

FIELD MEETINGS

Eight field meetings were arranged by the Natural History Section in 1953, and members also attended excursions organised by the Ornithological Section to the Swannery at Abbotsbury and to Steep Holm. Three members attended the Whitsuntide Conference of the South Western Naturalists' Union at Ilfracombe.

The first field meeting was held at Asham Wood between Shepton Mallet and Frome on Saturday, 2nd May. Outside the wood, on an open slope facing south, the vegetation was close-cropped by rabbits. Among the plants in flower here were wall speedwell, thyme-leaved speedwell, lesser dandelion, parsley piert, early forget-me-not, salad burnet and milkwort. Crosswort was growing among taller grass nearby and rue-leaved saxifrage on a rock. A solitary bee, *Osmia bicolor*, a species confined to chalk and limestone, had appropriated an empty snail shell for its nest and was covering it with small twigs or bents. These were disturbed by a member of the party; whereupon the bee carefully rearranged the shell and covered it once more with a neat little mound of sticks.

Much of the oak and ash in Asham Wood has been felled, but hazel is abundant and toothwort was flowering plentifully. A reddish-purple form of wood anemone occurred in several patches. Hybrids between herb bennet and water avens were frequent near the stream. Common solomon's seal and lily of the valley were in bud and a single flower of herb paris was observed in bloom. Meadow saffron leaves and capsules were very common. The speckled yellow moth was noted, and butterflies seen were brimstone, wood-white, green hairstreak, grizzled skipper, comma, peacock, holly blue and small tortoiseshell. The smallest British beetle, *Ptinella denticollis*, barely a millimetre long, was only noticed because it happened to be crawling over the yellowish-white resupinate form of the fungus *Polystictus versicolor*. A red-tailed and a white-tailed form of a very uncommon fly, *Criorrhina ranunculi*, was seen on blackthorn. This fly resembles a bumble bee and it breeds in debris at the roots of trees. Quarrying is going on rapidly at both ends of the wood, and it is to be feared that before many years have passed Asham Wood, with its assemblage of plants and animals will disappear. A record of the species found is therefore of special interest.

On Thursday, 21st May, members visited Dunster Beach and Minehead Warren. On the sand and shingle, viper's bugloss, dyer's rocket, houndstongue, Danish scurvy grass, Portland spurge and rue-leaved saxifrage were flowering and horned poppy was in bud. A careful search on the dune sward behind the huts revealed a number of small plants including sea storksbill, *Trigonella ornithopodioides* and *Myosotis versicolor*. *Silene conica* was seen still further eastward than it had been noted previously. Three small maritime clovers—*Trifolium striatum*, *T. scabrum* and *T. suffocatum* were found and sea lime-grass was flowering near Minehead. The dearth of insect life was presumably due to lack of sunshine during the afternoon. The only butterflies seen were one orange tip and one common blue. The shore slater, *Ligea oceanica*, was plentiful on the beach. A female of *Callimya amoena* was running about on leaves, as is the habit of the species. This beautiful little fly is patterned with velvet black, silver and orange, and it breeds in fungi. The male is velvet black all over.

A large party met at Berrow on Saturday, 6th June, for a joint field meeting with members of the Entomological Section of the Bristol Naturalists' Society. Fortunately the sun was shining all the afternoon, so that insects were fairly abundant, though some groups were much less noticeable than they usually are at this time of year, presumably owing to the preceding spell of cold weather. The same cause had evidently delayed the flowering of dune plants. The tiger beetle *Cicindela maritima* is usually very abundant on the drier parts of the shore and the mobile dunes, but very few were seen. Among the beetles taken was *Eurynebria complanata*, a buff-coloured one with striking black markings, which is restricted to the south-west of England and of very local occurrence. The bee *Osmia aurulenta* was collecting pollen from hounds' tongue and birdsfoot trefoil wherever there were good patches of these plants. This bee nests in empty snail shells, as does *Osmia bicolor*, but, unlike that species, it does not cover up the shell in any way. For the past five years entomologists have been searching for a black fly, *Tachytrechus notatus*, the predatory larva of which lives in damp sand. On this excursion it was found in large numbers running about on wet muddy sand at the edge of the salt marsh. It is known to occur in similar habitats in Devon and Glamorgan, but has never before been recorded in Somerset. Among the butterflies seen was one small blue, a species usually

found in small colonies on chalk and limestone hills. A male red-backed shrike was seen at quite close quarters in one of the thickets of sea buckthorn, an ideal place for its "larder." Field Alkanet made an occasional patch of bright blue on the sand hills, a few bee orchids were seen, hare's foot clover was in bud, and ladies' fingers and blue fleabane occurred sparingly. The sea milkwort formed patches of pink on the landward side of the salt marsh where *Spartina townsendii* has reclaimed many acres of land from the sea in the past thirty years. During the past ten years new sand dunes have been formed on the seaward side of this marsh.

