

SOMERSET RARE PLANTS GROUP

Recording all plants growing wild in Somerset, not just the rarities



Meeting Report

**Saturday 5th June 2021 Crook Peak,
Mendip Hills (VC6)**

Leaders: Liz McDonnell & Helena Crouch

Report: Liz McDonnell & Helena Crouch



Plant ID on the species-rich slopes. Photo: Margaret Webster

Bookings for this field meeting were popular and Helena Crouch kindly offered to lead a separate group, with Liz leading a slow, lower-slopes route with an emphasis on identification (the first part of this report), and Helena leading a more adventurous party further afield, to update and add to records on the slopes around Crook Peak itself. We all met at the roadside car park in Webbington Road and Liz's group spent the first hour looking at the botanical riches on the species-rich slopes just inside the gate! There were so many species of interest, especially for those not familiar with the Crook Peak grassland. Common Rock-rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*) and Dropwort (*Filipendula vulgaris*) were abundant and it was pleasing to see several flowering plants of Basil Thyme (*Clinopodium acinos*), the main centre of distribution in Somerset being the Mendip limestones. This is on the GB & England Red-list as Vulnerable.

We found a few leaf rosettes of Spring Cinquefoil (*Potentilla verna*) and an abundance of Common Cudweed (*Filago germanica*) on the bare earth of the steep rocky slopes. Also in this habitat were a few



Dwarf Spurge (*Euphorbia exigua*) on the bare soil of the south-facing rocky slopes. Photo: Will Eden

tiny plants of Dwarf Spurge (*Euphorbia exigua*). This has long been known here, but it is more commonly known as an arable weed.

Making our way slowly westwards along the lower path, it was not long before we found Honewort (*Trinia glauca*). This too was flowering and fruiting and we found numerous male and female plants and some that had both flowers. The male plants were much easier to spot, as they resembled tiny pale creamy-yellow cauliflower clusters embedded in the



Fruits of Honewort (*Trinia glauca*). Photo: Sam Braine

close-cropped turf. The female plants were more cryptic, with the few-branched umbels bearing a small number of fruits.

The Speckled Yellow moth (*Pseudopanthera macularia*), whose food plant is Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*), was seen nectaring on Honewort. Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*) occurred on suitably bare rock outcrops, mostly in the crevices, but further up the slope it was growing on bare open soil in small tufts where the felted lower sheaths



Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*) grows on these steep, south-facing rocky slopes. Photo: Jen Weaver

were fairly obvious under a hand lens. As we climbed higher up the slope, we stopped to compare the small yellow clovers which were growing together – Hop Trefoil (*Trifolium campestre*), Lesser Trefoil (*T. dubium*) and Slender Trefoil (*Trifolium micranthum*). We went through the identification keys and examined the details of each.

We looked at the differences between Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and Western Gorse (*U. gallii*) and noted patches of the limestone-heath plant community often associated with Western Gorse on the upper slopes of Mendip, where the soils of the wind-deposited loess support species such as Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*), Brown Bent (*Agrostis vinealis*) and Slender St John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*). We reached the ridge of the Crook Peak peninsula and dropped over to the north-facing slopes to see how the vegetation differed from the dry sun-baked rocky slopes. Here trees and scrub were clothing the lower slopes and the grassy areas at the top were dominated by Tor-grass (*Brachypodium rupestre*), with Meadow Oat-grass (*Avenula pratensis*), Downy Oat-grass (*A. pubescens*) and Crested Hair-grass (*Koeleria macrantha*). Honewort was still fairly frequent in the sward and

Squinancywort (*Asperula cynanchica*) was just coming into flower.

Meanwhile Helena's group headed for the peak, pausing regularly during the steep ascent to look at the tiny treasures mentioned earlier, finally sitting down to begin recording as soon as we reached our target monad. We immediately found Honewort (*Trinia glauca*) in the glorious short turf around rock outcrops – we later found thousands of plants on the steep south-facing slopes. The rosettes of Autumn Lady's-tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*) were spotted, and diminutive plants of Western Eyebright (*Euphrasia tetraquetra*). We found a single bush of Small-flowered Sweet-briar (*Rosa micrantha*), and examined Mouse-ears. During the day, we found five species: Common Mouse-ear (*Cerastium fontanum*), Sticky Mouse-ear (*C. glomeratum*), Little Mouse-ear (*C. semidecandrum*), Sea Mouse-ear (*C. diffusum*) and the GB Near Threatened Dwarf Mouse-ear (*C. pumilum*).



Western Eyebright (*Euphrasia tetraquetra*) on thin soils amongst rocks. Photo: Helena Crouch

In a rocky depression by the path, we checked on White Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) which has been known here for at least 30 years.

Below the peak, we also explored an area of limestone-heath, finding two plants of Trailing St John's-wort (*Hypericum humifusum*) in flower, comparing it with nearby Slender St John's-wort (*H. pulchrum*). We also found two small plants of Heath Groundsel (*Senecio sylvaticus*), last recorded on Crook Peak in 1997.

On rocks around the peak, we recorded Southern Polypody (*Polypodium cambricum*), Early Forget-me-not (*Myosotis ramosissima*), Rough Clover (*Trifolium scabrum*) and Knotted Clover (*T. striatum*). We found Knotted Hedge-parsley (*Torilis nodosa*), the first

record for Crook Peak for over 20 years, and Bur Chervil (*Anthriscus caucalis*). We also found Helena's daughter, who had run to Crook Peak from Black Down! After lunch on the peak, we explored the southern slopes, immediately finding Basil Thyme (*Clinopodium acinos*) and Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*) with its fibrous leaf bases.



Somerset Hair-grass (*Koeleria vallesiana*). Photo: Fred Rumsey

During the day, we also found Crested Hair-grass (*Koeleria macrantha*) several times, the leaves of which are distinctively hairy, whereas Somerset Hair-grass is hairless. The southern slopes of Crook Peak are a mosaic of scrub, limestone-heath, grassland and open stony areas.



Recording on the slopes of Crook Peak. Photo: Fred Rumsey

In a clearing amongst gorse, we checked on the population of Dwarf Sedge (*Carex humilis*) which was first discovered here in 1964 and appear to be thriving. On lower rocky slopes we found abundant Common Cudweed (*Filago germanica*), last recorded in this monad in 2004, and small patches of Spring Cinquefoil (*Potentilla verna*).



Spring Cinquefoil (*Potentilla verna*) on Crook Peak. Photo: Fred Rumsey

A single Broomrape spike was identified as Common Broomrape (*Orobanche minor*), the first record for Crook Peak since 1997. The abundance of Honewort and Basil Thyme on these slopes was astonishing.



Basil Thyme (*Clinopodium acinos*) on rocks on the south-facing slopes of Crook Peak. Photo: Helena Crouch

During the day, we recorded 154 species in our target monad, adding 25 species to the square and updating records for many rare plants. It had been an excellent day at a very special site with stunning views, fine weather and good company.