

FIELD MEETING – FARTHING DOWNS – JUNE 2022



As a keen but relatively new and inexperienced member of the WFS, I must admit to being rather alarmed when Priscilla Nobbs asked me if I would co-lead a WFS trip with her in 2022. I did stress that although I am pretty confident with most plants in my own patch and where to find the local specialities, I have no idea when it comes to recognising hybrids, subspecies etc. However Priscilla is not an easy person to refuse! But I needn't have worried - take a group of enthusiastic botanists to a small car park and they can easily amuse themselves for an hour or two. Take them to a stunning area of rich chalk grassland as found at Farthing Downs, and the job is done! Plus, of course, Priscilla and Gareth Bursnall have a wealth of knowledge which they willingly shared with the group.

We met on a warm sunny morning in the car park on top of the Downs with great views over the countryside and up to London. Farthing Downs was purchased by the City of London in 1883 and they continue to manage the area which is an SSSI and in 2019 became part of the new South London Downs NNR. After Priscilla's introductions we wandered along the top of the downs finding Wild Carrot *Daucus carota*, Dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria* and Horseshoe Vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* (which were growing close to each other for a useful comparison) and admiring the local speciality, Greater Yellow-rattle *Rhinanthus angustifolius* which, although rare nationally, grows in great numbers in this area. When compared to *R. minor* the differences are quite subtle but two distinguishing features are that the violet tooth of the upper lip is longer than wide and the lower lip does not turn down, away from the upper lip. We were pleased to spot a few patches of the tiny Thyme-leaved Sandwort *Arenaria serpyllifolia* but were then temporarily diverted from plants by the singing of skylarks and then a yellowhammer which obligingly posed on top of a shrub for us to have a good look at him.

Dropping down from the top of the Downs to a sloping meadow, we spent some time admiring a good selection of Fly Orchids *Ophrys insectifera* and Man Orchids *Orchis anthropophora* plus large numbers of Common Twayblades *Neottia ovata*. Gareth also pointed out that the Valerian we were seeing was the *Valeriana officinalis* ssp. *collina*, found in dry calcareous areas. By now we had worked up an appetite and as we hadn't moved far from the car park we had the bonus of returning to the nearby benches for lunch.

We started the afternoon in my favourite field which was awash with stunning Chalk Fragrant-orchids

Gymnadenia conopsea and Common Spotted-orchids *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. We all had a good sniff of the Fragrant Orchids which, for pollination, rely predominantly on attracting moths with a long proboscis as the nectar is found at the bottom of their long spur. We also found several Bee Orchids *Ophrys apifera* and a few Pyramidal *Anacamptis pyramidalis* bringing our total up to 7 orchid species. We found examples of the deep-blue Chalk Milkwort *Polygala calcarea* which prompted discussion of the differentiating features when compared with Common Milkwort *P. vulgaris*. The easiest feature to observe was the false rosette of leaves above the short woody stem.

We progressed from these east-facing meadows to the meadows on the other side of the valley and slowly worked our way up the slope admiring many other chalk specialities until near the top of the hill we found a few examples of Field Mouse-ear *Cerastium arvense* which was a new species for several of the group.

A leisurely return to the car park ended a fascinating and, in the end, very enjoyable day with a great bunch of enthusiasts.

MOIRA SMITH