

Conservation of moths

Moths in decline

Moths, like butterflies, are in decline in the UK. Although the diversity of moths has actually increased over recent decades (thanks to new species becoming established here, often with garden plants from overseas), the overall abundance of moths has decreased sharply and many species have declined dramatically or become extinct.

Recent studies by Butterfly Conservation and Rothamsted Research show that the total number of moths has decreased by a third since 1968. The picture is particularly serious in southern Britain, where moth numbers are down by almost half over the same period.

These declines have occurred among common ‘garden’ moths, like the Garden Tiger and the Heart & Dart, as well as rarer species. Common moths are part of the fabric of the UK’s countryside that we take for granted, occurring in countless millions across the landscape from urban gardens to wild stretches of moor or coast. Yet we now know that two-thirds of common moth species have decreased in number, many at alarming rates. Some, such as the Dusky Thorn, the Figure of Eight and the Spinach, have declined by over 90%.



The Garden Tiger moth, with its “woolly bear” caterpillar, was once a familiar sight across the UK, but since the 1960s it has declined by almost 90%.

The decrease in moth numbers is important because they play vital roles in nature: many other species depend upon moths either for pollination or for food. Many birds, including familiar garden birds such as the Blue Tit, Wren and Robin, feed on moths (and their caterpillars), as do bats, many other mammals, insects and spiders. Therefore a widespread reduction in moth numbers is likely to have serious knock-on effects for other wildlife.

It is not clear yet what is causing the decrease in the UK’s moths. The loss of wildlife-rich places brought about by intensive agriculture, commercial forestry and urban development is likely to be a major reason. Climate change, pesticides, fertilizers and light pollution may also be causing problems for moths.

What can I do?

Many of the declining common moths live in gardens, hedgerows, field margins and road verges. These species are still sufficiently widespread for everyone to be able to help in their conservation:

- Don’t work too hard in the garden! Nature is untidy and moths need fallen leaves, old stems and other plant debris at the back of borders, in which they can hide away over the winter.
- Go organic or reduce your use of pesticides and herbicides in the garden.
- If you have space for a wild area, then long grass (especially if some can be left long over winter) and self-sown weeds will provide suitable breeding habitat for many common moths - and will cost nothing and be easy to maintain.
- Variety is the spice of life - a small tree and some shrubs, in addition to lawn and flowerbeds, will make the garden better for moths.
- Keep your garden green - moths can’t live on concrete, decking or gravel!
- Field hedgerows cut every few years will be better for moths and other wildlife than hedges that are flailed each year.
- Field hedgerows with trees and with wide grassy margins are good for moths.
- Help to slow climate change by reducing your energy use and carbon emissions. The decline of the Garden Tiger moth appears to be a direct response to climate change.

On the verge of extinction

During the twentieth century over 60 moth species became extinct in Britain and others may have followed in recent years. For example, the Brighton Wainscot has not been seen since 2001, despite intensive searches of former locations. Many other moths are perilously close to extinction. The UK government has identified more highly threatened moths than birds or butterflies, and many rare moths are restricted to a handful of places. Although conserving the most threatened moths is a daunting task, recent successes have shown that it is possible with sufficient knowledge, will and resources.

What can I do?

You are unlikely to have rare moths living in your garden, but you can still help to maintain these precious creatures and ensure that they remain part of our natural heritage for years to come:

- Join Butterfly Conservation, the UK charity taking action to conserve moths, butterflies and their habitats.
- Help with surveys. Rare moths are no more difficult to identify than common moths, and some even fly in the daytime. Moths Count training events will show you how to find and identify moths (for local events in your area see www.mothscount.org or phone 01929 406009).
- Get your hands dirty and keep fit at the same time! Butterfly Conservation and other conservation organisations need volunteers to help manage important sites for moths and other wildlife. Why not lend a hand? See www.butterfly-conservation.org/events or go to www.bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces for details of work parties on nature reserves.



R.Thompson

The Fiery Clearwing is only found in three small parts of the Kent coast. After learning more about its requirements, conservationists are now helping landowners to improve conditions for its survival.

Recording and conservation

Wildlife sightings (termed "records") provide the information which is the foundation for almost all work to conserve wildlife. Many thousands of members of the public record the moths they find and pass these records on to volunteer County Moth Recorders. The information then goes to the National Moth Recording Scheme, set up recently by the Moths Count project, and is used for conservation, education, raising awareness and research. In this way, finding moths is not only an enjoyable experience, but a valuable and rewarding one too. Recording moths in your back garden or in the local park or countryside will, through the National Moth Recording Scheme, help to inform government policies and contribute to wildlife conservation.

Recording is easy: if you can identify a moth then you can record it! The other details needed are simple, such as where the moth was, the date, how many you saw etc. You don't need to be a moth expert to be a moth recorder, you just need to be able to identify a few straightforward species. Moths Count events are ideal places to make a start. Find out more about events, recording and County Moth Recorders at www.mothscount.org



R.Leverton

Thanks to moth recorders, new colonies of the very rare Dark Bordered Beauty have been found recently in Scotland. The four sites where it occurs are now being managed to benefit this moth and other wildlife.

www.mothscount.org