

# MOTH MUMBLINGS: EARLY AUGUST 2024

## LEAF MINES ON LONG-LEAVED WILLOWS

Long, whitish mines are now appearing on the upper surface of long-leaved species of *Salix* (= willow trees). These are popularly assumed to be caused by the caterpillar of *Phyllocnistis saligna* – **but read on**. Other species of *Phyllocnistis* mine the leaves of poplars (*Populus* species) and often create what are referred to as “snail-trail” mines, because they create the appearance of a slime trail left by snails. When on willows, they are more like the standard mines that we find in the autumn, such as the one shown here:



London (Middlesex), 4<sup>th</sup> August 2024. Barbara Mulligan.

## WHY THE INTEREST

A chance discovery, based on material collected at Wicken Fen in Cambridgeshire, has shown that we

have an overlooked species in Britain. An example of *Phyllocnistis saligna* from Wicken proved, in fact, to be the non-British *Phyllocnistis asiatica*. Both species mine the leaves of long-leaved *Salix* species = willows. Consequently, it is unclear if the *Phyllocnistis* species on long-leaved willows in Britain are *P. saligna*, as we have always believed, or if they are all misidentified *P. asiatica*. Of course, theoretically we may have both species! The image above shows what we have always called *Phyllocnistis saligna* – here on a Weeping Willow leaf in West London.

**The form of the mine:** This image shows a typical example – the mine starting in the stem (not shown), working up the centre of the leaf and then abruptly turning to travel downwards again right next to the outbound track. When it reaches the stem again it mines under the “bark” and may or may not enter a second leaf. The chrysalis forms either in the end of the mine or else on a leaf within a minute marginal fold (very easily missed).

However, some mines adopt a different format. Is this a second species? Or are the caterpillars just random rebels! Some are entirely in the leaf; others affect the stem. Some also affect the underside!

**WHAT I NEED YOU TO DO:** Help me to sort out how many and which species we have in our area. I need to collect as many mines as possible, from multiple sites and multiple host tree species, then look at the DNA bar code of the adults that emerge. This is a joint research project and I must mention here Stella Beavan and Will Langdon, both of whom are involved. Please ...

- Go out **now** and look for these mines;
- If possible, take a photo of the mine;
- Gently hold the stem (don't squash any pupae within) and cut the section of stem bearing the mined leaf. Please include at least the next two leaves up and the next two down, so your cut section will have a single stem bearing 5 leaves. Of course, it is rarely that simple – just make sure I get leaves above, below and around each mine as well as the mined leaf itself;
- Keep searching and send me as many samples as you can find from the same tree;
- Bag samples from different trees separately – the moths may not be the same species;
- Repeat for as many different sites as possible;
- Make sure it is possible to cross-reference samples with the photos (e.g., number them);
- Send/deliver to me IMMEDIATELY (I need them alive and wriggling). Put the cut

sections in a plastic bag to avoid desiccation (add no tissues, please). An ideal bag of the right size might be the inner plastic bag of a well-known brand of breakfast cereal;

- Remember to label with place name, date, your own name and if known the species of willow involved;
- Send or deliver all the bags to me immediately. Ordinary post (don't pay for "signed for" or whatever as this merely creates delay and the need for me to collect from the sorting office.

It is possible that the moth species on Weeping Willow is not the same as that on White or Crack willows. Likewise, that on Purple Osier is almost certainly *asiatica*. Please visit wetlands, riverside walks in town parks, weeping willows by village ponds, people's gardens and all other habitats that you encounter.

As I mentioned, there are mines made by *Phyllocnistis* species on various species of poplar – often making more convincing "snail trails". I do, of course, want these records (and feel free to send mines for ID), but the main research interest lies in those mines on long-leaved species of *Salix* – traditionally referred to as "willows".

Once we know what we actually have, attempts can be made to prepare an identification key based on characters visible by eye. It might just be that the form of the mine is characteristic. Or perhaps not?

