

MOTH MUMBLINGS: SEPTEMBER 2024

WELCOME

It looks like we have been hit by a giant wave of immigrant moths in late August and early September – and it still continues. In the last few nights there were **Convolvulus Hawk** moths dropping to moth traps at various places and almost everyone has now seen the almost completely white pyralid that is *Palpita vitrealis* (everyone except your County Moth Recorder – who has caught a nice round zero).

Some casual reports are given below to inspire you to get the trap back out there after the truly disastrous summer and start catching moths. But before all that, here is some more mundane stuff.

THE DATABASE

Quite a few of you are now using the facility on our web site to upload lists of moth captures as you make them (rather than send them to me at the end of the year). I am pleased to report that this does in fact save me quite a lot of work – though these records still have to be put through the verification process. The uploaded lists are first downloaded to my computer and then checked before entry into the database, kept here. These records are now ready for copying to the web site database periodically so that they appear on the maps. Maps on the web site are only as up to date as the last upload by me. If you are a professional person using the web site “in anger” you should always contact me for any updates.

Text on the web site is updated periodically, as information reaches me.

I am happy for this process to continue, but I strongly advise beginners to send lists direct to me, in the traditional manner. This is quite simply because beginners are inevitably more likely to make mistakes and it is much easier for me to pick these up in a direct communication.

It is not just about accuracy of course. If I discuss a possible error with you at the time, you have a significantly improved learning opportunity. Indeed, many beginners choose to e-mail me images, telephone me with requests, dump live moths in pots in the box by my front door, or whatever, so that I am able to confirm or correct the names they have applied.

RELEASING UNKNOWN MOTHS

Though I support (and undertake) scientific collecting, there is no requirement placed on you to kill moths. HOWEVER, if you have reported an unnamed moth to me and asked me to name it remember that I may ask you to check a particular

feature – so keep it (in the fridge) until a name has been applied and you can then release it. Most moths will survive several days or even weeks in the fridge; if you ask me to name a moth for you I will be very pleased to try and do so but expect me to be less than pleased if I then ask a question that you cannot answer because the moth was deliberately released.

I accept, of course, that some moths simply escape! I promise not to moan in such a situation.

THIRD PARTY DATA EXCHANGES

Your moth data are securely held on a stand-alone computer with two back-up copies on two other computers at different locations. I have absolute control over the release of data, to ensure that it is not abused. That said, data is occasionally shared by me with those people who need it for valid conservation purposes, notably the adjoining county biological records centres/wildlife trusts.

During August, I performed our annual data exchange with the Hertfordshire records centre people. This motivated Alex Waechter at the records centre to go through our data with an ultra-fine toothed comb, checking all of the stated grid references. She has found a number of discrepancies, which I now need to address. I might be contacting some of you for clarification.

Some of these “errors” are easily explained. For example, moth trap data from a garden may be intentionally skewed (though always within the correct one-kilometre map square). Some of you, for example, create an artificial position in the dead centre of the monod (one kilometre square that contains the garden). So, if a trap is actually at grid reference TL123456, this might be reported to me as TL125455. The reason is rooted in the recently updated data protection legislation. My garden trap at “14 West Road Bishops Stortford” might, for example, be listed in the database simply as “West Road Bishops Stortford”. The house number is removed but if I then give the complete grid reference that still identifies my garden. A skewed grid reference puts me in the middle of the correct one-kilometre square. I am sure that dedicated baddies could still find me and sell my details to specialist burglars who target people with moth traps, but let’s not make it too easy for them!

I am not alone; one or two of you have asked me not to identify your garden in the maps – modern technology these days is frighteningly accurate and invasive! In fact, the law says that if so asked I must comply, so your garden grid reference might be shifted to next door on one side or the other, or even out in the street if necessary. As a general rule,

private addresses in the database do not bear house numbers (except for some older ones that I am in the process of altering).

