



BRITISH NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION

An Introduction to Commonly Seen Moths

By Roger Tabor

There are over a couple of thousand different species of moth in the British Isles. Whilst there are many very small and easily overlooked species, as with most groups of animals, there are some that are either commonly encountered or of memorable appearance and this is an introduction to some of these.

Observing and Collecting

Most moths are attracted by lights at night and can be seen at porch lamps. Entomologists use powerful mercury vapour lamps that attract moths over a large distance. The lamp is set in a funnel which takes the moths down into a closed live trap. This is normally furnished with egg boxes that allow the moths to rest unharmed overnight, and out of the light. The following day the moths are examined and released. Do not repeatedly trap and release at the same point, or birds will opportunistically exploit a regular local concentration of insects.

An alternative means of attracting moths is to put thin dribbles of sugary solutions on places such as tree trunks. Normally the moths do not become stuck on the solution, which they keep off, but feed from it by dipping in their proboscis.

The Moths

Poplar HawkMoth (*Laothoe populi*)

This is the most abundant of the hawkmoths which are among the largest of our moths. They have big bodies. As could be expected, this moth is most normally found near poplar trees. This moth can be seen flying in May-June, and fewer in August as a second generation. The poplar hawkmoth has areas of grey and brown patterning to its wings when at rest. It can be seen with its hindwings projecting ahead of its forewings, and these hindwings have a red patch that is flashed at predators when the wing position changes.

Other Hawk moths

The first of two more with dramatic appearance is the privet hawkmoth (*Sphinx ligustri*) ; its hind wings and body have a pink colour. The second is the eyed hawkmoth (*Smerinthus ocellata*), which has brown wings that blend into tree bark when at rest, yet when a bird gets too close it uncovers the big blue and black eyespots on its hind wings. Both fly in June and also July.

Garden Tiger (*Arctia caja*)

This is among the most vivid of our common moths, with patterned brown and white forewings, and bright red hindwings with black spots. These are flying in July. Their bright colours warn birds that they are distasteful.

Buff-tip (*Phalera bucephala*)

This moth is very commonly seen at light-traps, particularly in the south of England. It is a grey moth with a buff-gold patch at its wingtips and one over its head. When it has its wings folded around its body these look like the broken ends of a twig. It flies from May to July.

