

Field Meeting to Arley and Coldridge Woods

April 10th 2010

BRETT WESTWOOD

We had willow blossom and its insect visitors in our sights when we met in Arley Wood on April 10. It was a fine sunny morning and, with temperatures approaching 18C, the large willow bushes along the main ride through the wood were buzzing with insects. The only problem was that the majority of the bushes were too tall, and most of our nets too short, so many of us had to name what we could using binoculars. Only Harry Green and Malcolm Smart were to be seen waving their high nets amongst the tree tops with spectacular effect! Dark-bordered Bee Flies (*Bombylius major*) were common with plenty of bumblebees including Red-tailed (*Bombus lapidarius*) and Early Bumblebee (*Bombus pratorum*) among the many Buff-tailed Bumblebees (*Bombus terrestris*). At this time of year, when nearly all of the bumblebees are queens, they are often easy to identify even at a distance with a crick in your neck!

The classic spring hoverfly of willow blossom is *Criorhina ranunculi*, which looks rather like an emaciated bumblebee with long legs and has red-tailed and white-tailed forms, both of which were whizzing about among the catkins. We had rather less luck with the occasional elusive solitary bees (probably *Andrena* species) and someone did suggest hiring a cherry-picker on our next visit. Peacock and Comma butterflies were feasting on the nectar and there was a welcome Small Tortoiseshell, not nearly as common as it was a few years ago.



Green Tiger Beetle, 10 April 2010 Rosemary Winnall

From the main ride we headed along a track through young larch plantations. Green Tiger-beetles (*Cicindela campestris*) rose up ahead of us and newly-arrived Willow Warblers were singing in the birch saplings. We counted five males in song, a very welcome total, as this, once our commonest summer migrant, has declined alarmingly in southern and Midland England over the past decade or so. Birds summering in these areas winter more closely to the Sahara than those in northern England and Scotland, and it's likely that loss of habitat in the Sahel zone has contributed to the declines. By contrast, Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps which winter much closer to home, are increasing and we had about eight Chiffchaffs and three Blackcaps in song. Overhead a Sparrowhawk displayed and a Peregrine circled.



Green Tiger Beetle, 10 April 2010 Rosemary Winnall

We looked in vain among the bracken and birch stumps for basking Adders. The last ones were seen here about five years ago and in the past the author has found two severely wounded individuals and a freshly-dead Slow-worm coinciding with large-scale Pheasant releases into the wood. However several Common Lizards darted along the ride-edges. Observational feat of the day was Dave Scott's apparently casual spotting of an Engrailed moth (*Ectropis bistortata*) high on a birch-trunk, an astonishing trick of selective vision which left us open-mouthed in wonder.

From the conifer plantations we moved east towards the stream dividing Coldridge Wood and Spring Coppice, a rich potential hunting ground for Land Caddis larvae (*Ecnoclyta pusilla*). Careful sifting of the leaf litter here added two precious monads (SO7982 and 8081) to the insect's national distribution. The stream here is very narrow and shallow, though sandbanks deposited in recent floods could be read like a book. One bank was impressed with the huge splayed footprint of a grey heron and the muddy margins were prinked with Muntjac and Fallow Deer slots. Best of all, Rosemary Winnall found the neat round pad-marks of an Otter, following up her discovery with a fresh spraint on a nearby stone. We trudged back through dense conifers to the main ride and as we relaxed with a coffee, we were entertained by several large furry tachinid flies *Tachina ursina*, holding territory on sun-warmed bramble leaves. This is an early spring fly which is a parasitoid of caterpillars of large moths and is very locally distributed throughout the British Isles, mainly in ancient semi-natural woodland. As we watched them returning time and again to their favourite leaves, we felt it was a good omen for the Wyre season to come.



Tachina ursina John Bingham