

MOTH MUMBLINGS – EASTER 2023

WELCOME

This year seems so slow that we could easily start calling it the year of the snail! Every occasion on which the sun finally appears and warms things up is followed by temperatures of zero or below the following night, as there is no cloud cover to keep the heat in.

In a few, apparently isolated, places some moths are being discovered! These places are, in the main, older woodlands where there is evidently a warmer microclimate – at least for the first few hours of the night. Domestic gardens, on the other hand are pitifully poor (unless you know different); my own has so far produced little more than the common *Orthosia* species (Common Quaker, Hebrew Character etc).

However, all is not doom and gloom. In the first four or five days of April there were multiple reports of Humming-bird Hawk-moth across southern Britain and at least one made it to our patch - at Southgate, Middlesex.

It can only get better?

JOBS FOR THIS WEEKEND

The moth world has been motivated this week by the publication of a paper by William Langdon in the *Entomologist's Record* telling us how easy it actually is to find larval mines of *Phyllonorycter ulicicolella* on Gorse bushes. “Officially” it is a very rare moth and absent from most counties of Britain, but William has found it in many places in all the counties from Somerset to Berkshire – including many new county records!

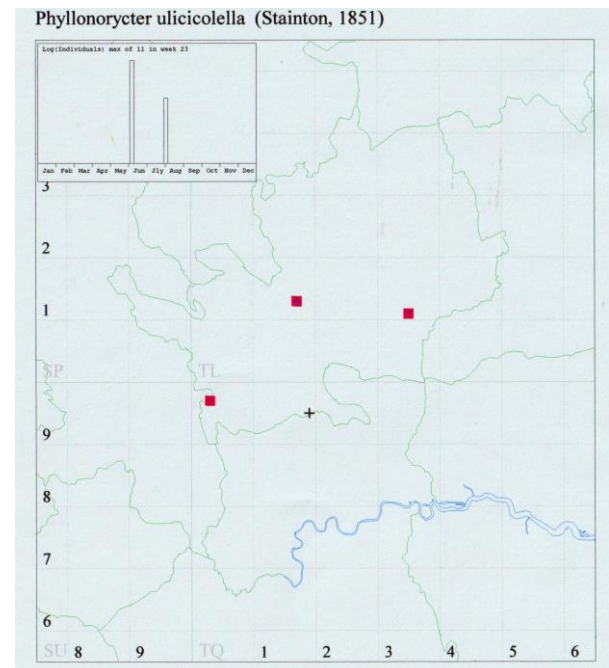


Larval mine of *Phyllonorycter ulicicolella* in stem of Gorse. Mine presents as a discolouration on the green stem, sometimes showing purple blotches and sometimes extending into a leaf. Photo pinched from William Langdon's paper, ©W.B.V. Langdon.

To date, there are no reports from Middlesex. In Hertfordshire, an adult male was found at Borehamwood on 30th July 1966 by the late Eric Bradford. In my haste to organise an *impromptu* field trip yesterday I overlooked a record of adults at Hertford

Heath on 8th June 2022 by John & Jenny Chainey. However, these were the only county records until said field trip yesterday, when I was joined by William Bishop and Trevor Brownsell at Nomansland Common, just north of St Albans. We spent about an hour and a half staring at gorse bushes and we did see half a dozen or so “candidate” mines on the stems, but these were not especially convincing – perhaps just discoloured “bark”. Just to be sure, the affected sections of gorse were snipped off and taken home for a more careful examination. I am glad we did this, because when I opened the very last candidate mine a live *Phyllonorycter* larva was discovered! **SUCCESS!** A more destructive examination this morning of the samples thought not to be mines now suggests that two of them probably are!

STOP PRESS: Just as I was about to upload this newsletter I had a telephone call from Andy King to tell me that he has found the larval mines of *P. ulicicolella* at Chorleywood Common.



Herts & Middx distribution (all time) at April 2023. The + symbol for Borehamwood in 1966 is arbitrarily designated to a tetrad west of the town centre and may not be correctly placed.

