

# Nature Notes from Somerset

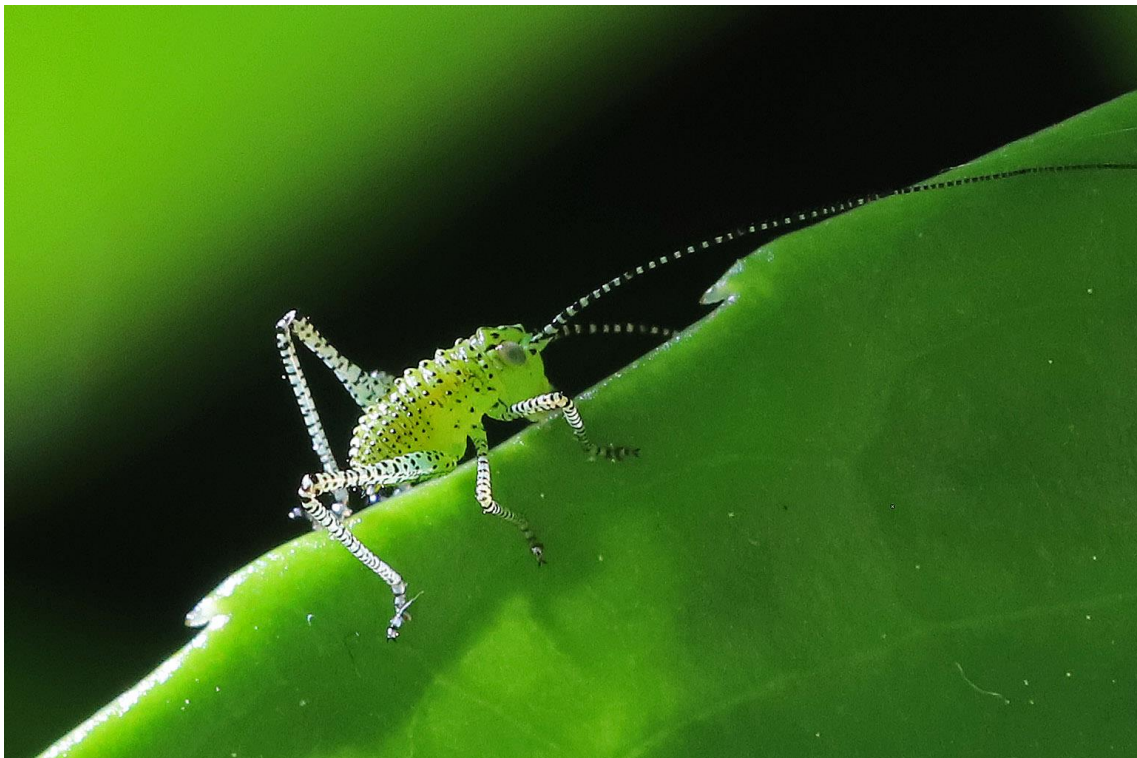
## May 2020

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Apologies for the lateness of these Nature Notes for the month of May 2020. Nature doesn't stop and wait for the naturalist to take time out to write their notes! Most of this month's observations were made in our garden, admittedly quite a large garden so affording a variety of flowers, shrubs, trees and micro-habitats. Later in the month a walk along the River Yeo a few miles away afforded a change of scene and a riverside habitat. May was mostly warm and sunny bringing lots of wildlife to the attention of the keen observer. The month was the "sunniest calendar month on record" (UK Met Office) and this year's May was also the driest on record for England. This gives many insect species a boost, allowing them to accelerate their development, though species reliant on plants for food will need rain to bring their foodplants into top condition in the coming months of the year.

### Highlight of the Month



This Speckled Bush Cricket nymph is only about 2-3 mm in length but is perfectly formed and should hopefully develop through all six larval stages to reach a mature adult by mid-August. This species is Britain's most common bush cricket mainly found south of a line between the Wirral and the Humber, though it has been found as far north as Dumfries & Galloway, preferring warm coastal locations as one moves further north. The adults only have small vestigial wings and are unable to fly so if they want to increase their range, they are going to have to walk!

## Life in Miniature

Continuing the theme of beauty at small-scale is this soldierfly, the Black-horned Gem, *Microchrysa polita* (male, right). Black-horned because its black antennae distinguish it from the other two British species of *Microchrysa*. Its larvae develop in various decomposing plant materials such as compost heaps, so, since I'm sure you all have a compost heap in your garden, there is no reason why you shouldn't find this little gem.



This small and beautifully coloured fly (left) is one of the frit flies, family *Chloropidae*. There are several species with these markings, but it could be *Thaumatomyia notata*, sometimes present in large numbers, and therefore nicknamed the Yellow Swarming Fly. The adults overwinter and may be found indoors seeking a refuge in which to hibernate. The larvae live in the stems of grasses where they feed on root aphids.

## Damn Flies – Great Pollinators!

Flies are not generally appreciated but did you know that they run bees a close second in their importance as pollinators? They also do a fantastic job in clearing up dead and decaying plants, animals and their dung. In the modern parlance, they provide essential “ecosystem services”.



These two flies are from the family *Anthomyiidae*, which means “flower flies”, but this is a very diverse family including root maggot flies, seaweed flies and kelp flies; some of them are also leaf miners. On the left is *Hylemya vagans*, whose larvae develop in cow dung, which may explain why it is one of the most common of British anthomyiids. On the right is one of the Dalmatian-like grey-and-black species of the genus *Anthomyia*, as so often with flies, there are several similar species. They are often found feeding on bird droppings, in this case at a convenient height on the top bar of a gate. In this case the larvae are found in birds' nests.

