

FIRST FLOWERING

A collective endeavour to keep track
of spring during the COVID-19 pandemic



Simon Leach

&

Members of the Somerset Rare Plants Group
(SRPG)

FIRST FLOWERING

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'Time is a spiral. What goes around comes around.'

Kathleen Jamie, *Surfacing*, 2019

*'... in autumn things fall apart, in spring things
come together'*

Tim Dee, *Greenery*, 2020

*'Obviously, spring is going to feel like
liberation.'*

Frederik Sjöberg, *The Fly Trap*, 2014

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Preface

We're not unusual, you know. There are little groups like ours all over the country—a network of botanists quietly pursuing their passion for plants. You won't tend to see us (or indeed many plants) on *Springwatch*, and we only very rarely make headlines. When people talk about 'wildlife' they don't usually mean the green stuff. On TV, animals stride and swagger across the plains, while plants just help with the scenery and provide a few of the props. You'd notice if they weren't there, of course, but they're terribly easy to ignore when they are. We are, on the whole, a quiet bunch, we tend not to blow trumpets; we're not the best at fighting our corner. It's not that we *choose* to keep out of the spotlight, but we do seem to be very good at that.

The Somerset Rare Plants Group has about eighty members (not all of them living in Somerset, as you'll discover). We would normally hold field meetings every two weeks between the start of April and the end of October, plus monthly indoor meetings during the winter. Our group's name is a bit of a misnomer, really, as we're deeply interested in *all* wild plants in Somerset, not just the rarities. In fact many of us are more interested in common plants than in anything you might call 'rare'. On the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, in February, we held what proved to be our last indoor gathering of the year. Our March meeting was cancelled, as was our entire programme of field meetings. This came as a considerable disappointment. Later in the year, like everyone else, we discovered new (online) ways of keeping in touch and sharing our discoveries; but field meetings, sadly, don't really work on Zoom.

Groups like ours are as much about the friendships as they are about the flowers. Well, of course, it's the botany that brings us together, but the group only survives to the extent that we enjoy each other's company. Finding ways of continuing to engage with one another was bound to be one of the challenges of lockdown. We wondered if a project to record first flowering dates, something I'd been doing on my home patch since 2008, might be worth a try—any of us could contribute to such an endeavour, however much

our lives had been curtailed by the regulations, the constraints on travel and exercise, and the requirement to stay at home. There'd be first flowerings wherever we spent our days: in the back garden, park or street; in the car park outside our house or flat; and in the lanes, hedgerows, fields and woods within walking distance of home.

As we went into lockdown, little did we know that we were about to bear witness to the most extraordinary spring in living memory. Week by week, regular first flowering updates would be posted on the group's website or circulated to members via email. Each piece would be a quick stitching together of everyone's latest observations, as we attempted to keep up with the year's vernal unravelling.

At the outset, we didn't intend that these (usually weekly) updates would end up appearing as a single account, let alone that they might be read by anyone beyond our small circle—so you'll have to excuse the occasional repetition, or the odd 'in joke' which could bemuse you if you don't know the personalities involved. It might seem all a bit rough round the edges; but, apart from a little tidying up, and a few corrections, we've tried to resist the temptation to do any kind of major overhaul—it is what it is, and we feel it would be dishonest to now go back and rework the pieces with the benefit of hindsight.

You'll doubtless be struck, too, by the mundanity of it all. This doesn't matter: indeed, one of the things we've learnt through the pandemic is that surprising and delightful moments can arise quite unexpectedly from the most mundane circumstances. This account is mostly, as you'd expect, about the plants; but you'll also find some reflection on how the pandemic—and the various restrictions and lockdowns we were living under—affected the way we viewed our lives and our relationship with the natural world. For many of us, there was something of an emotional re-calibration, a 'taking stock', whereby the ordinary, the everyday, the humdrum, began to be viewed in a new and sharper light. We emerged from the experience having

learnt things that we wouldn't have expected in mid-March when the shutters came down.

It is possibly true that, because of our confinement, we witnessed things that in a normal year we'd have (at best) under-appreciated or (at worst) overlooked entirely. In the absence of traffic noise—and the lack of planes passing overhead—many of us became acutely aware of birdsong; for others it was the flash of a butterfly's wing, or the snap and crackle of a dragonfly patrolling a river-bank. But mostly, as you'll find, it was the flowers that turned our heads and kept us sane.

You may read what follows and find you're put off by the seemingly endless lists of plant names. Unhelpfully, too, you'll discover that each species has two names, one English (e.g. Lesser Celandine), the other—*Ficaria verna* in this instance—often called the *Latin* name, although since many of these names are derived from Greek rather than Latin they're usually (and more properly) referred to as 'scientific' names¹. Some of our group know their English names better than their 'Latin', while others (like me) seem perversely to have a better grasp of 'Latin' than English. In my own case, this stems from discovering as a child that I could annoy my mother by reciting the 'Latin' names of wild flowers when we were out on country walks. Her good-natured irritation spurred me on to learn the scientific names. Holding the English names in my head is another matter entirely, and so one rule in writing up our observations was that we would always try to use both names, in the hope that gradually we would all become bilingual—me learning English, some others learning 'Latin'².

¹ There's also a convention that while English names are given in 'normal' type, the 'Latin' names are always *italicised*.

² We should probably point out, too, that plants frequently have *more* than two names. Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis*, is a good example, as many people (including myself) tend to call it Lady's-smock. And it might be worth saying here that scientific names can change, too. Common Ragwort, for instance, long known as *Senecio jacobaea*, has recently changed its name to *Jacobaea vulgaris*. These things are designed to keep us on our toes, and you'll see various references in the text to some of the most recent name changes.

Whatever our preferred language, though, botanists do like to be able to name the plants they come across. It can become a bit of an obsession, if I'm being honest. And because of this, plant names tend to rattle around in a botanist's brain like liquorice allsorts in a sweet jar. So when we go for a walk, even if we don't mean them to, the names keep popping into our heads. We see the plants and we just can't stop ourselves from naming them... And so the mental list gets longer and the names keep rattling about. "*Herb Robert, Herb Robert, Ground-ivy, Hemlock, more Herb Robert, Pellitory-of-the-Wall, more Herb Robert, MORE Herb Robert...!*" Be warned, a botanist may not be the best company on a countryside ramble: conversation can be difficult, progress is bound to be slow, and trains of thought can become disrupted by the names that keep pop-pop-popping into the brain. The constant 'name-popping' might seem to others like an unwelcome affliction, but to a botanist it does have its uses. It's one of the ways in which we're constantly trying to make sense of the world, and during the spring of 2020 our need for this *sense-making* seemed more urgent than ever. As the season advanced, so the names kept coming: from the first Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum maculatum*, in the middle of March, to Ivy, *Hedera helix*, toward the back end of August, the names just kept on coming; each week's roll call began to read like an incantation; each venturing outside, a litany of names...

Some would argue that this incessant *naming* of things affects our ability to just *appreciate* nature. Others, me included, would argue the opposite. Biodiversity is a wonderful thing, and names are important in enabling us to appreciate it fully. Without names, and the knack of being able to tell one plant from another, would we ever realise that in Somerset there are more than one-hundred-and-fifty different species of Dandelion? Names are important, then, as is the ability to distinguish each species from its closest lookalikes. Anyway, how could we possibly keep track of spring's *flowering* without calling out the species as they took the stage?

We all know, and feel 'in our bones', that spring without a Swallow just wouldn't be spring. That the same could be said of first-flowering Bird's-foot-

trefoil, *Lotus corniculatus*, may come as something of a surprise. While each of these may 'harbinger' spring as much as the other, most of us (most of the time) will be far more aware of the summer migrants flying in from above, than we are of these other harbingers coming at us from below, like the trefoil—the ones that emerge from the earth up, so to speak.

As it happens, today, more than thirteen months since the start of the first lockdown, I saw my first Bird's-foot-trefoil flowers of 2021. Earlier this week the thrill came from seeing (and listening to) my first Common Whitethroat, and then three days ago, we glimpsed our first Swifts. That the trefoil might be as thrilling as the Whitethroat, or even the Swift, may seem odd. All three of them are potent signs of spring, yet while the avian arrivals certainly help to anchor us to a particular point in the calendar—the last week of April, give or take a few days either way—the first-flowering trefoil, being a much more moveable event, tells us something of spring's *progress*. It pinpoints our position in the *season* rather than the *calendar*. Timing is everything, and today's trefoil hints to us that *this* spring, thanks in part to the frostiest April since records began, is lagging about ten days behind last year's balmy lockdown spring. But, worryingly, it's also letting us know that today's springs, even this one, are actually about two weeks *earlier*—and they progress much faster—than those our grandparents would have lived through. The world is changing, and each year's first flowerings, like today's Bird's-foot-trefoil, speak this truth as loudly as (or maybe louder than?) the Whitethroat or the Swift.

In 2020, the simple daily act of noticing which plants had just begun flowering was one of the things that helped us navigate through the year. For our little group, the flowers were like stepping stones, way-markers, pin-pricks of light and colour in the darkness. With these first flowerings we made a daisy chain (of sorts) that kept us all roped together during a difficult and deeply troubling time.

Taunton
2nd May 2021

Acknowledgements

Heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed, whether members of our group or not; without you the project wouldn't have existed and there would have been very little to write about. Thanks to Dee, as well, for her editorial input to an earlier version of the text which appeared, in part, in issue 21 of the Somerset Rare Plants Group's annual newsletter.

We have decided against giving here a full list of the more than fifty people involved in the project. But equally, we felt it would be wrong not to give recorders credit in the text for their observations through the year. Therefore, as in the original progress reports posted on the SRPG website, we have stuck to using contributors' first names throughout. A few first names—Ann, Chris, David, Ian, Karen, Sue—apply to more than one person. We use numbers to distinguish between them: so you'll find, for example, that there's a 'Chris1' and a 'Chris2', along with Davids 1, 2 and 3!

On a personal note, I should explain that Vicki features in these pages by virtue of being my long-suffering partner. Our younger son Ben also makes the odd appearance as he lived with us during the first lockdown when furloughed from his part-time job in London and after his university course became 'virtual' due to the virus. Neither would claim to be especially interested in botany, but they often got pulled in whether they liked it or not, and they seemed to tolerate my year-long obsession with only the occasional flicker of irritation. Gilly, on the other hand, is a dog. She contributed nothing to the project, other than through her twice-daily insistence that walks should continue through even the tightest lockdowns. Her impatience and enthusiasm for life were limitless. By driving us mad she unwittingly helped to keep us sane.

18th March - 116³

Getting started - the dog & the *Arum*

I was walking Gilly down by the river yesterday morning, reflecting on the general grimness of our present situation, and expecting that many of us will now be taking steps towards self-isolation/social distancing. And reflecting, too, on the likelihood that our spring and summer meetings programme may also end up having to be substantially curtailed or cancelled.

I was also lamenting the fact that my recording of first flowering dates, or FFDs for short, has been a bit lackadaisical lately, not least because I just haven't really been feeling in the mood for it. And then I saw my first Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum maculatum*, and immediately I felt I wanted to share the enjoyment of it with the rest of the group. Seeing something is one thing, sharing what you've seen with your mates is another thing entirely...

Anyway, I sat with the *Arum* while the dog chewed a stick, and it got me thinking that maybe others in the group might also enjoy helping to record some of this year's first flowerings. What I've got in mind is something along the following lines: I would endeavour to send an email each week to Ellen, for onward circulation round the group. This would include a list of, say, ten to twenty species needing to be looked for in flower during that week, and would ask anyone venturing out to let me know if they'd seen any of them. No need for lengthy details: just the species, date and a rough location will do. And then, following the first email, weekly 'round robins' would summarise highlights of the previous week, and give a list of the next species to be targeted.

³ For much of the year, government Coronavirus briefings and figures for 'positive cases', hospital admissions and deaths, were a daily reminder of the awfulness playing out around us – like a constant drum beat in the background (and sometimes the foreground) of our lives. It felt wrong not to acknowledge this in some way; so, throughout this account, at the head of each diary entry or 'chapter' we have noted the official figure for reported deaths from COVID-19 in the UK on the date when it was written.

I floated the idea round a few in the group, and there was a general feeling this could be a good thing to try. Several people have suggested more sophisticated ways of keeping in contact and ‘posting’ our observations directly on the website, so maybe this could morph in the coming weeks into something less ‘clunky’ than round-robin emails⁴. Who knows? But, for this week anyway, let’s just make a start and then see where it takes us. We’ll run the weeks from Thursday to Wednesday, so Week 1 starts tomorrow. But bear in mind this is supposed to be fun, so only take part if you really fancy it, and just dip in and out as you wish.

Now, as you’ll have already noticed, this year spring seems to be very early. Having recorded first flowerings in the Taunton area for twelve years now, for three-hundred-and-thirty-nine species I can look back at average FFDs for the decade 2008-17 to see how this year compares. On the basis of these ‘decadal averages’ I would have expected species coming into flower in the next week or so to have included Moschatel, *Adoxa moschatellina*, Wood Anemone, *Anemone nemorosa*, Greater Stitchwort, *Stellaria holostea*, Rue-leaved saxifrage, *Saxifraga tridactylites*, Spotted Medick, *Medicago arabica*, Laurel, *Prunus laurocerasus*, Hairy Violet, *Viola hirta*, Wood Spurge, *Euphorbia amygdaloides* and Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*. But none of these are on the first list of target species because, at least on my home patch, they’ve already started flowering. Are they in bloom yet in your own area, I wonder? If they aren’t, it might be interesting to see when they *do* start flowering—so do do let me know your first dates for these if you get them coming into flower over the next week or two.

Right then: Week 1, 19th – 25th March. And here’s a list of nineteen species that could be ‘next in line’ to start flowering (probably in the next ten to twenty days or so), but which aren’t yet blooming in the Taunton area.

Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*; Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*; Garlic Mustard, *Alliaria petiolata*; Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis*;

⁴ An SRPG WhatsApp Group was created at the end of June, and became an important means of communicating new sightings.

Wood-sedge, *Carex sylvatica*; Common Stork's-bill, *Erodium cicutarium*; Cleavers, *Galium aparine*; Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*; Yellow Archangel, *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum*; Field Wood-rush, *Luzula campestris*; Hairy Wood-rush, *Luzula pilosa*; Cowslip, *Primula veris*; Goldilocks Buttercup, *Ranunculus auricomus*; Crack-willow, *Salix fragilis*; Charlock, *Sinapis arvensis*; Hedge Mustard, *Sisymbrium officinale*; Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*; Germander Speedwell, *Veronica chamaedrys*; Common Dog-violet, *Viola riviniana*.

Have you seen any of these yet? If you have, or when you *do* see them, let me know. And also try to keep a note of *anything* that you think might be especially early—it may be on a later list and you'll be kicking yourself that you never jotted it down.

25th March - 703

Week 1 of lockdown - moschatel, wood-rush...

A fantastic response: I've been inundated, and some really good records too. I'm starting to wish we'd set up something like this a few years ago. Thanks to everyone who emailed, texted or 'WhatsApped' during the week.

I listed nine species that had already been seen in flower in the Taunton area, but which I would have expected, in a 'normal' year, to start flowering during the week just gone. Of these, no-one reported seeing Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, or Wood Spurge, *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, but I think the rest were all mentioned in dispatches. Several people had first-flowering Moschatel, *Adoxa moschatellina*, this week: Margaret near Lords Wood on the 12th, David1 in the Portishead area on the 15th, Steve in North Petherton on the 16th or 17th, Gill at Postlebury on the 20th, Caroline at Tivington (near Minehead) on the 21st, and Georgina at Nordrach on Mendip on the 23rd. (My own date in the Taunton area was the 14th, at Fyne Court.)

Our Week 1 target list comprised nineteen species, twelve of which were recorded in flower by at least one person during the week⁵. This was clearly 'wood-rush week'. Many people (although not me, sadly) are starting to see Field Wood-rush, *Luzula campestris*, in flower. Unfortunately the places where I might go to see it here aren't really within easy walking distance, and I now have no car—for reasons too complicated to explain here. (And not sure, anyway, how useful a car would actually be, with full lockdown having kicked in on the 23rd.) David1 had it—that's *Luzula*, not the car—in Portishead on the 15th, Liz in Wedmore on the 18th, Steve in North Petherton around the 17th, Gill at Postlebury on the 20th, Margaret at Winford on the 21st, and Caroline, on her lawn in Minehead, on the 22nd. Hairy Wood-rush, *Luzula pilosa*, was also spotted in flower, by me on the 20th, at Thurlbear, and by Caroline at Tivington on the 21st.

⁵ Throughout this account *target* species for the week in question are shown with their scientific names **emboldened**.

Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis*, had already been seen by a few of you during the two weeks prior to the start of lockdown: for example, Georgina had it in flower at Hinton Blewett on the 11th, and Margaret near Lords Wood on the 12th. These are much earlier dates than my own in previous years for the Taunton area, but this is probably because it doesn't seem to be terribly common around here—so the chances of stumbling across it when it's just beginning to bloom are much lower as a result.

Wood-sedge, *Carex sylvatica*, was already flowering at Thurlbear on the 20th, and then on the 22nd Margaret spotted it at Bithams Wood. She also spied a single flower of Goldilocks Buttercup, *Ranunculus auricomus*, and some (unusually early) Sweet Vernal-grass, *Anthoxanthum odoratum*. Also very early was Warfaring-tree, *Viburnum lantana*, seen by me near Corfe on the 19th—thirteen days earlier than my previous earliest, in 2012.

Cowslips, *Primula veris*, have been popping into flower all over the place, three of us all reporting them for the first time on the 20th: me at Thurlbear, Ro at Kilton Church, and David1 at Portishead. Caroline and Linda have both seen Common Dog-violet, *Viola riviniana*, with Linda spotting it in her garden.

Only two people have so far reported Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum maculatum*, the species that set this hare running in the first place. Ro saw it, in all its glory, on the 22nd in Lilstock, while Helena had it in her garden on the 24th, her delight at seeing it being pinged through as a WhatsApp message complete with a very nice photo!

As yet, we have had only singleton records for Common Stork's-bill, *Erodium cicutarium* (Margaret, on the 20th at Sand Bay), Yellow Archangel, *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum* (Linda, on the 23rd in woods up near Wellington Monument), and Cleavers, *Galium aparine* (me, Holway Hill, Taunton, on the 22nd); plus there have been two records for Germander

Speedwell, *Veronica chamaedrys*—Andrew, in Weston-super-Mare on the 23rd, and Ro, at Kilve/Lilstock on the 25th.

Taken overall, these dates are mostly very early in comparison with 2008-17 average FFDs for the Taunton area. This week, Garlic Mustard, *Alliaria petiolata*, Common Dog-violet, Cuckooflower, Goldilocks Buttercup, Wood-sedge, Cleavers, and Bush-vetch, *Vicia sepium*, all recorded their earliest FFDs 'since records began' (i.e. since 2008). And, last but not least, I had Wood Melick, *Melica uniflora*, on the 20th at Thurlbear—an extraordinary date, almost four weeks earlier than my previous earliest back in 2008 and 2011.

* * *

On to Week 2 which runs from tomorrow, 26th March, until next Wednesday, April Fools' Day. We've had sunny days and frosty nights lately (frosts even in Taunton), and the forecast for the next few days is dry and sunny too—which makes it deeply frustrating that there is now an increasingly urgent demand from Government that we stay at home and only venture forth for essential journeys, and for purposes of daily exercise. Any continuation of this little project will obviously have to work within these understandable and necessary constraints.

If you live in the countryside, of course, you may be able to get out a little more easily (and have more botanically productive habitats close to hand) than those of us in the towns; but all of us, wherever we live, will be finding getting out to botanise less and less easy over the coming days and weeks.

It's surprising, though, how much one can see in one's local street, hedgebank, park or road verge, and even, of course, in one's own garden—as shown by Linda's Common Dog-violet, Caroline's Field Wood-rush, and Helena's Lords-and-Ladies. This week, during my regular garden patrols (which now include, much to the amusement of neighbours, a few press-ups and 'standing runs'), I have seen Bee-flies, *Bombylius major*, and Flower Bees,

Anthophora plumipes, as well as Small Tortoiseshell, *Aglais urticae*, Comma, *Polygonia c-album*, Holly Blue, *Celastrina argiolus*, and Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*. And whenever we sit on the garden bench, a friendly Peacock comes and perches on the wall beside us. That's the butterfly, *Aglais io*, not the bird.

On the botanical front, too, things are gathering pace in the garden—Lesser Celandines, *Ficaria verna*, are at full throttle, Dandelions, *Taraxacum* spp, are starting to look their best too, and there are Primroses, *Primula vulgaris*, and Early Dog-violets, *Viola reichenbachiana*, everywhere.

So, despite the constraints of the Coronavirus lockdown, I thought it would still be worthwhile sending out a Week 2 list of seventeen potential targets, seven of which are carried over from last week, namely:

Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*; Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*; Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*; Crack-willow, *Salix fragilis*; Charlock, *Sinapis arvensis*; Hedge Mustard, *Sisymbrium officinale*; Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*.

But to these we can now add the following ten species:

Bugle, *Ajuga reptans*; Glaucous Sedge, *Carex flacca*; Pendulous Sedge, *Carex pendula*; Beaked Hawk's-beard, *Crepis vesicaria*; Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*; Dove's-foot Crane's-bill, *Geranium molle*; Hedgerow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pyrenaicum*; Meadow Buttercup, *Ranunculus acris*; Red Clover, *Trifolium pratense*; Common Vetch, *Vicia sativa*.

And one more to look forward to, probably not until the 1st or 2nd week of April, but – who knows? – it could *just* make an appearance in March: Early-purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula*.

1st April - 3,125

Week 2 - email heaven - the joy of
spread-sheets - cowslips, foxtails &
crane's-bills

Each evening I peer into my email in-box to view the little parcels of unopened treasure stacked up in a column, with subject titles like 'flowering dates', 'first flowerings', 'FFDs', 'Carex?' and 'Only Charlock!'. This is *almost* as good as having been there in the field with you and seen them myself. It's been a remarkably good week for records, too, despite the extent to which daily activities have been curtailed by the Coronavirus lockdown. In fact, you've submitted so many records I've had to construct a spread-sheet to hold them all; which means that I can now sort the records by date, species, recorder, etc.

Anyway, thanks to everyone for sending in their sightings. In all, there were more than one-hundred records in Week 2, covering at least fifty species. If Week 1 was Wood-rush week, Week 2 was more about Cowslips and Foxtails. As reported last time, Cowslip, *Primula veris*, was seen by three of us on the 20th, but these widely separated early records heralded a wave of first flowerings for this species across the county: Linda saw her first, near Wellington, on the 23rd, Helena had them flowering well in her garden in Paulton on the 26th, and then there were records from Somerton on the 27th (David3), and Chewton Mendip (Ellen) and Winford (Margaret) on the 28th. Meadow Foxtail, *Alopecurus pratensis*, wasn't on the target list – omitted because it had already been found flowering exceptionally early, on the 18th, in Taunton. That didn't stop a surge of first dates for it during the week, though, from Brent Knoll (Andrew), Winford/Frog Lane (Margaret), Postlebury (Gill), Paulton (Helena) and Clevedon (Dee).

Turning now to the seventeen target species for Week 2, a total of twelve were seen either during the week or, in one or two instances, towards the end of the previous week. Running through them in alphabetical order...

Horse Chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*, began flowering in French Weir Park (Taunton) on the 30th. It always seems to be the same tree each year, but still a very early date for a species that would normally be at its peak of flowering at the start of May, just when the Swifts return.

Glaucous Sedge, *Carex flacca*, was seen at Brent Knoll on the 30th (Andrew) and at Kilve today, 1st April (Ro). Very early dates! Pendulous Sedge, *Carex pendula*, has been seen too, in Wellington on the 29th (Linda), and along the banks of the Sherford stream, Taunton, on the 31st (Simon). In a matter of days we'll probably find it popping into flower right across the county. (Also on the sedge front, Andrew recorded Wood-sedge, *Carex sylvatica*, flowering at Brent Knoll; that's a third record to add to the two from Week 1.)

So far, just the one record of Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*, from Wooten Hall on the 24th (Ellen). I saw it in bud in Thurlbear Wood on the 20th, but haven't been back since, for obvious reasons. I imagine some of the woodland paths up there to be lined with its star-burst of flowers by now; I absolutely *love* Woodruff, and it's intensely frustrating that I can't pop out there to see it...

Or maybe Week 2 should be called 'Geranium week'. We had three of them on our hit list, and all of them have been notched up by someone somewhere in the county. Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*, was seen by Margaret at Winford/Frog Lane on the 26th, and by Steve in North Petherton on the 27th. I've been searching hard for this in Taunton – as Vicki will testify – but maddeningly there's been no sign of it in flower yet, although (slight digression) several patches of it have had leaf-roll galls caused by the mite, *Aceria geranii*. Dove's-foot Crane's-bill, *Geranium molle*, is *just* starting to flower now in Taunton – first seen this morning, down near the cricket ground, while Andrew also had it today at Brent Knoll. The first sighting of it, though, was by Steve, in North Petherton, on the 28th. Hedgerow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pyrenaicum*, too, was on my tally of 'new flowerers' this morning, at Firepool Weir, but Jeanne reported it already in bloom last week,

on the 21st, on the roundabout at Tropiquaria – while, needless to say, she was out there sampling Dandelions, *Taraxacum* spp.

Meadow Buttercup, *Ranunculus acris*, has now been seen by three people: Caroline, in Minehead, actually saw it *last* week, on the 21st, while Steve had it in North Petherton on the 27th and Gill, at Postlebury, on the 30th. In Taunton there's plenty of Bulbous Buttercup, *R. bulbosus*, on the road verges especially, but still no sign of *R. acris*.

Of the willows, Crack-willow, *Salix fragilis*, catkins are about the last to appear. Goat Willow, *S. caprea*, and Sallow, *S. cinerea*, were both 'flowering' in the last week of February, but it's only this week that Crack-willow has finally made its appearance. Jeanne saw it on the 24th in the community orchard in Old Cleeve, while I had it on the 28th, on the banks of the River Tone. Today, during daily exercise, I noticed that many Crack-willow trees are now in catkin, and looking very splendid too.

Dee got in touch to say she'd recorded Charlock, *Sinapis arvensis*, flowering in Clevedon on the 19th, at the start of Week 1, but the only other record for this species was today, from Helena. Ro had Hedge Mustard, *Sisymbrium officinale*, at Kilve/Lilstock on the 22nd, while it was also seen in Taunton on the 27th (Simon) and North Petherton on the 28th (Steve).

Common Chickweed, *Stellaria media*, is a plant you can find in flower pretty much at any time of the year, but its larger cousin, Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*, doesn't tend to flower until the end of March or early April. And, as if on cue, two of you have seen it this week: Steve in North Petherton, and Linda in Wellington—both on the 27th.

Amongst other noteworthy finds of the week were: Tormentil, *Potentilla erecta*, seen by Pat out at Nettlecombe on the 31st; Hemlock Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe crocata*, also by Pat, on the 26th, a *very* early record; Hemlock, *Conium maculatum*, by me, this morning, down at Firepool Weir where it was growing on waste ground close to the Hedgerow Crane's-bill;

and a second very early record for Wood Melick, this one by Anne from near Rodney Stoke on the 25th.

We have also had records this week for Wild Strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*, while two more records for Wood Spurge, *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, and three for Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, provide ample evidence—along with the Woodruff and Wood-sedge already mentioned—that spring is bounding along in our woods.

The strangest find of the week for me, though, was on the 29th when I stumbled upon a young tree of Bird Cherry, *Prunus padus*, growing near the River Tone in a strip of rough secondary woodland behind 'Go Outdoors'. I was flabbergasted. And it was blooming nicely too. I was absolutely *convinced* this would be a new monad for it, maybe even a new tetrad or hectad. No such luck; a quick look on the BSBI database showed that it had already been recorded, at that very spot, in 2019. *What?* I couldn't *believe* it! Who could possibly have recorded it there? On *my* patch! And then I looked again and saw, to my amazement, that the recorder's name matched my own...

* * *

Week 3, if you're up for it, runs from tomorrow, 2nd April, until next Wednesday 8th April. Five species are carried over from last week, namely:

Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*; Bugle, *Ajuga reptans*; Beaked Hawk's-beard, *Crepis vesicaria*; Red Clover, *Trifolium pratense*; Common Vetch, *Vicia sativa*.

To which we can now add the following ten species:

Barren Brome, *Anisantha sterilis*; Winter-cress, *Barbarea vulgaris*; Greater Pond-sedge, *Carex riparia*; Lesser Swine-cress, *Lepidium didymum* (= *Coronopus didymus*); Early-purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula*; Elder, *Sambucus*

nigra; Common Comfrey, *Symphytum officinale*; Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*; Common Nettle, *Urtica dioica*; Wood Speedwell, *Veronica montana*.

Hopefully this gives you a decent range of species to look out for, whether you're in the sticks or an out-and-out townie. If spring continues advancing at the same pace as it has up until now, we probably ought to have knocked all these off by about the 12th.

By which time the Swallows will be back.

8th April – 8,575

Week 3 – summer migrants – Mendip goodies –
precocious umbellifers

Self-evident, I know, but it's still amazing how no sooner than one week ends, the next begins. There's no let up, is there? A steady flow of emails and WhatsApp messages too. The spread-sheet is proving its worth, all the records neatly stacked and sorted. Without it I'd be in a complete pickle by now.

The warm weather, especially in the last couple of days, has really kept spring rattling along nicely. Not botany, I know, but yesterday several of you reported your first Orange Tips, *Anthocharis cardamines*. (I saw my first this morning when walking out to Roughmoor.) Also yesterday we had our first Small Whites, *Pieris rapae*, here, while two days ago there was a big arrival of Willow Warblers. We had one singing in a neighbour's garden first thing in the morning; then along the River Tone, between Obridge and Creech Castle, I counted at least twenty in full song where two days earlier there'd been none. Several of you have reported Swallows, too, suggesting that many summer migrants have been arriving in the last few days, no doubt helped on their way by the southerly breeze.

In spite of the continuing lockdown, fourteen of you have submitted records during the week, which is a considerable achievement in the circumstances. It may be different in the countryside, of course, but in town the police are now a much more visible presence, with regular patrols of parks and open spaces to break up any gatherings and to check that no-one's exercising further away from home than strictly necessary. For now, though, we have continued to do our usual daily walks, which means being out of the house for about an hour-and-a-half. Having a dog seems to help, and it certainly *feels* less problematic botanising in town when Gilly's trotting along beside me. It's as if a dog provides an immediately obvious explanation for why one might be 'out and about', and so much easier to just say you're walking the

dog than having to acknowledge that what you're really doing is peering at plants.

So, it's been another good week for first flowerings. In all, we made more than eighty records in Week 3, and these included first sightings for more than two-thirds of the target species. But before we get to these, let's have a quick look at some of the species you've found that *weren't* targets. These include a few real rarities, like Spring Cinquefoil, *Potentilla verna*, which was recorded flowering at Black Rock (Cheddar) by Georgina on 31st March – so actually at the end of Week 2 – and Alpine Penny-cress, *Noccaea caerulea*, also found by Georgina, this time at Blackmoor, on the 2nd. And she attached a lovely photo to prove it, too. Such Mendip specialities seem a world away at the moment to those of us holed up in the 'deep south'.

It's also been a surprisingly good week for umbellifers, with some *incredibly* early sightings of three species that one wouldn't really expect to see in flower until late June, or even July. Ro saw Wild Parsnip, *Pastinaca sativa*, in flower at Lilstock on the 5th, while Georgina had Rough Chervil, *Chaerophyllum temulum*, at Ubley Drove on the 2nd (both records supported by super photos); and then today, to cap it all, Andrew reported Upright Hedge-parsley, *Torilis japonica*, flowering at Brent Knoll. Extraordinary! Will these prove to be 'one-off' anomalies, I wonder? Certainly, it would be worth the rest of us keeping an eye out for these species in the coming weeks.

An unusual record of my own, on the 6th, was Subterranean Clover, *Trifolium subterraneum*, several patches of which were flowering in a road verge near the roundabout by the Shell garage on Priory Bridge Road, Taunton. It was growing there with flowering Dove's-foot Crane's-bill, *Geranium molle*, and Scarlet Pimpernel, *Lysimachia* (= *Anagallis*) *arvensis*. Another highlight of the week was Crosswort, *Cruciata laevipes*, seen by Pat at Nettlecombe on the 5th, while she was also able to confirm this week an earlier sighting of Three-nerved Sandwort, *Moehringia trinervia*, on 31st March.

For some species I've been playing 'catch-up' this week, including Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis*, (Longrun Meadow) and Goldilocks Buttercup, *Ranunculus auricomus* (Cotlake Hill), both on the 5th, and at last, Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*, on the 6th, in a flower bed on Eastbourne Road, Taunton.

Turning now to the fifteen target species for Week 3, eleven were seen by one or more of us, either during the week or, in one or two instances, towards the end of the previous week. Running through them in alphabetical order...

Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*, was recorded by David1 on the 1st, at a location 'up north' to such an extent that it was actually just in VC34 apparently. We'll let him have it though, shall we? On the 7th Anne reported Sycamore flowering on Mendip, while I had two trees starting to flower in Taunton, also on the 7th. (Incidentally, Caroline, in Minehead, had her first Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*, flowers on 29th March, and she says that her earliest blossom, like mine, seems to be on the same tree each year.)

Barren Brome, *Anisantha sterilis*, was actually seen by Andrew flowering on Brent Knoll last week, on 30th March, while this week we've had three more records for Sweet Vernal-grass, *Anthoxanthum odoratum* – Helena in Paulton, Pat at Nettlecombe, and me in Longrun Meadow, all of them today. Helena has also notched up the first record of flowering Winter-cress, *Barbarea vulgaris*, on a road verge in Paulton, while David1 and Andrew both reported having seen American Winter-cress, *Barbarea verna*, during the week. *B. verna* is actually quite a scarce plant in Somerset, and an introduction, whereas *B. vulgaris* is a widespread native, pretty common through most of the county apart from in the far west. I've seen the latter in bud this week, but not yet in flower.

Chris2 had Greater Pond-sedge, *Carex riparia*, flowering in the Molly Brook—a tributary of the River Chew—on the 1st, while I had it just starting to flower on the River Tone in Taunton on the 5th. (Pendulous Sedge, *Carex pendula*,

by the way, is now flowering in many places in the Taunton area, although it has yet to be reported from other parts of the county.)

I saw a just-opening ‘capitulum’ of Beaked Hawk’s-beard, *Crepis vesicaria*, in Taunton today, along with flowering Lesser Swine-cress, *Lepidium didymum*. Both of these I’d happily swap, however, for the Early-purple Orchids, *Orchis mascula*, seen this week—by Chris1 on the 2nd at Langford Budville, Pat at Nettlecombe on the 5th, and Hilary on Hutton Hill (near Weston-super-Mare) on the 7th. Linda’s Early-purple Orchids were *in bud* in woodland below Wellington Monument on the 7th, so will surely be blooming there by the middle of Week 4. (She also saw Wood Sorrel, *Oxalis acetosella*, on the 7th. Has anyone else seen this in flower yet?)

Red Clover, *Trifolium pratense*, is starting to make its presence felt, with records of it flowering on the 2nd and 5th in Taunton (me) and on the 7th in Wellington (Linda). Common Nettle, *Urtica dioica*, has also made its first appearance this week, being seen flowering in Taunton today (me).

And finally a couple of ‘V’s—Wood Speedwell, *Veronica montana*, which was seen by Anne at Hill Lane (Mendip) on the 2nd, and by Andrew on Brent Knoll today. And while Andrew was busy racking up first-flowerers on the Knoll (lucky sod) I was scuffing about the not-so-salubrious verges of Taunton, with dog by my side, where as well as Beaked Hawk’s-beard, Lesser Swine-cress and Common Nettle I also spotted a single but very ‘showy’ flower of Common Vetch, *Vicia sativa*. The plant was on the grassy bank beside Tangier car-park, just a stone’s throw from Riverside Chambers, where Natural England used to have its local HQ, and where I spent many a long year filling in spread-sheets, writing reports and generally keeping my nose clean.

Those were the days...

* * *

Right, here we go again—Week 4. First, we have four species carried over from last week, namely:

Bugle, *Ajuga reptans*; Elder, *Sambucus nigra*; Common Comfrey, *Symphytum officinale*; Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*.

To which we can add the following twelve species:

Greater Celandine, *Chelidonium majus*; Cut-leaved Crane's-bill, *Geranium dissectum*; Cat's-ear, *Hypochaeris radicata*; Ox-eye Daisy, *Leucanthemum vulgare*; Bird's-foot-trefoil, *Lotus corniculatus*; Smooth/Spreading Meadow-grass, *Poa pratensis/humilis*; Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*; Salad-burnet, *Poterium sanguisorba*; Broad-leaved Dock, *Rumex obtusifolius*; Procumbent Pearlwort, *Sagina procumbens*; Sanicle, *Sanicula europaea*; Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*.

As last week, this should give you a decent range of species to watch out for in your local patch, whether that's the back garden or slightly further afield while taking your permitted exercise—with or without a dog! You'll see that I've included Ox-eye Daisy, even though on road verges in Taunton it's been flowering—much like Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium* and Cock's-foot, *Dactylis glomerata*—since the start of the year. It would be good, though, to see if we can get a date for it away from road verges, i.e. in 'proper' grassland.

15th April – 14, 993

Week 4 – Tim Dee's *Greenery* – woodruff at Thurlbear – whitethroats – unseasonal betony

This morning I took delivery of *Greenery: Journeys in Springtime*, a new book by Tim Dee⁶. If you haven't read anything by Tim Dee, he's well worth a try. His latest book is a fitting accompaniment to what we're trying to capture about *this* spring, the spring of 2020, in our own particular neck of the woods. Tim Dee resides for much of each year in Bristol, and his parents live in Minehead. So our own neck of the woods is his, too. You'll find references in *Greenery* to many familiar places—Dunkery Beacon, Horner Wood, Dolebury Warren, Black Down, Burrington Combe, Ham Wall—as well as to many *less* familiar, in East Anglia, Africa and Scandinavia, for example. It's a book about places, yes, but it's also a book about life and death, about happy coincidences, about loss and longing. About spring, but also about the *meaning* of spring.

