

MOTH MUMBLINGS – end of May extra (2022)

My apologies to those who told me that the last Mumbblings was becoming a bit too technical! Not my intention (I think some of you might actually mean there are too many micros and not enough macros?). My aim is to try to please all of you! There is no doubt that a great many readers are beginners at mothing, but at the same time other readers are more advanced. I would be doing you all a great disservice if I engaged in any sort of “dumbing down”, but do please continue to offer “guidance” – after all if you don’t want to read it I would be wasting my time in writing it!

Don’t forget that I am happy to receive contributions for inclusion on this newsletter! As long as they are about moths and likely to be of interest to mothers associated with Herts & Middlesex in particular.

A FEW MOTHS FLYING NOW

Most expected species are now coming to light traps across our area, but it ain’t half hard work finding them. Nobody seems to be getting **all** of the species available at any date, but combine the results of half a dozen trappers and the list is there! When I go out to “the woods” I find that in any single trap the species list is poor, yet if I run 10 traps through a woodland I get a rather good list. This probably sounds quite logical to an outsider, but believe me it is not typical of most years; although each trap will generate a different list, most traps might be said to be fairly representative. And then there are the numbers! Are any species turning up in double figures this year? I am sure it is not just me the pair of Great Tits nesting in the concrete blocks stacked on my patio are bringing food to the nestlings at intervals of 2 or more minutes (in my younger days I am sure it was about every thirty seconds or so). They are typically arriving at the nest with a single caterpillar or whatever – not with a beak full. Not at all scientific, but I reckon mum and dad Great Tit are probably not having the easiest of lives at the moment; it will be interesting to see how many babies actually fledge. As I always try to point out, we can only record reality. It may be less interesting from a human pleasure perspective, but these low numbers of moths are real and a consequence of some unknown environmental factor(s) – which may include climate change. It is crucial that we maintain a permanent record of the actual situation, without any exaggeration, so that future moth people will have a comprehensive and factual database of information that they can analyse.

Four-spotted Moths are flying now – daytime, usually in sunshine, at the known sites on the borders of our county with Essex/Cambridgeshire. Worth a walk in the sunshine in chalky places where there is plenty of Field Bindweed growing at road verges, field edges etc (it’s the pretty one with the smaller, pinkish flowers, not the big white jobbie). Take a net – there will be other stuff flying too. In another 4 weeks the same places are likely to produce Six-belted Clearwings wherever there is any Bird’s-foot Trefoil.

Several **clearwings** are now flying. So far (28th June) I have personally seen **Currant, Red-belted, Red-tipped** and **Yellow-legged** clearwings in my garden (attracted to pheromone lures). Others are likely poised ready for action should the sun ever come out again. They are day fliers, of course.

Speckled Yellow has just started flying in the last few days in the woodlands of south Hertfordshire – and possibly elsewhere. The classic locality is Broxbourne Wood (National Nature Reserve), but other woods in the general area are also affected and in the last couple of days it has been noted for the first time ever in Balls Wood.

Map-winged Swift is not a common moth in our area. In the last ten days I have found it in good number at several woodland sites in north-east Herts from where there are no previous records. Looks like it is having a good year? Or have I simply found where it was hiding all along?

SOME PROJECTS FOR THE UPCOMING, EXTRA-LONG HOLIDAY WEEKEND

This issue is aimed at directing all of you towards some urgently needed field work (on both macros and micros). I hope it will also provide some measure of enjoyment. The selected species are all potentially threatened or at least very rare in our area and up to date information is most desirable. All should be easy to look

for and afford opportunities for the discovery of other species too. I have made a selection that allows opportunities in different parts of the county and includes day-flying species so that those of you who do not have a portable light trap can also participate. Of course, the list is not exclusive – there are many other moths that need our urgent attention. **If you want a free moth trap – read on down the rest of this newsletter!**

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED – LIQUORICE TORTRIX – *Grapholita pallifrontana* (EAST HERTS)

Approximately 1st to 20th June (records are from 5th to 15th June)

I need someone who already knows where the site is to check on the only Hertfordshire population of the **Liquorice Tortrix** (*Grapholita pallifrontana*). I had a look today, 26th May, but the moth is not yet flying.

