

MOTH MUMBLINGS – MID/LATE AUGUST 2022

Past issues of this informal and irregularly produced newsletter of the Herts & Middlesex Moth Group are uploaded to our website at www.hertsmothgroup.org.uk and may be downloaded from there if you so wish.

Please feel free to pass on/circulate this and any other issues to anyone who may be interested. The more readers the merrier. To get on the list yourself, e-mail me (Colin Plant) at the address at the end of this newsletter.

WELCOME

So – that was summer then? It is hard to decide if the last few weeks were poor for moths because of the drought – or because it is the seasonal “August quiet”. Perhaps a combination. In between occasional captures of “good” moths, many of you have been telling me that things have returned to the poor level we were experiencing before the sun came out. If the reason was that the ground was too dry and hard to allow moths to emerge from subterranean pupae ... well then they forgot to tell the **Common Wainscots** *Mythimna pallens*, which are having a year of super-abundance. Also bucking the trend by being super-numerous just recently have been things like *Blastobasis adustella* (I had over 200 on a vertical sheet at one site a week ago). Some may be rejoicing at the lower than usual numbers of **Large Yellow Underwing** *Noctua pronuba* and **Heart & Dart** *Agrotis exclamationis* in the traps? Even **Jersey Tigers** *Euplagia quadripunctaria* are down, numerically and the world take-over by **Box tree moths** *Cydalima perspectalis* seems to have screeched to a halt. A proper analysis will, of course, need to wait until I get all your lists in January 2023 but it is likely to be scientifically interesting – even if ecologically depressing?

Now, of course, the drought has ended (you can tell this, because now that it has finally rained the water companies have declared a drought). Last Tuesday it hit Bishops Stortford – no thunderbolts and lightning, just a torrential downpour for about one hour only. My 200 litre water butt filled in just 15 minutes. However, an hour later a prod about in my garden with a trowel showed that 3 inches down it was still utterly bone dry! Not likely to have much effect on subterranean pupae until it has soaked in a bit? Still, at least I now have some water for my redcurrants (oh no – wait a minute – those are tomatoes!).

Interestingly, the last ten days or so have been buzzing with immigrant activity. Of course, migration is prompted by conditions at the source site – not the arrival site, but most of Western Europe has been hotter than even Hertfordshire. [Official temperatures are measured inside a Stephenson Screen, of course, to reflect the ambient air temperature, but in direct sunlight the thermometer on my shed wall went well over 50°C on several days.] Most immigrant activity is detected in the coastal zone of Britain, of course, but here in Herts & Middlesex we have had a few oddments. Here are a few that I have been told about (not a full list):

UNQUESTIONABLY IMMIGRANTS

Loxostege sticticalis [Crambidae] – Hadham (near Bishops Stortford, 13th August 2022 (Jono Forgham).

Vestal Rhodometra sacraria – Highgate Wood Middlesex (Michael Hammerson) and Sawbridgeworth, Herts (Bob Clift) spring immediately to mind.

Bedstraw Hawk-moth, Letchworth, 9th August 2022 (Roger Millard). Only the 12th Hertfordshire record. There are 4 from Middlesex, all prior to year 1900 – mostly from the 1880s.

Humming-bird Hawk-moth *Macroglossum stellatarum* – Harpenden, 17th August 2022 (David Hunt, who notes two other sightings a few days earlier). Increasing sightings over the years. Evidence of temporary residency but to become fully established, this moth needs to adapt to our winter climate (or, of course, the climate may change to suit them).

Convolvulus Hawk-moth: One to light in Harpenden on 14th August 2022 (David Hunt). I have rumours of others. Some people have a pheromone lure for this large moth – may be worth digging it out of the freezer?

Eublemma cochylioides: Royston, 15th August 2022 (Dave Hatton, det. John Chainey). A noctuid moth **new to Britain** and a complete surprise. On the border with Cambridgeshire but definitely on our side of the line.

Scarce Bordered Straw Helicoverpa armigera – Harpenden, 16th August 2022 (David Hunt); Letchworth, 12th August 2022, Roger Millard); Welwyn, 19th August (William Bishop). This species has even reached as far north as Northumberland this year, where one was caught on 18th August by Tom Tams. I expect there will be several in our area that I am currently unaware of.

MAY BE IMMIGRANTS OR MAY BE UK INTERNAL WANDERERS

Scrobipalpa ocellatella – a usually rare (inland) member of the Gelechiidae that has, for some reason best known to itself, suddenly appeared across Leicestershire, Buckinghamshire and some other south-eastern counties. In Hertfordshire and Middlesex, I am aware of a female on 7th July 2022, at Welwyn (William Bishop, genitalia seen by me), Muswell Hill, two on separate nights in mid-August (Gerry Rawcliffe) and Berkhamsted, 25th May (Ian Gamble, genitalia seen by me). The evidence from other counties suggests that we have likely overlooked dozens of them?

