



Sandnats Newsletter SPRING 2024

Clifden Non-pareil - by Richard Orton

“So what’s the rarest moth you’ve ever caught then?” It was a moth night on the 8th of September which we ran for the Friends of Warley Woods and the lady who asked was new to mothing. I went on to explain about a miserable, drizzly dawn about ten years ago, in Sussex, and how I awoke to find this enormous moth in my trap. It was triangular, (think Vulcan bomber), with grey bark-like patterned upper wings. It easily filled the palm of my hand. When disturbed, it revealed its startling secret: The underwings were black with a beautiful pale blue band across them, (a rare colour amongst moths). This was the Clifden Nonpareil, (or more prosaically, Blue Underwing), *Catocala fraxini*. A rare moth even when first described – hence the poetic name, it has continued to be scarce and a holy grail for British moth hunters. There have been sporadic colonisation attempts, but most records seem to have been from migrants blown westwards from eastern Europe. For example, 1976 apparently was a bumper year, with nineteen records across the whole country. Usually, it was just a handful. About 2007, it started to colonise suitable woodlands (the food plant is Aspen), along the South Coast, including Sussex. It was probably one of these which I was lucky enough to catch.

I had hardly finished speaking when two more newbies, (Sophie and Matt Gornall – like the place but two Ls!), came running up to the table yelling they’d caught a “big moth”. One glance was enough. They passed it to Jenni, who (making noises reminiscent of an over-excited gibbon), unceremoniously up ended her box of pristine pots to find something big enough to put it in. Special treatment, as after we had all admired it, it was bound for Andy P. to be recorded for posterity. What a way to start your mothing career!

To be honest, it wasn’t a complete surprise. Since 2007, the Clifden Nonpareil has spread slowly northwards and there had been tantalizing records from Shropshire and other parts of the West Midlands, including one from Edgbaston the day before.



Photo by Andy Purcell

It would also be tempting to ponder on fate and serendipity. For example, the moth night had originally been scheduled for June, but was postponed because of a dire weather forecast and September was the earliest date we could reschedule it. Not surprisingly, we have booked to go back to Warley Woods next September too. It also affected our subsequent behaviour as we hurriedly re-scheduled mothing sessions in Sutton Park and Sandwell Valley. We did not catch another Clifden, but the impromptu session we held in Park Farm Car Park, (we thought there might be Aspens near-by), did enable us to record Merveille-du-Jour, (now everyone's second-favourite moth), and Mike B. to catch a parasitic wasp (*Orionis coxator*) new to the Valley (see last newsletter). None of this would have happened if the June weather had behaved.

Worcester Entomology Day (November 2023)

Richard gave a lecture at Worcester Entomology Day last year, where he presented the findings of the Sandwell Valley Water survey.



Photo by Jenni Wilding

News from David & Judith King

Early January - We are mainly working with Butterfly Conservation, with weekly Brown Hairstreak egg hunts at various locations in the county (Redditch this Thursday) and monthly work parties at Trench Wood being the highlight. We look forward to widening our scope of interests this year.

I found two Blue-bordered Carpet moth eggs on a local Blackthorn bush the other week and was told by iRecord's automatic verification that my record submission needed to be reviewed by an expert because the report was outside the *known flying period* for the moth. Apparently, ignoring the life stage of a submission is a known bug in iRecord - the record and attached photograph was subsequently examined by an expert and accepted as correct.

Purple Horizons Project - news from Aaron Bhambra

Mid- January saw the completion of the bare earth sand extraction work at Barr Beacon. We excavated to a depth of around 3.5 metres and extracted an enormous pile of sand, which was then overlain into shallow trenches, allowing us to cover an area of around 0.4 acres. This is the last of the bare earth works to take place as part of the Purple Horizons project for now, we have created 4 acres of habitat across 8 sites in Walsall.

(Aaron has found the Cat's Ear Mining Bee, *Andrena humilis*, and Cat's Ear Nomad Bee, *Nomada integra* at this site – the exciting news of these discoveries made the BBC website!)



