

Butterfly and Moth Recording in the Outer Hebrides

Prior to 1980 there had been approximately 202 species of macro moth and 15 species of butterfly recorded in the islands, although in the last 5 years, 2 new butterflies have been added to the list and at least 37 species of macro moth.

Some of this can be explained by immigration with Speckled Wood colonising the Castle Grounds somewhere around 2004; although some suggest the butterflies were assisted by human intervention. The chance that someone did bring caterpillars across can not be eliminated although the fact that the colonisation mirrors the expansion of this species on the mainland supports the theory that it has reached us naturally.

The other new species, the Ringlet was first recorded last year from South Glendale, South Uist. Encouragingly it has also been seen at the same site this year suggesting that a small population has possibly become established there.

We are also seeing increasing numbers of Peacock butterflies in the islands which may be due to the increase in observers although hopefully this will be a precursor to this species also becoming established. Other resident butterflies with significant populations on the islands include Large Heath, Dark Green Fritillary and Grayling (the latter two only occurring in South Uist and south). Unfortunately it's not quite all good news as Small White appears to have become very scarce and Large White appears restricted to a few sites although a better understanding of the distribution should emerge as more people become interested.

The number of new macro moths for the islands is quite staggering and although some have also increased their range and moved into the islands since 1980 such as Elephant Hawkmoth, others have probably been here for some time. It would appear that the lack of observers at

New moths that were recorded in 2006



Gem (female)



Least Yellow Underwing



Lunar Underwing



Vestal

certain times of year in the past has led to some species being missed, eg Feathered Thorn.

The lack of records before 1980 of more widespread species such as Straw Dot is a little harder to explain. There has certainly been an upsurge of interest in the Lepidoptera and a number of enthusiasts have moved on to the islands during the last four years. This wider coverage has allowed more casual or rare immigrants to be detected and both White Speck and Bordered Straw have been added to the list this spring. Other rare autumnal migrants added in the last four years have included Scarce Bordered Straw, Gem and Vestal.

So what is there left to do? Many areas have been relatively untouched for moth recording including the only significant area of mature, mixed woodland in the Outer Hebrides; Lews Castle Grounds in Stornoway. I have paid a few visits with a Heath Trap over the last few years and been rewarded with quite a few new species although it was obvious that this was only skimming the surface. This became very apparent when a couple of enthusiasts took a mercury vapour trap and generator into the grounds in June 2009 and recorded no fewer than 8 new species for the islands! This site will undoubtedly be the source of many more new species for the islands although will almost certainly not be alone: Sweet Gale, Drinker, Double Lobed and Powdered Quaker have all been trapped in relatively normal and sometimes quite sparse looking gardens in the last two years.

There is still a great deal of work to be done on the moths and butterflies of the Outer Hebrides making it a very exciting time for anyone involved with this group of insects in the islands.

For more on the butterflies and moths of the Outer Hebrides please visit: www.western-isles-wildlife.com

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