Agdistis sp. This genus of plume moths tends to be coastal in Britain, though there are several additional species in Europe that thrive at inland sites. One caught by Simon Knott, on 13th August 2022 at Bengoe (Hertford) remains unidentified. Consequently, we are unsure if it is a wanderer from the Essex coast or an immigrant from “down south”.

WANDERERS EXTENDING THEIR RANGE

As I type this, the **Hoary Footman** (*Eilema caniola*) has just started to fly this year. It still affects only the north-west of our patch, but has been steadily spreading, so all pale “Scarce Footman” should be bagged for a closer look. This may be the year that it takes off! Meanwhile, another species that has colonised us from the north-west in the past ten years is:

Coronet (*Craniophora ligustri*) – one at Dumont Road, London, N16 on 14 August 2022 (Matthew Gandy). This record from the extreme south-east of our area fills a gap in the distribution map, at last, and allows us to rightfully claim that this species is now “found everywhere” in the two counties.

MAY BE IMMIGRANTS OR MAY BE RESIDENTS

2022 continues to be “the year of the tortrix”. Following on from discoveries earlier in the year that species such as *Pammene suspectana*, *Pammene giganteana* and *Grapholita lobarzewskii* are both geographically ubiquitous and numerically abundant in our two counties (thanks almost entirely to surveys using artificial pheromone lures) we now have three more to consider:

Cydia illutana – Maple Lodge, 22 May 2022: female (Simon Buckingham) – provisional ID by Simon confirmed by genitalia dissection by myself. The only other Herts records are from Chorleywood, 7 July 2016 (Andy King) and Bramfield Woods, 26 May 2020 (Ben Sale & Trevor Brownsell). Overlooked resident? Or an immigrant? Larvae feed in the green cones of Larch trees (*Larix europaea*).

Cydia interscindana – West Ealing, at a 20W Blacklight on the NHBS basic (Skinner) trap, 12th August 2022 (Bill Haines). There are repeated reports from the wider area of West London and the 2002 record tends to support the notion that, whatever the original source, this species is now resident in that area; the general area of Ealing seems to be the focus. On the other hand, it was noted on a “migrant night” when this year’s moth was caught. The larval foodplant in Europe is *Juniperus oxycedrus* – not a native British species. Native Juniper (*J. communis*) is pretty scarce in our area, but there was/is some at Horsenden Hill, which is not far from where the moth has been found several times! Locals might want to investigate? Presumably it will feed on one or more garden varieties of ornamental Juniper in British gardens as well?

Pammene juniperana – Welwyn, a male at light on 16 June 2022 (William Bishop); Berkhamsted, a male to the “SOF” pheromone lure on 4 July 2022 (Ian Gamble). Both specimens gen. det. C. W. Plant. **3rd and 4th British Isles records and new to Herts.** This rather small tortricid was reported new to Britain based on a single specimen trapped in a garden in Winnersh, near Wokingham, Berkshire on 6 August 2018 (Cole, Sims & Harvey, 2019. *Br. J. ent. nat. Hist.* **32**(1):51-52). There was another during June 2022 in Berkshire and oddly half a dozen or so at a single site near Colchester in North Essex. These discoveries are being written up for the journal *Entomologist's Record*. The larvae feed, in Europe, within the fruits of Common Juniper (*Juniperus communis*) and Spanish Juniper (*Juniperus thurifera*). Junipers are dioecious – so you need to look on female plants if searching for larvae.

FAILURES

Can't have you lot getting too excited – here's a couple to bring you back to earth ...

The **Butterbur *Hydraecia petasitis*** was last reliably in Herts at Lemsford Springs N.R. on 10th August 2002. So, on 10th August 2022, William Bishop and myself dutifully trotted off to the Lemsford Springs nature reserve and set up a mix of mv and actinic lights deep amongst the Butterbur plants. It transpired to be one of our poorest nights ever! No Butterbur moths were encountered. The habitat remains ideal, and there is no reason to suspect that the moth has been lost – but twenty years is a long time. If anyone else fancies a visit there, please get on with it (talk to the wildlife trust first as you will need a gate key). There are other patches of Butterbur plants in the Lea valley and elsewhere – all of which could usefully be checked this weekend before it is too late for them.

