

# WEG WATLINGTON ENVIRONMENT GROUP

A Walk on Watlington Hill - 24th June 2020 with Tanya Smith.



It was a sweltering hot Wednesday when my sister and I met for a wander and picnic at Watlington Hill. I was very glad to escape the stuffiness of sitting at the computer for a couple of hours. As we stepped out of the car we admired the *Prunus avium* cherries just beginning to ripen in the central island of the car park.



We meandered first down the path through the woods to the south and could hear treecreeper piping its squeaky song among the European larches *Larix decidua*. Squirrels were also playing above us and mewling at each other as they bounded between the trees.



After enjoying the reprieve of the cool yews lower down the path, we emerged into the open and the sight of the valley in the sun was dazzling. Several plants of *Blackstonia perfoliata* (photo overleaf - top left) were looking lovely on the right of footpath leading down the hill, mingling with the subtler yellows of agrimony *Agrimonia eupatoria* and wild mignonette *Reseda lutea* (overleaf top right).



The yellow theme continued as we climbed the hill to our right, treading over carpets of rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium* and tiny bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*.



Whitethroats were busily churring in the scrub and grasshoppers chirping. Dark green fritillaries & marbled whites flitted around us as we ate our sandwiches looking back down the hill over the woodland. I am not good at telling apart the fritillaries, but Sarah was able to identify them due to her experience of living at the edge of the Aston Rowant NNR and volunteering there.

Several bright red stars of robin's pincushion galls also shone out speckled over the ground – created by the gall wasp *Diplolepis rosae* for its young to develop, on tiny nibbled *Rosa* on top of the hillside.



Pink and white clusters of squinancywort nestled nearby too, Sarah and I both agreed that this is one of our favourite names for a chalk grassland plant – presumably derived from trying to pronounce the species name *Asperula cynanchia*.



We had managed to not meet another person since the start of our walk but once we got out onto the main hill, several other groups and families were out picnicking in the shade.



After completing a quick loop, Sarah sadly had to get back home for her work but I decided to take another half an hour to mooch around and take a few more photos. Apologies for the quality, taken by my iphone, it is usually reasonable but the brightness of the day and contrast made many appear a bit washed out. I hope you will be able to use your imagination to fill in the detail, as well as the smells and sounds!

Tiny delicate heath speedwell *Veronica officinalis* was hard to capture but thought I would include this one as it shows nicely the bristly texture of the short-cropped grassland at ground level, full of life. Stemless thistle *Cirsium acaule* added another dimension to the experience of being down on my belly among the plants!



On the northern facing slope, wild thyme *Thymus polytrichus* was forming gorgeous purple domes over the anthills.



To escape the heat of the sun for a while I scrambled into a path leading west through the scrub adjacent to hill road – there's a small opening from the first open northern facing hillside.

The wild privet *Ligustrum vulgare* was in full bloom and obligingly photogenic in the shadows, despite the pale creamy colour of its flowers.



Partway along this path, in deep scrub of privet, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, I stumbled across 12 stems of Deadly nightshade *Atropa Belladonna* at SU 70438 93688. Although the overall structure isn't exactly elegant, I always enjoy seeing this plant because of its spooky reputation. The leaves, stem, berries and roots all contain poisonous concentrations of atropine and scopolamine, which if ingested by humans cause hallucinations, convulsions and paralysis in the involuntary muscles of the body, including the heart.





A bulfinch was quietly singing very near to me as I crouched low to peer upwards into the mystical plum-coloured bell shaped flowers. Apparently the plant isn't deadly to every living creature, as some invertebrate had been making a good meal of it, leaving tiny perforations over all of the leaves. A quick google investigation revealed that some insects, birds, rabbits and cattle can eat deadly nightshade without supposed ill effects.

After arriving at the bottom of the slope nearest the town I veered back up again to the north, the gorse had all more or less finished flowering and was loudly popping its seeds into the air. Salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* had almost finished too but some stems were still putting on a show, necessary to kneel down again to appreciate. While on the floor I also helped myself to a few sweet ripe fruits from the wild strawberry *Fragaria vesca* which was fruiting abundantly.





At 2pm it was time to head home and the temperature was still steadily climbing. Before I disappeared back up the shady woodland path to the car park, I enjoyed the spectacle of a beautiful bright yellow carpet of St. John's worts *Hypericum hirsutum* and *H. perforatum* on the hillside at SU 70545 93459, the dark glands edging the sepals of the latter looking like tiny blackfly.



I am sorry to have missed out on a social walk and pub lunch with all of you in the Environment Group, but hope you are still able to continue your own rambles in nature. It has been lovely seeing and reading about everyone else's wildlife experiences in the excellent newsletter that Robert has been putting together for us. We shall make the most of sharing in this way until we can begin to meet up again!



Tanya Smith