

***Centaurea cyanus* L.**

Cornflower

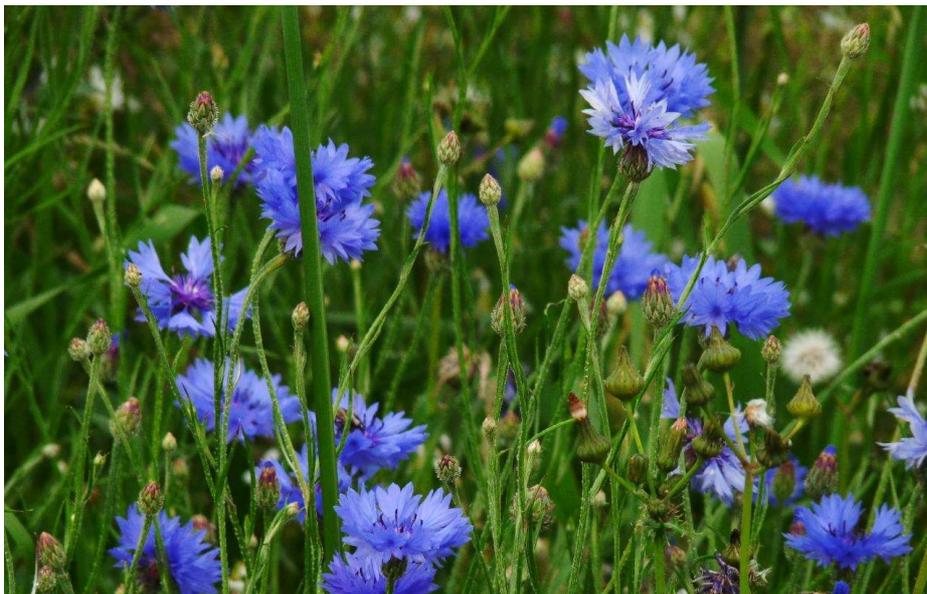
Archaeophyte

GB & England: Least Concern

UKBAP/Section 41

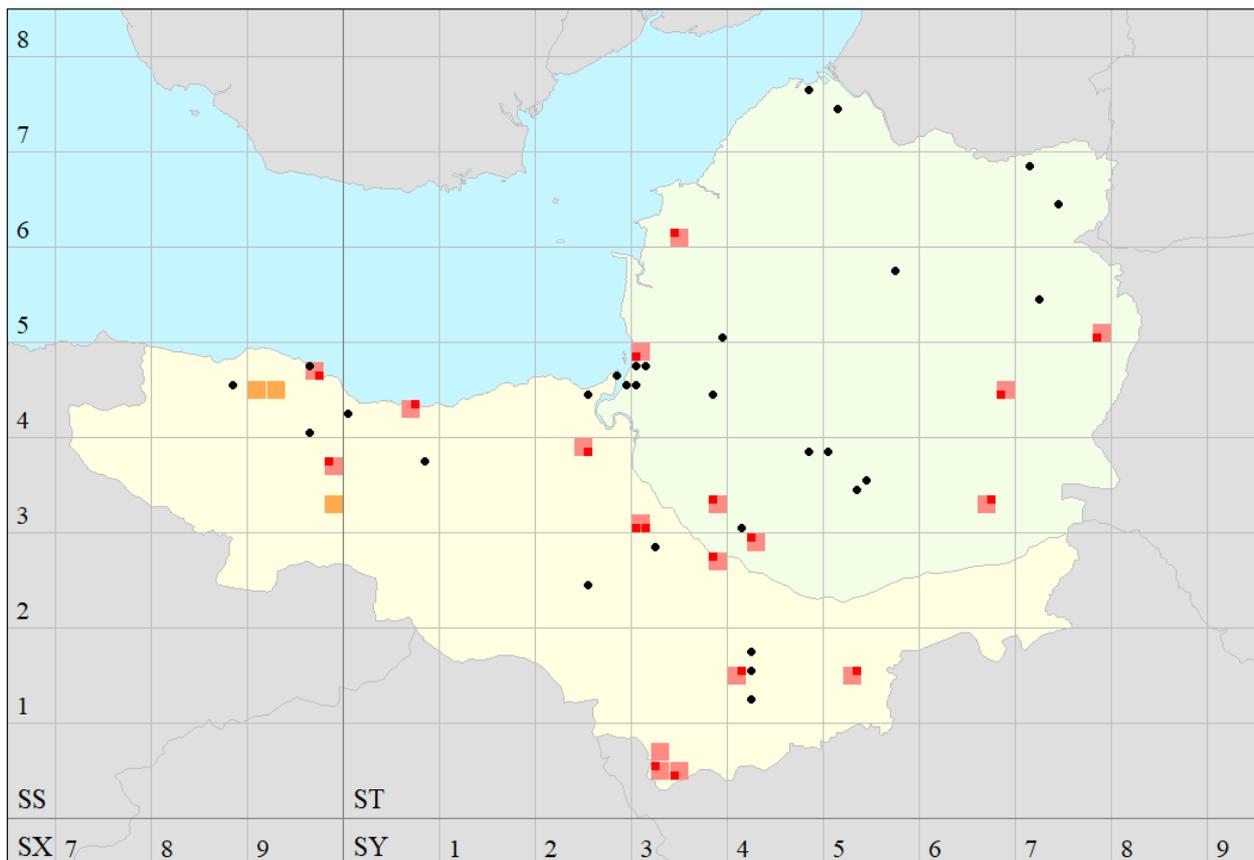
VC5 Not Scarce; VC6 Not Scarce

An annual, formerly a weed of arable fields, but now rarely found in this habitat, with most recent records made on waste ground, roadsides and field edges. In the early nineteenth century, Babington ((1834), describing the distribution around Bath, simply wrote “In cornfields, frequent”, yet in his lecture of 1866 on the Bath flora Jenyns (1867) listed it as one of three weeds common in most parts of England, which he had never succeeded in finding around Bath. Murray (1896) regarded Cornflower as rare in Somerset, listing only six records. White (1912) also recorded this species as rare, describing it as a casual, chiefly on waste ground, rubbish tips and the borders of cultivated fields. In Somerset *Centaurea cyanus* had become very rare as an arable weed by the end of the nineteenth century. In VC5, found by W.D. Miller in 1914 in a field at Thurloxton, then by Walter Watson in a field between Watchet and Blue Anchor, far from houses in 1925 and in a cornfield at Staplegrove in 1941. Roe (1981) stated that “the only recent record in a cornfield was at Buckland St Mary” in 1968. Most recent records for arable fields have been in sown margins, for example at Moondown in 2014; however in 2009 Anne Jones found three plants flowering in a field on her farm at Lyng, growing in a very poor barley crop amongst abundant Common Poppies. It is possible that these arose from deeply buried seed, together with the unprecedented display of *Papaver rhoeas*. As an introduction, Cornflower has been found on seeded verges at Headon Cross, Carhampton and Croydon Hill in the west of VC5, on the verge of Cannington bypass, and at Tatworth, Yeovil and Seavington St Michael in the south. It was sown around the car park at Steart Marshes, recorded in 2015, and used as part of a cornfield mix at Culver Cliff Walk, Minehead, found in 2002 by Ian Green, and also on a roundabout at Quay West near Minehead, recorded in 2013. A single plant was found on the sea wall at Fenning Island in 2014, the origin unknown. It has also been noted as a garden escape, for example in Minehead, found by Caroline Giddens in 1990, and found on dumped soil at Minehead, Watchet and Weston Bampfylde.



