

MOTH MUMBLINGS: DECEMBER 2023

WELCOME

I have relatively little moth news to disseminate at the moment. In the last issue I mentioned that December moths were on the wing – only to be told by several of you that they had been flying for a week! Sorry – I don't do social media! All I do is report what people tell me. Hopefully this side of things will improve when we launch the new website, as there will be a bit where you can upload your latest sightings for other people to see. In that regard (as well as probably others) I shall be rendered obsolete!

I am getting serious frosts most mornings now and trapping in my garden has ceased – at least for the time being. Of course, if we get a mild spell there will still be a few extra species to find for the year – and even if it stays cold I have yet to add **Black-spotted Chestnut** to my garden list. It ought to be waking up about now ... has anyone caught one yet?

Meanwhile, I am sifting through the huge backlog of leaf mines that still (1st December) keep arriving in the post. I very much look forward to all these packages but the backlog is now considerable and it is going to take me ages to catch up. I prioritise the identification process, as the leaves may dry out or decay, and so I apologise if you are waiting for lists; these are unlikely to come much before xmas, but they are “safe”.

Aside from leaf mines, I am also building up a huge backlog of (mainly) micros for genitalia dissection. A conservative estimate suggests I may currently have nearly 5000 specimens in the freezer. Again, I **do** want to look at these and again I apologise if you are waiting for lists – as with the mines these are unlikely to come much before xmas (the only difference is that I am not specifying which year!).

THE NEW WEB SITE

Progress is excellent – on target. That said, I am blaming all the delays in communicating with you all on the new site. I stupidly thought it would be a case of pay the man, wait for the thing to appear, then bask in the glory! **Wrong!** I did not fully appreciate that **every** species text needs updating. The old site has an excellent combination of quotes from the Herts Moth Book and some more recent publications, all compiled by Andrew Wood and all factually correct **at the time**, but in 2023, going on 2024, the information is so far out of date that in some cases it is misleading. It also mostly talks about Herts – the new web site is for both Herts and Middlesex. In a few places it is embarrassing – mainly because we have done so much field work since the original time of writing. The whole text needs re-writing from scratch.

So, I am rewriting it all. However, it is only now that I have got my head into it that I realise that what I am actually doing is re-writing the entire of the Herts Moth Book and expanding it to include Middlesex! I had not allowed for this in my hectic social diary! So, I had a slight change of direction. Detailed data in the Herts Moth Book and other published works is already preserved as a permanent record and so does not necessarily need repeating. In any case, all the data used are within the database and accessible. So, I am producing something more of a summary for each species; that is the fastest way to ensure that every species has at least got an entry. When the site is up and running I will be able to update texts a species at a time as required (e.g., when asked questions that the site could not answer). For now, we are uploading basic text (and a photo if possible) for each and every included species. I started at species number 01.001 in the ABH checklist and on 30th November reached the end of the Tortricidae. That leaves pyrales and macros still to do. On the basis of my performance so far, I might just get the job done by xmas. Anyway, that is my excuse for not dealing with your e-mails for the last month.

Meanwhile, Ben Sale is making excellent progress uploading images of each species. We are trying to upload at least one image of each species by the time we launch the site on the unsuspecting public. Of course, we will fail, but the odd gap is better than no images at all. The final site will have a facility for all of you to upload your records, if you wish, and along with this you will be able to upload supporting photographs. I think they call it “interactive” and I do hope that everyone will contribute to make the site the best possible.

If you have any suggestions and/or questions on the web site now is the time to tell me so Jim can incorporate these where I agree. I even invite constructive criticisms of the basic model for the site (which is the Norfolk Moth Group web site) – in other words, if there are elements of the Norfolk site that you don't like, please tell **me** now or else these may be included in our own site.

