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ON THE BUMBLEBEES OF NORFOLK

In his Presidential Address, reproduced in the current edition of Transactions, Tony Irwin commented that it was almost 30 years since there had been any detailed study of the bumblebees of Norfolk. In the light of changing agricultural practices and the suspected nationwide decline in numbers of bumblebees, Tony commented that these insects could well repay further study in the county.

Having expressed an interest in the group, Tony let me have (for the princely sum of £1) a copy of the 1967 Transactions which contains a paper by R C Plowright, detailing the distribution of the 12 species of bumblebee and 6 species of cuckoo bumblebee then found in Norfolk.

One sentence from that report epitomises the agricultural revolution which was subsequently to sweep across the county and change the face of the countryside within a single generation - "Most of the sampling, especially in late summer, was confined to fields of red clover".

Where are those fields now - replaced by chemical sprays rendering the traditional 4-crop Norfolk rotation redundant and permitting intensive single crop farming.

A recent visit to the Narborough railway line brought home to me just how impressive these fields of clover must have been. At the eastern end of that reserve is a small area of Sainfoin, a species formerly grown as a commercial clover crop, which was alive with bumblebees. Reproduce that over the whole of the county and one realises the immense loss that our insect fauna has suffered during the past 2 or 3 decades of change.

How can we help - flower gardens are important, especially those providing traditional cottage garden blossoms like foxglove and marjoram; and of course rough areas where bumblebees can make their nests are essential. Excessive tidiness is the enemy of conservation.

Your rewards are likely to be the presence of the 6 species of bumblebee which remain widely distributed throughout the country:

Bombus lapidarius (whose large black queens with red tails are readily identified);

Bombus pratorum (also red tailed, but much smaller and with yellow bands on thorax and abdomen);

Bombus lucorum & *Bombus terrestris*

(somewhat difficult to separate with yellow band on thorax, and yellow and white (or buff) on the abdomen)

Bombus hortorum (with 2 yellow bands on the thorax, yellow and white on the abdomen, but also quite common in a melanistic form);

Bombus pascuorum (the common 'carder bee' with orange thorax).

The other six species reported from Norfolk were only locally distributed, and their resemblance to the common species above makes it difficult to determine their current status.

B. ruderarius is like *B. lapidarius* but with red hairs on the pollen baskets;

B. sylvarum is superficially similar to *B. pratorum*;

B. ruderatus is like a dark *B. hortorum*;

B. jonellus is like a small *B. hortorum*;

B. muscorum and *B. humilis* are similar to *B. pascuorum*.

Add to that differences in size between queens and workers in all species, and differences in appearance between workers and males, and one realises that one would be rather foolhardy to make claims for any other than the six common species on sight observations alone.

All six British species of cuckoo bumblebee could be found in Norfolk in Plowright's time, but again their current status is unknown. From personal observations *Psithyrus vestalis* and *P. sylvestris* seem to be the most readily identified.

Society members are encouraged to take an interest in the bumblebees, and as well as the 1967 Transactions, the following text with colour plates and keys is recommended:

Bumblebees - Prys-Jones and Corbet, Naturalists Handbook no. 6
(*Richmond Publishing Company*).

Records should be sent to Tony Irwin at the Castle Museum, or perhaps there is someone out there who is better at bumblebees than I am and who would like to take on the role of recorder. If so I am sure Tony would love to hear from them.

David Richmond.

Collin's Field guide, Insects of Britain and Northern Europe has been a well used standby for many of us since it was published in 1973. Many of these early copies have been thumbed to near destruction but relief is on the way! The third, revised and up-dated edition is in the bookshops.

Author Michael Chinery is known for his clear and instructive texts. The first of this volume includes the helpful chapters on the study of insects that have in the last twenty years proved their worth to many hopeful entomologists. The colour plates have been grouped in the centre of the volume which makes access to any given one much easier. Not every insect in the land has been depicted. No pocket sized guide could include the vast numbers involved. The majority of those we may expect to find are there or in the companion volume, Collin's guide to the Insects of Britain and Western Europe.

