

Farndon (v.c. 58). April 1

Jonathan Shanklin

Snow during the preceding week had left the Welsh and mid-Cheshire hills coated in white down to 100m, but fortunately the starting point for this meeting, lying mid-way between the two, was just 20m in altitude. The meeting was aimed at teaching recording practices to beginners, and learning how to use vegetative keying. The spring thus far had been the coldest for many decades so we were put to the test rather more than expected.

A group of nine braved the cold to meet at Farndon church, where Jonathan Shanklin began by explaining the elements of recording. We then went into the churchyard and began to put theory into practice. For a relatively average churchyard we did quite well, managing to identify 87 species. A creeping plant by the church tower was spotted, which we thought was Pirri-pirri-bur *Acaena novae-zelandiae*, but decided that confirmation would be needed in the summer as this would only be the 5th county record. Given the choice between a cold and windy picnic on the banks of the River Dee, or visiting the warmth of a pub for lunch, the group wisely chose the latter. On the way we wandered down a lane banked by a sandstone cliff, where there were a couple of bird-sown Cotoneasters and a Pyracantha. During lunch, a Speedwell was inspected, having been collected because “it looked a bit different”. Although initially dismissed as a small Common Field Speedwell *Veronica persica*, the fruits gave a clear diagnosis – it was Grey Field-speedwell *V. polita*, scarce for Cheshire.

Fortified by hot chocolate the group set off for a walk along the Dee. We had not gone far when one of the targets for the day, Navelwort *Umbilicus rupestris* was spotted on an abandoned roof, with more on the cliffs above. Passing through a wooded glade some ferns caught our eyes, and after some debate, the more mature specimen was identified as Soft Shield-fern *Polystichum setiferum*. Emerging onto flood meadows the skeletal remains of Black Mustard *Brassica nigra* on the river bank were identified by the appressed erect pods. With time passing, the short version of the route was chosen to lead us back to a second site for the Navelwort. Although it had looked unpromising from Google Earth, ground truth revealed the plant, and we even managed to find it in the adjacent tetrad. Two of the party decided that it was necessary to check out a Sweet-grass in a shallow pond, with the Vegetative Key pointing towards the hybrid *Glyceria x pedicillata*, though as County Recorder, Graeme Kay wanted stronger evidence before recording it as such. Now lagging behind the rest, the two passed a swamp with a tussock which looked a bit odd for Tufted Hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*. Closer inspection showed that it was a sedge, which fortunately was just coming into flower to provide identification as Greater Tussock-sedge *Carex paniculata*, a scattered species in Cheshire, and this apparently its westernmost current tetrad. Returning to our cars, a final find was Spurge Laurel *Daphne laureola*, a species on the Cheshire RPR, though here the parent was probably planted in the hedge, and now seeding.

Given the delayed start to spring, we had not expected to find much, but the total list for the day totalled over 150 species, and the challenge given at the start of the day to find 30 species in flower was just exceeded.