OUR AND NOW – OUR FAMOUS MEMBER

For the benefit of those who don't yet know, our member **BARBARA MULLIGAN**, who lives in the general area of Ealing, Middlesex, has just hit the moth jackpot – she has had a new species of moth named after her. Not only that – it was she who found the moth in the first place, at her local patch in West London!

Way back in July 2021, Barbara collected some unusual micros at Walpole Park, Ealing. She did not recognise the species and so she added them to the pile to bring to me for a closer look. I did not recognise them either, scarcely an unusual event, but these moths had very striking hindwings – they were transparent, with the

long veins picked out in black scales – almost exactly as you would expect in one of the clearwings. At this point an alarm started ringing in my head – there is no British species that has this feature! To cut a long story short, I sent images of the adult moths to various friends and colleagues across the planet, and eventually it was Martin Corley, in Oxford, who suggested that they might be *Tachystola hemisema* – an Australian species. Certainly, standing back they sit nicely next to our common species *Tachystola acroxantha* – also an Australian adventive. Peter Hall then dissected the genitalia; the results seemed to agree with Martin’s suggestion, but were not 100% exact.



Tachystola mulliganae Sterling, Plant & Lees, 2023. (Oecophoridae). Lectotype male.



Tachystola mulliganae Sterling, Plant & Lees, 2023. (Oecophoridae). Paratype female.

As it happens, the Australians have been rather good at DNA bar-coding their moths and it is known, as a result, that examined specimens of *Tachystola hemisema* fall into no less than five different groups – almost certainly indicating that there are five different species. Barbara’s moths fit one of these groupings – from Western Australia and also, weirdly, in California, USA – but they do not fit “*hemisema*”. So, two questions – not only “what did Barbara have?” but “what exactly is *hemisema*”?

Enter, the chaps at the Natural History Museum who did all sorts of weird and wonderful stuff involving DNA both on Barbara’s moths and on examples of all five Australian groupings (including successful DNA extraction from the 150 years old type specimens). As a result, it rapidly became clear that Barbara’s moths were, in fact, a species completely new to science. This species has now been formally published and given the name *Tachystola mulliganae* Sterling, Plant & Lees, 2023 in Barbara’s honour.



Tachystola mulliganae Sterling, Plant & Lees, 2023. (Oecophoridae). Walpole Park, Ealing, July 2021. Male genitalia, kindly prepared and imaged by Peter Hall. .

Since July 2021, several additional examples of this moth have been captured by Barbara and it is clear that, whatever its origin, it is currently resident in the Ealing area of Middlesex. The larvae are believed to be associated with *Eucalyptus* trees in their native Australia and *Eucalyptus* trees do indeed feature in the area surrounding all the trap sites in Middlesex. I was amazed to discover how common such trees are in Britain. Here in Bishops Stortford I did a quick appeal via a local neighbourhood social media “thing” and discovered that there are 11 mature trees within one kilometre of my garden, including one that is publicly accessible in the local churchyard! The larvae of *Tachystola mulliganae* are unknown, but are expected to feed on leaf litter and other detritus from within a portable case made by spinning together two bits of bark. If there is a *Eucalyptus* near you it could be well-worth the effort of gathering up sacks of bark, leaves etc from under the tree and waiting to see if any of it starts moving!

The moth is a member of family Oecophoridae and in the British checklist has been formally given the number 28.0245, which puts it immediately after *Tachystola acroxantha*. Further reading: Sterling, Plant, Price, Cuber, Hall, Beasley & Lees, 2023. *Tachystola mulliganae* sp. nov. (Lep.: Oecophoridae), a Western Australian species adventive in West London. *Entomologist’s Record & Journal of Variation* **135**: 225 – 243.

MOTH SURVEY IN THE BARBICAN, 2024 – VOLUNTEERS WANTED

I have received the following. It is too far away for me to get involved – plus, of course, my Land Rover and ULEZ would just not get on with each other (not to mention the congestion charge. If **you** are interested in helping out, please contact Christopher Berry direct. It will be quite fascinating to know what species of moth are hanging on in this “concrete zone” of Middlesex. Occasional trapping on the tops of “skyscraper” buildings suggest there may be some significant interest.

