



In search of a rare violet

Thirteen years ago, the Sussex Botanical Recording Society organised a field meeting in Plumpton. It was one of many meetings in the two counties aimed at collecting plant records for *The Flora of Sussex* (2018). The leader (who didn't live here) said it might be boring but it had to be done. I couldn't attend that meeting for various reasons but I still wonder why the leader thought that Plumpton was boring botanically. It has a wide range of habitats with their own particular collection of plant species - from the chalk downland through the heavy clays and woodlands of the Low Weald to the more acid soils to the north on the border with the High Weald.

I have been recording plants in the area for many years and there have been many surprises and discoveries of rarities too. Rarities are always good to find - whether of plants, insects, birds or any members of other groups of living things. I guess it is a similar feeling to that experienced by others when they turn up a treasure in a junk shop or find a roman coin in a field. In the first lockdown, when wanderings were very restricted, it gave me the opportunity to look at my local patch more closely. I was pleased to find a species of Water-crowfoot that I had not seen before and when I identified it as Common Water-crowfoot, *Ranunculus aquatilis*, and looked it up in *The Flora of Sussex* I found that, despite its name, it was considered to be possibly extinct in East Sussex (although common in other parts of England). I got it confirmed by an expert and it caused a bit of excitement among the botanists.

Even better was finding a rare violet, Pale Dog-violet, *Viola lactea*, on Chailey Common when I was able to wander further in that first lockdown spring. That particular plant species was seen there in 1970 and then not again not until 2011 when two plants were found in a different place to where I found my group of 16 plants. Repeated searches in the intervening years had failed to find it which is very odd. It is a perennial plant so why is it so spasmodic in its appearance? I searched for it again in the same place in 2021 and did not find it.

The Sussex Botanical Recording Society is at present undertaking a review of *The Sussex Rare Plant Register* published in 2001 to discover how things have changed for our rarer plants. In March I gave a talk about rare plants on Chailey Commons at the Chailey Common Society's AGM and asked members for help in locating the Pale Dog-violet. It is very distinctive with its pale grey-blue flowers and leaves that are quite unlike the heart-shaped leaves of more common violets. I was not hopeful but in May two people who thought they had found it contacted me. I went to check and they were right. One find was not far from the spot where I had found them on Pound Common in 2020 but the other was far away on Red House Common. As a result of these finds and a more intensive search with two other members of the Chailey Common Society we now have six sites for this species. Some consisted only of seedlings, as was the case this year at my original site, but others had flowers. These are being monitored so that, when the capsules are ripe, some seed can be collected for the Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place and possibly for propagation and reintroduction. We still don't understand why it is so rare but the current management of grazing and clearing scrub may help because it seems to like disturbed ground in which to germinate and thrive.

Jacqui Hutson