My own week has included several highlights, not all of them botanical, but the best of the lot came on Bank Holiday Monday when Ben persuaded me to 'break cover' and dare to head out of town to Thurlbear Wood. In the car it took us nine minutes to get there, and seven to get back—being downhill on the return leg—so it was, I admit, *marginally* further away from home than the five-minute 'guideline' for how far you can drive to reach a place for purposes of taking your daily exercise. It was strange to be sitting in a car again—my first trip out on four wheels in almost a month—and when we reached the wood I felt slightly light-headed, woozy. The wide open spaces seemed to me to be somehow *wider* than I remembered them, the lush greenery seemed *greener* and *lusher* than I had anticipated. The Bluebells, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, carpeting the woodland floor, were somehow *bluer*—but the star-bursts of Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*, lining the paths were just as I was expecting them to be. We walked in the woods for about

⁶ Published by Jonathan Cape, London. ISBN: 9781787330559.

an hour, Gilly having a field day with sticks, me having a field day with flowers. We met one other person up there, so social distancing was a doddle. I think it may have been the Bluebells, but I got a bit emotional; and it was a reminder, if I needed it, to never take a place like this for granted ever again.

So, spring continues its glorious gallop towards summer, a fact reflected over and over again in this week's batch of FFDs. Of course, the weather helps, doesn't it? It's been a dry week, and for the most part remarkably sunny and warm; here in Taunton we had four days in a row—Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday—with temperatures above 23°C. By my reckoning, it was the warmest, and sunniest, Easter weekend for at least a quarter of a century. And while the sunshine has continued, the last couple of clear nights have produced grass frosts, even here in the middle of Taunton.

Let's begin, like last time, with a few *non*-botanical happenings. It's been another good week for butterflies: Orange Tips, *Anthocharis cardamines*, all over the place, plus our first Green-veined Whites, *Pieris napi*, on the 9th, Speckled Woods, *Pararge aegeria*, on the 10th, and then this morning (15th) the first Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*, of the year. Flower bees, *Anthophora plumipes*, and Bee-flies, *Bombylius major*, continue to patrol the Lungwort, *Pulmonaria officinalis*, and Primroses, *Primula vulgaris*, in the back garden, while Mason Bees, *Osmia* sp., emerged about a week ago and are busy around the 'bee boxes'. We've also noticed in town large numbers of mining bees (not sure which species) nesting on patches of bare, dry soil. Many such areas seem to be far less disturbed/trampled than usual, so this could prove to be an excellent year for mining bees.

On the bird front, last week's 'fall' of Willow Warblers proved to be a transient affair; no sooner had they arrived than they left again, and I haven't heard one since. But other summer visitors have taken their place. On the 10th, Sand Martins were back at their little colony beneath a road bridge at Creech Castle, Taunton—their nest-sites situated in drain pipes set into a concrete retaining wall. Then today Vicki had House Martins at the junction of Priory Avenue and St Augustine Street, near the cricket ground, while I

enjoyed ten minutes listening to my first Whitethroat, singing lustily from a hedgerow on the northern flank of Cotlake Hill, Trull. Whitethroats make me smile. They seem to take everything terribly seriously, and get so easily agitated.

Turning now to botany, it's been another bumper week for first flowerings. Very many thanks, once again, to everyone for sending in their records. During Week 4 we made, between us, more than one-hundred-and-thirty records involving at least seventy-five species. And who would have anticipated that this week's offering would include rarities such as Petty Whin, *Genista anglica* (Langford Heathfield, on the 14th, seen by Chris1), Soft-leaved Sedge, *Carex montana* (Ubley Warren, on the 8th, Georgina), and Green-winged Orchid, *Anacamptis morio* (Stoke Camp, Mendip, on the 10th, seen by Georgina's niece, with a pin-sharp WhatsApp photo to prove it)?

This week we had sixteen target species to look out for, four of them carried over from 'Week 3'. Between us, we saw eleven of them during the week. Here's a summary, in (roughly) alphabetical order...

The first report of Bugle, *Ajuga reptans*, was on the 5th. It came from Libby, who saw it in her garden—the proper wild plant, not a garden variety—but then she realised that it shouldn't really count because she doesn't *quite* live in Somerset. The first records for Somerset *sensu stricto* came a few days later, when Margaret saw it at Winford on the 12th, and then it was recorded at Thurlbear (me) and near Wellington (Linda) on the 13th.

I have still not seen Greater Celandine, *Chelidonium majus*, flowering in Taunton—although my chances have diminished significantly as a result of Vicki's enthusiastic weeding of the back path (a former stronghold for it) over Easter weekend. However, Linda produced a photo of it in flower which she'd taken in Wellington on 21st March—a very early date—while Alastair saw it flowering in Minehead a few days later, on the 25th. The only person to see it coming into flower during Week 4 was Andrew, in Brent Knoll village on the 9th.

And now for a few grassland species. I had my first Cat's-ear, *Hypochaeris radicata*, on the 14th, in a front garden on South Road, while two of you recorded Bird's-foot-trefoil, *Lotus corniculatus*, this week—Andrew at Cross Quarry on the 12th, and Hilary at Bleadon Hill on the 13th. No doubt others will follow in the days ahead. Smooth/Spreading Meadow-grass, *Poa pratensis/humilis*, was noted on Taunton road verges for the first time on the 14th, while Salad-burnet, *Poterium sanguisorba*, was one of a whole clutch of first-flowerers up at Thurlbear on the 13th, although Andrew had already seen it flowering on Brent Knoll on the 10th.

Broad-leaved Dock, *Rumex obtusifolius*, and Common Comfrey, *Symphytum officinale*, were both found *just* starting to flower in Taunton, by the River Tone, on the 11th. The comfrey was more than three weeks later than last year's FFD, possibly delayed due to high river levels and flooding in February and early March. Other early-flowering comfreys reported during the week included White Comfrey, *S. orientale*, and Creeping Comfrey, *S. grandiflorum*.

Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, was seen in Henlade on the 12th, my third earliest FFD for this species in the last twelve years. Pat also had it on the 12th, at Nettlecombe, while Andrew saw it on the 14th, at Brent Knoll. Sanicle, *Sanicula europaea*, also recorded its third-earliest FFD, being about three weeks earlier than the average FFD for the last decade in the Taunton area. Helena and Jim were the first to spot it, 'up north' at Chewton Wood on the 12th; this was followed in the next three days by records from Nettlecombe (Pat), Langford Heathfield (Chris1), Thurlbear (me) and Postlebury (Gill).

Lastly, Anne recorded Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*, at Hill Lane, Mendip, on the 9th, while Pat had it at Nettlecombe on the 14th.

Of the target species from earlier weeks, you have been sending in lots of records this week for Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*, Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*, Sweet Vernal-grass, *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, Pendulous Sedge, *Carex pendula*, Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*, Yellow

Archangel, *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* subsp. *montanum*, and Wood Speedwell, *Veronica montana*. But the species with the most records, by a country mile, was Early-purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula*, with reports of it from Gill (Postlebury, 10th), Anne (Littlestoke, 10th), Georgina (Long Wood, Mendip, 11th), Helena and Jim (Chewton Wood, 12th), me (Thurlbear, 13th), Linda (Wellington, 13th), and Pat (Nettlecombe, 14th).

While on the subject of orchids, two of us—me and Chris1—recorded Common Twayblade, *Neottia ovata*, in flower on the 14th. This compares with an average FFD over the last twelve years of 4th May, and Walter Watson's date from the 1930s of 23rd May. Grey Sedge, *Carex divulsa*, was seen by me in Trull this morning (15th), the earliest FFD for this species in the last decade, and (like Common Twayblade) more than five weeks earlier than in Watson's time.

We've had several notable records of *summer*-flowering species 'getting ahead of themselves', so to speak. The most extraordinary, surely, has to be Linda's record of Betony, *Betonica officinalis*, which she found on the 13th near Wellington. To put her date into some sort of context, Watson's average FFD for Betony in the 1930s was 9th July, while my own average for the decade 2008-17 was 5th July. The earliest FFD in the last twelve years was 6th June. Almost as surprising was Andrew's report of Fairy-flax, *Linum catharticum*, on the 12th at Cross Quarry—a species that usually doesn't start flowering until mid-May. Alastair's Common Ragwort, *Jacobaea vulgaris*, and Pat's Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota*, also seem to be in the same category; although some species, and maybe Common Ragwort is a good example, can sometimes continue flowering right through the winter, such that early flowering in the spring is perhaps best viewed as being exceptionally late flowering from the previous summer—since the flowers often continue to appear on the previous year's shoots.

You recorded a number of other species during the week that are, broadly speaking, probably flowering at about the right time, but which weren't on the target list due to a paucity of data from previous years – usually because

they occur only very infrequently (or not at all) in the Taunton area. These included Lousewort, *Pedicularis sylvatica*, Heath Milkwort, *Polygala serpyllifolia*, Pill Sedge, *Carex pilulifera*, and Flea Sedge, *C. pulicaris*, all recorded flowering by Chris1 at Langford Heathfield on the 14th, and Bitter-vetch, *Lathyrus linifolius*, seen by both Chris1 on the 14th at Langford Heathfield, and by Linda on the 13th, on a lane bank near Wellington. Also Thin-spiked Wood-sedge, *Carex strigosa*, seen by Gill on the 10th at Postlebury, and by Chris1 on the 14th at you-know-where. And lastly, as a follow-up to Linda's Wood-sorrel, *Oxalis acetosella*, on the 7th, there were two more records of it during the week, both of them 'up north': at Charterhouse (Georgina, on the 10th), and at Postlebury (Gill, on the 15th).

Oh yes, and Pedunculate Oak, *Quercus robur*, was recorded coming into flower during the week too, the first records being from Chris2 by the River Chew on the 10th and from Steve in North Petherton on the 11th. My own date this year was Easter Day, the 12th, in Ruishton and Henlade. It's not a species I routinely record—heaven knows why not—but the dates I *do* have for it suggest very little variation from year to year, the FFDs normally falling (like this year) between 10th and 20th April.

Right, that's it: I've run out of steam, and need to get to bed. Apologies to anyone whose records should have been mentioned, but weren't—like Andrew's Buck's-horn Plantain, *Plantago coronopus*, and Common Milkwort, *Polygala vulgaris*, Alastair's White Ramping-fumitory, *Fumaria capreolata*, Margaret's Soft-brome, *Bromus hordeaceus*, my own Yellow Oat-grass, *Trisetum flavescens*, etc...

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Shall we see if we can keep this up for another week? In which case, there are five species to be carried over from last week, namely:

Cut-leaved Crane's-bill, *Geranium dissectum*; Ox-eye Daisy, *Leucanthemum vulgare*; Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*; Procumbent Pearlwort, *Sagina procumbens*; Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*.

To which we can add the following ten species:

Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*; Black Mustard, *Brassica nigra*; Carnation Sedge, *Carex panicea*; Pignut, *Conopodium majus*; Dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*; Spindle, *Euonymus europeus*; Yellow Pimpernel, *Lysimachia nemorum*; Sorrel, *Rumex acetosa*; White Clover, *Trifolium repens*; Guelder-rose, *Viburnum opulus*.

Please look after yourselves, stay safe, and I hope you all have a good week. Only another fortnight and the Swifts will be back.

22nd April – 21,120

Week 5 – more *Greenery* – two seasons or four? – St Mark's flies – pignut

This was the week when someone, maybe flagging just a little, asked the question: how long, exactly, is this first-flowering malarkey going to go on for? Until the end of spring, perhaps? Well, yes. Certainly let's try to keep going until the end of spring. But what exactly *is* spring? And how can its end be best determined? Meteorologists keep it simple: four seasons, each one precisely three months long. For the weather-watcher, then, spring neatly starts, without fail, on the first day of March, then carries on until the last day of May. Come June, come summer! The rest of us do something similar, but using equinoxes and solstices as our seasonal dividers; so the *start* of spring coincides with the spring equinox, while the summer solstice marks its end.

Tim Dee, on the other hand, suggests in *Greenery* (p. 9) that the year may be more fittingly divided into *two* seasons rather than *four*...

“But I see, and have always seen, the year in two halves. I feel it like that: a coming, spring, and a going, autumn; six months forward before six months back, six months up before six down, six months of lengthening days before six of longer nights, six greening months before six browning, six growing before six dying; in autumn things fall apart, in spring things come together ...”

Viewed this way, it's not that summer and winter don't exist, exactly, but that they represent periods of *overlap* between spring and autumn. So 'summer' becomes the time when spring overlaps with autumn, while 'winter' is when autumn collides with spring. Maybe that's why we so happily, and productively, begin our search for the 'first signs of *spring*' in the depths of *winter*. Equally, though less obviously, why we might discern the *last* signs of spring at the back end of *summer*, even though our chatter then is all about 'mists and mellow fruitfulness', and the garden, each morning, is slung with spiders' webs.

If anything speaks of springtime it's surely 'first flowerings', yet there are hosts of plants that don't start to bloom until long after the summer solstice, by which time many others are—to use Dee's terminology—'on their way down'. So, perhaps we should stretch our notion of spring in both directions, not only by beginning it around Christmas-time with the first flowering of, say, Spurge-laurel, *Daphne laureola*, but also by not ending it until about the second week of September when Ivy, *Hedera helix*, begins to blossom. Which means we can keep going for another four to five months if we want to...

Week 5 then: another dry, sunny week, except for Friday and Saturday which were grey, chilly, damp and, in Taunton at least, intermittently drenching. One of the stranger aspects of the last five weeks of Coronavirus lockdown has been how for almost all of this time we've been bathed in warm sunshine. It pains me to say it, but *never* has there been such a perfect start to a cricket season, weather-wise. It's just the complete lack of cricket that's the problem. Friday, on the other hand, felt like a *throwback* to another life, a day sitting in the pavilion watching covers being removed and replaced, removed and replaced, without a single ball bowled; a time for 'business as usual', reminding us—just for a day—of a pre-virus world marked by endless rain, rivers full to bursting, ground saturated, mud everywhere. Who would have guessed that we might hanker after such days, before the pause button was pressed, before the weather changed for the better and everything else changed for the worse? Anyway, yes, it's been another mainly dry, fine week—and, it has to be said, another truly remarkable week for first flowerings too.

First, though, a nod to things *non-botanical*. Vicki and I saw our first Swallow on the 16th, then on the 17th we heard newly-arrived Reed Warblers—several of them—*chug-chug-chugging* from riverside bramble patches between Obridge and Creech Castle, and in the reed-beds and willow scrub behind B&Q; and then, on the 19th, from the little patch of reeds around Roughmoor pond. No Sedge Warblers yet⁷, which seem to have declined in this area as

⁷ I didn't see one all year!

Reed Warblers have increased. Still much activity amongst the solitary bees, while Eve says in her area St Mark's flies, *Bibio marci*, have been in evidence in the last few days. On the 21st Vicki and I spotted our first dragonfly: a Southern Hawker, *Aeshna cyanea*, patrolling the herbage bordering the footpath through Orchard Wood—the place where, three weekends ago, we were due to hold our first field meeting of the year. My old dragonfly book suggests that *A. cyanea* should be on the wing mid-June to mid-October, while the British Dragonfly Society website suggests May onwards. So, is 21st April especially early for it, does anyone know? A sign, perhaps, that not only wild flowers are quick to respond to such 'unseasonal' weather.

This week, Week 5, twenty-one of you, including two friends of Caroline's, Ruth and Sue¹, contributed more than one-hundred-and-thirty records involving ninety-six species. We had fifteen target species to look out for, ten new ones and five rolled over from Week 4. Many of these were species of more open habitats, so it felt like we were finally emerging from beneath the trees. Early spring involves a lot of rooting around on the forest floor, but most woodland herbs have now been ticked off, and indeed many—like Moschatel, *Adoxa moschatellina*, Wood Anemone, *Anemone nemorosa*, and Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*—are already at or well past their peak of flowering.

Of the fifteen target species, only Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*, White Clover, *Trifolium repens*, Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*, and Guelder-rose, *Viburnum opulus*, have so far evaded us. Here's a summary of the eleven we *did* see, arranged, as usual, in (roughly) alphabetical order, with various others getting a mention here and there...

Black Mustard, *Brassica nigra*, was seen by me coming into flower on the banks of the River Tone at Creech Castle on the 19th, but the more remarkable riverside find was the next day when Vicki and I witnessed the first fully-open flowers of Yellow Iris, *Iris pseudacorus*. The only sedge on this week's list was Carnation Sedge, *Carex panicea*, recorded by Chris¹ on the 20th at Langford Heathfield (with Pale Dog-violet, *Viola lactea*, and/or possibly the hybrid

between *lactea* and Common Dog-violet, *V. riviniana*). But other sedges seen for the first time this week included Hairy Sedge, *Carex hirta*, at Longrun Meadow on the 18th, and two records of Greater Tussock-sedge, *Carex paniculata* from VC6, one of them by Steve while on a work trip to Shapwick. (And there's Starved Wood-sedge, *C. depauperata*, in my garden – but that probably shouldn't count, should it?)

Other 'C' species included the first records of Pignut, ***Conopodium majus***, seen by Linda near Wellington Monument on the 21st, and Sue1 near Selworthy on the same day. We also had second sightings for Rough Chervil, *Chaerophyllum temulum*, by David1 on Tickenham Hill on the 19th, while Steve had Hemlock, *Conium maculatum*, in North Petherton, also on the 19th.

Turning to shrubs... On the 16th Andrew spied flowering Dogwood, ***Cornus sanguinea***, in Burnham-on-Sea, while Vicki and I notched up Spindle, ***Euonymus europeus***, today, at Roughmoor. More of you are now reporting Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, including Ro in Lilstock and Steve in North Petherton. Elder is one of a number of white-flowered shrubs/small trees—others include Blackthorn, *Prunus spinosa*, Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*, Wayfaring-tree, *Viburnum lantana*, and Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*—that seem to be flowering earlier now than they did, say, fifty years ago. I see that neither Elder nor Rowan are mentioned in the Ladybird book '*What to look for in spring*', illustrated by Charles Tunnicliffe; instead they're featured in the companion '*... summer*' volume, published in 1960, with the telling comment that Elder blossom "... most distinctly speak[s] of June and midsummer..." Not any more, it doesn't! (Although it may still do in other parts of the country, of course.)

Cut-leaved Crane's-bill, ***Geranium dissectum***, has been recorded beginning to flower this week on grassy banks, verges and arable field margins: the first sighting of it was on the 19th in Trull (me), then on the 20th in Middle Street (Andrew), and the 21st in Wellington (Linda). The plea for records of 'proper' Oxeye-daisy, ***Leucanthemum vulgare***, was answered by Ro on the 15th (Nether Stowey), me on the 19th (Taunton, various places), and Alastair on

the 21st (Hurlstone). Back beneath the trees, Yellow Pimpernel, *Lysimachia nemorum*, was spotted by two of you on the same day, the 20th: by Linda, in Wellington, and by Gill at Postlebury. I think Gill's was probably first, though, as she's an early riser and usually tramping around her patch while the rest of us are still fast asleep.

Docks aren't especially eye-catching, they're easily overlooked and do little to raise the pulse. Nevertheless, several of us have turned up Sorrel, *Rumex acetosa*, this week: Andrew and me on the 16th, in Burnham-on-Sea and Taunton respectively, closely followed by Margaret on the 20th in Winford, and Hilary on the 22nd at Uphill (where she also saw Green-winged Orchid, *Anacamptis morio*, and picked up a second very early record for flowering Betony, *Betonica officinalis*). We've also had a couple of other docks, Clustered Dock, *R. conglomeratus*, and Wood Dock, *R. sanguineus*, coming into flower this week, both on the 18th in Taunton, and surprisingly early—certainly the earliest recorded FFDs for these in at least the last twelve years.

Procumbent Pearlwort, *Sagina procumbens*, has now started flowering in many parts of the county, including Minehead on the 15th (Caroline), Taunton on the 17th (me), Wellington on the 21st (Linda) and Burnham, also on the 21st (Andrew). An exciting discovery this week was Sea Pearlwort, *Sagina maritima*, on the 22nd, growing on the verge of the A38 in Taunton. Exciting, not because it was flowering, but because this appears to be the first record of it for the Taunton area. It was growing with Common Stork's-bill, *Erodium cicutarium*, Sea Fern-grass, *Catapodium marinum*, and large numbers of tiny plants of (flowering) Bird's-foot Clover, *Trifolium ornithopodioides*—the last was a big surprise, being only the second inland locality for it in VC5. (Also, while we're on the subject of clovers, another of this week's highlights, for me, was a sizeable colony of now-flowering Least Trefoil, *T. micranthum*, within spitting distance of the Subterranean Clover, *T. subterraneum*, found a couple of weeks ago. But, amazingly, still no Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*, in this corner of the county.)

Last but not least, I can report that Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*, was in full blossom in Taunton on the 17th, in the ‘children’s wood’ by the River Tone. Helena says that in the ‘far north’ many species seem to be behind in their flowering, but she reports that her garden Rowan is in full blossom.

Other highlights this week have included FFDs for (the highly photogenic) Herb-Paris, *Paris quadrifolia*, in Harptree Combe on the 14th (Chris2) and at Long Wood, Mendip, on the 21st (Georgina), and Purple Gromwell, *Aegonychon purpureocaeruleum* (= *Lithospermum*), on the 18th (Anne). Liz had flowering Blinks, *Montia fontana*, in two flower pots in Wedmore. In the far west of the county Alastair recorded Sheep’s-bit, *Jasione montana*, at Hurlstone on the 21st, and Grass-vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*, at Minehead on the 20th. Amongst my own ‘earliest yet’ FFDs were Wood Millet, *Milium effusum*, at Thurlbear on the 16th and Hairy Tare, *Ervilia hirsuta* (= *Vicia*), in Longrun Meadow on the 22nd. Meanwhile, up at Portishead on the 17th, David1 spied an unusually early Brooklime, *Veronica beccabunga*. More mundanely, we have two reports of (the easily ignored) Rough Meadow-grass, *Poa trivialis*, in flower this week—in Taunton and North Petherton.

Apologies to anyone whose records I should have mentioned, but the night is no longer young and neither am I.

* * *

And on to Week 6. There are four species to be carried over from last week, namely:

Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*; Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*; White Clover, *Trifolium repens*; Guelder-rose, *Viburnum opulus*.

To which we can now add the following twenty species:

Wetted Thistle, *Carduus crispus* (= *acanthoides*); Fern-grass, *Catapodium rigidum*; Remote Sedge, *Carex remota*; Crested Dog’s-tail, *Cynosurus*

cristatus; Broad-leaved Willowherb, *Epilobium montanum*; Yorkshire Fog, *Holcus lanatus*; Rye-grass, *Lolium perenne*; Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*; Water-cress, *Nasturtium officinale* (agg.); Silverweed, *Potentilla anserina*; Celery-leaved Buttercup, *Ranunculus sceleratus*; Dog-rose, *Rosa canina* (agg.); Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus* (agg.); Curled Dock, *Rumex crispus*; Annual Pearlwort, *Sagina apetala/filicaulis*; Wild Clary, *Salvia verbenaca*; White Stonecrop, *Sedum album*; White Campion, *Silene latifolia*; Black Bryony, *Tamus communis*; Heath Speedwell, *Veronica officinalis*.

29th April – 26,049

Week 6 – The delights of kerb-crawling – seaside plants in unlikely places – swifts & cuckoos – Fred's sedges & personal bests...

When I'm kerb-crawling I always think of Clive. I mean this, of course, in the nicest way possible. He and I share, along with many others in the group, a particular fondness for road-verge botanising, and this week I've been reflecting on why this might be so. It may have something to do with the lure of the unexpected. Absolutely *anything* can pop up on the kerbside, so you never quite know what you might come across next. It could be a scarce 'alien', like the (flowering) plants of Annual Toadflax, *Linaria maroccana*, I stumbled upon a couple of weeks ago on the edge of Canal Road, near the site of Taunton's old livestock market—only the third record for this species in VC5 this century. Or what about the Woolly Clover, *Trifolium tomentosum*, found last year, and again this, on the cut-and-scalped verge outside Wickes?

These are all well and good, but often it's roadside *coastal* plants that generate the greater excitement. This week's offering (after last week's Sea Fern-grass, *Catapodium marinum*, Sea Pearlwort, *Sagina maritima*, and Bird's-foot Clover, *Trifolium ornithopodioides*) has included (fruiting) Sea Stork's-bill, *Erodium maritimum*, on Trenchard Way—the new road on the south side of Taunton railway station—and Lesser Chickweed, *Stellaria pallida*, a sand dune annual masquerading as a pavement weed in Bridge Street near the wholefood shop. Botanically, these verges often have a distinctly maritime feel to their flora; so if, like me, you're an inland dweller desperate for a whiff of sea air, a stroll along a (relatively) deserted highway could be the answer. You can't go to the seaside, so why not investigate your local road verge and see if the seaside's come to you?

Still on verges, several of you are noticing that flowery roadsides have (so far) escaped their usual 'spring cut'. Not so in Taunton, where the mowing gangs—and their gang mowers—have been much in evidence this week;

frustrating, I agree, if the plants you were willing into flower end up decapitated before their time, but a pleasing sight, for Clive and me at least, since many of the little annuals in these places—Knotted Hedge-parsley, *Torilis nodosa*, and Small-flowered Buttercup, *Ranunculus parviflorus*, for example—seem to thrive on a regular close shave; plus, ideally, a combination of spring/summer drought and a pinch of de-icing salt in winter.

Week 6. Another dry, warm week, until a late hiccup of rain yesterday and today which, in a parallel universe, would have annoyingly led to the final day of the championship match between Somerset and Hampshire being rain-interrupted—and fizzling out as a draw, probably. In *this* universe, Steve spotted his first Swifts while clapping for carers in North Petherton on the 23rd. Maureen, who lives in Priorswood—a real hotspot for breeding Swifts—had two flying over her house on the 25th, while we heard high-altitude ‘screamers’ on two evenings, the 24th and 27th, but despite much sky-scanning we have yet to actually *see* them. Anyway, the main thing is: THEY’RE BACK! Which, as Ted Hughes says, “... means the globe’s still working, the creation’s / still waking refreshed, our summer’s / still all to come ...”

Summer migrants touching down this week have included Lesser Whitethroats (Eve’s on the 26th, mine on the 27th) and Cuckoos (Eve, in Mendip, on the 24th; Maureen, on Cothelstone Hill, on the 25th). Still no Sedge Warblers though. And as for Tree Pipits, Pied Flycatchers, Redstarts and Wood Warblers; well, for those of us unable to visit wooded combes on Exmoor or the Quantocks, such birds are the stuff of dreams...

Turning now to ‘first flowerings’, it is interesting to see how varied FFDs are from different parts of the county. Several of you have noted how onset of flowering is affected by altitude, distance from the coast, aspect, etc. As Ellen and Eve will testify, anyone high up on a north-facing slope a long way from the sea should expect to be perhaps two to three weeks behind the rest of us. Even in the ‘deep south’, this is the case. The moment of ‘peak bluebell’ at Thurlbear Wood (80-90 metres a.s.l.) was about ten days ago, but at

Cothelstone Hill (250 metres a.s.l.) they've only just begun to look their best, with the peak probably still a few days away. It is noteworthy, though, that since the middle of March *everyone* has seen *something* in flower before anyone else—even those who feel that they're generally trotting along about two weeks behind the rest of us.

This week, the sixth since lockdown, was another exceptional week for first flowerings, with seventeen of you contributing more than one-hundred-and-ten records involving eighty-six species. Our target list for Week 6 comprised twenty-four species, of which fourteen were seen and ten weren't. Here's a summary of the fourteen we *did* see, arranged, as usual, in roughly alphabetical order, with others of particular interest getting an honourable mention in passing...

Starting with the 'C's... Welled Thistle, *Carduus crispus*, was just starting to flower near Roughmoor on the 28th, where it grows in a scrum of tall herbage beside the River Tone. Remote Sedge, *Carex remota*, is yet to start flowering in Taunton, but Andrew spotted it in Brent Knoll churchyard on the 21st. Other sedges have been widely noted, and it's been a good week, especially, for Grey Sedge, *C. divulsa*: Steve had it in North Petherton on the 23rd, while Caroline, also on the 23rd, saw it flowering in Alcombe—followed by Dee in Clevedon, in St Mary's churchyard, and Liz in Wedmore, both on the 25th.

Following my (bracketed) mention of back-garden Starved Wood-sedge, *Carex depauperata*, Fred—from his tiny enclave of would-be Somerset within a region otherwise known, apparently, as Hampshire—reports no fewer than eighteen species (or hybrids) flowering in his sedge collection. Many are northern 'exotica' that aren't found in Somerset, and, frankly, shouldn't really be in Hampshire either, like Fibrous Tussock-sedge, *Carex appropinquata*, String Sedge, *C. chordorrhiza*, Bird's-foot Sedge, *C. ornithopoda* and Sheathed Sedge, *C. vaginata*. Not to mention a Lady's-slipper, *Cypripedium*, called 'Hank Small'. On the 23rd, he saw Yellow Pimpernel, *Lysimachia nemorum*, and Marsh Valerian, *Valeriana dioica*, in a nearby local nature reserve. Talking of which... Back in Somerset proper, Gill

encountered Marsh Valerian on the 28th at Postlebury. A really interesting 'first', this one, as it's probably not something many of us are likely to come across on our home patches. It's certainly not on mine.

Returning to 'C', the large form of Fern-grass, *Catapodium rigidum*, subsp. *majus*, was found flowering as a pavement weed on Holway Avenue, Taunton, on the 26th. It had been 'in bud' for about ten days, and then suddenly—overnight—the yellow anthers emerged. These made the whole inflorescence look 'gritty', as if it had become covered with minuscule sand grains.

Moving on to 'E'. Just the one this week, Broad-leaved Willowherb, *Epilobium montanum*, which was seen by Steve in North Petherton on the 20th, in Week 5, but its identity wasn't confirmed until the start of Week 6. I had it in Taunton, as a pavement weed, on the 26th. Then there's a couple of grasses. Yorkshire Fog, *Holcus lanatus*, was seen in Taunton on the 26th and by Linda in Wellington on the 27th, while on the 25th Andrew had Rye-grass, *Lolium perenne*, at Brent Knoll. Within a week or so it'll probably be everywhere.

We did well with the 'P's: we had two to find and we got them both. Graham recorded first flowers of Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*, on the 23rd, and close-up examination of the hairs on the leaves identified his plants as subsp. *euronota* (described in 'Sell & Murrell', but not in 'Stace'). Andrew also saw it on the 23rd, at Uphill, Dee had it in Clevedon on the 24th, Linda in Wellington on the 25th, and finally, *finally*, I saw it just coming into flower at Thurlbear on the 27th. Silverweed, *Potentilla anserina*, was spotted by Andrew in a lay-by at Webbington, while Linda saw it in Wellington, both on the 25th. Helena, also on the 25th, dashed past it while on a two-mile run with her daughter Jenny. Doubtless spurred on by the Silverweed, Helena notched up a new 'personal best' of twenty minutes and forty-five seconds.

We did even better with the 'R's. Two of you reported Celery-leaved Buttercup, *Ranunculus sceleratus*: Andrew in Brent Knoll village on the 19th (so actually in Week 5), and Liz in Wedmore on the 28th. Dog-rose, *Rosa*

canina (agg.), was flowering at Roughmoor on the 28th, and at Obridge on the 29th. I anticipate a flood of Dog-rose records during Week 7. The first Curled Dock, *Rumex crispus*, was on the 24th, in Taunton, although Graham or Clive might well have determined it as a 'probable hybrid'. But as it was me determining it, this simplified things enormously.

One species I thought we wouldn't get this week was Wild Clary, *Salvia verbenaca*. Certainly, its sites around Taunton are all too distant or difficult to get at easily. Anyway, I needn't have fretted, as Andrew turned it up on his visit to Uphill on the 23rd, along with Honewort, *Trinia glauca*: another of those Mendip specialities that, to me, feel like the half-forgotten inhabitants of a former world, one in which Somerset would doubtless have trounced Fred's Hampshire within three days...

White Clover, *Trifolium repens*, on the other hand, is a plant we can *all* relate to, and one we'll be bound to get sooner or later. Probably sooner, since Andrew and I both had it on the 24th—me near Taunton railway station, and Andrew on Brent Knoll. Four days later it was coming into flower more widely in Taunton, including in Longrun Meadow.

And finally, our 'V' of the week was Guelder-rose, *Viburnum opulus*, reported from Bossington by Caroline's friend Ruth on the 21st, Brent Knoll churchyard on the 24th (Andrew) and Roughmoor on the 28th (me).

Amongst the other more interesting FFDs this week: Kidney-vetch, *Anthyllis vulneraria*, at Uphill on the 23rd (Andrew); Oval Sedge, *Carex leporina*, and Lesser Pond-sedge, *C. acutiformis*, at Wedmore on the 27th and 28th respectively (Liz); a second FFD for Crosswort, *Cruciata laevipes*, this time at Ubley Warren on the 23rd (Georgina); Swine-cress, *Lepidium coronopus*, in Trull on the 25th (me), and Wedmore on the 28th (Liz); Ivy Broomrape, *Orobanche hederæ*, in Clevedon on the 23rd (Dee); Lousewort, *Pedicularis sylvatica*, at GB Gruffy nature reserve on the 26th (Georgina), and near Wellington on the 27th (Linda, with Tormentil, *Potentilla erecta*); Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*, at Uphill on the 23rd (Andrew); Ragged Robin, *Silene*

flos-cuculi, at Rew Mead nature reserve, near Wellington, on the 25th (Linda); Salsify, *Tragopogon porrifolius*, in North Petherton on the 23rd (Steve); a second record of Brooklime, *Veronica beccabunga*, this time at Nettlecombe on the 29th (Pat); a second record for Yellow Flag, *Iris pseudacorus*, near Wellington on the 25th (Linda); and, lastly, Biting Stonecrop, *Sedum acre*, on Priory Bridge Road, Taunton, on the 24th—that's almost four weeks earlier than my previous-earliest FFD for it, and more than six weeks earlier than Walter Watson's FFD in the 1920s/30s.

Contender for the strangest find of the week, though, was a *Camassia*, a single plant of which was discovered in a field/wood-border in Trull. I'm hopeless on garden plants, so didn't have a clue what it was, but a WhatsApp photo pinged across to Helena produced an immediate response. The key in the *European Garden Flora* indicated that the Trull plant was most probably *C. leichletii*, rather than *C. quamash* which curiously is the only *Camassia* species mentioned in 'Stace'. Many thanks to Helena for sorting this one out. It's a beautiful plant, so worth googling if you don't know it.

Other than that, I've been playing 'catch-up' for much of the week, with Lesser Trefoil, *Trifolium dubium*, on the 24th, Greater Celandine, *Chelidonium majus* on the 25th, Prickly Sow-thistle, *Sonchus asper*, on the 26th, and Yellow Pimpernel, *Lysimachia nemorum*, on the 27th.

Many thanks, as usual, for your records. And for your stories too. On days when every piece of news seems destined to depress, there's always fun to be had from peering into my email 'in-box'.

* * *

For Week 7, we have ten species to carry over from last week, namely:

Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*; Crested Dog's-tail, *Cynosurus cristatus*; Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*; Water-cress, *Nasturtium officinale* (agg.); Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus* (agg.); Annual Pearlwort, *Sagina*

apetala/filicaulis; White Stonecrop, *Sedum album*; White Campion, *Silene latifolia*; Black Bryony, *Tamus communis*; Heath Speedwell, *Veronica officinalis*.

To which we can now add a further ten:

Horse-radish, *Armoracia rusticana*; Quaking-grass, *Briza media*; White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*; Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*; Smooth Hawk's-beard, *Crepis capillaris*; Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*; Square-stalked Willowherb, *Epilobium tetragonum*; Common Rock-rose, *Helianthemum nummularium*; Corn Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*; Dewberry, *Rubus caesius*.

Several other species, for which early FFDs have already been recorded, should soon be coming into flower more generally, so it would be well worth keeping a note of when you first see them, e.g. Black Knapweed, *Centaurea nigra*; Rough Chervil, *Chaerophyllum temulum*; Yellow Flag, *Iris pseudacorus*; Fairy Flax, *Linum catharticum*; Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*; Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*.

6th May – 29,863

Week 7 – ‘BOOM!’ – bryonies black & white –
small heaths & spring skippers

I dived into my emails on Saturday morning and alighted immediately on an incoming message with the subject title “BOOM!!” It was from Linda. Two days before, on the 30th, she’d emailed with a photo of her first—*our* first—Black Bryony, *Tamus communis*. I’d suggested, in reply, that all she needed now was White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*, to complete the set. I imagined this would be unlikely so early in the week, and besides, I had my own plans for White Bryony; last year there had been a great sprawling, clambering—and early-flowering—patch of it in a riverside tangle at Roughmoor, so that was where I’d be heading. This would be one of the easier plants, I fancied, in the week ahead—just a matter of getting the timing right, really.

But the next day, May Day, Linda took a stroll out to Nynehead, where (expletives deleted) she stumbled upon the first flowering *Bryonia* of the year. In VC6 this would be called a *squeak*; in VC5, evidently, it’s now to be known as a *BOOM*. Attached to her email were three photos: one of the plant, a close-up of the flowers, and one of a woman with a Cheshire cat grin, standing beside a hedge. The subject title, the message and the photos said it all, really, revealing both the plant and the pleasure, plain as day, in black and white—*black* one day, *white* the next... The complete set, damn it!

Black Bryony has had quite a week. Along with its white namesake (no relation—one’s a monocot, the other’s a dicot), it was on our list of potential Week 7 first-flowerers. But whereas our FFDs for most species have tended to span several weeks—varying according to microclimate, aspect, altitude, distance from the sea, etc.—the onset of flowering of Black Bryony has shown a remarkable synchronicity across the county. Following Linda’s trail-blazer on 30th April, Val (Glastonbury), Ro (Honibere) and I (Orchard Wood) all reported it for the first time on May Day, followed by Liz (Wedmore) and Chris1 (Wiveliscombe) on the 2nd – and then Helena and Jim (Paulton) on the

3rd, who took a seven-mile hike to Chewton Wood and saw “nothing from the Week 7 list until we were almost home when ... we finally found *Tamus*.” So it’s a fair bet that others will start seeing it in the next few days. Note that the earliest flowers tend to be on the lowest (least conspicuous) axillary racemes, while the upper, more visible, racemes are still tightly in bud.

To put these FFDs for Black Bryony into context, in twelve years of recording first flowerings my *earliest* date for it was 29th April, in 2011, while the *latest* was 2nd June, in 2013. For the Taunton area, the 2008-17 decadal average FFD for Black Bryony was 18th May; Walter Watson’s, from almost a hundred years ago, and similarly based mainly on observations around Taunton, was 2nd June. By any measure, then, for Black Bryony the spring of 2020 is proving to be an especially early one...

Which is hardly surprising, given the weather we’ve been having. The long, warm, dry spell has been only briefly punctuated by cooler, damper conditions. We had a taste of these during Week 7, fronts bringing cloud and rain on Thursday, Sunday and Tuesday, and temperatures for the most part well down on previous weeks. One evening we even lit the fire. The rain was badly needed and, despite the cooler temperatures, the inclement weather has probably helped to further *accelerate* spring rather than slow it down.