So, back to Alex and her detailed scrutiny of the database. Quite a lot of grid references are affected by the above discussion. Computer software links address to grid reference – which is why I am working through to remove house numbers from the data. She is right in that they are wrong, but it does not actually matter for highly mobile moths entering static moth traps.

Equally confusing is the fact that those of you who are blessed with larger gardens might report six-figure grid references against records of day-flying moths that you have netted. Confusion then arises in this case not because I have betrayed your address, but because they all have the site name! You might do the same at a local nature reserve – one site name and several grid references. That's fine – there is nothing wrong with this, except that the computer gets upset! It is now for me to carefully check where this sort of thing has happened.

It should be said, of course, that this discussion applies to the reporting of highly mobile adult moths. Reports of caterpillars, leaf mines and other such stuff should continue to be supplied with as much locality detail as possible since these stages are not mobile like the adult moths and the precise location reflects of reality.

Some of the errors that Alex has found will doubtless be real. The computer checked the grid references that you gave (or in some cases which I have allocated) against the vice-county that these lie in; as long as these two are compatible that is all it does. However, it sometimes spots major errors, such as using TL instead of TQ for some grid references; and there is always someone who puts northings before eastings in their grid references. I still have to check, of course; Alex has found 269 instances where the grid reference may not match the description in the location name field (not too bad in a data set of around million records).

Although my teeth may be firmly gritted, I thank Alex for her efforts here. I am not aware of any other county records centre that undertakes this level of scrutiny (I am told it is excessively time consuming and so judged not cost-effective); I suspect that some other counties dotted around the country might benefit from a similar exercise. As always, I welcome anything, from any source, that improves the accuracy/quality of our database even if it makes work for me.

I have already started checking the data. Once I have done this I will then be ready to update the web site, as mentioned above.

I should add at this point that I also share data with GiGL (Greenspace in Greater London – effectively the London biological records centre).

WEB SITE PHOTOGRAPHS

A number of comments have been received that makes this next text necessary.

When we created the web site, I set about trying to gather together as far as possible, at least one image of every species mentioned on the site **as long as that image was shot in either Hertfordshire or Middlesex**. Inevitably, some images were better than others but in that early phase, a poor image was better than no image.

There are still some gaps for which we welcome contributions. However, for most species we are now blessed with a choice of pictures and, harsh though it may seem to the photographer, we can select the better/best images and remove the worst. **Submission of an image does not guarantee that we will use it.** We do want more than one picture of each species, but two that are basically the same are less likely to be used than two that are taken, for example, from different angles.

Please continue to upload images to the site. These will eventually be scrutinised by Ben Sale – who is in charge of the selection process. Please be patient! It can take time. A small backlog of images developed in August – presumably the minority who were upset by this don't take August family holidays?

By the way – **we are now on a new quest – to upload images of the caterpillars of as many species as possible** (again, as long as they were taken within our two counties).

TARGET MOTH OF THE DAY

David Hunt (Harpenden) has just (this morning) sent me this excellent image of the larval case of *Coleophora argentula* (Yarrow case-bearer) – feeding in the seedhead of a Yarrow plant (*Achillea millefolium*). **Please get out there and look for it!**



RECENT MOTH SIGHTINGS

Please remember the following:

- This is **not** the definitive record – it is just a short and incomplete summary to whet the appetite of the reader.
- All submitted records go into the database but not all are mentioned here; if your name does not appear it does not mean that I missed or dismissed your report.
- Records mentioned here **still need to be sent to me at the end of the year** with your annual listings (or directly uploaded via the web site).

The following are presented somewhat randomly, mostly in the order that I received them:

Convolvulus Hawk *Agrius convolvuli*

Rumours of several. Those for which I have data include Bishops Stortford on 21st August and Harpenden on 6th September.



