

# MOTH MUMBLINGS: MIDSUMMER (almost) 2023

## WEB SITE UPDATE

I am gratified by the response to my request for opinions on the web site proposals. **In summary**, a very large number of you responded, all were in favour of a website update, all were happy with adopting the suggested “Norfolk” model, nobody disagreed and many of you promised a financial contribution.

The exercise has been very revealing on related fronts – in particular in relation to the *Herts Moth Book* and the proposed update of it. I find that this plan is less popular than expected. Our existing book *The Moths of Hertfordshire* was published in 2008 and established a baseline of moth information to the end of 2006. This exercise cannot (and has not) been faulted. Whatever happens into the future, that book will remain the baseline of moth information at that date. However, few people ever refer to it on a daily basis and, of course, it excludes Middlesex. Macros moths of that latter county were covered in my much earlier (1993) book *Larger Moths of the London Area* now hopelessly out of date and currently being updated by myself with assistance from Les Evans-Hill.

A sign of the times, I am sure, but people evidently much prefer to log on to a web site for **current** information – most frequently, it seems, starting with the Norfolk web site and then afterwards looking at our own, Herts & Middlesex, web site and relating generalised data to their current geography. It seems that the Herts Moth Book just doesn't do it for people who want to know what is happening “now”. Thus, the need is two-fold: an update of the book for scientific reasons at an appropriate date in the longer term future to establish a record for posterity **and** an effective web site that is up-to-date, current and ideally, interactive. I therefore propose to shelve the book project for the time being and instead will concentrate on the web site.

I have now had a lengthy discussion with Jim Wheeler, the designer of the Norfolk Moths web site. Unless I get floods of complaints this weekend I will, therefore, progress the new web site.

The cost of the web site update is much less than I expected for an update of the book. That said, it is not cheap! In the interests of clarity and transparency, especially as our group has no formal bank account and at the moment all expenses go through me, informally, Jim's quote (in pdf format) is appended to this newsletter (assuming I remember to do so).

An especially desirable aspect of the new site, it seems, will be the ability for each of you to post current reports; there will be no need to wait for a newsletter and the site will update daily.

Also strongly supported, is the facility for you to upload your moth records – that should please those of you who use a format different to the one I prefer. Do note, however, that I am not cut out of the loop and that data entered via the web site will not show on the web maps until validated by me. However, it does mean that things can happen faster. At the moment no dots are added to the maps until after the end of the year (when you send me your annual lists and I eventually give Andrew Wood a copy of the revised database to support the maps on the existing web site. Under the new system, the dots can be added to the live web pages the instant that I approve them. This does, of course, still call for effort on my part.

Jim suggests that the new web site will be up and running by the end of this year. It will not be a lot faster as it is now field season and Jim will be out looking at moths – not computer screens.

In the meantime, we need to prepare revised (updated) species texts (I wonder who gets that job!) and as mentioned before obtain photographs of all the species, in all life cycle stages, taken in Hertfordshire or Middlesex (for long-extinct species we may have to make do with photos taken elsewhere, but as far as possible, all photos must be taken of moths inside our area).

I will be asking the two bodies that elect me as the formal County Moth Recorder (Herts Natural History Society and London Natural History Society) to contribute. My thanks to those amongst you who have already sent me donations; I do welcome more, though the final fee averages out at a bit more than a tenner each. For the time being I will sit on the received cheques; in due course these will be either cashed or returned when we have a better idea of the wider funding issue.

## SNIPPETS

**Green Oak Tortrix (*Tortrix viridana*)** made a sudden appearance in many light traps on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2023. Years ago, mass appearances of Green Oak Tortrix were the expected norm. In the springtime, a walk in the woods “to listen to the rain” was a popular activity with kids (the “rain” being the sound of a zillion frass pellets – “poo” as far as the kids were concerned – being released from the high canopy by the caterpillars of this species.

Talking of oaks, the leaf mines of *Acrocercops brongniardella* are becoming obvious just now:



Very distinctive – specially as there is almost nothing else on the leaves at the moment.

## Migrants ahoy

I am told (all you social media buffs can probably confirm) that there has been an influx of **Rannoch Loopers (*Itame brunneata*)** affecting the entire eastern coast – from Kent to Northumberland. Traps out – eyes open.

