

# MOTH MUMBLINGS: MARCH 2024

## WELCOME

I am motivated to create this latest newsletter by the appearance of two apparent immigrant moths in our area: Richard Ellis was lucky enough to capture a **Red Sword-grass** *Xylena vetusta* in the Chorleywood area of western Hertfordshire on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2024. This is the thirteenth record of this species in our two counties though, interestingly, not the first for Richard. It must surely be an immigrant example, but from where? Richard's image of his moth is pasted below:



The second immigrant was an example of the rather more familiar **Humming-Bird Hawk-moth** *Macroglossum stellatarum* seen by Stacey McGovern at a garden in Hertford, "at 4.30pm ... darting between clumps of *Cardamine quinquefolia*, feeding on the nectar and 12<sup>th</sup> March 2024. Stacey also reports that there was another example in a friend's garden in Sussex on *Daphne bhoulia*, although this was several days earlier.

## Resident species

The experience of people running garden moth traps is incredibly varied across our two counties. At one extreme, my own trap in Bishops Stortford has produced results that could at best be described as abysmal, with zero moths on most nights – even on nights when other people are catching things. A constant feature has been the near constant rainfall combined with low overnight temperature and (until

the last week) regular frosts. I have lost several bulbs to the rain. Combined with the general poor-quality habitat of the estate that I live on, I am probably just in a bad place!

In sharp contrast, over in the centre of Hertfordshire at Marshall's Heath, John Murray writes that "2024 has the record highest total of moths at Marshalls Heath in January and February: 361 moths of 30 species. Even discounting the extra day of February 29th, it's still 357 moths of 30 species, way ahead of the previous record in 2019, which was 282 moths of 19 species".

This may or may not bode well for the rest of the year. Probably not! Rather interestingly, John adds that "only two of the previous years (five in all) which exceeded 200 moths in January/February went on to exceed the average yearly total".

Rather few goodies have been reported directly so far in March. One that has been is the **Pale Pinion** *Lithophane socia* picked up at light by Rob Parker at Letchworth. As with other members of genus *Lithophane* (e.g., Grey Shoulder-knot) this is a species that hibernates as an adult; it is unclear when mating takes place, but egg-laying is happening around now.



## Micro moths

Many of you are already aware that the tortrix moth *Pammene giganteana* is flying now and coming in good number to the pheromone lures “MOL”, “ARG” and “FUN” – probably also to others. It is always an early species, flying in March and April (and on into May), but this year, 2024, it appeared in the last fortnight of February!

Weirdly, this is a good time to have a look for **Raspberry Clearwing** (*Pennisetia hylaeiformis*) in your garden or allotment. The caterpillar lives for two years (spanning three *calendar* years). The eggs are laid on a leaf, then the hatchlings travel down to the ground and chew their way down into the rootstock. A year later, a gall is evident – as in the following picture (taken in my garden):



Those who grow raspberries will know that fruits are borne on last year's new stems. Those stems that produced fruit last year are now dead and done; they are usually snapped off by the gardener to allow air to circulate amongst the new canes. In some cases, the whole stem with any basal gall may be removed, but in many cases the stem snaps naturally above ground level. This leaves the gall, and hopefully its incumbent caterpillar, intact. If you are thinking now that it is time to clear all those dead stems that are still there because you never bothered in the autumn, you are right! If moths are more important, then snap the stem and leave the galls alone; if fruit production is the priority, cut off the galls below ground level and offer these to moth-hunter friends who might like to rear the adults.

Oh ... and don't forget to record the presence of the galls – either direct to me or via the data entry option of the web site.

## WEB SITE NEWS

As you are all aware, our new web site was released upon the unsuspecting public at the start of February this year (2024). Our intention had always been to get it out there and then update it, making any essential corrections, soon afterwards. That is exactly what we have done.

The first major update took place in early March. Approximately 20,000 new records from 2023 were uploaded along with a smaller number of corrections and deletions.

Database alterations can only happen via formal updates like this because they are done through use of the “sync” process within the MapMate recording software. Those of you who reported database errors in January and February should now be happy, since in theory these have now been fixed. Please have a look and on the off chance that a requested change has not been made please get in contact with me direct so we can work out what is going on.

There are, however, some areas of our web site which I can access and alter myself without delay. This includes, importantly, the species texts, which will ideally be updated regularly to reflect any changes. I am delighted that most of my typing errors in these texts have now been identified and corrected – as have a few minor anomalies where the text disagreed with the findings of the “auto pilot” that creates the various statistics on the site and updates these as the database is added to. The latest change was made ten minutes ago – I noticed that the flight period stated for *Pammene giganteana* had been taken from a standard text (at the initial web site construction stage) – I corrected this to reflect Herts & Middlesex data.

## PROTECTION OF PERSONAL DATA ON THE WEB

I have been specifically asked about this. The web site database is only a partial copy of the main database; personal details of contributors are not included. This is to ensure that if the site is “hacked” then your private information is simply not available to the hackers.

