



Purging Buckthorn - *ramnus cathartica*



The best time to spot Purging Buckthorn is in summer when it is in flower.

We have only managed to identify one specimen of Purging Buckthorn. This is on the corner where Vale Border enters the Great Hill. The trunk has fallen and runs along the ground parallel with the path bearing leaves and flowers at the end of the branches in the hedgerow (below 6/6/12).



The yellow-green leaves are egg shaped with toothed edges and short leaf stalks. A distinctive characteristic of the Buckthorn is the way the leaf veins curve back toward the tip of the leaf (right 5/6/12).



The small green flowers have four petals and are borne in clusters in the leaf-axils. This differentiates the Buckthorn from the Spindle. That has similar individual flowers but these are carried on long stalks and not clustered. Buckthorn is dioecious - which means that there are separate male and female plants. The four prominent stamens on each flower, topped with yellow pollen, show that our specimen is male (right 5/6/12). This means that it bears no fruit. (Buckthorn fruit is round and black and contains from two to four stones. It is ripe in September.)



As the name suggests, the bark (left 6/6/12) and fruit were used as a purgative in the past but their action can be severe and dangerous so they are now considered to be poisonous. The berries can also be irritating to the skin for humans but birds eat them with impunity and deposit the seeds in their droppings. Buckthorn is attractive to the Brimstone butterfly, which lays its eggs on the leaves. In spite of the name, our Buckthorn does not bear thorns although in some Buckthorns the terminal leaves on each stem are thickened to form spines.

Take a summer walk along the green trail. Look out for the Purging Buckthorn and note the veins on the leaves and the small green flowers in the leaf-axils.

