

Some Forest Moths -

HEW PRENDERGAST

Friends may well know the Forest's importance as a haven for the Dartford warbler and nightjar, the silver-studded blue butterfly and an array of plants like the acid soil-loving bog asphodel and sundews. But there's one large group you may have missed - the moths.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, what we find is an abundance *still* of many widespread species but also a concentration of specialised rarer ones. The 'still' is italicised for good reason as much of our wildlife is declining and the commonplace in Sussex today may not be so tomorrow.

Moth recording is largely night work, using bright lights to lure and trap them. Despite there being more than 2,500 species in the UK (so there's quite a lot of identification to learn about) and relatively few people to record them compared to birds or butterflies, a good picture has nonetheless emerged not only of which moths live where but how they are doing in terms of numbers: increasing, decreasing or more or less stable. An active Sussex Moth Group (SMG) coordinates county efforts and its coverage of course includes the Forest where I have been recording moths for some seven years. As well as some commoner species I introduce 'specials' of the Forest and show how its heaths and heathers in particular are crucial to their survival in the county.

From late April to August, but mainly in May and June, any heath walker may encounter the

daytime-flying and aptly named common heath. The clump of dots in the centre top of the Sussex map below marks the one kilometre Ordnance Survey squares where they have been recorded on the Forest. Most of the others are on West Sussex heaths and the South Downs; in such habitats heathers and peaflowers, respectively, are the likely food plants of the larvae [caterpillars]. Note too the date of '2010 on' in the top left corner. In short, this is a widespread species as long as the habitat is right.



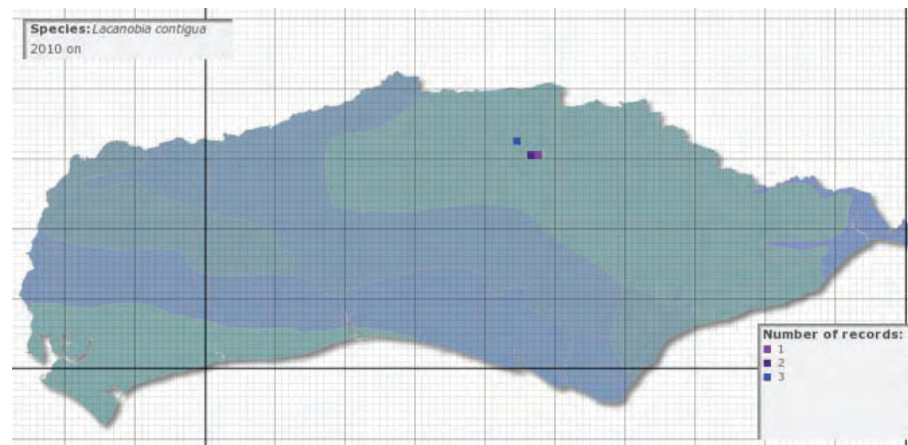
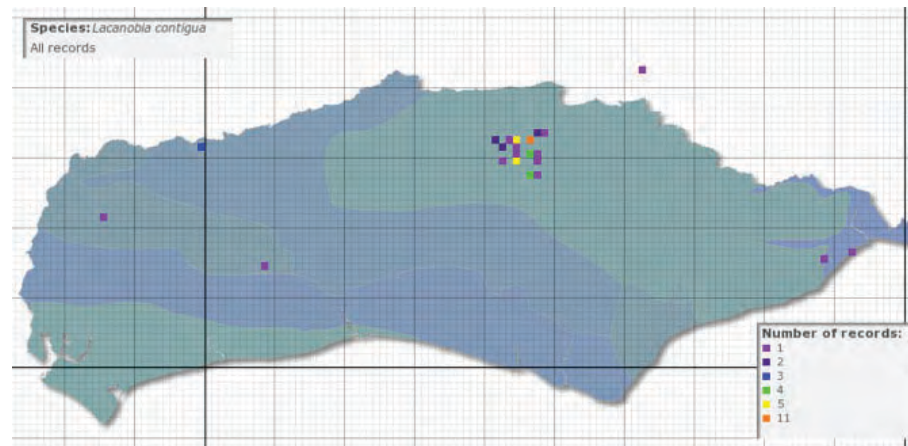
Common heath



Although larvae of the beautiful brocade feed on a variety of widespread woody plants (birches and oaks as well as heathers), the Forest has long been known to be the centre of its Sussex distribution. That it has just three post-2010 dots (see the lower map) may reflect fewer moth recorders on the Forest rather than fewer moths but the brocade's disappearance from West Sussex may well presage a wider decline.