I reckon the species must be present throughout Herts – and Middlesex – wherever Gorse bushes are growing (though it may not be on single isolated bushes). Consider this a challenge this long weekend. If anyone lives near Borehamwood it would be great to update the 1960s record.

And note the first week of June in your diaries to beat adults from Gorse bushes.

Whilst you are out there, both Orange and Light Orange Underwings are still on the wing. Locate these first by

looking up to the skies – they will be flying around the tops of birches and aspens in sunlight, often settling in the canopy. A pair of binoculars might be helpful. They also make frequent visits to ground level, often to “drink” from puddles etc. So find a puddle **in sunlight** not too far from a tree with active adults, unfold the camping chair and take a break! Entomology made easy! You can often increase the numbers coming to the ground by strategically positioning a tray of urine in place of a puddle (use your imagination).

Separating the two species is usually very difficult – occasionally easy-peasy. Males (but only the males) of Light Orange Underwing, have bipectinate antennae. The antennae of females and of both sexes of Orange Underwing, are not so adorned.

So – you get two shots! 1: If it has bipectinate antennae it can be named at once; 2: if it is unquestionably a male and has simple antennae it can be named at once. Otherwise, you will need to look more closely or perhaps take a photograph of a captive moth in a jam jar!

Photos will need to show:

- Presence or absence of white marks at front edge of fore wing;
- Whether the forewing fringe is unicolorous or chequered black & white;
- Presence, absence and size of discal spot on upperside of hind wing;
- An in-focus view of an antenna.

Now, here’s the problem. Many textbooks are simply wrong when it comes to foodplant. Both species will feed on birch trees and both species will feed on Aspen trees. Old records made only on the basis of a tree-association have to be disregarded. Additionally, we now know that both species can fly together in mixed groups!

On the basis of modern data, it appears that Light Orange Underwing is the more common of the pair and that Orange Underwing is relatively scarce. Over to you.

PHEROMONES AS WELL

Whilst you are out there this weekend – don’t forget to carry the Emperor Moth lure, if you have one. Pop it in one of those “string-vest” type bags that are used in washing machines (or a supermarket fruit and veg bag, etc), and clip the bag to your belt. If male Emperors are around, they should start to follow you! Afternoon sunshine is best.

And when you are ready to go home and double check the gorse twigs collected don’t forget to pick up the pheromone traps that you hid in the bushes around the car park on arrival. Several of the tortrix lures are now starting to yield results.

POTENTIAL NEW LEAF-MINING MOTH

A paper by Erik J. van Nieuwerkerken at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden, Netherlands, published in March, notified us all of the existence of the poorly known species *Stigmella naturnella* (Klimesch, 1936), that may be extending its range across Europe. It is entirely possible that we will eventually find it in Britain. The larvae mine the leaves of birch trees.

Of wider interest is the fact that the paper contains a revised identification key to linear leaf-mines on birch trees. These mines are notoriously difficult to name and Erik’s new key is extremely welcome.

Read the paper and the key at:

<https://nl.pensoft.net/article/99360/list/9/>

with GBIF dataset:

<https://www.gbif.org/occurrence/4030755606>

HAMPSTEAD HEATH BIOBLITZ

I have received the following message from the London Natural History Society:

We are organising a BioBlitz on Sandy Heath (part of Hampstead Heath), this summer and we very much need your help. Sandy Heath is a fairly biodiverse area sitting along the highest point of Hampstead Heath between Whitestone Pond (north of Hampstead) to the west and Spaniards Inn (on the route to Highgate) to the east. It sits mostly on Bagshot Sands that were quarried extensively in the late 1800s, resulting in the steep slopes favoured by cyclists. It contains a number of different small habitats including iron-pan ponds, heath-like patches of gorse and some heather, flower meadows, woodland mostly of beech, oak, birch, hornbeam and holly comprising large areas with almost no understorey due to a dense canopy and to over-walking/cycling, but other areas of low scrub of bramble, bracken, and a number of flowering plants. The City of London’s approach to management has been to clear the canopy around some of the ancient trees, creating and leaving some standing dead trees, keeping the many fallen trees and logs, clearing some areas of saplings, and building dead hedges to support the development of the scrub understorey.

