Fieldmeeting for Britishwhorl snail *Truncatellina callicratis*

Branscombe area,

south-east

Devon,

22 May 2004

Keith Alexander

1. Keith and the vacuum **2.** Sorting the litter **3.** *Truncatellina* habitat
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A rather small but select party gathered in the car park at Branscombe Mouth for what proved to be an enjoyable and interesting day investigating the local habitat for the British whorl snail *Truncatellina callicratis*.This tiny whorl snail has a mainly Mediterranean and southern Alpine range but has a few relict populations further north, most notably along the limestone sea-cliffs from south-east Devon to the Isle of Wight. Most British specimens differ considerably from typical *T. callicratis* from southern Europe in their much weaker apertural dentition - this distinction probably reflecting their long genetic isolation. It has been found in just 11 hectads since 1965 (Kerney, 1999, *Atlas of the Land and Freshwater Molluscs of Britain and Ireland,* Harley Books) and has been given *British Red Data Book* (Rare) status (M.P. Kerney, 1999, in:J.H. Bratton, ed., British Red Data Books: 3. *Invertebrates other than insects,* JNCC). Its British populations are regarded, however, as being relatively secure.

The snail is said to live amongst short dry calcareous grassland in exposed places and amongst rocks and screes on the cliff slopes of the south-facing seacliffs of the Cretaceous Chalk and Jurassic Limestone.The Branscombe area has some of the most westerly exposures of chalk within Britain.We were lucky to have Barry Colville with us and he was able to point out areas where he had previously found the species and where he had been told other members had found it in the past. One locality on the east side of Branscombe Mouth where he had found several in 1970 had subsequently ceased to be productive for the species – whether or not it still survives there is not known.

The field party started searching high on the brow of Branscombe West Cliff (SY2088).The sward varied from dense matted grasslands through finer herb-rich typical chalk grassland, into sparsely-vegetated therophyte vegetation along the cliff edges.A blower-vac machine with two-stroke engine was used to draw up loose debris from the cliff-top grasslands into a collecting bag.The debris was then passed through 2.5 and 0.5mm sieves to remove both coarse material and fine dust, and then examined in a white plastic tray. Little was found in the denser swards but the shorter, more open areas were found to contain large numbers of *Pupilla muscorum* together with *Candidula intersecta, Cernuella virgata* and *Vertigo pygmaea.* *Abida secale* was also locally frequent on steeper slopes with open friable areas.This is a very characteristic assemblage for long-established, fine and sparsely-vegetated, calcareous grasslands in southern Britain.At the time it was thought that no *T. callicratis* had been found but we each took away plastic packets with samples of the debris for microscopic examination. Both my own and Barry's samples from this area were, however, later found to contain one full grown and one juvenile shell each – unrecognised success at our first spot! Barry's also held a live *Pupilla* of sinistral form – there are very few references to this form in the literature.

We moved on to Berry Cliff (SY1988) and later to Lower Dunscombe Cliff (SY160881), continuing searching using the blower-vac machine as well as searching by hand.We did manage to spot a few old *T. callicratis* shells in the debris from the last site and so confirmed a successful expedition at the time.This last area is a site known to Martin Willing to hold the snail. Branscombe West Cliff may however be a previously unknown locality.

The day was finished off by the leader demonstrating how to knock *Balea perversa* snails from gorse foliage, where it presumably grazes the epiphytes which cover the spiny foliage. It can be found in great abundance amongst gorse all around the south-west coasts. Barry Colville drew the group's attention to a paper by R.C. Preece and E. Gittenberger (Systematics, distribution and ecology of *Balea (=Tristania)* (Pulmonata: Clausiliidae) in the islands of the Tristan-Gough group *Journal of Molluscan Studies* **69 (4):** 329-348) in which the authors accept the view of H. Nordsieck and T.E.J. Ripken that *Balea heydeni* is a separate species that sometimes occurs sympatrically with *B. perversa.* British conchologists need to follow this up and clarify the status of our *Balea* snails.

These cliffs are mostly owned by the National Trust and form part of the Sidmouth to Beer Cliffs SSSI and the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.We would like to record our thanks to John Channon (NT Property Manager), Matt Boydell (NT Warden) and Amanda Newsome (English Nature Conservation Officer for East Devon & Exeter) for their help in enabling this field meeting to take place.