**It is not possible to send me too many samples.**

### MISTAKE IN LAST NEWSLETTER



**This is NOT *Rhodophaea formosa*!**

The wrong image was inserted in the last issue of Moth Mumbblings. A picture of *Nephopteryx angustella* (repeated above) was used to illustrate

my text on *Rhodophaea formosa*. Please note that the text and the record itself, are both correct – its just that the wrong picture was dropped in by yours truly. I don't have an image of the *formosa* specimen referred to so you will have to look it up somewhere!

A good place to start might be our own web site at <https://hertsmiddxmoths.uk/micros.php?bf=14450>

### PLEASE USE THE WEB SITE

Which reminds me – happy as I always am to receive e-mails etc about moths, and equally happy as I am to make comments and offer interpretations, it can be sometimes useful to meet me halfway. We have created, at some financial cost, a web site that seems to meet the approval of most people as well as reducing effort on my part when I get queries from the public claiming to have the first ever Jersey Tiger outside Cornwall (because their moth books say so!). I always reply, of course, but now instead of wasting half an hour writing reams of information I simply give them the link to the web page.

This is great – some of these "publics" might go on to be the next David Attenborough! Who can tell? But *you lot* don't have the same excuse of ignorance as Joe Public does. You already know that we have a web site. So please, do continue to send me stuff to name, but before expressing great surprise and asking my opinion, please look at our web site for that species. The search box takes English and scientific names as well as checklist code numbers!

### MOTHS SEEN IN THE LAST FEW DAYS

A change in season is reflected in the change in resident moths arriving at traps in the last week. **Hoary Footman** *Eilema caniola* and **Gypsy Lymantria** *dispar* have both suddenly appeared at widely spaced locations. The number of **Jersey Tiger** *Euplagia quadripunctaria* on the other hand is significantly down this year. **Toadflax Brocade**, made a sudden appearance at the end of July in many areas, such as one at a garden in London N6 on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2024 (Jen Musgreave).

Amongst the micros, the extremely attractive yet impossibly small *Cosmopterix pulchrimella* has suddenly appeared at light traps in both Middlesex and Hertfordshire. It is certainly resident and is perhaps currently spreading. The caterpillars mine the leaves of Pellitory-of-the -Wall (*Parietaria judaica*). Do you have this in your garden? It grows "wild" in the City of Westminster!. Several images of the mines can be seen by visiting <http://www.leafmines.co.uk/html/Lepidoptera/C.pulchrimella.htm>.



Debate continues over whether some species, known formerly only as immigrants, are now established as breeding (and overwintering) residents. One such example is the **Blue Underwing (*Catocala fraxini*)** – one of which graced the moth trap at **Buckingham Palace Garden** on the night of 5<sup>th</sup> August 2024 (Tim Freed). The species is, potentially, resident on the Aspen trees there, but then there were other moths, more strongly regarded as primary immigrants, caught on the same night such. For example, tortrix *Cydia amplana* captured by Harry Witts at Clapton.

Then there are the other two large *Catocala* species to worry about. In my childhood, to see either Dark or Light Crimson Underwings one had to travel to the new Forest. In recent years we have had either immigrants or wanderers in our area and it is unclear to which category we should consign those that are turning up just now, in August 2024. There was a **Dark Crimson Underwing (*Catocala sponsa*)** at Harpenden on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024 (David Hunt) and there was a **Light Crimson Underwing (*Catocala promissa*)** at Chipperfield, on our boundary with Buckinghamshire, on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2024 (note that date, already mentioned above) by Dick Ashford.



**Dark Crimson Underwing *Catocala sponsa***, Harpenden, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024.

Separating these two red underwings as adults is actually rather more tricky than might be expected and a good view of the hind wing is extremely helpful – the black line across the red background takes a different form in each.

In the same category of “possible resident” is the **Dewick’s Plusia (*Macdunnoughia confusa*)** which came to a pheromone lure at Perivale Wood on morning of 30<sup>th</sup> July 2024 (Barbara Mulligan). Barbara has previously found pupae of this attractive moth on an allotment garden in the Ealing area.



**Light Crimson Underwing *Catocala promissa*** Chipperfield 5<sup>th</sup> August 2024

This certainly confirms breeding – but we have yet to demonstrate survival over a whole winter period.

