

Beginners' Botany with Michael Philip at Thornly Park

6th July 2023

Rainwear and brollies were the order of the day for this evening walk introducing botany in the grassland adjacent to South Avenue, Paisley. It was led by Michael Philip, Vice-county Co-recorder for Lanarkshire (vc77) and co-ordinator of the Renfrewshire Vice-county (vc76) Botany Network. Despite the drenching rain everybody thoroughly enjoyed the outing, thanks to Michael who so generously shared his expertise and explained different plant characteristics to look for in such an engaging way.



Michael Philip pointing out different orchids amid the soft rush and buttercups

When we arrived at the meeting spot Michael was busy examining Brambles along the edge of the road and we were amazed to learn that there is not 1, but over 300 Bramble species in the UK. Their identification is quite complex and involves studying the combination of characteristics of prickles, stems, leaves and flowers. The [Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland \(BSBI\)](#) had a workshop that weekend on identification of some of the more common local species. A bit too specialist for our needs we left the Brambles behind and headed through the trees to begin our walk. Within minutes, our introduction to the basics began as we encountered a large leafy plant, Pendulous Sedge (*Carex pendula*). Michael quoted the saying 'sedges have edges and rushes are round' to help us remember the difference between the two groups and, sure enough, when we examined it the sedge had a triangular stem. Once out of the tree cover we very quickly encountered the Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*) and checked that the stems were round. It is a common plant found in wet soils and we found other wetland species, including impressive examples of Greater Butterfly Orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*) and Common Spotted Orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsia*). There was also a profusion of buttercups and, whilst we were all familiar

with the flower, we learned that the two most common buttercup species are distinguished by the shape of their leaves. Meadow Buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*) having deeply cut leaves compared to the Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*) which is usually divided into 3 leaf lobes. As we walked across the grassland Michael fascinated us with many explanations of terminology and ID tricks of the trade used by botanists.



Greater Butterfly Orchid



Common Spotted Orchid



Soft Rush

But it wasn't all about botany. We were amazed that, despite the rain, there were a number of moths on the wing. Gordon Phillips managed to capture an interesting looking moth and later confirmed it to be a Yarrow Plume (*Gillmeria pallidactyla*). Its main food plant is Achillea species and whilst we didn't see any Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) there was plenty of its close relative, Sneezewort (*Achillea ptarmica*) around.



Yarrow Plume moth (Photo: Gordon Phillips)



Sneezewort

For a change of habitat, we went into Shaw Wood and looked at shade-loving plants growing in the drier soil under the ancient oak trees. We examined the arrangement of leaves on Greater Stitchwort (*Stellaria holostea*), the hairs on young shoots of Common Ivy (*Hedera helix*) and compared two horsetails, wood (*Equisetum sylvaticum*) and field (*Equisetum arvense*). Who

knew? You can strip back the sheath of a Field Horsetail, like stripping an electrical cable, to find, not wires, but a pale inner stem.

On the way back, we gathered samples of grasses for an ID session on the bonnet of one of our cars. Some of the grasses we had already discussed in the field, like the Tufted Hair-grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*), where you can easily stroke the leaves from the base to the point but not in the opposite direction, and the delicate flowers of Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*) which create a mass of 'pink fuzz'. Another common grass was the soft blades of the hairy Yorkshire Fog (*Holcus lanatus*) and its very similar looking cousin, Creeping Soft-grass (*Holcus mollis*), distinguished by its hairy knees! Another two similar grasses we learned about were the Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*) and Common Couch (*Elymus repens*) both having their spikelets arranged alternately along the stem but in the former they are edge on and in the latter, they are face on. So, if you're not sure turn it side-on and if it practically disappears, it is Rye-grass.



Identifying the samples of grass we had gathered (Photo: Gordon Phillips)

By the end of the walk, our heads were as saturated with botanical facts as our clothes were with rainwater. We all agreed it had been a most interesting evening and were keen to invite Michael to come back in the springtime to lead another botanical outing for us.

Kirsty Menzies