Before we tackle the rest of this week’s hit-list, let’s quickly highlight a few other happenings in the natural world...

- It’s been another good week for butterflies: Holly Blues, *Celastrina argiolus*, are still in abundance, while I had my first Small Heaths, *Coenonympha pamphilus*, Grizzled Skippers, *Pyrgus malvae*, and Dingy Skippers, *Erynnis tages*, on the 4th at Thurlbear. Georgina reported her first ‘dingy’ on the same day, at Ubley Warren, but her first ‘grizzly’ was much earlier, on 19th April—same date as in 2019, apparently. Has anyone had a Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*, yet?

- And what about dragonflies? My first Beautiful Demoiselle, *Calopteryx virgo*, was on the 2nd, beside the River Tone at Obridge. No damsels, although surely others are seeing them by now?
- If you're on the Levels you'll wonder what all the fuss is about, but in Taunton this year we appear to have at least *four* singing Cetti's Warblers—one each at Hankridge, Obridge, Longrun and Roughmoor.
- Last week's Swifts vanished, so we had to endure several days of empty skies, until the 4th when there was a sudden arrival of new birds. From midday onwards screamers were circling high overhead, while later in the afternoon some of the birds began hurtling about at rooftop height. And then one of them peeled away from the rest of the group, suddenly dipping and dropping, then curving round and up for a first, hurried 'fly-past' of its nest-site. It's hard enough to comprehend the length of the journey this bird must have been on since it was last here, yet harder still to appreciate the laser-like precision of its return; back from Africa, somewhere south of the Sahara, to the familiar, slightly warped fascia board on the gable-end of 16, Gordon Road. (TA1 3AU.)

This week, the seventh since the start of lockdown, produced the largest batch of first flowerings yet: more than one-hundred-and-sixty records and about one-hundred species, shared between eighteen recorders. We saw sixteen of the twenty species on our target list. Here they all are, as usual in alphabetical order, with a few 'extras' getting a mention along the way...

'A'. At last, we've 'ticked' Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*. I'd begun to think we'd never get it. Ro was the first, at Lilstock, on the 4th, followed by Andrew in Highbridge and me in Trull, both on the 5th. The Trull plants were growing along an arable margin with new-flowering Black-bindweed, *Fallopia convolvulus*. Two days earlier, on the 3rd, Andrew also had Horse-radish, *Armoracia rusticana*, on Wick Lane, near Brent Knoll.

'B'. White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*. As a footnote to Linda's record, my phone 'pinged' a few minutes ago and it was an incoming WhatsApp photo of a

White Bryony flower, from Helena in Paulton. Which means we have now had two records for it this week.

'C'. Sedges have included a very early Pale Sedge, *Carex pallescens*, recorded by Chris1 at Langford Heathfield on 30th April, and several records of False Fox-sedge, *Carex otrubae*, including Linda in Wellington on the 1st, Liz near Wedmore on the 2nd, and Ro at Lilstock on the 4th. Remote Sedge, *Carex remota*, is now widely flowering in the south of the county, with records this week from Wellington, Langford Heathfield, Taunton, Thurlbear and Orchard Wood. Dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*, has been slow to blossom, but Ro saw it at Lilstock on the 4th, while I had it the next day at Trull. We've also notched up two of this week's target 'C's. Smooth Hawk's-beard, *Crepis capillaris*, was seen by Alastair in Minehead on 24th April (so actually in Week 6), while Dee had it in Clevedon on the 30th. Crested Dog's-tail, *Cynosurus cristatus*, was coming into flower on a road verge in Taunton this morning. But perhaps the most exciting—and certainly the most photogenic—'C' of the week was Chris1's record of first-flowering Meadow Thistle, *Cirsium dissectum*, at Langford Heathfield. This isn't a species I routinely record, so I'm not sure whether this is especially early or not—but Walter Watson would have been astonished: his FFD for it was 12th June.

'H'. In Week 6, Hilary visited Purn Hill where, on 23rd April, she recorded not only Common Rockrose, *Helianthemum nummularium*, but also White Rockrose, *H. apenninum*, and the hybrid between the two, *H. x sulphureum*. Andrew also saw Common Rockrose in Week 6, at Cross Quarry on the 25th, while in Week 7 Ellen had it at East Harptree on the 1st, and Anne at Broadmead Quarry on the 3rd. It isn't flowering yet at Thurlbear.

'L' to 'P'. Just the one record for Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*, Helena seeing it in the churchyard in Midsomer Norton this afternoon (6th). 'L' of the week, though, should probably go to Andrew for his first-flowering Pale Flax, *Linum bienne*, at Uphill on the 2nd. (The only 'L' I could produce was Rye-grass, *Lolium perenne*, in the back garden on the 2nd.) Water-cress, *Nasturtium officinale*, was spotted by Liz on the 2nd. The first record for flowering Corn

Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, was also on the 2nd, as Gill pushed her bike up the hill from Nunney. I had it this morning, in less desirable surroundings, on a road verge in Taunton. But 'P' of the week, although not on our list, must surely be Greater Butterfly-orchid, *Platanthera chlorantha*, recorded at Thurlbear Quarrylands (me) and Ivythorn Hill (Fiona), both on the 4th – an exceptionally early first date. My decadal average FFD for Greater Butterfly-orchid is 28th May, while Watson's first date for it was 4th June.

'R'. The first bramble to come into flower is usually Dewberry, *Rubus caesius*. Watson's dates were 5th May for Dewberry and 21st June for *Rubus fruticosus* agg. While the latter is now flowering much earlier than that, FFDs for Dewberry have hardly changed at all. Anyway, we've had both during the week: the first *R. caesius* records were from Orchard Wood on the 1st, Roughmoor on the 3rd and Lilstock on the 4th (Ro), while the sole *R. fruticosus* record was from Station Road, Brent Knoll, on the 3rd (Andrew). Early-flowering '*fruticosus*', at least in Taunton, tends to be the introduced—and delicious—'Himalayan Giant', *R. armeniacus*, which should start blooming within the next week. Elm-leaved Bramble, *Rubus ulmifolius*, usually follows about a fortnight after the 'Giant'.

We had three 'S's on the list, and we found them all! Annual Pearlwort, *Sagina apetala/filicaulis*, was recorded in pavement cracks in Taunton on the 4th and Midsomer Norton on the 6th. White Stonecrop, *Sedum album*, was flowering on a road verge in Taunton, again on the 4th, and in Burnham-on-Sea on the 5th. Chris1 had what seemed to be the first record of White Champion, *Silene latifolia*, at Runnington (near Wellington), on 30th April, followed by Andrew's at Berrow, beside the churchyard, on the 4th. Then Alastair, in an email this afternoon, listed it with several other species as being in flower at Dunster beach on 26th April (Week 6); but then followed up with another email to say he'd just remembered that White Champion was flowering there several weeks earlier, on 27th March (Week 2), and he attached a photo to prove it. That's a very early record for it, but there's no doubting its veracity. Another 'S' of note, by the way, was an early Bittersweet, *Solanum dulcamara*, recorded by Liz near Wedmore on the 2nd.

'T' is for **Tamus**. Nothing to add on that one. But a brief nod here to Goat's-beard, *Tragopogon pratensis*, which several of you have reported for the first time this week, including Liz in Wedmore, Val in Glastonbury, Ro at Lilstock, and Andrew at Lympsham. It should probably have been one of our Week 7 targets. Another 'T', White Clover, *Trifolium repens*, is now popping up all over the county, from Nynehead and Lilstock in the south and west to Midsomer Norton in the far north.

And finally, 'V'. This week's 'V' is Heath Speedwell, ***Veronica officinalis***, which was flowering at Thurlbear Quarrylands on the 4th.

Amongst the other more interesting FFDs this week: Bugloss, *Lycopsis arvensis*, at Dunster beach on 26th April (Alastair) and Wellington on 4th May (Linda); Downy Oat-grass, *Avenula pubescens* at Berrow on the 4th (Andrew); a third Rough Chervil, *Chaerophyllum temulum*, this time on Cotlake Hill, near Trull, on 30th April; Foxglove, *Digitalis purpurea*, at Hurlstone on the 2nd (Alastair); Common Spike-rush, *Eleocharis palustris*, near Wedmore on the 2nd (Liz); Smooth Tare, *Ervum tetraspermum* (= *Vicia tetrasperma*), at Nettlecombe on the 6th (Pat); Tall Ramping-fumitory, *Fumaria bastardii*, at Lilstock on the 2nd (Ro), plus White R-f, *F. capreolata*, at Wedmore, also on the 2nd (Liz); Small-flowered Crane's-bill, *Geranium pusillum*, in the churchyard at Berrow on the 4th (Andrew); Common Water-crowfoot, *Ranunculus aquatilis*, near Wedmore on the 2nd (Liz), and its coastal counterpart Brackish Water-crowfoot, *Ranunculus baudotii*, at Dunster beach on 26th April (Alastair); second records of Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*, from Chewton Mendip on the 1st (Ellen), and Wild Clary, *Salvia verbenaca*, in and around Ro's garden at Lilstock on the 3rd; Common Figwort, *Scrophularia nodosa*, at Greenaleigh on the 1st (Alastair); Sea Campion, *Silene uniflora*, at Blackmoor, Mendip, on the 4th (Georgina); Bog Stitchwort, *Stellaria alsine*, on Croydon Hill, also on the 4th (Alastair); and Field Pansy, *Viola arvensis*, at Nynehead on the 1st (Linda).

And lastly, one more 'first' this week, from Ellen: "The first forage harvester heard howling on the hill beyond the village ... [which] always marks the transition from spring to summer for me."

Many thanks, as usual, for your records, and apologies if I've inadvertently omitted anything of particular interest. You've brightened up my week no end.

* * *

And on to Week 8...

First, four species carried over from last week:

Quaking-grass, *Briza media*; Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*; Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*; Square-stalked Willowherb, *Epilobium tetragonum*.

To which we can add the following sixteen species:

Ground-elder, *Aegopodium podagraria*; Spiked Sedge, *Carex spicata*; Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*; Eyebright, *Euphrasia* sp/agg; Flote-grass, *Glyceria fluitans*; Meadow Vetchling, *Lathyrus pratensis*; Lesser Hawkbit, *Leontodon saxatilis*; Privet, *Ligustrum vulgare*; Meadow Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*; Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*; Corky-fruited Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe pimpinelloides*; Creeping Cinquefoil, *Potentilla reptans*; Weld, *Reseda luteola*; Meadow Fescue, *Schedonorus pratensis* (= *Festuca pratensis*); Hedge Woundwort, *Stachys sylvatica*; Hop Trefoil, *Trifolium campestre*.

13th May – 32,640

Week 8 – birdsong – common blues – quaking-grass

I have to begin with Blackbirds. Since the start of lockdown eight weeks ago, one of the compensatory pleasures of being home-bound has been the opportunity—with the relative lack of traffic noise—to listen to birdsong. And even now, while I'm *clack-clack-clacking* on the computer keyboard, I'm aware of a more or less continuous backdrop of Blackbird song. From five in the morning until nine at night, one particular bird in our street is endlessly broadcasting its presence from various TV aerials and chimney pots. His song is both wonderfully varied and endlessly repetitive: he has two immediately recognisable 'stock phrases', both of them quite different to those of his neighbours. He can start to sound like a cracked record—the same phrases recurring *ad nauseam*—but listening more closely we've noticed that no two phrases are ever *quite* the same. Each time he repeats, he adds a squeal or a chatter drawn from an evidently limitless supply of 'terminal flourishes'. So while one phrase might sound strident, like a statement of intent, the next—same phrase, but ending this time with an upward lilt—seems more like a question. Or, same again, but dipping at the end and melancholic in tone, might be followed by another that's cheerily optimistic, like the punch line of a joke, complete with terminal chuckle. He seems to be *playing* with his song, testing out what works and what doesn't, and keeping us on tenterhooks to find out exactly *which* phrase, with *which* flourish, he'll choose to pull out from his bottomless song-bag next. He's become the talk of the street. And during our VE-Day street party on Friday he was perched on the TV aerial adding his own commentary to the evening's celebrations.

Week 8 was dry and mainly sunny again, the first half warm (26°C on Saturday), the second half less so. There was a ground-frost on Monday morning, the temperature overnight dipping to just 2°C in Taunton. Sunday evening's announcements on the gradual easing of the lockdown seemed to clarify and confuse in equal measure, but one thing we *do* know is that, from

today, we're free to take as much exercise as we like, and to drive as far as we like to take it—as long as that doesn't involve driving into Wales, where the 'stay at home' instruction still applies. On the face of it, then, for some of us this may open up new possibilities for exercising/botanising further afield. I'm tempted, but I think for now I'll be continuing to stick pretty close to home. Besides, I'm enjoying the lack of traffic.

Not many *non*-botanical highlights to report this week, although Helena seems to be chalking up a new 'personal best' of one sort or another each time she dons her Lycra. Her latest was a two-mile run, the first mile of which she completed in nine minutes and thirteen seconds. (She doesn't say how long the second mile took.) Usually she makes a few plant records while she's out running—like we all do, I suppose—but now everything's becoming a bit of a blur, apparently. We've also had three first-sightings of Common Blues, *Polyommatus incarus*: Georgina on the 7th, me on the 10th and Andrew on the 12th. And I had a Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*, this morning, presumably a newly-arrived migrant rather than surviving over-winterer.

Right! First flowerings. Another good week, but suddenly everything seems to be coming at once, and in no particular order. One-hundred-and-twenty-three records and ninety-four species. I'm beginning to lose track. Anyway, we saw sixteen of the twenty species on our target list for Week 8, or eighteen if you include records from the 'eastern enclave' otherwise known as Fred. Only Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*, and Common Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*, seem to have evaded us altogether. The following summarises our Week 8 records: target species, as usual, with their names emboldened, other notables slotted in as and when, and the whole lot loosely arranged in alphabetical order...

'A'. There have been patches of *winter*-flowering Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium*, on some road verges this year (my first record of Yarrow in flower in Taunton was between Christmas and New Year), but this is unusual and the decadal (2008-17) average FFD for it is 15th May. So the spring flush of new flower-heads noted in Taunton on the 7th and Wellington on the 9th

(Linda) is much in line with expectations. Ground-elder, *Aegopodium podagraria*, has yet to be spotted flowering in Somerset, the only record so far being from the eastern bloc, in St Michael's churchyard in Aldershot. Two more records for Black-grass, *Alopecurus myosuroides*, during the week, Helena in Paulton, and Jeanne between Blue Anchor and Watchet, both on the 10th. Jeanne found it in a field of (flowering) Crimson Clover, *Trifolium incarnatum* subsp. *incarnatum*—a stunning plant which used to be much grown as a fodder crop. (Interestingly, on the 9th Maureen recorded Crimson Clover in another field, near Kilve.) Georgina had a 'hairy' day in Mendip on the 7th, with both *Hairy Lady's-mantle*, *Alchemilla filicaulis* subsp. *vestita*, at Black Rock, Mendip, and *Hairy Rock-cress*, *Arabis hirsuta*, at Velvet Bottom. Andrew recorded (and photographed) a gorgeous 'Star of Persia', *Allium cristophii*, growing beside a rhyme at Middle Street on the 9th—possibly a first or second record for VC6 and Somerset, and one of a number of unusual garden escapes to be mentioned in dispatches this week.

'B'. This was the week for Quaking Grass, *Briza media*, with first-flowering records from Winford on the 9th (Margaret), Thurlbear and Brent Knoll on the 10th (me and Andrew), and Ubley Warren and Runnington on the 12th (Georgina and Chris1). The unlikeliest 'B' came from Margaret's garden, with self-seeded Interrupted Brome, *Bromus interruptus*, now flowering in one of her flower pots.

'C'. Spiked Sedge, *Carex spicata*, actually made its first appearance in Week 7, Margaret seeing it in Winford on the 7th, and Ro at Lilstock on the 5th. Some species, though, *really* seem to be getting ahead of themselves, and I've had two this week, both bindweeds, and both in Taunton: Hedge Bindweed, *Calystegia sepium*, on the 7th, and Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, on the 11th—the first in South Street, the second on Upper Holway Road. It's been quite a week for thistles too: Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, our 'target' thistle, was seen by Linda in Wellington on the 9th and by Val in Glastonbury on the 13th. Pat, also on the 9th, had a very early Creeping Thistle, *C. arvense*, at Nettlecombe, while Alastair saw flowering Marsh Thistle, *C. palustre*, at Crowcombe on the 8th. And Georgina recorded Musk Thistle, *Carduus*

nutans, in Cheddar Gorge on the 7th. As if to emphasise how much later some parts of the county can be than others, Chris2 had first-flowering Pignut, *Conopodium majus*, at East Harptree on the 10th, almost three weeks after its earliest sighting near Wellington. Finally, Alastair saw Hound's-tongue, *Cynoglossum officinale*, starting to flower at Dunster beach on the 10th.

'D'. Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, has been popping up all over the place—at Ivythorn Hill on the 8th (Fiona), Langford Heathfield on the 9th (Ian1), Thurlbear on the 10th, and Middle Street, Brent Knoll, on the 12th (Andrew). Ian1 had flowering Heath Spotted-orchid, *D. maculata*, also on the 9th, and also at Langford Heathfield.

'E'. I saw Square-stalked Willowherb, *Epilobium tetragonum*, in Taunton on the 7th, while Fred reported it in flower in Bordon on the 9th. I know, I'd never heard of Bordon either. It's between Alton and Haslemere, apparently. Chris2 had an Eyebright, *Euphrasia* sp., in East Harptree on the 10th, while Andrew reminds me that he saw early-flowering *Euphrasia tetraquetra* at Uphill on 23rd April.

'G'. Huge excitement beside the River Tone on the 12th, with drifts of Meadow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pratense*, just starting to flower—only forty-three days earlier than Watson's FFD for it! Also Flote-grass, *Glyceria fluitans*, in Taunton on the 9th, and Middle Street, Brent Knoll, on the 12th. And Margaret had Plicate Sweet-grass, *G. notata*, at Dundry Hill on the 9th.

'H'. Barely worth mentioning but, following last week's flurry of records, I can report that Common Rock-rose, *Helianthemum nummularium*, was just starting to flower at Thurlbear on the 10th.

'I'. I'm not sure what to make of the yellow-flowered variety of Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* var. *citrina*. Margaret had a flower of it at Sand Point in March, and I've now found another patch—the first time I've seen it in the Taunton area—flowering in a roadside hedge in Killams. I'm guessing it's either deliberately planted there or else a garden escape/throw-out. Does

this variety tend to flower especially early, I wonder? And is it generally regarded as a native variety, or as a plant in cultivation that sometimes leaps the garden wall? Can anyone shed any light please?

'J'. 'J' is for *Senecio*... Two more records this week for Common Ragwort, *Jacobaea vulgaris* aka *Senecio jacobaea*—Linda in Wellington on the 9th, and Andrew in Highbridge on the 12th.

'L'. Our first Meadow Vetchling, *Lathyrus pratensis*, was seen by Linda in Wellington on the 9th, while there were two further records for Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*, in Brent Knoll churchyard on the 6th (Andrew) and in Taunton on the 11th (me); also I've had our first Lesser Hawkbit, *L. saxatilis*, flowering on the road verge where I'd seen Sea Pearlwort, *Sagina maritima*, and Sea Hard-grass, *Catapodium marinum* a few weeks earlier. We've also had Privet, *Ligustrum vulgare*, spotted by Val in the Glastonbury area earlier today. And finally, there was a precocious Honeysuckle, *Lonicera periclymenum*, flowering in a hedgerow at Killams, Taunton, on the 9th.

'M.' Common Mallow, *Malva sylvestris*, is now flowering quite widely, with records this week from Minehead (Alastair) and Middle Street (Andrew). Our only flowering Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*, was annoyingly from the eastern enclave, so remains on the list as one of our targets for Week 9.

'O'. Once again, Brent Knoll leads the charge, with the county's first (and so far only) record of flowering Corky-fruited Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe pimpinelloides*—on the 10th, in Brent Knoll village, where Andrew says, "I was amazed to see these plants, which went from basal rosettes to eighteen-inch stems and first flowers in less than a week!" A couple of non-native 'O's too this week: Linda saw flowering Star-of-Bethlehem, *Ornithogalum umbellatum*, on the 9th in Wellington, while I had Upright Yellow-sorrel, *Oxalis stricta*, on the 12th, growing as a pavement weed on East Reach.

'P'. A motley collection of 'P's this week, only one of which was on the target list—Creeping Cinquefoil, *Potentilla reptans*, seen by Andrew on the 9th at

Middle Street, and by me in Taunton on the 12th. Another Common Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, this time at Dunster beach on the 10th (Alastair), while Pat had an extraordinarily early Corn-parsley, *Petroselinum segetum*, at Nettlecombe on the 6th. Andrew's Hoary Plantain, *Plantago media*, on the 10th at Brent Knoll, was also very early—its 2008-17 decadal average FFD for the Taunton area is 31st May. Lastly, I had Common Knotgrass, *Polygonum aviculare*, on the 8th on Cotlake Hill, Trull. Another early date: Watson would have been astonished, his own FFD for *P. aviculare* from the 1920s/30s being more than a month later, 16th June.

'R'. Lots of Yellow Rattle, *Rhinanthus minor*, seen this week, including Chris2 at East Harptree on the 4th, Margaret at Winford on the 9th, me at Thurlbear on the 10th, and Sue2 in St James's churchyard, Taunton, on the 12th. Other than that, our first Weld, *Reseda luteola*, was flowering well on waste ground on Canal Road, Taunton, also on the 12th, along with my own first Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus* agg., which, as expected, was 'Himalayan Giant', *R. armeniacus*. And today, Alastair has seen Marsh Yellow-cress, *Rorippa palustris*, flowering at Wimbleball Reservoir.

'S'. Like Chris2's Pignut, so also Ellen's just-flowering Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, on the 8th, which again illustrates the difference in FFDs between the 'balmy south' and the 'frozen north'. A ridiculously late 'first date', really, given that our earliest FFD for it this spring was on Easter Sunday, 12th April—but even Ellen's date would have seemed early to Watson, his FFD (from the Taunton area, don't forget) being 20th May. See also 'U', below.

More 'S's... First, *Schedonorus pratensis*, Meadow Fescue, which several of us have seen, including Pat at Nettlecombe on the 6th, and me in Trull on the 11th. And Fred's had it in the Far East too. Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*, was flowering in Longrun Meadow on the 7th, while Chris1 had Bladder Campion, *S. vulgaris*, at Thorne St Margaret on the 8th. Several more records of Bittersweet, *Solanum dulcamara*, this week too, including Taunton, Minehead and Aldershot. And early sightings of just-flowering Branched Bur-reed, *Sparganium erectum*, in Taunton on the 9th, and Lesser Stitchwort,

Stellaria graminea, at Nettlecombe, also on the 9th (Pat). We've had two records for Hedge Woundwort, *Stachys sylvatica*, at Sandford on the 7th (Andrew) and in Taunton on the 11th.

'T'. Andrew spotted first-flowering Knotted Hedge-parsley, *Torilis nodosa*, at Oldmixon on the 8th, and we have had another good record for Salsify, *Tragopogon porrifolius*, this time Linda in Wellington on the 9th. Our target 'T' was Hop Trefoil, *Trifolium campestre*, which Alastair spotted in flower on the 7th on North Hill, Minehead.

'U'. Ellen would, I'm sure, want everyone to know that on the 8th, on Greendown, she saw Common Nettle, *Urtica dioica*. In an email entitled 'Catching up with Taunton', she says: "[I've had] my first flowering *Urtica*— and I had to go out of my way to find it out of *thousands* searched..." Here in Taunton, meanwhile, I'm struggling to find any that's *not* flowering! Interestingly, very few of you have reported this species, so I'm starting to wonder, could Taunton be out of kilter with the rest of the county? If it's any consolation, Watson's FFD for it was 22nd May—so you're in good company, Ellen.

'V'. Heath Speedwell, *Veronica officinalis*, seems to be flowering quite widely now, with records this week from Black Rock, Mendip (Georgina), Langford Heathfield (Chris1) and Wimbleball (Alastair). Plus a record from Bramshill (Fred). And, for what it's worth, I've finally seen Brooklime, *Veronica beccabunga*, at Thurlbear on the 10th.

Winding up for another week, here are a few lines from a poem by Robin Robertson, about spring, printed last week in *The Guardian*:

"... the lights of the flowers / coming in waves / as I walked with the budburst / and the flushing of trees ..."

Exactly.

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Assuming you're still happy to continue, for Week 9 there are four species we failed to see last week, namely:

Ground-elder, *Aegopodium podagraria*; Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*; Meadow Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*; Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*.

To which we can now add the following sixteen species:

Pyramidal Orchid, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*; Meadow/Smooth Brome, *Bromus commutatus/racemosus*; Southern Marsh-orchid, *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*; Hoary Willowherb, *Epilobium parviflorum*; Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*; Dyer's Greenweed, *Genista tinctoria*; Long-stalked Crane's-bill, *Geranium columbinum*; Tutsan, *Hypericum androsaemum*; Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* (the real McCoy, NOT var. *citrina*); Dwarf Mallow, *Malva neglecta*; Water Forget-me-not, *Myosotis scorpioides*; Yellow Water-lily, *Nuphar lutea*; Reed Canary-grass, *Phalaris arundinacea*; Greater Plantain, *Plantago major*; Selfheal, *Prunella vulgaris*; Zigzag Clover, *Trifolium medium*.

Other species so far only recorded once or twice will soon be flowering more widely, so would also be worth recording if you see them, e.g. Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*; Hoary Plantain, *Plantago media*; Knotgrass, *Polygonum aviculare*; Lesser Stitchwort, *Stellaria graminea*; Knotted Hedge-parsley, *Torilis nodosa*. And what about Dog-rose, *Rosa canina*?

Please dip in and out as you wish. It's not compulsory.

20th May – 34,794

Week 9 – lockdown begins to ease – hairy yellow-face bees – damselflies, dog-roses & bindweed – an escape to Pewsey Down

A tentative and partial ‘release’ from lockdown seems to have changed things quite dramatically for some of us, yet barely a jot for others. ‘Stay at home’ was a clear message, easily understood and (to a large extent) universally applied. Now it’s all got a bit more complicated than that. The roads are busier, and the daily routine isn’t quite as straightforward as before. There are more options, and apparently we now have to ‘stay alert’, whatever that means.

Nothing this week has seemed quite the same as last week. There’s the Blackbird, for a start. His endless ‘variations on a theme’ have been replaced by something a little more mundane, less adventurous, less *musical* somehow. It’s as though his heart isn’t quite in it any more. And while his stock phrases still ring out—especially very early in the morning when some of us are starting to wish he wouldn’t bother—in the middle of the day he becomes silent and skulking. He seems distracted, as if his mind’s on other things; and of course it is, since for the last couple of days we’ve been seeing them flying about with beaks full of nestling food. Once the eggs have hatched, there’s clearly more to life than singing. And so this weary rooftop flautist now has to spend some of each day food-gathering for hungry nestlings, or else delivering his urgent *chook-chook-chook* alarm calls from the deep cover of the neighbours’ holly tree. Which probably means cats are about. I fear this may not end well.

We have a hefty lump of flint on our garden table, collected some years ago from the beach at Sidmouth. It’s about the size of a butternut squash, with rounded knobbles and dark recesses and holes running through it. For us, it serves as a paperweight, but also, I’ve just noticed, it’s become a favourite resting place (or maybe nesting site?) for tiny bees. These little bees I’d been

dismissing as flies; and they really are *extremely* small—probably no more than about 4-5mm in length. After much bee-watching, I've worked out they are Hairy Yellow-face Bees, *Hylaeus hyalinatus*. It seems that telling one *Hylaeus* from another is a challenge. There are about a dozen species in Britain, each one sporting its own unique black-and-yellow face pattern. Males and females have different markings, too. Only one, thank goodness, has a hairy face like ours. Plate 2 of Steven Falk's field guide, depicting the faces lined up in six ranks of four, looks like something ripped from a catalogue of Darth Vader masks, or maybe one of those charts at Slimbridge showing how to distinguish one Bewick's Swan from another by its bill pattern. I've been mesmerised by these minuscule bees on their cobble of flint; if I hadn't been instructed to *stay at home* I'd probably never have noticed them.

When it comes to botany, of course, I'd like to think I'm better able to pick up on these sorts of things. Yet, with apologies to Graham, Fred and Helena, I still happily turn a blind eye to Hawkweeds and Eyebrights. I just don't *get* them. But you can't hope to do everything, can you? You have to pick your battles...

Some battles, though, are more easily won than others, and Ro this week reminded me of one that, like getting to grips with *Hylaeus*, could be particularly well suited to this time of 'staying put': the colour-pattern variants of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*. Mostly we ignore them, and yet Peter Sell took a particular delight in them, naming no less than ten easily recognised colour forms. We know we have many of these in the county, but which are common, and which less so? Could we perhaps, between us, work out a 'league table' for Somerset, from commonest to rarest? Do any of them have differing or particularly distinctive ecologies or habitat/soil requirements? To start the ball rolling, here's a key to the colour forms so, if you'd like to, you can have a go at working out which ones you've got in your local area. I promise: they're *much* easier than dandelions.

**A key to flower-colour forms of Field
Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis* subsp.
arvensis - adapted from Sell & Murrell
(2009, *Flora of Great Britain & Ireland*
Vol. 3, pp 342-3)**

1. Inside of corolla pure white except for yellow throat, and sometimes a ring of pink/purple marks ('tick' marks) above the yellow throat → 2

Inside of corolla tinted pink or with clear white-and-pink stripes, with or without a ring of pink/purple marks ('tick' marks) above the yellow throat → 3

2. Inside of corolla pure white except for yellow throat, no 'tick' marks = forma ***arvensis***

Inside of corolla pure white with yellow throat and ring of dark 'tick' marks just above yellow throat = forma ***notatus***

3. Inside of corolla tinted pink all over most of surface, or pink except for white band above yellow throat → 4

Inside of corolla with pink and white stripes → 7

4. Inside of corolla tinted pink all over surface except for yellow throat → 5

Inside of corolla deep pink round top half with white band above yellow throat, into which point 5 lobes of the pink → 6

5. No 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma ***pallidiroseus***

Purple 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma ***pallidinotatus***

6. No 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma ***perroseus***

Purple 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma ***quinquevulnerus***

7. Inside of corolla with 5 white stripes and 5 pink 'windows' → 8

Inside of corolla with 10 white stripes and 10 pink 'windows' →
9

8. No 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma ***pentarrhabdotus***

Purple 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma ***pentastictus***

9. No 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma ***decarrhabdotus***

Purple 'tick' marks above yellow throat = forma ***decemvulnerus***

Week 9, then. Weather-wise it was like a back-to-front Week 8, this time *starting* with a ground frost (1°C in Taunton on the 14th) and *ending* with a heatwave (25°C on the 20th). Another dry week too, and for the most part sunny. It pains me to say it, but still there's been hardly a day of cricket lost to the weather, if only *every* day hadn't been lost already—to the virus. Dragonflies and damselflies are really taking off now, if you'll excuse the pun. I saw Broad-bodied Chaser, *Libellula depressa*, at Orchard Wood on the 14th, while Eve had *L. depressa* in the north of the county this week too. Several of you have reported seeing Beautiful Demoiselles, *Calopteryx virgo*, but not yet Banded, *C. splendens*. Of the damselflies, in Longrun Meadow Keith—who I bumped into earlier this week—has so far recorded Large Red, *Pyrrosoma nymphula*, Blue-tailed, *Ischnura elegans*, Common Blue, *Enallagma cyathigerum*, and Azure, *Coenagrion puella*. Butterfly highlights of the week included two reports of Green Hairstreaks, *Callophrys rubi*: one by a friend of mine, Lynda, at Thurlbear on the 19th, the other by Georgina at Ubley Warren on the 20th. Georgina also had her first Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, *Boloria selene*, on the 20th.

On the botanical front it's been another busy week, with sixteen of you sending in a total of one-hundred-and-forty-five records covering one-hundred-and-thirteen species. These included quite a few 'late' FFDs from higher altitudes of things recorded flowering in the 'low country' several weeks ago. It's all starting to get terribly confusing, though, and hard to predict which species we need to be looking out for next. In all, we saw just eleven of the twenty species on our target list this week. The following summarises our records for the last week...

'A'. Records have been tumbling in for Ground-elder, *Aegopodium podagraria*. Georgina says it was actually flowering in her garden *last* week, on the 12th, but others have begun seeing it this week, including Margaret at Strode on the 15th, Pat, also on the 15th, at Nettlecombe, and Helena with Dave on the 19th at Woolverton. The only other 'A' of note was Wild-oat, *Avena fatua*, in Upper Holway, Taunton, on the 18th.

'B'. I saw Meadow Brome, *Bromus commutatus*, in grassland near Orchard Wood on the 14th, and then at Longrun Meadow on the 18th and Thurlbear on the 20th. Remarkably, also some *very* early Yellow-wort, *Blackstonia perfoliata*, in open stony ground beside the railway at Taunton station on the 15th. Watson would be spinning in his grave—his FFD for it about a century ago was 27th June.

'C'. Linda very usefully picked up a couple of new sedges on a visit to Mount Fancy on the 16th, Common Yellow-sedge, *Carex demissa*, and Star Sedge, *C. echinata*. (Along with several other nice things, including Bog-bean, *Menyanthes trifoliata*, Lesser Spearwort, *Ranunculus flammula*, and Marsh Violet, *Viola palustris*. This is quite a late FFD for the violet, probably due to the fact that none of us are getting much opportunity to visit the right sort of habitat for it.) More sightings of Marsh Thistle, *Cirsium palustre*, this week included Linda's at The Quants on the 13th, and mine at Thurlbear on the 16th. Many of Pat's FFDs at Nettlecombe are, unsurprisingly, lagging behind some other parts of the county, so all the more remarkable that she recorded Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, on the 15th, when Taunton's plants—and I've looked

at *hundreds* of them this week—are still stubbornly in tight bud. Two more records of Crested Dog’s-tail, *Cynosurus cristatus*, at Burnham-on-Sea on the 15th (Andrew), and at Lilstock on the 19th (Ro).

‘D’ for Dactylorchids.... Margaret has seen both Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, and Heath Spotted-orchid, *D. maculata* this week, the first at Winford (Redding Pits) on the 17th, the second on the 15th at Strode, where she also saw one of our target species, Southern Marsh-orchid, ***D. praetermissa***. However, her *first* Southern Marsh-orchids were actually a day earlier, on the 14th, at Berrow, during her first botanical walk away from Winford since lockdown nine weeks ago. There have also been a couple more FFDs for Foxglove, *Digitalis purpurea*: at Ford Street on the 13th (Linda), and in Taunton on the 18th.

‘E’. Hoary Willowherb, ***Epilobium parviflorum***, has at last been found flowering away from Fred’s ‘eastern enclave’, so in the part of Somerset called Somerset: Andrew saw it at Highbridge on the 19th. Helena visited Priddy Mineries on the 13th, with one of the highlights being Hare’s-tail Cottongrass, *Eriophorum vaginatum*. She says it’s normally an early-flowerer, but Watson would still have been mildly surprised, his average FFD being 30th May; although even ‘back in the day’ he did see it, very occasionally, flowering as early as April. More exotically, I had flowering Californian Poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*, on waste ground in Canal Road, Taunton, on the 15th. (Nearby there was a lovely sprawling Sweet-pea, *Lathyrus odoratus*—a real rarity in the wild in Somerset, apparently.)

‘F’. Our target list included Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*, but Hilary went one better, with flowering Dropwort, *F. vulgaris*, on Purn Hill on the 16th. No-one has yet seen Meadowsweet, although it was very close to flowering in Killams, Taunton, on the 19th.

‘G’. A sudden rush of records of Long-stalked Crane’s-bill, ***Geranium columbinum***, this week: David1 at Middle Hill Common on the 9th (so actually Week 8) was followed by Hilary on Bleadon Hill on the 14th, Chris1 at Langford

Budville also on the 14th, me at Thurlbear on the 18th, and Gill up in the far north-east on the 19th. And a second record for Meadow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pratense*, at Woolverton on the 19th (Helena).

'H'. Margaret's lockdown break-out to Berrow on the 14th also produced some flowering Sea Sandwort, *Honckenya peploides*, while there have been two records for Tutsan, *Hypericum androsaemum*, in Taunton on the 18th, and in Leigh Woods on the 19th (David1). Nettlecombe's first Cat's-ear, *Hypochaeris radicata*, was on the 17th, more than a month later than its first sighting in the Taunton area.

'L'. A record from Fred of Grass-leaved Vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*, in Hants, but so far only a solitary Somerset record—that incredibly early one of Alastair's in Minehead on 20th April. I have searched in several likely places, without success. But it must be flowering by now, mustn't it? (And what about Yellow Vetchling, *L. aphaca*, too?) Meadow Vetchling, *L. pratensis*, has been remarkably slow off the mark, with Andrew's record from Burnham-on-Sea on the 15th being the only one of the week. Privet, *Ligustrum vulgare*, was beginning to flower in Taunton on the 17th, while we also have a second record of Honeysuckle, *Lonicera periclymenum*, this time from the Langford Budville area on the 14th. Marsh Bird's-foot-trefoil, *Lotus pedunculatus*, seems to have begun flowering very much under the radar: David1 saw it at Leigh Woods on the 19th, reporting that it had probably "been flowering for a while."

'M'. I saw a single plant of flowering Dwarf Mallow, *Malva neglecta*, growing around a roadside bollard in Upper Holway, Taunton, on the 18th. Ro was delighted to notch up Common Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*, on the 15th at Walford's Gibbet where it was "... looking so pretty in dappled sunlight." Linda also had Common Cow-wheat, at Thurlbear on the 18th. Following records in Week 8 of flowering Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*, in Hants and Bristol, we've finally had it beginning to flower in Somerset, in Gwynne Lane, Taunton, on the 18th.

'N'. Yellow Water-lily, *Nuphar lutea*, was recorded by Val on the 11th (so Week 8) in the Glastonbury area, then on the 18th by Andrew on the Huntspill River. (Not one I usually record, but White Water-lily, *Nymphaea alba*, was looking splendid on the pond at Roughmoor on the 17th.)

'O'. Corky-fruited Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe pimpinelloides*, was just beginning to flower on the 18th in Trull.

'P'. I had my first Hoary Plantain, *Plantago media*, at Thurlbear on the 20th, eleven days earlier than its 2008-17 decadal average FFD in the Taunton area, and more than three weeks earlier than Watson's average FFD. David1's record of Wood Meadow-grass, *Poa nemoralis*, in Leigh Woods on the 19th was similarly early. 'P' of the week, though, must surely go to Helena for her record of flowering Angular Solomon's-seal, *Polygonatum odoratum*, in Cheddar Gorge on the 14th, while I had the first flower on Hoary Cinquefoil, *Potentilla argentea*, in Longrun Meadow on the 17th. Oh yes, and Andrew had Knotgrass, *Polygonum aviculare*, at Burnham-on-Sea on the 15th.

