

## BRANTON PONDS FIELD-WORK DAY

On 23<sup>rd</sup> June a group of ten (an ideal size for this type of field work) met at 10.30 at the Branton Ponds car park. The forecast had been slightly worrying, threatening some heavy showers, but all was dry and mild at the start and despite a short shower near lunchtime we were really very lucky.

The aim of the day was to allow members who had little or no experience of trying to identify plant species in the field to have a go at doing so rather more systematically than just by leafing through pictures in a field guide. Richard was relying on the age-old trick of calculating that although he only knew a limited amount, with luck he would know more than his class.

Two keys were used, one to try to sort out species of Forget-me-nots (*Myosotis spp.*) and the other to see if Willowherbs (*Epilobium spp.*) could be identified vegetatively, before they had come into flower.

The range of plants at Branton is quite unusual. Over a period between about 20 and 10 years ago various seed mixes have been used to help create the flora at this small reserve. As a result there are several species that are not normally native in Northumberland, but since the ones that have survived are clearly holding their own, it is botanically acceptable to record their presence as naturalized plants.



Once we had sorted out the correct technique for using x10 hand lenses, we tackled a number of Forget-me-nots. The most common was *Myosotis arvensis* (Field Forget-me-not) [pictured] with hooked hairs on the sepal tube, spreading hairs on the stems, and small flowers. Then for *Myosotis laxa* (Tufted Forget-me-not) we had to see that the hairs on the sepal tube were lying flat and that the tops of the sepals were forming isosceles triangles rather than equilateral ones! All highly esoteric and not particularly easy, but with these species just looking at pictures is unlikely to enable you to identify the correct species – you need to use the key.

The Willowherbs also required close looks at hairs on the stems and things like whether the leaves were stalked or not.

By the time we'd done all that and seen some other good plants we returned to the cars for lunch. The rigours of the morning proved more than enough for some who decided to call it a day at that stage, but six of us remained to walk round the whole reserve and see some of the more interesting plants that were there. Or at least Richard thought they were interesting. Among the star finds were Hare's-foot Clover (*Trifolium arvense*) [pictured], Squirrel-tail Fescue (*Vulpia bromoides*) – a diminutive little grass which showed why rather barren-looking patches of ground are quite often more botanically interesting than more lushly vegetated areas, and the most showy of the rarities, Flowering Rush (*Butomus umbellatus*).



Altogether it seemed to have been a successful day and something AWG hasn't tried before. With luck one or two of those who came will have gone away with a little bit more knowledge than they started with. At various points some of the class were disobedient and insisted on looking at birds, but Richard soon whipped them back into line!

RP