

MOTH MUMBLINGS: JANUARY 2024

WELCOME

New year greetings to all. The last few have been deliriously quiet – only one visitor, almost no phone calls and on “that day” only one e-mail. As a result, I have made enormous progress in catching up with moth stuff of all kinds.

OUR NEW WEB SITE APPROACHES BIRTH

I did suggest that this might be up and running by Xmas. In my defence, I am pretty sure I did not specify **which** Xmas. Jim Wheeler, who is the person we took on the design the site, has done his bit – and done it well. The trouble is that I had not quite realised how much input was needed from myself! The delay is down to me – not to Jim. The main task has been for me to update all of the individual species accounts. On the old site, these accounts were largely copy-and-paste from of 2008 book *The Moths of Hertfordshire*” combined with similar copy-and paste from the 1993 book *Larger Moths of the London Area* plus a couple of update papers published in places like *London Naturalist* and *“Hertfordshire Naturalist*. This was done by Andrew Wood, who also edited a few bits and bobs as he went. I must say that until the last couple of months I had not truly appreciated the enormous effort that Andrew must have put into that task.

In general, the data on the old site are now out of date – often hopelessly so, because of the enormous recording effort that has been put in over the years 2006 to 2023.

The new updated texts written by me are deliberately much briefer. I think that I will have to re-visit the process after the launch and have another go at the text for some species, but for the moment the aim is to speed-typed my way though so that every species has at least some text when the site is launched.

As I type this newsletter, I have around 50 species texts still to write and I hope to complete over this coming weekend.

At the same time, Ben Sale has been doing his level best to ensure that every species is illustrated by at least one colour photograph **taken in either Herts of Middlesex**. This task continues, but it is clear that not every species will be illustrated – either in the next few weeks or any time soon! For extinct species, an image of a Herts/Middlesex example is unlikely to be possible. However, none of this matters. The site is specifically designed for you to upload images from the comfort of your own home! We are just trying to ensure that when you access the site it is not just words! Giving you the opportunity to upload images of your captures will support records of those species that your grumpy and generally untrusting County Moth Recorder might otherwise reject! However, there is nothing to stop you

uploading images of common species as well – and indeed that is what we intend you to do!

I should add that a few of you have already assisted in the image uploading process, either directly or via Ben. Thanks for this – I am not able to check easily who has done what, but thanks to everyone anyway. This is all very much appreciated. **and it can/should continue.**

You can already upload your moth photos to the new web site using the link:

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

Captions should all be the same style: Name, location, County, date (in format 12/07/2023) then additional information (e.g., leaf mine), finally photographer name, copyright if required. **For example:**



Brachodes sp. Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire, 25/12/2023. Underside of female. Photograph© Colin W. Plant.

In case anyone is wondering, this is a totally fictitious record for demonstration purposes only. As is the following – these sorts of images are also welcomed.



Typical catch of moths at light sheet. Central reservation, M25 motorway at Potters Bar, Middlesex, 25th December 2023. Photograph © C. W. Plant

At the moment, we are very weak on leaf mine images, so if you have any, please consider sharing these, please do restrict yourself to images shot in either Herts or

Middlesex. No password is needed, but for now you will only be given access to the photo upload area of the site; you can edit your own image, but will not be able to see your final, uploaded image within the context of the completed web page until the site goes public.

If there are any queries about images and uploading 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.

What I had overlooked however, is the need for bits of text at various other places here and there. I am also testing out the records upload function. This is the bit where you, if you wish, get to upload your own moth lists – either at the end of the year as now or “as you go”.

YOUR 2023 MOTH LISTS

The final act, before pressing the big red button to launch the new web site, will be the updating of the species distribution maps. This will be a matter of me sending to Jim a MapMate SYNC file which will automatically upload new records, changes, deletions and so on. **At that point – we will launch the web site.**

As of this morning, 11th January 2024, I have already received annual lists from 32 of you via e-mail. **I will process all received lists this coming weekend.**

It follows that if you have not sent me your lists by then, they may not appear in the initial web version of the distribution maps. Of course, if you miss this deadline it is not a problem. I do still want your records, but these will be uploaded at a later date. I will endeavour to process them immediately, but can make no promises. If you are not one of the thirty-two, please let me have your 2023 lists as soon as humanly possible so that the maps on the new site can be as completely up to date as possible.

LAUNCH DATE FOR WEB SITE

Taking into account all of the above, plus unforeseen stuff yet to be thrown at me, it is very much hoped that we can launch the new web site by the last week of January (2024).

BIG BUTTERFLY COUNT DATA FOR HERTS & MIDDX IN 2023

Readers may be interested to learn that Butterfly Conservation have passed to me the 2003 Herts and Middlesex moth data from the 2023 Big Butterfly Count.

The records comprise:

Silver Y <i>Autographa gamma</i>	102 records;
Jersey Tiger <i>Euplagia quadripunctaria</i>	587 records;
six-spot Burnet <i>Zygaena filipendulae</i>	63 records
Total	752 records

WHAT'S FLYING TONIGHT?

Moths noted flying after midnight at the start of 1st January 2024 include several examples of Chestnut (*Conistra vaccinii*), Winter Moth (*Opheroptera brumata*), Mottled Umber (*Erannis defoliaria*) and a late December Moth (*Poecilocampa populli*).

