

MOTH MUMBLINGS MAY 2021

CAN WE NOW GO MOTH-ING AWAY FROM OUR OWN GARDEN?

At last, the answer is **yes**.

- Moth trapping alone is entirely legal and so is travelling to any part of England or Scotland (probably Wales too, but I have no information).
- At today's date you can be joined by members of your family "bubble" or up to six socially-distanced strangers.
- However, from next Monday, these restrictions will be lifted and you will be able to go mothing in larger groups. Masks are not required outdoors, but do remember to wear one at the petrol station, if you need to get fuel on the journey.

BUT IS IT WORTH IT?

May 2021 seems to be a high ranking contender for "worst May ever for moths". The weird thing is that whilst almost all the expected species are in fact turning up at traps, almost nobody is getting a good list of several species in the same trap. As a result, a look at the county as a whole suggests that everything is as it should be – but in reality we all know that it is not. At the same time, moth numbers as a whole are significantly depressed. My own garden trap this morning produced only 16 moths of 10 species (8 macros and 2 micros). Direct comparison with recent years is tricky, as I seem to have been away collecting overseas at this period in most years, but taking dates that are nearly the same (within a few days either side), I see that I ought to be expecting around 100 – 150 moths of around 30 – 35 species.

That said, the answer to my question above is most certainly YES – it IS worth carrying on (and reporting lists to me). This is especially so in view of my comments above that "a look at the county as a whole suggests that everything is as it should be". Those that follow us in 50 or more years' time will not thank us if we did not record these depressing times as accurately as possible. We are the generation responsible for documenting the changing situation – even if we are unable to fully interpret it for the time being. It is imperative that you continue to list moths on a nightly basis in your garden and elsewhere and then make sure that your data are submitted to me (usually at the end of the year unless we have agreed otherwise). My task is, after the usual verification process, to ensure that your data are added to the county database (and, by annual uploads, to the national database), so that they can be accessed by researchers into the future.

If you don't already send your records to me, please start to do so. This usually means a list sent in January, after the year has ended, though some people send monthly lists (which is also satisfactory). Newcomers are welcome to telephone me and discuss how to go about this potentially boring yet essential task. **NOTE THAT I DO NOT PICK UP RECORDS FROM SOCIAL MEDIA OR OTHER WEB-BASED PLACES.** I also do not go chasing data sent to other places (such as iRecord); these theoretically get sent to me in due course, but usually without details of how to contact recorders (data protection rules) so I cannot check records properly. I expect you to e-mail (or post) records directly to me so I can discuss them with you if the need arises.

Many of you will already send me occasional e-mails containing odd records of interest. This is excellent – I do like to know what is going on. However, these e-mails can cause an administrative problem in that I have no idea if I am supposed to regard them as formal reports (and add them to the database) or mere conversation. Thus, I have to keep all these e-mails until I get your annual lists and

then spend time cross-checking so that the database does not contain duplicates. IN AN IDEAL WORLD, these e-mails, which I do welcome, should be informal; the interesting records that they contain should, please, still be included in your annual (or monthly) formal submissions. Failing that, simply mentioning which course of action you have selected would solve the entire issue! Remember, nobody pays me for this – I do it for “love”. Please try to make my life just a little easier if you can.

HOW NOT TO CATCH MOTHS

As discussed above, May is normally a good month for it! Sadly, the weather forecasters had not read the rules!

My trip up to Scotland on 1st May was wet and cold, but I held out hope for an improvement. The crossing to the Isle of Bute (vice-county 100) was calm (though Covid rules would not allow me to leave the Land Rover to appreciate the view). Eider Ducks were courting in the harbour on the Scottish mainland and Whimbrel were flying about on the exposed foreshore. A mere 45 minutes later the water was still calm as I drove off the ferry onto Bute. I found what looked like a nice spot and parked up to look for micros (of which almost one are recorded on Bute). Within a minute I had swapped my fleece for my insulated and windproof fishing coat (I don't fish, but these guys do some good cold weather gear). Bramble leaf-miner (*Stigmella aurella* agg.) was immediately ticked off and then I returned to the vehicle for my ski-trousers (I don't ski either, but these are designed for the snow so ought to be good). When I realised that I also needed gloves, I gave up and drove off, heater on full, to the pre-arranged meet with the local moth chaps.

Suitably socially distanced, we drove through a forestry plantation dropping off a total of 17 moth traps, affecting three separate map tetrads. Shouldn't have bothered – a reasonable haul of Hebrew Character dominated the miserable 12 species caught. The only good moths were a couple of Early Tooth-striped and a Glaucous Shears (but the wood has nesting Goshawk and Raven, so it was not all bad). It remained cold; the rain started at 05.30 hours and by mid-morning had developed into a force 8 easterly gale with horizontal rain and sleet; anything over about 1000 feet had a nice covering of snow! No trapping on night 2 – and not exactly a warm and comfortable night in the Land Rover either! Of course, this was the point that the gas “ran out” and I had to brave the elements to change the cylinder so I could brew a cup of tea!

Night 3 was in a rather nice, wet woodland strip alongside the sea in the north-west, where we set out 15 traps in a line along a farm track. The wind had dropped, but the temperature hovered around zero. We also put 2 mv lights in nearby Glen More and left them until morning. For our efforts, we caught about 30 moths, of which over half were Hebrew Characters. The two mv traps in Glen More produced a nice round zero captures!

