

Wychwood Flora Report: *Astragalus danicus* (Purple Milk-vetch) at Westwell Gorse SSSI

11th June 2024, Brenda Betteridge, Maggie Collins, Sam Amy, and Miles Gibson.

We surveyed for *Astragalus danicus* (Purple Milk-vetch) at Westwell Gorse SSSI on 11 June 2024, just a few days earlier than the previous year. As soon as we walked on to the site we were struck by the height of the vegetation and the presence of tussocky grasses (e.g. False Oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* and Cocks Foot *Dactylis glomerata*) with plants such as Crosswort (*Cruciata laevipes*) and Traveller's Joy (*Clematis vitalba*) and thatch (dead plant material) throughout. There was no sign of any grazing having taken place in recent months, and probably this year, though we have not yet been able to confirm this. The area of calcareous grassland in which the *A. danicus* usually grows along the south-western edge of the site, although still discernible as a different mix of grasses to much of the site (with Tor Grass *Brachypodium pinnatum* s.l. particularly dominant), was similarly overgrown and full of thatch. We started looking for *A. danicus* plants at the eastern end of the grassland, and spent almost an hour walking around, meandering along the transect and back down again, but sadly were not able to find any specimens in the sward. We focussed particularly on the areas where plants were found last year (see 2023 report and data) but, despite a very thorough search, we found none. It appears that a considerable amount of scrub clearance may have been carried out recently in the area toward the centre of the site, though not immediately around the more species-rich area, which might benefit from the same. Other notable plants present in this area included Downy-fruited sedge (*Carex filiformis*), Common Twayblade (*Neottia ovata*), Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), Horseshoe Vetch (*Hippocrepis commosa*), Burnet Saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*), Dropwort (*Filipendula vulgaris*) and Common Rockrose (*Helianthemum nummularium*).

In the absence of grazing, cutting in autumn and spring is likely to be beneficial to reduce the dominance of *B. pinnatum* (Ridding et. al, 2023) and open the sward for *A. danicus* and other forbs. Given the small area in question (<1 ha) this could be done by hand with scythes or strimmer in the areas most likely to retain the Purple Milk-vetch, and the arisings raked and piled elsewhere. Although not much is known about the longevity of *A. danicus* in the seedbank, it may have significant seed dormancy capacity (Plantlife, 2020), and so we can be hopeful that with management to open the sward it may well reappear. Westwell Gorse SSSI is designated because of the presence of *C. filiformis*, which we didn't survey on this occasion, although it was noted as present. The last official assessment of the Westwell Gorse SSSI was in 2018, when it was recorded as being in favourable condition (see details [here](#)). At that time, despite a lack of grazing, BBOWT volunteers had been and cut the site by hand, as well as clearing some scrub. BBOWT are no longer involved in the management of the site.



Downy-fruited sedge, Common Twayblade, Horseshoe-Vetch, Pyramidal Orchid, and Common Rockrose, growing amongst dominant Tor Grass in the area where Purple Milk-vetch is usually found, and Crosswort, growing near the entrance to the site.

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References

Plantlife (2020) https://naturebftb.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Purple_milk_vetch-Plantlife-factsheet.pdf

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