On Wednesday, 17th June, a small party met at Aller. The escarpment above the village is formed of red marls passing upward into Rhaetic shales. Two uncommon marginal plants found along the lower edge of Aller Wood were milk vetch and creeping gromwell. Bee orchid, pyramidal orchid, yellow vetchling and smooth tare were flowering in a meadow near by. Heavy rain fell as the party climbed the steep slope through the wood where bird's-nest orchids were flowering in the dense shade of hazel and maple. The shrub layer is particularly rich at the top of the hill, and the badly drained soil supports a number of sedges including carnation grass, pendulous sedge and remote sedge. On a rough patch of grass and scrub on the escarpment seven plants of the hairy mallow were found.

A large party of members, led by Mr. E. F. Payne, explored Walton Heath on Saturday, 4th July. This part of the moor has been so extensively cut for peat that the flora of the old raised bog is rapidly disappearing. Round-leaved sundew, bog asphodel, bog pimpernel, lesser butterfly orchid and sweet gale still grow in a few plots, but the western butterwort could not be found. All four species of duckweed were observed in the rhynes where also grow branched and unbranched bur-reeds, greater bladderwort, frogbit and water violet. Two species of *Donacia* were found. These are beautiful beetles with a brilliant metallic sheen of frosted copper above and silver beneath. Their larvae live under water and obtain their air supply by tapping the air spaces in the roots of aquatic plants. The long silken tubes of the spider *Agelena labyrintica* were much in evidence. A single raft spider was seen and a specimen of the largest of the wolf spiders was found under some old sacking. Among the butterflies noted on this sunny afternoon were meadow brown, small tortoiseshell, large and small skipper,

marbled white and dark green fritillary. It was very evident that the marbled whites only inhabit the drier parts of the heath, none being seen on the very wet areas. The five-spot burnet moth was on the wing, and other moths discovered among the herbage included common carpet, common wave, buff-tip, common heath and latticed heath. The blood-sucking *Haematopota pluvialis* and *Chrysops relictus* were common.

An excursion was made by coach to Exmoor on Saturday, 25th July. It was intended to visit, under the leadership of Mr. H. J. Wickenden, Pinkworthy Pond and the high, boggy ground around it, where, in 1952, the phenomenal rainfall of nine inches in 24 hours caused the Lynmouth disaster. But rain started as the coach began to climb up on Exmoor, the three mile walk was abandoned and the party explored the neighbourhood of Simonsbath. In many places the vegetation had already spread over and hidden the debris brought down by the flooded rivers and streams the previous August.

Exposures of Carboniferous Limestone at Burrington Combe were examined on Saturday, 3rd September. Among the plants still in flower in the lower parts of the combe were ploughman's spikenard, blue fleabane, harebell, wild basil and golden-rod. Common gromwell was in fruit. The sudden change from downland to heather moor used to give a clear indication of the passage from Carboniferous Limestone and Lower Shales to Old Red Sandstone. The spread of bracken has now made it difficult to find the junction precisely, though it is indicated by the occurrence of whortleberry and tormentil.

A fungus foray was held on Saturday, 26th September. The party met at Crowcombe Church and walked up the hill, finding many fungi under the beech trees by the side of the road. The beech avenue at the top of the hill was next explored. Here the commonest species were *Russula emetica*, with a pink cap, and the amethyst coloured variety of *Laccaria laccata*. Others found were the blusher, tawny grisette, sulphur tuft, chanterelle, honey agaric and beech tuft. *Russula heterophylla* was an unexpected find in this locality.

Four species of boletus were noted. *B. erythropus* changes colour from lurid yellow to greenish blue when cut with a knife. Slugs were eating this large spongy fungus, but where they had eaten there was no change in colour. This must have been because

the layer of mucus deposited by the slug prevented the air from reaching the cut surface.

Several stinkhorns were found. The earth ball was common under beech, but the common puff-ball and the hedgehog puffball were growing on rough pasture, where also the death cap and liberty cap were seen.

Some species of rove beetle are associated almost exclusively with fungi, and several of these were observed. Two 'deer keds' were observed at close quarters. These bloodsucking flies are curious flattened tick-like creatures, which are said to be found in Autumn flying in woods frequented by red deer; but at other times of the year are only to be found among deers' hair, with their wings bitten off.

Members were disappointed that Mr. A. J. Dodd was not able to lead the foray, but were grateful for his notes on the fungi he had previously found in the area and for his subsequent identification of most of the species found during the day.

A. D. HALLAM,

Secretary.