

MOTHS IN SOMERSET 2013

The year began quietly, with very few moths reported in January and February; there were many cold nights and perhaps a hangover from the very wet weather before Christmas. During February Butterfly Conservation's 'State of Britain's Larger Moths 2013' was published. It made for depressing reading, as many of our larger moths have declined alarmingly.

March was exceptionally cold, and things had not improved a great deal even by the end of April, with numbers of moths still well down on 2012. Even in May catches were low and it did seem that the extended cold wet weather, preceded by waterlogged ground during the winter, had particularly affected those moth species which normally hibernate as larvae or pupate at ground level.

June saw improving weather and a general improvement in the numbers of moths reported, with a Bordered Straw (*Heliothis peltigera*) in Langport on the 2nd and large numbers of the migrant Silver Y (*Autographa gamma*) being noted. In Langport, John Bebbington caught Large and Small Elephant Hawk-moths (*Deilephila elpenor* and *D. porcellus*), both males, with Greater Butterfly-orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*) pollinia on their eyes (Fig. 1). The nearest known site for

the orchid is some 2 km away, which suggests that at least males of these striking species may range widely in their search for mates.

Still in June, Nigel Cottle in Taunton had a 'first' for the county, a Summer Fruit Tortrix (*Adoxophyes orana*), perhaps an unwelcome arrival as this species can be a severe orchard pest. Mark Parsons of Butterfly Conservation recorded the Liquorice Piercer (*Grapholita pallifrontana*) (Fig. 2), another Tortricid, from Charlton Mackrell – the first record of this species in Somerset for more than 60 years.

Migrant numbers increased in July, with an influx of Red-necked Footman (*Atolmis rubricollis*) over much of southern England. They were reported from Westonzoyle and Sand Bay on the 4th and the 10th. Paul Bowyer reported Diamond-back (*Plutella xylostella*), Rush Veneer (*Nomophila noctuella*), Dark Sword-grass (*Agrotis ipsilon*) and Silver Y from Sand Point on the 27th. James McGill reported a Pine Hawk-moth (*Hyloicus pinastri*) from Thurlbear on the 21st; this is probably not resident in Somerset but a stray from the east.

August saw an influx of the very elegant Pyralid *Palpita vitrealis*, a pearly white species with a pink or purple leading edge to the forewing. There were reports of the uncommon Hoary Footman (*Eilema*



Fig. 1 Small Elephant Hawk-moth (*Deilephila porcellus*) with Greater Butterfly-orchid pollinia stuck to its eyes

canioa) from Weston-super-Mare on the 2nd and Taunton on the 27th. In Britain this is generally regarded as a scarce coastal species, but it has undergone a marked expansion on the continent where the larvae feed on lichens and algae on house roofs. It may well become more widespread in Somerset.

During September and October there were more reports of migrants, notably three specimens of the magnificent Convolvulus Hawk-moth (*Agrius convolvuli*) and large numbers of the much smaller

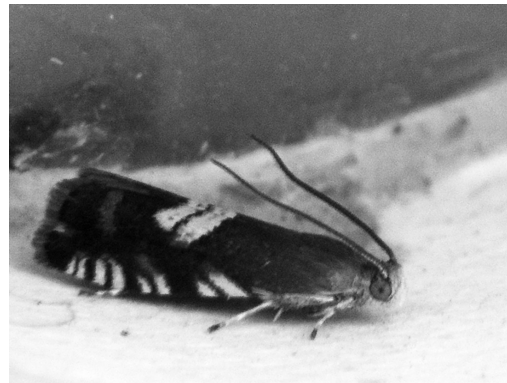


Fig. 2 Liquorice Piercer (*Grapholita pallifrontana*)

Vestal (*Rhodometra sacraria*), the latter including seven at Burnham-on-Sea on 4th October.

November and December were much quieter and the usual early winter species such as Blair's Shoulder-knot (*Lithophane leautieri*), Sprawler (*Brachionycha sphinx*) and December Moth (*Poecilocampa populi*) were all regulars. Surprisingly, on 21st December a Dark Sword-grass was taken in Langport, almost a month later than the previous latest record for the county. Was it a migrant, or the offspring of an earlier arrival?

As we all know, December saw the arrival of severe stormy weather and disastrous flooding. It remains to be seen what effects the prolonged flooding will have had on our moths – let's hope for an improvement in 2014, with a good migrant year.

A new edition of Butterfly Conservation's 'Atlas of the UK's Larger Moths' is planned for publication in 2018. Between now and the end of 2017 the Somerset Moth Group will be targeting under-recorded parts of the county, but all records are welcome. Details of how to submit records can be found on the Group's website (www.somersetmothgroup.org.uk).

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