Palpita vitrealis

Widespread reports, though for now details of many are not available. The earliest was on 21st July at Berkhamsted and the latest was last night, 6th September, in North London. Sites range as far north as Royston in Hertfordshire, down to Hackney in Middlesex and west to Hillingdon.



As an aside, did you know that you can sex these white moths? The males have black scales at the tip of the abdomen, whilst the girls are entirely white-tailed. Unsurprisingly, since migration in moths is a dispersal mechanism, most arrivals in Britain are females (as is the Middlesex example, above).

Cydia amplana.

This tortrix moth was unheard of in Britain a few years ago – now we get one or two per year. In our area we have one at Welwyn Garden City on 11th August and two from the Hampstead area of North London on 25th August and 27th August.

Anania crocealis

Possibly a wanderer from some not-too-distant calcareous grassland habitat, there were two in North London, two on 26th August.

Clancy's rustic *Caradrina kadenii*

Several reports, across both Hertfordshire and Middlesex, but few with details that can be used here. Dated examples include Clapton, Middlesex on 2nd September 2024.

Dorset Cream Wave *Stegania trimaculata*

This rather rare European moth has turned up again at the garden in Clapton, Middlesex where it has been reported twice already, this time on 2nd September 2024.

Pale Eggar *Trichiura crataegi*

Classified as “Endangered” in Herts and Middlesex (see web site for details). One arrived after the night of 24th August in West Cheshunt, Herts. The site is within flying distance of the Broxbourne Woods National Nature Reserve, where we believe that this species is still hanging on.



A micro moth *Aroga velocella*

A female of this apparently rare species in our area was caught in a light trap in Stoke Newington, Middlesex, on 30th July 2024.

Small Mottled Willow *Spodoptera exigua*

One was caught at Ware after 26th August 2024. Not a regular occurrence in our area.

True-lover's Knot *Lycophotia porphyria*

More likely a wanderer than a true immigrant there was one in Ware on 9th August 2024, the second garden record (first was in 2022).

Jersey Mocha *Cyclophora ruficiliaria*

I have a report of one only, so far, from Perivale Wood, 1st September 2024. Image below does not betray the sex (males have feathered antennae).



Dark Crimson Underwing *Catocala sponsa*

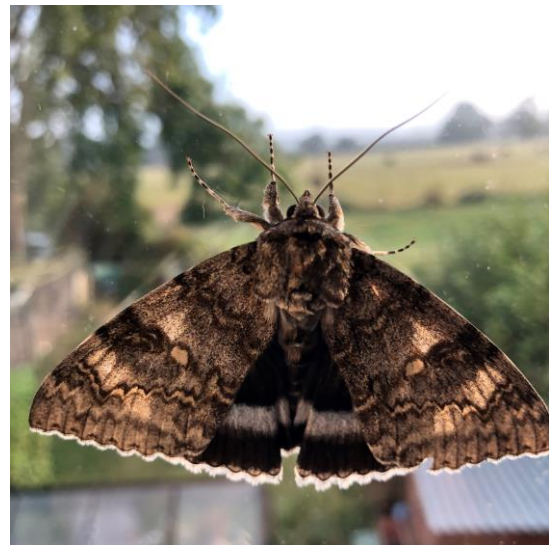
There have been a few in the past few weeks, maybe immigrants or maybe the progeny of the 2023 immigrant females? The one in the picture below was found in North London on the bedroom curtain when the reporter awoke during the night of 25th August 2024.



Blue Underwing = Clifden Nonpareil

Catocala fraxini

When I was a teenager we would happily have killed to see one of these; in the past three or so years however, they have become a regular feature. There are likely to be local breeding populations and it will be interesting to see if these survive in the long term. Meanwhile we also get fresh immigrants. It is anyone's guess to which category this current example belongs. Benington, Middlesex, 1st September 2024.



Yellow Belle *Aspilates ochrearia*

One at Harefield on 30th August was the first in Middlesex since 2015. It has not been seen in Herts since a single wanderer in 1951.



