

Square Bashing - John Roberts

Flowers are forever a joy, yet beyond their loveliness and fascination, there lurks the extra, primeval thrill of searching for them. Val and I have pursued flowers throughout the British Isles and in some sixty other countries for approaching half a century. Now with older legs and painful knees I walk less well, managing no more than two to three hours on my feet. My love for plants, and discovering them, remains and by good fortune can easily be met in Warwickshire. The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland is to publish a countrywide Atlas in 2020, so Botanical Recorders everywhere are encouraging engagement with this enterprise to update and add to local records. John and Monika Walton are the Recorders for Warwickshire, organizing and galvanizing recording for Vice-County 38 through the Warwickshire Flower Group.

In May 2014 John and Monika suggested Val and I might visit some monads, 1km squares, for which they held few or no records. We followed this nudge and it has proved enormous fun and manageable, providing exercise, visiting well-known Warwickshire, and keeping botany skills well-honed and improving.

Parking in a chosen square equipped with 2½" map, identification book, x10 lens, binoculars and camera we clearly invited attention, particularly in quieter villages, even suspicion. Were we 'casing' local properties; were we anything to do with fracking? Local people found reason to talk to us and the explanation of our visit was often greeted with warmth, since an interest in flowers seems widespread. The BSBI Atlas added legitimacy and our eccentricity was accepted. Some villages already promoted wildflowers with special, seeded beds, by leaving areas uncut, especially in churchyards, and so on. Villagers in Preston-on-Stour were about to embark on their own wildflower survey and requested a copy of our findings, even in Latin! Farmers got off tractors to talk with us, showed particular interest in what we were up to and willingly let us wander their land. In most cases we found practices favourable to wildflowers, indeed to wildlife generally, with wide field margins, retained copses, broad hedges, ponds and so on.

Our hunting needed to sample all habitats in the square, searching each thoroughly and carefully. Flowers needed to be sought in byways as well as highways, in unexpected nooks and crannies. So we thrilled to find allotments, car parks, scruffy garage blocks, village halls, passageways, tips, neglected areas, rivulets and the like. Such pleasure may seem a little sad really, but this is where different plants can be found. We identified everything with caution, naming what we were certain of, and discussing queries and what we could not resolve with John and Monika, providing specimens or photos. Many out-of-flower plants could be identified from their leaves, fruits or remnants even.

Over seventeen months we enthusiastically visited 80 monads. Those with several habitats regularly furnished higher plant numbers. For instance, our top scorer for one visit was Napton West with 183 species. This monad had a long section of the Oxford Canal and a huge, abandoned industrial estate, containing a quarry, bare ground, scrub, wetland and grassland. Elsewhere in the square we came upon road verges, fishing pools, footpaths, a pub, arable fields and a farmyard...to say nothing of the claimed view into seven counties from the windmill. In early August this monad produced a wealth of specials, like Blue Fleabane, Eyebright and Corsican Heath, the last a record of national importance and a first for Vice-County 38. At the farmyard a Red Fox leapt out in front of us, perhaps in celebration. This was a long, very sore knees day. Birdingbury and Ladbroke shared second place with 182 species, with Tredington and Alveston at 177. These squares all illustrated the bounty of diversity.

At the other extreme our lowest score from one visit was Barford East in mid-March with a paltry 69 – there were but three roads to search. In contrast we had tackled Wolston a month earlier and identified 86 plants, including White Butterbur and Spring Crocus. Wolston possessed the River Leam, a wood, the village, a churchyard and footpaths. This more diverse situation compensated the seasonal disadvantage. Similarly, Wroxall was explored in late April and gave a modest 92, whereas we reached 132 at Bishops Tachbrook three days after. Bishops Tachbrook presented a village, church, pub car park, footpaths, verges and a stream, whilst Wroxall offered only a long cul-de-sac, some woodland edge and arable fields. We had no access to its large, private wood and vehicle proving ground. Villages usually offered more niches for plants, with warmth being an extra enticement. Despite Wroxall's restrictions, this monad produced some significant flowers, like Moschatel, Rare Lords-and-Ladies and Goldilocks Buttercup, adding a bonus fungus, Common Morel. Clearly more habitats in a square inevitably lead to more wildflowers, but there are other influences.

