

Postcard Survey of the Cinnabar Moth, 2009

Like many of the commoner moths, the Cinnabar has undergone a long-term decline in recent decades (83% over 35 years, based on Rothamsted trap data) and at the UK level is now regarded as a vulnerable species (see 'The State of Britain's Larger Moths' report). It remains widespread across England & Wales, but is much more scarce in Scotland, where it is most often seen in coastal areas. The East Scotland branch, along with the Moths Count team, wants to learn more about where it occurs and this is most easily done by spotting the colourful orange and black caterpillars which feed on ragwort leaves, often in such large numbers that they strip the plants completely. The caterpillars can be seen in July and August; the equally striking adult moth has a long flight season and, because it is easily disturbed during the day and will fly when it's sunny, may also be recorded during the same period.

Postcards showing both the larva and adult have been widely distributed over recent weeks and further publicity is planned. People are being asked to send in any sightings using either the postcards or directly by e-mail to Barry Prater, the Moth Recorder for VC81, Berwickshire (barry@prater.myzen.co.uk).

During 2009 the survey will be focused on the Scottish Borders region, but records from anywhere in Scotland would be greatly appreciated. If the project proves successful this year then there is the possibility of extending the distribution of postcards elsewhere in Scotland in subsequent years. One of the objectives of the survey is to highlight the issue of moth conservation in the context of the overall pressure on biodiversity.

The reliance of Cinnabar larvae on the widespread but controversial plant ragwort, known to be toxic to horses, may raise conflicts of interest, but a very helpful leaflet 'Ragwort Friend or Foe', prepared jointly by Butterfly Conservation, Plantlife and the British Horse Society is available from the BC Scotland page of the main BC website. The leaflet outlines the benefits and problems of ragwort and gives advice on its management.

Anyone who lives in Scotland or others who visit the country this summer can help by taking part in the survey.

Barry Prater
East Scotland Branch - Borders Sub-Group