

# MOTH MUMBLINGS: SEPTEMBER 2023

## WELCOME

We seem to have had a slightly busy moth week in early September. Although, the resident moth species still appear to be generally poor, the heatwave that has set the mercury rising to above 30 degrees even in my own garden has brought us several interesting continental immigrants. Here are some of the highlights.

First, however, an apology. In the last newsletter I failed to mention Keith Cherry's **Splendid Brocade** *Lacanobia splendens* which he caught in July – new for Hertfordshire. I did indeed miss this report, which was buried under many other e-mails, although the short review of “goodies” that I sometimes present in this newsletter is not intended to be complete. It is an overview – to whet your appetites. What matters is that the record finds its way into the database. **So, if your record is absent from the review that now follows, please don't give me grief** – I know already how inefficient I am – but **DO** please check with me that I have received it and that it is either already in the database or in the queue for entry.

Please remember also that, even for these exceptional sightings, unless we have a clear agreement in place between us, I do still need the species reporting again with your end of year lists.

## MOTHS NEW TO HERTS OR MIDDLESEX

A **Geometrician** *Grammodes* (= *Prodotis*) *stolida*, was a surprising capture at Sunbury on Thames on the night of 9<sup>th</sup> September 2023 by John Maxen.



**New to Middlesex** and there are no Hertfordshire records of the moderately widespread southern European species.

The nationally rare pyralid moth *Acrobasis tumidana* presented itself at Ian Gamble's light trap in his garden at Berkhamsted in western Hertfordshire on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023. Formally **new to Hertfordshire**, although Ian tells me (ever so politely, of course) that if I ever work around to the backlog of material sent to me for

checking/naming I might just find one or two earlier examples from this year! This is most interesting – repeat captures of this species might just suggest an overlooked resident.



The moth can look confusingly similar to *Acrobasis repandana* (*Conobathra repandana* in older books) which is moderately widespread in woodlands in Hertfordshire.

Down in darkest Muswell Hill, deep inside the new Ultra Low Emission Zone, which makes it a place I will never be able to visit again, Gerry Rawcliffe trapped a female *Pammene spiniana* at light on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2023 (just recently named by genitalia dissection). This tortrix species is **new to Middlesex**

The rather striking **Jack-fruit Borer** (*Glyphodes caesalis*) was noted free-flying in Camden, North London on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2023 by Tim Blackburn.



According to the text of the new pyralid book by Mark Parsons & Sean Clancy, which I am told will now appear in October, this species was intercepted as an importation in August 2008 by the Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate at Heathrow Airport on Key Lime [*Citrus × aurantiifolia*], and in August 2011 and July 2012 on Citrus sp. from Bangladesh. Mark Parsons informs me that both the 2011 and 2012 examples were larvae, also intercepted at Heathrow Airport. It is a resident of Sri Lanka, India, Myanmar, the Andaman Islands, New Guinea, Bangladesh, Fiji, Hong Kong, Thailand and Australia (Queensland). The Camden

individual was most likely imported with produce. Camden is an ethnically diverse area of London and it would be a surprise if Jack Fruit was *not* imported. Interestingly, the Heathrow intercepts all related to citrus fruits. I am advised, albeit informally, that there is at least one site within three kilometres distance where the Jack Fruit tree *Artocarpus heterophyllus* is established; citrus fruits are, currently, popular indoor plants. The Camden moth can almost certainly be treated as an adventive species (Appendix A in the British checklist by Agassiz, Beavan & Heckford), but for the time being it has not been allocated a checklist number.

Two days later, on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2023, a **Palm Moth** *Paysandisia archon*, Castniidae was noted at Staines by Martin Gray. Native to Uruguay and Argentina, but has been accidentally introduced to Europe. The first British record was made at Bosham, West Sussex on 13 August 2002 (Patton & Perry, 2003. *Atropos* 18: 28. It is listed in Appendix A of the British checklist with the number 51.0001.



The DEFRA Plant Pest Fact Sheet at <https://planthealthportal.defra.gov.uk/assets/factsheets/paysandisia-archon-palm-borer-factsheet.pdf> adds that in May 2007, nine live adults were discovered in an office building in West Malling, Kent. The moths had emerged from four 5 metre tall Canary Island Date Palms *Phoenix canariensis* imported from Spain in October 2006. These palms are popular in the glass atria of several modern buildings in London where they are able to attain a natural height of several metres. The Staines moth may have been free-flying, but it is a mere couple of wing beats away from Heathrow Airport!