'R'. Lots of sightings of Dog-rose, *Rosa canina*, this week, including Wellington, Glastonbury, Brent Knoll, Bleadon Hill and Leigh Woods. Only one more record, though, for Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus* agg. But, more interestingly, a 'first' for Raspberry, *Rubus idaeus*, at Nordrach on Mendip on the 15th (Georgina).

'S'. It would be remarkable if Helena's FFD for Mossy Saxifrage, *Saxifraga hypnoides*, on the 14th wasn't also its first flowering in the UK, given that Cheddar Gorge is an extreme southerly outpost for this 'northern' species. There have also been further sightings of many other 'S' species, including Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*, Bog Stitchwort, *Stellaria alsine*, Lesser Stitchwort, *S. graminea*, and Hedge Woundwort, *Stachys sylvatica*. Plus, a cecidological 'S': in Leigh Woods on the 19th David1 spotted galls on Wayfaring Tree, *Viburnum lantana*, caused by the gall-midge *Sackenomyia*

reaumurii. I haven't checked yet, but suspect this may be a 'first' for Somerset⁸.

'T'. Further records this week for Goat's-beard, *Tragopogon pratensis*, and Salsify, *T. porrifolius*, as well as the hybrid between the two, *T. x mirabilis*⁹. I've also been pleased to pick up flowering Hop Trefoil, *Trifolium campestre*, and Knotted Hedge-parsley, *Torilis nodosa*, on Taunton road verges, and Zigzag Clover, ***Trifolium medium***, just beginning to flower on the 20th at Orchard Wood. The most notable 'T', though, must surely be Steve's "many plants" of Woolly Clover, *Trifolium tomentosum*, at Huntworth, near Bridgwater Services, on the 17th—only the second record of this species in VC5 and Somerset.

'V'. Helena, presumably running more gently than usual, was able to spot Bithynian Vetch, *Vicia bithynica*, flowering well on the 15th at Paulton. Other than that, the main 'V's this week have been Squirreltail Fescue, *Vulpia bromoides*, on a droughted grassy bank in Longrun Meadow on the 17th, and Rat's-tail Fescue, *V. myuros*, which was seen on the 15th by Helena on her front path, and coincidentally by me on the same day on mine. And finally, the newsflash you've all been waiting for: on the 18th Helena ran five kms—that's 3.15 miles—in under thirty-five minutes, and her first mile was nine minutes and eleven seconds, so two seconds faster than her previous best. Is there any scope for the rest of us to report 'personal worsts', do you think?

I'll leave it to David1 to wrap up this week's report. On Sunday, 17th, he bravely "ventured into Wiltshire", to visit Pewsey Downs...

"Couldn't find a single orchid in flower ... but did scratch out a few plants of Field Fleawort [*Tephrosia integrifolia*]. To be honest the best thing was the ... Chalk Milkwort, *Polygala calcarea*, and Horseshoe Vetch, *Hippocrepis comosa*, stretching on and on, like a pattern infinitely repeated with slight

⁸ Indeed it was.

⁹ Hester reported that this patch of hybrid Goat's-beard was flowering for a second time at the end of August.

variations. And ... Marsh Fritillaries all over the shop, and [a single] Adonis Blue, like a scrap of the Aegean alighted on the Wessex ridge.”

* * *

I’m going to take a short break from weekly report-writing, so here’s an extra-long target list of twenty-eight species that hopefully will keep us going until 3rd June. First of all, the ‘roll over’ of nine species from last week’s list:

Pyramidal Orchid, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*; Viper’s-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*; Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*; Dyer’s Greenweed, *Genista tinctoria*; Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* (not var. *citrina*); Water Forget-me-not, *Myosotis scorpioides*; Reed Canary-grass, *Phalaris arundinacea*; Greater Plantain, *Plantago major*; Selfheal, *Prunella vulgaris*.

To which we can now add the following nineteen species:

Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*; Wild Onion/Crow Garlic, *Allium vineale*; Fool’s Watercress, *Apium nodiflorum*; Black Horehound, *Ballota nigra*; Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*; Rosebay Willowherb, *Chamaenerion angustifolium*; Enchanter’s-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*; Great Willowherb, *Epilobium hirsutum*; Hedge Bedstraw, *Galium album*; Marsh Bedstraw, *Galium palustre*; Lady’s Bedstraw, *Galium verum*; Bristly Ox-tongue, *Helminthotheca echioides*; Hairy St John’s-wort, *Hypericum hirsutum*; Perforate St John’s-wort, *Hypericum perforatum*; Purple Loosestrife, *Lythrum salicaria*; Timothy, *Phleum pratense*; Wood Club-rush, *Scirpus sylvaticus*; Alsike Clover, *Trifolium hybridum*; Tufted Vetch, *Vicia cracca*.

And don’t forget to have a look at the crib chart and key to colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, and then—if you fancy it—see if you can work out which ones you’ve got in your ‘home patch’.

3rd June - 38,034

Weeks 10 & 11 - an end to the heatwave -
marbled whites & meadow browns - banded
demoiselles - meadowsweet & bedstraws -
botanical graffiti

The Blackbird has fallen silent. He was broadcasting from the TV aerial first thing this morning, but now the rain's clattering on the roof and he's made for cover. Eerily quiet, then, and a day quite different from every other day since the middle of March: overcast, wet, and much warmer indoors than out. Somerset should have been playing a T20 today against Sussex at Hove, but it would almost certainly have been rained off anyway—a consoling thought. So we've given Hove a miss, and instead Ben and I have been walking the dog up at Staple Hill and Mount Fancy where, apart from a good crop of first-flowerers, I was particularly pleased to witness another excellent show of Stinkhorn fungi, *Phallus impudicus*, in the same place we saw them as a group almost exactly a year ago.

Taking the fortnight as a whole, today's rain has been an aberration at the end of another prolonged period of dry, sunny, warm weather. You'll have heard on the TV News that it's been the sunniest spring on record (since 1929); and in Taunton, at least, ten of the last fourteen days have recorded temperatures of 25°C or above. The lack of rain this spring has also been noteworthy. Effects on first flowerings can be strange and unpredictable: while drought stress might cause one species to 'stall', another—sensing impending doom, perhaps—decides to flower as quickly as it can, resulting in a mixture of responses. Even a single species can behave quite differently in different places, blooming precociously on a dry, sheltered, sunny, south-facing slope while remaining stubbornly in bud everywhere else.

This also means that different people can have wildly differing perceptions of how FFDs are progressing. So, while some of us have had rich pickings in the last fortnight, others have been complaining that they've found next to

nothing. Today's rain, especially if it's the start of a period of more changeable weather, may even things up a bit. Expect the barrenness of recent days, if that's been your experience, to be followed by a great flourish of new records in the next week or two...

Turning to what we've seen in the last fortnight, let's start, as usual, with things other than plants. At home—where, despite all this talk of 'easing', I still seem to spend much of my time—I've been mainly distracted by bees and Blackbirds. In Week 10, continuing the 'b' theme, it was beetles. The first, appearing like a mislaid brooch on the doormat, was a Rose Chafer, *Cetonia aurata*, to be swiftly followed, in the back garden, by an equally iridescent and jewel-like Thick-legged or Swollen-thighed Beetle, *Oedemera nobilis*. They're not *thighs* of course—beetles don't have thighs, do they?—but the first segments of the male's back legs (the 'hind femora', to give them their proper name) are noticeably swollen, making it instantly recognisable: a beetle that looks like it's been seriously 'working out' at the gym. I'm sure I've been shown them on SRPG or SANHS field meetings, but this is the first time we've spotted one in the garden. It's a 'southern' species, with a distribution centred on the Mediterranean region and southern Europe. In the UK, at its north-western limit, it used to occur only very locally in southern-most counties of England, but since the 1990s, presumably as a result of climate change, it's undergone a rapid expansion of range. Now common across England and Wales as far north as a line running from the Mersey to the Wash, there are even scattered records into northern England, and (most recently) the extreme south of Scotland. Definitely one to watch out for in your flower borders.

It's been a good fortnight for butterflies. Georgina saw her first Small Blues, *Cupido minimus*, and Large Skippers, *Ochlodes sylvanus*, on the 25th at Stoke Camp, and first Marbled Whites, *Melanargia galathea*, and Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*, on the 30th at Draycott Sleights. My own first Meadow Brown, at Orchard Wood, was on the 25th, followed by several at Thurlbear on the 27th. Keith had Meadow Browns and Large Skippers at Longrun Meadow, Taunton, on 1st June. He also saw his first Emperor Dragonfly, *Anax*

imperator, there on the 1st. On the 2nd, down by the River Tone at Obridge, we found there had been an overnight/early morning mass emergence of Banded Demoiselles, *Calopteryx splendens*. What a gorgeous insect this is! We walked between Obridge and Creech Castle and counted dozens and dozens and *dozens* (easily more than 50) where the previous afternoon we hadn't seen a single one. The description in Cyril Hammond's field guide is spot on: "females have a feeble fluttering flight ... [but] males are much more active and engage in chasing one another and sometimes more than half-a-dozen may be seen involved in the chase which can last many minutes. Courtship is pretty to watch, the male vibrating his wings rapidly in front of or above the female before flying with her in tandem." Their slow, bobbing, butterfly-like flight is distinctive, as are the broad bands on the wings of the males, which seem, like their bodies, to have been dipped in blue-black 'Quink'.

On the botanical front it's been a busy two weeks, with nineteen of you sending in a total of two-hundred-and-twenty-five records covering goodness-knows-how-many species. As already hinted, while some of you found target species elusive, others (including me) were having a field day. In all, we saw all but five of our twenty-eight target species. The following gives you an idea of what we've all been up to, and what we've seen; as usual, stitched together in an order that's vaguely alphabetical, except when it isn't...

'A's abounding! Two reports of Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, first seen by Kate at Stolford on the 23rd, and then by Andrew (another 'A') at Crook Peak on the 30th. Pyramidal Orchids, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, are beginning to flower all over the place, with many of you noticing how the first blooms open towards the base of the spike, even while the top of the pyramid is still tightly closed. The first was Andrew's, at Yarley on the 25th, then me at Orchard Wood on the 27th, followed by Steve in Bridgwater on the 29th—right next to a courting couple, apparently. Keith photographed a Pyramidal Orchid on the 1st in grassland out near the Silk Mills park-and-ride, which is currently being used as a COVID-19 testing station. I had my first bulbil-laden

head of Wild Onion, *Allium vineale*, in a Taunton roadside flower-bed on the 2nd. Also we've had two records of the much prettier Rosy Garlic, *A. roseum*, one in Taunton on the 24th, the other from Alastair in Minehead, actually on the 14th (Week 9). Fool's Watercress, *Apium nodiflorum*, is one of the species that seems to have 'stalled' in the last week or two, but I did see it in flower on the 2nd in Taunton. Other noteworthy 'A's included: Fool's Parsley, *Aethusa cynapium*, on the 31st in Bridgwater (Steve); Marsh Foxtail, *Alopecurus geniculatus*, on the 25th in Bridgwater (Steve) and 2nd June at Postlebury (Gill); and more Kidney-vetch, *Anthyllis vulneraria*, this time at Stoke Camp, Mendip, on the 25th (Georgina).

A paucity of 'B's. We had two to search for, but only struck lucky with one of them: Black Horehound, *Ballota nigra*, was starting to flower at Obridge, Taunton, on the 23rd, while Andrew had it at Berrow on the 3rd. Flowering Rush, *Butomus umbellatus*, we'll have to carry over to Week 12. Amongst other 'B's, we've had first records of flowering Yellow-wort, *Blackstonia perfoliata*, in 'proper' habitat, i.e. NOT beside a railway line. Georgina had it at Draycott Sleights on the 30th, while the next day Andrew saw it on Crook Peak. It's still only 'in bud' at Thurlbear. A couple of sightings of Borage, *Borago officinalis*, this week, from Steve and Linda, and also a surprisingly early record of Butterfly-bush, *Buddleja davidii*, on the 31st in Bridgwater (Steve).

'C' is for *Convolvulus*. I'll spare you the details, except to say that Andrew is leading the pack when it comes to colour-forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, having already seen seven of the ten on offer. Looking at everyone's records so far, f. *arvensis* and f. *pentarrhabdotus* seem to be the most frequent, followed by f. *decarrhabdotus* and f. *pallidiroseus*. Colour forms with tick marks round the throat seem to be scarcer than those without. Or maybe they just start to flower slightly later? Thanks to Andrew, Jeanne, Ro and Linda, in particular, for their records, many of them with accompanying photographic evidence. (Sorry, I said I'd spare you the details, then couldn't resist giving you them anyway.)

Still on 'C's, and still on bindweeds, there have been several records of Large Bindweed, *Calystegia silvatica*, from Highbridge (Andrew), Wiveliscombe (Linda) and Taunton. I've been catching up with a few 'C's of my own, with Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, on the 24th, and Basil Thyme, *Clinopodium acinos*, on the 30th, the latter in its usual spot on Thurlbear Quarrylands. Of our targets, Rosebay Willowherb, *Chamaenerion angustifolium*, showed its first flowers in Taunton on the 2nd (on our back path) but Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*, (also on our back path) is yet to show itself. 'C' of the week, though, must surely be Steve's Bermuda-grass, *Cynodon dactylon*, at Bridgwater docks on the 24th. Only the second record of this grass in VC5.

'D' is for Ellen's exceptionally *late* FFD for Common Spotted-orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. It was the same with her nettles, which you'll remember were also very late. (Rumour has it she's still having to scrape ice off her windscreen each morning!) For sheer classiness amongst the 'D's, though, what about Georgina's Cheddar Pink, *Dianthus gratianopolitanus*, seen flowering in the Gorge on the 30th?

'E'. I had thought Steve's Viper's-bugloss, *Echium vulgare*, on the 24th was a first for the year, until I looked back at Alastair's records and discovered that he'd seen this species flowering at Dunster on 18th April. So that one shouldn't have been on the list, really. Other than that, we've had our first Couch-grass, *Elymus repens*, in Taunton on the 29th and Highbridge on the 30th (Andrew), Great Willowherb, *Epilobium hirsutum*, in Taunton on the 30th, and Pale Willowherb, *E. roseum*, also in Taunton, on the 29th. But still, amazingly, only a single record of Hoary Willowherb, *E. parviflorum*, which seems to have been badly affected by the prolonged dry spell. A couple of records of Caper Spurge, *Euphorbia lathyris*, on the 28th in Taunton and the 31st in Bridgwater (Steve). And, finally, a vaguely autumnal 'E' in the shape of Bell Heather, *Erica cinerea*, seen today at Staple Hill. This is usually the first of the 'heathers' to flower—even Walter Watson's FFD for it was mid-June—but should soon be followed by Cross-leaved heath, *E. tetralix*, and then Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*. If you're out looking for any of these, keep an eye

out also for the first Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*. Oh, and Slender St John's-wort, *Hypericum pulchrum*, too...

'F'. Just the one target this week, Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*, which three of us have seen—me on the 24th in Taunton (in the same ditch as the *Apium* a week later), Andrew at Binham Moor, near Mark, on the 28th, and Steve in Bridgwater on the 31st. Others have commented on how it seems to have got 'stuck' in bud. Have another look in the next couple of days and you may find today's rain has worked its magic.

One other 'F' in passing: a plant of the not-so-common Common Cudweed, *Filago vulgaris*, flowering in bare ground off Canal Road, Taunton, on the 1st. We've had records of it in previous years from road verges near the railway station, but this is the first in Taunton away from that area. It's quite a scarce plant in Somerset, and 'Near Threatened' on the England Red List, so a nice one to have whether flowering or not.

'G'. Three species of bedstraw, *Galium*, were on our target list for the fortnight, and Andrew managed to twitch them all! On the 30th he found Lady's Bedstraw, *G. verum*, on Brent Knoll; the next day he had Hedge Bedstraw, *G. album*, on Crook Peak; and the day after that he picked up Marsh Bedstraw, *G. palustre*, at Wick Lane, Brent Knoll. And, not wanting to miss out completely on this sudden rash of bedstraws, I can also report seeing Fen Bedstraw, *G. uliginosum*, today at Mount Fancy, Staple Hill. To put these dates into some kind of perspective, Walter Watson's FFDs for *verum* and *album* were 25th June, *palustre* 10th June, and *uliginosum* 3rd August.

Our only other target 'G' was Dyer's Greenweed, *Genista tinctoria*, flowering at Thurlbear on the 26th and at Ellen's place 'up north' on the 28th. Amongst other 'G's, there were records of Goat's-rue, *Galega officinalis*, in Minehead on the 25th (Alastair), Gallant-soldier, *Galinsoga parviflora*, in Bridgwater on the 31st (Steve), Yellow Horned-Poppy, *Glaucium flavum*, at Dunster beach on the 25th (Alastair), and Corn Marigold, *Glebionis segetum*, near Nynhead on the 23rd (Linda). There were also three records for flowering French Oat-

grass, *Gaudinia fragilis*, from Yarley, Brent Knoll and near Thurlbear. The last was in a new monad, in a field through which I've walked, probably every week, for the last twenty-five years. I'd like to think it must be a recent arrival, or else I've been extremely good at overlooking it all these years. I suspect the latter.

'G' is also for (botanical) Graffiti. Several of you have been in touch about the #morethanweeds campaign, becoming popular during lockdown, to chalk up the names of 'weeds' (sic) growing in urban streets, in pavement cracks and on roadside walls and verges. It's simple really, you just head out with some coloured chinks, then write on the pavement or wall the English and scientific names of the plants you find. The hope is that people walking by will be encouraged to notice these street plants, and their names, and maybe come to *value* them more as a result. I mean to start my own campaign of pavement-scribbling soon, as well as posting a few pictures on our recently-formed neighbourhood WhatsApp group—Adria Bellflower, *Campanula portenschlagiana*, Ivy-leaved Toadflax, *Cymbalaria muralis*, Mexican Fleabane, *Erigeron karvinskianus*, Guernsey Fleabane, *E. sumatrensis*, Water Bent, *Polypogon viridis*, etc, etc... And the odd dandelion too. But it turns out someone's already on the case, as I've just come across an 'annotated' Herb Robert, *Geranium robertianum*, growing against a wall in Eastbourne Road. That's got to be my plant of the week. (And it was flowering too.)

'H'. Three target 'H's, and all of them picked up by somebody in Week 11. Bristly Ox-tongue, *Helminthotheca echioides*, was seen in Taunton on the 28th, and at Lilstock on the 2nd (Ro). Hairy St John's-wort, *Hypericum hirsutum*, was on Crook Peak on the 31st (Andrew), and at Thurlbear on the 1st, while Perforate St John's-wort, *H. perforatum*, was seen on waste ground in Taunton on the 1st, and in Langford Budville on the 2nd (Chris1). We've also had records this week for Meadow Barley, *Hordeum secalinum*, in Bridgwater and Taunton. 'H' of the week, though, has to be Andrew's Lizard Orchid, *Himantoglossum hircinum*, at Berrow on the 22nd.

'H' is also for Helena, who's beaten her personal best so often in the last fortnight it's making me dizzy just thinking about it.

'I'. The normal colour variety of Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima*, is now flowering quite widely, following an early first sighting at Lilstock on the 19th (Ro), then Thurlbear and Orchard Wood on the 23rd (me) and Brent Knoll on the 29th (Andrew). Ro's experience is worth sharing, since it shows the lengths to which we're prepared to go when plant hunting: "I had one of those walks that just turns out horrid. An arable field edge ... had become choked with tangled Alexanders and Blackthorn suckers ... and Brambles, so I had a hellish struggle to get round ... I managed to collect two ticks and get stung and pricked." But it was worth it, in the end, as she also picked up her first flowers of Stinking Iris—or *Gladdon* as she and several others have called it. This name is derived, apparently, from the Latin *Gladiolus*, and was formerly applied also to Yellow Flag, *I. pseudacorus*, when early botanists knew it as 'water gladiolus.' (With thanks to Geoffrey Grigson.)

'J'. A rush of rushes this week, with first flowerings noted for Hard, *J. inflexus*, on the 23rd (Kate), Soft, *J. effusus*, and Compact, *J. conglomeratus*, on the 26th at Thurlbear, and a trio of Toad, *bufonius*, Bulbous, *J. bulbosus*, and Jointed, *J. articulatus* all flowering up at Mount Fancy earlier today. Watson would have expected these to be coming into flower in the last ten days of June, except for *J. bulbosus* for which his FFD was the 16th. So they're all jolly early, basically. Has the dry weather sped them up, I wonder?

'L'. Grass-leaved Vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*, and Meadow Vetchling, *L. pratensis*, are both flowering well now, while there have been further records for Fairy Flax, *Linum catharticum* (me, at Thurlbear), Honeysuckle, *Lonicera periclymenum* (Gill and Liz, at North Wootton) and Purple Toadflax, *Linaria purpurea* (Dee, Clevedon). The first flowering Purple Loosestrife, *Lythrum salicaria*, was beside the River Tone on the 2nd.

'M'. Tufted Forget-me-not, *Myosotis laxa*, this week, but *still* no Water Forget-me-not, *M. scorpioides*. Alastair, by the way, had Bastard Balm,

Melittis melissophyllum, at Sully on the 20th. (Helena had some in her garden, but that probably shouldn't count. Lovely picture though.) We've also had further records for Dwarf Mallow, *Malva neglecta*, Wall Lettuce, *Mycelis muralis*, both in Bridgwater, and Common Cow-wheat, *Melampyrum pratense*, in both the Blackdowns and the Quantocks. The Thurlbear plants could well be subsp. *commutatum*, which is the one that tends to occur on calcareous soils. It needs checking though, so there's a specimen in the press for Fred to examine later.

'O'. More records for Corky-fruited Water Dropwort, *Oenanthe pimpinelloides*, including near Castle Cary on the 24th (David2) and Bridgwater on the 25th (Steve). Several records of Bee Orchid, *Ophrys apifera*, too: Orchard Wood (me) and Yarley (Andrew), both on the 25th; Fiona's lawn (no idea where she lives, maybe near Street?), on the 26th; and Chantry, on the 1st (Gill). And then, to cap it all, there was Jeanne and Tim's Fly Orchids, *Ophrys insectifera*, on the 26th. And Andrew has just reported seeing first-flowering Common Restharrow, *Ononis repens*, at Berrow golf course. This would have been on next week's list, had he managed *not* to see it. But he did, so it isn't!

'P'. We saw three of the four 'P's on offer: Canary Reed-grass, *Phalaris arundinacea*, was flowering well beside the River Tone at Obridge on the 29th; Selfheal, *Prunella vulgaris*, had just started flowering at Yarley on the 25th (Andrew) and at Orchard Wood on the 27th; and Greater Plantain, *Plantago major*, flowering (if you can call it that) on a road verge in Taunton on the 30th. Which just leaves Timothy, *Phleum pratense*, to carry over to Week 12.

'R'. Interesting to note how much later Field Rose, *Rosa arvensis*, is than Dog-rose, *R. canina*. That was the case in Watson's day, too. Whereas our first *R. canina*, was on 28th April (Watson's = 22nd May), our first *R. arvensis* wasn't until 28th May when Linda had it at Langford Heathfield (Watson's = 7th June). The next day, on the 29th, Gill saw it at Truddoxhill, while my own first for it was on the 30th in Taunton.

'S'. Firsts this last fortnight for Small Scabious, *Scabiosa columbaria*, on the 30th (Georgina, Draycott Sleights), Pepper-saxifrage, *Silaum silaus*, on the 23rd (Kate, Stolford), and Wood Club-rush, *Scirpus sylvaticus*, on the 29th (me, River Tone at Obridge). Nothing much else of note, although good to see Ragged Robin, *Silene flos-cuculi*, now being widely reported, as also Common Figwort, *Scrophularia nodosa*, and Water Figwort, *S. auriculata*.

'T'. A third record for Hop Trefoil, this one from Linda on the 30th in Wivvy. More significant, though, was Georgina's discovery, on the same day, of Wild Thyme, *Thymus drucei* aka *praecox* aka *polytrichus*, just starting to flower on Draycott Sleights.

'V'. And, as usual, ending with our 'V' of the week... This time, Andrew's patch of Tufted Vetch, *Vicia cracca*, at Wick Lane, Brent Knoll.

* * *

For Week 12 we'll go for eighteen species. First of all, there are five to 'roll over' from our Weeks 10 and 11 list—a bit of a 'mixed bag' I'm afraid:

Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*; Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*; Water Forget-me-not, *Myosotis scorpioides*; Timothy, *Phleum pratense*; Alsike Clover, *Trifolium hybridum*.

To which we can now add the following thirteen species, lots of them tall and showy, so hopefully fairly easy to spot as soon as they begin to flower:

Water-plantain, *Alisma plantago-aquatica*; Wood False-brome, *Brachypodium sylvaticum*; Greater Knapweed, *Centaurea scabiosa*; Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*; Hemp-agrimony, *Eupatorium cannabinum*; Reed Sweet-grass, *Glyceria maxima*; Field Scabious, *Knautia arvensis*; Musk Mallow, *Malva moschata*; Wild Madder, *Rubia peregrina*; Perennial

Sowthistle, *Sonchus arvensis*; Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*; Great Mullein, *Verbascum thapsus*; Vervain, *Verbena officinalis*.

Plus there are lots of species, e.g. Common Centaury, *Centaureum erythraea*, Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota*, Branched Bur-reed, *Sparganium erectum*, and Betony, *Betonica officinalis*, for which we've had one or two anomalous/exceptionally early records, but which should soon be flowering more generally.

10th June – 39,025

Week 12 – enchanter's-nightshade –
colliding seasons – tigers in the polytunnel
– field scabious & great mullein – a queue
at the dump

It's raining again. This time, a soft crackle on the tiles like the sizzling tick and patter of an old vinyl record. An indifferent week, weather-wise—which, given what's gone before, is surely noteworthy—often breezy, sometimes wet, not especially hot, and generally a fairly unpredictable mixture of cloud and sunshine. Which has given us new things to ponder, like whether it might be sensible to wear a coat of some sort. Or maybe take a brolly, just in case?

This week I've been reading Madeline Miller's *Circe*, a (quote) “bold and subversive” retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, written from the point of view of the goddess-witch Circe, the much-maligned daughter of Helios, God of the Sun. And, would you believe it? One minute she was giving birth to her son, Telegonus, via what appeared to be *self-administered* Caesarean section; the next, on the back path, I came across first-flowering Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*. The link between the witch and the plant had never really occurred to me before, but is well summarised in Geoffrey Grigson's *Dictionary of English Plant Names*. To quote:

“The Flemish botanist Mathias de l'Obel (1538-1616) equated the Greek plant *kirkaia*, Latin *circaea*, used in charms, [at] first with *Solanum dulcamara*, the Woody Nightshade, then [later] with *Circaea lutetiana*. *Kirkaia* was taken to mean the plant of the witch or enchantress Kirke, or Circe...”

Or, more simply, as noted on the Woodland Trust's website:

“*Circaea* relates to Circe, an enchantress sometimes depicted as the Greek goddess of magic, who was known for her knowledge of herbs.”

Strange, anyway, that two such disparate worlds—of Greek myths and first flowerings—should collide in this way.

And Tim Dee’s two seasons of spring and autumn seem to be colliding too, which means that (in spite of this week’s weather) it’s really starting to feel like *summer*... And, as if to prove the point, Georgina reported her first Dark Green Fritillary, *Speyeria aglaja*, on the 5th, at Blackmoor. There have been further sightings of Marbled Whites, *Melanargia galathea*, and Large Skippers, *Ochlodes sylvanus*, Ro’s had a Green Hairstreak, *Callophrys rubi*, and now Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*, seem to be *everywhere*. Amongst other ‘miscellaneous records’, Helena and Val spotted a Swollen-thighed Beetle, *Oedemeria nobilis*, in Great Breach Wood on the 9th, while Andrew, on the same day, saw Chimney Sweeper moths, *Odezia atrata*, at GB Gruffy. And Ro reports that she has tigers in her polytunnel, although in this case, thankfully, *Scarlet Tigers*, *Callimorpha dominula*.

In the next couple of weeks, if you find yourself tramping through rough grassland, listen out for the first stridulating grasshoppers and bush-cricket; Meadow Grasshopper, *Chorthippus parallelus*, and Field Grasshopper, *C. brunneus*, are the two commonest species in the county, and they’re also often the first to reach adulthood and make themselves heard.

On the botanical front it’s been a more straightforward week, with a shorter list of target species, and many of them big and blousy, so quite easy to spot, even at a distance. The rain has helped to push things on a bit, and we’ve managed to record all but five of the eighteen species on our list. Another interesting week, too, for *late* first flowerings, particularly so for Pat over at Nettlecombe. She’s been noticing how delayed some of her FFDs are in comparison with those from coastal or more lowland areas to the east. Tutsan, *Hypericum androsaemum*, for example, came into flower at

Nettlecombe on 7th June (cf. 18th May in Taunton). But, don't forget, Pat also had the earliest FFD in the county for Creeping Thistle, *Cirsium arvense*, which shows that it's never safe to generalise. I've had my own catching up to do this week, with one of the best finds being on the 4th, an extraordinarily late FFD for White Bryony, *Bryonia dioica*—five weeks after Linda's at Nynehead. Even Watson would have found my date unremarkable; his FFD for it was 2nd June. Being five weeks behind Linda is bad enough, but two days behind *Watson*? I'm beginning to understand how Pat and 'ice-scraping' Ellen must feel. But, anyway, it's not a competition. Is it?

Here's a summary of what we've all found this week. A bit shorter than usual, partly because there are less species to cover, but mainly because I'm hoping for an early night.

An Absence of 'A's. Well, not quite, but nothing from the target list other than more sightings of Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, at East Quantoxhead on the 3rd (David1), and Stoke Hill, Stoke St Mary, on the 6th (me). David1 also reported having seen Pyramidal Orchid, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, flowering at St George's Flower Bank on 25th May, the same day as Andrew's at Yarley. Potentially the most interesting 'A'—although at this point there will doubtless be shouts of 'L' for *Lysimachia*—was Chris1's Bog Pimpernel, *Anagallis tenella*, at Langford Heathfield on the 9th. This isn't one I usually record, but Watson's date for it was 23rd June.

'B' for *Brachypodium*. Two reports of Tor-grass, *Brachypodium rupestre/pinnatum*, both in Week 11, and both from Crook Peak: David1 on the 28th, and Andrew on the 31st. But Week 12 was certainly the week for Wood False-brome, *Brachypodium sylvaticum*. The first report of it was from Wellington on the 5th (Linda), which provoked an email discussion about when, exactly, a grass like this can be said to be *flowering*. Grasses are difficult, we decided; and while some are quick to reveal their sexual parts, others, including this one, can be decidedly coy about it. (Wall Barley, *Hordeum murinum*, is another.) Anyway, following Linda's slightly optimistic record there was a flurry of sightings: David1 in Leigh Woods on the 7th,

Andrew at Purn Hill on the 8th, and then on the 9th there were records from Helena and Val at Great Breach Wood, Pat at Nettlecombe, and me at Thurlbear. The first Butterfly-bush, *Buddleja davidii*, in Taunton, incidentally, was on the 5th.

'C'. Two of you have seen Greater Knapweed, *Centaurea scabiosa*, both records were on the 3rd, so actually in Week 11. In our most easterly outpost, Fred had it in bloom while he was investigating broomrapes near Whitchurch, and the same day David1 saw it at East Quantoxhead. As mentioned, there were also first records this week for Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*: Taunton on the 4th, Leigh Woods on the 7th (David1), and Paulton on the 9th (Helena).

'C' is also for *Convolvulus*. Several of you have been sending in records of the various colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*. Early indications are that f. *arvensis* (white) and f. *pentarrhabdotus* (5-pointed star) are the *most* frequent, while those having 'tick' marks round the yellow throat are the *least* frequent. The scores at the moment are: f. *arvensis* = 8 records; f. *pentarrhabdotus* = 8; f. *perroseus* = 4; f. *pallidiroseus* = 3; f. *decarrhabdotus* = 3; f. *pallidinotatus* = 2; f. *notatus* = 1; f. *decemvulnerus* = 1; f. *pentastictus* = 1; f. *quinquevulnerus* = 0. Needless to say, these ten forms can seem like points along a continuum of variation, with the pink of some flowers being very pale, and tick marks faint, while others are much more strongly marked. The f. *perroseus* is particularly striking, the flower usually being a very pretty deep pink with contrasting white 'star' in its centre. The f. *pallidiroseus* can be hard to separate from f. *arvensis*, the pink 'flushing' often being very pale; yet, put one of these barely-flushed flowers next to a pure white f. *arvensis* and you can immediately see the difference: f. *arvensis* is the colour of an 'ice white' polo shirt, whereas f. *pallidiroseus* is like the same polo shirt after it's been through the wash with a pair of red socks. Also, I do wonder whether f. *arvensis* flowers tend to be slightly smaller than f. *pallidiroseus*?

'D' is for Carrot. Lots of records of Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota*, now, including Dee in her garden on the 1st, then at Clevedon Pill on the 7th, David1 at East Quantoxhead on the 3rd, and Andrew at West Huntspill on the 5th.

'E'. I picked up Hemp-agrimony, *Eupatorium cannabinum*, earlier today, on the bank of the River Tone beside Goodlands Gardens. I'd been watching it all week as it was 'pinking up', but only this morning did the first flowers start to open. Also, following last week's rain, Hoary Willowherb, *Epilobium parviflorum*, has finally begun to flower in Taunton; and a second record of Great Willowherb, *E. hirsutum*, this time in Brent Knoll village (Andrew). And a 'first', too, from Chris1 who has reported seeing Cross-leaved Heath, *Erica tetralix*, at Langford Heathfield on 26th May—so actually in Week 10. Very early! (Watson's date for it was 23rd June.)

'F'. Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*, is popping up everywhere now—even at Nettlecombe where first flowers were seen on the 10th.

'G'. *Galiums* galore this week, with lots more records of *verum*, *album*, *palustre* and *saxatile*. Reed Sweet-grass, *Glyceria maxima*, like *Brachypodium sylvaticum* a rather 'shy' grass when it comes to exposing its anthers, is now beginning to flower along the canal in Taunton, near Firepool Weir. Panicles are nicely expanded, anyway.

'H'. It's also been quite a week for St John's-worts. Plenty more Hairy, *H. hirsutum*, and Perforate, *H. perforatum*; plus lots of first-flowering Slender, *Hypericum pulchrum*, including Georgina on the 5th at Blackmoor, Pat on the 7th at Greencombe, Linda on the 8th at Wivvy, and Chris1 on the 9th at Langford Heathfield.

'I'. An early FFD for Ploughman's-spikenard, *Inula conyzae*, was Andrew's from Purn Hill on the 8th. The yellow variant of Stinking Iris, *Iris foetidissima* var. *citrina*, has been spotted again, too, this time by Helena and Val at Great Breach Wood: "Interestingly, we first started seeing yellow ones on the slope above the former Monocot Nursery ... but there was quite a bit on New Hill,

further along the slope, mixed in with blue ones.” Which leaves me still wondering to what extent this variety might have been preferentially taken into cultivation, from where it has then got back out into the wild as a garden escape or throw-out.

‘J’. Not a first-flowerer, but we can’t pass this point in the alphabet without a nod to David1’s discovery in Leigh Woods on the 7th of *Janetiella lemeei*, a midge causing little wart-like galls on Wych Elm, *Ulmus glabra*. This appears to be a new county record of a species for which there is only a handful of GB records on the NBN. (With thanks to Simon Haarder, a Danish cecidologist/dipterist, and Keith Harris, one of the UK’s gall-midge aficionados, for confirming its identity.) David1 also had a couple of nice midge galls on Lime, *Tilia* sp., *Contarinia tiliarum* and *Didymomyia tiliacea*, the latter also, possibly, a ‘first’ for the county.

‘K’. Field Scabious, *Knautia arvensis*, was on our target list, but probably shouldn’t have been, since David1 had it flowering at St George’s Flower Bank on 21st May (at start of Week 10), and Chris1 saw it in Langford Budville on 28th May (at start of Week 11). My own FFD, in Taunton, was on 5th June.

‘L’. One species that’s begun to spread in these parts recently is Great Lettuce, *Lactuca virosa*. Previously a real rarity in VC5, the first record for the Taunton area was Graham’s on the day of our ‘last week hunt’ at the end of October 2018, in the Silk Mills park-and-ride car park. In 2019 we found it to be quite abundant on road verges near the Somerset Heritage Centre. And this week, to my astonishment, I’ve seen it in two new roadside sites on Obridge Road, and close to the junction of Priorswood Road and Lyngford Road. The plants were flowering well, but more than anything it was their height that really impressed: they were *massive*, with the tallest attaining a height in excess of three metres. A plant with real *chutzpah*. (For Bog Pimpernel, *Lysimachia tenella*, you’ll have to go back to ‘A’.)

‘M’. Two targets this week: Water Forget-me-not, *Mysosotis scorpioides*, which was found to be flowering well in the canal near Firepool Weir,

Taunton, on the 4th; and Musk Mallow, *Malva moschata*, starting to bloom with great synchrony this week, in Taunton on the 4th, Wivvy on the 8th (Linda), and Clevedon also on the 8th (Dee), to list but three. Lucerne, *Medicago sativa* subsp. *sativa*, was also seen this week, like the *Malva*, in Taunton and Wivvy.

'P', 'R', 'S'. One of each. Timothy, *Phleum pratense*, at last, was seen by Andrew on the 6th, at Highbridge. Wild Madder, *Rubia peregrina*, was picked up by David1 on his highly productive visit to East Quantoxhead on the 3rd (Week 11), while I had it in a wood-border hedgerow at Thurlbear on the 8th. The only 'S' was Perennial Sowthistle, *Sonchus arvensis*, which was seen on the 6th in a road verge beside a bridge over the M5 between Stoke St Mary and Taunton. Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*, though, we'll have to roll over to Week 13.

'T'. Three extra-curricular 'T's this week: Hare's-foot Clover, *Trifolium arvense*, in flower on Berrow golf course on the 7th (Andrew); Bulrush, *Typha latifolia*, in Taunton on the 9th; and, with thanks to David1's father, a record of Common Meadow-rue, *Thalictrum flavum*, on Weston Moor on the 5th.

And, as ever, our 'V's of the week, and both Week 12 targets: Great Mullein, *Verbascum thapsus*, on 30th May in Wivvy (Linda), on the 6th at Highbridge (Andrew), and on the 8th in Taunton; and Vervain, *Verbena officinalis*, in Brent Knoll village on the 4th (Andrew).

