

Uncommon Plant Species Found Within the Wyre Forest

John Bingham

This is the third article in a short series on the uncommon plant species in the Wyre Forest. In the previous Reviews I wrote about wood cranesbill (*Geranium sylvaticum*), moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*), chaffweed (*Anagallis minima*), heath cudweed (*Gnaphalium sylvaticum*) and marsh violet (*Viola palustris*) in 2003, and in 2004 added columbine (*Aquilegia vulgaris*) soft-leaved Sedge (*Carex montana*) mountain melick grass (*Melica nutans*) bog pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*) and cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*).

Since the first article, Paul Reade (2005) found common wintergreen (*Pyrola minor*) growing along the old disused railway line. I had listed all wintergreens as 'lost' from the forest so this is a particularly good discovery and gives hope to the re-discovery of other species not recorded for many years.

PLANT SPECIES

Sawwort

Why choose sawwort (*Serratula tinctoria*) as uncommon? It's not exactly rare in Worcestershire, (Day 2001 lists it as uncommon), but in Shropshire it's a different story. This native plant is listed as rare (Lockton & Whild 2005) and found in only three locations; Hobarris Wood SO3077, The Hollies SO4891 and Wyre Forest, which is the stronghold for the plant in Shropshire. Nationally sawwort has a south-westerly distribution as far as Cumbria, and Wyre Forest lies at the edge of a gap in the distribution that occurs in the Marches heading north.

There is a long history of records from Wyre Forest from Edwin Lees in 1841 to the modern day. George Jorden in 1855 considered it as 'plentiful' and recorded the white flowered form *var. alba*.

In Worcestershire sawwort can occur in species-rich grasslands where it can be abundant as well as in a number of woodlands. In Wyre it tends to revert to its woodland habitat showing a preference for south facing steep slopes often in a species-rich mix of woodland plants but with some open ground. Often a little dampness is useful such as around the spring-line seepages that occur. It is not a species that likes strong competition in its woodland habitat. It does occur along forest

rides such as the water pipeline and in roadside verges, but such sites are far less common.

Is it under threat in Wyre? Well, it appears to be less common now than it was in the 1980's and nothing like as common as Jorden suggests. But just how many sites does it occur at and how strong are the populations? The only way to tell is to record it more carefully and monitor the populations.



Sawwort

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The plant is not difficult to recognise and even non-botanists should have no trouble in identification. High summer is the best time to look to see it in full flower. The flowers are purple, like small thin thistles and the leaves are not prickly but are divided and have serrated edges (hence the name) like teeth on a saw blade.

Oak Fern

This is the first fern I have included in the list of plant species and oak fern (*Gymnocarpium dryopteris*) is a real rarity in Wyre Forest. This has not always been the case. The first record came from Jorden in 1864 and is qualified by 'a plentiful supply'. The Victorian craze for fern collecting must have devastated this species as with so

many of our uncommon ferns. By the 1900's the plant was 'lost' from Wyre Forest but in 1962 M. C. Clark and S. Green re-discovered a small colony on the Worcestershire side of the forest. It's been there ever since and now and again some keen botanist checks on it to see if its still surviving. Thankfully it still is.

This remains the only site for Worcestershire, so the plant is recorded by Day (2001) as rare. In Shropshire the situation is a little better as oak fern does manage to survive in a few rocky areas in woods and on some of the upland bits of the county.



Oak Fern

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The chance of stumbling over the oak fern in Wyre Forest would, to say the least, be very lucky. The site must remain something of a secret, as fern collecting, regrettably, is still an occupation for some. There is always the possibility of there being other sites and if we are to prevent the extinction of the fern in Wyre then we need to protect all colonies from accidental damage or mismanagement.

There is no surprise to suggest looking along damp shady valleys, amongst rocky ledges and steep embankments for the oak fern. The plant dies back in winter so early summer is the best time to look. You may not succeed in finding it but there are other ferns that will prove of interest and some interesting hybrids are to be found lurking in the forest.

