

MOTH MUMBLINGS October 2020

GENERAL UPDATE

My apologies for the prolonged silence. Two reasons. First, the moths have gone a bit poor and there has not really been a lot worth sharing. A few reports of Clifden Nonpareil at the end of September added to those received earlier and there was a Dewick's Plusia – uncertain if this species has started breeding in Herts and Middlesex yet or if our moths are still just immigrants. Second, I have been taking a bit of a stress break. Thus, for the last ten days I have actually been working on my own moths, which makes a pleasant change. In particular, I have been relaxing and setting several hundred Spanish macros collected by other people over the last two or three years and sent to me for naming. It is fairly tedious after the first couple of hours! However, the real drag comes around Xmas when they need to be taken off the boards and individually labelled. I have also finally shifted a couple of overdue papers; the latest, for those interested in pyralids, can be downloaded for free at this link - [A new species of *Elegia* \(Lepidoptera, Pyralidae, Phycitinae\) from the Balkan Peninsula](#). The Spanish material complements my reference collection with material from a different geographical region and will hopefully raise its overall value to biodiversity researchers. Members of this group are reminded that my collections will be re-opened for *bona fide* research by appointment as soon as the pandemic has passed us by.

Of course, people have continued to send me specimens – mostly scale-less micros that need dissection. The backlog always increases – never seems to decrease! I am proposing to return to this lot next week (ish) so don't worry – you are not forgotten.

I did also make a sneaky trip (alone, self-isolated, encased in my Landrover and to a place where humans do not tread) to look for Brindled Ochre (*Dasytopia templi*). This moment of self-indulgence did not pass without proper punishment. On the selected night, after 9 hours driving, with a very cold overnight stop on the moors in the Cheviot Hills and gawd knows how much money spent on diesel fuel, the wind picked up and scattered the traps across the dunes at St Cyrus National Nature Reserve. It peaked with gusts at Storm Force 10 – there were no Brindled Ochres. The following day, after a fruitless drive around northern Scotland looking for a calm area to trap, I turned south and headed home. I had a forced (by fatigue) overnight stop at a place called Biggar and set out a couple of actinic traps as I slept in the Landrover, but the fates had decided that this was the ideal night for Scotland's first frost of the season. Somewhere around minus 5 at dawn – there were no moths of ANY species. I give up!

RECENT MOTHS

As I just said, above, there haven't been many! We are now into the autumn residents and, although there are many species available (see below), the numbers are as much down now as they have been all year. It surely must be one of the poorest years on record; it is utterly CRUCIAL that we carry on recording, accurately and without a break, through this period of miserableness so the long-term trends can eventually be identified and, most importantly, analysed. Tempting though it is to blame it all on climate change (and I have no doubt that this makes a huge contribution), we must make absolutely sure that we don't miss any other factors that might be masked by climatic bias. Give the boffins a chance – make sure they get a good quantity of accurate data to work with.

NOVEMBER MOTHS

These are about to become topical – they may already have started. You are reminded that in Herts and Middlesex we do NOT accept specific identifications of the three possible species [if you are unsure, go to the web site at www.hertsmothgroup.org.uk and search for “*Epirrita*”] UNLESS the male genitalia have been examined. What other counties do is their business – but here we insist on genitalia dissections. If in your annual lists, the sexes of “November” moths are not given, I shall have to assume that you did not dissect – these records will just be deleted. Sometimes, the Autumnal Moth does stand

out as different, but this is a scarce species with us and probably not a garden moth – preferring woodland habitats; verification is required in any case. **It is quite impossible to separate November Moth from Pale November Moth on the basis of wing pattern, position of discal spot or whatever.** Both species have identical forms and there is considerable variation within the rather restricted theme. If we are going to name them at all then we may as well get it right!

Proper dissection is not necessary. Simply use an artist’s brush to brush away the scales on the tip of the abdomen, on the underside, to render visible the last abdominal segment. This is adorned with two spines on the rear edge and the position of these, with care, is diagnostic. If there are no such spines, the moth is either a female [ID not possible] or something quite different that you have wrongly identified. Look at the dissection website at <https://mothdissection.co.uk/> and select “macro moths” then “Geometridae”. The list has scientific and English names in separate columns and you can also arrange the lists alphabetically if you wish. Once you have reached either “November Moth” or “Epirrita” there is a comparison image which shows the differences clearly.

If you are a relative newbie and want to tick off all three species for your garden (you will get November and Pale November at least, though Autumnal Moth is harder), you need to select potential candidates for each species, at different dates, and either examine them yourself or post them to me (remembering to include full data) until at least two are ticked off. Hardened experts, intent on monitoring numbers, will have to check every specimen – an activity that may be rather pointless for the moment, as there are no indications of a decline in any of the species.

MOST GARDENS WILL HAVE BOTH NOVEMBER MOTH AND PALE NOVEMBER MOTH – so don’t assume that you only have the one. Both these species should be present in most areas of both Herts and Middlesex. It would be a complete surprise if you don’t get at least one of them – but both are equally likely. Indeed, if there is a nearby birch tree, then Pale is the more likely.

