

# MOTH MUMBLINGS – JUNE 2023

## COLIN LIVES

You know when you are getting old – people that you know start telephoning, with poorly-disguised excuses for doing so, to ask how you are doing as they have not heard from you or a few days! Of course, it would be easier to check if the milk was piling up on the step (except that getting milk delivered these days is nigh on impossible). However, to repeat the famous misquote of Mark Twain “*Rumours of my death are greatly exaggerated*” (the actual quote, made in 1897 to a journalist at the New York Journal, was “*The report of my death was an exaggeration*”). It is nice to feel wanted, but I was simply having a week off to catch moths in Scotland – without your permission! Sorry! I did suffer for it – it was extremely cold and windy and the moth were poor!

## VOLUNTEERS NEED THIS WEEKEND AND FOR THE NEXT WEEK

The following article about the Liquorice Tortrix (*Grapholita pallifrontana*) reinforcement project applies. We need people to sit and watch the adult moths at a site on the Herts/Beds border between around 2pm and 5pm in the hope of observing female moths laying eggs. The males fly in direct sunshine over the foodplant, diving for cover as the sun goes behind a cloud and then reappearing again 30 seconds or so after the sun has come out again. Female activity is completely unknown. The males start flying around about now for about two weeks. We need information on where and when eggs are laid in order to progress the project. If you are willing and able to volunteer please e-mail David Riddle for all the details ([davidriddle1@btinternet.com](mailto:davidriddle1@btinternet.com)). The site is a public footpath; a folding chair might be useful. A notebook is essential.

## LIQUORICE TORTRIX (*GRAPHOLITA PALLIFRONTANA*) REINFORCEMENT PROJECT

Last autumn, we established a number of metre squares of black plastic in field margins at two Hertfordshire sites with the cooperation and positive encouragement of the landowners. This was done with the aim of suppressing vegetation over the winter so that by the spring we could plant out Wild Liquorice seedlings. These young plants have been grown from native Hertfordshire seed was collected in the autumn and grown on by our member David Riddle.

During the last week of May 2023, David returned to these sites for me and planted out 50 Wild Liquorice at one, near Watton-at-Stone and 50 more near Wallington. At Wallington 4 plants per square were inserted compared with a single plant per sheet at Well Wood. David also put some plants direct into bare soil after removing the turf in a couple of places where the vegetation looked less competitive.

Now it's just a matter of crossing fingers and praying for rain without slugs (and hopefully not too much replanting in the autumn). In due course, we hope the plants will become established and sufficient in quantity to support populations of the Liquorice Piercer tortrix moth (*Grapholita pallifrontana*).

Now we are investigating the next stage which will be to introduce the moth to each of the two new sites from the two existing Hertfordshire sites, probably mixing the two sources in order to maximise opportunities for genetic diversity. As yet we are not sure exactly how we will perform this task and we welcome opinions. If anyone is interested in helping, perhaps with targeted capture of female moths in June 2024, please do get in touch. For now, we just want the host plants to establish and mature.

## PROPOSED NEW WEB SITE FOR THE HERTS AND MIDDLESEX MOTH GROUP - SHORT PERIOD OF CONSULTATION



Our web site at [www.hertsmothgroup.org.uk](http://www.hertsmothgroup.org.uk) has been around for about twenty years or so and has been managed for us most ably by Andrew Wood. However, time marches on, and in many ways people's expectations are both different and higher. Technical possibilities have multiplied and our site has to some extent been “left behind”, especially as maintenance is a manual exercise and thus requires the input of time and attention of individual people. Inevitably some people have grumbled that we need updating.

We have not ignored these grumbles. Both Andrew and myself agree that it is time for an upgrade. With this in mind, we asked our moth group member William Bishop to investigate the situation for us and after much discussion and subsequent investigation of the various possibilities, he has recommended that we should upgrade our web site to follow the “Norfolk Model”. Take a look at [www.norfolkmoths.co.uk](http://www.norfolkmoths.co.uk) and form your own opinion as to whether or not this is a good model to follow. Note that it has been adopted by around a dozen county moth groups so far and continues to receive rave reviews; it seems to be becoming the standard.

