

Exmoor Field Meeting June 2020

Dunster Beach and North Hill, Minehead.

Given uncertainties about numbers allowed in gatherings and knowing that many Somerset Rare Plants Group members know both of these sites on the Exmoor coast quite well, we decided to restrict the meeting to WFS members only, which gave us 13 visitors. This was the luckiest decision ever! The most exciting plants at both locations are extremely small and this year, after a cold, mostly dry spring, this was all too apparent. A greater number of bodies trying to keep distancing round minute specimens would have led to people feeling shut out and unable to see enough which is, anyway, an effect we both worry about when trying to plan meetings. In the event, a larger crowd would have been a disaster because not only were the target plants so difficult to see, but the group had a very wide range of experience.

A concern for botanical planners is always how to keep a happy balance between beginners who need to feel supported and experienced botanists who don't want to be held back. In this we were extraordinarily lucky as numbers were almost evenly divided between highly skilled members and absolute beginners and friendliness, kindness, patience and generous help flowed easily from one group to the other from the start. Graham and I learned a great deal ourselves because at least two copies of Stace were carried throughout and the owners were willing to go head down over keys as soon as any details needed checking. After the two days we were the happiest of organisers and have decided never to try to lead larger groups again.

The locations helped the happiness of course and weather was ideal – sunny with touches of breeze from the sea, so never too hot. At Dunster beach on Saturday our target plants included various annual clovers and Smooth Cat's-ear *Hypochaeris glabra*. Two uncommon seaside Fescues, Dune Fescue *Vulpia fasciculata* and Bearded Fescue *V. ciliata* ssp. *ambigua*, have been recorded here in the past but they are very similar and we hoped to solve the 'one or both?' question. The long stretch of shingle bar behind the beach here is backed by a stretch of stony and sandy ground in front of the famous row of chalets which are now reputed to cost as much as a full-sized house. Most of this ground is heavily trampled and all is exposed to full wind force and salt spray in stormy weather, so it's a specialised habitat. Native plants such as Viper's-bugloss *Echium vulgare*, Hound's-tongue *Cynoglossum officinale* and Musk Thistle *Carduus nutans* flourish in these tough conditions and put on fine displays and we were at peak flowering season for Fragrant Evening-primrose *Oenothera stricta*, a 19th century introduction from Chile which has been known here for many years. The real treasures however meant putting noses to the ground, so we gathered quite a few curious stares and questions about what we were doing. One of the first clover species to be found was the tiny Bird's-foot Clover *Trifolium ornithopodioides*, its single white flowers scattered level with the ground. It proved very abundant (on both days) so it was easy to 'get the eye in' and recognise from head height the slightly darker green patches made by the spreading plants. It was accompanied by the commoner Rough Clover *T. scabrum* with Knotted Clover *T. striatum*, and Lesser Trefoil *T. dubium* with Slender Trefoil *T. micranthum*, allowing for plenty of practice in telling these 'pairs' apart. A real rarity which proved to be having a good year was Suffocated Clover *T. suffocatum* with its bright yellowish-green rosettes and curious green flowers buried in the centre of the tufts.

Another target species, the Smooth Cat's-ear *Hypochaeris glabra* was also abundant in several places. A newish member Mary Ensor and her partner David Ware know and like this part of Somerset but they have always come as birders. Indeed Mary told me later that when the group first left the cars, immediately falling to their knees and spouting Latin names, the Ensors very nearly 'quietly disappeared'. I'm so glad they didn't! The pleasant sharing of knowledge within the group tempted them to stay and they found a lovely population of the Cat's-ear in a previously unrecorded location. The species lists for the two main monads in this much-recorded place already had large totals, but amazingly this day managed to add to both although the confusing Fescues remained stuck at 'probably' only one species, even with the help of Rodney Burton's nobly carried herbarium specimens for comparison!

Mary and David finding a new patch of Smooth Cat's-ear among the Fragrant Evening-primroses



North Hill, the location for the second day, is a big rocky shoulder nearly 300m high which cradles a corner of Minehead old town. The North edge falls steeply to sea cliffs while the ridge gives wonderful views of the Exmoor coast. We were relying on the spectacular location to make the day memorable, as this site lacks large, pretty flowers and we were again anxious that weather might have restricted what could be found. However the 'eyes down' practice on Saturday had made the group highly attuned to almost-invisible species and everyone was soon finding, not only Bird's-foot Clover in amazing quantity, but having no trouble with different uncommon tinies such as Upright Chickweed *Moenchia erecta* and Spring Vetch *Vicia lathyroides*. These plants are both notoriously inconspicuous but our team proved terrific at spotting them. In fact by the end of the day the vetch had been added to a new monad and their charms were much appreciated, both the miniature pink vetch flowers and the elegant silver-edged green sepals of the Upright Chickweed. Combined with the landscape looking its best, this would have made an enjoyable day, but something unexpected happened too. A disused quarry floor near the track gives interesting dry and damp microhabitats, so everyone had a wander here. I like this site because my favourite Pearlwort can usually be found. Heath Pearlwort *Sagina subulata* always looks so smart with its little white eyes, unlike the near-invisible greenish petals of its relatives. We were enjoying plenty of little flowering clumps when Steve Little reached for a Stace and began counting stamens, petals and sepals. His incredibly sharp eyes had told him that these were giving contradictory and variable information and soon there was an intense gathering with all the copies of Stace out and texts and emails rushing out for further information. After much discussion and counting of parts, it became clear that something was going on in the community of Pearlworts! All agreed in the end that the hybrid between *S.subulata* and *S.procumbens* was present among plenty of both pure species. This is a rare hybrid, *S. x micrantha*, previously unknown in Somerset, so the find made a really star achievement for the day, a historic occasion for VC5 in particular, and a superb lesson in the value of keying plants out in the field if conditions allow.

After so many worries about weather and virus conditions, it was really wonderful that the weekend was so enjoyable and so valuable to Somerset botany. Correspondence from members afterwards

mentioned the pleasure of 'meeting up with like-minded friends' and 'appreciating our wild flowers in all their glory' even if you needed your specs on, and the coastal landscapes certainly helped. Our heartfelt thanks go to all who attended and made it such a joy.

RO FITZGERALD



Eyes down by the famous chalets