Am I the only one to find that a good way to remain sane while in a traffic jam is to engage in roadside botany? Well, it paid off handsomely on the 8th, with my own first-flowering *Verbena officinalis* being the high point—along with Greater Quaking-grass, *Briza maxima*, and Wall Bedstraw, *Galium parisiense*—of an hour spent queuing to get into Priorswood Recycling Centre.

* * *

For Week 13, we'll go for nineteen species. I think maybe we should give up on Alsike Clover, *Trifolium hybridum*, so let's start by rolling over four from Week 12, three of them wetland species:

Water-plantain, *Alisma plantago-aquatica*; Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*; Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*; Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*.

To which we can now add the following fifteen species:

Creeping Bent, *Agrostis stolonifera*; Greater Burdock, *Arctium lappa*; Lesser Burdock, *Arctium minus* agg; Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*; Hairy-brome, *Bromopsis ramosa*; Lesser Centaury, *Centaureum pulchellum*; Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*; Wild Basil, *Clinopodium vulgare*; Tufted Hair-grass, *Deschampsia cespitosa*; Teasel, *Dipsacus fullonum*; Square-stalked St John's-wort, *Hypericum tetrapterum*; Marjoram, *Origanum vulgare*; Autumn Hawkbit, *Scorzoneroides autumnalis*; and, lastly, for anyone who happens to be on the Levels, what about Tubular Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe fistulosa*? Or, if you're near the coast, Parsley Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe lachenalii*?

17th June – 39,625

Week 13 – thunder storms – *The Subtle Knife*
– Captain Roe’s card index box – square-
stalked St John’s-wort – autumn hawkbit

The air today is thick and humid, and there are distant—and then not-so-distant—rumbles of thunder. For the last ten minutes a Peregrine has been circling overhead, calling and pulling in a mob of agitated gulls. An absence of Swifts, and the rumbling’s getting louder: the sky is dark to the west, darker still to the north-west. It’s dry here, for now, but it’s probably pelting on the Quantocks. Today’s brewing storm feels like it might be a repeat of yesterday’s cloudburst, when rain drops were like gobbets the size of garden snails, or liquid marbles, each producing its own miniature puddle as it hit the ground; within a minute, down-pipes full to bursting, drains in the street bubbling up from below—and our Blackbird dumb-struck and marooned in the depths of his holly tree.

Yet now, I notice, the rumbling has gone away, the air has cleared, the sun is shining again and next door’s plastic roof gutters are clicking in the heat. And that, really sums up the week, a mixed assortment of weather that each of us would probably describe quite differently; a week when it feels unsafe to generalise, when one person’s moment in the sun doubtless coincided with another’s drenching. The only settled days, in Taunton at least, were on the 14th and 15th. Otherwise, we had rain here each day, with two days, the 11th and 12th, also quite windy. Daytime temperatures in the upper teens, peaking stickily yesterday at 24°C. Nights have been warm too, actually warmer than during earlier ‘heatwaves’, presumably due to the frequent overnight blanket of cloud.

Yesterday I was scanning the bookshelves for Philip Pullman’s *The Subtle Knife*. Ben used to have the boxed set, but only the first of the ‘Dark Materials’ trilogy—*Northern Lights*—is in the box, the other two have disappeared. Searching for something is always an opportunity to find

something else you weren't really looking for, which maybe you'd forgotten you ever had. *The Subtle Knife* was proving elusive, but instead I came across something *far* more interesting: an old card index box, with pull-out drawer and a covering of imitation snake skin. The box, I now remember, came to me on loan from Helena a few years ago. It had previously belonged to Captain Robert G.B. O'Neil Roe, BSBI's Vice-county Recorder for VC6 1965-1993, and VC5 1978-1993. Roe, like Walter Watson before him, had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the flora of Somerset and was an assiduous keeper of records. The two men, luckily for us, also shared a particular interest in first flowering dates. But while Watson's dates were eventually published (at least in summary form) Roe's remained hidden away in this card index box. There are *hundreds* of 5" x 3" index cards, one for each species, and each one listing FFDs—with locations—for the period 1951-61. He had the neatest writing, and the smallest too. His records aren't always straightforward to interpret, not least because in some years they were as likely to relate to places in Cornwall, or Wiltshire, as they were to Somerset. Also, his own 'local patch' was around Bath, whereas Watson's was Taunton; and, as we've seen in our own records this year, dates are liable to vary considerably from one part of the county to another. But Roe's record cards nevertheless provide a rich seam of data that would merit much closer study.

Interestingly, many of his FFDs seem to be as late, or later, than those recorded by Watson in the 1920s/30s. To take a random example: Tutsan, *Hypericum androsaemum*, was said by Watson to flower between June and August, with an average FFD of 26th June, whereas even Roe's *earliest* FFD in the 1950s was 1st July. Sometimes he didn't see it flowering until August, and his *average* FFD was 8th August, so about six weeks later than Watson's. As a comparison, my own average FFD for the period 2008-17 was 6th June, while our earliest FFD for Tutsan this year was 18th May, three days earlier than even the *earliest* FFD during the period 2008-17. Watson would have been astonished, but Roe would have been *flabbergasted*. Anyway, be prepared, from this week onwards, for our own records to be cross-referenced occasionally with Roe's as well as Watson's dates.

Now, as you'll be aware, the premiership football season gets underway again today, with some matches even being shown on terrestrial TV. In celebration of this long-awaited shift towards normality, I'll start this week's botanical summary by giving you the latest 'state of play' on *Convolvulus arvensis* colour forms. Assume that there are five matches, then, and that each match is being played between a 'non-ticked' colour form (on the left in the Table below) and its 'ticked' counterpart (on the right). So, for these purposes, you have to imagine that f. *arvensis* (all-white strip, without 'ticks') is playing against f. *notatus* (similar strip but with a rather smart ring of purple 'ticks' around the neck)...

Field Bindweed, interim scores up to end of
Week 13

Aston Villa	0	v.	Sheffield United	0
Manchester City	3	v.	Arsenal	0
f. <i>arvensis</i>	12	v.	f. <i>notatus</i>	2
f. <i>pallidiroseus</i>	4	v.	f. <i>pallidinotatus</i>	3
f. <i>pentarrhabdotus</i>	11	v.	f. <i>pentastictus</i>	1
f. <i>decarrhabdotus</i>	3	v.	f. <i>decemvulnerus</i>	1
f. <i>perroseus</i>	5	v.	f. <i>quinquevulnerus</i>	0

You can see from the above that all those teams sporting ‘tick’ marks (apart from Sheffield United) are consistently being thrashed by their ‘unticked’ rivals, giving a combined score of thirty-five records for ‘non-ticked’ colour forms against just seven for ‘ticked’. Oh yes, and while I think of it, to add to last week’s notes about how to distinguish between f. *arvensis* and f. *pallidiroseus*, it’s also worth stressing that the first has *white* anthers while the second has *purplish* anthers. This also holds good for the ‘ticked’ variants f. *notatus* (corolla and anthers white) and f. *pallidinotatus* (corolla flushed palest pink, anthers purple).

Now for our sightings from the last week. Between us, we saw ten of the nineteen target species...

‘A’ is for Bent. On our target list we had Creeping Bent, *A. stolonifera*, seen on the 15th in Taunton, and reported by Andrew on the 16th from Lots SWT reserve—the latter along with flowering Common Bent, *A. capillaris* and Velvet Bent, *A. canina*. Amongst other ‘A’s, Andrew recorded the first few flowers on Water-plantain, *Alisma plantago-aquatica*, at Brent Knoll village on the 14th. Pat, out at Nettlecombe, picked up Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, on the 17th, amongst another really interesting batch of relatively late FFDs. Other species of note included Alastair’s Babington’s Leek, *Allium ampeloprasum* var. *babingtonii*, at Porlock Marsh on the 8th, a second record of Bog Pimpernel, *Anagallis* (= *Lysimachia*) *tenella*, this one at Lots on the 16th, and Meadow Oat-grass, *Avenula pratensis*, another one of Andrew’s records, at Priddy Mineries on the 12th.

‘B’. Betony, *Betonica officinalis*, has now begun its ‘proper’ flowering season, with records from GB Gruffy on the 9th (Andrew), Ashton Court meadows on the 14th (David1), and Long Dole Meadow, also on the 14th (Helena and Fred). Still no sign of it, though, at Thurlbear or Orchard Wood. One other ‘B’ of note was Rye Brome, *Bromus secalinus*, on the 17th, on a road verge in Taunton rather than in its usual arable habitat.

It was a week of 'C's, with four on the target list and all of them seen by at least one of us. Lesser Centaury, *Centaureum pulchellum*, was actually recorded by Jeanne on the 7th (so in Week 12), at Blue Anchor; Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*, had begun to flower at Observatory Hill—so just in VC34—when David1 visited on the 16th; first-flowering Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*, was clambering over a low shrub-border on the edge of Tesco's car park off Wellington Road, Taunton, on the 14th; and Ro had Wild Basil, *Clinopodium vulgare*, at Lilstock, also on the 14th. Other noteworthy 'C's included Steve's Whorl-grass, *Catabrosa aquatica*, near North Newton, on the 13th, and my own (very early) Fat-hen, *Chenopodium album*, near Creech St Michael on the 12th. Just for the record, Watson's average FFD for Fat-hen was 8th July, while Roe's earliest in the 1950s was 9th July.

'D'. Two reports of first-flowering Tufted Hair-grass, *Deschampsia cespitosa*, this week: GB Gruffy on the 9th (so actually Week 12), courtesy of Andrew, and North Newton on the 13th, with thanks to Steve. Another grass seen flowering for the first time this week was Heath-grass, *Danthonia decumbens*, at Thurlbear on the 15th and at Lots on the 16th. Also at GB Gruffy on the 9th was Wavy Hair-grass, *Deschampsia flexuosa*, which is now flowering well at several heathland sites on the Blackdown Hills, along with a couple of 'E's, Bell Heather, *Erica cinerea*, and Cross-leaved Heath, *E. tetralix*.

'H'. This has definitely been the week for Square-stalked St John's-wort, *Hypericum tetrapterum*, with records from Old Cleeve on the 9th (Jeanne), Creech St Michael on the 12th (me), The Quants on the 15th (Linda), and Langford Heathfield on the 17th (Chris1). Another 'H' of possibly only niche interest, was the discovery earlier today of a large roadside/waste ground population of (flowering) Hoary Mustard, *Hirschfeldia incana*, on Trenchard Way, close to the bridge across Station Road. This seems to be the first record of Hoary Mustard for ST22 and the Taunton area since the turn of the century.

'L'. First records this week for: Prickly Lettuce, *Lactuca serriola*, on the 17th on waste ground near the A38 at Creech Castle, Taunton; Yellow Loosestrife,

Lysimachia vulgaris, on the 12th at Postlebury (Gill); and Water-purslane, *Lythrum portula*, on the 15th at Blackdown and Sampford Common—just over the border in Devon, I admit, but always considered, by me at least, to be part of ‘Greater Somerset’. Well, the parking place is in Somerset!

‘M’, ‘N’, ‘O’... Just the one target species: Marjoram, *Origanum vulgare*, which, like the Water-purslane fell just outside the county’s borders—this time at Observatory Hill, Bristol, where it was seen by David¹ on the 16th. Other than that, a motley collection including reported first flowerings of Creeping Forget-me-not, *Myosotis secunda*, Water Chickweed, *Myosoton aquaticum* (= *Stellaria aquatica* in the latest ‘Stace’), Mat-grass, *Nardus stricta*, Bog Asphodel, *Narthecium ossifragum*, and Spiny Restharrow, *Ononis spinosa*.

‘P’. Included here are sightings of two ‘P’s that would have been on later lists had we not seen them this week: Hawkweed Oxtongue, *Picris hieracioides*, on the 17th at Creech Castle, Taunton; and Burnet-saxifrage, *Pimpinella saxifraga*, on the 12th at Priddy Mineries (Andrew). Linda found flowering Pale Butterwort, *Pinguicula lusitanica*, at Ring Down on the 13th, while there were also two records of Annual Beard-grass, *Polypogon monspeliensis*, from Stock Moor on the 14th (Steve), and on waste ground at Firepool Weir, Taunton on the 15th. This is an attractive and eye-catching grass that seems to be spreading, at least in parts of VC5.

‘S’. Our target was Autumn Hawkbit, *Scorzoneroides autumnalis*, and it was seen by three of us: Helena in Paulton on the 14th, me in Taunton, also on the 14th, and Andrew at Crook Peak on the 17th. This is exactly a month earlier than Watson’s average FFD of 15th July, and three to four weeks earlier than Roe’s dates in the 1950s. Its English name really ought to be Summer Hawkbit. Some really lovely ‘S’s tagging along too, such as Chris¹’s Lesser Skullcap, *Scutellaria minor*, at Langford Heathfield on the 14th, Helena and Fred’s Devil’s-bit Scabious, *Succisa pratensis*, at Long Dole Meadow on the 14th (a very early date), and—less lovely, but still noteworthy—my own Sand Spurrey, *Spergularia rubra*, on Blackdown and Sampford Common where it

was growing alongside the Water-purslane. The only Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*, was in Surrey (thanks Fred!), so that one stays on the list for another week I'm afraid.

'T'. Amongst her batch of mainly 'late' FFDs, Pat also had our *earliest* FFD for Wood Sage, *Teucrium scorodonia*, on the 15th. Also, we had two more reports of Wild Thyme, *Thymus drucei*, both in Week 12: one from 'near Watchet' on the 8th (Alastair), the other, also on the 8th, from Purn Hill (Andrew).

'V'. A strange absence of 'V's this week, apart from Gill's Vervain, *Verbena officinalis*, at Truddoxhill, and my own Tufted Vetch, *Vicia cracca*, which has at last begun to flower in the Taunton area.

The end of another week, each one now seeming a little more 'normal' than the last, despite the need for endless discussions about what's acceptable and what's not, how one defines a 'bubble', whether to wear a mask, which is the best hand sanitizer... not to mention daily amazement at some people's interpretation of what is meant, exactly, by the term 'two metres'.

Yet amid all the uncertainty and understandable worry, it's good to see that a few of us are beginning to meet up with friends again for the occasional socially distanced botanical foray; and good, too, that the numbers of sites being visited seem to be increasing each week. A sure sign that we are returning—slowly, tentatively—to some of our old haunts and old ways.

Do keep the *Convolvulus arvensis* records coming in, by the way. It seems that *f. arvensis* may be destined to win the League—much like Liverpool—and that 'non-ticks' will ultimately hold sway over 'ticks'. But, as football commentators always say following a late goal against the run of play: "it's never over 'til it's over"...

And we *still* haven't found *The Subtle Knife*.

* * *

I'm taking another one-week sabbatical, so we'll have a list to last us a fortnight this time around. Let's go for twenty-one species. First of all, there are nine to carry over from Week 13:

Greater Burdock, *Arctium lappa*; Lesser Burdock, *Arctium minus* agg; Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*; Hairy-brome, *Bromopsis ramosa*; Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*; Teasel, *Dipsacus fullonum*; Tubular Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe fistulosa*; Parsley Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe lachenalii*; Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*.

To which we can add the following twelve species:

Wild Angelica, *Angelica sylvestris*; Spear-leaved Orache, *Atriplex prostrata*; Fig-leaved Goosefoot, *Chenopodium ficifolium*; Marsh Cudweed, *Gnaphalium uliginosum*; Many-seeded Goosefoot, *Lipandra polysperma* (= *Chenopodium polyspermum*); Gypsywort, *Lycopus europaeus*; Purple Moor-grass, *Molinia caerulea*; Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*; Stone Parsley, *Sison amonum*; Tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*; Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*; Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*.

1st July - 40,491

Weeks 14 & 15 - a marathon, not a sprint -
one-metre plus - a very hot day - ringlets &
grasshoppers - the blue cummerbund - marsh
woundwort

“This is a marathon, not a sprint.” Admittedly, that statement was being used in relation to our slow emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic, and to highlight the need to remain vigilant as the lockdown eases. But it could equally well apply to first flowerings. In the last two weeks we’ve slipped beyond the summer solstice. Tim Dee would declare this to be the time when things start to unravel and fall apart; when the surge of spring that’s been carrying us forward suddenly seems to dissipate, and we’re left to face the long trudge toward autumn. Well, I’m as prone to ‘PSD’ (post-solstice doldrums) as anyone, but I’m not prepared to give up on spring just yet. As the politician said: this is a marathon, not a sprint.

So, we’ve reached that point in the year when (in our parallel universe) thoughts would turn to Wimbledon and Glastonbury and Lord’s. Roger Federer, Kaiser Chiefs, Jonathan Agnew... The weather has had a distinctly summery edge to it: hard to pin down or predict with any certainty, frequently wet, sometimes windy, and occasionally hot and humid. Just enough rain, probably, to turn Worthy Farm into a steaming mud bath. There was a particularly drenching day on the 18th, when it rained from start to finish, then on the 25th we endured the hottest day of the year so far (32°C in Taunton); when UV levels were supposedly the highest ever recorded in the UK, and when too many of us decided to head off for a day at the seaside. Some roads were gridlocked, car parks and beaches were packed. Throughout lockdown many have struggled with the concept of ‘two metres’, but we’re now expected to re-calibrate to a new measurement called *one-metre plus*—which, once the pubs open and the summer holidays begin, could very quickly come to mean ‘no distance at all’. If we can avoid a second wave it’ll be a miracle.

In the last update, I got so carried away with Captain Roe's index cards that I forgot to report on non-botanical matters. These included first 'hearings' of Meadow Grasshoppers, *Chorthippus parallelus*, and Field Grasshoppers, *C. brunneus*, on the 14th—at Longrun Meadow in the south, and Long Dole Meadow in the north. Also on the 14th there were Small Skippers, *Thymelicus sylvestris*, and Six-spot Burnets, *Zygaena filipendulae*. In Weeks 14 and 15 the 'buzz' of high summer continued with Ringlets, *Aphantopus hyperantus*, from the 22nd, while Ro had her first Humming-bird Hawk-moth, *Macroglossum stellatarum*, nectaring on Red Valerian, *Centranthus ruber*, on the 26th. Several of you have commented on the exceptional numbers of Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*, and Marbled Whites, *Melanargia galathea*. Apparently this is the second good summer on the trot for Marbled Whites; anyone living in Taunton would normally expect to have to head into the Blackdowns to guarantee seeing this butterfly, but in the last few weeks they've been popping up all across town—in Vivary Park, Goodlands Gardens, between Obridge and Creech Castle, Longrun Meadow and Roughmoor. Since mid-June there's also been a flurry of records of 'summer brood' Commas, *Polygonia c-album*, perhaps a couple of weeks earlier than usual. These are the offspring of over-wintering butterflies that emerged in early spring.

The dog's ears are a good barometer of the changing seasons, too. Gilly is a cocker spaniel, and once past the summer solstice her ears start to become tangled with burrs. A walk of one hour can lead to a de-burring session at least as long. At the moment it's mainly the burrs of Wood Avens, *Geum urbanum*, but within a week or two it'll be Cleavers, *Galium aparine*, soon to be followed by Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, Enchanter's-nightshade, *Circaea lutetiana*, and Burdock, *Arctium* spp. Each burr to its own season.

You've sent in many more records of *Convolvulus arvensis* colour forms in the last fortnight, and the scores are beginning to look less like football and more like rugby. So, here's an update, this time headed up by Exeter Chiefs' crucial game against Saracens that lifted them to the top of the Premier League

back in December. As before, teams wearing ‘unticked’ strips are on the left, those with ‘ticks’ on the right.

Field Bindweed, scores up to end of Week 15

Exeter Chiefs	14	v.	Sarracens	7
<i>f. arvensis</i>	20	v.	<i>f. notatus</i>	3
<i>f. pallidiroseus</i>	9	v.	<i>f. pallidinotatus</i>	5
<i>f. pentarrhabdotus</i>	17	v.	<i>f. pentastictus</i>	1
<i>f. decarrhabdotus</i>	7	v.	<i>f. decemvulnerus</i>	1
<i>f. perroseus</i>	11	v.	<i>f. quinquevulnerus</i>	0

Clearly, teams lacking ‘tick’ marks continue to outscore their ‘ticked’ counterparts, with a combined score of sixty-four records for ‘non-ticked’ colour forms and just ten for ‘ticked’. In the latter group, only *f. notatus* and *f. pallidinotatus* are at all frequent, while those displaying five- or ten-point stars seem to be invariably tick-free. But maybe that will change as the season progresses.

Now for our first flowerings from the last fortnight. Many thanks, as usual, for your records. This time we had twenty-one target species to search for, of which we saw all but three.

‘A’. Our target list was awash with ‘A’s, and we saw all bar Mugwort, ***Artemisia vulgaris***. Chris1 had first-flowering Wild Angelica, ***Angelica sylvestris***, on the 29th at Langford Heathfield. In Taunton, the two Burdocks

had been stubbornly in bud for about two weeks, but the mini-heatwave produced a sudden 'opening' of Greater Burdock, *Arctium lappa*, on the 27th and Lesser Burdock, *A. minus* agg., on the 29th. Meanwhile, Andrew reported first flowers on Spear-leaved Orache, *Atriplex prostrata*, at Burnham-on-Sea on the 21st. It was seen flowering in Taunton, too, but not until the 29th. Amongst other 'A's, there was a second record of Water-plantain, *Alisma plantago-aquatica*, this time from the pond at Roughmoor, on the 26th, to add to the Great Water Dock, *Rumex hydrolapathum*, which began flowering there on the 18th. And another 'A', Alastair, spotted first flowers on Sea Aster, *Aster tripolium*, at Wall Common on the 25th. (Watson's date for Sea Aster was 24th July.)

'B'. Hairy-brome, *Bromopsis ramosa*, is another grass that can be hard to judge the flowering of. It has such graceful, dangling inflorescences, but at what point, exactly, do you decide it's flowering rather than merely *about* to flower? It's certainly up and showing well, as Linda reported on the 28th, and I've seen it close to flowering at Thurlbear on the 29th, and again earlier today, but I'm not convinced yet. Andrew, however, had it flowering at Hollow Marsh on the 30th, so that's great, and we can expect more records of it in the coming days. Flowering-rush, *Butomus umbellatus*, seems particularly shy this year, but I finally found a clump of it in flower on the River Tone at Obridge on the 27th. Not an especially early date for it. Watson's average FFD for *Butomus* was 7th July; Roe's earliest in the 1950s was 2nd July. All much of a muchness, then.

'C'. Just the one target species this week, given that Many-seeded Goosefoot is now *Lipandra* rather than *Chenopodium*. Fig-leaved Goosefoot, *C. ficifolium*, was seen first by Linda on the 23rd, in Wellington, then by me on a rare trip to the Levels, near Burrowbridge, on the 26th. Otherwise, 'C' is for 'catch-up', including my own first Greater Knapweed, *Centaurea scabiosa*, and Common Centaury, *Centaureum erythraea*, on the 22nd, Wild Basil, *Clinopodium vulgare*, on the 28th, and Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*, on 1st July. All of them at Thurlbear. Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*, was flowering at Clevedon on the 18th (Dee), and at Sandford on the 25th (Ann2). And Pat,

at Nettlecombe, had her first Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*, on the 28th, and Rose-bay Willowherb, *Chamaenerion angustifolium*, on the 30th, continuing the pattern of slightly later first flowering in that area. These dates are very much in line with what Watson would have expected in the Taunton area in the 1920s/30s, his FFD for the former being 26th June, and for the latter 8th July.

‘D’ is for Teasel, *Dipsacus fullonum*, with Ro delighted to spot her first “blue cummerbund” on the morning of the 20th. Later the same day, Andrew had it beginning to flower at Highbridge, followed by records in Taunton on the 22nd and Linda’s in Wellington on the 23rd. Among other ‘D’s was Common Sundew, *Drosera rotundifolia*, reported by Andrew from Westhay on the 23rd. I’ve no idea whether this is early or not, but I see that Watson’s date for it was 3rd July. Unfortunately, Roe’s dates from the 1950s all seem to be from locations outside Somerset.

How can we skirt past ‘E’ without mention of Andrew’s Marsh Helleborine, *Epipactis palustris*, at Berrow on the 24th? The plants were small of stature, so the flowers were hidden in the herbage and hard to spot. Well worth the search though, and another one, like Common Sundew, for which the only FFDs we have to go on are those of Watson’s—his date for it was 11th July.

‘G’ and ‘H’. Just the one record so far of Marsh Cudweed, *Gnaphalium uliginosum*, seen flowering with *Lipandra polysperma* on a muddy field margin near Roughmoor on the 26th. (Also with lots of Bulbous Canary-grass, *Phalaris aquatica*—a new hectad record for this game-cover species.) And, just in passing, I need to note further sightings of Hoary Mustard, *Hirschfeldia incana*, in the Taunton area. Is this a recent colonist, or have I been overlooking it? A couple of plants of it are in full flower on the A3038 dual carriageway between Wickes roundabout and the Shell garage, while there are great *thickets* of it alongside the railway line between Staplegrove Road and Silk Mills. The petals are a more delicate, slightly paler yellow than those of Black Mustard, *Brassica nigra*, with which it sometimes grows, while the little club-shaped fruits and greyish leaves help to distinguish it too. It seems

to be more widespread in VC6 than in VC5; in *The Atlas Flora of Somerset*, the Green twins note that it's "an increasing species in the county, especially in the Bridgwater area."

Two other surprising 'H's to report: Frogbit, *Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*, on the 23rd on Mark Moor (Andrew), and the 26th at Burrowbridge (me); and, also on the 23rd, Helena and Fred had Marsh Pennywort, *Hydrocotyle vulgaris*, at Tynning Wood, near Gare Hill—not just flowering, but a first record for the hectad this century. Watson didn't mention Frogbit in his paper on FFDs¹⁰, but a quick look at the BSBI Database revealed that there were only four records of this species for Somerset before 1930. It appears that Frogbit has become widespread across the Levels only since about 1950. I'd always presumed it to be a long-established native species in Somerset, but maybe that's not the case?

'L'. Many-seeded Goosefoot, *Lipandra polysperma*, had just started flowering at Roughmoor on the 18th, in pouring rain, with Marsh Cudweed following suit in the same place a few days later. Gypsywort, *Lycopus europaeus*, was also flowering there, beside the pond, on the 26th, as it was on the Huntspill River (Andrew). Another noteworthy 'L' in the last week was Common Sea-lavender, *Limonium vulgare*, seen by Alastair at Wall Common on the 25th.

'M'. Just the one target: Purple Moor-grass, *Molinia caerulea*, which was recorded by Andrew at Westhay on the 23rd. But a special mention, also, for Alastair's White Horehound, *Marrubium vulgare*, at Wall Common on the 20th.

'O' for *Oenanthe*. Andrew saw Parsley Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe lachenalii*, on the 24th at Berrow; but Tubular Water-dropwort, *O. fistulosa*, still eludes us. Amongst my own 'O's, there was Common Restharrow, *Ononis repens*, on

¹⁰ Oh yes he did! Why would I ever doubt the man? He's got it sandwiched in his list between *Elodea* and *Neottia*, whereas I'd been looking in the vicinity of *Alisma*, *Sagittaria* and *Butomus*, which aren't even on the same page! Anyway, his date for it was 15th July.

the 22nd and Marjoram, *Origanum vulgare*, on the 23rd. Plus, to add a dramatic twist, a large colony of Common Broomrape, *Orobanche minor*, in Taunton, in the Frieze Hill community orchard between Roughmoor and the Staplegrove Road allotments. A scarce species in Somerset, and a rarity in Taunton, so a real treat to see more than two-hundred flowering spikes of it emerging amongst the apple trees.

'P'. Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, was spotted by Linda and Chris1 at Milverton on the 27th. Also a 'P' that used to be an 'S': Rock Stonecrop, formerly *Sedum* but now *Petrosedum forsterianum*, was found by Alastair at Greenleigh on the 14th.

'S'. Just the one target, Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*, which was finally spotted in Taunton on the 20th (me), Minehead on the 23rd (Alastair), and Huntspill River on the 26th (Andrew). Even Watson would have been only mildly surprised by these dates, his FFD for it being 5th July. Three other first-flowering 'S's deserve a mention, all of them Andrew's: Common Skullcap, *Scutellaria galericulata*, at Westhay on the 23rd, and Floating Bur-reed, *Sparganium emersum*, and Arrowhead, *Sagittaria sagittifolia*, both on the Huntspill River on the 26th.

A couple of 'T's: Tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*, was seen just beginning to flower by Andrew on the 30th at Highbridge, while I had Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*, at Upper Holway, Taunton, on the 29th.

And lastly, no 'V's this week, but a first-flowering 'U' instead when Helena had Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*, at Stockhill on the 27th.

Apologies to anyone whose records I've overlooked. It's been a distracting week, with too much going on, and it seems that one drawback to the lockdown being eased is the way in which normal life starts to intrude again.

I can feel 'busy-ness' returning, and I'm not sure I like it...

*

*

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As spring shifts towards autumn, so the pace of first flowerings begins to slow down, which makes me think it probably makes sense to do another list to keep us occupied for at least the next fortnight. First of all, here are the three species we're carrying over from Week 15:

Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*; Tubular Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe fistulosa*; Stone Parsley, *Sison amonum*.

To which we can add the following eleven species, making fourteen in all:

Carlina Thistle, *Carlina vulgaris*; Woolly Thistle, *Cirsium eriophorum*; Common Calamint, *Clinopodium ascendens*; Dodder, *Cuscuta epithimum*; Thorn-apple, *Datura stramonium*; Autumn Gentian, *Gentianella amarella*; Hoary Ragwort, *Jacobaea erucifolia*; Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*; Corn Mint, *Mentha arvensis*; Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*; Water-pepper, *Persicaria hydropiper*.

As well as the above, it would be worth looking out for species already recorded by one or two of us, but which should be coming into flower more generally very soon, e.g. Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, Burnet-saxifrage, *Pimpinella saxifraga*, Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*, Hawkweed Oxtongue, *Picris hieracioides*, and Devil's-bit Scabious, *Succisa pratensis*.

8th July - 40,754

Week 16 - Test cricket - harebell & mugwort
- it's starting to feel like autumn...

With today's return of Test match cricket, everything suddenly seems uncannily *normal* again. Even the inevitable rain delays add to the sense of 'business as usual'. We've won the toss and, despite a forecast of intermittent mizzle and generally muggy conditions, we're going to bat. West Indies would have fielded anyway, apparently, so everyone's happy. I'm off to listen to the opening exchanges.

Well, play eventually started at two, and they were off by quarter past, England scoring one run and losing one wicket in the process. Another half hour lost to rain, then two more overs and now they're off again. Just two runs added to the total.

Turning away from the cricket for a moment, if you can bear it, Georgina had her first Harebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*, on the 6th at Blackmoor, Mendip; but she summed up the general mood when she said: "... it always feels like autumn when I see one."

And I felt a similar twinge of autumn too, on the 4th at Orchard Wood, when amongst trackside Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, and Upright Hedgeparsley, *Torilis japonica*, I found my first heads of Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*. Linda and Chris¹ had recorded it flowering near Milverton, on 27th June, so I'd been on the look-out for it. What surprised me, though, was how the sight of those flower heads triggered an unexpected flood of memories of childhood summer holidays in Devon, of ripening blackberries, cream teas, scrabble and Ambre Solaire. But those striking yellow blooms brought to the surface less pleasant feelings, too, of summer being *almost gone*—marking, as they always did, the beginning of an unstoppable countdown to the start of a new term, the new school year...

Things may have stalled a little on the first-flowering front in recent days, but here's Georgina again, who has "nesting Spotted Flycatchers in the garden plus three baby Tawny Owls ... One of the adults was spied by me early one morning ... attempting to catch serotine bats returning to roost, so plenty of nature to amuse me even if I can't find many new plants." The first Gatekeepers, *Pyronia tithonus*, have been seen this week, too.

Yet despite the 'go slow', there were still first flowerings to be had: from our target list, I notched up Stone Parsley, *Sison amonum*, at Corfe on the 6th, plus Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*, and Water-pepper, *Persicaria hydropiper*, beside the River Tone on the 7th. Round-leaved Fluellen, *Kickxia spuria*, was a bonus while tramping the field-borders between Corfe and Pitminster. Also on the 6th, Andrew saw first-flowering Tubular Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe fistulosa*, at Max Bog, and Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*, at Mark Moor. The day before, there were reports from Ro of Burnet-saxifrage, *Pimpinella saxifraga*, flowering abundantly at East Quantoxhead, and Hawkweed Oxtongue, *Picris hieracioides*, at Kilton, while Georgina, at Ubley Warren, had her first Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*.

And then this morning, Andrew spotted the first few open flowers on his local Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, in Brent Knoll village, while I came upon two plants of Small Teasel, *Dipsacus pilosus*, their flower-heads just beginning to 'burst'. What a gorgeous plant Small Teasel is, with its understated 'globose' heads and whitish flowers that lack the brashness and over-confidence of its much larger cousin. Walter Watson's FFDs for Water Mint and Small Teasel in the 1920s/30s were 30th July and 5th August respectively. Capt. Roe's dates for Small Teasel in the 1950s were even later than that, with six of his eight FFDs being in *September*. It may only be the second week of July, but we're closer to autumn than we think.

England have progressed to 35-1 off 17.4 overs. Bad light's stopped play, and there's more rain around, so they're taking an early tea. I think I'll do the same.

15th July – 40,925

Week 17 – hair cuts – a trip to the supermarket – butterflies & bush-crickets – calamints, carline & woolly thistles – a ridiculously late bluebell

The last time pubs, cafes and hairdressers were open there were flowering Lesser Celandines, *Ficaria verna*, everywhere, and many of us were eagerly anticipating our first Moschatel, *Adoxa moschatellina*. For the last seventeen weeks—from Moschatel to Mugwort—their doors have been locked, their windows shuttered. But now, gradually, we emerge blinking into the light to enjoy a pint and get our hair cut; maybe it's time, too, to get that dandelion-clock tattoo we've all been hankering after.

Most of us are beginning to get out more, seizing opportunities to meet friends and family for socially-distanced gatherings in each other's gardens, or in the park, or else heading into nearby countryside for walks together. Even sharing *meals* together! For months we've tried to restrict ourselves to activities deemed to be 'essential', but the definition of that word seems to get broader and looser with each passing week. Having already braved the dump, last Friday I stepped inside a supermarket, for the first time since 15th March.

So, despite the unexceptional weather—not to mention the cricket—I'm feeling much more upbeat about things; last week I was hurtling toward autumn, but this week it's been almost like spring again. The butterflies have helped: there have been newly-emerged Brimstones, *Gonepteryx rhamni*, on the wing—offspring, presumably, of those we saw while hunting for Moschatel—along with second-generation Holly Blues, *Celastrina argiolus*, and Common Blues, *Polyommatus icarus*.

Many 'high summer' butterflies have also been much in evidence. Still inordinate numbers of Marbled Whites, *Melanargia galathea*, but recently

joined by a crowded rabble of Gatekeepers, *Pyronia tithonus*—much perkier and more richly coloured than the now drab and rather tired-looking Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*. This week, too, from the 12th, there were sightings of Silver-washed Fritillaries, *Argynnis paphia*. We've found them in good numbers up at Thurlbear, and at Orchard and Henlade Woods (the latter a Woodland Trust reserve).

Roesel's Bush-cricket, *Metrioptera roeselii*, continues to expand its distribution in Somerset. First reported from the county in 1996, and a real rarity until at least 2010, there were sightings of it in the Taunton area in 2018-19, at Longrun Meadow and in fields near Staple Fitzpaine. This week I've started hearing its distinctive high-pitched 'buzzing', on the 12th in an area of rank *Arrhenatherum* grassland at Thurlbear Quarrylands, then the following day near Orchard Wood. Marshall and Haes's description of its song is worth quoting: "an intensely penetrating and continuous, if high-pitched, stridulation ... the sound has been likened to that of an electrical discharge such as is emitted by pylon-cables in damp weather." Definitely one to listen out for in the next few weeks.

When it comes to first flowerings, it's been a surprisingly productive week. Between us, we've seen twelve of the fourteen species on our target list for Weeks 16 and 17, five of them for the first time during the week just gone. Here are some of the highlights, as usual in roughly alphabetical order.

'A'. Following Chris's exceptionally early Wild Angelica, *Angelica sylvestris*, on 29th June, the rest of us are slowly catching up, e.g. I had it at Staple Hill on the 9th, while Alastair picked it up today, the 15th, at Wimbleball. Also today, a second record for flowering Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*, this time from Dee at Clevedon Pill.

'C'. A couple of thistles: Georgina's Carline Thistle, *Carlina vulgaris*, at Ubley Warren on the 11th; and my own Woolly Thistle, *Cirsium eriophorum*, near Orchard Wood on the 13th—in an area that used to be a tree nursery, then became overrun with brambles, and is now an ever-improving mosaic of

scrub and calcareous-clay grassland with hundreds (probably thousands) of Pyramidal Orchids, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, and dozens of Bee Orchids, *Ophrys apifera*. Also a good week for Common Calamint, *Clinopodium ascendens* (or *Calamintha* in old money), with first-flowering records from Bleadon Hill on the 6th (Hilary), Wellington on the 9th (Linda), and Avon Gorge on the 14th (Georgina). And the first Dodder, *Cuscuta epithymum*, was also on the 14th, at Thurlbear Quarrylands.

I'll spare you a further update on the colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, except to say that f. *quinquevulnerus*, the one colour form that hadn't been reported yet, was seen at Henlade Wood on the 14th. The 'ticked' forms are still outnumbered by the 'unticked', although there have been lots of records of f. *notatus* and f. *pallidinotatus* in the last couple of weeks. Could 'ticked' forms be later-flowering than 'unticked'?

'E'. I was up at Staple Hill on the 9th and noticed several flushes with just-flowering Marsh Willowherb, *Epilobium palustre*. Not one I usually record, but Walter Watson gives it as the latest-flowering of the willowherbs, with an average FFD of 22nd July, so possibly the 9th is quite an early date for it. Has anyone else seen it yet?

'G'. Alastair reported Marsh Fragrant-orchid, *Gymnadenia densiflora*, from near Watchet on the 4th (so in Week 16). Between 2008 and 2019 my earliest FFD for Autumn Gentian, *Gentianella amarella*, was 27th July, while Watson's date for it was 15th August. So to find it just starting to flower at Thurlbear on the 12th came as quite a surprise—although Captain Roe's FFDs for six years in the 1950s did include one amazingly early date for it, in 1958, when he found it flowering at Goblin Combe on 8th July.

'H'. Trailing St John's-wort, *Hypericum humifusum*, wasn't on our list of targets, but probably should have been. We may have missed its earliest flowering, but this week two of us recorded it for the first time: me at Staple Hill on the 9th, and Linda at Wiveliscombe on the 11th. It's one of the latest

Hypericum species to flower, only Marsh St John's-wort, *H. elodes*, being later. Have we missed that one too?

