

WESSEX BRYOLOGY GROUP

Sidbury Hill, Salisbury Plain (east), South Wiltshire VC8

26th April 2009

In his extensive 1986 report detailing the botanical interest of the Salisbury Plain military training estate, Ron Porley described how lack of grazing had led to much of the plain having very limited bryophyte interest. However, Sidbury Hill and the surrounding area of Haxton Down and Weatherhill were known to have a richer chalk grassland flora, though not recorded in detail for many years. In early 2009 a team from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology surveyed the bryophytes of a small part of this area and found surprising riches, including a new population of the nationally rare liverwort *Lophozia personii*, in a major extension westward of its known British range.

Sidbury Hill is a major Iron Age Hill fort, with dramatic ramparts and associated trackways and other linear features spreading out across the nearby downland. Recent management work by Defence Estates has focussed on removing many of the trees that were planted for training purposes in past decades to preserve and expose the monument. At the same time, a semi-natural ash woodland on top of the hill was left intact as there is little such woodland on Salisbury Plain. Tracked vehicles i.e. tanks no longer climb the flanks of the hill but the flinty valleys around its base are still heavily used. The vegetation in these valleys is very rich, especially at the interface between track and chalk downland, where rare vascular species such as *Cerastium pumilum* and *Minuartia hybrida* are present.



Rich bryological pickings at the foot of Sidbury Hill

The bryophytes are equally interesting, as we found out during the visit. The disturbed zone supported much *Weissia longifolia* var *angustifolia*, along with *W. controversa*, *Didymodon acutus*, *Brachythecium mildeanum* and *Didymodon fallax*. It was however too late to see such small ephemerals as *Microbryum curvicolium* and *Tortula lanceola* which were recorded a month earlier in the same valley by the CEH survey.

Heading into slightly less disturbed chalk grassland quickly uncovered an abundance of *Homalothecium lutescens* and one of the specialities of the area – masses of *Abietinella abietina* var *hystricosa*. This handsome moss thrives in the short parched swards of the area and is especially abundant on nearby Silk Hill. Growing with it was *Ditrichum gracile* and the uncommon moss *Entodon concinnus*, which we also found to be widespread in the area. Moving up onto the ramparts of

the hill we found many of the same species, along with *Trichostomum crispulum* and on NW facing slopes, masses of *Neckera crispa*. Despite a careful search of many of the ant-hills there was disappointingly no sign of *Rhodobryum roseum*.



Abietinella abietinum var *hystricosa*

On moving into the ash woodland we found many different species, including a good range of epiphytes, such as *Neckera pumila*, *Orthotrichum pulchellum*, *Dicranum tauricum* and *Frullania tamarisci* which is quite rare in Wiltshire.



Dicranum tauricum on a fallen hawthorn

Returning to our cars we found them to be covered in chalk dust thanks to the movements of fleets of tanks passing through at high speed, one of the hazards of botanising on Salisbury Plain.

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