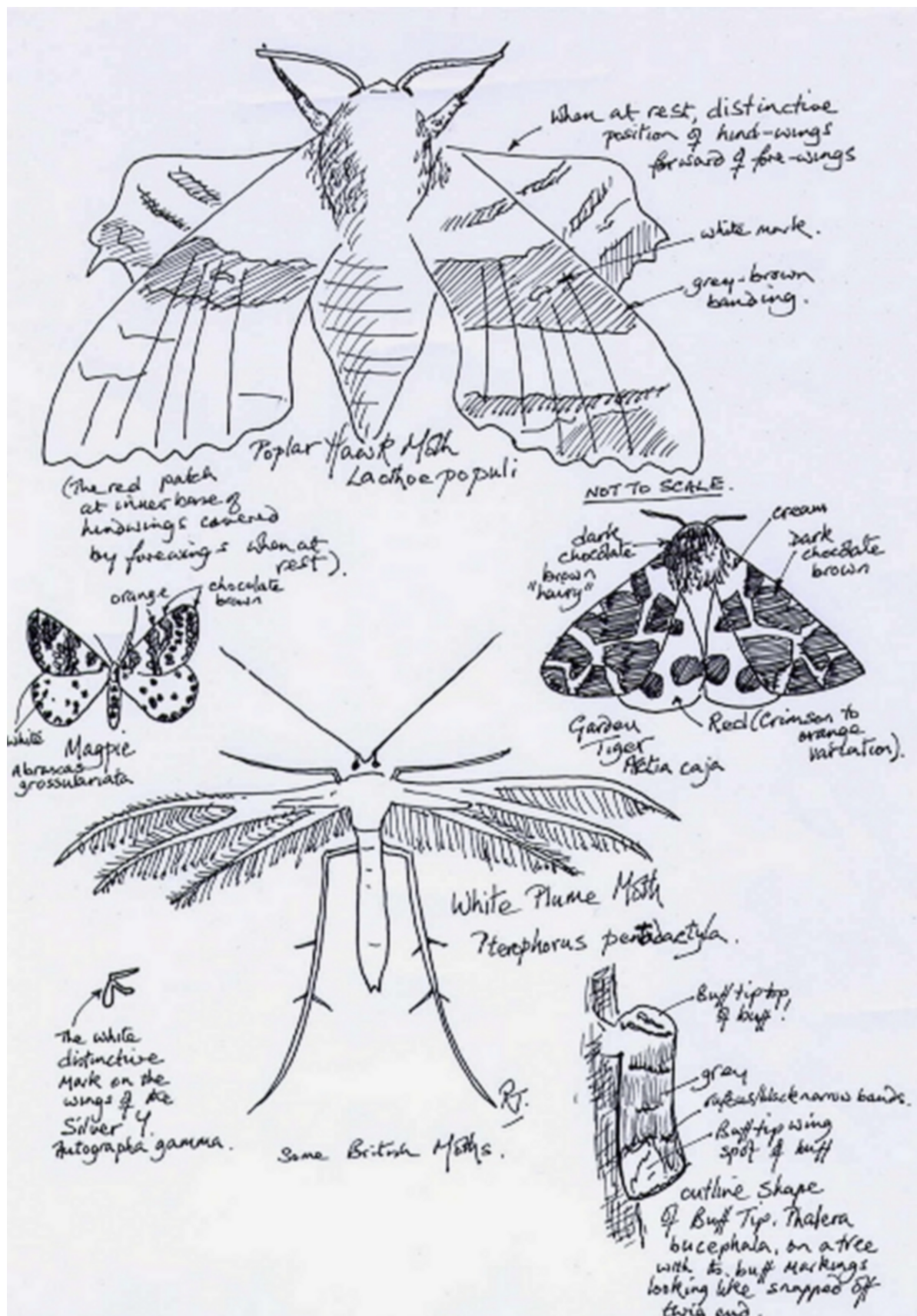
White Plume (*Pterophorus pentadactyla*)

This is one of my favourite moths, and one of the most easily recognised. It is a ghostly white all over and its wings are reduced to thin plumed ribs that look like fine feathers. Its hind legs also have side

extensions. At rest it adopts a cruciform shape. It flies in June and July. During the day it can be spotted resting on long grass.

Magpie (*Abraxas grossulariata*)

This distinctive moth is white with brown spotted patterned hindwings, and orange-yellow on it's body and forewings. It's caterpillars are likely to strip parts of currant and gooseberry bushes in gardens. It's coloration warns birds of a foul taste. It flies in July and August and can be seen flying in the day.



Sketch by
Roger Tabor

Swallowtailed Moth (*Ourapteryx sambucaria*)

A most attractive large moth. It's pale lemon colour gives it a delicate appearance. It is not a strong flier, but it is on the wing from the end of June and throughout July. As it's caterpillars feed mainly on ivy, plus hawthorn and blackthorn, the main hedgerow shrub species, it can be found widely. It is strongly attracted by light.

Brimstone (*Opisthograptis luteolata*)

This is another yellow moth, but a stronger colour as shown by it's name. It's caterpillars also feed on hawthorn in hedges and the adult rests in hedges during the day. It flies from April to October, due to three broods. In the north it just flies June and July.

Angle Shades (*Phlogophora meticulosa*)

This is a very common moth, but it's angled brown patches on it's folded wings means most people ignore it as a dead leaf. It can be found flying in May and June.

Silver Y (*Autographa gamma*)

During early summer (May – June) this strong- flying migrant moth arrives in Britain and loves to top up on nectar from buddleia flowers. As these are commonly planted in gardens to attract butterflies, you are likely to see this moth. It has attractively patterned grey-brown front wings, with small pinky patches. It's distinctive feature is the white curling Y mark in the centre of both forewings. It is regularly seen at porch lights.

Further Reading

Skinner, B. 1984. *Colour Identification Guide to Moths of the British Isles*. Viking.