A rather nice surprise for Alida Heston was a **Bloxworth Snout** *Hypena obsitalis* which she found in a lit stairwell/entrance to a block of flats in Battersea, on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2023. **New to Middlesex.**



There is a single Hertfordshire record, from Welwyn Garden City on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2020 (Trevor Brownsell). Adults are moderately regular south coast immigrants, but rare this far inland.

#### **Fig Leaf Skeletoniser** *Choreutis nemorana*

I am moderately sure that up there in the main “moth motorway” in the sky, there is a large sign at the Bishops Stortford turn-off that states “Warning – County Moth Recorder lives here .... Use a different exit”. Why else do I get nothing whilst you lot get all the rarities! However, something must have gone wrong with the signing, because at long last I had added a new moth to my garden list – in the form of the Fig Leaf Skeletoniser. Feeding has appeared, literally, in the last week (during the hot spell) on my four year old Fig tree that I planted from seed in the hope that this very moth might find it!



One week earlier, feeding signs were not visible (I have been constantly looking for it) and the feeding damage in the photo above has developed in less than a week. Maybe now is the time to look in your own area? The upper leaf surface is grazed by the caterpillar from under the protection of an extensive, but flimsy silk web that covers much of the leaf surface (not clearly visible in my photo). Frass (droppings) accumulate as individual black pellets across the whole undersurface of the web. Pupation is said in most books to take place on the ground, but in my garden at least some caterpillars

pupate in underside leaf folds, spun up with silk, as shown here.



A few silk spinnings in my garden today (14<sup>th</sup> September) still contained a green-with-black-dots caterpillar). I have probably overlooked somebody else's e-mail, in which case my apologies, but as far as I can tell for the time being this seems to be a moth **new to Hertfordshire**. It is, of course, widespread across most of Middlesex, including central London.

### SOME RECENT IMMIGRANTS

**Scarce Bordered Straw *Helicoverpa armigera***. Berkhamsted, Herts., 21<sup>st</sup> July 2023 (Ian Gamble). We have 129 records in the database prior to this one, but separating genuine immigrants from accidental importations with food products can be difficult.

**Clancy's Rustic *Caradrina kadenii*** turned up at a garden trap in Tottenham on then night of 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Matthew Gandy).



All 21 of the records in the database are from year 2020 onwards, except for one at Stevenage on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2018 (Ben Sale); all relate to Hertfordshire except for one at Barnet, Middlesex, on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2020 Rachel Terry).

#### **Delicate *Mythimna vitellina***

Many reports including: 27<sup>th</sup> August 2023, Berkhamsted (Ian Gamble); Twickenham, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2023 (Peter Gray); Letchworth, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Roger Millard) and Cowley, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Roger Morton). I am aware of others but do not know all the details. I expect than many more will turn up before the month is done? There are, including these above, 42 valid records for

the two counties, but only 4 apply to Middlesex – those from Twickenham and Cowley above, plus Northwood in 1961 and Harefield in 2014 (Simon Buckingham). Of the total of 42, that from Northwood in 1961 plus another from the Rothamsted Estate in 1992 are the only two noted prior to year 2001.

#### **L-album Wainscot *Mythimna l-album***

Several, including Osterley Park, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Barbara Mulligan) in Middlesex and my garden in Bishops Stortford, on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2023, in Herts .



As with the Delicate, I am aware of others, but do not have the details to hand for all. Overall, we have 117 reports for our two counties, but apart from one in 1960 at the Rothamsted Research Station in Harpenden all relate to year 2009 onwards.

#### **Dark Crimson Underwing *Catocala sponsa***

Several, including Hemel Hempstead, Herts., 6<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Ian Bennell). I await details on a couple of others.



#### **Clifden Nonpareil *Catocala fraxini***

Several, though I currently lack details for most. It is of interest that the **localities** are not in the main areas likely to contain breeding habitat (e.g., back garden moth traps) *perhaps* suggesting that we are now seeing a fresh wave of primary immigrants and not the progeny of adults from earlier years that have become established. Much more work is needed here and it is important that exact dates of captures are always recorded, along with numbers.

### *Palpita vitrealis*

Berkhamsted, Herts., 31<sup>st</sup> August 2023 (Ian Gamble). Of the pre-existing 44 records in the database, affecting both counties, 42 relate to the years from 2006 onwards.

