

False Cleavers *Galium spurium* in Worcestershire 2022: the lure of the obscure.

Brett Westwood

November 13th 2022 was an inauspicious day for botany, as many November days are. As an excuse for getting out of the house, I made myself trudge familiar bridleways in old haunts at Ismere near Churchill (SO875797), not expecting a great deal. But a lone gull in a field, green with winter corn unexpectedly turned out to be an adult Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans* and piqued my enthusiasm: little did I know I was a few steps away from achieving a lifetime's ambition.

It had been a mild frost-free autumn and some flowers in the headland surrounding the asparagus fields were still in bloom. I ambled through a sward which included Crimson Clover *Trifolium incarnatum ssp. incarnatum*, Bullwort *Ammi majus* and Shaggy-soldier *Galinsoga quadriradiata*, all indicators of a conservation seed mix. At the top of one strip, among the sprouting seedlings of Goose-grass *Galium aparine*, I noticed a fruiting bedstraw that looked slightly different (01). It was still green and had flowers even this late in the year when all of the summer's Goose-grass had long since dried out. Furthermore its leaves were sharply tapered to a point whereas all the newly germinated Goose-grass had spoon-shaped leaves. I took a specimen to key it out.



01. *Galium spurium* plant in situ, Ismere 13.11.22. Brett Westwood.

Could this be False Cleavers *Galium spurium*, a species I had dreamed of finding for years, but had been daunted by its close similarity to Goose-grass and its great rarity in the UK?

I knew that this plant needed critical examination and so set about interrogating Stace's Flora (2019). It soon became apparent that my specimen differed from Goose-grass in the following ways: Many seed-capsules (04) examined were all 2mm or so in diameter, whereas in Goose-grass they are 3mm or more. I was able to compare this directly with larger dried fruits of Goose-grass gathered from the nearby hedgerow.

The leaves (02) were eight to a whorl. In Goose-grass, there are normally fewer than seven in each whorl. They seemed slightly narrower than Goose-grass.

The plant had green flowers (03). *G. spurium* flowers in autumn, whereas Goose-grass has whitish flowers in spring and summer and although unseasonal flowering does occur, it is unusual and there was no evidence of it at the site.



02. *Galium aparine*(L) and *Galium spurium*(R) comparison of shoots. Brett Westwood.



03. *Galium spurium* in flower, from Ismere 13.11.22. Brett Westwood.

I sent the record and photographs to John Day, the BSBI's Botanical recorder for Worcestershire (vc37). To my delight, he confirmed that the plant "seems to be fairly straightforward *Galium spurium* and that the only realistic confusion would be with *Galium aparine* which is very variable... all the critical features on your plant seem to fit well".

The Ismere plant had bristly fruits (04) and appears to be *var. echinospermum*: a smooth-fruited form is even rarer in the UK, so beware keying this species out using John Poland's Vegetative key to the British Flora which uses smooth fruits as an identification feature. Although The Flora of Worcestershire (Maskew 2014) does not admit this critical species to the county list, John Day considers two potential county records, from the eminent Scottish botanist George Don in Redditch in 1784 and from Hoobrook in Kidderminster (Hardaker 1954) to be worthy of review. A more

recent record on the BSBI database is from John Day himself who found a plant in 1979 on the edge of an arable crop at SP000464, a former site for wool shoddy aliens. The record has not been submitted to the Worcestershire database as John can't locate the original index card, so is still "somewhere waiting to be uploaded".



04. *Galium aparine*(L) and *Galium spurium* (R) comparison of fruits. Brett Westwood.

False Cleavers is a rare plant and almost certainly overlooked because of identification difficulties, but has shown a slight increase in records nationally, from three locations in the 1980s and 1990s, to 16 locations between 2000 and 2022. The plant at Ismere seems to have been an introduction with a conservation seed mix and though I searched the margins for other specimens, none were found and none appeared in 2023. Who will find the next?

References

Maskew, R. 2014. *The Flora of Worcestershire*, published by the author, Roger Maskew.
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Stace, C, 2019. *New Flora of the British Isles* (4th edition). C&M Floristics.

Images

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