

WESSEX BRYOLOGY GROUP

Fyfield Down, North Wiltshire VC7

15th March 2009

Glorious early spring sunshine greeted us at this meeting, a real bonus as Fyfield Down is very exposed.

Fyfield Down National Nature Reserve lies just west of Marlborough and comprises a series of shallow valleys in which 25,000 sarsen stones lie in their natural setting, unlike the stones of nearby Avebury. The sarsens are believed to be the remains of a sheet of soluble silica formed during the early Tertiary, 50 million years ago. The stones (weathered fragments of the silicrete) were carried to their present location through periglacial action and brought to the surface by erosion of surrounding soft chalk by stream water 20 million years ago. Over time, the sarsens have accumulated highly notable communities of bryophytes and lichens. The bryophyte community – though not especially diverse in itself – supports several species that are very rare in southern England.



Typical scenery

While one small group of knowledgeable enthusiasts led by Neil Sanderson examined the lichens, the rest of us got to grips with the bryophytes. In the bottom of the main valley, it was relatively sheltered and this is where many of the interesting species were. One of the commonest species on the stones was *Hypnum lacunosum*, often with small cushions of *Dicranoweisia cirrata*. *Grimmia trichophylla* was also frequent and we spent some time considering the field differences between this and *Dicranoweisia*.

Pockets of moderately acid soil were lodged in cracks and holes in the sarsens and these typically supported a characteristic bryoflora of *Polytrichum juniperinum* and *Ceratodon*

purpureus. *Dicranum scoparium* favoured small soil-filled holes in the rock itself, which Tom thought might be the remains of burrows of marine worms.

At lunch we were treated to a wonderful view of a stoat, hunting nearby between the sarsens, apparently unfazed by us though very alert to our presence.

Most of Fyfield's specialities were found quite quickly, including small hoary cushions of *Grimmia decipiens*. A species of *Racomitrium* was noted on a few of the stones, later kindly confirmed by Gordon Rothero and Tom Blockeel as *R. heterostichum* forma *obtusum*. In VC7 any population of a *Racomitrium* species is a notable record.



Grimmia decipiens

Small tufts of *Hedwigia stellata* and *H. ciliata* subspecies *ciliata* were also found on a few of the stones, as well as the liverwort *Frullania dilatata* – more typically seen as an epiphyte. We failed to find any of the very rare *Orthotrichum rupestre*, seen here in 2008, or *Pterogonium gracile* which grows on sarsens in two nearby sites (Piggledene and Lockeridge Dene) but decided that the remaining 24,950 stones would have to wait until another visit!.



Hedwigia stellata – probably!

A quick visit to an isolated oak and bluebell copse in the middle of the NNR provided an opportunity for some in the group to brush up on their epiphyte identification. We quickly found *Orthotrichum affine*, *O. lyellii*, *Ulota phyllantha*, *Cryphaea heteromalla* and *Radula complanata*. A short-eared owl flew across our path in broad daylight on the walk back, providing a fitting climax to a lovely day.

Sharon Pilkington