Unfortunately, adopting this format does not come cheap. Each county that adopts the model pays a fee to do so, plus there is the cost of actually creating the thing. We have an “in principle” agreement with the site designer that he will create the new site for us, but of course we have not yet fully committed. There are bound to be tweaks required to make it more relevant to our own two counties and in any case, we would prefer to first have the approval of you – the membership.

So – over to you all. **I WANT YOUR OPINIONS.** Please have a look at [www.norfolkmoths.co.uk](http://www.norfolkmoths.co.uk) and play around with it. I especially like the fact that we can instantly see photos of the latest captures people have made. There are many features that we cannot presently offer. I observe that it may also be possible to enter your own records via the site (though accuracy safeguards will remain in place).

Please let me have comments and opinions, positive or negative. These are best e-mailed to me. Remember that we also have a Facebook page so if you want to get an open discussion going that may be a good platform?

Whatever design we choose, an upgrade of the web site will need to be funded; we need to raise a substantial sum of money. Whilst I am waiting for your opinions to reach me I will investigate possibilities as if we are going ahead. I will be asking the Herts Natural History Society and the London Natural History Society (for which bodies I am the formal County Moth Recorder for Herts and Middlesex respectively) for a contribution. I will also ask the single wildlife trust that covers our two counties – the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust – to join in sponsorship. I welcome offers from elsewhere.

Technically, with around 300 people on my mailing list we could be almost self-funding? If all 300 were to donate a tenner we would be there already! Of course, that is unlikely to happen. Some people may not be able to afford a tenner – and I have no intention of identifying them in public. The moth group is open to all people interested in moths – regardless of any other factor. Nevertheless, some people may wish to contribute and so I will open a special piggy-bank to receive the flow of contributions.

You will already be aware, of course, that the Group does not have its own bank account. We operate completely informally; we do not have a membership fee and if there are any expenses I can usually cover them. Therefore, **all donations need to be by cheque to myself or cash.** Cheques made out to the group cannot be cashed and will be returned. I will issue receipts, so there is proof that I have your money and am not able to run off with it. This also means that if an organisation steps forward to fund the entire project, I will know how much was given by whom and be able to issue refunds. I am not prepared to share my bank details here as this newsletter's circulation is too wide and I am far too untrusting, but if people wish to make a direct transfer please give me a shout (contact details at end of this newsletter) and my bank details can be provided to you privately.

### NEED FOR PHOTOS FOR THE NEW WEB SITE

Whatever model we adopt, a part of the plan is to illustrate ALL Herts and Middlesex moths (around 1800 species) on the new web site. This includes:

- Living moth at rest (all forms and varieties wanted)
- Both sexes in species that differ;

- Additional images if needed to ensure that all critical features are visible;
- Museum (specimens) – notably to show the hind wings and undersides
- Forms and variations;
- Caterpillars;
- Chrysalids;
- Eggs;
- Mines or galls if appropriate;
- Habitat images.

Just for fun have a look at this foreign website [https://lepiforum.org/wiki/page/Noctua\\_pronuba](https://lepiforum.org/wiki/page/Noctua_pronuba), to see examples of the range of images possible.

**Images sent should be of native Herts or Middlesex individuals.** It is a lot of images; we need to start gathering these now. Your photos are now welcomed. **Please send images for use on the web site to Ben Sale at [bensale@rocketmail.com](mailto:bensale@rocketmail.com).** Please note that sending an image does not automatically guarantee that we will use it (though in all probability we will). Images sent for the web site are also likely to be used in the proposed revision of the Herts Moth Book unless you specifically tell us otherwise).

Please save us hours of work and confusion by renaming the image files so that we do not need to look anything up. Filenames should include species name, sex if known, place found, date found, person taking the photograph.