Dear Colin,
Leading on from my running a moth trap at the Royal Hospital in Chelsea, I was asked if I would run the trap at The Charterhouse in the Barbican next year.

<https://thecharterhouse.org/>. The Charterhouse, as well as having a large garden, are also involved with <https://www.pollinatinglondontogether.com/>. From my perspective the logistics of setting up and running a trap in the City is not ideal and I was wondering if you or a fellow London Moth-er would be interested in so doing? I could then introduce you to Justin Dennis the Head Gardener at the Charterhouse. I met with Justin this morning and he is keen to assist with the idea. **Let me know if you are interested.** Christopher Berry (ceberr@btinternet.com).

WINTER TIPS: TREE HUNTING

Now is an excellent time to go and look for trees such as Larch, Spruce, Scots Pine and so on – as these evergreens will be more easily visible now the deciduous trees have lost their leaves (yes – I do realise that Larch is deciduous). Make detailed notes on where they are and on how to get to them with actinic light traps etc so that when the call comes next May you will be ready to look for a whole list of supposedly rare moth species.

WINTER TIPS: DEAD-HEADING

Let loose your inner gardener – get the secateurs out and go dead-heading!!!

Huge numbers of micros, mainly tortrix and gelechiids, over-winter in the dead heads of various wild flowers. Some are in the dead flower head; some are in the very top of the stem that bears the flower. Good targets might include, Knapweed and Scabious (different plant species = different moth species), Ragworts, Fleabanes (again, different plant species = different moth species), burdocks, thistles and others.

If a plant has a stem and is still standing in December, nature has almost certainly taken advantage of this fact. There is almost always *something* to be found. With plants such as Hemlock and other tall umbellifers, it might be worth harvesting the whole stem – several *Agonopteryx* species are potentially present.

Trying hard to keep different plant species separate, so we know what the caterpillars were feeding on, snip off the dead heads about 6 inches (15cms in modern money), below the tip. Bundle these together (e.g., loosely tie with green garden twine) and keep them outside until you are ready to deal with them. In about April, put each separate bunch into a large see-through container (*you have all winter to nip down the pound shop and buy half a dozen or so plastic pasta-storage pots or similar – so no complaining!*), and simply wait for the moths so emerge. Remember to label things as you go – and remember also to let me have sight of the moths for identification purposes if you are at all unsure.

BROADWATER LAKE, SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST.

So, SSSIs can be trashed! Well ... who knew? An application has been submitted by Hillingdon Council to

construct a new Watersports Facility and Activity Centre. The general feeling is that this would be catastrophic for wildlife and set a dangerous precedent for “legally protected” sites like Broadwater Lake across the UK.

Broadwater Lake is a nationally important wetland and this proposed development poses a significant threat to birds in particular – but I can’t see it doing a lot to improve moth biodiversity. If you are miffed by this, then note that **we have until Thursday 21 December** to make our voices heard. Go to the link here and find the button to click on to register your objection.

<https://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/threat-broadwater-lake-sssi>.

SLAVE LABOUR OPPORTUNITY

I am looking for a suitable person, any age and either sex, who might find it interesting/informative/educationally beneficial to catalogue my entire library (journals, papers, reprints etc as well as books). I would, myself, consider this an horrifically boring task, but I am told that there are student of things like “library studies” out there who might welcome such a project. If interested, please get in touch. I have no preconceived ideas on methodology (nor do I own any library software, though I might be persuaded to invest if necessary). The work can be done directly into a computer here or, if preferred, extracted to cards and then computerised in your own home/office/university at a later date.

There are around 30 metres of journals, magazines, periodicals, newsletters, etc. These are mostly alphabetical and will not take a great amount of time. However, there are also about 60 metres of natural history books (not only moths), and 2 or 3 metres of miscellaneous junk. There are also several hundred paper reprints of works published in the entomological literature that need to be rehoused as well as catalogued.