**Heath Rustic** *Xestia agathina*, Letchworth, Herts., 12<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Roger Millard). We have only two prior reports from Herts – at Little Hadham, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2012 (Geoff Senior) and Welwyn, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2020 (William Bishop). This moth may have wandered here from Breckland or some other area of East Anglia, though it is equally likely to be a primary immigrant.?



### *Vestal Rhodometra sacraria*

Several reports including Welwyn Garden City, Herts., 6<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Trevor Brownsell). I expect others will be reported. This moth has always been a feature of both our counties, but in recent years is becoming more frequent. Of the 306 records pre-existing in the database, around three-quarters were made from year 2006 onwards.

## NON-IMMIGRANTS

### *Gypsy Lymantria dispar*

Throughout August 2023, I have received many records of female Gypsy moths and/or egg masses indicating that this formerly extinct species, that was accidentally reimported to Britain, is now fully established as a resident across both our county areas. We have always had reports of males arriving as primary immigrants from Europe; it is popularly supposed that strikingly different-looking females do not fly. We continue to get reports of males – this year in raised number, and it is impossible now to distinguish between residents and immigrant examples. Female egg masses are noted on trunks of trees (Beech is the only species mentioned in reports), on wooden fence posts and similar, typically between 1 and 2 metres above the ground. Females “assemble” males – I have received a rather nice video clip of a female on a railway sleeper (used as a border between soil and path on an allotment garden), attended by several males. There was also an egg mass on the sleeper, which surprised me, and it is possible that

concentrating on posts and trunks might lead to egg masses being missed?

*Clepsis dumicolana* has reached Welwyn Garden City. I am also aware of a report in the last few weeks from southern Sussex. Expect this moth everywhere where there is Ivy this time next year. It was discovered new to Britain very recently in central London and is spreading.



### *Cydia interscindana*

Repeat sightings at Ealing, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2023 (Bill Haines) and other reports from the same area. This recent addition to the British list is established and spreading.



**Dewick's Plusia** *Macdunnoughia confusa* is now regarded as a resident, though immigrant examples may still occur. Apparently, it responds well to the Ni Moth pheromone. Trevor Brownsell reports it as “more common than the Silver Y this year” at Welwyn Garden City. Here in Bishops Stortford – not all that far away – I never see the darn thing!

The **Oak Lutestring** *Cymatophorima diluta* is likely to be widespread in our southern woodlands, but is rarely seen/reported. With so many species becoming scarce this may be a cause for concern and it is certainly worth mentioning one in a light trap in the Broxbourne area of Hertfordshire on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2023, spotted by George Fowler.

**Turnip Moth** *Agrotis segetum* is not a rarity by any stretch of the imagination. Numbers of residents are boosted in the autumn by primary immigration from Europe. However, of note is a single example spotted 7 floors up in a tower block in London SW1 on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2023, by Alida Heston. Not many people run moth traps at that altitude!

### WEB SITE CHEQUES

As mentioned in the last newsletter, our new web site is being 100% funded by the Herts Natural History Society. Cheques sent by moth group members to help fund the new website are no longer needed and have now been destroyed, whilst the cash sent by two of you was refunded in last week's post (tell me if it does not arrive).

### MOTH SPECIMENS ALWAYS WANTED

Specimens sent to me for naming are almost always kept and added to the reference collection for our two counties. The entire overall collection covers the whole of the Western Palaearctic Region from Ireland to the Ural Mountains and from Finland to the Mediterranean coast. It may be accessed by genuine researchers at mutually convenient times by appointment. However, note that I do not loan material (apart from inter-museum style loans that are properly documented); all moth specimens are numbered and catalogued and must be examined here.

I am always keen to add interesting new species – especially all these odd immigrants that we keep finding. In years to come, when the cost of DNA analysis makes the technique an everyday event for us amateurs, many of these “first examples” can be re-examined with a view to narrowing down their geographical origins – contributing even further to biodiversity research and conservation.