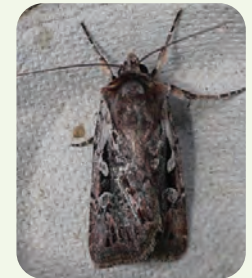
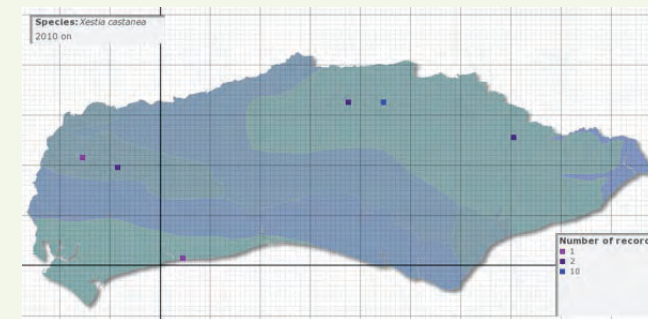
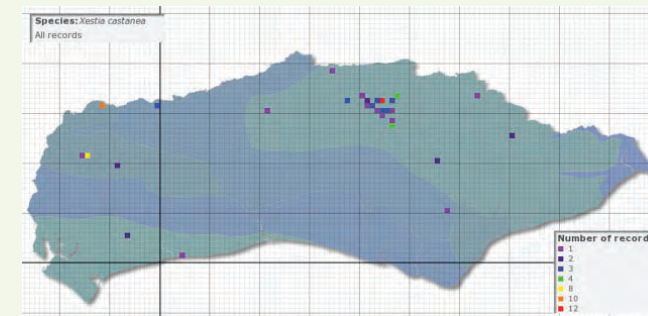
Beautiful brocade



Both the closely related neglected and heath rustics have heather-dependent larvae.



Neglected rustic

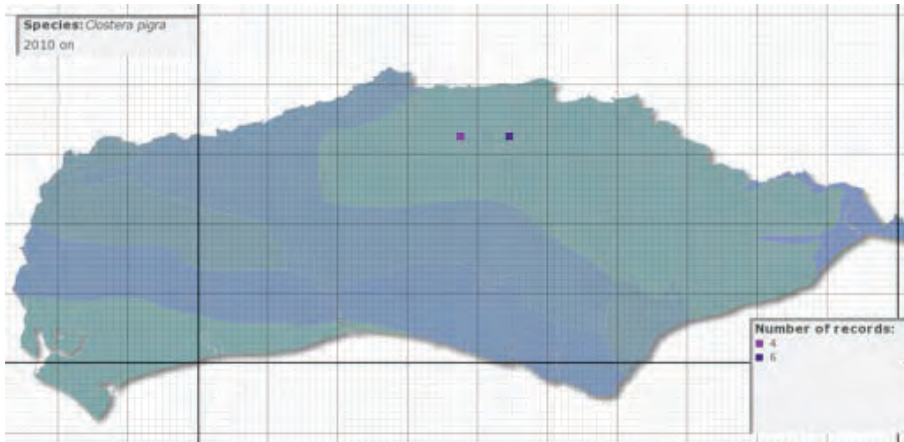


Heath rustic

The first is a late summer flier, with a somewhat similar distribution to the brocade's (the red dot in the upper map marks my records) but West Sussex still features. It is, according to the SMG website, "sometimes fairly common". Of course this might change were the heaths to disappear under woodland. The heath rustic is described by Colin Pratt, author of four magisterial volumes on the butterflies of Sussex, as "a very localised heathland resident and a suspected occasional continental immigrant". My own records have been in September, typical for the flight period.