Centaurea cyanus near Failand (2011). Photo: JPM

In VC6, *Centaurea cyanus* was recorded in a cornfield between Abbotsleigh and Failand in 1879 (White, 1912). In 1990 Ian Green found it growing as a weed of an arable field at Oldford, but the field was re-sown to grass in 1991. A recent record of a possibly genuine cornfield weed was at Beer Field near High Ham, where a single plant was found by John Poingdestre in 2011, perhaps arisen from long-buried seed. In 2017 Margaret Webster recorded 6 plants in a field sown with clover near Widcombe Common, their origin unknown. In 2011 John Martin recorded thousands of plants growing with other typical arable weed species in species-rich weedy margins sown with a grassland mix, on an organic farm at Failand; their origin was uncertain, but they looked like a natural population. As in VC5, other recent records for arable fields have been in sown margins, for example at Baltonsborough, where it was recorded in sown strips alongside maize in 2016. Cornflower has been found as an introduction on road verges in VC6 at Greylake in 1987, Faulkland in 2007, Beckery, Glastonbury in 2008 and by the Lower Bristol Road in Bath in 2015. It was found sown at the entrance to Yeoman's Quarry in 1999, on Langport Rifle Range in 1992, along the banks of the Huntspill River in 2002 and at Bath Racecourse in 2017. At Apex Leisure Park at Burnham-on-Sea, it has been sown in amenity planting, recorded in 2015 and 2016. It has also been found as a probably garden escape in High Street, Glastonbury in 2015, and on dumped soil on Mark Moor in 2005 and on Allerton Moor in 2017. *Centaurea cyanus* was once a frequent and persistent weed of cultivation, but declined dramatically in the early twentieth century with improvements in seed cleaning followed by the introduction of herbicides. Although rare in Somerset as an arable weed, this species has increased in the county as a result of its inclusion in cornfield flower mixes for field margins and amenity planting.



Distribution of *Centaurea cyanus* in Somerset, mapped using MapMate.
 Black dots are post-2000 records; red squares are 1987-1999 records;
 sepia squares are pre-1987 records