It's not really confusing! The second contain more illustrations but less text. The Field Guide, as well as the features mentioned above, has excellent keys to point us on our way.

Rex Hancy.

Sunday June 13th, in the diaries of the plant recording group, Yarmouth Naturalist's Society-(though in fairness to them, they had another meeting planned) and in the programme of this Society, as the day in which an attempt was to be made, given sufficient numbers, to get some recording done in all eight tetrads which impinge on to that remotely inaccessible area, Haddiscoe Island. There is a public footpath round the seven mile perimeter of the island, but permission had been given-perhaps a little reluctantly, as it was nearly three months between applying for permission and receipt of same-to walk the internal paths and visit marshes unoccupied by sheep or cattle, to examine the dyke flora. While we waited for the hordes to arrive, Colin and I were attracted by a male Chaffinch which landed with something large in its beak, about five yards from us, quickly dropping it and flying off on realising our nearness. We strolled across and discovered a beautiful newly emerged Puss Moth, apparently none the worse for its experience.

Two early arrivals agreed which tetrad they would concentrate on and set off, leaving Colin and I to await the last arrival, the three of us deciding to do the tetrad adjoining that already taken. Not a tremendous list, by mid afternoon, but an interesting one. One of the more frequent grasses proved to be Meadow Barley *Hordeum secalinum*, which seems in Norfolk to be confined to marshes twixt Broads and sea. A number of plants which featured in the recent BSBI Scarce Plants project were recorded, including the lovely Marsh Mallow *Althaea officinalis*, not yet flowering unfortunately, and the Brackish water Crowfoot *Ranunculus baudotii*. The dykes yielded Water Milfoil *Myriophyllum spicatum* and the pondweeds, *Potamogeton pectiantus* and *Zannichellia palustris*. Proximity to salt water was obvious from the abundance over the marshes of Hairy Buttercup *Ranunculus sardous*, and such plants as Sea Arrow Grass *Triglochin maritimum*, Mud Rush *Juncus gerardii* and both Glaucous Bulrush *Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani*, and Sea Scirpus, *Scirpus maritimus*. Further colour was added to the marshland picture by the tiny massed flowers of the pink flowered Black Saltwort *Glaux maritima*, and the mauve of the rayed form of Sea Aster *Aster tripolium* here and there, a plant I normally associate with August.

At the end of the day, we compared notes with the two other stalwarts, who passed on a grass which, it was suggested, was *Catabrosa aquatica*. Not quite happy with it, I sent it to Arthur Copping, who pronounced it to be *Puccinellia fasciculata*. Redshank, Shelduck, Lapwing and Reed Warblers were among the birds met with, though the most memorable bird seen was a male Marsh Harrier which put in several appearances during the day. We were also made aware that the Meadow Brown butterflies were newly emerged when we went onto the hay meadows.

After the others had left for home, Colin and I had an hour in a third tetrad, and added about a hundred ticks to the blank card, including Stiffish Saltmarsh Grass *Puccinellia rupestris*. Whilst this was the second east Norfolk record for the species this year, the first being made by Ken Beckett on the North Walsham bypass, where it must be regarded as a 'salt alien', the present record was only the third ever in the county, so far as I can ascertain.

We had a good day and made some interesting records, but so far as our target of recording in all eight tetrads was concerned we lost, 5:3! Presumably permission to finish the job only just started will be just as difficult to obtain. A pity more support was not forthcoming when we could go onto the island.

Alec Bull.

THE CAMCORDER; A MIXED BLESSING

My wife who writes "In the countryside" articles for the EDP has bought herself a Camcorder. I thought they were idiot proof, press and shoot instruments but I was mistaken. The handbook is large and full of technical terms and, while not actually written in Japanese, might just as well be so far as my understanding it is concerned. The camera also is festooned with little buttons with mysterious names and letters. Unfortunately the lettering is too small for my eyesight and this leads to desperate, random pressing resulting in frightening whirring noises from the camera and strange figures and symbols flashing in the viewfinder.

