



Bush crickets

Bush crickets, or long-horned grasshoppers, are similar to grasshoppers but with very long antennae, much longer than the body. The females have a long, sword-like ovipositor, and generally the males stridulate (chirp) with their wings, whereas grasshoppers stridulate with their legs. There are ten species in Britain and all are recorded in Sussex. Four are mostly restricted to marshy areas, and three to coastal areas and the downs or cliffs, but three are quite widespread and occur around the village. And any of them can turn up indoors. All are mostly active at night.

The dark bush cricket (*Pholidoptera griseoaptera*) is common low down in woodland edge and hedgerow vegetation. It's a chunky insect, dark chocolate brown with paler markings and may be mistaken for a spider. Its wings are short but produce a loud 'chirp' repeated at intervals of three or four seconds, more rapidly when excited by a possible mate or a rival. It eats both animal and plant material.

The oak bush cricket (*Meconema thalassinum*) is a vivid lime green, smaller and slimmer than the dark bush cricket and the adult has fully developed wings but doesn't fly very much. It lives in trees, including particularly oak but also a wide range of others. It has a rather longer chirp, about a second long and repeated about every three seconds. Although it may do this by rubbing its forewings together in the way usual for bush crickets, it doesn't have the usual stridulatory organs and the resultant sound is very soft. Perhaps what is usually heard is the sound produced by the rapid drumming of one hind foot on a leaf.

The speckled bush cricket (*Leptophyes punctatissima*) is also bright green but is covered in tiny dark spots that give it a slightly purplish tinge. The small wing remnants are usually brown. It has a more bulbous abdomen than the others. It likes bushes, shrubs and small trees, as well as ivy-like creepers on walls. The song is very faint and consists of a very short chirp repeated every three or four seconds, more rapidly as the temperature rises. Actually I mostly hear this one when I am out at night with my bat detector. The call is a bit like the social calls of some bats, but the latter are usually produced in flight rather than from the same spot.

We would be interested in receiving records of these beasts. August and September are probably the best months, but they usually extend into November when many other insects have disappeared.

I make no apology for giving you the scientific names for these animals; they roll so nicely off the tongue. The same goes for the wart biter (*Decticus verrucivorus*), one of Britain's rarest bush crickets (is there a shortage of warts and verrucas these days?). This is a protected species, and one of the handful of British sites where it is still found is on the Downs, more or less south of here.

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