OTHER SEASONAL MOTHS TO LOOK OUT FOR BETWEEN NOW AND XMAS

Newcomers in particular – this is for you. Knowing what is “allowed” might help you with naming what you catch. Of course, there may be other species too, so don’t be too hasty. From now to December look out for this lot, record and if at all possible count:

LASIOCAMPIDS

December Moth

GEOMETERS

Dark Marbled Carpet

Red-Green Carpet

Winter Moth

Northern Winter

Feathered Thorn

Scarce Umber

Mottled Umber

NOCTUIDS

Brindled Green

Sprawler

Black Rustic

Pale Pinion

Tawny Pinion

Grey Shoulder-knot

Blair’s Shoulder-knot

Green-brindled Crescent

Merveille du Jour

Large Ranunculus

Satellite

Chestnut

Dark Chestnut

Red-line Quaker

Yellow-line Quaker

Brick

Sallow
Pink-barred Sallow
Brown-spot Pinion
Beaded Chestnut
Orange Sallow
Barred Sallow
Dusky-lemon Sallow
Rosy Rustic

This is not an exhaustive list – other species may also turn up in your light trap. Others might be found in car headlights or by torch light in country lanes – especially just after dark for about an hour. Expected flight times are available in the species accounts either in the Herts Moth Book or on the web site at www.hertsmothgroup.org.uk

“SUGAR” AND SIMILAR TACTICS

Remember, at this time of year the sugar patch can be very productive. I prefer wine ropes by that is just me. Whichever you choose, set up before dusk and look IMMEDIATELY after darkness has set in as this is when most moths will want to feed. Then it is worth checking again around midnight. Patches/ropes might be dry by now, so replenish and then you can look again in the hour before daybreak, as many species will feed again after a hectic night of fling/mating ready to survive the potentially cold day ahead.

I CHALLENGE YOU TO FIND:

Keep all specimens of these few, alive or dead, until a second person has verified the identification, please. THESE ARE OUR RULES – please follow them or your potentially important record might be rejected.

Plumed Prominent – mid-November – Field Maple trees on calcareous soil. I hang on to the hope that it might yet be found in northern Hertfordshire.

Marigold Shark – expanding (range) species not yet recorded in our area, but the only shark found in winter – flies October to April. Eyes open!

Flounced Chestnut – now onwards, but probably now extinct in our two counties. Not seen here since 2006.

Pale-lemon Sallow – mature, native Black Poplar trees – probably extinct in our two counties?

Please report any captures of these four immediately as we will wish to check in most cases.

IMPORTANT MICROS IN 2019

Every year, the journal *Entomologist's Record* publishes an annual review of the more important micro records for the whole of the British Isles, broken down by vice county. This is done in November. The review's authors, Tony Davis and George Tordoff have recently sent me, as County Moth Recorder, a reminder to send them relevant records from Herts and Middlesex. This is, of course, rather easy in these days of computer databases. However, if for some reason a particular record has not been entered into the database it will, of course, not be included in the data export. Also, whilst new species are fairly easy, I could well miss important ecological or other data that you have gained on common species. It goes without saying that if I have not yet had your record then I cannot include it without your help. So, as a double check, I need YOUR help. I need to send them the following:

- New county records of micros;

- Second and third county records (at least) as this might be an early indication of colonisation.
- Comments on individual species (e.g., though there are many records and the species would not be listed on that alone, *Metalampra italica* is spreading southwards from central Herts – and that is the sort of thing that is certainly worth drawing to my attention);
- new foodplants or other discoveries;
- first county record in many years;
- seriously out of expected date range records;
- anything else judged interesting or important by you.

Remember, this exercise is only for **MICROS** and only for the year **2019**.

I am not passing the buck – it is more a case of running a check on myself in case I miss YOUR records. Leave nothing to chance. Please let me have these records over this weekend if possible, and don't forget to append your name so that YOU get the credit – not me!

DEAD-HEADING

It seems that not even Boris the Bonkers knows what the rules are at the moment, so as far as the rest of the year is concerned it is anyone's guess. The 1920's flu pandemic ran for 4 years and I think we should be prepared for this current problem to last well into the year 2021 as a minimum. I did hope we could run a leaf-miner field trip at the end of October, but this now seems most unwise. Barring unexpected changes, there will be no outings of this moth group until at least May 2021.

So that means you are on your own, but fear not as guidance is at hand. NOW is the time for solo expeditions with a pair of secateurs and a knapsack full of clean, empty pillow cases (patterns optional). Snip off the dead heads, plus about the top 6 inches of stem, and put into a pillowcase. Keep going on that same plant species until the bag is full, then tie it off with a spare shoe lace or similar. Then move on to plant species 2 and repeat *ad infinitum* until either tired or challenged by the police (it has happened). Keep the filled pillow cases out of doors if possible, exposed to the weather but away from extremes, then bring in during about February and wait for the moths to emerge over the following weeks.

You may be surprised at what you find (and there may be some new foodplant records too?). It is worth purchasing "A Field Guide to the Smaller Moths of Great Britain and Ireland" by Langmaid, Palmer & Young (ISBN: 978-1-899935-08-6). This lists and cross-references the foodplants of all our micros and is a superb guide to which plant species you should target. Try and target moth species not yet on the county lists if possible!

SPECIMENS FOR NAMING

Although I am not receiving visitors, I have no problem with telephone calls and e-mails and I am always happy to receive material in the large black box by my front door. I check it at least daily.

That's all for now.

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