I also failed miserably this year to locate any **White-spotted Pinion *Cosmia diffinis***, which did show signs of re-colonising the elm hedges in the vicinity of Hexton Chalk Pit. It is not too late if anyone can get up that way with a battery operated actinic trap (tuck it well in under the elm growth- they tend not to move more than a few feet from the host plant).

Pale Shining Brown (*Polia bombycina*) was last seen in Hertfordshire in 2013. There was a slight glimmer of hope that it might be hanging on in the fields to the south-east of the Luton area (in our county) but so far no captures. This is unsurprising and in line with the national decline ... sadly this species is likely to become extinct in Britain, and perhaps is already so in our area. That said, specific searching in 2023 would be desirable.

TUFTED ELACHISTAS

The following message was circulated amongst the County Recorders and is worthy sharing here. Guy Meredith stated:

“Moth-trapping at Glos. Wildlife Trust Brassey NR in the River Windrush valley on Saturday night, one of the specimens I potted for later identification looked like an *Elachista* but when viewed live in the pot with a magnifying glass, whenever it was facing away from me there were clearly two groups/tufts of raised darker scales near the mid-point of each forewing. After freezing, either the raised scales were lost in the tube or they were lowered. On dissection the moth is a male *Elachista freyerella*. The species accounts in *MBGBI* and Traugott-Olsen & Nielsen do not mention raised scales, and I'm wondering whether this was a known feature of this species (and perhaps of some other *Elachistas*)?”

Subsequently, Dr Lauri Kaila at Helsinki University commented: “Several species in the *E. freyerella* group (worldwide) have very slightly raised scales that are fast worn out. In *E. freyerella* of which, surprisingly, I have rather little experience, I have not seen, or at least paid attention to this phenomenon. So, I would not be entirely surprised, but yet, somewhat”.

Guy continues: So now we know that it is a temporary feature of very fresh specimens. It would be good if someone could get photos showing the tufts. Contact Guy direct, if you have any information to share, by e-mail at: gmeredith308@btinternet.com

THE LIQUORICE PIERCER MOTH

We have begun to collect seeds of Wild Liquorice ready to attempt reinforcement planting of this host plant, which has only two stations in the county (the moth is found only at one of these). Thanks to David Riddle for his efforts in this project. David has also found the moth at a new site (sadly in Bedfordshire, not in Herts) near

Holwell, where the foodplant was known to persist. A small number of seeds were also collected from this site to increase the genetic diversity of the foodplant for the moth reinforcement project and within one of the seed pods a live larva of the Liquorice Piercer was encountered. Note that although Wild Liquorice is not a protected species, it is rare and we took the precaution of consulting with the expert botanists at *Plantlife* before designing the project. In due course, if the plant thrives at its new locations, we propose to introduce a few gravid female moths from the known site for the species and, if permission is forthcoming, from one other site so that there is a measure of genetic diversity. We gratefully acknowledge the help and full cooperation of the landowners at all sites affected by this project.

MOTHS AT FIR AND POND WOOD

The Fir & Pond Woods Nature Reserve straddles the boundary between Herts and Middlesex at Potters Bar (adjacent to and in the north-east corner made by junction 24 of the M25 motorway). Andrew Wood has received the following (edited by me) e-mail:

“I have past moth records [for Fir & Pond Woods], but probably the last visit was in 2012. I wonder if the Herts and Middx moth group would like to pay the reserve another visit. Perhaps you could forward this to the relevant person. As it is late summer, possibly next year may be better; also we have sheep on the meadow and some cattle on the wet fen until autumn”. John Rowley (warden): 07984-724125

Those interested, do please telephone John Rowley direct and make your own arrangements. We have a reasonable list, though it is indeed now ten years old, so it would be good to update it. It is an excellent site and I expect that it might support a range of a-yet unrecorded moth species. I count several members who live within 10 miles of the site.

NOT A HERTFORDSHIRE MOTH – YET!

A paper in the *Entomologist's Record*, due for publication on 25th September 2022, will add a new tortrix moth (a species of *Epiblema*) to the British list from Suffolk. No details can be released prior to formal publication, of course, but do keep on bagging *anything* that looks even slightly “unusual” and get it to me for checking.

FUNERAL DETAILS FOR BARRY GOATER

I have received the following:

Dear friend or contact of the late Barry Goater,

The funeral will be held from 12:30 to 14:30 on 24th August 2022, at Hinton Park Woodland Burial Ground, Wyndham Rd, Hinton, Christchurch BH23 7EJ followed by a reception at: The Old Barn, New Milton, BH25 6SJ.