Not a five-minute job, but equally not a lifetime’s work. I suggest it might make, or form a part of, a student project? Feel free to circulate this in academic newsletter if you decide it is indeed a suitable student project. If you want this as a college project, please ask your tutor to contact me first.

The final catalogue might well be published on our new web site so that other moth people will be able to access it.

WINTER TIPS: PHEROMONE SUPPLIES

Now is the time to draw up a list of the artificial pheromone lures that you might want to use in 2024. Do a bit of research – these lures now cover much more than just clearwings and there is growing evidence that many lures attract a range of species in addition to the one they are designed for. Make a list, sit on it for a couple of weeks in case there are any changes to make, then get

your order in to Anglian Lepidopterists Supplies ready for delivery in the spring. ALS order in what is required – the manufacturers make hundreds, especially for the African pest control market, so buying in a stock is a non-starter. ALS need to know who needs what and get the bulk order in with time to spare. It is no good asking for something scarce in mid-summer!

MYSTERY LUMPS ON RUE



Barbara Mulligan is at it again! The plant shown here is a species of *Ruta* but the feeding does not fit anything known.

The feeding pattern does not fit the micro moth *Prays peregrina*, which is, of course, a Middlesex speciality that feeds on *Ruta*. The outstanding work *British Plant Galls* by Margaret Redfern and Peter Shirley, published this year, has no entry for *Ruta*. The standard work on leaf-miners (Hering, E. M. 1957. *Bestimmungstabellen der Blattminen von Europa 1–3*, at page 914), gives two species on *Ruta*, both Diptera: *Phytomyza atricornis* Mg. and *Philophylla heraclei* L.. It is neither of these. Dr Willem Ellis, who maintains the European leaf/stem miner web site says “For a moment I have thought of a *Metapion*, but mining is not an Apionidae habit. I don’t know!” [Apionidae are the seed weevils].

The plant was collected by Barbara, in the company of Peter Edwards, at Kew Gardens. Not actually Middlesex but separated only by the width of the River Thames so of at least passing interest.

Does anyone know what caused this feeding damage? Opinions welcomed.

WINTER TIPS: OAK MINES

Pucker mines on deciduous oaks are a nightmare to name. Two in particular can be targeted **now**: *Phyllonorycter harrisella* and *P. heegeriella* mines are the very common ones measuring less than 15mm on the undersurface of oak leaves. Separating the two requires rearing the adult. You can do this yourself or if you follow a few rules I will have a go for you. These rules are: select mines carefully, as I only want those containing larvae or pupae. Mines that are ripped open are no use. Look on the tree, but also look on the woodland floor on fallen leaves. Several mines in the same area of a single tree *might* be from a single female, but a similar group on an adjacent tree might not even be the same species. Twenty or so occupied leaves per tree would be ideal (I am happy if there are many trees). Put mines leaves in a plastic sandwich bag and label with details of place, date etc. Then get these to me uncrushed parcel – don’t keep them in the warmth of your house for any longer than possible. Put the parcel for posting outside until ready.

Remember, 20 or so mined leaves per bag. NOT huge branches with dozens of leaves so that I have to find those with mines on them! If there are too many for the sandwich bag then the sample is too large.

For this exercise I do not want other species. **However**, if you are still gathering leaf mines in bulk from unrecorded areas please do carry on but separate these from the oak mine project material.

... AND FINALLY

Please remember to upload your moth photos to the new web site using the link:

<https://www.imoths.uk/hertsmiddx/uploadpic.php>

Remember – I want larvae, mines, pupae, undersides and all other variations in addition to ninety-degree overhead shots.

If there are any queries about images please go direct to Ben Sale. If you ask me I will simply forward your query as I have neither the time nor the technical know-how!.

ENJOY ...

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