

## Purple Milk-vetch (*Astragalus danicus*) at Westwell Gorse, 2025

Westwell Gorse (Oxfordshire) is a Site of Special Scientific interest (SSSI)<sup>1</sup>, notified in 1994 for its herb-rich limestone grassland and population of the Nationally Rare Downy-fruited Sedge (*Carex filiformis*). It supports the only known site in Oxfordshire for Purple Milk-vetch (*Astragalus danicus*). In February 2025 the site was assessed by Natural England as being in Unfavourable-Declining condition, but we are hopeful that with recent and ongoing management planned, there is a far more optimistic outlook.

### June 2025 survey

On Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> June 2025, five of the Wychwood Flora Group went to monitor the Purple Milk-vetch at Westwell Gorse. Those present were Brenda Betteridge, Genny Early, Christine Marsh, Joe Grainger-Hull and Sam Amy.

Having not being able to find any plants in 2024, we were hopeful that the Purple Milk-vetch may have returned following an excellent job of cutting and collecting the grass sward organised by the owner, Mr Robert Mills, in autumn 2024, and some closer strimming and raking away of thatch (deposited at the edge of the grassland) in the small areas the plant had last been seen by a few volunteers in February 2025. The area where the Purple Milk-vetch and Downy-fruited Sedge has occurred, where the sward has tended to be shorter and with more diversity, is close to the southern wall of the Westwell Gorse site (Figure 4).



Figure 1. Purple Milk-vetch plants found in June 2025

We were not disappointed! Following the recording method started by Ken and Brenda Betteridge, using a line measure out from a peg towards the NE corner of the site running 6m from the wall to then record any plants within a 1m<sup>2</sup> grid, we were able to carefully check the locations most often found in the past. Although we didn't find a mass of purple flowers as there may once have been, Joe did manage to spot the distinctive, but very tiny and well-disguised

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<sup>1</sup> Westwell Gorse SSSI detail:

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/SiteDetail.aspx?SiteCode=S1006633&SiteName=westwell%20gorse&countyCode=&responsiblePerson=&SeaArea=&IFCAArea=>

leaves of a Purple-milk vetch plant, and we found two more within 0.5m (SP 21987 211324, Figure 1). Unfortunately, despite a thorough scouring of the whole area in which they have been recorded in the last 40 years we did not discover any others.

We didn't systematically record the Downy-fruited Sedge (*Carex filiformis*), as has been done in the past (though not for some time), but we noted that it does appear to be doing well and remains spread across much of the area in which it was formerly known. It appeared slightly shorter and a little less conspicuous than I recalled, perhaps due to the very dry spring.



Figure 2: Twayblade, Greater Knapweed, Dropwort and Downy-fruited Sedge

Anecdotally, we thought that this year following the autumn cutting, the area to the north of this, towards the centre of the site, seemed particularly floriferous and with a good showing of flowering plants such as Dropwort (*Filipendula vulgaris*), Greater Knapweed (*Scabiosa columbaria*) and Field Scabious (*Knautia arvensis*; Figures 2 and 3).

Table 1 lists species found across the grassland (woodland was not searched).



Figure 3: Central area with an encouraging abundance and diversity of wildflowers



## Management

Recent management has included cutting and collecting the sward in autumn 2024, and then some additional strimming and raking by hand in early February, and Mr Mills hopes to bring sheep onto the site later in 2025.

Keeping the sward cut or, ideally, grazed from late summer-early autumn (ideally from late August) is recommended.

The reason for this timing is:

Wildflower seed set: Waiting until mid-late August will enable wildflower seeds to set and drop.

Preventing dominance of coarse grasses: The aim is for a sward height of 5cm, but with longer tussocky areas remaining on site (i.e. around the edges), to ultimately reduce the dominance of the coarse grasses which would otherwise shade out wildflowers. It's likely that sheep would preferentially graze the area with the Purple Milk-vetch anyhow as the sward is finer already.

Creating open ground: Grazing in autumn/early winter can help create bare patches in which wildflower seeds can germinate next spring, though this is more effective with cattle.

