

Centre News

The Woodland Education Centre, Offwell, Honiton, Devon EX14 9SW. Tel 01404 831373



Centre Director's Report - Autumn 2003

A New Moth for Devon!



Crambus silvella has now been recorded in Devon.

A moth never before recorded in Devon, has recently been discovered at the Woodland Education Centre! A single specimen of the moth, *Crambus silvella*, was found at the Centre in early August, during a trapping session led by Roy McCormick, the Devon County Recorder for Moths. Roy was ably assisted by a team from the Devon Moth Group, including Brian Bewsher, who actually trapped the moth.

This moth, although small and fairly insignificant to the lay person, has occasioned great interest. It is a type of micromoth, which is a group of generally small, fairly primitive moths. This species has a caterpillar which feeds on sedges and it is thought to be associated with heathlands. So far, despite two additional trapping sessions at the Centre by Roy and his team, as well as one on nearby Gittisham Common, no further specimens have been discovered. The period when adults of this moth are around has now passed, so this species at least, is holding onto its secrets until next year and a new flight season.

The County Recorder's first visit to the Centre was prompted by the 'Mothathon' which was held at the Centre over the last weekend in July. The Mothathon is an annual event organised by twelve dedicated moth experts. They pool their trapping resources to intensively investigate the moth fauna of selected areas over a whole weekend period. This was their tenth annual Mothathon and the first to be held in Devon.

The Mothathon generated an enormous amount of interest and publicity. The *Western Morning News* and the *Express and Echo* both ran full page articles on the event and a live radio interview went out on BBC Radio Devon.

On the Friday and Saturday nights, reporters and photographers mingled with moth trappers and interested onlookers in the eerie shadows cast by the bright glow of the light traps.

A total of 178 different moth species were trapped over the whole weekend. The 'Mothathon maximum' to date is 198 species, so the Centre was not too far short of this mark. The species list generated stimulated some fascinating discussion, which led to Roy and his Devon Moth Group team coming to investigate the Centre for themselves.

Moths are one aspect of the extraordinary biodiversity of the Centre which usually remain hidden from view. Apart from a number of day-flying species, most moths do not come out until it is dark and we are safely tucked up indoors. The number of individuals and the range of species (not just moths either) which are drawn to the light traps is truly astonishing. Nearly 2,500 individual moths were recorded over the Mothathon and on many occasions, a mask would have been very handy to avoid inhaling the cloud of insects insistent on getting to the light.

So far this year, 249 different moth species have been recorded at the Centre in six separate trapping sessions. Many of them are intricately patterned, colourful and beautiful. They delight in quaint names such as 'True Lover's Knot', 'The Seraphim' and 'Pigmy Footman' and have an amazingly varied ecology.



A Black Arches moth is admired by two of the Mothathoners.

The diversity of the moth fauna at the Centre is a direct reflection of the habitat diversity which makes the Centre so unique. It provides a very clear indication of the ecological health of the area.

Anyone wishing to know more can visit the new 'Moth' section of the Trust's website. Species lists, general facts about moths and many images of some of the more beautiful or unusual moths can all be accessed there. For those living locally it is intended to start an informal social moth group. This will combine moth trapping with a social get together. For more information about this please contact Barbie Corker on 01404 831373 or by e-mail offwell1@aol.com.

The website, as ever, continues to grow and attract visitors from around the world. This is just one of the many areas where OEL plays a valued role in supporting the Trust. For example, OEL member, Gillian Dunkley, has recently written an article on pond-making, utilising her 20 years of experience and anecdotes to advise newcomers to the activity. This has been incorporated onto the website and in one week, it received 642 hits, making it the 20th most accessed resource in the top 200 topics listed.

Gillian is not the only OEL contributor to the website. Seasonal favourites such as the section on 'Fungi' also benefit from OEL involvement. This section has an introductory article written by Vice Chairman, Jeff Benn.

Local bird expert, Dr Mike Hounsome is also a contributor, with an article on bird life spans. All of these contributions help to widen the general interest and appeal of the website. The recent start of the new term for schools and colleges was immediately reflected in the website statistics, which are checked weekly. The number of hits doubled to over 100,000 as the new term started. It is further proof of just how valuable the site is in Education. It is also good to see local organisations such as East Devon District Council making good use of the website.

Schools and groups continue to book into the Centre for Autumn visits and are even booking now to secure their preferred dates for next year. Family Activity days held over the summer holidays at venues ranging from the Centre, to Lyme Regis and Ladram Bay, were a great success. The Young Rangers' Club also continues to meet regularly, bringing on a new generation of enthusiastic naturalists.



The Young Rangers' Club meets fortnightly.

The truly blissful weather has benefited recent visitors to Centre, such as Devon Conservation Forum and Devon WI members. The warm sunshine brought the butterflies out to sit on colourful flower backdrops, while dragonflies hawked up and down carefully inspecting onlookers. Ruddy Darter dragonflies even posed for WI members, with mating pairs by the lake, proving that they breed on site and are not just migrants. (Ruddy Darters that is, not WI members!).



A rare Ruddy Darter is modelled by a WI member.

This has been an exceptionally good year for many insects including butterflies, moths and dragonflies. Migrant species such as Painted Lady butterflies and Silver Y moths have arrived in droves from the continent. Jersey Tiger Moths, with their striking orange hind wings and Hummingbird Hawk-moths have also both been spotted flying at the Centre. Interestingly, a number of Migrant Hawker dragonflies have also been seen.

The first autumnal tinges now in evidence are a reminder that Autumn and Winter conservation work programmes at the Centre need to be set into action. This is the time for containing encroaching aquatic plants such as the Fringed Water Lily now dominating the lake. All the seed heads of Yellow Iris and Reedmace (sometimes known as Bulrush) have all had to be removed to lessen the staggering dispersal abilities of these plants. The parent plants will also have to be controlled in certain areas. Add to this the burden of Heathland Project area management tasks, as well as keeping paths accessible for visitors and one can see that there is more than enough to keep the Centre's Leading Hand, Mike Manvill, fully occupied!

On a somewhat more worrying note, despite the extended period of fine and dry weather, no progress has been made in addressing the problems originating from the old landfill site upstream of the Centre. Even with no appreciable rain for months, the situation is worsening as a section of hillside is now moving inexorably downwards into the stream. Given our normal autumnal gales and heavy rain, thousands of tons of debris are just waiting to be carried downstream. Regrettably, all of the predictions made by the Trust regarding this problem have so far proved to be correct, despite contrary assurances from the Environment Agency. The consequences of continued inaction are such that this issue now threatens the future of the Education Centre. The Trust continues to explore all avenues to reach a satisfactory solution.