAW, VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since AFS.

*Hieracium prominentidens* (Large-toothed Hawkweed) – Radstock (ST69075468), 23 Aug, growing in an open site on disused railway sidings, DG (conf. DJMcC, specimen in Herb. HJC), VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since 1955, but tragically the site is now being developed.

*Hieracium vagum* (Glabrous-headed Hawkweed) – Midsomer Norton (ST66975426), 6 Sep 2011, frequent on summit of coal spoil tip, HJC (det. DJMcC, specimen in Herb. HJC); Midsomer Enterprise Park (ST672547), 25 Aug 2012, on steep

bank at edge of waste ground beside industrial estate, HJC, VC6. First records for VC6 and Somerset since 1991.

***Hyoscyamus niger*** (Henbane) – Williton (ST0740), 10 Sept 2013, on roadside, RFitzG, VC5. Third record for VC5 since *AFS* and a new locality for this Vulnerable species.

\* ***Iris latifolia*** (English Iris) – Sand Bay (ST332649), 19 Apr, single plant in flower, DG, VC6. Second record for VC6 and first since *AFS*.

\* ***Malva x clementii*** (Garden Tree-mallow) – Berrow Dunes (ST29395407), 5 Aug, one plant at edge of grassland beside road to beach, HJC & IS, VC6. Fourth record for VC6 and first since *AFS*. (Previously recorded as *Lavatera thuringiaca*, but the taxon is now resolved as this hybrid: *Malva olbia x thuringiaca*).

\* ***Mauranthemum paludosum*** (Annual Marguerite) – South Cadbury (ST63232561), 10 May, one plant growing in road at base of wall of The Camelot pub, SRPG, VC5. Second record for VC5.

\* ***Narcissus x medioluteus*** (*N. poeticus x tazetta*) – Sand Bay (ST330638), 19 Apr, DG, VC6. Third record for VC6 and first since *AFS*.

***Oenanthe fistulosa*** (Tubular Water-dropwort) – Pawlett Hams (ST27524276), 2 Jul, at edges of wide rhyne for about 10m, JP, VC6. New to Pawlett Hams and a new hectad record for this Vulnerable species.

***Orobanche elatior*** (Knapweed Broomrape) – Manor Farm, Langridge (ST73807011), 19 Jun, one flowering spike parasitic on *Centaurea nigra*, SRPG, VC6. First record for the Bath area since 1941.

\* ***Persicaria capitata*** (Pink-headed Persicaria) – Mill Lane, Wedmore (ST4447), 6 Jul, self-seeded from hanging basket, EJMCD; Highbridge (ST31804750), 28 Aug, two plants between base of wall and pavement, JP, VC6. Fourth and fifth records for VC6.

***Poa infirma*** (Early Meadow-grass) – Bagley Green, near Wellington (ST123196), 16 Mar, small patch on roadside, SJP, VC5. Third locality, and first inland record, for VC5.

***Polygonum oxyspermum*** subsp. *raii* – Sand Bay (ST32886342), 27 Jun, one smart plant at top of

beach, HJC & FJR, VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since 1998.

***Polygonum rurivagum*** (Cornfield Knotgrass) – Thornfalcon (ST288229, ST288231), 25 Jun, several plants in barley field on N side of road, scattered along edge of ploughed/cultivated area, SJL, VC5. First records for VC5 since *AFS*.

***Potamogeton obtusifolius*** (Blunt-leaved Pondweed) – Garstone Lane, Merriott (ST4413), 29 Aug, JP, VC5. Fifth site for VC5 and first record for VC5 since 2003. Also Decoy Lake and Noah's Lake, Shapwick Heath (ST4239, ST4339, ST4240, ST4340), 26 Sep, in several sites within these lakes, HJC & SJP, VC6. This species was reported as new to VC6 when found by James McGill at Ham Wall in 2010, but was actually first found at Ham Wall in 2007 by James Cadbury & Sally Mills and was also recorded at Ham Walls by Mark Gurney in 2008. This year's records add four new monads and a new hectad to the known distribution of this rare pondweed in VC6.

\* ***Prunella laciniata*** (Cut-leaved Selfheal) – Manor Farm, Langridge (ST73257003, ST73267003), 19 Jun, six plants in glorious grassland on S-facing slope, SRPG, VC6. A new site and hectad record for this RPR species, first found by Donald MacIntyre in 2000.

***Prunella x intermedia*** (*P. laciniata x vulgaris*) – Manor Farm, Langridge (ST73257003, ST73277004) 19 Jun, five plants in glorious grassland on S-facing slope, SRPG, VC6. A new site and hectad record for this RPR hybrid.