FOR EXAMPLE: a filename of:

Large Y Uwing adult Bishops Stortford 1Jun2023 C W Plant;

Be careful not to use confusing abbreviations such as “L” yellow underwing (Large, Lesser or Least). In most cases we will know what the picture shows – but pretend that we do not, especially with non-adult images. **Photographer's name:** Please use the format/manner in which you wish to be credited on the web site. Please don't reduce file sizes for e-mailing as this may reduce image quality. Large files or numbers of files adding up to loads-a-megabytes should be sent using the “free” option within “We Transfer” (access via the web – free software – long-established and virus-free).

### MEANWHILE – WHERE HAVE ALL THE MOTHS GONE?

You are not alone! **Many** people are telling me how bad it is for moths this year; **nobody** is telling me that it is good. Granted, if you wander off to the woods and set up several light traps you may get a reasonable list, but those of us that run a single lamp in the garden each night (that's 99% of us) are just getting more and more depressed. Most species do eventually turn up, but the numbers are through the floor. In the last few days of May 2023, I learn that Jim Fish & Julian Reeves, whose adjacent gardens are in north Bishops Stortford, are recording between 1 and 4 macros per night (numbers – not species) at the moment. Looking at the database, for the same period last year their nightly average was 15 –

20; for the year before, 2021, it was nearer to 30 [numbers not precise – do not quote without checking database]. For my own garden in south Bishops Stortford the situation is near identical, (though I was away last week, so I am looking at a combination of just before and just after) – the figures are 3 this year, 16 in 2022 and 26 in 2021. At Hall Wood near Kimpton, where Vincent & Betty Judd run a light throughout the year on occasions, the dates do not coincide especially well, but extrapolating for the same general time period the figure would be in the order of 4 in 2023, 12 in 2022 and 18 in 2021. This is not scientific – though it is undoubted *fact*. The numerical declines equate to 87% (Bishops Stortford north), 88% (Bishops Stortford south) and 78% Kimpton. Not at all scientific – do not quote – but these figures are in keeping with the national decline in moth populations which is put at an average of around 90%.

I have no real idea what is going on. Climate change perhaps, but the general assumption that climate change is responsible for everything that is wrong in the world could easily mask something else as yet undiscovered. I mentioned my findings to Roy Leverton (Banffshire, Scotland) and wondered what the situation was in Scotland. His reply is most interesting and opens up a whole new area of thought. He said:

*I've always considered that not being a trained scientist is one of the greatest assets of an amateur. It protects us from group-think, not having to follow the accepted consensus of the time. We can put forward our own views without worrying that occasionally being wrong will destroy our reputation and careers. (The only way to avoid being wrong is never to say anything original, merely to quote what others have said. Whole careers are built on this.)*

*I'm not disputing that moths are declining in Hertfordshire and indeed much of southern, central and eastern England. My argument is that measuring these declines from light trap data may be flawed. It assumes that light traps are still catching the same % and variety of moths as in previous years. This we cannot prove, nor do we know what % of the population a light trap catches. (I regularly use sugar and get very different results.) There are at least three incidental reasons why light traps catches may have declined.*

1. *The light source itself is less good. There are some [this includes me – Colin] who think the old 'green' MV bulbs were the best and there are studies that support this. The Wotan bulbs were also pretty good, but in the last few years I've been using a 125 bulb labelled Kolorlux, Hungary, which I suspect is less effective than the Wotan ones. Even RIS used various brands of bulbs over the years with no comparison of the lumens and wavelengths of light they emitted.*