## Watch Out! There's a Tachinid About!



The fly family *Tachinidae* comprises species which are all parasitoids, their larvae develop inside other insects. This may not seem a very pleasant lifestyle, but they have a valuable role to play in controlling the numbers of other species which may otherwise get out of control. Many tachinids are adorned with very strong bristles and have been referred to as “bristly-bottom flies”. This one (above) is probably *Carcelia lucorum* and is readily found sunning itself on leaves in our garden. Its host species include several species of moth from the family *Arctiidae*.

On the final day of the month, I made an outing to an area of ancient woodland, Great Breach Woods, an SSSI and a Somerset Wildlife Trust site. There I had my first sighting this year of one of my favourites, a large and unmistakable tachinid called *Tachina fera*. The adults often feed on umbellifers at a convenient height for photography. They parasitise a range of moth caterpillars mainly in the family *Noctuidae*. In many cases insect parasitoid-host associations are poorly understood and there is much scope for future observations and research.



## Three Tails by the Riverbank



Another rare excursion this month away from the Ashworth garden took me for a walk along the banks of the River Yeo at Ilchester. Mayflies were resting in the long grass and it was quite tricky parting the grass stems for a clear view with the camera without disturbing them. This is the very common *Ephemera danica*. Mayflies may have three tails, as in this case, or two tails, depending on which family they belong to. The adults do not feed, they emerge from the river, mate and die all within the space of a few days.

## Things that go Bump in the Night

May is the time for seeing the May Bug or Cockchafer, *Melolontha melolontha*, not a bug at all but a beetle in the family of chafers and scarabs, the *Scarabaeidae*. The males are strongly attracted to light and three times this month a May Bug flew into my bedroom at night. This can be quite alarming as they are large heavy beetles and crash into light fittings etc for a while before dropping onto the floor. This one (right) spent the night safely in a pot before being released the next morning.



In 2018 I placed my night-time May Bug visitor on a leaf for a closeup photo (left) before he rather dramatically flew off at great speed high over the treetops. You can check he is a male from the number of leaf-like lamellae in the antennae: males have seven, females only six. As with many insects the adult lifespan is much shorter than that of the larvae. The adults die after around five to six weeks whereas the grubs take three to four years to mature, munching away at tree roots underground.

In the forestry industry Cockchafers are regarded as a pest causing significant damage to young trees impacting forest regeneration. Monitoring of Cockchafer numbers has shown that emergence can be synchronised leading to swarming, and in that case the adults can also cause significant damage through defoliation as they eat the young leaves of deciduous trees, principally species of oak.

Many moths also come into the house on warm summer evenings when the windows have been left open. The Small Magpie (right) is common across Britain and often attracted to light. The caterpillars eat a wide range of common plants mostly nettles but also woundworts, mints, horehounds, and bindweeds. Having such a wide range of foodplants is a good way for an insect to guarantee a wide distribution across a range of different habitats.



## Micromoths



Micromoths are often found resting on vegetation in the daytime. This beautiful purple and yellow marked Mint Moth *Pyrausta aurata* (above left) was found around mint feeding on the flowers and presumably the female will also lay her eggs there. It is quite large for a micromoth but it isn't in my book of "macros" so it must be a "micro". This striking gold and white moth (above right) is the Triple-barred Argent *Argyresthia trifasciata*. It was first seen in Britain in 1982 in London, probably imported with garden conifers. Now it is often found in gardens where the caterpillars feed on juniper and *Cupressocyparis leylandii* – anything that eats *Leylandii* is OK by me!

The rather poor photograph of a Sulphur Tubic Moth *Esperia sulphurella* (below) was taken on a breezy day when the leaves were waving around. It is a dead wood specialist and the caterpillars have been found feeding under the bark of a range of different trees. There is a beautiful illustration (right) of the Sulphur Tubic Moth in John Curtis' "British Entomology: Being Illustrations and Descriptions of the Genera of Insects Found in Great Britain and Ireland" which was published in monthly instalments from 1824 to 1839.



## Hopping down in Somerset



The Red-and-black Froghopper (left) must be one of the easiest insects to identify in the field. Its colours make it stand out and nothing else looks anything like it! *Cercopis vulnerata* is the only British member of the family *Cercopidae* and is common in woodlands and gardens in England and Wales. The nymphs are rarely seen as they feed on underground roots. With its warning colouration it should be unpalatable and/or poisonous to predators, but it is reported merely to taste of grass sap! However, it can jump to

escape predation and as an example of bio-inspired engineering, studies of the jumping mechanism of this froghopper have been used in the design of jumping robots!

*Oncopsis alni* is a leafhopper with rather more subtle colouring. It feeds on alder, as its name suggests, *Alnus* being the genus of alder trees. *O. alni* is a member of the *Cicadellidae*, which have a series of movable spines along the hind tibia (visible in the photo) and is the largest British bug family with 297 out of 400 hopper species. Many sap-sucking bugs can spread plant diseases and *O. alni* has been implicated in the spread of alder yellows, fortunately not a major problem currently in the UK, but something to monitor.



## And Finally



This hand-held photograph (left) is the caterpillar of the Jersey Tiger moth, the adult of which I saw in the garden in 2016 (right).

Although restricted to the Channel Islands and the south coast in the past, the Jersey Tiger has been expanding its range and is now found in several counties of southern England. Its larval foodplant is the common nettle.



Take care and enjoy nature wherever and whenever you can!

Mike Ashworth, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020