

The Withybed Ant Expedition

Study Group field meeting on 21 August 2010

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This was a day full of uncertainties, the state of the weather being foremost in the minds of those who turned up for the meeting. Rain had been about and there was little doubt that the weather gods had been offended by something the Study Group had done, because they allowed us to proceed peacefully into the Forest, grumbled quietly and just when we thought we might get some interesting myrmecology started, they sent over a prolonged and very wet shower. It went badly for me. I had grabbed an umbrella before leaving the car and it turned out to be the damaged one I had intended to throw out instead of its new replacement. My waterproof developed a leak. I nearly fell over down a slippery slope on spotting some Coleophorid cases on sedge, but forgot to collect any so we shall not know what they were. We climbed up onto a clearing and I fancy Brett Westwood found Scarce 7 Spot Ladybirds, but at that juncture I discovered water in my collecting bag and had to rescue the stuff round it. Brett mentioned the possibility of finding a scarce shield bug *Sehirus biguttatus* on the Cow Wheat which was apparently around us, but remarked that our chances had probably been reduced because I had walked all over a nice patch of the food plant.

We retired into the woodland as the downpour increased in savagery and had our lunches in what shelter was available. We then moved on and down to a stream area where the wet flushes looked full of promise but the conditions denied us any possibility of sweep netting. In trying to extricate ourselves from the mire we encountered some Common Wasps. They were not happy because Badger had taken a liking to their nest in a grass tussock and had eaten it for lunch. They took revenge by stinging a member of the party. We scrambled from the ravine to be bathed in warmish sunshine for a brief period - unfortunately we were pretty wet and the best of the day was gone. Nonetheless we anted while the sun shone, exploring a number of *Formica rufa* nests without encountering any guest ants. Geoff Trevis had spotted my disconsolate demeanour and cheered me up by pointing out that one of the nests had black gnats flying over it. I told him he could keep them! He immediately tubed one and handed it to me.

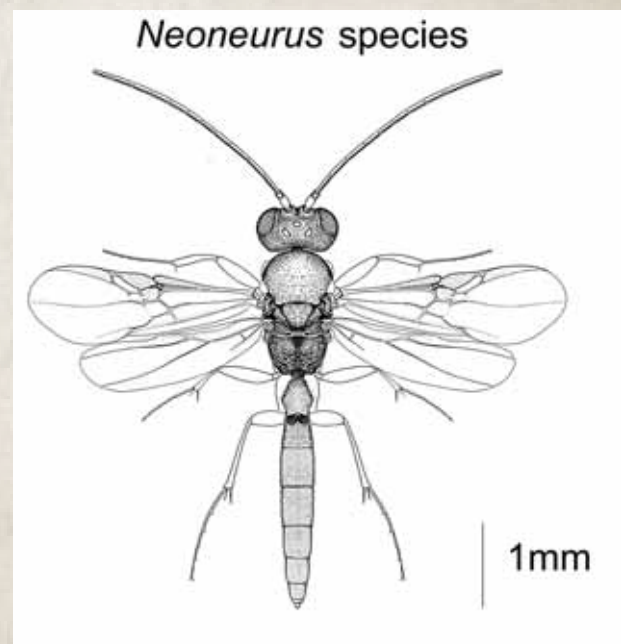
The black gnat turned out to be one of Britain's most elusive braconid wasps – a *Neoneurus* species. The insect keys out to the braconid subfamily Neoneurinae in Shaw & Huddleston (1991) and is a member of a small but very characteristic group of insects associated with ants. *Elasmosoma* sp (close relatives) are known to be parasitic on *Formica* species (Shaw 2009) and the literature suggests similar hosts for *Neoneurus*. As the lifestyle of the genus is still mysterious, the study

group has another fascinating avenue of exploration open to it, should anyone feel like spending a very long time investigating the contents of a *F. rufa* nest (as a species most likely to be the host - based on the observations here). A good starting point might be to mark the nests over which *Neoneurus* adults swarm, as that ought in theory to narrow down the search to (almost) manageable proportions! I reckon I may have just put a little more work in the direction of Brett Westwood and the *Formicoxenus nitidulus* gang.....I am indebted to Dr Mark Shaw for his assistance in this matter.

REFERENCES

Shaw, M.R. & Huddleston, T. (1991) Classification and Biology of Braconid Wasps (Hymenoptera: Braconidae) 'Handbooks for the Identification of British Insects' vol. 7(2)..

Shaw, M.R. (2009) Occurrence of the Genus *Elasmosoma* Ruthe (Hymenoptera: Braconidae, Euphorinae) in Britain. Br.J.Ent.Nat.Hist. 22 2009. P49 – 51.



Coleophorid pupal cases on *Juncus*

Rosemary Winnall