**Clearwing moths** are now very much active and coming to the Artificial pheromone lures put out for this purpose.



**Hornet Clearwing**, adult on poplar trunk, Hampstead Heath, June 2023 (photo Adrian Brooker).



**Hornet Clearwing**, chrysalis cases (exuviae) protruding from holes at the base of a poplar tree, Hampstead Heath

I am aware of captures in our area of **Hornet, Current, Yellow-legged, Orange-tailed** and **Red-belted clearwings** in the last week. Red-belted may be having an especially good year. Some of these may be earlier than in previous years. It is certainly worth putting out any lures you have this week and the coming weekend. See comments below about **DUSKY CLEARWING**.

A **Breckland Plume** (*Oxyptilus distans*) in Ware on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2023 was unexpected but, as experienced moth-ers know, some nights are “movement nights” with many moth species, often those normally linked to wetland sites, pitching up in garden traps in suburbia. This is the likely reason behind a Breckland Plum in Ware. It probably also explains an unexpected **Pinion-**

**streaked Snout** (*Schrankia costaestrigalis*) and an **Obscure Wainscot** (*Leucania obsoleta*) in Letchworth a couple of days ago.

All moths are equal, of course, but some are inevitably more equal than others. Pride of place in this newsletter goes to the tortrix moth *Epinotia granitana*. First recorded in Britain at Elveden, Suffolk in 2007, it was subsequently found at Marlow, Buckinghamshire in 2010 and then on our own boundary at Chorleywood (but just into Buckinghamshire) in 2021 by Andy King. The fourth British example, and first for Hertfordshire, came to William Bishop’s garden moth trap in Welwyn during 2022. The capture of another example in his garden a week ago on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2023, the 5<sup>th</sup> British record, suggests that it is likely to be resident in the Welwyn area. A select few active moth-ers were immediately e-mailed and asked to look for this species – which is associated with Spruce trees. Lo and behold, a couple of nights later, on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2023, Ben Sale caught two at Chippenham Fen up the road in Cambridgeshire. The original photo and data can be found in the *Entomologist’s Record* for January 2022, pp 16 – 17. For those with a copy of Manley’s book, in the third edition it is image 49.236 on page 205. The image below shows the Chorleywood example. It is a rather small tortrix – but the wing pattern is distinctive.



*Epinotia granitana*, Chorleywood, 2021.

I consider this an overlooked resident. I expect it to be resident in the south-east wherever there are established Spruce trees. Spruce trees are frequently used as Xmas trees and may be sold with roots and may have been planted in gardens. It is worth tapping the lower branches of Spruce tree in the late afternoon/evening – as well as, of course, running light traps.

**Puss moth** (*Cerura vinula*) appears to be having a good year. Many people are finding this large beast in their garden light trap catches for the first time in the last week.

**Chimney Sweeper** (*Odezia atrata*) flying in strength at its known site in Trent Park (Enfield area) Middlesex on 8<sup>th</sup> June. In Hertfordshire, it was noted near Knebworth Park at Wintergreen Wood on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2023. This

delicate little geometrid moth is threatened by habitat degradation/loss.

Also in the Trent Park area, the **Orange Conch** (*Commophila aeneana*) is also on the wing, but perhaps now “going over”. It may be worth the effort of using a swep net on patches of Ragwort plants in the next few days; the moth may be found on the flowers in daytime.

**Four-spotted Moth** (*Tyta luctuosa*) remains vanishingly rare in our area, confined to the north-east corner. On 7<sup>th</sup> June, it was noted flying just across the county boundary at Cumberton Bottom, in Cambs/North Essex. Liz Goodyear. Surely, it must be active at its Herts sites?

**Liquorice Piercer Moth** (*Grapholita pallifrontana*) has, as far as I am aware, not put in an appearance at its known Hertfordshire site so far this year. If you know different please tell me. It is possible that some targeted visits may have been made a few days too early? I visited a new site, in the north of the county along the Bedfordshire border on three dates recently. I am sure that the first two were too early; on the latest, on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023, the weather conditions appeared to be fine, but no adult moths were spotted.



**Liquorice Piercer** (*Grapholita pallifrontana*), Hertfordshire, 2017. The brilliant white head is not visible in this image – view the moth head-on.

### MIDSUMMER MADNESS: THE QUEST FOR THE DUSKY CLEARWING

Our target, in Hertfordshire and Middlesex, from the urban centre to the arable wastes, for the next 4 weeks, until mid-July, is the **Dusky Clearwing** (*Synanthedon tabaniformis*).

It became extinct in Britain in 1924. Or did it? All the text books prior to around 20 years ago considered ALL the clearwings down as phenomenally rare (with the single exception of Currant Clearwing (considered a pest and easily found when pruning currant bushes – hollow stems containing frass stand out amongst unaffected stems that remain solid). Then we discovered artificial pheromone lures. Result – almost all clearwings are regarded as widespread and common over the greater part of Britain.

