

Cock Marsh, Cookham - May 2020 Field Meeting

Spring 2021 and the gradual relaxing of the second lockdown due to Covid was under way. I hadn't left London since the previous October, had been botanising only in my central London patch and attendance of botanical group events had been strictly via Zoom. For me therefore, joining the WFS for an exploration of this area of water meadows and steep chalk hillsides on the River Thames near Cookham was a happy and significant occasion – it was also my first meeting with the WFS.

The 'Rule of Six' still applied so we split into three groups. After the cold spring, we knew many things were late but nevertheless set off full of optimism from the NT car park on the edge of the village. It was a bright, crisp morning with clouds scudding across the sky.

The first section of the path lay amongst trees and scrub and here we noticed Lords-and-Ladies *Arum maculatum* in profusion. Gwyndaf John showed us the fascinating structure of male and female flowers concealed at the base of the spadix and, above them, the ring of thread-like sterile flowers which act as a

one-way door to capture insects in the base of the flower where they become covered in pollen; these hairs then wither away to allow the insects to escape and take the pollen to other plants. Another plant in noticeable numbers was Caper Spurge *Euphorbia lathyris*. We saw a densely-flowered Gorse *Ulex europaeus* that turned out to be the double-flowered cultivar 'Flore Pleno'.

Our path traversed a flank of Winter Hill from where we had glimpses of Cliveden amongst the trees on the other side of the Thames. A Whitethroat sang loudly as we passed by. In the fields alongside, Bulbous Buttercup *Ranunculus bulbosus* was in flower with its reflexed sepals. We examined the tiny blue flowers of a Cornsalad *Valerianella* but, without fruits, we were unable to identify it to species. We dipped down to look at the banks of the Strand Water drainage sluice which were thick with Greater Pond-sedge *Carex riparia*, Glaucous Sedge *C. flacca*, leaves of Common Comfrey *Symphytum officinale*, an Angelica, possibly an escaped *Angelica archangelica* rather than *A. sylvestris*, the tangle punctuated by big clumps of Greater Tussock-sedge *C. paniculata*.

Passing under a railway bridge our path levelled and we walked at the foot of a steep escarpment where the chalk showed itself everywhere the surface was disturbed. These slopes demand a visit later in the year, the turf being thick with rosettes and emergent leaves of what was to come. But one beautiful plant was already in flower, the Meadow Saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata*, with delicate clusters of flowers held high on fine, reddish stems. The colour, as we saw on closer inspection, is created by the red-tinged glandular hairs which cover the stems and calyx.

To our right lay the marshy river meadows which have been common land used for grazing since 1272. This grazing and a scrub clearance regime has created a wonderful habitat of varied plant communities and the fact that the whole area is subject to periodic flooding and drying out is also a factor in maintaining the botanical richness. The scene in front of us was like a painting – meadows, patches of water with lopsided willows and groups of grazing cattle.

A series of silted pools lay ahead with a wealth of plants ranging from those on the hoof-churned muddy sides to the willows standing, but half falling, in the water. Here we had our first sight of the exquisite Water Violet *Hottonia palustris* found particularly in calcium-rich waters such as these. Each flower spike emerges straight out of the water, the whorl of leaves which supports it being just below the surface. The flowers were mid-pool so we couldn't approach closely to observe them, but we knew they were in *Primulaceae* and have two types of flowers, pin and thrum. In this pool we saw our



first Water-crowfoot of the day; these plants also favour alkaline water. The leaves of Yellow Iris *Iris pseudacorus* dominated the edge and shallower parts along with Glaucous Sedge *Carex flacca*.

At the furthest pool our three groups loosely gathered for a rest and picnic lunches. Here there were many more *Hottonia* in flower and other plants were just showing their leaves above the surface of the water.

Roger Heath-Brown talked us through the features to notice in Water-crowfoots, drawing our attention to the two types of leaves, floating laminar and underwater filigree, the disposition of the petals, which on some species overlap and on others are widely and gap-spaced and the shape of the nectar-pits at the base of the petals. We'd seen Common Water-crowfoot *Ranunculus aquatilis* with leaves both floating and submerged, petals overlapped and circular nectar-pits, and Thread-leaved Water-crowfoot *R. trichophyllus* with all leaves submerged and filigree, petals widely spaced and crescent shaped nectar-pits. There were other Water-crowfoots which couldn't definitively be identified.

Moving on we turned towards the river taking the boardwalk that crosses an ancient, abandoned channel of the Thames, which still floods regularly in winter. On drier areas of grassland the hairy rosettes of Hoary Plantain *Plantago media* were profuse; this again is a plant that favours chalk environments. On the way back along the riverbank with its many quaint houses and cabins, we saw plants characteristic of the waterside - Winter-cress *Barbarea vulgaris*, Water Dock *Rumex hydrolapathum*, Water Mint *Mentha aquatic* and Water Plantain *Alisma plantago-aquatica*.

By the time we got back to the car park the weather had turned squally and distant murmurs of thunder threatened. We therefore said our thanks to Janet and Gwyndaf John for organising a very enjoyable day and set off home before the downpour. I, for one, will definitely return to Cock Marsh both for the sheer beauty of the setting and for its abundance of interesting and rare plants.

MAUREEN PARRY