For this same reason, we have applied generic names to map tetrads (and ten-kilometre squares). So, if you live in the minute village of “Littleham” that has 2 houses and a pub but your map tetrad also contains “Bigtown”, your interesting records are allocated to “Bigtown” and not to “Littleham”. This makes it impossible for hackers etc to relate your mothing activities to an individual property!

I find it sad that this level of security has become necessary but be assured that I am on to it. I am always happy to listen to comments and observations – especially if these help with security *without* making the site user-unfriendly.

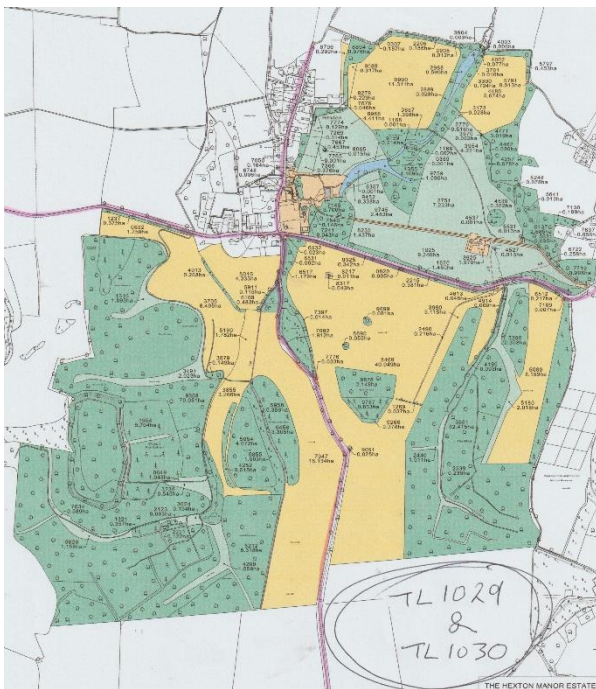
## MOTH LITERATURE REFERENCES ON THE WEB SITE

As you read selected species texts on the web site, you will occasionally come across literature citations (e.g., “Plant, 2008”). It is not made clear, but to access these you need to go via the main options on the top banner and select “Info” followed by “References”. Using the above example, you will find that “Plant, 2008” refers to our very own “Herts Moth Book”. Other references are more obscure, but usually findable if you really do want to read them (if in doubt, ask me first, as most are likely to be in my own private library).



I have realised, however, that the list needs a mega-update. Initially, I copied across all the literature references from the *Herts Moth Book* and so any relating to records made prior to 2006 are almost certainly included. However, any literature citations in updated text sections have only a 50:50 chance of being interpreted in the “References” list. I am working through these, but it will take ages as I must read through species by species to work out what is missing. If you happen to be reading the text for a particular moth species and come across a literature citation that is not interpreted in the “References” list – **please tell me so that I can specifically add it.**

**HEXTON HILLS NATURE RESERVE  
MOTH SURVEYS REQUIRED**



**Natural England have just purchased Hexton Hills.** In the map above, this is the entire of the yellow/green coloured area SOUTH of the B655 road from Barton-le-Clay in the west to Hitchin in the east. Land north of that road is not included. In the map, Hitchin crossroads is obvious – the narrow green finger hanging southwards from the cross-roads is the existing Hexton Chalk Pit nature reserve (managed by the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust). Affected grid squares are TLTL1029 and TL1030.

**We have been asked to survey moths across this entire area.**

There are good on-site access tracks, so we can drive onto the site with generators etc. I am currently awaiting a key to the gates and once this has been received we can get started properly – hopefully in the next few weeks. Clearly, once we have a key we will be able to visit as suits, though as we get going it will be courteous to advise Natural England of visits just in case anything

else is going on at the time. Of course, we can visit any time we wish on foot – starting today!

The Natural England officer in charge is Holly Bilcock, Senior Reserves Manager, North Chilterns NNR Group, West Anglia Team, Email: [holly.bilcock@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:holly.bilcock@naturalengland.org.uk)  
On site emergencies (only): 07388 955296.

Hopefully, I will be able to meet Holly on site very soon for a preliminary visit to explore mothing possibilities. The database shows that we have absolutely zero data at the moment for the land west and south of the crossroads – and apart from the Chalk Pit, almost nothing from the east. However, the very few records that we do have include two outstanding beasts – the **White-spotted Pinion (*Cosmia diffinis*)** and the **Striped Lychnis (*Shargacucullia lyncnitis*)**. Hexton Chalk Pit itself supports many outstanding chalk grassland moths – including some really rather rare micros. It will be interesting to see, at last, if these affect the wider area away from the pit.

**EXTERNAL REQUEST FOR PEOPLE TO SIGN A PETITION**

There are around 280 different bee species in the UK. We rely on bees to pollinate 75% of our crops but, frighteningly, in the East of England, 73 species of bee are threatened, regionally extinct or of conservation concern. Even more alarming is that the UK Government has recently approved the use of Thiamethoxam on Sugar Beet crops. This is a neonic or neonicotinoid pesticide and is 100% fatal to bees. If you think this is utter madness, please scan the QR code below to sign the petition.



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