Larvae of the small chocolate-tip feed on members of the willow family, among them the creeping willow for which the Forest is the Sussex stronghold. A good many plants grow on a ride barely 100m from my moth trap which has now caught most of the county's specimens since 2010 (see the right

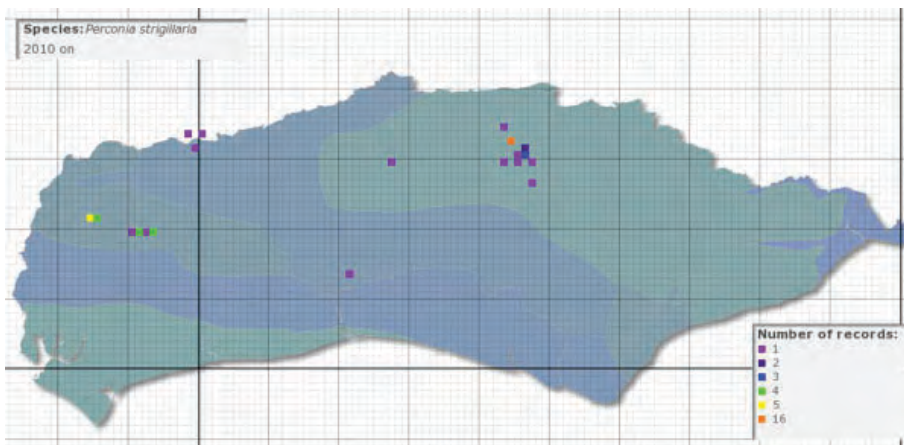
dot in the map overleaf). The website of the SMG is clear about its status: "In danger of extinction in East Sussex, where the moth is usually seen in singletons, although it sometimes appears sparingly at mv light in deciduous woods; presumed extinct in West Sussex, where it was last detected in 1996."



Small chocolate-tip



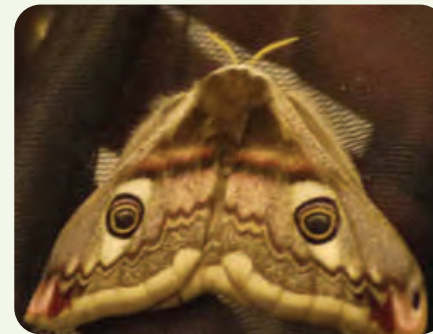
The SMG is equally unequivocal about the grass wave: "Resident species in danger of extinction across the region. Sometimes fairly common to common by day on heathland and in a few woodland clearings". Despite its name it is yet another species for which the heathers are important food plants. The orange dot on the map reflects the extent of my recording compared with other places on the Forest rather than any (very) locally higher numbers.



Grass wave



Grass wave



Emperor moth



I close this snap-shot of Forest moths with two species more familiar in their larval forms (again heather feeders) than as flying adults. Both the fox moth and the emperor moth are reasonably common species in Sussex, the adults flying in early summer, often in broad daylight. One's more likely, however, to come across their spectacular caterpillars, up to 60-70 mm long, labouring along open heathland rides in late summer and autumn. Irritant hairs and bright colours are effective warnings to potential predators that they are not worth consuming, indeed best avoided.



Fox moth



In seven years nearly 500 species have come to my trap. Every night brings its own complement. I count every species and submit the results online to iRecord, a database managed by the National Biodiversity Network. There the records are reviewed (queried or accepted) by county experts and make their way to the respective biological records centre, managed here by the Sussex

Wildlife Trust. This is the best place, really the indispensable one, to find out in depth about the status of all the Forest's wildlife. It relies on financial support from local district councils, who use the data to assist them in the vital task of assessing the environmental impact of proposed developments, and seeks it from any conservation organisation in Sussex worth its salt.

Acknowledgements: My thanks for the maps go to the Sussex Moth Group and its website manager Bob Foreman, and to the Sussex Biological Records Centre who supplied the data collected from innumerable enthusiasts.