

Wiltshire Botanical Society

Newsletter No.3

March 1993

This newsletter has been produced to coincide with the AGM and the committee hopes that members will express their opinions about the draft constitution and any other matters of concern to WBS members.

We are now an institutional member of the Botanical Society of the British Isles and are entitled to receive a journal and three newsletters a year. If any member wishes to read these can they please contact Katie Hill. As we have entered our second year on 1st January, subscriptions are now due. Katie has agreed to accept any outstanding subscriptions at the AGM.

Winter Meetings.

These were well attended and it was good to meet members who travelled from the more distant corners of the county.

Slides/Discussion, November 21st, 1992

John Presland and Barbara Last showed and talked about slides they had taken of plants and their habitats.

John had a varied selection of slides of local plants from the attractive common flowers (a field of poppies) to more rare species such as the Bath Asparagus (*Asp. officinalis*) and *Euphorbia coralyoides*. Amongst a group of aberrant plants he showed a white corn poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*), a strange common toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris*) and crow garlic (*Allium vineale*) which was actually in flower. The camera can often demonstrate more clearly than the eye can see, for instance the difference between the styles of the field rose (*Rosa arvensis*) and the dog rose (*Rosa canina*) was much easier to define on the screen than in the field. Similarly, the white helleborine (*Cephalanthera damasonium*) rarely opens, and the slides showed the internal reproductive organs with marvellous clarity. John concluded with some non-botanical slides including a raft spider and a silver-studded blue butterfly.

Barbara's slides had been taken over the past year and her selection included some interesting tree photography, particularly the splendid beeches at Kings Barrow near Stonehenge (which have since been cut down by the D.O.E.). She showed some beech woods in their autumn colours at Shearwater, and in the spring, undergrown with bluebells. In complete contrast was a slide of *Lemna miniscula* blanketing the canal at Devizes and a photograph taken through a microscope of a single specimen.

R.G.

Flora of the upper reaches of the River Kennet. January 23rd, 1993.

A team of WBS members lead by Jack Oliver surveyed the dried out River Kennet last summer and Jack illustrated his talk with slides demonstrating the overgrown river bed and its banks. The distribution of plants was measured and charted.

The charts showed the occurrence of the twenty most common plants and the number of tree species. The prevalence of land plants in the whole riverine area was very noticeable.

D.C.

Mosses and liverworts. February 27th, 1993

Despite freezing weather there was a good turn-out for the second field visit to look at the mosses and liverworts of Savernake Forest. As before the walk was expertly led by Rod Stern.

For those who have not looked at these plants before, they can all appear deterringly similar upon superficial examination. Use of even a X10 lens will however reveal remarkable detail and beauty of structure. Microscopy facilities, courtesy of Marlborough College and Malcolm Hardstaff, showed how easily species could be identified by the beginner.

This excursion concentrated on the more common species that are most likely to be encountered by the non-specialist. Distinctive species including *Brachythesium rutabulum* and *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus* were much in evidence on the ground, with *Hypnum cupressiforme*, *Ulota crispa* and *Orthotrichum* as epiphytes. Greater diversity was added by banks of chalky spoil in one place that supported *Pleuroidium acuminatum* and *Barbula unguiculata* amongst other species.

The size of the species found ranged from the 4-inch tall *Polytrichum formosum* to the diminutive *Amblystegium serpens* and *-Leucolejeunea ulicina*. This last species might have been classified by the uninitiated as "green scum" - never again!

P.W.

Summer Meetings

Joy has arranged a varied and interesting programme for our first summer season - from an arable weed reserve to wetlands to ancient woodlands. A separate agenda for these meetings is to found at the end of this newsletter.

Stinging nettles along the River Kennet

A separate sheet on this topic is attached to the back of this newsletter.

Sainfoin, asters and aberrants

Some members of the society are interested in specific areas of botany and would welcome information from other members about their particular interest.

Audrey Summers wishes to gather information regarding large stands of sainfoin (*Onobrychis viciifolia*) within the county. There is a rare and particular bee which feeds only on sainfoin and it would be extremely useful to know where this plant occurs.

Jack Oliver would like to gather records of Michaelmas daisies (*Aster spp.*) and has prepared a leaflet. Please take one or get in touch with Jack if you have any notes, specimens or interest in this topic.

The register of aberrant forms of native plants.

(by Martin Cragg-Barber,

1, Station Cottages, Hullavington, Chippenham, SN14 6ET)

"Unusual forms of native plants are not strictly of relevance to traditional botanical recording. Although some flower colour forms and flower size forms may be recorded out of general interest there doesn't seem to be any correlation of these reports and they will only contain a minority of the most stable forms.

"Plant aberrations were well-recorded in the last century in the teratological literature but do the same aberrations still occur in the same species? A proper recording scheme might be able to correlate when aberrations arise with weather conditions/increased nutrient levels.

"Examples of aberration are double-flowered forms, flowers without petals, leaves growing inside flowers or on fruit. Pigment aberrations could lead to unusual flower colour, leaf colour, petiole colour, stem colour or fruit colour. Fasciation is a thickening of plant tissue in one plane as if it had been compressed by a rolling-pin."

Martin would welcome any reports of plant aberrations to be included in the register. There are simple forms available if you wish to make a report - please take one and get in touch with Martin. We hope that he will be able to talk to us on the subject later in the year.

Countryside Stewardship

During the last ten years there has been much controversy about the over-production of cereals within the EEC. This has largely been tackled by means of "Set-aside". Under the current regulations, farmers must not sow crops on 20% of their arable area in return for an area payment. This land must be returned to arable cultivation after one year, and it can be ploughed for weed control in May. There is therefore little of environmental benefit to be expected from these measures, although future plans may include longer-term managed set-aside.

A more constructive approach goes under the name of "Countryside Stewardship", an initiative of the Countryside Commission. This involves the withdrawal from arable farming of specific areas of land that are thought to have the greatest potential for wildlife. Wiltshire Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group are keen to establish the success of the new scheme, and have approached WBS for assistance in monitoring the flora of Countryside Stewardship sites.

This is potentially a very exciting project, and is an opportunity to carry out rewarding botanical recording that will contribute directly to the enhancement of Wiltshire's botanical diversity.

If you would like to take part in this project would you please contact either Phil Wilson (0725 20748) or Andrew Moorhouse, Wiltshire FWAG Officer (0380 723431).

P.W.

Finally, "Plant Life", which is an organisation specifically dedicated to the conservation of plants and their habitats, has sent us information about a "Great Hedge Survey" that they are conducting. They require interested people to survey a stretch of their own parish boundary hedge and record the details. They supply an explanatory leaflet containing a short questionnaire. Please take one or obtain one from Jack if you think you can help.

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Audrey Summers, Easton House, Easton Royal, Pewsey, SN9 5LS.
(0672) 810268.
Katie Hill, 31, Malthouse Close, Blunsdon, SN2 4BG.
(0793) 726371.

PS (handwritten) Standing order forms for subscriptions are available, and these can be obtained at the AGM or from Katie Hill (the treasurer/membership secretary)