To date, I think about 60 people will attend, including family members. If you have notified me of your intention to be there, many thanks, if you haven't, but do intend to come, do not feel under pressure to notify me - you will be very welcome anyway. Several of you hoped that the service will be live streamed. I'm afraid that organising this has been too difficult and it's not going to happen. Sincere apologies for this, it's a real shame.

Some of you have asked about a “dress code” for the funeral. Please wear whatever you like and feel comfortable in. I'm sure that some will wear dark suits and dark ties, but anything, from these, to lighter clothes, to humorous ties, to birding or mothing gear, to colourful dresses will not cause offence and would add to the interest of the scene. Remember, though, it may be hot weather, so woolly hats and gloves may not be a good idea! And leave binoculars, scopes, nets and pill boxes in your vehicle!

with best wishes,

Rick Goater, Braes' End, Castle Road, Doune, Perthshire FK16 6EA
Tel: 07875-029201

BENHS ANNUAL EXHIBITION 2022

Just when I feared that the world had switched over permanently to “zoom” meetings (whatever they are) and dispensed with human contact for the exchange of moth information, the **British Entomological & Natural History Society** has announced ... “after a gap of three years due to the Covid19 pandemic, Council is very pleased to announce that the Annual Exhibition will once again be held in person, for 2022, as follows:

Saturday 5 November 2022
11.00am until 4.00pm
Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL”.

The Exhibition is one of the highlights of the moth hunter’s calendar and enables members and their guests to view specimens and images, to catch up with old acquaintances and to make new ones with people who share a fascination with entomology. I commend it to Herts & Middlesex moth group members. If you are not a member, on the off-chance that anyone asks please announce yourself as my guest (and then, of course, consider joining!).

Exhibits are welcome and encouraged from **both BENHS members and from non-members**. These can be set specimens, live invertebrates, photographs, drawings, artwork, poster displays, novel equipment, historical items, literature, reminiscences, curiosities or light-hearted trivia. Scientific novelty or rarity are not the only criteria for exhibiting, nor do presentations have to relate to the current year. **Indeed, this is an opportunity to show real specimens taken since the last Exhibition in 2019 or before.** Exhibits showing personal interests, taxonomic conundrums (or resolutions), ecological, local or historical themes, make fascinating displays, for example. A table will be set aside for the exhibition of unidentified specimens, although identification cannot be guaranteed, many members are always happy to offer advice and assistance on such difficult specimens. However, please note: *Series of specimens of threatened, scarce or reintroduced insects will **not** be welcome. The Code for Insect Collecting, endorsed by the BENHS, suggests that a pair of specimens of such species is sufficient. Similarly, long series of any insect taken from a single locality will not be welcome unless legitimate extenuating circumstances (e.g., an approved and possibly licensed, scientific study) are supplied to the BENHS Council in advance. Any specimens associated with the commercial trade in insects will also **not** be welcome.*

At the Exhibition, the winners of the prizes awarded to the best exhibits will be announced. Exhibits presented at Conway Hall AND exhibits only submitted for the virtual exhibition will be considered together for these prizes. In order to achieve that, **exhibits only being submitted for the virtual exhibit will need to be e-mailed as attachments to BENHS by midnight on Saturday 22 October.** Details as to how to do this are given below.

Over the last two years, the Exhibition was obliged to move online, with a virtual exhibition being created within the Members Only section of the BENHS website. This had the advantage of enabling those who cannot easily travel to London to both offer exhibits and to view those contributed by others. As with the ‘in person’ exhibition, members have been able to obtain access to the online exhibition for their guests. In 2022, we would like to retain the positive aspects of having the exhibition online as an adjunct to the main event in London. Consequently, we would like everyone who does bring an exhibit to London to also e-mail to us a digital image which can be subsequently loaded up to the website. In addition, anyone who cannot get to London is encouraged to submit a digital photograph of an exhibit to be shown as part of the online or virtual exhibition, as mentioned above we would like this by midnight on Saturday 22 October.

When you arrive at the Conway Hall please register your exhibit at the signing-in table and provide a short descriptive note about it including:

- Your name, postal and e-mail addresses on all sheets of information.
- An indication of the significance of what is being exhibited, why it is interesting and what exactly it is.
- For specimens, give the locality (including the county), date of capture (in the following format: 22.iii.2021), whether they were at light. Where possible also give the grid reference and the vice-county name and number.
- Use current scientific names; as well as italicizing or underlining these, please also give the family name and authority. (Please do the same for any foodplants cited if possible.)
- For British Lepidoptera, please also provide the current checklist number as given in ‘Checklist of the Lepidoptera of the British Isles’ (Agassiz *et al.*, 2013); these numbers are available widely online.

- Please provide separate notes for each submission under the category headings above even if located in the same display case.