There are other frightening differences between a camcorder and an old fashioned movie camera. Instead of pressing and holding when shooting you have to press and release and press again to stop. Inevitably I leave the camera running between scenes and the results show flashes of sky, my feet and the back of someone's neck. All this shooting between scenes means that when you come to a scene you wish to record the battery is flashing "bat -bat - bat", before finally blacking out altogether.

There are other drawbacks; the auto focus is prone to drag its feet and when you are panning takes a while to catch up with the new scene. Fine detail in middle distances is often a mild blur. The camera doesn't like bright white objects which it underexposes and when you use the "backlit" button (see how technical I'm getting) goes to the other extreme and creates a wishy washy picture.

No wonder that all this complex technology should eventually malfunction; the viewfinder, which up to the time had been the only part of the camera which I understood, suddenly broke out into a rash of colours and shapes that bore no resemblance to anything on this earth. And as nothing these days can be repaired it was immediately replaced with a new one.

However having got these little grumbles out of the way I have to say that Rosemary has made some remarkable films of Spring flowers. The advantages are that you can shoot in almost any light and often the dull light pictures are the best. In close-up, the camera excels and the texture of things like tree bark are beautiful to see. There is also the beauty of sound which records the sighing of the wind and the tinkle of a waterfall with marvellous fidelity.

Nevertheless for all the Camcorder's marvels I am content to remain loyal to my dear old Canon T90. I fear that the Camcorder, because of its versatility, could become a tyrant that takes up all your time. I'm afraid that, in common with most people in this television age, I see far too much of life second hand already and the last thing I want to do is to bore myself, and other people, by playing back large sections of my life, as Camcorder enthusiasts seem to want to do.

Richard Tilbrook April 1993.

A STORY WITH NO STING IN THE TAIL

Having an interest in natural history occasionally adds a little extra interest in your work life. The following account is one of the calls I get for help.

Laurie Featherstone of Hygiene got a nasty shock when approached by a large insect with what appeared to be a giant 'sting' in the tail. Swatting the offending insect with a mop in self defence he successfully killed it while doing the minimum amount of damage – none as far as I could see; it probably died of fright after being chased by an angry man with a mop!

Luckily he took the insect to Jean Hazelden who aroused me from my slumbers to try and identify it. It was obviously a female member of the wood wasp group, the long 'sting' being an ovipositor with which it lay its eggs deep in the wood of a tree.

The insect was sent to Tony Irwin at Norwich Museum and a rapid response was received stating that it was *Xeris spectrum*. Tony could find little reference to the insect apart from a forestry publication in French which, with the aid of a dictionary, I was able to read.

It did confirm that it laid its eggs in pine trees, and as such was almost certainly imported as a grub in timber, probably from one of our pallets. The Museum do not have a specimen of this and as Laurie caused so little damage it will end up there on a pin for future generations to look at.

There are a limited number of other records of this insect arriving in a similar manner.

This is not the first unusual visitor we have had in our plant. Several long horn beetles of similar timber origin were found a few years ago. these were captured alive and died a natural death prior to being sent to Ipswich Museum to add to their reference collection.

Nick Gibbons.

WINDOW WATCHING

Whilst watching the garden birds through the patio doors a Long tailed tit flew off the bird feeder and flew directly towards me. My first thought was that it would fly into the window and damage itself, but no, it stopped abruptly just as before reaching the plate glass and proceeded to flutter up and down the glass pane for around 45 seconds.

Recounting this

close encounter to my wife she said the same thing had happened to her a few days prior to this.

I have seen birds fluttering around windows previously, stopping to peck for insects which are hiding around the window frame. The bird did not stop at any time for this purpose but kept fluttering up and down the window until it flew back onto the bird feeder. I could see no sign of any insects settled on the glass which it might have been attracted to either.

I went outside to check what the reflections in the window were like, expecting to see a good reflection of the bird feeder in the window but found this not to be.

Has anyone had any similar experiences or does anyone know what it might have been doing?

Nick Gibbons.

