

Flowering Plants of Sammocks Hill 2005: Nick Owens and Perdita Cawthorne

Both fields were cut and baled in early July, and the bales removed from the site. Sheep arrived for aftermath grazing in early September and stayed into the New Year (2006). The sheep were a mix of Manx Loughton, Hebridean, Ronaldsay and Longwools. There were generally about 35 sheep present.

The plant species list, begun in 2004, was maintained for Sammocks East (SE) and Sammocks West (SW) separately, with the assistance of Perdita Cawthorne. The list is based on casual observations over several visits. Flowering plants (including woody plants in the dividing hedge) and ferns are included, but not bryophytes.

Wild carrot, alsike clover, yellow rattle and **kidney vetch** had not previously been found anywhere on the Sulehay Reserve, so almost certainly came from introduced seed. **Cowslip** and **field scabious** may have come from introduced seed or from naturally dispersed seed. The total number of plant species identified so far is 59 (SW) and 64 (SE), as shown in the table. So species diversity is similar for the two fields despite their very different original treatments – SW having been being ploughed and reseeded and SE being treated with introduced straw bales on existing turf (both in the autumn of 2003). The total number of plant species for the two fields combined is 87, showing that their species composition is rather different. Many of the annual arable weeds in SW disappeared in 2005, notably the **charlock** and the **fuellens**, but **creeping thistle** continued to be dominant here. **Ragwort** continued to flourish in both fields and some was spot sprayed. With the loss of arable weeds, SW is currently less diverse than SE.

The impact of the **yellow rattle** from the hay spread on SE was quite marked. In areas with high densities of yellow rattle, the grass was greatly reduced in vigour or even apparently absent altogether. In its place there was a great deal of **ribwort plantain** (not parasitized by yellow rattle) and **red clover**. However, by the year's end there appeared to be quite a good mixed sward developing on these areas, probably helped by the sheep grazing, with **cowslip** rosettes appearing in places.

The sheep seemed to be eating most plants, including grasses, **common knapweed** and plantains. Some sheep were also eating ragwort rosettes, to the extent that none could be seen on East Field (by the Wansford Road) in December. However, ragwort rosettes were still in evidence in Wansford Pasture where Hebridean ewes have been at work at low density for several years. It seems that, given the right conditions, some sheep will eat ragwort rosettes. The important thing seems to be grazing intensity. The sheep corralled on Walden Hill ate all the ragwort right down into the taproots in January 2006. It remains to be seen to what extent this reduces the coming season's growth.