

2010 International Year of Biodiversity ... in The Worthys July 2010



A celebration of life on earth and of the value of biodiversity, this month ...

'Wildflowers in the Worthys'

"I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, quite over canopied with luscious woodbine, with sweet musk roses and with eglantine."*

Well, maybe not quite your vision of Kings Worthy but if you look around carefully, you could be surprised by what you discover here.

Let's 'walk' the Worthys starting at the northern end of the old *Didcot, Newbury and Southampton Railway line*. At Worthy Halt a special natural environment has developed, partly due to the shelter of the platform and partly to the very dry nature of the former rail bed. We have seen Biting Stonecrop, Mignonette, Vervain, Broad leaved helleborine, Basil thyme, Common Spotted Orchid and even Wild Liquorice here.

Wild liquorice with its zig-zag branched stems about one metre long is a member of the vetch family; this is its only known occurrence in Hampshire.



Wild liquorice © J R Crellin 2005

Moving further south, along the former railway line, WCV has cleared encroaching scrub to create glades some of which now have benches from which to admire the views. On the bridge above the farm track, a grassy area now grows Ox-eye daisies, St John's Wort, Birdsfoot trefoil and Lady's Bedstraw. The latter has tiny cruciform flowers, and in legend a connection with Our Lady, as the straw used in the Bethlehem stable.

At one of the benches recently, we found Twayblade (a type of orchid) and Figwort, and planted primroses which we hope will flower in years to come. However, nearby there

was evidence of a careless garden waste dump: invasive Japanese Knotweed and some Spanish bluebells. These paler, more upright flowers with broader leaves are a poor cousin to the purple hued, delicately perfumed native bluebell that carpets Micheldever and Crab Woods in spring.

In another glade, plenty of wild strawberry plants have colonised the clearing. It will be interesting to see whether they produce miniature fruits or whether in fact they are a similar but different species, the Barren Strawberry.

From the old railway line, re-entering Kings Worthy along the Hookpit Farm track, many of us have visited what's become known as "*Top Field*". On one survey of the field, while it was still in "set aside", we discovered over 50 plant species. The showy, Willowherbs were in evidence in July along with Wild Carrot: a similar type of plant to Cow Parsley but with a central red flower in the midst of the off white 'umbel'. I'll also mention wild marjoram and wild basil, two native herb species which grow in our limy soils.



Knapweed, Top Field 2008.

Across the field and onto *Kim Bishops walk*, the western end of the "Watercress Line", we can cross Springvale Road without encountering the traffic. The path is well sheltered by trees but in the more open patches we have found soapwort and broad leaved helleborines amongst the more familiar species. And yes, soapwort contains saponin which foams with water and was once used as a soap substitute.

On now, to *the centre of Springvale*, where wildflowers have been sown into the Green. A good display borders the area with species such as Scabious, Knapweed, Vetch, Oxeye daisy and Birds Foot Trefoil to name a few. There's also white clover – an important food plant for bees. In years gone this was a natural fertiliser and grew abundantly around farmland. Nitrogen is fixed by root nodules on pea family plants such as clover. The plant's demise has been linked to the decline in the honey bee too.

I haven't space to mention more, there are pockets of interesting wildflowers around our parish – e.g. the wild garlic down beside the Itchen in Abbots Worthy and I'm sure you know of others. If you do and would like to share your knowledge we would be pleased to read your contribution to our Nature Watch website www.worthysconservationvolunteers.org.uk/naturewatch.

Charlotte Smith

*From King Oberon's speech in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream: Act2 scene1