

Dumfriesshire Botany at Springkell Sunday 16 June 2024

Seven of the group met at Burnfoot with kind permission to survey the Springkell Estate grounds from Rachel Johnson-Ferguson. A route had been discussed with Rachel before the visit and we stuck to that route as closely as possible which avoided taking us close to the main house but gave access to grasslands, wetlands and woodlands. This allowed us to visit three monads on the estate each of which had either no records or one record only previously. The hope was that a relatively unchanged landscape of this antiquity would have some botanical riches. The original house was built in 1734 and the estate has been in the Johnson-Ferguson family since 1893. The weather was fine though overcast in the morning but deteriorated in the afternoon with rain becoming persistent and the party becoming very wet!

Our first route took us through the open field south of the main house to the East Avenue. Here we saw a typical semi improved grassland with a mix of grasses fully in flower including the following : **Sweet Vernal-grass** *Anthoxanthum odoratum* **Crested Dogs-tail** *Cynosurus cristatus*; **Meadow Foxtail** *Alopecurus pratensis*; **False Oat-grass** *Arrhenatherum elatius* and **Smooth Meadow-grass** *Poa pratensis*. A few other herbs were present including **Hairy Sedge** *Carex hirsuta* and **Meadow Buttercup** *Ranunculus acris*. On the Avenue a woodland edge flora was evident. The **Wood-sedge** *Carex sylvatica*, **Great Wood-rush** *Luzula sylvatica*, **Hairy Wood-rush** *Luzula pilosa*, **Giant Fescue** *Schedonorus giganteus* and **Wood Cranes-bill** *Geranium sylvaticum* were here with **Red Campion** *Silene dioica* and **Blaeberry** *Vaccinium myrtillus* perhaps indicating



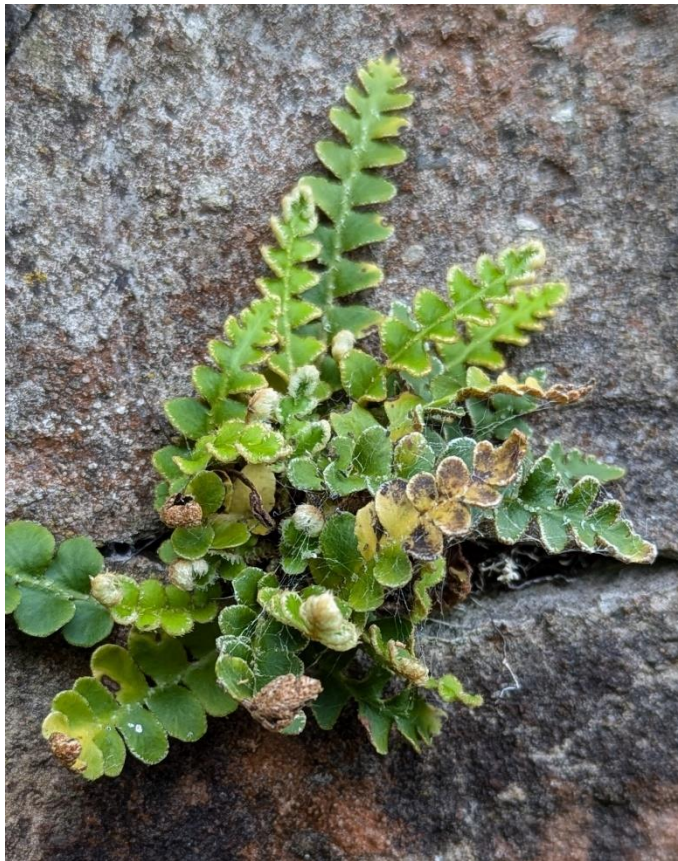
Broad-leaved Helleborine Springkell

former heathy condition. The best find here though were numerous plants of **Broad-leaved Helleborine** *Epipactis helleborine*. This was also seen later on the North Avenue and at present is the best known population of this species in Dumfriesshire. The plants were not quite in flower and are easy to miss given the shady habitat and their general green colouration.