I can tell selected others where the site is (all I can say here is “East Herts”), or it will end up in other newsletters and on social media – undesirable as the moth is considered extremely vulnerable. My support for scientific collecting is well-known, but there is no scientific value in collecting this moth at this site. There is only the single known Herts site for this species, which is also rare throughout Britain. There is only one patch of Wild Liquorice and this supports the moth population; as a result, the moth could easily be rendered extinct in the county, especially if females are taken.

If you are able to visit, please get in touch so that I can advise the landowner of your intended presence. The site is a fields margin alongside a hedge that marks a public footpath, but the footpath is on the other side of the hedge and so, technically, the site itself is on private property. Do please remember to report to me on return – otherwise there is no point! If you don’t know the site, but are willing to help by taking a look for me, please contact me urgently. My previous experience at this site suggests that the moths are active in full sunshine, but as soon as the sun vanishes behind a cloud they dive for cover under the vegetation. When the sun emerges again, there is a delay of 25 to 30 seconds before the moths start flitting about again.

The landowner is a reader of these *Mumblings* and is fully aware, and is actively maintaining the site for the benefit of this moth. It would be very useful to attempt to encourage Wild Liquorice to grow in additional field margins – perhaps from seed this autumn? If we can establish the plant this year and if it thrives through to 2023, then we might consider catching and moving a couple of gravid females across? *If there are any botanists with helpful opinions/experience do please contact me.* I have a couple of sites in mind – it is likely to be sensible for a botanist to look at these to make sure that they are suitable. More volunteers, please!

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED – PALE SHINING BROWN – *Polia bombycina* (NORTH-WEST HERTS)

Approximately second half of June and first half of July

I challenge you all to re-find this species in Hertfordshire in 2022. In my view, it is now probably extinct here and will very soon also be extinct in Britain! It was formerly quite widespread, but has vanished from all known sites. In the present millennium (2004 to 2013), there are reports of it hanging on in the general area of arable cultivation lying north of Harpenden and west of Kimpton, most recently at Marshall’s Heath and Peter’s Green, with a single report from Hemel Hempstead. It is typically associated with the margins of wheat fields, but it does wander to light traps in gardens and probably comes also to smaller actinic traps set in field margins. The favoured habitat is without question seriously under-examined in Hertfordshire. I am fairly sure it has gone, but wouldn’t it be nice to prove me wrong!!! **I will need proof** (photographs, actual moths).

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED – HEART MOTH – *Dicycla oo* (MOSTLY SOUTH HERTS & NORTH MIDDLESEX)

Approximately mid-June to mid-July

Almost certainly extinct in both Herts and Middlesex. Now more or less confined to very few sites in Surrey and Berkshire, but also in Northamptonshire – likely to become extinct in Britain quite soon? There was a surprising, but correct, record from Harefield (Herts/Middx border) on 4th July 2008; prior to that our last record was in 1971. It likes mature/veteran oak trees – almost certainly restricted to *Quercus robur* – the English Oak, whilst shunning Sessile Oak (*Q. petraea*). It used to be almost everywhere – from ancient parkland to the isolated mature oaks that line some roads in the area of Bushey and Borehamwood. In fact, a good place to start looking might well be that line of fragmented old woodlands and marginal (oak) tree lines from Harefield in the west to the Lea Valley in the east, running the length of the Herts & Middlesex boundary line. Was the 2008 Harefield example an immigrant or a hanger-on? If the latter – there **MUST** be a breeding population somewhere near. Has it switched

to non-veteran trees (I have caught it regularly in areas of oak wood away from veteran trees in Bulgaria). Again, **I will need proof** (photographs, actual moths).

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED – OLIVE CRESCENT *TRISTALELES EMORTUALIS* – EXTREME WEST OF HERTS

Last week of June to first week of August.

