

A night out with the moth-ers



When I was little, the summer nights seemed to be full of moths, circling and beating against the lamps, dropping into your lap and thudding onto your pillow. These days, the closest I get to a moth are the ones that emerge in clouds from my cupboards, bits of my favourite woollens in their tiny jaws, and the discarded and indigestible remains that the bats leave in my porch.

Last month, Karen Pritty, local moth-er (that's the technical name for someone who is hooked into moths) and keeper of the Chailey Commons Society Robinson moth trap, led a mothing event for the Plumpton & East Chilington Wildlife Group. The night before, she set her moth trap, and in the early evening of the next day (ideally it would be the next morning, to save the moths spending too long in the trap, but rain delayed play), we gathered to see what glories would emerge from its depths.

First, the moth trap itself. It is, basically, a large, round bowl, with a perspex lid, a hole in the middle, and an upside-down lampshade stuck in the hole, with a special light bulb in it (see the Sussex Butterfly Conservations' Beginner's Guide to Mothing for some handy tips on building one yourself - www.sussex-butterflies.org.uk/species/moths/mothing%20guide.html). You set this contraption on the ground, on a white sheet, to magnify the light, and leave it overnight. The moths are attracted to the light (all those years of natural selection, and they never learn), tumble into the lampshade and topple into the bowl, whence they can't easily escape. The bowl itself is packed with cardboard egg boxes, which provide lots of nooks and crannies for the moths to hide in while they await release.

So, we gathered excitedly around the bowl, while its beauties were revealed.

Moths are astonishingly, breathtakingly and amazingly beautiful in the subtlest and the most garish ways. They are also, arguably the drabest insects on planet earth. There's the dingy footman - its name says it all. There's even a moth officially called 'uncertain', because its nondescript colouring is so very nondescript that a special category has been created for it and all its relatives. Then you get the A-list - the hawk moths - lime, poplar, eyed, elephant, humming bird, privet, and the giant in a giant family, death's head (yep, it has a human skull tattooed on its back). We had three elephant hawk moths in our haul - lime green with bright pink trimmings, and HUGE. Mega-moth bling.

There's a vast array of mottled, marbled, dappled and spotted moths; moths with pink and green tummies; moths convincingly disguised as twigs or bird droppings, and moths with menacing eyes on their backs that no right-minded

bird should want to eat. If you have the special little pots with magnifying lids to capture them in, you can admire the delicate patterns and subtle colourings to your heart's content.

Just the names are a delight. We captured some 45 different species (there's 2,500 in the UK), plus a few micro-moths (for the true aficionados with very good eyesight). They included dark arches, heart and dart, riband wave, bordered beauty, common wainscot (not, sadly, the smoky wainscot, which is also quite common locally), bright line brown-eye, mother of pearl and the European corn-borer. At the mothing event earlier in the summer, we scored a coxcomb prominent and a pistol case-bearer.

Don't handle them with your bare hands. If they're in a container and fluttering frantically, pop them into the fridge for a bit until they calm down. Having identified them, release them carefully, as soon as possible, into foliage, where they can take refuge from hungry birds until night time. And, of course, report your findings to the Sussex Moth group at www.sussexmothgroup.org.uk/

Moths aren't just a pretty set of wings; they're a vital food source for birds, bats and other insectivorous animals (blue tits in the UK and Ireland eat an estimated 50 billion moth caterpillars each year, the greedy varmints), and they support numerous other predators and parasites, many of which are specific to individual moth species, or groups of species.

Mothing has been described by Michael Blencowe, of the Sussex Wildlife Trust, as like Christmas - only better, because you can do it all year round. I'm hooked. For reference, he recommends the *Field Guide to the Moths of Great Britain and Ireland* by Paul Waring and Martin Townsend, also available in a concise version.

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