

Butterfly Conservation Upper Thames Branch

Priority Moth Species Report 2020

By Peter Cuss, Priority Moth Species Champion

Introduction.

The aim of this report is to give a brief overview of some of the surveys and field trips undertaken for the recording of the Upper Thames priority moth species and to highlight sightings of particular interest.

Striped Lychnis

A small group of UTB members managed to carry out the largest survey of Striped Lychnis larvae that has been achieved in recent years. The volunteers managed to count 17336 dark mullein flower spikes and 1353 larvae on over twenty sites. The table below shows a summary of the results.

DATE	SITE	LARVAE	FLOWER SPIKES
07/07/2020	Moulsford	21	150
08/07/2020	Henley to Stoner, roadside area A	44	275
08/07/2020	Henley to Stoner, roadside area B	8	60
08/07/2020	Henley to Stoner, roadside area C	5	76
09/07/2020	Bix, roadside	5	150
09/07/2020	Homefield Wood	30	745
09/07/2020	Yoesden	48	111
09/07/2020	Yoesden extension	30	460
12/07/202	Warburg	6	1
13/07/2020	West Wycombe Hill	24	210
14/07/2020	Skirmett, roadside	5	50
14/07/2020	Bradenham Estate	480	7205
15/07/2020	Wormsley Estate	26	157
15/07/2020	Turville	12	48
16/07/2020	Lower Assendon	5	250
16/07/2020	Caversham Heath Golf Course area A	17	70
16/07/2020	Caversham Heath Golf Course area B	7	40
17/07/2020	Mapledurham Estate	5	60
18/07/2020	Peppard Hill	6	35
18/07/2020	Swains Wood	3	30
20/07/2020	Holtspur	71	375
20/07/2020	Dairy Lane, Verge	28	180
21/07/2020	Watlington Hill	259	2000
22/07/2020	Green Farm Hughenden	208	4598

The Striped Lychnis appears to be doing well in our area. There is some evidence it is increasing its range a little with sightings of larvae outside its typical reported range such as Moulsoford in Berks, Wallingford, Peppard Hill and the Mapledurham Estate in Oxfordshire. The top three sites in the Upper Thames, in terms of the amount of dark mullein and the number of larvae were the Bradenham Estate, Watlington Hill and Green Farm, all National Trust sites. Roadside verges remain an important habitat for this rare moth and probably play a key role in allowing its movement across the wider countryside. There is great potential to work with councils within the moths range to protect and improve verges for it.

We have been running a pilot project in the Hambleton valley offering free seed or plug plants of dark mullein to landowners and gardeners, to create new habitat, and have been successful in getting some interest. Nearly 400 plug plants were planted in total in this area and at Holtspur.

Going forward, Steve Wheatley and the Moth Team have asked if we can pick five areas to act as key 'indicator sites'. These sites (which will be part of ten across the UK) will be monitored every year and should provide BC with the data to track the population trends of this species. The five sites chosen will be Bradenham Hangings, Watlington Hill, Henley to Stoner road, Green Farm in the Hughenden Valley and our Holtspur Bottom reserve. Although these will become the five priority sites to monitor we will of course continue to record as many other areas as possible.

Green Farm was a conservation success story for the Branch. This site in the Hughenden Valley was once the best site for Striped Lychnis in the UK, but had become fairly shaded with a lot of scrub in the key field. In 2008 Peter Hall and his team had recorded 1770 larvae here. Last year only 55 larvae were found. We met up with the National Trust at the end of last year to see if anything could be done to improve the area. The NT did a fantastic job working on the site over the winter, which was reflected in this year's count of 208 larvae and a big increase in the amount of available food plant.

Drab Looper

The table below records some of the successful searches for this species in West Berks. The habitat at Mirams Copse and other areas around Rushall Farm remains excellent. Although reasonable numbers were recorded throughout Frilsham Woods many of the sites here are becoming very shaded as planted trees become mature. Moor Copse is also losing much of the better habitat. The moth would benefit greatly from intervention to improve areas of food plant by coppicing and ride widening. John Lerpiniere also reported a couple of second brood Drab Looper in August at Mirams Copse.

DATE	SITE	NUMBER	RECORDER
18/05/20	Mirams Copse. SU57717310	4	P.Cuss
18/05/20	Mirams Copse.SU57677319	1	P.Cuss
20/05/20	Moorcopse . SU63807394	3	J.Lerpiniere,G. Hawker, P.Cuss
20/05/20	Frilsham Woods. SU55017248	14	J.Lerpiniere, G.Hawker, P.Cuss
20/05/20	Frilsham Woods . SU55227258	2	J.Lerpiniere, G.Hawker, P.Cuss
20/05/20	Frilsham Woods. SU55167288	2	J.Lerpiniere, G.Hawker, P.Cuss
28/05/20	Fence Wood. SU51327238	2	P.Cuss

Pale Shining Brown

This species has not been recorded in the UK since 2013 despite much searching. I was fortunate to be able to join Dr Marc Botham on a couple of trips to the Callows Farm/Stonesfield area of Oxfordshire. The first on 3rd of June was a fairly cold and soggy night that produced few moths. The second on the 25th June was much better weather but again PSB was not recorded, although it was a good nights catch with a species list of over 180 (with the micros)and included Ruddy Carpet and Red necked Footman.