We particularly want to look at the invertebrates on Sandy Heath, focussing on:

- woodland to include a patch of sunlit bare ground, a patch of shaded bare ground, living and dead trees and scrub;
- heather and gorse patch;
- the ponds;
- wildflower meadows and rides.

We decided it would be a good idea to survey on two different dates to have a chance to cover early and later season species, so we’re going to use two of our public

survey days (the first Saturdays in the month) in May and July. **Meet at 10:30am** at the Flagstaff by Whitestone Pond (TQ 26237 86366) - 10 mins up the hill (A502, Heath Street) from Hampstead Underground Station; the Jack Straw's Car Park is nearby.

If you can come on either or both of these dates that would be really helpful, or if you have any suggestions for better times of the year to survey this area please tell me. **If you are planning to come by car, let me know and I can organise free parking.** For taxa such as mammals and birds we plan to run separate surveys: The Bioblitz will concentrate on everything else.

Liz Andrew
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London Natural History Society

CONVERTING MOTH RECORDS ... APPLE TO PC

The way in to the Herts & Middlesex Database is, in almost all cases, via Microsoft Excel operated on my PC. However, this leads to occasional compatibility issues, because some of you use Apple software. Apple has a spreadsheet function that looks a bit like Excel, but the two programs cannot mate with each other. However, your records are not lost: Here is a little trick that I was unaware of – and having mentioned it in various low places, it seems that very few other knew about it either. Simply upload the Apple file to:

<https://cloudconvert.com/numbers-to-xlsx>

and as if by magic, it will be converted to an Excel file. You will, of course, want to check that none of the records have corrupted during the process, but my minimal experience to date suggests that there are no particular problems.

HOLIDAY MOTH LISTS

Thinking of a trip to the former Yugoslavia area? If so, then the following message from my friend at the University in Belgrade may interest you.

Dear colleague,

I am pleased to inform you that *The First Catalogue of Moth and Butterfly Fauna of Serbia (Lepidoptera Linnaeus, 1758)* has finally been published. You can download the catalogue from web-address:

<https://radar.ibiss.bg.ac.rs/handle/123456789/5521>

This is the first online-version, I continue to work on the second version. I would be grateful for any additions and corrections.

Best wishes,

Predrag Jakšić

PART-TIME ENVIRONMENTAL INPUT

I have been contacted by **Nicola Pazdzierska**, who is the new **Lead Advisor** at the Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire Team of **Natural England**. Nicola can be contacted at:

Eastbrook, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge, CB2 8DR
Tel: 020 8026 5947 / 07789816259
Email: Nicola.pazdzierska@naturalengland.org.uk

Her working days are Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Not quite sure what it is that Natural England do these days, but it is interesting to know that we in Hertfordshire warrant just 3 days per week from a person who also covers a second county – so we actually get 1.3 days per week. It must be important?

MOTHS BEAT BUTTERFLIES AT POLLINATION

Researchers from the University of Sussex have discovered that moths are more efficient pollinators at night than day-flying pollinators such as bees. The cynic in me says that this is not especially surprising, given the numbers of moth species versus butterflies, but do read on as this press statement is rather general. Studying 10 sites in the south-east of England throughout July 2021, the Sussex researchers found that 83% of insect visits to bramble flowers were made during the day. While the moths made fewer visits during the shorter summer nights, notching up only 15% of the visits, they were able to pollinate the flowers more quickly.

Pollinating insects are a vital part of ecological communities and a very important part of the life cycle. Pollinators allow plants to fruit, set seed and breed. This in turn provides food and habitat for a range of other creatures. So, the health of our natural ecosystems is fundamentally linked to the health of our bees and other pollinators. However, due largely to climate change and intensive agriculture, there is widespread decline in wild populations.

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That is all. Sun is shining – moths are flying. What are you doing?

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