

Lostwithiel Saltmarsh Walk With Ken Preston-Mafham

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On Friday 2nd September 2011 a group of us met at Coulson Park in Lostwithiel, and were guided by wildlife photographer and author Ken Preston-Mafham on a walk through the Shire Hall Nature Reserve, which is part of Lostwithiel Saltmarsh.



Reeds *Phragmites australis*,
photo by Abby Crosby

sedges nor rushes, despite their English names. Rushes have round stems and their family name is Juncaceae.

Next came Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*, photo right) which is in the daisy family, Asteraceae, and looks rather like a very pale Michaelmas daisy. There

We looked across the brackish river to the large area of Reeds (*Phragmites australis*, photo left) which is the plant traditionally used for thatching roofs.

Between the Reeds and the river was an area of Grey Club-rush (*Scirpus tabernaemontani*), a tall plant with bluish green smooth round stems growing down to the water's edge. Next Ken pointed out Sea Club-rush (*Scirpus maritimus*), another tall perennial, but with triangular stems ending in clusters of dark brown grape-sized flower spikes set in two or more long green bracts. *Scirpus spp.* are in the Cyperaceae family, which is mostly sedges (including Papyrus) which all have triangular stems, hence the saying 'Sedge has the edge' for helping to distinguish between rush and sedge. These Club-rushes however are neither



Sea Aster *Aster tripolium*,
photo by Abby Crosby

were several Drone Flies feeding on the flowers in the warm sun. The larvae of these flies are called Rat-tailed Maggots, because of the tail-like breathing tube which enables them to live in stagnant water, and even in dung-heaps.



Fool's parsley, photo by Abby Crosby

Next, Fool's Parsley, photo left, a delicate white umbellifer, though this family is now called Apiaceae. The longish bracts under the flowers are diagnostic (not to be confused with Wild Carrot, a much bigger plant which has bracts at the base of the umbel, whereas the Fool's Parsley bracts are at the top of the umbel, just under the actual flowers).

There was Traveler's Joy, which is the wild Clematis, flowering in the hedge.

Ken is a leading expert in micro-fungi, and he pointed out to us a patch of white mould on a dead Elder branch, which he named as *Hyphodontus sambucaae* (photo below).

The ground was becoming marshier now, and several small ponds were to be seen, with egg-laying pairs of the red Darter dragonfly, *Sympetris striolatum*.



Fungi on elder *Hyphodontus sambucaae*, photo by Abby Crosby

Amongst the long grass stems of *Festuca arundinacea* were slung the impressive webs of Wasp Spiders (*Argiope bruennich*, photo next page courtesy of Claire Hoddinott) with the striking white zigzag of the stabilimentum like a

lightening flash above and below the central female spider. The stabilimentum is presumably to strengthen the web.



Wasp spider *Argiope bruennich*, photo by Claire Hoddinott

Breaking a dead twig from a nearby branch, Ken commented that if one were to soak it in water and look at it under a microscope one would almost certainly see Rotifers, which surprised me as I previously thought they were only found in water! Apparently they simply fold themselves up to minimize water loss and go into a dormant state in order to survive until next time it rains.

We walked on across squelchy ground, encountering as we went Sea Arrowgrass (*Triglochin maritima*), Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*), and Common Orache (*Atriplex patula*). On the way out of the marsh we stopped to look for Short-winged Coneheads (Bush Crickets, photo below) in a patch of marshy grass and club-rush. Ken found a few. Not as many as he'd expected though. We all saw at least one however, and Ken explained how the eggs overwinter in a club-rush stem, inserted into the stem with the aid of the scimitar-like ovipositor on the tail of the female. They will hatch next spring into tiny nymphs which develop through several instars into adults by the end of the summer. When the nymphs are newly hatched it is easy to mistake them for green fly.....look carefully before you squash!

On the way back Ken pointed out a Spindle tree with its exotic looking pink fruits and next to it a Guelder Rose laden with bright red berries. At the edge of the path was a clump of Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*) with its wiry tangle of stems and tiny pale flowers. A little further on we found False Fox Sedge (*Carex otrubae*) and Hedge Bindweed (*Calystegia sepium*) and Ken showed us how to distinguish it from Great Bindweed (*Calystegia silvatica*) by looking at the sepal-like bracts at the base of the flower, if they overlap it's Great, if not it's Hedge!

A first for me was the Wall - rue which Ken pointed out growing periodically all along the old grey wall. It is no relation of the herb Rue, being a small fern (*Asplenium ruta-muraria*), but its leaves look similar to the herb. There were many other plants in the wall, including Perforated St. John's Wort and Maidenhair Spleenwort (*Asplenium trichomanes*).

On the river side of the path Ken found Reed Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), but no sign of Hay-scented Buckler Fern, which he was hoping for.

Just before we reached the car-park we were lucky enough to see a dipper having a bath at the edge of the river, and then the heart-warming sight of a kingfisher flashing across the water.

It was the perfect end to a wonderful afternoon, and we all felt very grateful to Ken for giving up his time to guide us so expertly.



Short-winged conehead. Photo by Claire Hoddinott



Ken Preston Mafham with volunteers. Photo by Abby Crosby



Group walking out onto the saltmarshes Photo by Abby Crosby