This information may be used in the summary of the Exhibition published every year in the *British Journal of Entomology & Natural History*. Certain exhibits or specimens selected as the most significant or interesting will be photographed on the day, this will be in addition to any digital photograph submitted for the virtual exhibition. A note will be placed next to the selected specimens; please then make yourself known to the official photographer.

Digital photographs at the highest resolution possible in any popular format (e.g. jpg, tif, png) accompanied by notes should be submitted to Les Evans-Hill (webmaster@benhs.org.uk) by midnight on **Friday 12 November 2022** at the very latest. These will then be used to create the virtual exhibition on the *Members Only* pages of the BENHS website which will go **live from Saturday 26 November 2022**.

Both Pemberley Books and Atropos Books will be selling new and second-hand entomological and other natural history books at Conway Hall. Also, other natural history and entomological organisations will be represented, e.g., the Amateur Entomologists' Society. Apart from the booksellers mentioned, no other commercial trading is permitted within the exhibition.

Light refreshments (sandwiches etc) and drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) will be available for purchase.

How to get to Conway Hall

The nearest Underground station to Red Lion Square is **Holborn** (Central and Piccadilly lines). Car parks and street parking is available locally, but for a charge in addition to the London Congestion Charge.

The Marsh Charitable Trust Awards for entomologists in 2022 will be either presented at the Conway Hall on 5 November or at the online launch on 26 November (or possibly a combination of both).

LONDON MOTH BOOK UPDATE

It must surely be widely known by now that my *pre-historic* book on the macros of the London Area (published in 1993) celebrates its 30th birthday next year and that this event is being marked by the publication of an update by the **London Natural History Society**. For this work, I am joined by Les Evans-Hill as a co-author, whose computer skills far outweigh my accomplished use of the Abacus – in particular in generating distribution maps with multiple layers – not necessarily using the same base map for each species.

The London area includes all of Middlesex and about the southern third of Hertfordshire (as well as bits of Essex, Kent and Surrey plus just a thin sliver of Buckinghamshire). Records to the end of 2022 will be included – in spite of any unofficial suggestions to the contrary. We are, of course, concerned about the seasonal work load and it will be obvious to all that the sooner we get 2022 data submitted the happier we will be, but this year's data **will** be included. If you have **macro** moth records from the London Area, as defined in the 1993 book and/or on the LNHS web site, you are welcome to submit these early if that is possible – as long as you can avoid duplication by repeating the same data later. However, this is not compulsory and we are prepared to wait. We simply ask that you try to maintain your lists in an organised state as you go, so that you will be able to send records to me as soon as possible in January 2023.

Some data submissions may well affect the distribution maps, but this is of low concern as we will not output the maps until the very last minute. What is of greater importance is, of course, the text that we will have to write. This takes time. The accounts for several species will be radically different to those generated thirty years ago ... much has changed. In addition, the flight period of some species has evidently shifted and we cannot create the final output, and then try to explain it, until the data has all been entered.

Les is dealing with the data-crunching, but the system is unaltered; I remain the official Moth Recorder for the LNHS, so please continue to put your records into the system via me. No need to separate macros (for the book) from micros as I can do that here and send the macro data to Les for crunching. For data from Kent, Surrey and Bucks, please submit as usual to the appropriate County Moth Recorder with the same level of urgency. If, for any reason, you prefer to send everything to me, please try to make sure I am aware if you have **not** send the data elsewhere, so I can do so on your behalf.

I particularly welcome comment and opinions on the project in general – either direct to me or discuss it openly on the Herts & Middx Moths Facebook thingy. In particular, anything you think the new book should include that is not normally included in county moth books would be worth mentioning.

Meanwhile – a word about **the money**. The LNHS is funding the project and will be the publisher. As a charity, the LNHS is not allowed to profit, but it is also not allowed to knowingly make a loss and so they will be looking for sponsors. Ideally we are looking for a one off sponsorship deal to the value of around £50K. If you are in some way connected to a larger business organisation that is linked to the London area you might ask the bosses there if they are interested in an opportunity to flash their green credentials in this way. If they are, please put people in touch with me in the first instance (in my role as a Vice President of the LNHS) to open preliminary, no-commitment discussions on what they might get in return. If we find that there is common ground, then I will pass them on to the LNHS Admin & Finance Committee.

AUTUMN MOTHS

We are already experiencing a change in moth species, as summer species die out and the autumn taxa start to appear. I predict that in about two weeks' time over half the catch will be new species, so get those moth traps back out there and see what you can find!

That's all have for now.

Enjoy!

Colin

Colin W. Plant
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