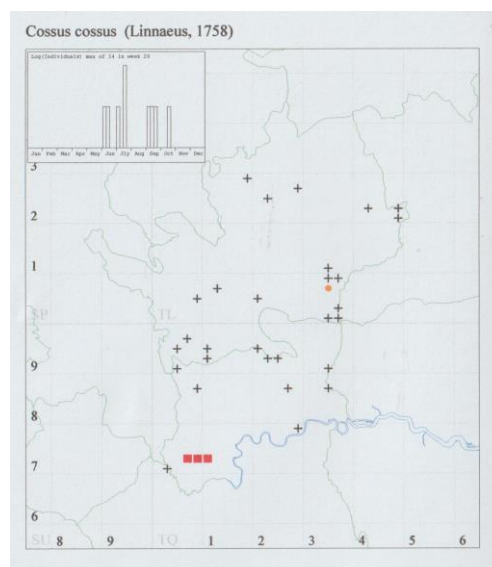
2. *Even if the light source is just as good, increasing light pollution throughout most of southern England is reducing the effectiveness of the trap. Satellite photos of Britain and Europe at night, sometimes shown on the 10 o' clock news, shows how greatly light pollution has increased in recent years.*

3. *My own pet theory is that urban and suburban moths are evolving to be less strongly attracted to artificial light. It's over 150 years since towns were brightly lit at night. Being attracted to (or distracted by) light must reduce a moth's chance of leaving progeny, favouring individuals that ignore it. 150 generations of strong selection pressure would surely have some effect.*

I know I have said it before, but I will repeat it again and again – it is critical that we do not give up garden moth trapping. Never before have your data been so important. Carry on light trapping in your garden and carry on listing **and counting** the moths (at least count the macro moths even if micros are only listed) and making sure that your lists reach me at the end of every year. Only by gathering this empirical evidence will we ever be able to convince politicians and other parasitic taxa to actually listen to us.

### GONE IS THE GOAT

The Goat Moth has fared less well than the old goat typing this newsletter. Apart from an unconfirmed report by an environmental consultancy that was surveying the area around Heathrow Airport in 2018 and one at Bedfont Lakes Country Park in 2015 (red dots on the map below), we appear to have finally lost the Goat Moth from both Middlesex and Hertfordshire. The orange spot on the map relates to Danemead Nature Reserve, a part of the wider Broxbourne Woods complex; the moth was recorded there by me in 1999 but there are no subsequent reports. The tree that supported larvae no longer stands.



### SNIPPETS

There are rather few reports, but here are the better ones (sorry if I missed anyone off):

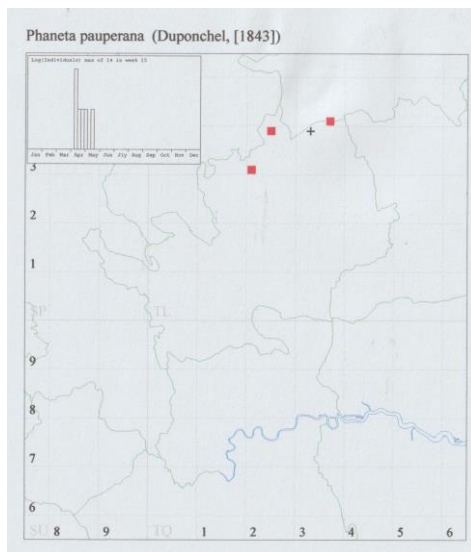
**Phaneta pauperana (Dup)** This rare tortrix, formerly *Eucosma pauperana*, made a repeat appearance at Letchworth, in late April 2023 (garden trap by Roger Milward). The larvae are associated with Wild Rose plants in a chalk-dominated landscape. Roger's garden opens out onto suitable habitat on the edge of Letchworth and at his invitation, Mark Stirling and myself searched the area a couple of weeks ago looking for early stages and then Mark and Roger searched again on 28<sup>th</sup> May. Both dates were perhaps too early. Mark's brother Phil (co-author of Stirling, Parsons &



Lewington, 2012), tells us that the caterpillar spins flowers and hips – neither of which are yet in evidence.



*Phaneta pauperana* Letchworth, April 2023



**Blastobasis rebeli** was noted for the first time in Hertfordshire in 2021, at St Albans by Mark Stirling. Recently received records (necessarily delayed by the number of genitalia dissections made to ensure 100% accuracy), reveal that during 2022 Tim Freed added it to the Middlesex list from the garden at Buckingham Palace. These two are the only records of this species in our area to date; adults fly in late July and August. This and other species of *Blastobasis* may well arrive in YOUR garden this year – in most cases, I WILL need to see the moths to confirm identities.

