

MOTH MUMBLINGS

WHERE HAVE ALL THE MOTHS GONE

We seem to be well into the traditional “Autumn Quiet”. It is always less busy in the autumn as far as native, local populations of moths are concerned; there is a definite lull in most years between the last of the summer moths and the start of the autumn fliers. This year, however, is exceptionally poor. Many people put it down to the uncharacteristically hot and dry spring, though the truth is that we do not, as yet, really know the reason(s). It is especially important, of course, that we keep on recording moths as usual. Placing your actual numbers on record along with everyone else’s results will, with a bit of luck and a tail-wind, hopefully allow for greater understanding of the broader picture.

That said, some species are in fact doing quite well. Whilst the Uncertain (*Hoplodrina octogenaria* as we are supposed to call it these days), has practically vanished from my garden, Straw Underwings (*Thalpophila matura*) seem ready to take over from the ants as masters of the universe! And a few autumn species are in fact starting to appear, although this is slow. Expect it to pick up as we approach and enter October.

All that said, there have been a few noteworthies in the two counties. Here is what I am aware of.

Simon Knott added **Dark Crimson Underwing** *Catocala sponsa* to the list of local goodies in his garden at Bengoe, Hertford on 2nd September 2020.



Was this an immigrant? UK wanderer? Even, possibly, a local resident arising as progeny of the 2019 immigration of this species? Time will, hopefully, tell. It would be rather good to add this to the county breeding list.

Of equal interest, Kevin Widgery reports that after a couple of very dull weeks he had a **Clifden Nonpareil** = **Blue Underwing** = (*Catocala fraxini*) in his garden trap in Stevenage –

also on the night of 4th September 2020.



This is a species that actually has set up residency in England, with known populations in Dorset and Kent (so I am told) and also in south-west London at Richmond Park (Surrey). For this to become an expected species in moth traps in Herts/Middlesex would certainly brighten up otherwise dull nights in the autumn!

At Ruislip, Middlesex, a **Convolvulus Hawk-moth** (*Sphinx convolvuli*) was seen and photographed by Miles Gillman on 5th September during the daytime. Information via Ched George. This is a regular immigrant species, recorded in most years, but still always nice to see.

Also of significance, Paula and David Shipway were lucky to catch a male **Pale Eggar** (*Trichiura crataegi*) in their garden trap at Gubblecote, in the far west of Hertfordshire, on the



night of 4th September.

This is a resident species in the county, but these days it is a rare one. It was listed by me as “Endangered” in Hertfordshire in our 2008 book *Moths of Hertfordshire*, when I also noted that it was a UK Biodiversity Action Plan *Watch List* species. There are five other post-1999 records for Hertfordshire, widely scattered but with one in Long Marston – not that far from Gubblecote – in 2011. Other than the current record, the most recent county report was from

2012. For Middlesex it was last reported from Pinner and Mill Hill by Cockerell in his list published in 1898 and so has been absent for a minimum of 122 years. Nationally, it shows a long term decline and qualifies as “Vulnerable” under IUCN criteria. We are currently at the peak of the expected flight period – so eyes open please.

Graeme Smith, with his son Finn as well as Steve Easby, visited the Broxbourne Wood National Nature Reserve on the night of 2nd September. Their efforts, in this poor season, were rewarded by this year’s first *Musotima nitidalis* – a recently established crambid (formerly in the pyralids), that feeds on Bracken in the caterpillar stage.



It is possibly overlooked; study the attached photo – it is on the wing now. Beating Bracken might be profitable. Graeme, Finn and Steve have now recorded 609 moth species in the wood in the past two or three years.