Heart Moth

Windsor Great Park remains the only known Upper Thames site for this species. We managed to record one Heart Moth in 2019 in less than ideal conditions. The plan this year was to carry out a more extensive survey. We were able to get a small team together and then split up to get the best possible coverage. On the 4th July 2020 Steve Wheatley, Marc Botham and Darren Taylor trapped in the Bears Rail area of the park, Paul Black and I trapped at Cranbourne Park. The weather was once again poor, cool and very windy, and the numbers of moths coming in was low for such a good site. One Heart Moth was recorded, by Marc, in the very early hours as he was packing up. It was good news to at least record it but difficult to draw any conclusions on the state of the population having trapped two consecutive years in such poor weather conditions.

It was also sad to hear that the area in which we recorded Heart Moth last year, the car park area near Queen Anne's Ride, had been sprayed for Oak Processionary. This was one of the best areas historically for Heart Moth.

Sloe Carpet

The last Upper Thames record of this moth was 1983, when three were taken near the Devils Highway, Mortimer. It is possible that it is hanging on somewhere in this area. In 2007 just over the border in Hampshire, at Silchester Sewage Works, one was taken by Graham Dennis. Having spoken to Graham this would appear to be a 'one off' as he records here on a regular basis. I spent some time last year looking for any remaining unmanaged blackthorn suitable for a spring search. At 'The Devils Highway' (SU66966259) and along the railway at Mortimer (SU6699563900) there is a fair amount of unmanaged hedgerow blackthorn which will be worth a look. The most promising Mortimer site is in a field at SU673164311. Here the blackthorn grows in dense thickets that plainly have been unmanaged in a very long time and look perfect habitat. It also matches two historical records, M. Critchon in 1967 at SU6764 and another record in 1906 at SU6764. Although only a four figure grid references these records could possibly be the same field. Could it still be here? I approached the landowner for permission to carry out a search this spring. Initially she said yes and I looked forward to a few nights searching for the species. Unfortunately she changed her mind and also informed me she will be removing much of the blackthorn this year as it gets in her horses hoofs. I had planned to try running a few actinic lights on nearby Thames Water Land and was in the process of getting permission when Covid-19 threw yet another spanner in the works. I'm hoping for better luck with this moth in 2021!

Silvery Arches

A search for this species was undertaken at Swinley Brick Pits, near Bracknell on the 18th July, with Steve Wheatley, Marc Botham and myself. The moth has been recorded here in the past (David White 2013). Unfortunately we didn't find the target species, although it may have been a little late in the season. The site remains excellent potential habitat for Silvery Arches and the evening produced some other interesting species including Goat Moth, Triangle (a RDB species), Festoon, Waved Black and Beautiful Brocade.

Four-spotted

Tony Raynor recorded this moth at Cholsey, the first Berks sighting since 2006. Occasional, but well spaced out, sightings in the area of Cholsey / Appleford / Whittenham seem to suggest the possibility that the moth may be present as a breeding species in low numbers and requires further investigation.

Forester moth

Despite a very parched looking meadow and a shortage of flowers for a nectar source, the colony at the Millennium field, Sonning Common did well this year, with local volunteer Chris Brown counting 133 moths on one visit, the highest number he has counted at the site in the many years he has been recording here. The relatively few available flowers proved very busy and provided some excellent photo opportunities. There was also a couple of interesting reports of Foresters in Berkshire, at Cock Marsh and at another (private) site near Maidenhead. Dave Wilton counted 97 Foresters in the meadow just outside Grendon and Doddershall Woods, Bucks.

Cistus Forester also seemed to have a very good season at Aston Rowant.

Other notable UTB sightings

Pheromone lures have become very popular and continue to increase our knowledge of the distribution and population of the clearwing species. I was pleased to record White-barred Clearwing at Decoy Heath, Berks (and two on Pamber Heath). Sue Taylor recorded Sallow Clearwing at Grendon Underwood, only the second Bucks record (and without the use of lure!)

Purple-bordered Gold was recorded at Bracknell Forest. Goat moth was recorded at Swinley Brick Pits, as mentioned above, as well as Windsor Great Park during the Heart Moth search. The Butterbur was recorded at Thatcham Reed Beds.