**Small Yellow Underwing (*Panemeria tenebrata*)** has been reported by several people, with a good many records being made at Trent Park, Enfield where it is evidently having a good year. The species is widespread across our area, flying in afternoon sunshine and visiting flowers – especially yellow ones.

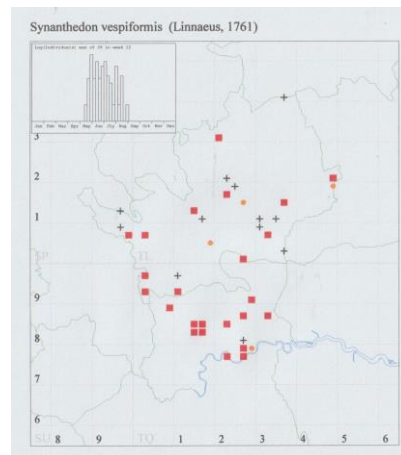
**Jersey Tiger (*Euplagia quadripunctaria*)** foodplants are very poorly known in our area. An unusual addition to the list of that of *Liatrix* sp. (Blazing Stars) with larvae associated with seedling plants by Nick Beale in North London. Whilst we are on the subject, I finally found a caterpillar in my own garden this year (first proof of breeding here). A week ago, one was accidentally carried indoors on a postal delivery that had been left on

the front doorstep amongst a mass of Common Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*).

**Yellow-legged Clearwing (*Synanthedon vespiformis*)** adults are now flying. This one was photographed at Bishops Stortford, on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2023, Jim Fish & Julian Reeves. It was attracted to the “VES” pheromone lure.



First thing on Monday morning, 29<sup>th</sup> May, I hung a trap containing the VES lure in my own garden. The weather was cool and breezy with zero sunshine – no moths were attracted. However, I left the trap out. Today, Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> June the sun finally came out at around 2pm. Still no moths but then at slightly before 3pm, still in sunshine, two male Yellow-legged Clearwings magically arrived!



**Box Tree Moth (*Cydalima perspectalis*)** larvae are evidently abundant at the moment. In the town of Wheathampstead, at the junction of High Street and Church Street, Vincent and Betty Judd report that a line of Box is rapidly being destroyed by well-grown larvae, but this is unlikely to be an isolated event.

### MOTH HUNTERS WANTED

The following was received recently by me: Please contact Sally direct if interested.

*I am organising a BioBlitz aimed at engaging and enthusing children and their families about the nature in their local area on 9 and 10 June in Lordship Recreation Ground, London N17. I am seeking a moth-er who might be prepared to run a*

moth trap the night of the 9 June and be happy to identify the moths early in the morning of the 10 June. Might you be able to suggest someone I could approach? I might be able to pay a small fee for their services, but at the moment funds are very limited.

Sally Haywill  
[shaywill@fastmail.co.uk](mailto:shaywill@fastmail.co.uk)

### FRANCE (AND WORLD TAXONOMY) NEEDS YOU!

I have received the following from my friend Dominique Thierry:

#### **Petition against decentralisation of Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris.**

Taxonomic collections and the associated libraries and archives are of vital importance to understanding the species of the globe. Moth-balling collections in inaccessible decentralised locations makes taxonomic work near impossible and stands against government incentives to halt the biodiversity crisis. Please join us in signing the petition to halt this calamity.

