

Wyre Forest Study Group

“What was it that just flew away?” In search of the Club-tailed Dragonfly.

JANE POPE



The Wednesday Group meeting of 3rd June 2015 was a walk along the east bank of the River Severn starting about a kilometre north of Bewdley town at the anglers' car park on Northwood Lane. A safety briefing noted that, although the obvious hazard was falling into the water, we had just passed the first test – all seventeen of us had arrived safely along the narrow but busy lane.

We walked down the side of a field to the river and set off towards Bewdley with two particular targets in mind, dragonflies and Black Poplars, pausing to admire the piers of the old railway bridge – a testament to the skill of Victorian engineers.

The particular Black Poplar we had come to see and measure is a venerable tree with beautifully arched branches and a deeply fissured trunk. (see separate account on page 9.) The fast-growing wood has an open texture and the tree is easily injured. A large hole at the base of this tree was no doubt started by an injury long ago and one or two small branches had come down as a result of the very recent high winds. We could see why, in former times, mature boughs of Black Poplar were used for roof timbers on account of their perfectly arched shape. The wood from pollarded trees would have been used in the making of matches because it could be easily impregnated with paraffin wax and was springy enough not to splinter when the match was struck. The tree likes damp but not stagnant conditions, so is well suited to the riverbank, but not many ancient specimens remain and many are male. It

hybridises easily with other poplars and other younger trees nearby appeared to be hybrids. The old tree with its rustling canopy of delicate new leaves seemed to be hosting a large number of insects, predominantly chrysomelid beetles.

We turned our attention to dragonflies and could rely on the expertise of Mike Averill, who has studied them along this stretch of river for very many years. There were Banded Demoiselles shimmering blue and green, and White-legged Damselflies, but we hoped for a glimpse of the Club-tailed Dragonfly. It is now uncommon in many areas, but has a stronghold on the Severn above Stourport. First we found the larval cases and then an adult was spotted rising from the water and making off towards the treetops. This is apparently typical behaviour for the species. Later another one darted up from the water's edge. Fortunately Mike could recognise a Club-Tail quite easily from a distance – like an old friend, perhaps.

We were lucky to have sunshine, but recent rain had caused the river to rise by a metre and the riverside vegetation was lush. The banks were colourful with campion, umbelliferae, comfrey, buttercups and newly-flowering bramble. The nettles on the field side of the path were home to colonies of caterpillars and leaf-mining larvae. It seems strange to say of nettles that they are in the right place, at the right height, but this was clearly the case as far as insects were concerned. Nearby molehills reminded me of Mole's Springtime



Oxyna parietina

Rosemary Winnall

emergence in 'The Wind in the Willows', exclaiming "Oh My, Oh My". Every plant supported a bug of some sort, perhaps many. There were crane flies, soldier flies, scorpion flies, beetles, weevils, ladybirds, bees, lacewings, aphids, butterflies, hoverflies, ants, spiders, water beetles, caterpillars and snails. As a novice, but life-long observer, I never cease to marvel at the collective knowledge of those in the Study Group. The wealth of information is remarkable and I just hope a little of it has sunk in.

An area of the bank near the flow-gauge had been cut so it made a convenient sunny spot for our lunch break, which was imminent according to Rosemary's body-clock! I was foolish enough to fling my rucksack onto the grass and it began to roll down the steep slope. A not-so-athletic lunge followed and lunch was saved. We were delighted to see a pair of Sand-Martins swooping low along the bank further downstream.



Female Beautiful Demoiselle eating mayfly

R. Winnall

Mike explained the complicated workings of the flow-gauge and as we watched the eddies and ripples a few of us had a rather whimsical conversation about how useful it would be to have a Perspex observation tunnel under the water, but the River Severn doesn't give up its secrets easily.

After our break we returned the way we had come, then headed further upstream. There was much to see and progress was slow. A flock of House-Martins passed by, perhaps not long arrived in the country. A damselfly was discovered devouring a hapless mayfly and many a gruesome close-up photograph was taken. On a more peaceful note, a Goosander drifted down-river with her offspring, one or two of whom had climbed aboard Mum for an easy ride.

We had seen a lot in a small area. Who would believe that nature is so busy right under our noses? Perhaps only the Wednesday Group, out for a monthly ramble.



Goosander with chicks, River Severn, 3 June 2015

Mike Averill