Then of course, there is the Black-spotted Chestnut (*Conistra rubiginosa*). My December appeal for people to go and look for this moth reached several of you. As a result we ticked it off for the year at two known sites but, more importantly, it turned up at a completely new site in Roger Millard's garden light trap in at Letchworth – a completely new area of the county. One more pitched up this very morning, 5th January, in Liz Goodyear's trap at Ware. Sadly, there are still no Middlesex records. Or are there? The adults should still be flying during January.

Few micros are yet reported, but Jon Murray got lucky at Marshall's Heath with *Ypsolopha ustella* on 1st January and another a couple of days later along with *Eudonia angustea*,

WHAT'S FLYING TONIGHT? will also be a feature of the new web site. This feature will, of course, be populated from the lists that people have submitted – so do please use it. That should save me a bit of work!

ONE TO LOOK FOR



Mine and exit hole in an Ash key found by Phil Barron in north Herts. **Probably *Prays ruficeps***, but there is practically no other information available (and this mine has been vacated so rearing the moth is not possible). There are actually two holes, but the most obvious one is probably not associated with the mine.

Many Ash trees still have some keys attached (though not so many since the storm of a couple of days ago). There are also keys littering the ground in many areas. I suggest that this might be an easy one to find this weekend?

DEADHEAD SEASON

Calling all gardeners ... gather together a pair of secateurs and a cotton pillow-case (a supermarket carrier bag will do as a temporary measure in the field), and go forth unto the great British countryside. Dead-head

anything that moves and bring the cut heads (ideally with about 6 inches of stem) home. Tie up the pillow case and leave outside until about mid-April at which point bring indoors and empty into a suitable container to wait for adults to emerge.

Most productive plants might include fleabanes, willow-herbs, knapweeds (including scabious), Mugwort, burdocks and thistles (other than the bog standard Creeping Thistle). However, a heck of a lot of other plants also provide over-wintering places in the flower/seed heads for an equal heck of a lot of moths. And all you have to do is wait for them to emerge! [and let me have the records]. So read on:

OTHER JANUARY MOTHS

Lime trees: Examine trunks (use a hand lens or put your glasses on). Look for small (3 – 4mm long) whitish-grey cocoons, longitudinally ribbed, in the crevices of the bark. This is the over-wintering pupa of *Bucculatrix thoracella*.

Hogweed, Hemlock & other umbellifers: Look for neat, round holes in the dead stems. Cut off the affected section, but make sure you get a good few inches each side of the holes. Several micro species are likely to be lurking within – as larvae. Keep out of doors in an old cotton pillow case or similar until ready to bring inside and watch stuff emerge.

Viper's Bugloss (*Echium vulgare*): A scarce plant in our area, but one of my favourites – wear gloves – its I bit prickly! Collect stems and keep outside in a cotton pillow case until late May. When brought indoors many dozens of the minute species *Tinagma* might appear. Flower heads might produce *Tinagma balteolella*; dead stems might produce *Tinagma ocnestomella*. Neither is yet recorded in our area, so a worthy target! Look out, also for mined basal leaves and the rather fluffy cases of *Coleophora pennella*. It also supports a quite rare beetle.

Rushes (*Juncus* species): In damp meadows etc look for rushes with white, silk cases of a *Coleophora* species in the flower heads. Usually very obvious. Two species are involved, but both should be over-wintering ready to emerge in the warmer weather. Unfortunately, the resulting adults will need saving for genitalia dissection to determine which species is involved.

Hart's-tongue Fern (*Phyllitis scolopendrium*): Look on the undersides of the leaf blades. The larvae of *Psychoides verhuella* might be found in very small leaf mines near to the patches of spores – which they will later switch (in about April) to feeding upon.

Evergreen oak (*Quercus ilex*): Mines of *Ectoedemia heringella* should be obvious at this time of year. There are usually several small mines per leaf.

Ivy (*Hedera helix*): flattened leaves spun together with silk will usually contain a tortrix larva of some sort – usually **Light Brown Apple Moth (*Epiphyas postvittana*)**, but just occasionally a different species.

Tree trunks – of various species: The larval cases of several species of bagworms (Psychidae) will be evident attached to the trunks. The size and shape of the case matters for identification. Detach cases, carefully, and keep outdoors on a piece of back similar to that from which it was detached (similar in terms of the lichens on which the larva feeds).

Birch catkins: If you can reach them, look for catkins with holes in them. These are likely to be either *Cochylis nana* or *Epinotia bilunana*. Rear the adults to find out which.

GETTING READY FOR “THE SEASON”

Whilst you are out and about, keep an eye peeled for summer light trapping opportunities. It can often take weeks to find the landowner and get permission, so start early. I am happy to write letters and try to get access if you provide me with all the important details.

A target for early season trapping might usefully be the **Mottled Grey (*Colostyia multistrigaria*)** from mid-March onwards. The data suggests it is rare with us, but I have a sneaky suspicion that it is merely overlooked.

ENTOMOLOGIST'S RECORD

The January issue is in preparation and includes yet more species reported as new to Britain. Subscribe now for the six issues due in 2024 at <https://www.amentsoc.org/membership/>

That all ... enjoy.

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