'I'. Ploughman's-spikenard, *Inula conyzae*, was flowering up at Thurlbear on the 12th, the first record of it since Andrew's on 8th June at Purn Hill.

'J'. (a.k.a. 'S') Dee has had flowering Hoary Ragwort, *Jacobaea erucifolia*, today, the 15th, at Clevedon Pill. Still in bud around Taunton, but we can expect more records of it in the next week or so. This is one of about a dozen species flowering later now than in Watson's day. Another, from the opposite end of spring, is Colt's-foot, *Tussilago farfara*.

'L', 'M' and 'P'. Alastair's highlight of the last fortnight was on the 8th, when he came across more than one-hundred-and-fifty plants of Weasel's-snout, *Misopates orontium*, at Porlock Marsh. As for me, it's been a week of 'catch-ups', with Purple Moor-grass, *Molinia caerulea*, on the 9th at Staple Hill, Burnet-saxifrage, *Pimpinella saxifraga*, also on the 9th at Orchard Portman, Wild Parsnip, *Pastinaca sativa*, on the 12th at Thurlbear, and Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*, on the 13th between Obridge and Creech Castle. Amongst Linda's 'catch-ups' was Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, on the 9th at Wellington, while Andrew's included Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, at Rooksbridge on the 13th. Dee saw Common Toadflax, *Linaria vulgaris*, on the 14th at Uphill—a species that should probably have been on the target list but wasn't. And this morning I noticed lots of Water-pepper, *Persicaria hydropiper*, flowering in scrapes and hollows, and around pools, in Longrun Meadow.

'S' is for *Sison*. Stone Parsley, *Sison amonum*, has been spotted coming into flower right across the county, including in Wellington on the 9th (Linda), Lilstock on the 12th (Ro), Brent Knoll village on the 14th (Andrew) and Clevedon today (Dee).

'T'. At last, Wild Thyme, *Thymus drucei*, is flowering at Thurlbear, but good grief it's taken its 'thyme'—probably because of a severe infestation of the

mite *Aceria thomasi* which causes woolly-haired shoot-tip galls. These can affect the flower buds, apparently. Andrew, meanwhile, had first-flowering *Thysseium palustre* (= *Peucedanum palustre*) on Catcott Moor on the 14th. I've never recorded a first date for it, but Watson's date in the 1920s/30s was a fortnight later than that.

And lastly 'U' is, once again, for *Ulex*. Following Helena's Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*, on 27th June we've since had reports of it from Staple Hill on the 9th, and from Staple Plain, Quantocks (Maureen), Oakhampton Wood (Linda) and Langford Heathfield (Chris1), all on the 11th.

To prove that spring isn't quite over yet, Helena sent me a photo via WhatsApp of a still-flowering Bluebell, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, which she found in the Blackdowns on the 12th. She thinks this could be a record *last* flowering date. I wonder, can anybody find a later one?

* * *

Looking ahead to the next fortnight, we have just two species to carry over from last week:

Thorn-apple, *Datura stramonium*; Corn Mint, *Mentha arvensis*.

To which we can add the following twelve, to give us a target list of fourteen species:

Sea-purslane, *Atriplex portulacoides*; Nodding Bur-marigold, *Bidens cernua*; Trifid Bur-marigold, *Bidens tripartita*; Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*; Broad-leaved Helleborine, *Epipactis helleborine*; Blue Fleabane, *Erigeron acris*; Common Hemp-nettle, *Galeopsis tetrahit*; Sharp-leaved Fluellen, *Kickxia elatine*; Common Reed, *Phragmites australis*; Saw-wort, *Serratula tinctoria*; Goldenrod, *Solidago virgaurea*; Sea-blite, *Suaeda maritima*.

I was almost tempted to add Autumn Lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, to the target list, but it's very unlikely we'll get it flowering before the end of July. Worth keeping half an eye out for it though? It would be brilliant, too, if we could get a first date for Goldilocks Aster, *Galatella linosyris* (= *Aster linosyris*), and what about Sea Wormwood, *Artemisia maritima*? Both of these we'd expect to start flowering sometime in August, but you never know...

22nd July – 41,047

Week 18 – stragglers at the ball – an absence of blackbird song – beginnings and endings

A proper ragbag of first flowerings this week. It begins to feel like we're trying to keep a register of guests attending a summer ball: we're down to the last few stragglers who every year seem to make a habit of turning up this late, but there are others who must have sneaked in earlier—and it's only now, when their names are called out, that we realise they're already here.

Among the perennial latecomers, Helena spotted Common Hemp-nettle, *Galeopsis tetrahit*, at Mendip golf course on the 15th, while on the same day Jeanne and Tim had Sharp-leaved Fluellen, *Kickxia elatine*, in a field border between Old Cleeve and Washford. Chris1's and Karen1's just-flowering Broad-leaved Helleborine, *Epipactis helleborine*, near Huish Moor on the 18th, is another in this group, as is my own Common Reed, *Phragmites australis*, at Roughmoor Pond, also on the 18th. The dates for all of these are well ahead of Watson's, and mostly they're earlier than my own in previous years.

The second group includes Helena's Bog St John's-wort, *Hypericum elodes*, at Yarty Moor on the 10th, Maureen's Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*, at Staple Plain on the 11th – both in Week 17 – and Chris1's and Linda's Blue Fleabane, *Erigeron acris*, at Milverton on 27th June (Week 15); as well as Helena and Margaret's Saw-wort, *Serratula tinctoria*, at Strode on the 1st (also Week 15), which Margaret says had probably started flowering some days earlier. At Langford Heathfield, Chris1's first-flowering Saw-wort was on the 4th. Also, it appears that Dodder, *Cuscuta epithimum*, started flowering earlier than suggested in last week's roundup: Jeanne reports having had it at Cleeve Hill on the 5th (Week 16).

Amongst my own 'catch-ups' this week were Tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*, and Fennel-leaved Pondweed, *Potamogeton pectinatus*, between Obridge and Firepool Weir on the 20th. Which reminds me that we've been rather ignoring pondweeds, so if anyone has first dates for any of these, do please own up to them now!

While we're at it, in Fig. 1 there's a quick update on numbers of records of the various colour forms of Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*—this time displayed as a pie chart having has a faint hint of *decarrhabdotus* about it...

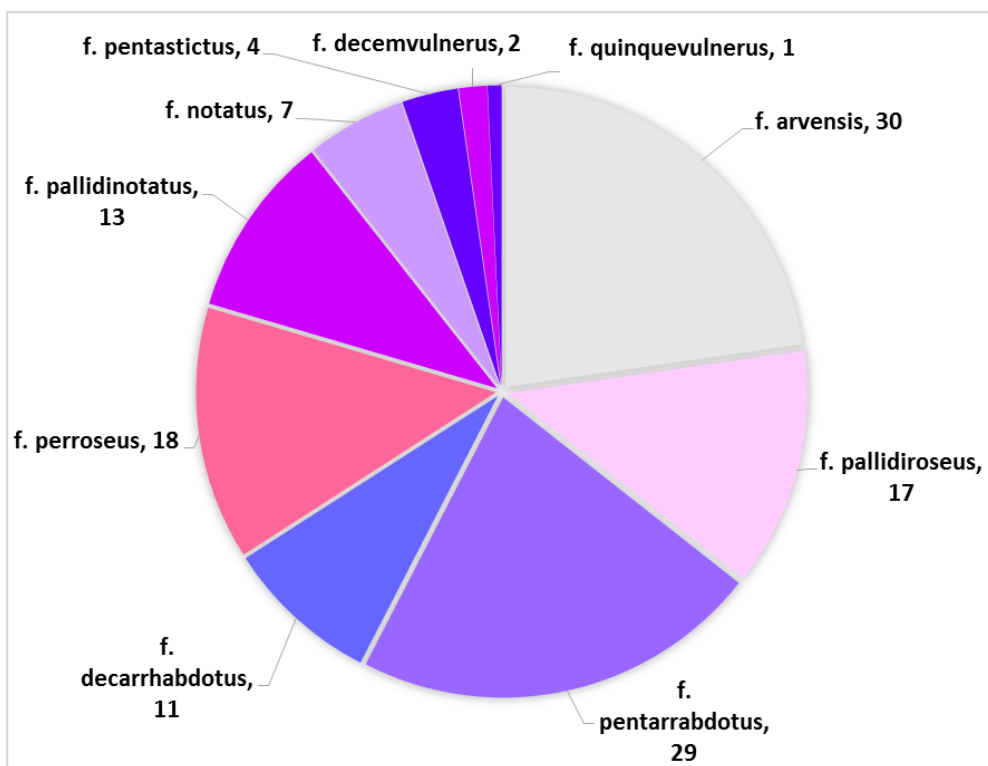


Fig. 1

Not much happening in the *non*-botanical world this week, although this morning's first Jersey Tiger, *Euplagia quadripunctaria*, was a delight to behold. And since the 17th we've had (more or less) daily sightings of Migrant Hawkets, *Aeschna mixta*, in the garden.

More than anything, though, it's an *absence* that's been on my mind this week. Yesterday, I was listening to birdsong in Longrun Meadow. There were Blackcaps in the riverside Alders, Greenfinches rasping from the hedgerows, and a single Song Thrush still triumphantly proclaiming its territory from the top of a Crack Willow. But there weren't any singing Robins or Chaffinches, and—worse than that—there was a strange and total lack of Blackbirds.

When I got home I checked back through the diary, to find that the last reference to our back-garden Blackbird had been in late June. Exactly on which day his chimney-pot monologue ceased, I cannot say. But if he sang in early July, I didn't hear him; or else, if I *did* hear him, I made neither physical nor mental note of it. I kick myself that he became utterly silent—at the start of his post-breeding moult, presumably?—without me noticing.

It may be true that recording the *end* of something is harder than recording its beginning: the first Lesser Celandine, *Ficaria verna*, is easy, the last is much trickier. But does this avian oversight also have something to do with our emergence from lockdown? As general 'busy-ness' resumes, maybe some of the little things that, during lockdown, assumed huge significance are starting to become small again. Odd, really, that when the world opens up—enlarges—there's also this *shrinking*.

29th July – 41,169

Week 19 – blackberries, thorn-apples &
autumn lady's-tresses

Perversely, just as we're able to get out more and range more widely around the county again, so there are less and less first-flowerers still to be found. But there are fruits galore. Among blackberries, 'Himalayan Giant', *Rubus armeniacus*, has been yielding abundant ripe fruit for about three weeks now, while Dewberry, *R. caesius*, is also fruiting well in the Taunton area. Even the 'berries' (technically each berry a collection of *drupelets*) of Elm-leaved Bramble, *R. ulmifolius*, are starting to ripen up nicely. Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*, trees are sparkling with their heavy load of orange-red fruits, wild plums are soft and sweet, and beneath every roadside 'Gean', *Prunus avium*, there's now the stain and smudge of wind-fallen cherries. Hedgerow brambles and flowery banks are alive with butterflies, too, with Gatekeepers, *Pyronia tithonus*, particularly abundant at the moment. My own butterfly highlight, though, was a spanking new second-brood Brown Argus, *Aricia agestis*, at Thurlbear Wood on the 27th.

Amid all this 'fruitfulness', it's been another week of latecomers to the summer ball. Of the target list, we found just two of the seven species we hadn't already encountered during Week 18. Corn Mint, *Mentha arvensis*, was spotted by Linda at Combe St Nicholas on the 26th, and by me at Thurlbear on the 27th, while there were also sightings of Thorn-apple, *Datura stramonium*, from the Taunton area on the 23rd (me) and 28th (reported by Linda's friend Jan) and—more surprisingly—a record via Steve of a singleton that had been seen flowering in a driveway in the Crewkerne area on or around 24th June. That's five weeks ago!

Thorn-apple is instantly recognisable by its white trumpet-shaped flowers and large spiny fruit capsules. There's nothing else quite like it, really. It's a plant that draws you in and pushes you away at the same time. Its reputation for being seriously poisonous resulted in the Crewkerne plant being

removed, while one of the party finding the plant/s on the 28th pointed out that, not only was it poisonous and hallucinogenic, but that “gypsy horse traders used to push the seeds up the backsides of ancient nags to give them a thrill and make them behave like two year-olds!” Roy Vickery’s *Folk Flora* is less entertaining than that, merely stating that Thorn-apple was grown for various ‘medicinal purposes’ from about the 16th century, and that in the Channel Islands, at least, the stems and leaves were dried and smoked like tobacco as a remedy for asthma. I’d sooner use Ventolin, frankly.

The Thorn-apple colony found on the 23rd comprised at least thirty plants on disturbed former arable land adjoining a new housing development. I’ll not mention its exact location, but can’t resist noting that it lies within a cricket-ball’s lob of the farmhouse where Walter Watson resided almost exactly a century ago while teaching at Taunton School. Is it too fanciful to imagine that these plants might be direct descendants of Thorn-apples, or ‘Devil’s Trumpets’, seen by Watson—maybe even from his bedroom window—shortly after the end of the First World War?

Other finds reported during the last week include more Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*, seen by Linda near the Wellington Monument on the 27th, and by me, today, on the Quantocks at Dead Woman’s Ditch; and another record of Blue Fleabane, *Erigeron acris*, this time by Andrew at Cross Quarry on the 24th. Also today, we’ve had more Autumn Gentian, *Gentianella amarella*, this time from Georgina at Ubley Warren. At Langford Heathfield, Chris1 had Gypsywort, *Lycopus europaeus*, on the 25th—a late-summer-flowering species that not many have reported yet.

Amongst Andrew’s FFDs were a few ‘stragglers’ from earlier weeks: Bifid Hemp-nettle, *Galeopsis bifida*, and Devil’s-bit Scabious, *Succisa pratensis*, at Catcott on the 14th (Week 17), and Hoary Ragwort, *Jacobaea erucifolia/Senecio erucifolius*, in Brent Knoll village on the 16th (Week 18). The first-flowering of Devil’s-bit Scabious is proving to be a long-drawn-out affair, beginning on 14th June when Helena and Fred found it to be already flowering at Long Dole Meadow. Andrew’s at Catcott was followed by Chris1’s at

Langford Heathfield on the 25th: “At last, some Devil’s-bit Scabious!” she said, adding “... I don’t know why I say that, it’s still *early!*” Indeed it is: Watson’s FFD for it in the 1920s/30s was 5th August.

Hoary Ragwort, on the other hand, is a species that seems to have gone the other way, flowering much later now than in Watson’s day. Unless it’s a typo—and without seeing the original data we can’t rule that out, of course—Watson’s ‘big table’ lists the FFD of *J. erucifolia* as ‘26/6’, i.e. 26th June. Our earliest record this year was Dee’s at Clevedon Pill on 15th July, followed by Andrew’s a day later, and my own, at Thurlbear Quarrylands, on the 27th—a full month later than Watson’s date. This lateness is backed up by my own records for the period 2008-2019, with FFDs ranging from 13th July to 14th August. So, while most species seem to be flowering much earlier today than in the 1920s/30s—or, for that matter, Roe’s 1950s—Hoary Ragwort, along with a handful of others, emphatically bucks that trend; the exception that proves the rule. (Or else his 6 should have been a 7...)

And, just now, I decided to make one last check of the emails and, blow me down, another message had come in from Andrew: “Somewhat to my surprise,” he wrote, clearly trying to down-play his excitement, “this afternoon [29th] produced the first Autumn Lady’s-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, at Purn Hill.” *Somewhat* to his surprise? I dread to think what ‘very surprising’ might involve—a Green-winged Orchid in January, perhaps? Anyway, Watson’s date for Autumn Lady’s-tresses was 6th September. Roe had five FFDs for it in the 1950s, ranging from 19th August to 22nd September. By any standard, then, 29th July is an exceptionally early date.

So, there we have it, the third and last of our targets with *autumn* in their English names: first there was the Hawkbit (14th June), then the Gentian (12th July), and now the Lady’s-tresses. Clearly, as already noted, summer is becoming more ‘autumnal’ by the day.

* * *

For the next fortnight we have five species to carry over from our Weeks 18/19 target list:

Nodding Bur-marigold, *Bidens cernua*; Trifid Bur-marigold, *Bidens tripartita*; Goldenrod, *Solidago virgaurea*; Sea-purslane, *Atriplex portulacoides*; Sea-blite, *Suaeda maritima*.

To which we can now add:

Hop, *Humulus lupulus*; Sea Wormwood, *Artemisia maritima*; Glasswort, *Salicornia* agg.

Plus, while we're striding out across coastal rocks and saltmarshes, can anyone come up with a plausible date for Rock Sea-lavender, *L. binervosum* agg.? It should have started flowering in mid-July.

5th August – 41,240

Week 20 – wood pigeons – vanishing swifts –
hop, harebell & henbane – tramping through
grass

She's right, of course. Everyone has their favourite season, it's just that this one isn't mine. But, as Ellen points out, 'high summer' does indeed have its own delights and compensations. Two weeks ago, for instance, I was lamenting the general lack of birdsong, but now—as if from nowhere—Wood Pigeons have stepped in to fill the breach: Tim Dee, this time in *Four Fields*, refers to late-summer pigeons playing “again and again [their] cracked tuba,” to produce “... a lullaby sung on an iron-lung.” Apart from the pigeons, there's still the odd Blackcap, an occasional Chiffchaff, and the wheezy *rasp* of Greenfinches. And then yesterday, down by the River Tone, in an old apple tree, I heard my first 'post-moult' Robin. Further along the river, in a bramble patch, a Wren made a hesitant, half-hearted stab at singing again.

The world's still turning, then, and these scraps of birdsong make up, just a little, for the sudden absence of Swifts. Last Thursday there were *dozens* in the skies above Taunton; on Friday and Saturday they could still be seen, and heard, as they careered and screamed around the streets at rooftop height, as well as larger numbers at higher altitude, probably feasting on flying ants.¹¹ On Sunday, though, the local air-space had become quiet, just a single sighting of one Swift, late in the day—plus, for good measure, a 'mewing' Peregrine that circled high above the street, before landing on the church tower opposite, causing consternation and panic amongst the local gull population. On Monday, two Swifts, early in the morning, then nothing for the rest of the day; yesterday, four birds first thing, then nothing; and finally today, nothing, nothing, nothing. So, it seems our local Swifts spent the weekend fattening up on ants, then skedaddled.

¹¹ The gulls were gorging themselves too, strutting around the outfield at the cricket ground, picking off ants as they crawled across the grass.

We may yet glimpse the odd bird passing through, but there's no getting round the fact: they've gone. As Peter Brown puts it, in the poem *Swifts Round a Tower*: "Three precious months / Is all that they could stay, / May, flaming June / And hot July. / Now swifts have left / To our dismay." At this point in the year, the 'Taunton Deane Swifts' WhatsApp group becomes a support network for those of us struggling with the harsh reality of a world without Swifts. It happens every year, of course, but that doesn't make it any easier.

There have, though, been arrivals as well as departures. Georgina had her first Clouded Yellow, *Colias croceus*, on the 30th, at Draycott Sleights—amongst "hundreds" of Chalkhill Blues, *Polyommatus coridon*—while Keith saw a female Clouded Yellow at Roughmoor on the 22nd. He also reports that in the last week at Thurlbear there's been the beginnings of a partial second brood of Dingy Skippers, *Erynnis tages*. Usually this butterfly has just a single generation each year, in the spring (April-May), but in especially hot summers second brood adults can occasionally be seen on the wing in southern England in August. Plants can do something similar, re-enacting spring with a second burst of flowering late in the season, like Val's Spring Cinquefoil, *Potentilla verna*, at Velvet Bottom on the 31st, or Helena's ridiculously late (or early?) Cowslips, *Primula veris*, in the Cam Valley today.

It's been another week of thin pickings on the first-flowering front. Between us we saw just four of our target species: Georgina and friends actually recorded Common Sea-lavender, *Limonium vulgare*, and Sea-blite, *Suaeda maritima*, at Sand Bay on 23rd July (so in Week 19); Dee reported just-flowering Common Sea-lavender at Clevedon on the 3rd; I saw my first Hop, *Humulus lupulus*, at Longrun Meadow on the 1st, followed by Trifid Bur-marigold, *Bidens tripartita*, between Obridge and Creech Castle on the 4th. The last of these was next to a fine patch of Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, which was flowering profusely despite having been noted as *not* flowering just four days earlier—which highlights how rapidly things can change, even when nothing much seems to be going on. The 4th was a good day for Water

Mint, with Helena and Val both ‘WhatsApping’ reports of having seen it flowering in VC6, the latter at Catcott Heath.

What else? I recorded Sneezewort, *Achillea ptarmica*, at Ruggin SWT reserve this morning—although I expect someone will surely have an earlier date for it? There was a second record for Harebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*, this time from Liz at Westbury Beacon on the 4th. My own first-flowerers this week included Carline Thistle, *Carlina vulgaris*, on the 31st (Thurlbear), Sharp-leaved Fluellen, *Kickxia elatine*, on the 1st (Corfe), Dwarf Spurge, *Euphorbia exigua*, on the 4th (Staple Fitzpaine), and Sowbread, *Cyclamen hederifolium*, today (Angersleigh). Elsewhere, Margaret saw Bifid Hemp-nettle, *Galeopsis bifida*, at Redding Pits on the 3rd, while Georgina *et al.* had Henbane, *Hyoscyamus niger*, at Sand Bay on 23rd (Week 19); and, most exciting of the lot, perhaps, was a message (and lovely photo) from Clive on the SRPG WhatsApp group reporting the discovery by Brian of flowering Autumn Lady’s-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, at Sand Point on the 27th—two days *earlier* than Andrew’s record of it at Purn Hill.

Ellen, in her email last week, noted the joy to be had from walking through grassland in summer, and I get what she’s saying, I really do. It’s interesting to track the subtle shifts in the nature of this experience as the season advances. The *sound* changes: in May and June, tramping through grass produces a soft, juicy-green *swish, swish, swish*, whereas now it makes a much harder, drier, *scrunch*; and each *scrunch*, each footfall, is accompanied by an explosion of grasshoppers, like fire-crackers going off.

She’s right: each season really *does* have its compensations.

12th August – 41,329

Week 21 – wilting in the heat – bush-crickets & bellflowers – fuchsia-mite galls – more last swifts – a dash to the seaside

By some margin, the hottest week of the year. I'm in the study working up a sweat, with every intention of being here for as short a time as possible. Drafting first-flowering updates is not for the faint-hearted...

Actually, there's really not much to report, as everything—and everyone—seems to have been struck down by the heat. So to keep it brief, this week's summary can take the form of a diary, lifted mainly from the 'NoteBook' app on my phone—not much in my 'real' notebook—plus various texts, emails and WhatsApp messages. All very modern, all very 'twenty-first century'.

Thursday, 6th. 25°C. Spent the afternoon in friends' back garden in Rockwell Green. Chicory, *Cichorium intybus*, on verge of Wellington bypass was my first of the year. They have a garden pond, in which Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, is flowering. They also have Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, which they're keen to get rid of, so I try to convert them by saying that it's f. *pentarrhabdotus*. Not sure they were terribly impressed, to be honest.

Val finds his first Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, in flower, on Chasey's Drove, along with Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*, galled by the midge *Wachtliella persicariae*.

Evening: sitting in another garden, this time in Colin Avenue, Taunton, eating a Gurkha 3 takeaway and discussing the Test match—while keeping an eye on the sky. At least five Swifts repeatedly circling, the first birds for a couple of days. Clearly, they *haven't* gone after all. A huge relief.

Friday, 7th. 27°C. Early morning: an email from Andrew to report that he and others had seen Common Sea-lavender, *Limonium vulgare*, flowering at

Uphill on the 4th, while there was Flowering Rush, *Butomus umbellatus*, on Allerton Moor on the 3rd, “... just when I’d given up hope of seeing any flowering locally [this year.]” Also, in response to my rather late FFD for Sneezewort, *Achillea ptarmica*, last week, he says he saw it flowering at Edford Meadows on 7th July.

Late morning: to Thurlbear Wood, trying to find some shade. First-flowering Creeping-Jenny, *Lysimachia nummularia*, at last! Dark Bush-crickets, *Pholidoptera griseoptera*, ‘chirping’ quietly in the brambles, plus late-summer generation (partial second brood) Small Heaths, *Coenonympha pamphilus*, and Dingy Skippers, *Erynnis tages*. With freshly emerged Brimstones, *Gonepteryx rhamni*, as well—two brightly-coloured males—it could almost be spring again.

Meanwhile, Toby posting on WhatsApp: “Afternoon all, first few Goldilocks Aster [*Galatella linosyris*] out at Brean Down today!” And another post, with photo, this time from Helena at Harptree Combe: “Pretty stars in the grass for you! *Campanula patula* [Spreading Bellflower] at its only Somerset site.” And then another, less pretty, from Dee in Clevedon, who has Fuchsias in her garden afflicted by the rather grotesque galls of the dreaded Fuchsia mite, *Aculops fuchsiae*. At which point, Steve decides to wander into *his* garden in North Petherton, only to find that *he’s* got Fuchsia gall mites too.¹²

Late afternoon: more Swifts, a tight group of at least fifteen. First one, then two, then *three* ‘mewing’ Peregrines, circling lazily, until one suddenly plunges into a stoop and aims directly at three, maybe five, Swifts dashing down the length of Gordon Road. They scatter in all directions and the Peregrine—presumably a young bird from the nest on St Mary’s church

¹² Worth watching out for this gall. It’s a horticultural pest, and apparently spreading rapidly in southern Britain. First record in Somerset was in 2010 (Minehead), first record in Taunton area was in 2017. I think Dee’s may be the first record of it from VC6 but, as demonstrated by Steve, it can be easily overlooked! Dee says: “I can’t remember seeing it in my garden before, though perhaps I might not have noticed a low level of infection. Certainly it’s pretty widespread in Clevedon: walking this morning, I noticed quite a lot of plants infected.”

tower—gains height again to re-join its siblings, with nothing to show for its efforts. Friends had come over for a back-garden cuppa but hadn't bargained on such wildlife spectacles. Neither had we.

Saturday, 8th. 29°C. Listening to Test Match Special—England closing in on a most remarkable win against Pakistan—while also watching Taunton Deane narrowly lose to Taunton St Andrews. Local derbies can be nerve-jangling affairs. A pint or two of cider on the outfield afterwards, but the relaxed banter and chatter still overshadowed by a disconcerting absence of Swifts.

Sunday, 9th. 26°C. Morning: Longrun Meadow, thistle-down everywhere. Thistle heads looking like particularly dishevelled prime-ministerial hairdos. Small Teasel, *Dipsacus pilosus*, still flowering nicely.

An email from David2 to say that he has Cowslips, *Primula veris*, flowering in his garden in Alford. And then Margaret posts a selfie on WhatsApp, showing off her splendid new botanically-themed face mask. It looks so much better than my own (probably useless) black snood—unless you're needing to look like a bank robber, in which case mine's perfect. Oh, and she also had flowering Water Mint at Blagdon Lake.

Evening: supper in the garden. Three Swifts, very briefly, swoop down to chimney-pot height, calling madly; they give the impression of being local birds.

Monday, 10th. 24°C, the coolest day of the week, but still oppressively humid. Barrington Hill. Autumn Lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes spiralis*, looking its best: maybe 50+ spikes along top edge of Hilly Field, and smaller numbers in Clover Ground and the bottom field. Lower flowers on some spikes already going over—so may have been flowering for a week or more? Abundant Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*, now living up to its name: 'strawberries' everywhere. Gilly's ears covered in Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, burrs. Brilliant view of a Barn Owl, flushed from a hedgerow Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*. A fragment of Skylark song, and then a Robin; otherwise, very

little bird noise—apart from Wood Pigeons. Blackthorns, *Prunus spinosa*, laden with sloes; Oaks, *Quercus robur*, laden with acorns, many of them engulfed by knopper galls caused by the gall-wasp *Andricus quercuscalicis*. Also, several ‘pepperpot galls’ in the flower-heads of Common Fleabane, *Pulicaria dysenterica*, caused by a tiny fruit fly now known as *Myopites apicatus* (previously *M. inulaedyssentericae*).¹³

On the way home, more Chicory, in a field border near Staple Fitzpaine. Also a Jersey Tiger, *Euplagia quadripunctaria*, perched on Hoary Ragwort, *Jacobaea erucifolia*. Various colour-forms of Field Bindweed, the best being *f. notatus*. Two Clouded Yellows, *Coleas croceus*, both males.

Late afternoon: 4.51 pm to be precise. Steve’s on the wireless, BBC Radio Somerset, talking about the recent re-appearance of Lesser Water-plantain, *Baldellia ranunculoides*, at Shapwick. Excellent interview. Steve, afterwards, on WhatsApp: “stiff drink required.”

No Swifts: stiff drink needed here, too.

Tuesday, 11th. 33°C. Sweltering! No desire to do anything today, really. First adult Speckled Bush-cricket, *Leptophyes punctatissima*, calling faintly from the flower bed.

A flurry of excitement on WhatsApp following Val’s posting of photos of Broad-leaved Ragwort, *Senecio sarracenicus* (= *S. fluviatilis*), beside the River

¹³ Most easily searched for later in the autumn, after the flower-heads have begun to fall apart, but do look for it now if you enjoy a challenge. Work your way through a patch of Common Fleabane, pressing down on the disc of each flower-head. An ungalled head will feel slightly spongy, and if you strip off the disc florets you’ll find the base of the flower-head (the receptacle) is small and relatively flat. A galled head will feel *hard* and *swollen* beneath the disc when you squish it, and removing the disc florets will reveal the galled receptacle, usually with a few tiny holes where the adult flies have exited the gall—hence the nickname ‘pepperpot gall’. Apparently quite scarce in the UK, *M. apicatus* is generally rare in central and northern Europe, but more frequent in *southern* Europe. First record in Somerset was in 2015, but a thin scatter of records in recent years suggests either we’ve been overlooking it or that it’s spreading. If the latter, this might be in response to climate change?

Brue at Baltonsborough. The Floras have it as an introduction, the Atlas as a neophyte; yet its early introduction (before 1600) and first date in the wild (1633), combined with its decline nationally, suggest that it could be close to the fuzzy margin between neophyte and archaeophyte...

Meanwhile, Steve is beavering away in North Petherton, dealing with a “freedom of information request.” Another stiff drink called for, perhaps?

Skies empty again, no Swifts.

Today, 12th. The air today is unbearably heavy and humid. Didn't sleep well. Overnight low of 19°C. Early morning: up to Thurlbear Wood. Very little to report. Blackcaps: *tchack, tchack ... tchack* alarm calls, like someone flint-knapping in the trees. Other birds are lying low: just a few hard-to-locate and impossible-to-identify ‘seep’ calls from the undergrowth. A startled Blue Tit. A brief snatch of Robin song against the background noise of a jumbo jet passing overhead—normality raised another notch.

It's now mid-afternoon, and the temperature has risen to 35°C.

I can't stay in this room any longer, so we plan an evening dash to the coast.

Some while later...

We've been to Watchet: a strong whiff of seaweed, views of the Welsh coast, a scattering of ammonites, Sandwich Terns noisily fishing offshore, and (miraculously) at least a dozen Swifts. And, later, fish and chips. Our second, but much-needed, visit to the seaside in nearly six months.

Meanwhile, David¹ is *in* Wales, not just gazing at it from afar, and sends us WhatsApp ‘postcards’ from Llyn Fanod, Ceredigion: Lesser Skullcap, *Scutellaria minor*, Water Lobelia, *Lobelia dortmanna*, Floating Water-plantain, *Luronium natans*...

And then Helena, on her second Cam Valley Botany Walk of the summer, not only avoids the brewing thunder storms but also turns up flowering Autumn Lady's-tresses, Harebell, *Campanula rotundifolia*, and Clustered Bellflower, *C. glomerata*. Clearly, a good week for bellflowers.

No preview needed for the coming week. Nothing much still to be seen, frankly. A few odds and sods, a few stragglers. And Ivy, *Hedera helix*, of course: which is starting to feel like the final piece in spring's jigsaw.

19th August - 41,397

Week 22 - bad light stops play - 'A' levels
& algorithms - sea-purslane - meadow saffron
- eating out to help out - yet more last
swifts...

Another week with very little, really, to report. In Week 21 we were sheltering from the heat, this week it's been more about trying to keep dry. In Taunton, at least, it's rained every day. In Southampton there's been 1½ days of cricket when there should have been 5. It began with the warmest night of the year—21°C in Taunton—and then 27°C the next day, after which the temperatures subsided to a pleasanter 18-22°C for the rest of the week; still very humid, sharp showers, and the occasional thunder clap. And a funnel cloud, apparently, in the Bristol Channel. We had three days on the trot without any sunshine, ensuring that bad light stopped play even when the rain didn't.

Let's try diary format again...

Thursday, 13th. Very little sleep. The warmest night for years. 'A' Level Results Day. The injustice of 'THE ALGORITHM'.

WhatsApp from Val: Small Teasel, *Dipsacus pilosus*, at Baltonsborough. Email from Pat, who had visited Porlock Weir on the 9th (so Week 21) to find Sea Aster, *Aster tripolium*, just starting to flower, and Sea-purslane, *Atriplex portulacoides*, which "had probably been flowering for weeks." Also a Jersey Tiger, *Euplagia quadripunctaria*, in the orchard at Nettlecombe.

Evening: a single group of three Swifts, circling high above Trinity Street. So they're still here...

Friday, 14th. Ivy, flowering in the rain in Upper Holway, Taunton. It's climbing over a roadside garden fence, but some of the leaves are suspiciously

variegated; clearly a cultivated Ivy of some sort—and in keeping with the weather, my initial excitement that it might be first-flowering *Hedera helix* is soon dampened by the realisation that it's *H. colchica*.

Liz posts a stunning picture of Apple-of-Peru, *Nicandra physalodes*, from Wedmore allotments where it grows on a muck heap. The day's highlight, though, is surely Fred's Least Lettuce, *Lactuca saligna*, on Fobbing Marshes, Essex, where he says it's "having an amazing year!"

Saturday, 15th. Email from Val: "I've seen Sparrowhawk at Catcott Lows, and last week a Hobby at Baltonsborough."

Sunday, 16th. Email from Georgina: just-flowering Meadow Saffron, *Colchicum autumnale*, at Velvet Bottom and Blackdown on Mendip. A real rarity in VC5, so didn't even think to have it on our target list, but Georgina's date is very early. Walter Watson's FFD for Meadow Saffron was 13th September, while Captain Roe had four FFDs for it in the 1950s, all of them in September.

At Ubley Warren, Georgina reports having had two second-brood Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, *Boloria selene*, on the 8th, and second-brood Dingy Skippers, *Erynnis tages*, on the 12th (all Week 21). Both occurrences are unusual, reflecting the exceptionally warm spring and summer we've been having.

Not entirely unconnected, an email from Hester, who has noticed a second flush of flowering of Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*, at Longrun Meadow, Taunton. Hester is a 'Friend of Longrun', one of the team of volunteers responsible for looking after the area.

Monday, 17th. THE ALGORITHM is ditched. Government announce that teacher-assessed grades will now apply.

Late morning: walking between Thurlbear and Winter Well, some fine large plants of Woolly Thistle, *Cirsium eriophorum*—a new monad record—and carpets of Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*. Meanwhile, on WhatsApp, Ian2 is enjoying a profusion of Common Wintergreen, *Pyrola minor*, in Moray—our most northerly outpost yet.

Tuesday, 18th. Morning: walk over to Trull allotments to meet friends for a socially-distanced flask of tea and lemon drizzle cake. Interesting allotment weeds, including several species of *Oxalis*: Procumbent Yellow-sorrel, *O. corniculata*, and Upright Yellow-sorrel, *O. stricta*, are frequent enough in the Taunton area, but it turns out that Garden Pink-sorrel, *O. latifolia*, is new for ST22. Of the three, *O. latifolia* is clearly causing the most trouble, some plot-holders seem to be growing it for fun—lines of dwarf French beans with a rather lovely *latifolia* ‘understorey’. Black currants infested with Black currant gall mite, *Cecidophyopsis ribis*. Pear trees laden with fruit, their leaves orange-spotted with galls of the ‘pear rust’, *Gymnosporangium sabinae*.

Today, 19th. Morning: Thurlbear churchyard, picking blackberries; Ivy now so close to flowering—pedicels fully extended, buds swollen, but still tightly closed like clenched fists. How long before they show their hands? Within the next week to ten days, I reckon...

Afternoon: walk in to town. Happy students everywhere. Our first experience of ‘Eat Out to Help Out!’ Two teas and a flapjack for three quid, at the café in Goodlands Gardens where we stopped on our SRPG/Wild Flower Society ‘last week hunt’ in October 2018. White Melilot, *Melilotus albus*, in the stonework where the old millstream joins the River Tone. First recorded here in 2008, this is its only site in the Taunton area, and quite a scarce plant in VC5.

Late afternoon: walking back past the cricket ground, it’s spitting with rain, and—would you believe it?—there are five Swifts, high above the rooftops and the floodlights, tacking into a strengthening headwind, tilting this way and that as they zig-zag across the sky.

Having been wrong several times already, I hesitate to proclaim that these are the last Swifts of the year.

(But I think they might be.)

26th August - 41,465

Week 23 - another last swift - my first ever
brown hairstreak - ivy! - endings and
beginnings

A week of sometimes dramatic weather. Rain each day, until today, and windy almost the whole week; two named storms, 'Ellen' (*such* a good name for a storm) and 'Francis'. 'Ellen' was responsible for a little unauthorised felling of trees in Thurlbear Wood, while 'Francis'—the wilder of the two—threatened to flatten our back-garden fence. It was wobbling yesterday afternoon, but still upright this morning, thankfully. At least the weather should improve now the Test series is over.

On Saturday, 22nd, we arrived up at Taunton Deane Cricket Club too late to watch any cricket, as Wellington had offered only feeble resistance and the game was finished by about 4.30 p.m. So instead we walked the 'Wyvern Round', a particular dog-walking route (for some reason all our regular routes are called 'rounds') from Vivary Park to Mountfields: past Pool Farm, where Walter Watson once lived; through what's now known as 'Thorn-apple Field'; and then back along the path running behind Richard Huish College, to check the Ivy, *Hedera helix*. (Still in bud.)

Anyway, here we are, sitting on the outfield. Half a pint of Thatchers Haze and an orange juice and soda; and much chatter about cricket, as you'd expect. And much chatter above, too: House Martins busily circling—a constant twittering—and then, suddenly, there's another kind of tilt and flutter, followed by a rapid scything through the air that leaves the martins looking almost pedestrian in comparison. Just a few seconds, and then gone. Or lost, let's say, against a sky that's darkening to the colour of roof slates. Could *this* one be the last, maybe? Almost certainly...¹⁴

¹⁴ Having been proved wrong so often, I'm now *deliberately* suggesting this is the last Swift, since that's evidently the best way of guaranteeing it isn't!

