

MOTH MUMBLINGS MARCH

WELCOME

Yesterday was gloriously sunny – today is a typical, miserable English day with wind and rain. Two weeks ago I dug over a flower bed (only a little bit each day, mind you, or I would probably have keeled over!) – a few days later we iced over again. I try to convince myself that we need all this rainfall that we have been getting for ages now, in order to replenish the aquifer (or, what most of us remember it being called, “the water table”), which was so depleted in the excessively dry summers of the early 2000s. It would be nice to have all of Hertfordshire’s chalk streams flowing again.

Yet, in spite of this weather-related doom and gloom there are actually moths flying. Unlike us, they are not slowed down by Covid. Even if we cannot get out yet, the opportunity arises for the best ever garden recording session ... many of us are, currently, at home when it is time to turn the trap on (not stuck in an office or a train) and we are theoretically also able to bring in the trap before the birds eat all the moths (put it in shade, bung the holes and go back to bed!). Trapping in March can be very interesting: low numbers, certainly, but low enough to count (please) whilst there will be a few specialist species that are simply not found later in the year.

So – do please try to run a trap every night and count numbers of each species. If you need to focus on something, here are two ideas:

MARCH 2021 TARGET SPECIES – FLYING NOW

MOTTLED GREY – *Colostygia multistrigaria*

This moth is on the wing now, throughout march, in spite of the cold weather. Allegedly rare in Herts; allegedly absent from Middlesex. In reality, probably overlooked because of date and non-descript appearance. Probably more likely to be found out and about in woodlands rather than in gardens but please at least familiarise yourself with the beast (Interweb, picture books etc) and if you come across any candidates then at least take a photo (ideally, retain moth and show to me, or to an expert one lives nearer to you). If posting LIVE moths please pad adequately and then double wrap (outside layer for the postie, who does not need to know, inside layer clearly labelled LIVE moth (for my benefit, so it does not escape when I open the package).

2021 TARGET SPECIES – COMING SHORTLY

SLOE CARPET – *Aleucis distinctata*

By about the second week of April it will be time to look for the Sloe Carpet, which is, on paper, absent from both of our counties). That is only a month away! “Sloe” is the Old English name for Blackthorn – the caterpillar foodplant. Use the rest of March to locate areas of ancient or semi-ancient sloe bushes. These may form patches in fields, or at woodland edges or in hedges. You need the older hedges, ideally. To age a hedge, use Hooper’s Rule: count the number of species of tree or shrub found in a 100-foot length of hedge. This number (averaged over three or more sample stretches) multiplied by 100 gives a rough estimate of the age of the hedge. So a hedge with an average of five woody species might be tentatively regarded as 500 years old. Beware of fruit trees – these may have been planted by our ancestors.

Sloe Carpet moths can sometimes be beaten out by day, but light trapping is the best method. Actinic traps work just as well as mv traps. It looks similar to an Early Moth, but that should have “finished” by April and in any case the male antennae differ (look it up).

2021 TARGET SPECIES – LOADS-A-LARVAE!

Now, throughout March, is also an excellent time to wander your local area with a head torch (or other torch) and a largish net. Firmly, but gently, sweep the vegetation with your net, inspecting it after every two or three sweeps. You will be surprised how quickly you find moth caterpillars. If you are careful, you will sweep groups of the same plant species, or sometimes individual plants, so that you know what the caterpillars were feeding on and will thus be able to feed them and rear adult moths.

Many species will wake up and feed relatively high up on their foodplants as soon as it has got dark. Others may wait for an hour for “proper” darkness. Yet others will in fact wait until midnight. Apart from the fact that the timing is usually the same within any given species, there seems no logic that would lead to predict the times that each species feeds. It is worth recording both the time and the plant (use the comments column in Mapmate/Excel).

Rearing adults is usually easy – unless you find a fussy species. See through plastic boxes are the best. Line with sterile compost or damp sand (sterilise by boiling then allow to cool) about 4cms deep (to allow for eventual pupation) and then add the caterpillars plus plenty of fresh foodplant (search and remove predators first – ladybirds, shield bug larvae etc.). Refresh food frequently, removing any eaten leaves completely unless they are spun up with silk. Keep out of direct sunlight and don’t allow major temperature variations. There is an element of “learn-as-you-go” but it is great fun and relieves lockdown boredom considerably. It is also good science – we know very little about the foodplants of moths in or counties. Don’t assume that they have read to text books.

In your annual return next winter, please record the date the larva was found (NOT when the adult emerged as this latter may be artificial). Also please record the foodplant. These data will be most welcome indeed.

CHECKLIST OF BRITISH MOTHS

To my amazement, there are people out there who seem to be quite unaware of the existence of the checklist of British moth (and butterflies). These people, it seems, rely on web sites and the like as well as the inbuilt checklist in the computer program Mapmate. This might explain some of the “interesting” spellings in submitted moth lists! I confess I cannot understand how anyone can study moths without being aware of the total list of available species. I am certainly not going to name names, but the checklist that we all work to is as follows:

Agassiz, D. J. L., Beavan, S. D. & Heckford, R. J., 2013. *A Checklist of the Lepidoptera of the British Isles*. Royal Entomological Society/Field Studies Council.

Known to many as the ABH checklist, after its authors’ initials, it replaces the more familiar Bradley and Fletcher (B&F) checklist, created in 1976 but frequently updated. The ABH checklist is used by the Mapmate recording software

Equally important, and probably even more overlooked, are the annual updates (additions and corrections) to the ABH checklist. These are published annually, in the January issue of the journal *Entomologists Record*. I declare an interest – I am the Editor – but a subscription (£30 per year for 6 parts) is highly recommended. Cheques payable to Amateur Entomologists Society and send with your name and address to “Entomologist’s Record, PO Box 8774, London SW7 5ZG”.

MANLEY VERSION 3

I am told that Chris Manley's "*British Moths*" has just been published as a third edition. I have no idea if it is just a new printing or if there are revisions within its pages. Can anyone advise? Either way, it is a book worth having, especially if you don't have either of the two earlier versions.

That's all for now.

Enjoy!

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