Early spring grazing is sometimes also recommended where coarse grasses have become dominant, but as the Purple Milk-vetch is an early flowering species, this is probably not advisable.

**Figure 4: Location of Purple Milk-vetch plants found during June 2025 survey**



**Table 1: Species recorded at Westwell Gorse (excluding wooded area) on 12/07/25**

Scientific name	Common name
<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>	Sycamore
<i>Agrimonia eupatoria</i>	Agrimony
<i>Agrostis stolonifera</i>	Creeping Bent
<i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>	Pyramidal Orchid
<i>Arrhenatherum elatius</i>	False Oat-grass
<i>Astragalus danicus</i>	Purple Milk-vetch
<i>Betonica officinalis</i>	Betony
<i>Brachypodium pinnatum</i>	Tor grass
<i>Briza media</i>	Quaking Grass
<i>Bromopsis erecta</i>	Upright Brome
<i>Campanula rotundifolia</i>	Harebell
<i>Carex filiformis</i>	Downy-fruited Sedge
<i>Carex flacca</i>	Glaucous Sedge
<i>Centaurea nigra</i>	Black Knapweed
<i>Centaurea scabiosa</i>	Greater Knapweed
<i>Cerastium fontanum</i>	Common Mouse-ear
<i>Cirsium acaule</i>	Dwarf Thistle
<i>Cirsium arvensis</i>	Creeping Thistle
<i>Cirsium eriophorum</i>	Wooly Thistle
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Spear Thistle
<i>Clematis vitalba</i>	Old-man's Beard
<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	Hawthorn
<i>Cruciata laevipes</i>	Crosswort
<i>Dactylorhiza incarnata</i>	Common Spotted Orchid
<i>Deschampsia caespitosa</i>	Tufted Hair-grass
<i>Ervum tetraspermum</i>	Smooth Tare
<i>Festuca rubra</i>	Red Fescue
<i>Filipendula vulgaris</i>	Dropwort
<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>	Ash
<i>Galium album</i>	Hedge Bedstraw
<i>Galium aparine</i>	Cleavers
<i>Galium verum</i>	Lady's Bedstraw
<i>Glechoma hederacea</i>	Ground Ivy
<i>Helianthemum nummularia</i>	Common Rock-rose
<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Hogweed

Scientific name	Common name
<i>Hippocrepis comosa</i>	Horseshoe Vetch
<i>Holcus lanatus</i>	Yorkshire Fog
<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	Perforate St. John's Wort
<i>Lathyrus pratensis</i>	Meadow Vetchling
<i>Linum catharticum</i>	Fairy Flax
<i>Listera ovata</i>	Twayblade
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Bird's-foot Trefoil
<i>Luzula campestris</i>	Field Wood-rush
<i>Mercurialis perennis</i>	Dog's Mercury
<i>Ononis repens</i>	Restharrow
<i>Orchis mascula</i>	Early Purple Orchis
<i>Phleum pratensis</i>	Timothy
<i>Pimpinella saxifraga</i>	Burnet Saxifrage
<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	Ribwort Plantain
<i>Poa trivialis</i>	Rough Meadow-grass
<i>Polygala vulgaris</i>	Milkwort
<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	Tormentil
<i>Primula veris</i>	Cowslip
<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>	Selfheal
<i>Prunus spinosa</i>	Blackthorn
<i>Rhamnus cathartica</i>	Buckthorn
<i>Rhinanthus minor agg.</i>	Yellow Rattle
<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i>	Common Dock
<i>Sambucus nigra</i>	Elder
<i>Scabiosa columbaria</i>	Small Scabious
<i>Silene vulgaris</i>	Bladder Campion
<i>Stachys sylvatica</i>	Hedge Woundwort
<i>Tamus communis</i>	Black Bindweed
<i>Trisetum flavescens</i>	Yellow Oat-Grass
<i>Ulex europaeus</i>	Common Gorse
<i>Ulmus sp.</i>	Elm
<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Nettle
<i>Veronica chamaedris</i>	Germander Speedwell
<i>Vicia cracca</i>	Tufted Vetch
<i>Viola hirta</i>	Hairy Violet

Sam Amy  
For the Wychwood Flora Group

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