Barbara also caught a **Mocha (*Cyclophora annularia*)** at Perivale Wood on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2024. Formerly regarded as a very rare vagrant to our area there has been an increasing number of sightings since 2013; can anyone find caterpillars in our two counties?



**Mocha *Cyclophora annularia***, Perivale Wood, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2024

Sticking with geometers, there were two **Dorset Cream Wave (*Stegania trimaculata*)** at Clapton on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2024 (Harry Witts), both of the dark form *cognatana* **Lederer**, which prevails in the south of Europe and so, perhaps, hinting at their origin. First recorded in Britain in 1979, but not seen again until 2006. **NEW TO MIDDLESEX and not known in Hertfordshire.**



**Dorset Cream Wave (*Stegania trimaculata* form *cognatana*)**, Clapton, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2024

Quite a few interesting “micros” have also pitched up recently. I think all the world and his brother (and sister!) have by now caught at least one *Ethmia quadrillella*. The first seems to have been on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024, when examples were caught at Lemsford Springs Nature Reserve in Hertfordshire by William Bishop and Roy Hargreaves. There were several on the next night, including at Stoke Newington, (Matthew Gandy), the Ealing area (Barbara Mulligan) and Harpenden, (David Hunt).



*Ethmia quadrillella* Harpenden, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2024.

The crambid moth *Evergestis limbata* was mentioned in the last newsletter and since then we have had more sightings, including in the far north-east at Royston and other places. John Chainey advises me that this species is considered to be now resident in Norfolk and Suffolk and so the Royston area records might indicate that it is now colonising northern Hertfordshire? This could easily be the source of our other records this year?

*Musotima nitidalis* is not an immigrant – its native New Zealand is much too far away! It is an accidental introduction that is now well-established in woodlands where the caterpillar foodplant (Bracken – *Pteridium aquilinum*) grows. A complete surprise, however, was one caught by Simon Buckingham in a light trap on the roof of his office in The City of London, on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024. A more inhospitable site is hard to imagine; this report is clear indication indeed of the nocturnal movement that takes place amongst our moths!



*Musotima nitidalis*, The City of London, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2024.

Increasingly frequent sightings of formerly very rare species continue. For example, a **Rufous Pearl** (*Udea fulvalis*) in the Enfield area of North London on 29<sup>th</sup> July (Eugene Dillon-Hooper). The moth was indoors in a bathroom – presumably attracted by the bathroom light.

The tortrix moth *Celypha rufana* presented itself at Welwyn, with first a male on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2024 (confirmed by genitalia dissection a couple of weeks later) and then a female on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2024 (William Bishop). This is entirely **NEW TO HERTFORDSHIRE**.

William also netted a male *Aethes williana* on 21st July at Clothall Common. A glance at the web site suggested that this was his second capture of this species. However, investigations show that the existing record from Welwyn mapped on the web site represents nothing more than a typing error (species code 49.166 was intended, but 49.116 was entered). Thus, we still have only two modern records for this rather pretty little moth – the present one, plus one at Royston in 2023. Historic records in Hertfordshire are from Harpenden in 1890 and 1909 and in Middlesex at Ruislip in 1959. The caterpillar feeds on Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*) – surely this species might be overlooked?

To complete his “hat trick” William delivered to me what is possibly the smallest moth I have ever seen. Running around inside a glass tube it measured a mere 2mm from nose to tail; its size and behaviour suggested family Nepticulidae, and it’s all-over grey colour with no markings suggested genus *Trifurcula*. I was enormously surprised, upon dissecting it, when the classic *Elachista*-shaped genitalia appeared in view! It was quite easy to name, at this point, as *Elachista bedellella*. Another species entirely **NEW TO HERTFORDSHIRE and not known from Middlesex**. The web site currently records it as absent – I will hopefully update this quite soon. Careful measurements showed that the insect has a wingspan of 4.9 mm; the textbooks all say that British *Elachista* species all start at 7mm, so this one clearly didn’t eat all his Weetabix.

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That’s all folks – keep me posted of anything worth sharing.

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