

Combe Fen Survey

1 June 2025

Wychwood Flora Group members present:

Sam Amy, Rob and Helen Atkinson, Jan Blake, Sheena Derry, Genny Early, Joe Grainger-Hull, Rachel Lewis, Christine Marsh, David Morris, Susan Paice



Following the *Salvia* survey at Grintley Hill Bridge on Sunday 1st June, we moved on to survey the neighbouring Combe Fen. The site is a unique wetland on the Blenheim estate formed by two springs around which peat has developed, creating mounds raised above the surrounding floodplain. Historically, the site supported a rich fen flora typical of other alkaline fen sites in the county, including species scarce in Oxfordshire such as Common Cottongrass *Eriophorum angustifolium*, Marsh Helleborine *Epipactis palustris*, Marsh Pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris*, and Bog Pimpernel *Lysimachia tenella*. Many of the fen species recorded previously have been lost as scrub and alder have encroached on the wetland.

The Blenheim estate plan to restore fen habitat at the site and commissioned the Freshwater Habitats Trust to carry out a detailed baseline survey and produce a restoration plan, which was undertaken by David Morris in 2024.

We recorded 29 of the 37 fen species recorded in 2024, plus an additional four fen species not recorded last year, but recorded historically: Water Forget-me-not *Myosotis scorpioides*, Skullcap *Scutellaria galericulata*, Common Comfrey *Symphytum officinale*, and a few fresh flowering spikes of Southern Marsh-orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*. Of the fen species recorded, Marsh Pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris* is Near Threatened in England and Scarce in Oxon, and Ragged-robin *Silene flos-cuculi* and Marsh Valerian *Valeriana dioica* are Near Threatened in England. The full list of fen species recorded can be found in the table below.

While not strictly a wetland plant, we made a new record for the site of Hard-fern *Struthiopteris spicant*. A common sight in the damp, acid woodlands of the west, hard-fern has a restricted distribution in Oxfordshire owing largely to a lack of its preferred base-poor soils. There are a handful of sites scattered in the Chilterns, but only one other occupied tetrad in the Oxon Cotswolds, making this record the second. The plant was growing out of a splendid tussock of greater tussock-sedge *Carex paniculata*, isolated from the base-rich waters of the site's springs. David Morris also spotted the magnificently named sedge hybrid *Carex x boenninghausiana* growing along the southern edge of the wooded area, whose parents are greater tussock sedge and remote sedge *Carex remota*. The former is a species of a variety of wetlands, including swamps and fens, and the latter a species of damp woodlands. This represents the first record of the species in the vice-county of Oxfordshire since 1932, and is only the second known population within the modern county.

Table 1: Fen species recorded in 2024-25 of all recorded historically at Combe Fen

Scientific name	Common name	Present 2025	Present 2024
Bryophytes			
Bryum pseudotriquetrum	Marsh Bryum	-	Y
Calliergonella cuspidata	Pointed Sparmoss	Y	Y
Campylium protensum	Dull Starry Feathermoss	-	Y
Fissidens adianthoides	Maidenhair Pocketmoss	Y	Y
Palustriella commutata	Curled Hookmoss	Y	Y
Pellia endiviifolia	Endive Pellia	Y	Y
Plagiomnium elatum	Tall thyme-moss	Y	-
Ferns			
Equisetum fluviatile	Water Horsetail	-	Y
Equisetum palustre	Marsh Horsetail	Y	Y
Flowering Plants			
Angelica sylvestris	Wild Angelica	Y	Y
Caltha palustris	Marsh-marigold	-	Y
Carex acuta	Slender Tufted-sedge	-	-
Carex acutiformis	Lesser Pond-sedge	Y	Y
Carex disticha	Brown Sedge	Y	Y
Carex echinata	Star Sedge	-	-
Carex nigra	Common Sedge	-	Y
Carex panicea	Carnation Sedge	Y	Y
Carex paniculata	Greater Tussock-sedge	Y	Y
Carex paniculata x remota = C. x boenninghausiana	-	Y	-
Carex riparia	Greater Pond-sedge	Y	Y
Cirsium palustre	Marsh Thistle	Y	Y
Dactylorhiza fuchsia	Common Spotted-orchid	-	-
Dactylorhiza incarnata	Early Marsh-orchid	-	-
Dactylorhiza praetermissa	Southern Marsh-orchid	Y	-
Eleocharis palustris	Common Spike-rush	Y	Y
Epilobium hirsutum	Great Willowherb	Y	Y
Epilobium parviflorum	Hoary Willowherb	-	Y
Epipactis palustris	Marsh Helleborine	-	-
Eriophorum angustifolium	Common Cottongrass	-	-
Eupatorium cannabinum	Hemp-agrimony	-	-
Filipendula ulmaria	Meadowsweet	Y	Y

<i>Galium palustre</i>	Marsh-bedstraw	-	-
<i>Galium uliginosum</i>	Fen Bedstraw	Y	Y
<i>Glyceria maxima</i>	Reed Sweet-grass	-	-
<i>Glyceria notata</i>	Plicate Sweet-grass	Y	Y
<i>Hydrocotyle vulgaris</i>	Marsh Pennywort	Y	Y
<i>Hypericum tetrapterum</i>	Square-stalked St John'swort	Y	Y
<i>Juncus acutiflorus</i>	Sharp-flowered Rush	Y	Y
<i>Juncus articulatus</i>	Jointed Rush	-	Y
<i>Juncus effusus</i>	Soft-rush	-	Y
<i>Lotus pedunculatus</i>	Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil	Y	Y
<i>Lycopus europaeus</i>	Gypsywort	Y	Y
<i>Lysimachia tenella</i>	Bog Pimpernel	-	-
<i>Lysimachia vulgaris</i>	Yellow Loosestrife	-	-
<i>Lythrum salicaria</i>	Purple-loosestrife	Y	Y
<i>Mentha aquatica</i>	Water Mint	Y	Y
<i>Myosotis laxa</i>	Tufted Forget-me-not	-	-
<i>Myosotis scorpioides</i>	Water Forget-me-not	Y	-
<i>Oenanthe fistulosa</i>	Tubular Water-dropwort	-	-
<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i>	Reed Canary-grass	Y	Y
<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	Common Butterwort	-	-
<i>Sagina nodosa</i>	Knotted Pearlwort	-	-
<i>Scrophularia auriculata</i>	Water Figwort	Y	Y
<i>Scutellaria galericulata</i>	Skullcap	Y	-
<i>Silene flos-cuculi</i>	Ragged-Robin	Y	Y
<i>Sparganium erectum</i>	Branched Bur-reed	Y	Y
<i>Symphytum officinale</i>	Common Comfrey	Y	-
<i>Triglochin palustris</i>	Marsh Arrowgrass	-	-
<i>Valeriana dioica</i>	Marsh Valerian	Y	Y

Local history



Above is a photo (1967) of the field with Combe fen in (to left of photo, off the image). Michael Green's family used to farm it until 1970, there were no trees, and the whole field was grazed by cattle following the hay cut. Then it was taken over by another tenant, there was no substantial grazing, resulting in trees colonising the fen, and the new tenant dug a ditch around it.

Photos from 1 June 2025



Report by Joe Grainger-Hull
Wychwood Flora Group