AND TALKING OF NUMBERS

A year ago (if not longer) I put out some numbers of moths recorded in people’s gardens in the form of a league table! There is no point in repeating that until 2020 lists from each and every one of you are in the database, but I can just report that the best recorded garden (greatest number of species) is still not mine! A month ago I started working through the micros from the adjoining gardens of James Fish and Julian Reeves in the northern part Bishops Stortford. When I began this exercise I noted that their garden list was 777 species – annoyingly, one more than my own garden in central Bishops Stortford, which has produced 776. Since then, my investigations have added a few and their list is now 783 species. In spite of my best efforts I have not been able to add to my own list. Is there any other competition out there? I do hope,

in any case, that you are all recording the micros? Or at least collecting them for me to name for you?

LEAF-MINERS

I have not had time to complete the Coleoptera Crib mentioned in the last newsletter, but I hope it can be done this week. The peak autumn season for Coleophora cases is probably October.

That said, many leaf-mining moths are now becoming evident as mines. It is time to start looking for these on all and every plant species in your garden as a minimum. Anything not named should be popped into a plastic sandwich bag along with a note on the place, date and collector AND, please, the species of leaf where known.

MOTHS IN THE POST

About 4 or 5 times a year, with monotonous regularity, the postie puts through my letterbox one of those cards that says they have a small package for me, but did not deliver it because the sender failed to pay the correct postage. Weirdly, I had **three** such cards in the last week. It is a significant effort for me to go to the main post office. There is no parking anywhere near and I must therefore walk from the other end of town – an operation that takes up far too much of my time and which usually ends up with me having to lie down for an additional hour because my bad legs have kicked in. Plus, I have to pay the additional postage AND the £2 fee. This is unlikely to make me a happy bunny. **I am very happy to receive moths for ID or whatever, but** just so that people know, I do **not** go and collect/pay for these under-stamped items; I ignore them and they are, presumably, eventually returned to sender (assuming you did remember to put a return address on the envelope).

A CORRECTION

In my last missive I reported a **Bedstraw Hawk-moth** caterpillar in Bishops Stortford. This was an error – the beast was in fact a fully grown caterpillar of the **Spurge Hawk-moth**. It was found in Castle Street, just round the corner from my house and has, apparently, been featured on various social media outlets. Many thanks to Richard Melarange for bringing this to my attention. **Accuracy is paramount – never be afraid to tell me if you think you have spotted a mistake.**

EXTRA MOTHS OF NOTE

In the short period between clicking “send” on the last newsletter and teatime today, the following three noteworthies have presented themselves:

Dewick’s Plusia (*Macdunnoughia confusa*), Hitchin, 5th September (Rob Stubbs).
Potentially a primary immigrant, although the species is locally resident in the south-east.

Slender Burnished Brass (*Thysanoplusia orichalcea*), Stevenage, 3rd September 2020, Ben Sale. Without doubt a primary immigrant. Only the second Hertfordshire record – the first was on 18th November 2000 in Hitchin.

Heath Rustic (*Xestia agathina*) One female at Welwyn on 2nd September 2020, found in his trap by William Bishops. A very worn example, the identity and sex of which were confirmed by Graeme Smith on the basis of genitalia examination. This is only the second county record. The last was at Much Hadham, near Bishops Stortford, on 11th September 2012 (Geoff Senior).

WHILST I AM HERE

If anyone, in any part of the two counties, starts catching **LARGE THORN** (*Ennomos autumnaria*) in the next couple of weeks will they please e-mail me at once and let me know (including a note of where you are). This was always a scarce moth in the county and is evidently confined to eastern Herts (including my garden), whilst absent from Middlesex. We have only 46 records from the earliest in 1940 to the latest in 2017. Our post-1999 records number just 22 and we have had no reports for three years. Peak of flight period is the second week of September. PLEASE KEEP ME POSTED.

That's all for now. Do keep stuff coming.

Colin W. Plant
Herts & Middx Counties Moth Recorder
14 West Road
Bishops Stortford
Herts CM23 3QP
01279 – 507697

Colin W. Plant
Herts & Middx Counties Moth Recorder
14 West Road
Bishops Stortford
Herts CM23 3QP
01279 – 507697