I wonder if I might beg some assistance from Natterjack readers who, like myself, like to indulge in the study of the creatures that dwell in our freshwater habitats.

For many years now I have found the species *Ranatra linearis*, sometimes known as the water stick insect or long bodied water scorpion, to be extremely elusive in the areas where I have searched. I have dipped in all kinds of freshwater habitats including several of the broads and found none whatsoever, that is until April of this year, when I was dipping in a small dyke at Horsey and found a little hoard of them. I pulled out four in one sweep of a small six inch net and subsequent nettings captured several more.

I would be most interested to hear from readers who have encountered this species in their travels, where they are found and in what numbers.

My garden is surrounded with Leylandii Cypress trees and for around four years now I have found the caterpillar of the Blairs Shoulder knot moth, *Lithophane leautieri*, a species very well camouflaged on these trees. I am aware that this species was first recorded as recently as 1951 and that its distribution is mainly in the south of England. I have found this species in no other location than in my garden and have found it there regularly. I would be greatly interested to hear from readers regarding this species. I should like to know how common or scarce it really is and where it is found. Incidentally, I have never found the imago of this species in my garden.

Any information would be greatly appreciated to Tony Brown, 16 Mariners Park Close, Hopton, Gt. Yarmouth, NR31 9DQ.

ASHWELLTHORPE LOWER WOOD

6th June 1993

This visit by the Society was attended by about 30 members. These rapidly dispersed into the wood following their own interests. Our small group had a particularly rewarding day.

There seemed to have been a recent emergence of the Wasp Beetle *Clytus arietis* since they were especially common. A single specimen of the Cardinal Beetle *Pyrochroa coccinea* was seen and a mating pair of the Ant Beetle *Thanasimus formicarius*.

Numerous rolled up hazel leaves and a few active weevils *Apoderus coryli* indicated how common this insect was in the wood.

A few Hornets *Vespa crabro* were seen and an Ichneumon Wasp *Netelia testaceus*. Colin Dack drew my attention to a solitary wasp *Argogorytes mystaceus* which was about to extract a frog hopper larva from its 'Cuckoo Spit'. These are taken to its nest in soil as provisions for its young.

On such a dry day few sizeable fungi were found. A specimen from a colony of *Scutellinia asperior* growing in a damp area was a new record for our Norfolk list. This is a small round disc about 1cm in diameter, conspicuous in its red colour and fringed at the edge by black hairs. There are several similar species separable by microscopic details.

Among the many plants recorded was Field Madder *Sherardia arvensis*. A few plants being found in one area on the path.

Reg & Lil Evans.

NEW ADDITION TO OUR LIST

Sepultaria sumneriana

This fungus has recently been found at Pentney growing under a cedar tree with which they are associated. It appears in April-May. The fruiting body is about 2 to 7 cms in diameter, at first embedded in the ground then breaking into irregular star shaped lobes. The inner surface is light ochre, and the outer brown and bearing dark brown hairs

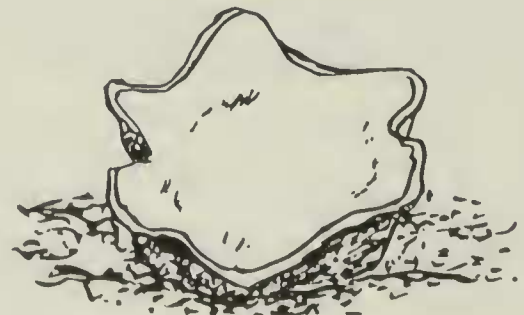


(1)

This species could well appear elsewhere under cedars in Norfolk at the right time of the year. We have no other record in 18 years, and this fungus is considered rare. When it does occur it is often in colonies and is not easily overlooked. Since many cedars grow in private grounds, it could be much under recorded.

We are indebted to Heather Williamson and Gillian Becket for bringing this rare species to our notice.

Reg & Lil Evans.



(2)

Please send items for Natterjack to Colin Dack
12, Shipdham Rd, Toftwood, Dereham Norfolk NR19 1JJ

Sepultaria sumneriana