Formerly resident in the Chilterns, the Olive Crescent vanished from there in the 1970s. Currently resident only in a small area of coastal Essex, but it occasionally pitches up as an immigrant elsewhere. It likes Beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica*) on the chalk, though may also feed on oaks and Sweet Chestnut. The astute will realise that the tail end of the Chiltern Chalk penetrates Hertfordshire in the extreme west and that there are some rather interesting looking Beech woodlands on the chalk in the general area of Tring. Tantalisingly, we have a single record from Berkhamsted on 16th July 2014. It was perhaps an immigrant, but given the historical breeding area there is a small possibility that this may have been a resident moth that wandered into the light trap from the Beech-dominated woodland in that area? The relatively small area of Herts between Tring and Berkhamsted, mostly south of the A41 road, as well as north-east to include parts of the Ashridge Estate, must surely be worth looking at? Of course, we might also find it over the border into Buckinghamshire – nothing like a bit of friendly rivalry! **I will need proof** (photographs, actual moths).

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED – FORESTER MOTH – *ADSCITA STATICES* – ALL GRASSLAND AREAS

Flies throughout June – in sunshine during the day.

I am going to stick my neck out and say that this species is still with us and will eventually be found. Will you be the one? It affects grasslands and the caterpillars need Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*); adults feed at various grassland flowers in full daytime sunshine, but in spite of their bright, metallic green wings are very hard to spot once they have taken to flight! This species has declined nationally and is very local in distribution. Old records affect the whole of both Herts and Middlesex. Our last record was at Albury Nowers Nature Reserve in 1976 (where it may still be present following the habitat restoration there?), but in recent years it has popped up without warning at Denham Water Meadows (Colne Valley) in 1996, at Bushy Park (Hampton, Middlesex) in 2020, at Trent Park (Middlesex) in 2021 and at both Maple Cross and Chorleywood Common in Herts, also during 2021. I have a very small number of (experimental) pheromone lures for Forester Moth; I can loan some of these out to anyone who guarantees to be able to visit suitable habitat at least once during June. If that is you, please get in touch as soon as possible. **I will need proof** (photographs, actual moths) if the Forester is found.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED – LARCH TORTRIX – *CYDIA ILLUTANA* – ANYWHERE THERE IS LARCH

Flying now – May/June

A bit of an afterthought, based on the fact that someone just caught one in the last week. It is a nationally rare moth that is extremely local in Herts and not yet found in Middlesex; it is associated with Larch (*Larix decidua*) trees. It is probably overlooked, but then again there are not so many Larch trees in the two counties. Recent reports are from Bramfield Woods (mid Herts) and Harefield (Middx/Herts border). It comes readily to light traps. **A distinctive species, especially if caught next to a Larch tree, but I would be keen to see photographic evidence or actual moths if you are not experienced with tortrix moths.**

FREE MOTH TRAPS AVAILABLE

I just received this letter (below). **Well don't just sit there – act!!!** I think the emphasis is on Middlesex (Greater London area north of the Thames). If you contact him direct, please mention me and the Herts Moth Group as your source.

Hi Colin,

I've been involved with the DECIDE project and have been helping them develop their online app from a record centre's viewpoint. The project has an aim of directing recording effort to less trodden areas and focusses towards recorders of all

ages and experiences. Here's a link to the current version of the app and some background on the project. <https://decide.ceh.ac.uk/opts/scoremap/map> <https://www.ceh.ac.uk/our-science/projects/decide>

As part of their funding they have made available to us a number of moth traps. The project group are happy for me to distribute them amongst our community with the only requirement being feedback on using them in conjunction with the app. They are relatively cheap bucket moth traps so we aren't too worried about losing them and at the end of the project would be more than happy for the recipients to keep the moth traps for their own uses.

I was therefore wondering if you knew of around 10 individuals who would like to take part and receive a trap. They can be from a range of experiences so do not have to be experts. We would be providing some training on use depending on previous experiences with the traps and will be supplying the traps ready built.

Please do let me know if anyone comes to mind of if you have any questions about the project or the traps

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Enjoy!

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