Simply follow this link to sign: <https://chng.it/sKR4pLZSdJ>

I urge all British moth people to sign this on-line petition NOW. The target number of signatures has almost been achieved. You can read more information at the following link: [https://www.change.org/p/sauvons-les-collections-du-mus%C3%A9um-national-d-histoire-naturelle?original\\_footer\\_petition\\_id=20182323&algorithm=promoted&source\\_location=petition\\_footer&grid\\_position=1&pt=AVBldGI0aW9uAEt1JgIAAAAAZFYwigwoZMVjNWJlZDBiZQ%3D%3D](https://www.change.org/p/sauvons-les-collections-du-mus%C3%A9um-national-d-histoire-naturelle?original_footer_petition_id=20182323&algorithm=promoted&source_location=petition_footer&grid_position=1&pt=AVBldGI0aW9uAEt1JgIAAAAAZFYwigwoZMVjNWJlZDBiZQ%3D%3D)

### BROADWATER LAKE SSSI

I have also received the following:

I'm sure you are aware of the proposals from London Borough of Hillingdon (LBH) to relocate Hillingdon Outdoor Activity Centre (HOAC) to Broadwater Lake SSSI. The Trust has grave concerns about the impact of LBH's proposals on the wildlife of the SSSI and will be doing all that we can to defend nature here if a full planning application is submitted (as we think, given conversations to date, is likely).

In preparation for this, we are trying to gather as much evidence as we can regarding the importance of Broadwater Lake for wildlife. GiGL have kindly undertaken a data search for us for the site/surrounding area but I wondered if you may have any further information on its importance in terms of inverts? We have quite a lot of evidence around the ornithological interest of the site but I would really like to strengthen that which we have for any other groups if recent records exist.

If you have any data/thoughts/knowledge related to the site we would be very keen to hear from you to help us make our case. Also, if you know of anyone else locally who may have data/knowledge of the importance of the site for other groups please do let me know.

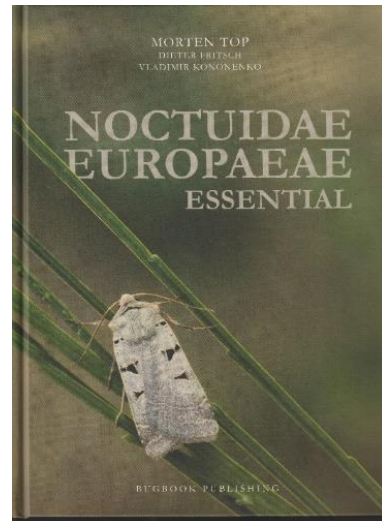
Chloë Edwards  
Director of Nature Recovery  
Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust

### NEW BOOK RECEIVED

From 1990 to 2011 we were given the outstanding 13 volume series that is *Noctuidae Europaeae*. The only problem was the price – at £100 to £150 per volume, they were out of the reach of most of us. Now, at least two are out of print and the price for the rest has not gone down. So, imagine my nerdy joy when someone took all

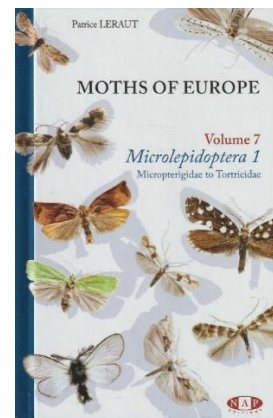
the species, added a few extras, expanded the colour plates, cut out the unnecessary elements of text and rewrote the whole thing in a style more akin to a field guide and produced ... *Noctuidae Europaeae Essential*.

Now OK – I hear you – at £158 it is still money, but condensing the original overall series price of £2000 down for one concise (and very heavy) volume surely



gives outstanding value for money. Sole UK distributor is Atropos Books.

Also hot off the press is the latest in the series *Moths of Europe* by French lepidopterist Patrice Leraut – in the form of volume 7, *Microlepidoptera part 1*. In terms of the British checklist this covers families 1 (Micropterigidae) to 25 (Scythropidae) plus 49 (Tortricidae). Presumably part 2 will include 27 (Autostichidae) to 48 (Choreutidae) and complete the series.



That's all for this issue. Don't forget to comment on the web site proposals.

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Colin W. Plant  
Herts & Middlesex Counties Moth Recorder  
14 West Road  
Bishops Stortford  
Hertfordshire, CM23 3QP

Landline telephone: 01279 507697  
E-mail: [Colinwplant@gmail.com](mailto:Colinwplant@gmail.com)

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