Bloody Cranesbill

This may cause some upset to some people who consider that bloody cranesbill (*Geranium sanguineum*) is nothing more than a garden escape. Often this is the case and perhaps some of our Wyre Forest population comes from garden origins. Records go back to 1841 and all seem to refer to the Shropshire side of Dowles Brook where the plant was plentiful according to Jorden in 1856.

The plant as a native is extinct in Worcestershire (Day 2001) but very scarce as an introduction. In Shropshire (Lockton & Whild 2005) it is recorded as native occurring at Wyre Forest and possibly also native at Earl's Hill.

The question is whether the Wyre Forest population is native or not? I remember speaking to Norman Hickin who reported that there were at least three native sites for the plant in Wyre Forest but one had been lost after he had told a group of people at a talk he gave where the plant was to be found. Norman showed me the main site just off the trackway along Dowles Brook. This is the location he wrote about in his book *The Natural History of an English Forest* (Hickin 1971). He thought the plant native as he had researched the historical records and was happy there were enough sites in the forest to dismiss the garden plant origin.

Not everyone agreed. Malcolm Clark who was recorded for the 10km square for the Shropshire Flora Project was more dismissive and favoured the garden origin theory, yet Charles Sinker editor of the *Shropshire Flora* (Sinker et al 1985) accepted the historical data as being a native species.



Bloody Cranesbill

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I was sitting on the fence over this debate, but in 1990 I discovered a small non-flowering colony of bloody cranesbill on a steep slope in oak woodland above the Dowles Brook. It was far from any possible garden location and in a

quite hostile habitat for a lime loving plant with shale soils, disturbed ground, dense canopy woodland and in association with soft-leaved sedge and mountain melick grass, both of which are good native species. After this discovery I was convinced it must be native and searched but failed to locate any further sites.

The flowering plant with the bright purple-scarlet flowers is well known to gardeners but to find this plant at new sites, look for the dissected leaves. You may well discover plants around the forest edge but these will no doubt prove to be garden escapes!

Bird's-nest Orchid



Bird's-nest Orchid

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This is not the most important orchid species in the forest. That honour goes to the much-studied narrow-leaved helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*), but bird's-nest orchid (*Neottia nidus-*

avis) is actually even scarcer in the Wyre Forest. It is given as rare in Worcestershire by John Day (Day 2001) and is just common enough to be excluded from the Shropshire rare plant list. Bird's-nest orchid is an odd plant as it lacks chlorophyll and is entirely saprophytic. It was first recorded from Wyre Forest by Gissing in 1855 who was probably reporting Jordan's record. The plant has always been rare and records are scattered: the side of Park Brook Rea 1910, near Cook's Green 1916 and Eymore Woods 1926.

My first sighting of the plant was in 1987 with Mike Taylor whilst we were erecting dormouse nest boxes on the embankment of the disused railway line near Town Mill where we found three plants under hazel. In 1990 a good clump appeared near the Roxel entrance but disappeared after a few years only to re-appear in a new place some 5 metres away. Up to five spikes appeared most years until the forestry managed to allow contractors extraction access over the plants. They have not been seen since and this species is lost from Wyre Forest for the time being.

Although rare, because these plants can be hard to spot, it would not be a surprise to learn of new colonies. They could appear almost anywhere in the woodlands and may prefer a disturbed or secondary area of woodland. No doubt a bit of lime rich soil would help.

Late May or early June is the time to look, but the old flowering spikes can persist for some time afterwards. All parts of the plant are a honey-brown colour, the flowering spike typically in Wyre bearing some 30-60 small flowers. My guess would be to look in some dense woodland with deep leaf litter (some of the beech looks ideal) but I may be wrong as historical records favour other habitats. Slugs seem to be a real problem as they often get to the plants before they have chance to flower, so maybe a dry spring is the best time to go looking.

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