Also on the ornithological front, Gill sent a photo this week of a grounded Sparrowhawk, wings splayed, beside a box of drying onions. She jokes that the bird may have landed in her garden thinking that the onions were eggs needing to be incubated.

* * *

On Sunday, 23rd, the dog and I were doing another 'round', this time near Orchard Wood, the venue for our first field meeting of spring had the year not unravelled in quite the way it did. In the shelter of a hedgerow there were Gatekeepers, *Pyronia tithonus*, a few bedraggled, storm-battered Meadow Browns, *Maniola jurtina*, and a Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*. It was overcast, humid, and now there was spitting rain in the air.

A presumed-to-be Gatekeeper touched down on a bramble; in flight it looked unremarkable, but on landing it seemed far too smart, too dapper. It looked like a Gatekeeper on its way to a rather posh dinner party. It perched with wings closed: they were orangey-brown underneath, with thin black 'hair lines' across the undersides of both forewing and hindwing, one of those on the hindwing being accentuated by a white line along its outer edge, the other, shorter than the first, with a white line along its *inner* edge. At the bottom of each hindwing there was a little 'tooth' or... I don't know what to call it, really: a 'sharp protuberance'; a miniature swallow-tail?

And then, coyly at first, it opened its wings, which were a velvety chocolate colour, the forewing sporting a large 'crescent' of orange; the hindwing's 'tooth' was orange too, with two little spots of orange on either side of it. It was beautiful. It was *gorgeous*. And it was my first ever Brown Hairstreak, *Thecla betulae*. According to Wikipedia, Thecla was an early Christian saint who was "miraculously saved from burning at the stake by the onset of a storm." Another 'Ellen', perhaps?

[In fact, our last Swifts weren't until 28th Aug: three circling, in the rain, above Trinity Street. I think that's the latest we've ever recorded them in Taunton.]

I'd never really rated Brown Hairstreaks. I'd been on a trip to search Blackthorn, *Prunus spinosa*, twigs in winter for their eggs; an experience that was a bit underwhelming, to be honest. I couldn't fathom what all the fuss was about. But then, unlike my fellow egg-hunters, I'd never seen the adult butterfly. Now, with this glorious female perched on a bramble stem, all became clear.

The name *Brown Hairstreak* really doesn't do it justice though. *Hairstreak*? Well, okay. But *Brown*? No, not okay: *brown* sounds boring, *brwn* sounds dull, *brwn* just doesn't cut the mustard. It needs a name that better reflects its deliciously rich colours, the dark chocolate, the bright orange—*Chocolate Orange* sounds suitably delicious, don't you think?

* * *

And now, finally, the botanical highlight of the week. Ivy, *Hedera helix*, is starting to blossom. First sightings were on Saturday, 22nd, when David² had Ivy flowers opening in Alford, as did Karen² at Cocklake (near Wedmore). And then on Monday, 24th, it was seen at Felton Common (Margaret), Draycott Sleights (Georgina) and Henlade (me).

So, there you have it: the last first flowering of spring. From now on, then, the steady descent towards winter, at which point, with the Ivy still blossoming, we'll begin again to seek out the first signs of spring. Which begs the question: does Ivy represent the last first flowering of the spring just finished? Or, could it be the *first* first flowering of the spring to come? Or might we allow it to be *both* these things, acting as a kind of bridge between the end of one spring and the start of the next? *Tail End Charlie* and *harbinger* rolled into one...

Tim Dee, you'll remember, made the case for there being just two seasons: spring and autumn. He imagines the year to be in two halves:

“... a coming, spring, and a going, autumn; six months forward before six months back, six months up before six down, ... six greening months before six browning, six growing before six dying; in autumn things fall apart, in spring things come together ...”

Yet, to counter that notion, one could argue that even in spring, amidst all the ‘comings’, there are also ‘goings’. During May, for instance, when spring is at full throttle, Lesser Celandine, *Ficaria verna*, is already beginning its *browning*, its *falling apart*, as it dissolves back into the soil, ready for its long summer hibernation. Just as, later in the year, on the cusp between summer and autumn, there is still an inkling of spring to be had—as this week’s just-flowering Ivy proclaims.

Over the last few weeks I’ve been fretting about spring’s imminent demise, yet now I’m beginning to see that *every* season has a touch of spring about it. You just have to locate it, and see it for what it is. This year’s Ivy will still be blossoming when next spring’s Spurge-laurel, *Daphne laureola*, begins to flower around Christmas time, followed by Hazel, *Corylus avellana*, not long after that. Dog’s Mercury, *Mercurialis perennis*, I have seen flowering before the end of November, Sweet Violet, *Viola odorata*, occasionally as early as October. If spring (the season) were another sort of spring, a *watery* spring, it would gush madly between February and the middle of June, then reduce to a trickle in late summer and autumn, but at no time of the year would it dry up completely. And so each first flowering becomes a harbinger of the next, and the next, and the next, and together they help to pull us through the year. Until we reach Ivy: and then, after the briefest of lulls—or maybe no lull at all—it starts all over again...

* * *

This year’s first-flowerings project was conceived as just one way of helping to keep people’s spirits up—not least my own—through a uniquely worrying time. It would give us reasons to be in contact with one another, to keep us ‘doing botany’ when this perhaps wouldn’t have been uppermost in our minds; a collective attempt to not be dragged down by the pandemic, to

provide a distraction, yes, but also a focus; something that any of us could take part in, if we chose to, whatever our circumstances, and however socially-distanced and tied to home we needed to be.

If nothing else, it presented, during lockdown, an opportunity to see things, to *appreciate* things, and to keep telling each other *about* things that we might otherwise have overlooked or presumed to be too commonplace to be noteworthy. For a few weeks our lives slowed to a near-standstill, just as spring's trot turned into a gallop. Trying to keep up with it, to stay on its tail, became part of the fun.

21st September – 41,788

Was it *really* such an exceptional year?

Our lives this year have been dominated by graphs and charts. And, worryingly, many of the lines on these graphs are now heading in the wrong direction again. Infection rates are rising, the 'rule of six' prevails (except where it doesn't), and local lockdowns are starting to proliferate—though, thankfully, not in Somerset yet. One secondary school in Taunton has had two year-group 'bubbles' self-isolating within ten days of the start of the new school year. That's more than four-hundred pupils, apparently. The test and trace system seems to be creaking under the strain. This doesn't bode well, and right now it's hard to see where it will all end.

It feels like we're in for a tough winter. From today's vantage point, perched on the autumn equinox, the notion that any time soon we might be able to meet in a room together to talk about plants seems fanciful. Let's hope that by the time of the *next* equinox we'll be able to gather again. Presumably some of the field meetings cancelled this year could be rolled forward to 2021: maybe we'll hold that early-April meeting in Orchard Wood after all, just twelve months later than anticipated.

But what about first flowerings? Has it *really* been such an exceptional year? This isn't the easiest question to answer, and it may have to involve a few graphs, which I'm sorry about because we're probably all sick to the back teeth of such things. At least these graphs have *nothing*, absolutely *nothing*, to do with viral pandemics. So, let's try to think of them as light relief, if that's possible?

As you know, in the early decades of the last century Walter Watson kept detailed records of first flowering dates (FFDs). His paper, published in 1949, included a nineteen-page Table of average FFDs and 'flowering periods' for no less than eight-hundred-and-forty-three species. A total that puts the rest of us to shame, frankly. Watson lived in Taunton, and much of the fieldwork

he did was in the south and west of the county. For the bulk of species his FFDs were based on at least ten years' records, which we think were made in the 1920s and early 1930s¹⁵. The man's energy was extraordinary. Don't forget that during this time he was teaching Biology at Taunton School, while also actively involved in the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, as well as being an internationally-renowned lichenologist, a more-than-competent bryologist and mycologist, and (as it happens) a man with an interest in plant galls. As if that weren't enough, he was an avid watcher of cricket. For most of his adult life he was a member of Somerset County Cricket Club; at the time of his death, in 1960, he was the Club's longest-serving member. He proved, if proof were needed, that one can combine natural history with a love of cricket. A relief to us all, I'm sure you'll agree.

But that's not the point. The point, really, is that Walter Watson bequeathed to his successors this extraordinary baseline of information, allowing us to compare FFDs today with those of roughly a century ago. Of his eight-hundred-and-forty-three species, this year we've recorded first dates for five-hundred-and-twenty-six of them. Up until mid-March the FFDs were mine, of course, but from the start of lockdown they could have been anyone's. Plotting our earliest FFD for each species in 2020 against Watson's FFDs gives us the graph in Fig. 2 on the next page. There are five-hundred-and-twenty-six dots, each one a species.

You can see immediately that the data-points lie mainly *below* the line, indicating that our dates were, on the whole, earlier than Watson's. Just nineteen species (3.6%) had later dates than Watson's, and some of these were probably only 'late' because during lockdown the places in which we might find them were hard for us to visit. If you don't like graphs, let's summarise these findings with a single statistic: overall, our FFDs were, on average, ***thirty-one days earlier*** than the dates listed in Watson's big Table.

¹⁵ We don't know precisely *which* years, unfortunately.

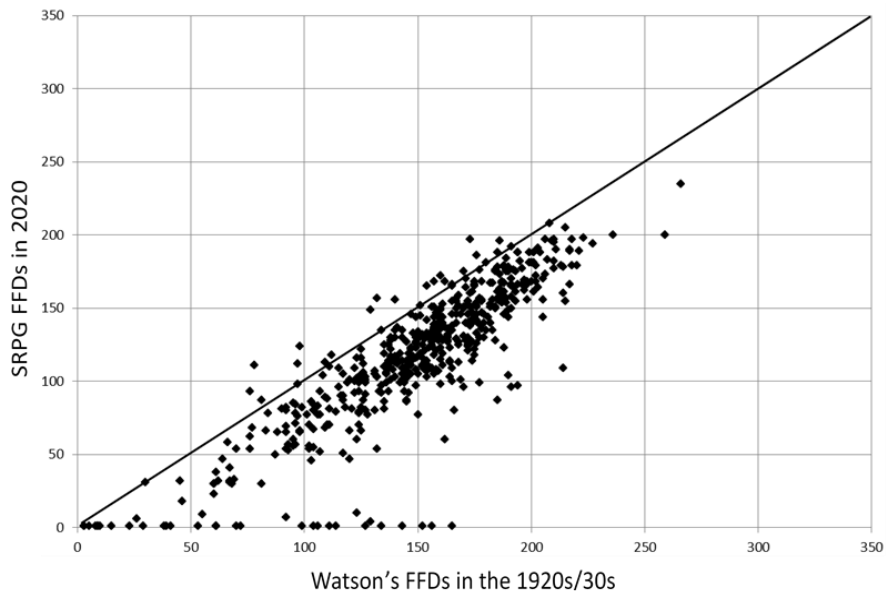


Fig. 2. FFDs for 529 species in 2020, plotted against 'average first flowering times' given by Watson. Dates are shown as day no. (1 January = day 1). The diagonal line marks the line along which the data-points would lie if 2020 FFDs were identical to Watson's; above the line is later than Watson's date, below the line is earlier

Really? Watson, I think, would greet this news with incredulity. Mind you, his dates were *average* FFDs over more than a decade, so obviously in some years his dates would have been earlier than average while in others they'd have been later¹⁶. But a *whole month* earlier? He'd doubtless protest that his dates were based on one pair of eyes operating across a fairly restricted geographical area, whereas ours had the benefit of many pairs of eyes scattered across the entire county. And, to be fair, he'd be right to insist that the latter would produce an earlier crop of dates than the former. In essence, then, he'd say that we had an unfair advantage.

So, maybe a fairer comparison would be to test our dates against his by restricting the analysis to just *one* person's FFDs. So let's try that. We'll take mine, if that's okay, since not only does that give us the largest pool of species to work with, it also comprises a set of records drawn from a geographical area that is roughly similar to Watson's. The first thing to be said, though, is that as soon as you use only one person's records you lose an awful lot of information, as the pool of species becomes substantially reduced—despite the fact that the individual concerned was being spurred on each week by everyone else's recording! I recorded FFDs for four-hundred-and-six species, just over three-quarters of the number recorded by the group as a whole. The results for these are shown in Fig. 3.

I'm not altogether happy with my own records for this spring. In late March and April, for instance, there were places I couldn't get to, either because they were beyond the limits of daily permitted exercise or because Ben had gone off with the car. So some dates may actually be a little *later* than they would have been had we not been in lockdown. But bear in mind that Watson, too, would probably have been recording through a pandemic—in his case Spanish 'flu—and anyway his mobility could have been pretty limited in comparison with mine¹⁷. Also, his records were made mostly while he was

¹⁶ The raw data from which his average FFDs were calculated cannot be found, so we have no idea the *range* of dates he recorded.

¹⁷ There is much we don't know about Walter Watson. Did he own a car, for instance? Or did he have to rely on public transport to get around the county? We've got no idea...

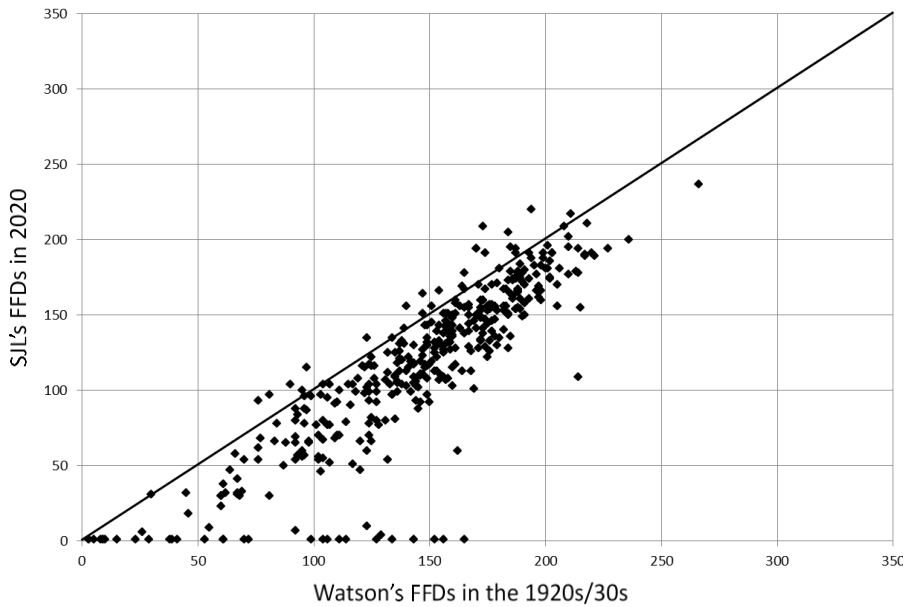


Fig. 3: FFDs for 406 species recorded by SJL in 2020, plotted against 'average first flowering times' given by Watson. As in Fig. 2, the diagonal line marks the line along which the data-points would lie if 2020 FFDs were identical to Watson's; above the line the 2020 date is later than Watson's date, below the line is earlier

still working full-time—while I’ve had the distinct advantage of being retired and with time on my hands. We could have argued the toss late into the night, him and me, but none of that would alter the fact that my own FFDs for 2020 are still strikingly early—below the line—in comparison with his. Again, for those who dislike graphs, my dates for these four-hundred-and-six species were, on average, ***twenty-eight days earlier*** than Watson’s.

Interestingly, if we do the calculation again, but this time using the *group’s* earliest FFDs for these species rather than my own, the figure is ***thirty-four days earlier***. This illustrates well the added value of having many pairs of eyes, the *group’s* FFDs being almost a week earlier, on average, than my own dates. Actually, the difference would have been greater than this, but for the fact that first-flowerers before lockdown (i.e. between January and mid-March) were only recorded by me—others in the group would doubtless have conjured up earlier records than mine, had they been involved from the outset.

So, okay: our FFDs in 2020 were exceptionally early in comparison with the sorts of dates that Watson was getting about a century ago. But, you might say, this is hardly surprising: climate change is happening, the evidence is all around us, and truthfully it would have been a shock had our dates *not* been much earlier than Watson’s. And yet many of us still felt—at least during lockdown—that the spring of 2020 was unusual, even viewed through the prism of today’s ‘new normal’. Was it, perhaps, that the season’s gallop, its *speed of advancement*, accelerated just at the moment our own movements were abruptly curtailed? In which case, could our perception of ‘earliness’ have been, to some extent, an artefact of lockdown? Was it that we were keeping a closer eye on spring than we would normally do, and so noticing things that might otherwise have passed us by?

Well, let’s consider the *weather* for a moment. The spring of 2020 was one of the driest and sunniest springs on record. In fact it was the sunniest since records began, in 1929. Also, it followed an exceptionally mild and relatively frost-free winter. Nationally, it was the sixth-warmest January since 1884,

and the warmest in the thirteen years that I've been recording FFDs, i.e. since 2008. February was also relatively mild, being the second-warmest during that same period (only 2019 was warmer). March wasn't especially mild, but this was followed by the second-warmest April and May since 2008. Summer was marked by prolonged periods of mainly dull weather; yet while June and July were relatively cool by today's standards, August 2020 was, nationally, the warmest on record. In SW England, seven of the nine months from December to August had mean daily temperatures at least 1°C warmer than the long term (1961-1990) average.

Given the weather, then, one might anticipate that spring 2020 would indeed have been 'early', even in comparison with other recent springs. We can test this by looking at the FFDs of species in 2020 against their 2008-2017 'decadal average' FFDs. This reduces the pool of species still further, since there are only three-hundred-and-thirty-nine species for which we have a decade's-worth of values. In 2020 I failed to record FFDs for ten of these, but results for the others are shown on the next page in Fig. 4. Note that the x-axis has changed: it now shows my own 2008-17 average FFDs, rather than Watson's from back in the day.

Again, most data-points sit well below the line, indicating that the first dates in 2020 were for most species earlier than their decadal average. Look closely, though, and you'll see a little group of dots sitting well *above* the line around day 100 on the y-axis; these 'late' FFDs were at the end of March/beginning of April when lockdown brought me to a temporary standstill and some usual haunts like Thurlbear Quarrylands and Orchard Wood suddenly became off limits. Nevertheless, taking all species combined, FFDs in 2020 were, on average, **fifteen days earlier** than the decadal average. More than that, though, it turns out that they were **four days earlier** than even the *earliest* set of dates during that decade, in 2014.

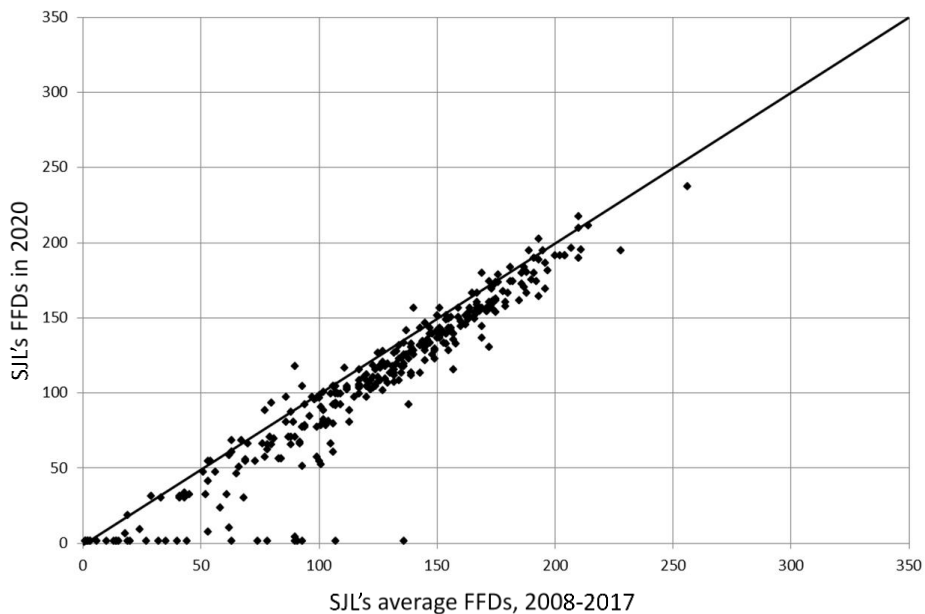


Fig. 4: FFDs for 329 species recorded by SJL in 2020, plotted against 2008-17 decadal average FFDs recorded by the same observer. As in Figs 2 and 3, the diagonal line marks the line along which the data-points would lie if 2020 FFDs were identical to the decadal average; above the line the 2020 date is later than the decadal average, below the line is earlier

In summary, then: FFDs in 2020 were twenty-eight to thirty-one days earlier (on average) than in Watson's day, fifteen days earlier (on average) than in the decade 2008-17, and four days earlier (on average) than even the *earliest* spring of that decade. So, to answer the original question: yes, it *has* been an exceptional year.

* * *

Today, 21st September, has been sunny “from the word GO!”, as weather forecasters like to put it. A cloudless sky to mirror perfectly the weather we were experiencing in Week 1 of lockdown. A lot warmer today though. The spring equinox was marked by a ground frost and a daytime maximum temperature of 14°C. Today's maximum is 25°C. We've been sitting in the garden enjoying Red Admirals, *Vanessa atalanta*, and Speckled Woods, *Pararge aegeria*, and a Hummingbird Hawk-moth, *Macroglossum stellatarum*, has been busily working its way across the patch of ground we optimistically call ‘the flower border’.

Several of you have been reporting *second* first flowerings. An Indian summer can sometimes bring with it a nod to spring, and so it's with a sense of *déjà vu* that Gill, Helena, and Margaret—and maybe others—have been noting flowers on trees of Holly, *Ilex aquifolium*, otherwise laden with berries. Ann1 and I have recorded Wayfaring-tree, *Viburnum lantana*, flowering again in the Taunton area—Ann1 has seen flowering Spindle, *Euonymus europaeus*, too—while Hester's Greater Chickweed, *Stellaria neglecta*, was soon followed by Grass-leaved Vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*, on a grassy bank in Longrun Meadow, as well as Goat's-beard, *Tragopogon pratensis* and its startlingly beautiful hybrid with Salsify, *T. porrifolius*, *T. x mirabilis*, which hadn't been seen flowering since the end of May. There have also been records of Dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*, and Apple, *Malus domestica*, flowering a second time, while one or two of you have mentioned unseasonal sightings of Cowslip, *Primula veris*, and Primrose, *P. vulgaris*. Margaret claimed possibly the unlikeliest record of the last few weeks when she saw

several newly-flowering Yellow Iris, *Iris pseudacorus*, in a ditch near Chew Valley Lake on 15th September. Blooming ridiculous, if you'll excuse the pun.

This morning at Thurlbear I've had a wide variety of still-flowering plants like Wild Basil, *Clinopodium vulgare*, Hawkweed Oxtongue, *Picris hieracioides*, Wild Thyme, *Thymus drucei*, Musk Mallow, *Malva moschata*, Agrimony, *Agrimonia eupatoria*, and Traveller's-joy, *Clematis vitalba*. We are used to the flowering periods of such species continuing long into the autumn, but the records of spring/early-summer species are much more surprising. It's like we're viewing the world through a distorting mirror, the seasons being temporarily jumbled in an early-autumn heat haze. We claimed that spring had finally ended with the first blossom of Ivy, *Hedera helix*, but now there's this echo, a faint reprise of better days—like a *second* spring, of sorts. But it won't last, it never does, and as the temperatures tumble so these flowers will begin to falter, like little lights going out. The Ivy, though, will see us through.

11th November – 50,365

Weeks 29 to 34 – drop-outs, hangers-on,
second flings and upstarts

The start of another lockdown, and as good a moment as any to peep over the parapet again. Curiously, the weather on the eve of this second lockdown was exactly the same as it was back in March at the start of the *first*. A ground frost, followed by a day of unbroken sunshine, and an afternoon high of 13°C. It felt almost spring-like...

Given my year-long obsession with spring you won't be surprised to learn that I'm finding autumn a bit of a challenge. If I were to claim otherwise, I'd be lying. But this isn't for want of trying, I can tell you. Vicki and I have been dipping into and out of BBC's *Autumnwatch*, and like Chris Packham I've spent quality time with conkers, sniffed great fistfuls of leaf litter and humus, and welcomed the arrival of Fieldfares and Redwings. We've marvelled, too, at flocks of two-hundred or more Avocets on the Parrett Estuary. And uncountable numbers of Dunlin. We've seen Peregrines, departing Swallows, and Red Admirals, *Vanessa atalanta*, on late bramble blossom and rotting windfalls. I've been revelling, as best I can, in the autumn colours this year, even after our failed attempt to 'pre-book' a visit to Westonbirt. We went to Ashton Court instead, where the Beech trees, in particular, were stunning, and where we met some of Vicki's family for a socially-distanced picnic in the rain.

But despite such autumnal highlights, it's the things still flowering that have really helped to keep my spirits up. Spurred on by the "chairman's challenge"¹⁸, on 1st October—at the start of my 'Week 29'—I resolved, if I could, to keep a weekly list of species still flowering on my local patch. Steve

¹⁸ A challenge, set by the Somerset Rare Plants Group chairman Steve Parker, to see how many wild plants we could find in flower on our local patches in the months of October, November and December.

asked us to concentrate on a local 1-km square, which I determined to do, except I found it hard not to stray beyond the gridlines, and so I ended up making a note of anything still flowering on any of our usual dog-walking circuits in and around Taunton. But, even so, it's hard to ignore the extras seen while making a rare trip along the M5 (Great Mullein, *Verbascum thapsus*), or when traipsing across Steart Marshes (Parsley Water-dropwort, *Oenanthe lachenalii*), or on one-off visits to Ash Priors Common (Devil's-bit Scabious, *Succisa pratensis*) or Langford Heathfield (Sneezewort, *Achillea ptarmica*), or Lydeard Hill (Bell Heather, *Erica cinerea*, and Cross-leaved Heath, *Erica tetralix*).

Which means I've ended up trying to keep multiple lists, involving another spread-sheet, damn it. For the "chairman's challenge" I decided to confine my recording to Longrun Meadow, although even this falls foul of Steve's rules (or were they guidelines?) in that this not-very-big site inconveniently straddles not one, not two, not three, but *four* monads. Apart from that, all our usual dog-walking routes lie in or close to Taunton, and all except one sit within hectad ST22—the only exception being Orchard Wood which annoyingly strays into ST12 at its southern end.

I have to say that, challenge or not, the last six weeks have been something of a revelation, with my own list of flowerers amounting to two-hundred-and-fifty-seven species, and most of these—well, at least two-hundred—on our regular dog-walking routes. Of these, eighty were seen flowering in Longrun Meadow. Yet even the relatively short list for Longrun contains a few surprises. Hoary Cinquefoil, *Potentilla argentea*, is (as of 7th November) still flowering nicely, but the most astonishing 'still-flowerer' has to be Grass-leaved Vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*. There's a big patch of it on the bank of the western-most flood retention lagoon—the end nearest the Hospice—and it's still throwing out the odd flower more than five months after the first flowers appeared in late May. And let's not forget Alastair's first record of it flowering in Minehead, on 20th April. To put these extreme dates into perspective, Walter Watson gave the flowering period for Grass-leaved

Vetchling as 'June to July'. Clapham, Tutin & Warburg suggests 'May to July'. No mention of November (or April) anywhere.

A few, of course, like Ivy, *Hedera helix*, Gorse, *Ulex europaeus*, and Sowbread, *Cyclamen hederifolium*, are species that we'd expect to be flowering in the autumn. Yet most of October's flowerers are probably best regarded as 'hangers-on' from summer, with some of these finally throwing in the towel at some point in the six weeks since Steve's "challenge" began. I estimate that at least thirty species have been lost over that time, joining a long list of others that had already ceased flowering before the end of September. It is a curious fact that quite a few species coming into flower relatively late in the summer also seem to drop out remarkably early in the autumn. Carline Thistle, *Carlina vulgaris*, and Strawberry Clover, *Trifolium fragiferum*, are two examples of this. And notice how Small Teasel, *Dipsacus pilosus*, starts later and finishes earlier than Wild Teasel, *D. fullonum*, with the latter still flowering in one or two favoured spots as late as the fourth week of October. Amongst my own 'drop-outs', last records of flowering Bird's-foot-trefoil, *Lotus corniculatus*, Meadow Vetchling, *Lathyrus pratensis*, and Dodder, *Cuscuta epithymum*, were all in the first week of the month. The second week saw more species succumbing, including Field Bindweed, *Convolvulus arvensis*, Great Willowherb, *Epilobium hirsutum*, Purple Loosestrife, *Lythrum salicaria*, and Greater Plantain, *Plantago major*—although the last of these is hard to spot, its rather underwhelming flowers making it look 'past its best' even when it's at its peak! Lesser Burdock, *Arctium minus*, also petered out, for me at least, in the second week of October.

The third week of October (Week 31) had a host of last-flowerers. At Thurlbear, for instance, I witnessed what turned out to be the final flowering of Wild Parsnip, *Pastinaca sativa*, Stemless Thistle, *Cirsium acaule*, and Mouse-ear Hawkweed, *Pilosella officinarum*. In town, down by the river, we had the last Marsh Woundwort, *Stachys palustris*, Water Figwort, *Scrophularia auriculata*, Water Mint, *Mentha aquatica*, Amphibious Bistort, *Persicaria amphibia*, and Hemp-agrimony, *Eupatorium cannabinum*. None of these gave the impression that they'd be gone so soon, and yet the following

week, and the week after that, the inevitability of their absence gradually dawned.

Being certain of the week of the final ‘curtain call’ for each species gets more problematic the nearer you get to the present moment, since there’s always the possibility that something apparently gone in the last week may yet come back to surprise us *next* week. So I hesitate to claim, yet, the last Bush Vetch, *Vicia sepium*, or Fool’s Watercress, *Apium nodiflorum*. And only this week am I starting to feel confident that I’ve probably seen the last of Thurlbear’s Autumn Gentians, *Gentianella amarella*, and Eyebrights, *Euphrasia* agg. Although, having said that, I thought we’d lost Yellow-wort, *Blackstonia perfoliata*, last week, and then miraculously it popped into view again on Monday. Struck off one week, reinstated the next!

So, these are the drop-outs, but then there’s the (currently much bigger) group of what I’m calling ‘hangers-on’, the spring- and summer-flowering species that seem intent on continuing to flower through thick and thin, although in almost every case we have to acknowledge that at some date, yet to be specified, they too will (in some cases quite literally) fall by the wayside. My own list currently has upwards of one-hundred-and-thirty such species, and one wonders which will be next to make the switch from ‘hanger-on’ to ‘drop-out’. Within Taunton there are no fewer than five still-flowering Crane’s-bills, *Geranium* spp., although three of them—Dove’s-foot, *G. molle*, Small-flowered, *G. pusillum*, and Hedgerow, *G. pyrenaicum*—haven’t been seen this week so may have already gone. Meadow Crane’s-bill, *G. pratense*, continues to light up patches of long grassland by the River Tone between Obridge and Creech Castle, but there’s less each week, and I’m preparing myself for the shock of its vanishing—it’s been a constant companion since its first appearance on 12th May, almost exactly six months ago. Meanwhile, Herb Robert, *G. robertianum*, the hardiest of the lot, carries on undeterred, and might well continue to produce flowers even in the middle of winter if it stays reasonably mild.

Alongside Herb Robert there's a gang of species renowned for their all-year-round ability to keep going when those around them have long since stuttered to a halt. Daisy, *Bellis perennis*, Shepherd's-purse, *Capsella bursa-pastoris*, Petty Spurge, *Euphorbia peplus*, Annual Meadow-grass, *Poa annua*, Groundsel, *Senecio vulgaris*, and Dandelion, *Taraxacum* sp., are six such species. But in Taunton, and maybe more widely in Somerset, there are others flowering now that in the past you wouldn't have expected to persist through the darkest quarter of the year. White Dead-nettle, *Lamium album*, is a case in point. Watson had its average FFD as 11th March, yet in the last decade we've usually seen it already blooming on New Year's Day. A still more extreme example is Pellitory-of-the-wall, *Parietaria judaica*: Watson had it flowering between May and October, but this seems almost ludicrous now, as this has become another species that in most recent years has continued flowering right through the winter. Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium*, is another. As is Annual Mercury, *Mercurialis annua*. And Hogweed, *Heracleum sphondylium*. And maybe Cow Parsley, *Anthriscus sylvestris*? And it's worth keeping an eye on your local Ivy-leaved Toadflax, *Cymbalaria muralis*, too. The list of these 'all-rounders' seems to get longer with each passing year.

Another group of species flowering at the moment are those that I like to think of as having a 'second fling'—these are plants that, following a (usually lengthy) period *without* flowers in mid to late summer, have recently indulged in a second spike¹⁹ of flowering due to the exceptionally mild (and until last week, frost-free) autumn. Some of them you had already begun noting in September: Gill's Holly, *Ilex aquifolium*, and Ann1's Wayfaring-tree, *Viburnum lantana*, for example. But there have been many others in October. The one that's surprised me the most has been Heath Speedwell, *Veronica officinalis*, at Thurlbear and Orchard Wood. It's not just the odd plant either,

¹⁹ There are many words and phrases that have been purloined by the pandemic, and as such have lost their innocence and acquired more sinister meanings. I think 'second spike' is a good example of that—which is a pity. There are other words that didn't even *exist* a year ago. Where, for instance, did the horrid word 'uptick' come from? It just means 'increase', doesn't it? So why don't they just say 'increase'? In my view 'uptick' should be banned from the English language. (And then there's 'lockdown' which is probably here to stay, unfortunately.)

it's dozens of plants, maybe *hundreds*. Watson's flowering period for it is May to August, but I'm starting to think that this new flush of flowers could keep going until December, weather permitting.

Other species engaged in a 'second fling' have included Soft-brome, *Bromus hordeaceus*, Rye-brome, *B. secalinus*, Long-stalked Crane's-bill, *Geranium columbinum*, Ground-ivy, *Glechoma hederacea*, Cowslip, *Primula veris*, and Blackthorn, *Prunus spinosa*. On one wood-bank at Thurlbear I've even seen fresh-flowering Wood Melick, *Melica uniflora*, stamens and all, while the amount of Dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*, blossoming now is quite exceptional—although this is one that Watson did recognise as being peculiarly prone to a second bout of flowering in mild autumns.

And then there's the group of species that I'm calling 'upstarts'—the ones that seem to be getting ahead of themselves, behaving as though winter's nearly done and spring's starting gun is about to be fired. Maybe a few of the 'second flings', like the Blackthorn, have been acting in a similar way, but there are others: Early Dog-violet, *Viola reichenbachiana*, is already flowering in the back garden, while Primrose, *Primula vulgaris*, is beginning to bloom up at Thurlbear. At Orchard Wood this morning there was lots of flowering Ivy-leaved Speedwell, *Veronica hederifolia*, and Wall Speedwell, *Veronica arvensis*, where two weeks ago there was none. Watson's flowering period for Ivy-leaved Speedwell was February to June! And Cut-leaved Crane's-bill, *Geranium dissectum*, was flowering there too. Watson reckoned on its flowering period to be May to August, so to see a new generation of plants beginning to flower in November is odd, to put it mildly (pun intended).

I've reflected more than once this year on how much harder it is to record the *ending* of something than its *start*. The latter only requires you to make one record, the date on which you first see it. But *endings* mean having to note something over and over, and over again; and then it's only when you *stop* noting it that you realise, with the benefit of hindsight, that it's finally slipped from view. Much like trying to spot the last Swift. But the "chairman's challenge" invites us to try to keep track of these disappearances, and

although my own catalogue of losses will be quite unlike anyone else's, it'll be interesting to see what similarities there are between our various lists. As Steve says, we should find the lists getting shorter as the year progresses, with December's possibly the shortest of the lot. Unless, of course, the weather continues to stay mild, which might allow some of the 'hangers-on' to keep going until the earliest of next year's spring-flowerers like Hazel, *Corylus avellana*, Spurge-laurel, *Daphne laureola*, and Sweet Violet, *Viola odorata*, begin to flower. In the meantime, for those of us impatient to get next spring's main course underway, within a matter of days there could be Winter Heliotrope, *Petasites fragrans*, to whet the appetite.

Yes, I know it can be a bit of a thug, but it does at least do an admirable job (despite its name) of signalling *spring* when everything else seems to be screaming *winter*.

6th January – 77,346

Weeks 35 to 42 – lockdown #3 – still
flowerings – midwinter mistletoe – starlings
at dawn

Forty-two weeks since the start of the first lockdown in March, today marks the beginning of a third lockdown. A good moment, perhaps, to reflect on the last couple of months, and on the start of a new year which in many ways has seemed depressingly like the old one—the one we were so keen to see the back of. It's much harder at this time of year, I know, but there are still consolations to be had from what's happening (or not) in the natural world. We can fret all we like, but the world out there—the world of Blackbirds and Celandines—just gets on with it. This began as an attempt to keep track of spring, and forty-two weeks later this remains the case, the only difference being that it's no longer the same spring as the one we started out with.

Quite apart from the virus—and Brexit—the start of 2021 couldn't be more different to the new year of a year ago. In England, last winter was the third least frosty on record. The first frost of 2020 in Taunton wasn't until 18th January, which was also the first day of that month with a single-digit daytime maximum. Just six days into 2021 and we've already had as many nights of freezing temperatures as in the *whole* of last January. Daytime maxima have yet to exceed 5°C. Last year's New Year Plant Hunt, in Taunton, produced about eighty-five species in flower. This year's, encompassing much the same route, could muster only fifty-nine. Our 'hunt' took a very different form this year, of course, with Tier 4 restrictions over much of the county meaning that we couldn't meet up as a group. Instead we worked either in pairs or on our own, mostly concentrating on our home patches. The counts varied greatly: urban areas produced the biggest totals while the countryside generally offered only meagre pickings following storm 'Bella' on Boxing Day and two nights of sub-zero temperatures on the 30th and 31st. As if to emphasise how odd 2020 had been, New Year's Eve's early morning low of -3°C turned out to be the coldest of the year in Taunton—saving its worst for last, one might

say. Plants that I'd seen still flowering a couple of days before had, by New Year's morning, succumbed to the cold. Overnight, quite literally, they'd given up the ghost. Between Christmas Eve and 30th December my usual dog walks produced seventy-two species still flowering, but by 4th January this had dipped to well below sixty.

