

Creatures of the Dark!

ROSEMARY WINNALL

2009 was the year when a few of us went searching for a creature in Wyre that led us into deep dark places, stumbling over broken brickwork and crawling with our knees in water. We procured cranial bruises and one of us (the wise one) was even prompted to go to a garden centre to purchase some knee pads. We became experts on the vagaries of an array of different headtorches and we frequently adopted a troglodyte pose as we crept and crawled and slipped and slithered through dark and dripping culverts. We had a number of false alarms and cries of misplaced excitement as we tried to focus our torchlights with pot at the ready – all bent double. We had to take care not to look up with our mouth open – something hairy with long legs might have dropped in!

Then we spotted two hibernating Herald Moths hanging from the roof of the tunnel. On closer inspection, it was seen that they were using a large white cocoons about 2 cms long as a perch. More cocoons were suspended from the ceiling with delicate threads and we knew we were getting close to our quarry! In our torchlight they lit up like Christmas decorations, but we needed to find

the builder. Cracks and crannies were examined until some very large spiders were spotted with a legspan of 5cms. and we knew that we'd successfully found the cave spider we'd been searching for!

Out of the five European species of spiders within the genus *Meta* in the family Tetragnathidae, there are 2 that live in complete darkness, *Meta menardi* and *Meta bourneti* and ours were later identified by John Partridge as *Meta menardi*.

The adults are photophobic and exist in complete darkness feeding on small insects and woodlice. However, when the young hatch they move towards light which results in the dispersion of the young and colonisation of new sites.

This is a species that may well be overlooked because of the nature of where it lives. There are not many people who wish to explore these dark places, particularly if there are large hairy creatures lurking with the desire to entangle!!



Meta menardi, Wyre Forest, 8th October 2009 Rosemary Winnall



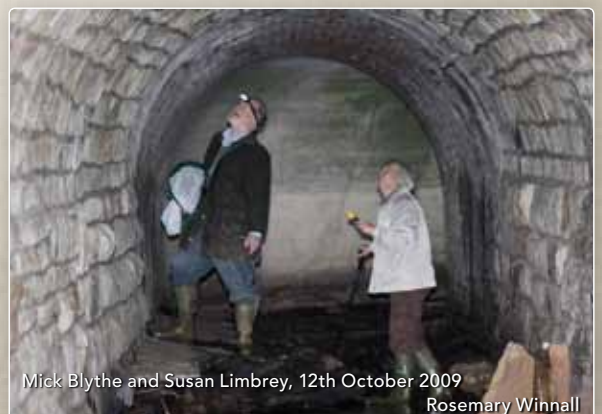
Herald Moths on *Meta menardi* cocoon, 9th November 2009

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Susan Limbrey exploring a culvert, 28th October 2009

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Mick Blythe and Susan Limbrey, 12th October 2009

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