During 2021, a female (only males come to the lures, of course) was found, at rest on the basal branches of a poplar tree at an undisclosed site in Warwickshire. The tree was one of a group growing in the corner of a field in farmland – quite isolated from any areas of “habitat” and not connected with any “green corridor”. The moth is considered to be breeding at this site. Read the write-up in the July 2022 *Entomologist's Record* **134**: 210 – 212, from which the following photo is taken



**Dusky Clearwing** breeding habitat, Warwickshire

So, why has nobody yet picked it up at the TAB lure? One reason might be that the lure is not especially effective? Another is that, unlike most clearwing lures it *might* not hold on to its charge of chemicals and so rapidly become ineffective. I am not sure either theory is true, but I have just ordered a fresh lure from Anglian Lepidopterist's Supplies (<https://www.angleps.com/>) just in case. I think it more likely that people just haven't bothered to purchase this lure – on the basis that it will probably not attract anything?



**Dusky Clearwing** female, Warwickshire. The species is distinctive in both sexes as the only one in Europe with entirely dusky forewings. Some wear may take place, but the character persists.

In Europe Dusky Clearwing affects town and country equally and is found in almost all places where poplar trees are present. Town parks in several European cities generate this species at lures during the lunch-break! It seems to like hybrid poplars as well as proper “black” poplars and may well be found affecting the same trees groups as Hornet Clearwings.

**I challenge you all** – I am convinced it is out there. Target poplar trees (even in urban areas) with the TAB lure between about midday and tea-time. Sooner or later someone will find it – will it be you? I will, of course, need photographic or other evidence, please.

### EUPARAL AVAILABLE AGAIN

For all those who had given up and assumed that the microscope slide mountant “Euparal” had been added to the government’s banned list, I can now reveal a new source. After being on “back-order” for three months or more, Agar Scientific finally delivered my order. I know that they currently have a small stock, though I have no idea how long it will last.

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### BIOGRAPHIES

I am still interested in receiving self-penned biographies of Hertfordshire and Middlesex moth recorders. Thanks to the two of you who sent me theirs in the last couple of months. Take a look at the “people” section in the Herts Moth Book to see the level required – though feel free to expand if you wish. If you record moths in Herts or Middlesex, I would very much like to include you in this coverage. Your status and ability are of no consequence; you are, like it or not, a part of the long-term record of moth recording in our area and for that reason alone I welcome your details. Remember, if you “move on”, someone else might well write about you (e.g., in some future moth book or, ultimately, as an obituary) – ask yourself if you trust anyone else to get it right!

I am also keen to receive a colour photo of the featured person – either a standard portrait, or an “action shot” or, better still, both. Equally important, I would like to be sent an image of the garden, or wherever it is the person runs the regular moth trap. These “habitat” souvenirs could become immensely important with the passage of time, so try to get a shot that sets the site in context (e.g., by hanging off the chimney stack? Or perhaps if you have a drone?).

### HNHS conference in memory of Trevor James Saturday 9 September 2023

You, your family and friends are warmly invited to take part in a special conference to remember the outstanding Hertfordshire naturalist Trevor James BEM who sadly died in June 2020.

The event will take place **from 11am to 4pm on Saturday 9 September** in the Swendell Hall at Redbourn Parish Centre, The Park, Redbourn AL3 7LR. The programme will include memories of Trevor as an inspiring 'all round' natural historian who was always willing to share his extensive knowledge with others. His crowning achievements included publication of the first Hertfordshire atlases for flora and beetles. He was county recorder for plants and beetles for 40 years and, in earlier days, bird recorder. He was the first Chair of



the National Forum for Biological Recording and made an important contribution to wildlife recording across the UK through his work on internet-based schemes.

Appropriately, there will be keynote presentations on Trevor's national role as well as his specialist wildlife interests in Hertfordshire. Besides flora and beetles, the conference will consider striking changes in county bird records since the 1980s when Trevor was recorder. A concluding discussion will invite views on how best to secure his legacy, taking forward wildlife recording in Herts and building a future for the HNHS as it approaches its 150th anniversary, in two year's time. [A full programme and list of speakers can be found on the website.](#)

There will a £5 admission charge on the door to cover the cost of venue hire and refreshments. Participants should bring their own packed lunch. To give an idea of numbers attending, please [e-mail David Utting](#) to say you are able to attend.

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