The survey month is one such factor. Looking at monads visited in February, March and April the average plant total

was 91. The average for surveys in May to August leapt to 153. This was hardly a surprise: more flowers appear in later spring and summer. September continued equally worthwhile, with eleven monads also averaging 153. The seven monads in October averaged significantly lower at 130.

Time opportunities meant most of our monads received a single visit. Ideally it must be sensible to survey twice in different seasons to witness a fuller range. Nine of our squares received two visits, the second raising their totals by 48 plants on average. The triumphant, two-visit champion was Stretton-under-Fosse with a grand total of 224, with Ratley next at 203, then Willoughby at 202.

It must be emphasised that we surveyed for plants in poorly or unrecorded squares; we did not run a controlled, scientific experiment. Nonetheless our results strongly suggest a minimal best practice of **two visits between early May and the end of September** to deliver higher totals and to smooth seasonal differences.

The vast majority of recorded plants (we submitted some 11,389) were common species, but there were many memorable exceptions, such as the Heath already quoted for Napton West. A dodgy venture in Snitterfield South-West along the A46 with brutal, buffeting traffic, gave us our first salt-tolerant, coastal Buck's-horn Plantain and Lesser Sea-spurrey. Climbing a stile into Oxhill church amazed us with Knotted Hedge-parsley, which we met again by the church wall at Tredington, a village where we also added Corn Marigold, Vervain, Crow Garlic and handsome Silver Ragwort. Annual Mercury, Field Pepperwort, Cotton Thistle, Gallant Soldier and Spotted Deadnettle featured a few times, with single debuts for Atlantic Poppy at Wasperton, Wormwood at Southam East, Round-leaved Fluellen at Stockton East, Henbit at Stretton-on-Dunsmore, and Yellow-flowered Strawberry in flower and fruit at Frankton. Finally, I must mention Leamington Hastings, with a two-visit score of 181 species, exactly the average for all our two-visit monads. This apparently ordinary square, echoing Wroxall, produced a flurry of estimable flowers: Star-of-Bethlehem, Rare Lords-and-Ladies, a new site for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a colour variant of Rape, and a first County record for Garden Cress growing by a recently dug grave. Amazing what looking can reveal!

A last call one hot afternoon was at allotments in Southam East to seek permission to examine the extensive plots. Tricky Goosefoots and Oraches flourished, so we settled luxuriously at a table in the shade outside somebody's shed to identify them before leaving. Back home I sought the flower book to confirm other queries. The book had not come in from the car...but neither was it in the car...it had to be on the table in the allotments. We returned. Both entrance gates were now securely padlocked and the gardeners gone. Each five-barred, metal gate was surmounted by several strands of barbed wire. Only Val could climb the gate and squeeze through the gap I created between the top of the gate and the bottom of the barbed wire. Over she went, to return gleefully with the book. In her absence I had read the prohibitions notice and spotted a security camera focused on me and the car! I showed the book to the camera, smiled and drove home to await a police visit.

Incidental to the botanising, we experienced much other natural history. We came upon various mammals and amphibians, new fungi such as Choke, good birds like Cuckoo, Yellowhammer and Kingfisher, butterflies galore, including eight unrecorded sites for Silver-washed Fritillary, and ancient fossils in walls. We saw much we had never registered before, like the huge number of picture-postcard cottages, old stocks, wells and pumps, signs (Weeds for Sale: Pick your Own) and even the BBC filming Dan Cruickshank in front of the Manor House at Stoneleigh. Boxes of apples for passers-by, plus blackberries considerably growing to hand, provided puddings for weeks; the survey memories will nourish us for years.