

Galeopsis angustifolia (Red Hemp-nettle)

Lidstone Piece, Spelsbury Down Farm, 31 July 2024

WFG members who visited the site: Rachel Lewis, Genny Early and Brenda Betteridge

We were unable to find any Red Hemp-nettle plants or any other annual arable plants in the headland of this arable field, which members of the Cotswolds Rare Plants Group (the previous name of the Wychwood Flora Group) have surveyed almost every year since Red Hemp-nettle was found there in 1983. The headland did not appear to have been cultivated with the result that perennial plants, like Perennial Sow-thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*) and Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), are dominating the vegetation allowing no room for the small annuals. Red Hemp-nettle plants require open ground and cannot tolerate competition.

In 2023 there were 207 plants observed, and 58 plants counted in 2022.

To create the conditions favourable for the Red Hemp-nettle to grow, management in previous years has consisted of ploughing in mid-January followed by cultivation into a seed bed in late February to April, usually when the crop was sown. In some years, to prevent Charlock (*Sinapis arvensis*) smothering the vegetation in the headland when it was about 1 foot high and flowering in June it was topped once or twice with a cut-and-collect topper. In 2017 Perennial Sow-thistle posed a significant threat when it dominated the headland. Advice was sought from Natural England and Plantlife on what to do to make the headland suitable for small arable plants to flourish once again. In the end, although nobody wanted to advocate its use, spraying with a broad-leaved herbicide after the crop was harvested was decided the best way to deal with the problem. This was done with some successes.



One of the 207 Red Hemp-nettle plants photographed in 2023 by Genny Early

In the United Kingdom, Red Hemp-nettle (*Galeopsis angustifolia*) is a critically endangered and nationally scarce species. It is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and has its own Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). This is the only known site for this plant in Oxfordshire.

The farm is now under new ownership, and we look forward to working with them to ensure this very special headland will be cared for appropriately in the future. The management regime is critical to ensure the Red Hemp-nettle and its associated rare arable plants will flourish again.

Genny Early
for the Wychwood Flora Group

Copies to:

Sarah Wilkins (Farm Administrator for Chadlington Farming Partnership LLP)
Stephanie Miles (UK Collections Coordinator, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew Millennium Seed Bank)
Lizzie Cooke (Conservation Adviser, Plantlife)
Dr Pete Stroh (Scientific Officer & Atlas 2020 Coordinator, BSBI)
Neil Clennell (CEO, Wychwood Project)
Conservation Delivery Team (Natural England)
David Morris (VC23 BSBI County Recorder)
Ellen Lee (TVERC)