

SOMERSET INVERTEBRATES GROUP

Concerning the recent discovery of the Large Marsh Grasshopper

One of the great strengths of the Somerset Invertebrates Group (SIG) has been its summer programme of site visits, arranged and led by Robin Williams. Sometimes this reveals the unexpected. Indeed, in 2007 it was on just such a SIG visit to a boggy site in the Blackdown Hills that *Stethophyma grossum* (Large Marsh Grasshopper) was rediscovered.

S. grossum is Britain's largest grasshopper, and restricted to just a handful of localities in the English lowlands to the south of the Severn-Wash line. In Somerset it was, until the end of the last century, hanging on in quaking bog near Westhay on the Levels, and there are old records of it from Shapwick Heath. But it has for a while been considered extinct in the county. Imagine our surprise, then, when on

the day of the SIG visit to a site more than 20km away from its historic localities, a single specimen, in fine condition, was found by Claire Edwards. Claire was, at the time, a trainee at the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC), and the discovery serves to highlight the importance of developing and maintaining strong links between amateur groups like SIG and 'professionals' working for SERC or the conservation agencies.

There are a number of highly significant features of this discovery. First, the site is at relatively high altitude (c. 200m AOD), whereas other sites for this species across its European range are believed to be lowland, with many at or close to sea level. Second, the site is extremely small, the bog being only c. 0.25ha in extent. Third, the *Molinia caerulea* (Purple

Moor-grass) on the site – with which we all associate this species – is pretty sparse and scarcely tussocked. Taken together, these features suggest that in Britain we may have been too narrowly defining its presumed habitat preferences. If so, is it possible that there may be further populations of this great beast awaiting discovery within our shores?

European references suggest that across the Channel *Stethophyma grossum* can inhabit tall grass beside rivers (though lowland ones, admittedly). The new site is indeed beside a well-grassed river, although it has to be said that there are a number of *Molinia*-rich mires within a few miles of the new site, and both sexes of this species have good wings.

Over the last two summers, a small group of SIG enthusiasts has been in and around the Blackdowns

on sunny days in August, casting about riversides and bogs in the hope of seeing another of these wonderfully colourful beasts – or at least of hearing some (they don't stridulate, but make a series of strange clicks). No luck so far, though we have systematically quartered more than three 1km squares and nearly been bitten by adders more than once. Nonetheless, the effort has been worthwhile for a number of other reasons, not least of which has been the discovery or rediscovery of several other scarce orthopterans, including coneheads (*Conocephalus* sp.) in five sites, Lesser Marsh Grasshopper (*Chorthippus albomarginatus*) in two sites, and a single locality for the Bog Bush-cricket (*Metrioptera brachyptera*).

MARK ANDERSON