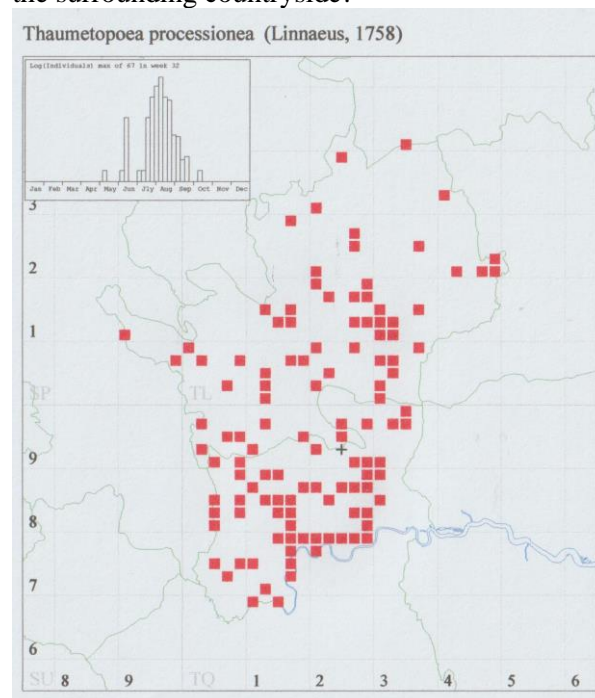
If you have interesting moths that you feel ought to be preserved somewhere, do please send/deliver these to me, along with full data. Feel free to contact me for advice on how to pack and send. Personal callers are always welcome, but please do try to phone first.

Unsurprisingly, I do not want all your Large Yellow Underwings. However, I am keen to receive selected larger collections where these are likely to be scientifically useful. If you have an old collection that is no longer wanted please get in touch so we can chat. If you are an active collector, at any level, please consider leaving your material to me in your Will. For the record, my entire collection is provided for in my own Will and so is not at risk in the longer term.

### THE TRUTH ABOUT OAK PROCESSIONARY MOTH

I am delighted to be able to report that the men in suits have apparently given up blanket spraying of insecticides (both chemical and biological) to control Oak Processionary Moth in our area (I have no information for the rest of Britain – only Herts & Middlesex). Instead, they are now deploying pheromone traps at selected “hot spots” with the attracted males being “removed” from the breeding pool.

This is commendable as, unlike with the use of sprays and viruses, there is almost zero collateral damage. However, traps are only in use at selected sites where the moth is considered to be established (e.g., Broxbourne Woods National Nature Reserve in Herts and Osterley Park in Middlesex). Whilst it is now 50 years since I did my biology degree, and I have probably forgotten most of it, it is still my considered opinion that this is a waste of time, effort and taxpayers' money. The map below shows the current distribution (at September 2023) of Oak Processionary Moth in Hertfordshire and Middlesex; it is pretty obvious that even if it were possible to remove all the males from a woodland there are plenty more just waiting to move in from the surrounding countryside!



It is inevitable, of course, that the bulk of the reports included in this map will relate to males and, within these, immigrant examples as well as residents. That, however, is irrelevant to the present discussion. Whilst I concede that this map does not show areas of residency it does demonstrate that male moths are “everywhere”. The pheromone trapping campaign depends on the elimination of males. It is unlikely to put any sort of dent

in the population of this species which is, I suggest, here to stay.

### ...AND FINALLY

As the heatwave ends (apparently) and we return to more normal autumn conditions, I am hearing reports of many of our autumn moth species. It would be worth some targeted trapping, perhaps. Here are just two suggestions for moths known to be flying now. **Orange Sallow** (*Xanthia citrigo*) is absent from many garden lists yet is known to be widespread. Try trapping underneath Lime trees (I have had success with small actinic traps placed under street trees in those rare spots where the street lighting leaves dark areas). **Dusky-lemon Sallow** (*Xanthia gilvago*) seems to be rather scarce with us, but ... could it be under-recorded. Try putting lights deep under the cover of Elm woodland or scrub – including established Elm hedges (tuck the trap right in – between the "stems" of the elm trees so it is under the canopy).

Fig Tree Skeletoniser is already mentioned above. Many other lea-grazers and leaf-miners are now poised to appear. I was catching adult *Phyllonorycter* species two weeks ago, so allowing a few days for eggs to hatch, the first signs of mines should be appearing by now without doubt.

### THINGS TO FIND NOW

If I can gather together enough information, I might soon generate a newsletter with field tips for finding moths in September. That is, things like early stages/leaf mines etc (such as the Fig Leaf Skeletoniser mentioned above) and very specific guidance for light tapping some species (like the Dusky Lemon Sallow).

It will all depend on contributions received – yes, from YOU. If you have any pet tips for finding any particular moth species in September/October – IN OUR AREA OF THE COUNTRY please share with me – especially if there are any accompanying photos etc. Obviously, I don't just want reminders to tell that now is the time to look for species X – I already know this. On the other hand, hints on where to look and how to find species X are very welcomed, even for common species.

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