During the second lockdown, in November, we witnessed how, one after another, plants that had still been flowering deep into the autumn spluttered to a halt. This was unsurprising, but somehow during lockdown it seemed harder to bear. Cataloguing the decline didn't make it any easier. Each week from the start of October I kept a tally of plants still flowering on our regular dog-walking routes. In the second week of October (Week 30) one-hundred-and-ninety-three species were in flower; a month later (Week 34) there were one-hundred-and-fifty-eight; and by the end of November (Week 37) the total had plummeted to one-hundred-and-fifteen, frosty nights on the 26th and 27th having an immediate impact. From about the middle of December, until those frosts right at the end of the year, we'd been bumping along with a weekly count of between seventy and eighty. Many autumn 'regulars' fell away in the first two weeks of Advent: in the first week we lost Wood False-brome, *Brachypodium sylvaticum*, Large Bindweed, *Calystegia silvatica*, Wild Basil, *Clinopodium vulgare*, Cleavers, *Galium aparine*, Cat's-ear, *Hypochaeris radicata*, Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon hispidus*, and Bramble, *Rubus fruticosus*, to name but seven. The following week we had what turned out to be our last sightings of Meadow Crane's-bill, *Geranium pratense*, and Spear Thistle, *Cirsium vulgare*.

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It felt like these disappearances were (yet another) reason for gloom and despondency, when really they ought to be viewed in a much more optimistic light. After all, this is winter doing what winter does best—wiping the slate clean, clearing the decks. Yet, even as all these 'hangers on' trooped off, exiting stage left, so others—signalling the shape of things to come—were beginning to enter stage right...

On 12th November, for instance, Gill had first-flowering Winter Heliotrope, *Petasites fragrans*, at Truddoxhill, which was followed by Chris1's record of it from Langford Budville on the 15th and my own, at Staple Hill, on the 23rd. Actually, next year's spring had got underway even earlier than this, when Karen2 spotted Spurge-laurel, *Daphne laureola*, beginning to bloom in Wedmore on 6th November. Helena's garden Spurge-laurel began flowering on the 15th, while I had to wait until 5th December, in an ancient hedge-bank near Corfe that marks the boundary of Poundisford Park. David1 had it at Weston Big Wood on 28th December, and it now seems to be flowering quite widely across the county²⁰.

Primroses, *Primula vulgaris*, have been seen flowering locally since mid-November, while there have also been some extraordinarily early sightings of Lesser Celandines, *Ficaria verna*, starting with Caroline's at Luccombe on 14th November, followed by my own in Taunton on 5th December, and then a minor flurry of records in the last days of the year. Hazel, *Corylus avellana*, is another to have made an earlier-than-usual start with first records 'up north' on 29th November (Gill) and 'down south' on 14th December (me). Steve's first Hazel in North Pethererton was on the 28th. My own first-flowerers in the last few weeks in the Taunton area have also included Sweet Violet, *Viola odorata*, on 17th December, Wild Strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*, on the 24th and, oddly, Small Nettle, *Urtica urens*, on 2nd January. Jeanne had Bush Vetch, *Vicia sepium*, and Greater Stitchwort, *Stellaria holostea*, flowering on her New Year Hunt. The first of these was flowering well into December in the Taunton area, so it's hard to know whether one is looking at the tail-end of last year's flowering or the start of this year's—or maybe both? The Greater Stitchwort, though, is amazingly early. As also was Margaret's Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*, in Chew Magna on 3rd January.

Spring has been announcing itself, albeit tentatively, in other ways too. My first singing Mistle Thrush was on 18th November, and first Song Thrush ten

²⁰ Walter Watson's average first flowering date (FFD) for Spurge-laurel early in the last century was 8th February.

days later on the 28th. But the best of the lot was on 15th December when I heard my first Blackbird, singing quietly at dusk from an Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, beside the cycle-path at the back of Stoke Road allotments. It wasn't our local bird, the one that sang its way through the first lockdown, but it'll do for now²¹.

Meanwhile, many of us have been getting thoroughly distracted by Mistletoe, *Viscum album*. Thanks to Chris1 and Linda, the SRPG Mistletoe survey was up and running by the second week of December, with beautifully arranged web page and natty on-line form for entering records. The great thing about Mistletoe, of course, is that searching for it involves looking up rather than down. How nice to be able to straighten one's back and yet still do botany! Hard-pressed GPs could do worse than prescribe 'mistletoe forays' for anyone suffering from backache caused by too much stooping.

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I can't not mention the visit that Vicki and I (and Gilly) made to Ham Wall at dawn on Christmas Day. We wouldn't be seeing any of the family, in part due to Tier 4 restrictions, so we decided that if Christmas wasn't going to go to plan then at least we ought to do something unusual to mark the day. We've watched starling roosts at dusk many times, but never at dawn. We weren't sure what to expect.

We parked the car at 7 a.m. and set off down the path to the roost. It was dark. There wasn't the slightest breath of wind. It was chilly, too: on the way over the car thermometer had stayed stubbornly on zero. As we arrived at the roost, we could hear the faintest murmuring, like a distant mountain stream, like water trickling over stones. That word *murmuration* perfectly describes the sound the birds were making as they woke up; and then slowly, imperceptibly, they began to turn up the volume. The sky above was the colour of dark slate, but there was a widening slit of lemon-yellow to the south-east. No moon, which had set hours ago, but Venus still shone to the

²¹ And this morning (7th Jan) my first Great Tit, singing from an old oak tree in Corfe.

south, gradually drifting upwards and fading as the day began to break. The excitement was growing and the chattering in the reed-bed became louder, then louder still. By 7.40 a.m. it was a raging torrent of water. If you shut your eyes, you could imagine being on the *inside* of a waterfall. And then, above all the chatter there came a deep—almost thunderous—rumbling, like a storm brewing, like sudden rushes of wind through the reeds on this otherwise perfectly calm morning. Through binoculars we could see that these rumbles were being produced by large ‘squalls’ of starlings as they shifted their position within the roost. The birds were getting restless.

And then, at 7.56 a.m. precisely, the chattering stopped and the whole roost rose up, like a veil lifting. They took off south-eastwards as a single flock, a great wall of starlings slowly gaining height as it headed towards the sunrise. Afterwards, there were coots and wood pigeons calling, wigeons whistling, and lapwings flying high enough to catch the sun that wasn’t yet visible to those of us still tethered to the ground. And a Cetti’s warbler added his own commentary, loudly spitting out expletives from deep within a patch of track-side scrub. Ham Wall was burgeoning with life, of course, but it was the lack of starlings that left the strongest impression: it felt like the whole place had emptied into the sky. And by 8.20 a.m. the sun peered above the horizon, lighting up first the tops of the Alders, then the tallest reeds, and then our faces. By the time we left, everywhere was bathed in early morning brightness.

When we arrived, there were just two cars in the car park; on our departure there were eleven. Altogether we’d seen six people and two dogs—a miserably small number to witness such a spectacle. But, in this age of social distancing, it turns out that dawn at Ham Wall on Christmas Day is probably about as good as it gets.

28th February – 122,849

Weeks 43 to 49½ – the coiled spring

We seem to have come almost full circle. Yet this spring, until now, has been quite unlike the last one. Recent weeks have been especially hard. This time last year life was carrying on much as normal. Well, maybe we were being advised to bump elbows rather than shake hands, but COVID-19 still seemed to be a disease wreaking havoc in another universe, and something from which we'd probably escape lightly – although what was already unfolding in northern Italy felt like a bleak warning of things to come. Of more immediate concern, anyway, was Storm Dennis, which nearly led to a postponement of our indoor meeting on 15th February. But 'Dennis' proved to be less of a menace than we'd been anticipating, and our meeting went ahead as planned. Leaving Shapwick at the end of the afternoon we hadn't the slightest inkling, really, that we might have to cancel our next meeting in March; and we were still looking forward to our first field meetings in early April, starting with a trip to Orchard Wood on the edge of the Blackdown Hills near Taunton. But by the last week of March we were in lockdown – and, as a group, we haven't met since, other than at our virtual AGM on Zoom in January.

Fast forward a year. The virus and the weariness of a third lockdown is taking its toll. All of us, in one way or another, have been affected by what's happened in the last year. The novelty of lockdown has long since vanished. Being expected to 'stay at home' in the spring is one thing, but being faced with the same constraints, or worse, in the middle of winter is quite another. The weather has been pretty diabolical, too. Short days made shorter still by the lack of sun. Days of permanent twilight. Rain. Then more rain. Mud, murk and mid-winter blues. It would be fair to say that I haven't been the best of company. The periods of numbing, biting cold haven't helped. We had more frosts in January than in the first *three* months of last year; and then, in the second week of February, we caught the western fringe of a 'beast from the east', with sleet, hail and even snow on several days, day-time temperatures

hovering within two degrees of zero, and down to minus 5°C in the night – the coldest nights in these parts for three years. Each cold snap seemed to slow spring’s progress: the new season put on hold, winter tightening its grip again. Plant species that had looked set to flower right through the winter came to a shivering halt. In Taunton, by mid-January we’d lost Bush Vetch, *Vicia sepium*, while later in the month a series of sharp frosts seemed to put an end to Pellitory-of-the-Wall, *Parietaria judaica*, and Smooth Sow-thistle, *Sonchus oleraceus*. And then February’s ‘beast’ finally saw off the last flowers of Red Valerian, *Centranthus ruber*, Yellow Corydalis, *Pseudofumaria lutea*, Ivy-leaved Toadflax, *Cymbalaria muralis*, and Herb Robert, *Geranium robertianum*. Weekly counts of species in flower (Fig. 4) showed the long decline through the autumn and early winter – no wonder my mood was worsening – with any gains being outweighed by losses until the middle of February. Hardly surprising, then, that the crawl towards spring can feel so painfully slow; each tiny tentative step forwards – the first Lesser Celandine, *Ficaria verna*, the first wheeze-and-chitter of a Greenfinch – countered by another step backwards. To begin with, these signs of spring are like punctuation marks in a seemingly never-ending stream of wintry prose, each new flower a comma, each bumble bee or hoverfly a semi-colon, each sudden burst of Chaffinch song an exclamation mark.

But now, at last, the graph (Fig. 5, on next page) has begun to tilt in the right direction again! And the road verges and grassy banks are studded with Lesser Celandines – just as they were a year ago. Three days of glorious weather – bright sunshine after an early frost – and it’s like we’ve been picked up and transported back to the start of the extraordinary spring of 2020. To be honest, I wasn’t intending to write anything this time around, but the sudden improvement in the weather has changed my mind. My mood is lifting and, considering it was last year’s first Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum maculatum*, that started this hare running, it seems only right that we keep going just a few more weeks – long enough, at least, to get us back to where we started, as it were. After that, who knows?

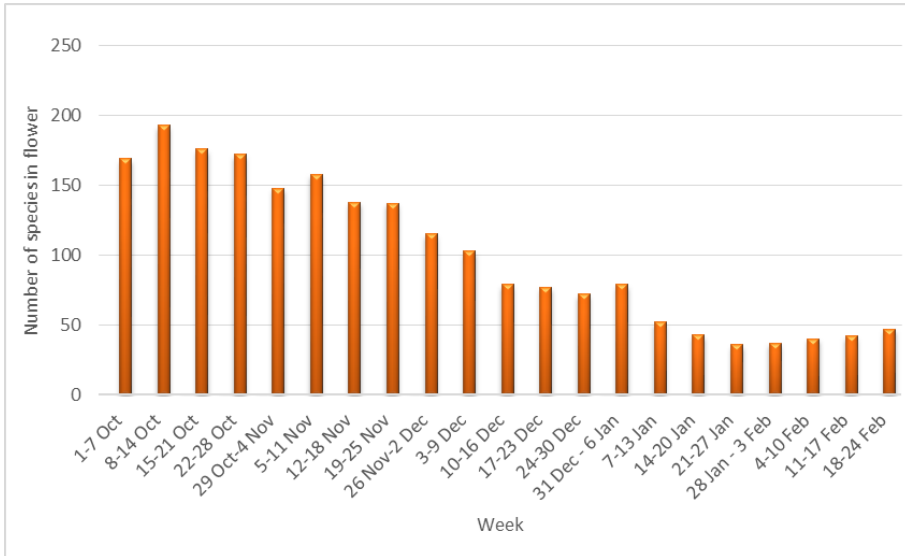


Fig. 5 Numbers of species in flower each week, recorded mostly along our usual dog-walking routes in the Taunton area - 1st October 2020 to 24th February 2021

So, as we await the first *Arum*, here's a slightly rough-and-ready account of the year so far, events arranged in (very approximately) chronological order. You'll have to put up with most of the observations being mine, I'm afraid, plus a few snippets from others picked up through the grapevine, mainly via emails and various WhatsApp messages.

Week 43: 7th–13th Jan.

- **Saturday, 9th.** Steve has had his first Greater Stitchwort, *Stellaria holostea*, in North Petherton: surely a rogue sighting, much as Jeanne's would have been at the start of the month on her New Year Hunt.
- **Sunday, 10th.** Another outrageous record today, this time Field Scabious, *Knautia arvensis*, in the road verge outside Wicke's, near the Obridge roundabout. It looks very sweet alongside the now-flowering Bulbous Buttercup, *Ranunculus bulbosus*, but hard not to imagine these overnight frosts won't soon get them both. Following on from Margaret's very early Shining Crane's-bill, *Geranium lucidum*, I saw my first today – at the base of the back wall of the Brewhouse Theatre²².
- **Tuesday, 12th.** Following Bill's report of Wild Strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*, yesterday, Margaret has now seen first-flowering Barren Strawberry, *Potentilla sterilis*, along with Dog's Mercury, *Mercurialis perennis*. *P. sterilis* has been seen already by one or two of us, notably by Helena on the 2nd. Lesser Celandine, also seen by at least three of us today, began to flower in Taunton in early December, and Margaret had it on her local patch on 3rd Jan. It seems to be popping up all over the place now. [Linda had her first Lesser Celandine on the 7th, Karen2 on the 13th, Steve and Ann1 on the 17th (Week 44), and Kate in Williton on the 22nd (Week 45).]
- **Wednesday, 13th.** Violets: Liz posts on WhatsApp that she's seen Early Dog-violet, *Viola reichenbachiana*, in flower. In Taunton, it's been flowering sporadically in the garden since early November, while Margaret had it on her list for New Year's Day, but now it's beginning to be seen more generally. Sweet Violet, *Viola odorata*, has also been

²² 28/2: And it's been flowering ever since!

flowering since about mid December and was another one that Margaret had flowering on the first day of the year.

Week 44: 14th–20th Jan.

- **Thursday, 14th.** Margaret has had her first Snowdrops, *Galanthus nivalis*, today, to be followed by Linda on the 15th and me on the 17th. [There was quite a flurry of *Galanthus* records on WhatsApp during January, encompassing a bewildering range of different species and forms. I've never been much of a 'galanthophile', to be honest; but we've got a profusion of ordinary *nivalis* in the 'front bed', purloined about twenty years ago from the garden at Roughmoor; and there's a very fine one in the back garden that originally came from Helena's collection. She's told me its name several times, and I've still forgotten it.]
- **Sunday, 17th.** There's a suspicion that Linda and Steve may have been walking in the same wood today since both of them independently found Greater Stitchwort and Dog's Mercury.
- **Monday, 18th.** The end of the first Test against Sri Lanka. I've spent far too much time watching Cattle Egrets wandering around the outfield in Galle, which has meant relatively little recording closer to home in recent days. This could become a bit of an issue in the next few weeks.
- **Wednesday, 20th.** Storm Christoph. The start of a much milder but very wet period...

Week 45: 21st–27th Jan.

- **Saturday, 23rd.** A Greenfinch singing in Longrun Meadow – in the same hedgerow, but six days earlier, than last year!
- **Monday, 25th.** More Cattle Egrets, plus – as I now realise – the Sri Lankan subspecies of the House Crow, *Corvus splendens*, subsp. *protegatus*. (Which just goes to show that natural history and laptop cricket-watching needn't be mutually exclusive.)
- **Tuesday, 26th.** Another grim milestone in the course of this pandemic, as the death toll rises to more than 100,000.
- **Wednesday, 27th.** Yesterday, at Thurlbear Wood, my own first Barren Strawberry. And then today, at last, a patch of Dog's Mercury, on a lane

verge at Poundisford, near Corfe; plus, for good measure, my first drumming Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Week 46: 28th Jan.–3rd Feb.

- **Monday, 1st February.** Between Christmas and New Year Vicki and I found a branch of Mistletoe, *Viscum album*, which had been ripped from a tree during Storm Bella, and on one shoot of it the flowers had just begun to open. Discounting that record as a bit of an anomaly, today was my first ‘proper’ flowering Mistletoe, growing at reachable height in Hawthorns in a hedgerow near Creech St Michael. [Later in the month, photos were being posted on WhatsApp as we tussled with the Mistletoe’s strange flowers, trying to work out which were male and which were female.]
- **Tuesday, 2nd.** An unlikely sense of *déjà vu* on finding first-flowering Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage, *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*, not only on the same date as last year but also in the same place – beside the path at Otterhead Lakes, in the Blackdown Hills. It seems that the cold period in January has done nothing to upset its impeccable timing...
- **Wednesday, 3rd.** Common Whitlow-grass, *Erophila verna*, has begun flowering in Taunton. I posted an excited WhatsApp message to proclaim its arrival, met, within minutes, by a return message from Steve to say he’d already seen it flowering in North Petherton at the weekend! Helena hasn’t found it yet in the north of the county, but as some consolation she’s seen Field Madder, *Sherardia arvensis*, flowering in Midsomer Norton. And spring must be on its way now, as I’ve heard my first singing Chaffinches today, out at Roughmoor and in the oaks along the southern edge of the community orchard at Frieze Hill. Last year’s first-singing Chaffinches were on 29th Jan, so they’re a little late this year. (Or is it me who’s a little late in registering them?)

Week 47: 4th–10th Feb.

- **Friday, 5th.** Surely the pick of this week’s first flowerings will be Toby’s Hutchinsia, *Hornungia petraea*, seen today in the Avon Gorge. It’s quite a

rarity, of course, but it's also a species for which neither Capt. Roe nor Walter Watson ever recorded a FFD. Clapham, Tutin & Warburg suggests a flowering period of March to May. First Test in India: there's an apparent absence of crows and egrets in Chennai, but I'm going to have to keep watching, just to make sure...

- **Saturday, 6th.** How much excitement can one take in a single day? Well, I've been pushed to the limit this afternoon. First, the 'flick test' confirmed that expanded Alder, *Alnus glutinosa*, catkins at Firepool Weir had begun to release pollen. And then, on the verge outside Wicke's I spotted a patch of a tiny grass with yellowish leaves and minuscule spikelets, and anthers too small to see. Voucher specimens – now pressed – confirmed it to be Early Meadow-grass, *Poa infirma*. Checking its distribution in the 'online Atlas of the British and Irish Flora', I discover that this species, which until the turn of the millennium was confined to coastal districts in the extreme south-west and south of England, is now being widely recorded inland across a great swathe of England – mainly on road verges, roundabouts and in car parks – south of a line from the Wash to the Bristol Channel. Graham recorded the hybrid between *P. infirma* and *P. annua* outside Sainsbury's in Taunton last year, but as far as I can tell this is the first record of *P. infirma*²³.
- **Sunday, 7th.** A cold day, just 4°C and a biting easterly wind. Storm Darcy heralds the arrival of what the *Daily Express* is quick to call the 'Beast from the East'. Not surprisingly, no-one seems to be recording *anything* while the Beast persists, which it does for almost a week...

Week 48: 11th–17th Feb.

- **Monday, 15th.** I was one of 275,956 people to receive their first jab today, for which I am extremely grateful. This is the first time I've seen the inside of the GP's surgery in more than a year. Not for want of trying, I can tell you!

²³ 28/2: Another patch of this grass was found a couple of weeks later in the park-and-ride car park at Silk Mills. I must be getting my eye in. As is Graham, who has since found it in a car park at Bossington, and (possibly) on the verge of the lane down to Dunster water treatment plant.

- **Wednesday, 17th.** On WhatsApp, Margaret reports the first dollops of frogspawn in her garden pond: “A sure sign of spring!” But this is also the start of four days of heavy rain, and localized flooding. The River Tone tops its banks in several places. Mud everywhere. It’s all a bit grim, to be honest, but makes a change from last week’s big freeze.

Week 49: 18th–24th Feb.

- **Sunday, 21st.** The next door neighbours have found a scattering of black feathers in their back garden. They think one of the local cats has killed a Blackbird. We fear this could be the rooftop songster that so cheered us through the first lockdown with his endless variations on a theme. The first ‘proper’ wild Daffodils, *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, at Poundisford are scant consolation, frankly.
- **Monday, 22nd.** A lovely sunny day after overnight rain. The start of a settled week, and suddenly the season is like a coiled spring, ready to be released by the next few days of relative warmth and sunshine. We’ve had Cherry Plum, *Prunus cerasifera*, in flower for several weeks now, but today I’ve spotted my first Blackthorn, *P. spinosa*. Plus bud-burst and first leaves unfurling on Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*, and Hazel, *Corylus avellana*.
- **Wednesday, 24th.** I woke early, just as a dawn chorus, of sorts, was getting underway. First a Robin, a distant Song Thrush, Herring Gulls and Jackdaws. And then, at the end of the street, an unmistakable catch-phrase being belted out by our local Blackbird – a mellifluous racket that three days ago we were convinced we’d never hear again. Maybe because of this, the ensuing batting collapse in Ahmedabad seems vaguely bearable. As the late Captain Sir Tom Moore said, with a catch-phrase of his own: “Tomorrow will be a good day!”

Week 49½: 25th–28th Feb.

- **Friday, 26th.** The morning begins with a Blackcap singing in the back garden, and later there are bumble bees on the Lungworts, *Pulmonaria* sp., and Primroses, *Primula vulgaris*. Then up at Thurlbear we see our first Peacocks, *Aglais io*, and a fleeting glimpse of a Brimstone, *Gonepteryx*

rhamni. And on the way home, first-flowering Danish Scurvy-grass, *Cochlearia danica*, on the verge of the A358 in Henlade. Gill, meanwhile, also sees her first Brimstone today, and a Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*. Spring's 'punctuation marks' are coming thick and fast now – it shouldn't be long before we get our first Comma, *Polygonia c-album...* (Smiley face emoji.)

- **Saturday, 27th**. First leaves on Field Maple, *Acer campestre*, at Obridge, followed by a Small Tortoiseshell, *Aglais urticae*, and then Colt's-foot, *Tussilago farfara*, by the canal. This is about the usual time for Colt's-foot to appear in the Taunton area, although it's several weeks later than last year.
- **Sunday, 28th**. The last day of meteorological winter, another gorgeous sun-drenched day following an early frost. The coiled spring continues to unwind, with Linda's first Colt's-foot "below Castle Neroche", and Margaret's wild Daffodils "bursting into bloom" at Shipham. For us, though, today's highlight has been much closer to home: a female Flower Bee, *Anthophora plumipes*, dashing about the back-garden Lungworts. Flower Bees are easily told from bumble bees by their hurried flight, relatively high-pitched buzz and the general sense of urgency they display. They always seem to be on a mission, and engage in aerial dog-fights at the slightest provocation. Females are black, males are buff-coloured. Steven Falk's Field Guide to Bees says the males emerge two to three weeks before the females – so today's female is a bit ahead of itself. Last year's first Flower Bees weren't until 21st March. Honey Bees, *Apis mellifera*, are much in evidence too, as are hoverflies.

The garden is starting to lose its wintry monochrome, Primroses are everywhere, Lesser Celandines are increasing by the day, and Spring Sowbread, *Cyclamen repandum*, is flowering really well along the back path. It's getting harder and harder to ignore the promise of what's to come. Vicki says there's no need for me to be quite so grumpy. She could be right.

21st March – 126,382

Weeks 49½ to 52½ – hurtling round the sun

We've made it! Tilting first towards the light, and then away, and now towards again, we've completed our circuit of the sun. The equinox was yesterday at 09:36 GMT, marking one of two moments each year when the duration of daylight and darkness is (more or less) the same. Not only that, but this equality of light and dark is shared across the whole globe, meaning that, for a day or two at least, we're all (more or less) in the same boat—despite the fact that half the planet's launching into spring while the other half's lurching into autumn. It's odd to think that for the last twelve months we've spun and hurtled our way around the sun, yet have still managed to end up almost exactly where we started. In a world with so much uncertainty—and so much change—this is a strangely consoling thought. Almost miraculous, really... Such a lot of what we're inclined to take for granted (like the seasons) relies upon gravity and the earth's tilt! And so here we go again, at the start of our next lap around the sun.

On the non-botanical front, there is now an abundance of Flower Bees, *Anthophora plumipes*, of both sexes, and Vicki and I have discovered that the buff-coloured males have a slightly more frantic, higher-pitched buzz than the black females. So it turns out you can determine the sex of a Flower Bee with your eyes shut. Our first singing Skylarks were on 5th March at Winter Well (near Staple Fitzpaine); since the start of the month we've been noticing Rooks repairing and rebuilding their nests, and we heard our first Chiffchaffs on the 16th—now, suddenly, like the Flower Bees, they're everywhere!

Perched on the equinox we're about to embark on a period of rapid *greening*. Which isn't to say bud-burst and first leafing haven't already begun in some species: Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, tends to be the first, with unexpanded leaves showing as early as January in some places, followed this year by Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*, and Hazel, *Corylus avellana*, from about the third week of February. This month, so far, I have seen leaves unfurling on Horse-

chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*, on the 16th (Ash Priors), Field Maple, *Acer campestre*, on the 17th (Obridge), Alder, *Alnus glutinosa*, on the 19th (Longrun Meadow and Firepool Weir), and Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*, on the 20th (Sherford Stream). A few of the earliest-flowering Blackthorns, *Prunus spinosa*, also have leaves starting to show amongst the old blossom. Some tree species flower before they come into leaf, others leaf before they flower, and in the latest issue of *Niche* (published by the British Ecological Society) there's an interesting piece reporting on research which shows that for several European trees the gap between dates of first *leafing* and first *flowering* is getting wider, with the date of the first of these events (whichever that is) advancing more than the second in response to climate change. It would be nice to compare changes in leafing and flowering dates of tree species locally... (Another project, perhaps?)

So, anyway, what of first flowerings? Like last time, this is bound to be a fairly haphazard and incomplete record, based on a few lists, my own sightings, plus various emails and messages posted on the SRPG WhatsApp Group. But to give it some sort of coherence we'll tackle them in (very roughly) alphabetical order, with 'target species', i.e. those listed on the spread-sheet circulated at the start of the year, shown in **bold**.

We've located four of our target 'A's, even though Lords-and-Ladies, ***Arum maculatum***, is yet to show itself—maybe next week? I'd been keeping a close watch on Moschatel, ***Adoxa moschatellina***, for a while, but 'town hall clocks' around Taunton were still tightly shut when Gill (Truddoxhill) announced on WhatsApp that it had started flowering on the 3rd in her neck of the woods (the same day as her first sightings of Colt's-foot, ***Tussilago farfara***, and Toothwort, *Lathraea squamaria*). The next *Adoxa*, and possibly the first in VC5, was Ro's (Lilstock) on the 6th during her 'first week hunt' for the Wild Flower Society. This was followed a week later by Linda's (near Fyne Court) on the 13th, Steve's (Kings Cliff woods) on the 14th, Georgina's (Velvet Bottom) and Chris1's (Langford Heathfield) both on the 15th, and finally mine and Vicki's (at Otterhead Lakes) on the 17th – a full fortnight after Gill's

northern trail-blazer. Evidently some ‘clocks’, town hall or otherwise, run more slowly than others...

Another of our target ‘A’s was Wood Anemone, *Anemone nemorosa*, which was seen by Georgina on the 8th, then Gill on the 9th, Linda on the 14th (near Wivvy), Margaret on the 15th (Redding Pits), Helena on the 17th (Cam Valley) and me, bringing up the rear again, on the 18th (Kingston St Mary). But, as if to get my own back, I managed to register first flowers of Ramsons, *Allium ursinum*, yesterday, bang on the equinox, by the Sherford Stream on the southern outskirts of Taunton—in the same place as I first recorded it last year. Is this especially early? Well, compared with its 2008-17 decadal average it’s about eight days early, and this is the fifth earliest FFD for Ramsons in the fourteen springs since the start of 2008. Mind you, it’s nine days *later* than last year, which goes to emphasise how exceptionally early last year really was. Garlic Mustard, *Alliaria petiolata*, has also started flowering, being seen by Andrew on the 14th (Sandford Batch) and by me on the 16th (Ash Priors). And lastly, this morning, between Obridge and Creech Castle, I had flowers just beginning to open on yet-to-expand panicles of Field Maple, *Acer campestre*.

‘C.’ Only one report, so far, of Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis*, and that was from Helena via WhatsApp on the 19th. And just a single record of Marsh Marigold, *Caltha palustris*, too, which was seen by Maureen and me flowering in Roughmoor Pond on the 6th. Also, surprisingly, there have been next to no records of Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage, *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*, apart from Linda’s on 28th February, and Helena’s on 9th March – easily overlooked I suspect, or maybe it tends to grow in out-of-the-way places that have been difficult for us to access during lockdown. Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*, was seen in North Petherton by Steve on the 18th, and by me this morning—in the same strip of woodland as the newly-flowering Field Maple. There’s one Hawthorn at Obridge that always blossoms in the middle of winter, but today’s was a ‘normal’ spring-flowering tree.

On our (essential) journeys, many of us have started to appreciate the hordes of roadside Danish Scurvy-grass, *Cochlearia danica*. An amazing sight, the masses of white or pale lilac flowers like narrow drifts of hail stones heaped up along the verges; something our botanical forebears would never have witnessed, since the earliest records of inland roadside Danish Scurvy-grass in Britain weren't until the 1980s.²⁴ David1, though, spotted *Common Scurvy-grass*, *C. officinalis*, flowering on the coast at Portishead on the 15th. Ivy-leaved Toadflax, *Cymbalaria muralis*, one of several species badly affected by Storm Darcy in the second week of February, has begun flowering again: I saw it in Taunton on the 14th, while Liz had it in Wedmore on the 19th. Herb Robert, ***Geranium robertianum***, Red Valerian, *Centranthus ruber*, and Oxford Ragwort, *Senecio squalidus*, are three other 'all-year-round' species now making a comeback in Taunton after having succumbed to February's icy blast.

'E' to 'H'. As if to emphasise that today is the opening day of astronomical spring, this afternoon's walk in Orchard Wood produced first-flowering Wood Spurge, ***Euphorbia amygdaloides***, and Bluebells, ***Hyacinthoides non-scripta***. On WhatsApp, it turns out that Helena, too, has had her first Bluebells today. There have been two sightings, so far, of flowering Ash, ***Fraxinus excelsior***. Amazingly, Ro recorded it on the 6th during her 'first week hunt', and then Steve had it in North Petherton on the 20th. I saw my first Ground-ivy, ***Glechoma hederacea***, at Obridge on the 3rd, as did Andrew at Sandford; and then the next day Helena had it on a wall in Paulton. We were all pretty pleased with ourselves, until we learnt that Linda had already seen it, on 28th February, at Castle Neroche. (Typical!)

²⁴ There's even a poem about Danish Scurvy-grass: see 'COCHLEARIA DANICA' in a little collection entitled *Stuart Point & other poems* (2009) by the Somerset poet Anthony Watts. Here is an extract: 'COCHLEARIA DANICA / ... is coming in like the tide, filling / the central reservations, sending out / slivers of silvery star-glisten -- / a froth of surf along the kerbs -- / as it sea-sidles amongst the sparse grass / of saline verges. / Shore-dweller, it makes itself at home / wherever roads have been salted -- / itself a salty deposit, a sweat-stain / fringing the green sleeves of motorways...'

Jumping to 'L', the most remarkable record so far this month came from another 'L', Linda, who spotted first-flowering Yellow Archangel, *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*, on the 2nd. An extraordinary date for a plant that usually starts to flower in early April, which made me wonder whether it could have been subsp. *argentatum*, the 'introduced' subspecies grown in gardens. But looking back at my own FFDs for subsp. *montanum* I see they span a full two months, the latest being 30th April but, significantly, the earliest being 28th February. So Linda's record, while admittedly very early, is certainly 'within range'.

While on 'L', White Dead-nettle, *Lamium album*, is—in Taunton at least—a year-round flowerer; indeed, I've recorded it already blooming in the first week of January in twelve of the last fourteen years. Only in the bitterly cold winter and spring of 2009-10 did it behave differently: the coldest December for fifty years was followed by the eighth-coldest January since 1914, and White Dead-nettle kept its head down, so to speak, with first flowers not being recorded until 22nd April. It seems, from the work of Richard Fitter and others, that all-year-round flowering of White Dead-nettle is a relatively recent phenomenon, and that its change in behaviour is probably a phenological response to climate warming. However, unsurprisingly, it's also something that tends to happen much more obviously (and frequently) in urban areas. As has been the case this year: while I've been noting it blooming nicely in Taunton right through the winter, hardly any has been seen in the surrounding countryside. It wasn't until 5th March that Margaret reported it from Winford: "my first of the year!"

We've had lots of flowering wood-rushes in the last two weeks, including my own Southern Woodrush, *Luzula forsteri*, at Thurlbear on the 12th, and Linda's Hairy Wood-rush, *L. pilosa*, on the 14th, followed by Margaret's on the 15th. Meanwhile, records for Field Wood-rush, *L. campestris*, have been trickling in too: Andrew saw it on the 6th at Ellenborough Park, Weston-super-Mare, while Margaret had it on her lawn in Winford on the 15th (six days earlier than last year). Linda's first, in Wellington, was on the 19th.

'P'. Cowslips, *Primula veris*, seem to have begun flowering at least as early as they did last year. My own first date at Thurlbear this year was the 12th, eight days sooner than in 2020. David2's first, in Alford, was on the 10th, while Helena and Linda both spotted theirs on the 16th – Linda at The Quants, Helena in her garden. Andrew got his first on the 17th, on Purn Hill. Our first Cherry Laurel, *Prunus laurocerasus*, was on the 8th, at West Monkton, while Blackthorn, *P. spinosa*, has now been seen by most of us – although there's always room for debate about whether some of the earliest Blackthorn is 'pure' *spinosa* or maybe some sort of hybrid.

'S' and 'T.' I was pleased to find my first Greater Stitchwort, *Stellaria holostea*, in Trull on the 2nd. Common Sallow/Grey Willow, *Salix cinerea*, started flowering in Longrun Meadow on the 6th, with Goat Willow, *S. caprea*, two days later. My 'S' of the month, though, was Rue-leaved Saxifrage, *Saxifraga tridactylites*, on the 18th in the long-stay car park at Taunton railway station. More records for Colt's-foot, *Tussilago farfara*, too, including Gill's on the 3rd, already mentioned, David1's "Colt's-foot galaxies in the evening sun" on the 7th, and Margaret's at Redding Pits on the 15th.

'V.' Early Dog-violet, *Viola reichenbachiana*, has been living up to its name, with most of us now having seen it, along with various colour forms/varieties of Sweet Violet, *V. odorata*. Only the one record of Common Dog-violet, *V. riviniana*, so far, from Linda's garden in Wellington on the 17th. And one record, too, for Hairy Violet, *V. hirta*, which had begun flowering on Thurlbear Quarrylands by the 12th.

A few other odds and sods could be listed, such as Helena's Butterbur, *Petasites hybridus*, Andrew's or Graham's Early Forget-me-not, *Myosotis ramosissima*, Ro's Spotted Medick, *Medicago arabica*, or my own Thyme-leaved Speedwell, *Veronica serpyllifolia*. But I've strayed way beyond my word limit, and I've run out of steam.

This isn't a good time to feel weary, though, just as the new season begins to gather pace. The clocks are about to roll forward an hour, and the old 'rule

of six' is set to return. There is so much to look forward to, and the challenge, as ever at this time of year, is keeping up with it all. A year ago we were entering the first lockdown; this time around we're about to be released, slowly, from our third. I wonder, will that make this year's spring-watching easier, or harder?

Ted Hughes had a way with words, and he certainly captured this pivotal moment in the year rather well:

“When the swallow snips the string that holds the world in / And the ring-dove claps and nearly loops the loop / You just can't count everything that follows in a tumble / Like a whole circus tumbling through a hoop”.²⁵

But I think for me the bird that 'snips the string' would have to be the Chiffchaff rather than the Swallow; not least because, as it busily flits through the still-leafless trees, it can't stop yelling about it: “Listen! Listen! It was ME! And this is how I did it... *snip-snip, snip-snip, snip-snip, snip-snip, snip-snip...* [*ad infinitum*]”

²⁵ 'April Birthday', by Ted Hughes, published in *Season Songs* (Faber & Faber, 1976).

31st March – 126,804

Week 54 – the dog & the *Arum*

I walked Gilly down by the river yesterday morning: through Victoria Park, across the dual carriageway and round the side of Wickes, picking up the riverside path at Obridge. How many times have I walked that route in the last year? Eighty? Ninety? Dozens of people—and their dogs—were strolling beside the river, enjoying the spring sunshine and the easing of lockdown; and a few fishermen, spaced out along the riverbank. Distant sounds of Somerset playing Worcestershire in a pre-season friendly.

There were good reasons to be cheerful: the lowest daily death toll for six months, and the warmest March day since 1968 (our thermometer, even in the shade, topped 23°C by mid-afternoon). In the previous three days we'd seen our first Commas, *Polygonia c-album*, lots of Brimstones, *Gonepteryx rhamni*, and possibly a female Orange Tip, *Anthocharis cardamines*. Bee-flies, *Bombylius major*, like miniature drones, are patrolling the Primroses, *Primula vulgaris*, in the garden. And we'd had our first Common Carder Bee, *Bombus pascuorum*, on Monday, woozily making its way from flower to flower along a warm grassy bank near Winter Well.

Yesterday brought with it another batch of 'firsts': Willow Warblers tentatively singing in an apple tree in Victoria Park, and Sand Martins returning, yet again, all the way from Africa, right on cue, regular as clockwork, to their drain-pipe nesting holes at Creech Castle. And then, blow me down, a Lords-and-Ladies, *Arum maculatum*. A bit the worse for wear, having already been attacked by marauding slugs, but it'll do: my first 'Cuckoo-pint' of the year²⁶. I took a picture and posted it on the WhatsApp Group: shared in an instant, as easy as you like.

²⁶ 'Cuckoo-pint' (rhyming with *flint*) is one of more than a hundred alternative English names for this species, most of them alluding to the phallic nature of the plant's *spadix*. 'Priest in the pulpit' is another one that's still commonly used. Others are more obscure, and long-

Then, just like last year, I sat with the *Arum* while the dog chewed a stick. And for a moment, but maybe it was longer than that, everything seemed right with the world.

winded: hard to imagine anyone now choosing to refer to it as 'Devil's Ladies and Gentlemen' or, heaven forbid, 'Kitty come down the lane jump up and kiss me'!