\* ***Rostraria cristata*** (Mediterranean Hair-grass) – Royal Portbury Docks (ST50227811), 10 Sep, several plants in gravel under a lorry in a vehicle parking lot at the docks, HJC, VC6. First record for VC6 and Somerset since 1930.

***Rubus ulmifolius x vestitus*** – Leigh Woods and Towpath (ST54737587), 16 Sep 2012, beside towpath, BNS (det. CML); Walton-in-Gordano (ST42167415), 24 Aug, on sea cliffs below Gorse, CML & EJMCD, VC6. First and second records for VC6 and Somerset since *FBR*.

***Ruppia maritima*** (Beaked Tasselweed) – Burnham-on-Sea (ST308475, ST309474), 5 Sep, abundant in brackish pools between Brue Pill and the sea wall, HJC & IS, VC6. First record for VC6 since 1991 and a new hectad record.



\* ***Senecio inaequidens*** (Narrow-leaved Ragwort) – Taunton (ST240254), Aug, on central reservation of the Toneway, SJL; Yeovil (ST5516), 7 Nov, one on edge of pavement in Sidney Gardens, PRG, VC5. Second and third records for VC5.

\* ***Solanum rostratum*** (Buffalo-bur) – Norton Fitzwarren (ST204260), 3 Sep 2009, Disturbed ground by new roundabout, growing with native ruderals and Himalayan Balsam, Frances Waddy; Chilton Trinity (ST301391), 5 Aug, in pasture on former brickworks site, restored many years ago, where a patch of ground was recently disturbed, John Andrews, VC5. Third and fourth records for VC5 and first for Somerset since AFS.

\* ***Stratiotes aloides*** (Water-soldier) – Bower Hinton (ST453170), 4 May, in farm pond, origin unknown, JP. VC5. Third record for VC5.

***Symphytum tuberosum*** (Tuberous Comfrey) – Camp Hill (ST52571455), 7 Jun, a single six square-metre patch beneath alders in SE corner of Rookery Copse, JP, VC5. Third record for VC5, all of them since AFS.

***Taraxacum cordatum*** (Entire-lobed Dandelion) – Yeovil (ST55071642), 6 May 2013, garden weed, PRG (det. A.J. Richards), VC5. First record for VC5 since 1978.

***Trifolium squamosum*** (Sea Clover) – Hucker's Bow (ST34756615), 13 Jun, c. 50 plants at SE end of NT car park, in seasonally damp area, HJC & MAW, VC6. New site for a Nationally Scarce species and first record for this monad.

***Typha* x *glaucia*** (*T. angustifolia* x *latifolia*) – Long Run Meadow (ST21272518), 18 Sep 2013, small stand in seasonal pond, SJP & SJL, VC5. Second locality for VC5.

***Viola canina*** subsp. ***canina*** (Heath Dog-violet) – near Hardington Marsh (ST51390943, ST51390940), 14 May, three plants in flower in species-rich meadow, HJC & IPG, VC5. First record for VC5 since AFS.

\* ***Yucca gloriosa*** (Spanish-dagger) – Midsomer Norton (ST67245487), 13 Mar, one large plant beside stile into field, at end of service road of Midsomer Enterprise Park, HJC & MAW, VC6. Second record for VC6 and Somerset.

## Plant Notes

### Helena Crouch

#### ***Sorbus richii* L. Houston (Rich's Whitebeam) – a new species for Somerset**

A new species has been added to the Somerset Rare Plant Register master list, following the description of six new species of Whitebeam by Rich *et al.* (2014). *Sorbus richii* (Rich's Whitebeam, named after Tim Rich) is endemic to North Somerset (VC6) and has been recorded from five localities along the coastline between Portishead and Clevedon. After the meeting at Woodhill Bay in September, some members of SRPG and Bristol Naturalists' Society were taken to admire the type specimen by Fisherman's Steps, Kilkeny Bay and another tree near the pier.

*Sorbus richii* is tetraploid and is distinguished by its large, unlobed, obovate, more or less uniserrate leaves and dark red, broad fruits. It is considered to be Endangered and is Scarce in VC6. For further details see Rich *et al.* (2014).

#### Reference:

Rich, T.C.G., Green, D., Houston, L., Lepší, M., Ludwig, S. & Pellicer, J. (2014). British *Sorbus* (Rosaceae): six new species, two hybrids and a new subgenus. *New Journal of Botany* **4**: 2-12.

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