

Forked Catchfly *Silene dichotoma* at three sites in Worcestershire 2022/23

Brett Westwood



01. Forked Catchfly *Silene dichotoma*, Dropping Well Farm 01.08.2022. Brett Westwood.

On August 1st 2022, at the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust's (WWT) Droppingwell Farm near Bewdley, I was exploring a field sown with a conservation seed-mix, including much Wild Carrot *Daucus carota* and scattered plants of Sainfoin *Onobrychis viciifolia* and Fodder Vetch *Vicia villosa*, when I noticed two plants of a catchfly species that I didn't recognise (01). They were over 1.5m tall and had long racemes of short-stalked, white flowers each with deeply-divided petals and three protruding, sinuous styles. Although they were obviously *Silene* species, it took me some time to track them down as Forked Catchfly *Silene dichotoma*, a native of arable fields and waysides in continental Europe.



02. Forked Catchfly, Lower Smite Farm 18.08.2022. Brett Westwood.

Hot on the heels of this record, came another of a dozen plants which Steve Bloomfield and I counted on fields sown with seed-mix at WWT's Lower Smite Farm on August 18th 2022 (02). Then on June 24th 2023, I found two plants at Ismere, near Churchill where they were growing in the margins of an asparagus field along with such familiar components of a wildflower seed-mix as Chicory *Cichorium intybus* and Crimson Clover *Trifolium incarnatum* ssp. *incarnatum*. I sent my photographs to John Day, Worcestershire's County botanical recorder, who confirmed my identification and supplied the following summary of the plant's history in the UK: Forked Catchfly is associated with seed imports from Europe and was first noted in the UK in 1853. A surge of records between the 1870s and 1880s reached a peak in the 1890s, after which the plants maintained a low level until the 1940s. This suggests a new and widespread use of a contaminated seed source introduced in the last quarter of the 19th Century. An increase in the 1950s and 1960s reflected systematic recording for the first Atlas of British Flora (Perring & Walters 1962), probably combined with the remnants of a pre-World War II landscape. A lack of records from the 1970s to the 2010s is notable and probably genuine as botanists were then actively recording for two subsequent Atlases. This suggests that the original seed source had been lost by the 1960s and that more intensive agriculture had put paid to any remaining populations.

In Plant Atlas 2020 (Stroh et. al. 2023), there are just three widely-scattered records in the UK, none of them in the English Midlands, so Worcestershire has already doubled the national total. However, John Day notes that there has been a national upsurge in records post-2020 which suggests that a new seed-source has revitalised the plant's prospects in the British Isles. Information from Steve Bloomfield at WWT revealed that the seed mix used at Lower Smite Farm was GS4 Legume and Herb-rich Sward supplied by Cotswold Seeds. *Silene dichotoma* seems to be a contaminant, rather than a deliberate ingredient, of this mix. Its ability to over-winter is uncertain here, so in Worcestershire at least, its presence is likely to be reliant on regular introductions, but it is an attractive plant whose renaissance is worth monitoring in the county over the coming years as it piggy-backs on the current trend for sowing conservation seed mixes.

Acknowledgements

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References

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Images

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