Plumed Fan-foot *Pechipogo plumigeralis*

See last newsletter. This species has expanded during 2024 from its central London base (or are all these moths fresh immigrants?). In the last few weeks its proven range expansion reached Welwyn Garden City on 11th August and Letchworth on 12th August 2024. Martin Albertini tells me that the first record of Plumed Fan-foot in adjacent Buckinghamshire was on 3 Aug 2024, at Burnham, SU9381.

Citron Plume *Hellinsia carphodactyla*

One to light at Welwyn, on 1st September 2024, on a night with absolutely no potentially immigrant species in the trap. There were, however, 347 moths of 64 species, which is a vast improvement on any recent trap (normally about 50 of 25). Presumably the plume was a wanderer?

Fig-leaf Skeletoniser *Choreutis nemorana*

now affects most of our area – from Hemel Hempstead in the west to Bishops Stortford in the east, and from Royston in the north and south all the way to the River Thames in Middlesex. There are several reports of the larvae and feeding signs on Fig leaves in the last few days.

Dewick's Plusia *Macdunnoughia confusa*

People are getting Dewick's Plusia to the ni pheromone. It remains unclear how well-established this species is as a resident and how many reports relate to fresh immigration from Europe.

Oak Processionary *Thaumetopoea processionea*

Notwithstanding the fact that this presumed pest species has an established resident population in Herts and Middlesex, there continues to be regular sightings of male moths in situations that suggest that they are primary immigrants. There was one at Harpenden on 5th August and two at Litte Hadham, Herts on 14th August – both areas where there is no current evidence of breeding.

Delicate *Mythimna vitellina*

I get the impression that there have been lots of these,. Those I have been given the details for include 3 on the night of 9th July 2024 at Berkhamsted.

Narrow-winged Pug *Eupithecia nanata*

One on the night of 2nd August at Berkhamsted was new to the garden site, though surely resident in the wider local area and not an immigrant.



Nemapogon clematella

Is one of the less frequently recorded species of Nemapogon. There was one on 13th August 2024 at Berkhamsted.



The pyralid *Uncinus obductella*

Is a sporadic visitor to our area. There was one on 13th August 2024 at Berkhamsted garden.



Porter's Rustic *Proxenus hospes*

One at Ware, Hertfordshire, on 5th August 2024. We have three previous reports only: Chorleywood, Herts on 2nd September 2008, Royston, Herts on 6th September 2012 and Enfield, Middx., on 14th September 2016. Interestingly, on 26th August 2004 Martin Honey caught one at Southfields, Surrey – only the second ever Surrey record; this supports immigration as the source.

A NEW MOTH FOR BRITAIN

Better than that, in fact – a moth recently caught by Harry Witts in London is only the third example in the Palaearctic Region (= Ireland to Japan). The moth is a pyralid, but cannot be named in public just yet as it is awaiting formal publication in *Entomologist's record*. It is a North American species, associated with Peanuts. Hopefully all will be revealed in our next newsletter.

2024 BENHS EXHIBITION

Make a note in your diaries that the 2024 Annual Exhibition of the British Entomological & Natural History Society will take place this year on Saturday 2nd November at the usual venue of Conway Hall in the Holborn area of London. Approximately 11am to 4pm. All welcome; free admission. The idea is that people bring along various exhibits for everyone to look at.

REVISED ABH CHECKLIST

The *Checklist of Lepidoptera of the British Isles* by David Agassiz, Stella Beavan and Bob Heckford is well-known by its authors' initials (ABH). It was published in 2013 and has been corrected and updated every January since then in the journal *Entomologist's Record & Journal of Variation*.

Happily, it has now been revised, putting the many changes and equally numerous species added to the British list over the last ten years, all together in one convenient place. I had to pay for my copy – so no free review here! However, I do recommend it. There are some sensible name changes back to what was before and there are a great many extra species.