Photo by Andy Purcell

Sandwell Valley Masterplan

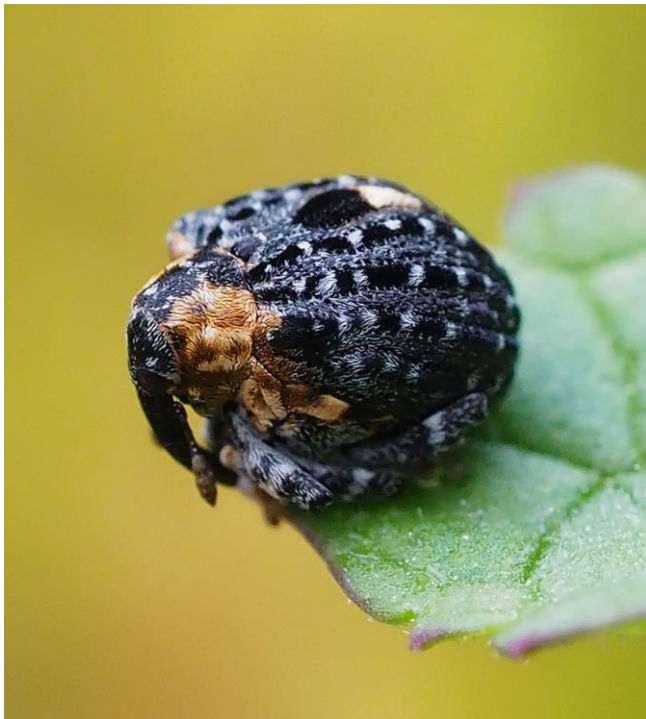
After some issues with timings and venues for the public meeting about this, we did eventually meet with Matt Huggins, and expressed our concerns about issues such as the lack of ecology in the plan (which will be included in a separate ecological plan) and the assumption of visitors arriving by car and disregard of public transport provision. The consultation is now closed, but details can be found at

[Sandwell Valley 10 Year Master Plan - Sandwell Council - Citizen Space](#)

January Meeting - Figwort Weevils of Stambermill by Mark Webster

The small group of weevils in the *Cionus* genus are known as “Figwort Weevils” since they’re found on plants in the “Scrophulariaceae” family such as Figwort. They all share the distinctive characteristics of having rather broad shoulders, a long rostrum and a particularly attractive pattern on the elytra that looks like a knitted cardigan.

Stambermill along the river Stour just east of Stourbridge has a dense patch of Water Figwort that was found to host 4 out of the 6 UK species of Figwort Weevils. The most abundant being *Cionus tuberculosus* which has a preference for Water Figwort.



Cionus tuberculosus – photo by Mark Webster

The patchwork of small holes in the plant leaves are a good indication that weevils are present and feeding. The weevils can usually be seen at rest on the upper surface of the leaves from April until late October, with peak numbers typically in October as new adults emerge. The larvae are very distinctive as they're covered in a glistening mucous that they use as a protective coating against predation. A closer inspection should also reveal the small pod-shaped cocoons that the larvae construct as protection whilst they pupate. These can usually be seen on the plant leaves and stems in late summer / autumn.

February meeting – Archaeology of the Sandwell Valley (Dr Mike Hodder)

A fuller report will appear in the Bulletin in due course, but this was a most interesting talk, which generated probably more questions than at any other meeting, such was the interest from the attendees.

Mike told us about the history of the Sandwell Priory site, from its early use as a Benedictine monastery, through to its use as Sandwell Hall, and subsequent demolition in 1928, and about the archaeological excavations that took place between 1982 and 1988.

We also learned that earlier evidence of occupation in the Valley could be found, such as prehistoric worked flints and burnt mounds still visible today.

Evidence of more recent industrial activity in the Valley from the Colliery such as the surviving building by Swan Pool, and the spoil heap and remains of the tramway can still be found.

We look forward to the outdoor meeting in April.

March meeting – AGM

This meeting was well attended, and the full minutes will be circulated to members in due course, but I am sure everyone will congratulate Mike Bloxham on being elected to the position of Chair of Sandwell Valley Naturalists. A moth trap was put out in the field behind the VC during this meeting, and so we were able to record three Common Quaker and an Oak Beauty at the end of the evening.



Photo by Jenni Wilding

Sutton Park Toad Hunt

If you had been strolling through Sutton Park in the dark, and on a slightly chilly night last Saturday (22nd March) you may have observed a group of people wandering around Longmoor Pool with bright torches, shining them into the water. Dave, Richard, and I joined the B&BC Amphibian and Reptile Group for a Toad Survey. A grand total of 53 toads were counted, along with 2 frogs, quite a lot of frogspawn and a couple of Smooth Newts.

Editors Comment

I hope you have enjoyed reading this newsletter. You may notice a change of format – this is partly to make the newsletter a bit more manageable in terms of production time, and also partly so that the excellent longer reports on SANDNATS activities that members write go into the Bulletin, which is the document that people tend to keep and refer back to since it is a printed booklet.

It would still be appreciated if people wanted to send a paragraph or two and a nice photograph of SANDNATS events for this newsletter. Perhaps being a bit less daunting than writing a longer article will encourage more members to send something in.

I recorded my first few Hoverflies of the year last week (including a rather lovely *Criorhina ranunculi*) at RSPB Sandwell Valley and am seeing a lot of new queen Bumblebees bumbling around looking for nest sites. Spring is definitely here, and we can hopefully look forward to finding lots of interesting wildlife this year.

Jenni