

Day-flying Moths

It comes as a surprise to many people that there are moths which fly by day as well as by night. Of the larger moths which can be seen during the day at least nine are to be found in and around Turvey. Perhaps the most obvious are the Burnet moths, the Cinnabar and the Humming-bird hawk-moth. Two species of Burnet moth occur locally: the Six-spot Burnet and the splendidly named Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet. Both species are coloured bluey-black and red, and are told apart by the number of red spots on the forewings. The bright colours serve as a warning to predators that they are distasteful but, of course, a few have to be sacrificed first before the predators find this out. These moths like areas of rough grassland containing various members of the Pea family, especially Common and Greater Bird's-foot-trefoil and Meadow Vetchling. The similarly coloured Cinnabar moth prefers Common Ragwort as its larval foodplant and can often be found in gardens. The adult colour is an example of Mullerian mimicry. It shares a similar warning colour to the Burnets not as a pretence but because it too is extremely distasteful. We have already seen an adult this year on the very early date of 23rd April. The Humming-bird hawk-moth puts in an appearance in most years and is, as its name suggests, very like a tiny Humming-bird in flight. It is a migrant from southern Europe and can arrive as early as April. Look out for it hovering in front of Valerian flowers. If you have good hearing you may even hear the buzz of its wings.

Equally obvious but rare and so like a Hornet that it can easily be taken for one is the aptly named Hornet Moth. One was present in our garden last year sitting on a leaf in very damp weather. The larvae feed just beneath the bark of Poplar trees and their exit holes can be found near the base. The adult can be distinguished from a real Hornet by its lack of a narrow waist. This is probably another example of Mullerian mimicry.

Two of the less conspicuous day-flying moths which occur locally are the Burnet Companion, found at similar times and places as the Burnets, and the Orange Underwing, found where Silver Birches occur. Both reveal brighter hind wings when in flight - yellow patches in the former and orange in the latter. The Burnet Companion can be seen in Abbey Park and nearby, but you have to make a trip to Odell Great Wood in early Spring for the Orange Underwing.

There's just room to mention The Latticed Heath and The Silver Y. Like so many moths the clue to their appearance is in the name.

Br. John