The Map Mate software has yet to catch up, so there is no need at the moment to start changing your own data. However, I do recommend that you get hold of a copy. The Second Edition is published by the British Entomological & Natural History Society and is a smaller, more compact item compared with the poorly-produced 2013 original – a much nicer book to handle.

GERMAN TRANSLATOR REQUIRED

I (Colin Plant) am looking for someone who can translate some moth identification keys for me – from German into English. There is not a huge amount – but it has become important to my research. I am willing to pay a reasonable fee – cash of course! Originals are usually photocopies, which I would scan and e-mail to you and you would respond with the translation as an editable Word file or similar, so that there remains scope for me to alter or annotate. Please contact me via my usual contact details at the foot of this newsletter.

THE WILLOW LEAF-MINER PROJECT

This has been mentioned in earlier Moth Mumbblings; my mistake was probably to mention it nationally – as I am now buried under a veritable mountain of willow leaves. Some even have mines in them; it seems few people actually read the request carefully enough to realise that I only wanted the mines – some people have sent me black plastic bin bags brimming with hundreds of willow leaves in the belief that I am keen to examine all of these just in case a mine is present!

On the positive side I have been getting some results – though nothing conclusive yet. Most *Phyllocnistis* mines on long-leaved willows in the south-east of England seem to be broadly similar in appearance (getting on for 1000 mines examined). Sadly, only three pupae have been found. This could, of course, be down to me needing a new pair of spectacles, but then it is far more likely that we are simply too late in the year. We started looking for mines as soon as these were apparent on willow trees but, of course, if the mines are obvious then they are likely to be already mature. Next year we need to start much earlier, probably at the end of July/early August, when finding the very small early mines is likely to be somewhat more tricky! Twigs bearing mined leaves can then be stuck in a water-filled milk bottle on the window ledge and the mines allowed to develop. In theory, the pupae can then be more easily found!

The three collected pupae will be sent for DNA sequencing; hopefully the results will tell us if we have *Phyllocnistis saligna*, as in the checklist, or if our species is *P. asiatica* – like the one encountered at Wicken Fen. Perhaps we have both, though this seems unlikely as all the mines appear similar inform. That said, a few mines from slightly further north follow a distinctly different pattern. Could these be a different species? Watch this space.

All of the above mine in the *upper* surface of willow leaves creating the grey/silver “snail trail” mines. I have also found a few examples of the stem-mining *Phyllocnistis ramulicola* in the Hertfordshire samples, but of greater interest are a very few mines on the *underside* of the leaves. These present as yellowish rather than grey/silvery and with a wider frass line up the centre. In the one case where a pupal skin was found this was at the end of the mine, protruding from it and not in an adjacent folded leaf edge as expected. This description seems to fit *Phyllocnistis valentinensis* – a European species not yet recorded in Britain. Could it be that all the effort was worth it and I have found a new species for Britain? I await the DNA sequencing results on the pupal skin. Meanwhile it is not too late for you to get

out there and find more! I am happy to look at photos or, even better, receive live pupae

LEAF MINER SEASON IS UPON US ALREADY

It is now time to start looking out for mined leaves at a more general level again – especially on tree species. Some appear to already be well-developed suggesting that the season is ahead of itself. I have no time now to dwell on it today, but in the meantime here is an example of what you should be looking for – a mine of *Phyllonorycter tristrigella* on the underside of a leaf of Wych Elm, found at Millhoppers Nature Reserve is far western Hertfordshire by Chris Haines.



Of course, there are also the various tunnel mines of which a particular target ought to be *Acalyptus platani* on leaves of London Plane trees, shown here, below:



This moth is known in Britain only from North London and possibly Cambridge. Start looking! (Mines on Norway Maple, Sycamore and Field Maple are NOT this species, though I do still want the records.

Don't forget to look on herbaceous plants as well. Not all will be made by moths, but I still want to know!

That's all folks. Do keep me posted of anything worth sharing.

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