After a tour of the island, looking for places out of the wind (I failed) and searching for any micros (I found two – both in the town in people's gardens whilst desperately searching for a fish and chip shop), the wind picked up again to about force 6. I gave up and caught the ferry back to the mainland the next morning. There followed an interesting drive home through snow in south-west Scotland and along the A66 road from Westmoreland to Durham! Not my best moth trip ever! For those whose interests extend beyond Herts & Middlesex here is the full list from the two nights (total of 34 trap nights if all added together):

MOTHS ON BUTE 2 & 4 MAY 2021: C. W. PLANT

NEPTICULIDAE

Ectoedemia septembrella – mines on *Hypericum* (St. John's-wort) in a garden

CHOREUTIDAE

Choreutis fabriciana – (Nettle –tap): larvae in spun shoots of *Urtica dioica*.

GEOMETRIDAE

Chloroclysta miata (Linnaeus, 1758)

Autumn Green Carpet 1

<i>Petrophora chlorosata</i>	Brown Silver-line	1
<i>Trichopteryx carpinata</i> (Borkhausen, 1794)	Early Tooth-striped	2
<i>Selenia dentaria</i> (Fabricius, 1775)	Early Thorn	1
<i>Ectropis crepuscularia</i> ([Denis & Schiffermüller], 1775)	Engrailed	1
NOTODONTIDAE		
<i>Odontesia carmelita</i> (Esper, [1798])	Scarce Prominent	1
NOCTUIDAE		
<i>Cerastis rubricosa</i> ([Denis & Schiffermüller], 1775)	Red Chestnut	about 50
<i>Orthosia incerta</i> (Hufnagel, 1766)	Clouded Drab	3 or 4
<i>Orthosia cerasi</i> (Fabricius, 1775)	Common Quaker	1
<i>Orthosia gracilis</i> ([Denis & Schiffermüller], 1775)	Powdered Quaker	about 15
<i>Orthosia gothica</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Hebrew Character	about 60
<i>Papestra biren</i> (Goeze, 1781)	Glaucous Shears	1

AN EASY MICRO

Caterpillars of the Nettle-tap (*Anthophila fabriciana*) are active NOW. Check out the local Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) patch during the daytime. Look for shoots that are spun up at the tip with silk and which usually also contain frass (droppings). Using gloves/secateurs, snip off the top few inches (or is it centimetres these days) into a clear plastic sandwich box and wait. The adult moths should emerge later this month or in June depending on how the season progresses.

Nettle-tap caterpillars are small (remember, it is a “micro”) and are greenish with black spots all over. Other species feeding in spun shoots of nettles are much bigger at this time of year (e.g., Burnished Brass, Mother of Pearl).

A RATHER GOOD NEW WEB SITE FOR MOTHS

Check it out ... <https://westmidlandsmoths.co.uk/index.php>

COLIN'S CALOPTILIA CAMPAIGN

Thanks to everyone who has got this project going by sending material. To date, I have received just over 50 specimens of *Caloptilia* species (all bar very few from either Herts or Middx). These have all been dissected by Graeme Smith and the genitalia photographed for reference. The finished-with moths are currently stored with me. Species seen so far are:

C. alchimiella male -
C. falconipennella - female
C. honoratella male female
C. populetorum - female
C. robustella - female
C. rufipennella male -
C. semifascia male female
C. stigmatella male -

We aim to photograph the genitalia of both sexes of all the British species; we may then produce a brief ID guide for moth group members to use. Whilst many species are fairly easy to name, there are a few species where identification is a potential problem. These are mainly those that have two colour forms – the typically marked adult and a near unicolorous form. **These are our main targets.** Existing ID keys (e.g., volume 2 of MBGBI, the Norwegian “encyclopaedia and the keys to micros of Holland), usually give the right answer, but occasionally fail or are hard to interpret. Our main aim is to produce

an ID guide that is both 100% reliable and also easy to use. [By the way – my personal recommendation is for the Norwegian work, but not all UK species are included].

Please collect all the Caloptilia that enter your traps in2021. If you prefer your moths alive that is fine – just post immediately or deliver to the black box by my front door.

Don/t be selective – we (Graeme and myself) will do that. We will simply release any moths that we do not want – but we DO want to see them before that happens.

We especially need to see **missing sexes of the species listed above**, plus the following which we have **not yet seen at all** (both sexes):

C. azaleella
C. betulicola
C. cuculipennella
C. elongella
C. hemidactyla

If you are fortunate enough to find larval stages (mines or folded leaves) please try to rear the adults (or pass the collected mines to me for that purpose). If you collect several mines from a single tree it is likely (though not certain) that all will belong to the same single species.

NOTE TO COMPLETE BEGINNERS: If in any doubt, please collect it. I am happy to receive unidentified micros from Herts & Middx (provided that they are fully labelled with place, date and collectors name). Unsolicited material welcome but if you want me to name **live** moths please do me the courtesy of telephoning before calling round with them ... I will then do what I can immediately, but some may have to sit in my fridge for a few days before I can work round to them.

LET'S LURE!

Hot on the heels of the supposedly rare but actually widespread and common *Pammene giganteana*, the somewhat similar *Pammene argyrana* is now flying (several reports) and is attracted to the "ARG" lure if you have it.

That's your lot for now. I am off for a snooze whilst the weather sorts itself out. Do please send snippets of information or me to include in my mumblings. I do not promise to use, but probably will, even if only to support more general statements.

Happy mothing,

Colin

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