From the East Avenue we followed the rough path to the recently restored ponds in the NE corner of the Estate. We passed through some fine old **Beech** *Fagus sylvatica* behind an old Ha Ha and younger broadleaved woodland predominantly of

Downy Birch *Betula pubescens* with much **Broad-Buckler-fern** *Dryopteris dilatata* and rather less **Golden-scaled Male-fern** *Dryopteris affinis*. Near the ponds the wetter ground has greater diversity with **Bugle** *Ajuga reptans*, **Wild Angelica** *Angelica sylvestris*, **Marsh Thistle** *Cirsium palustre*, **Brown Sedge** *Carex disticha*, **Meadow-sweet** *Filipendula ulmaria*, **Ragged Robin** *Silene Flos-cuculi*, **Water mint** *Mentha aquatica* and **Lesser Spearwort** *Ranunculus flammula*. In the ponds there were **Broad-leaved Pondweed** *Potamogeton natans*, **Small Pondweed** *Potamogeton berchtoldii*, a small amount of **Branched Burr-reed** *Sparganium erectum* and an extensive growth of **Lesser Pond-sedge** *Carex acutiformis*. The sedge extended as a reedswamp under adjacent woodland and amongst this was occasional **Bittersweet** *Solanum dulcamara* and **Flag Iris** *Iris pseudacorus*. Around the lower pond there was **Large Bitter-cress** *Cardamine amara* and **Brooklime** *Veronica beccabunga* but the flora here is just developing following the excavations.

We had lunch just as it started to rain and then made our way across a field to the



Rustyback Fern Springkell

North Avenue. We followed this down to the junction and headed for the North West Approach to walk up to the path into Foxhall Wood. Along the tall wall of a garden there were a typical range of wall ferns. One of these was the handsome and less frequently found **Rustyback Fern** *Asplenium ceterach*. A small plant on top of the wall caught our attention and proved to be the even less frequently found **Early Forget-me-not** *Myosotis ramosissima*. In fact this is only the sixth record for Dumfriesshire.

Along the North West Approach we noticed that as well as the **Wych Elm** *Ulmus glabra* there were some quite big trees of a small leaved elm whose leaves were smooth. This is not commonly seen in Dumfriesshire. Elms are very difficult to identify

precisely but this looks like it may fit within the *Ulmus minor sensu lato* group. It is unknown whether this is native at this site or whether it has been planted.

By the time we made it to Foxhall Wood the rain had set in and we were hampered by the lack of light under the canopy. The woodland has a mostly deciduous canopy and some typical old woodland plants like **Bluebell** *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, **Enchanter's-nightshade** *Circaea lutetiana* and **Soft Shield-fern** *Polysichum setiferum*. Of greatest interest was the paddock to the north of the woodland with the

remains of an old quarry now largely wooded. The grassland here is a herb rich mixture neutral and acid conditions. This is a super little area rich in orchids and other herbs so rarely found in lowland grasslands today. Unfortunately before we could fully explore this area the rain was so heavy that we had to abandon recording for the day. I was able to come back a week later to complete the recording of this area and it revealed just how rich it was.

There were over 70 species in the field. These included good old neutral grassland plants like **Spring Sedge** *Carex caryophylla*, **Pignut** *Conopodium majus*,



Greater Butterfly-orchid Springkell

Sneezewort *Achillea ptarmica*, **Salad burnet** *Sanguisorba officinalis*, **Arctic Eyebright** *Euphrasia arctica* and **Quaking grass** *Briza media*. But there was also acid grassland species like **Lousewort** *Pedicularis sylvatica* and **Bog Asphodel** *Narthecium ossifragrum*. The number of orchids stood out with many hundreds of **Common Spotted Orchid** *Dactylorhiza fuschii* and **Heath Spotted orchid** *Dactylorhiza maculata*. The star though was **Greater Butterfly-orchid** *Platanthera chlorantha*. We saw six flowering spikes. This has never been recorded in this area the nearest recent record being from Ecclefechan in 1979 (where it has almost certainly been lost). This is now only the second known extant site for this orchid in Dumfriesshire.

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