



(Cardoons by the bowling green photo: Mike McCrea)

Hi All,

Autumn is almost upon us once again, and the park will go through another transformation of colour, as leaves change to brown, russet and gold. The plum and apple trees in the walled garden are bearing very few fruits this year, which is indicative of the wet spring we have experienced. With much less sunshine evident this year, insects have not been pollinating the flowers. It has been a very mixed year to date with fluctuations of good and bad weather. I have hardly run the park moth trap due to the weather. This month the park will once again host the Festival of Nature on 8<sup>th</sup> September. I know that Steve (Roberts) has been working very hard towards this, so I wish him every success on the day (more in the next edition). For those who want further information on the festival please go to [www.stroudnature.co.uk](http://www.stroudnature.co.uk) . The Landscape Group, who maintains the park, has kindly donated £500 and will also have a presence at the

festival. As we approach autumn, I hope to resume discussions with Stroud District Council (SDC) regarding woodland management for the winter. I am guilty of losing some momentum in recent weeks regarding biodiversity work, due to personal circumstances and adverse weather, but I hope to move forward with monitoring and recording in the months ahead. Regardless of this, at this time of year, the park provides many opportunities to see wildlife, especially birds.

Mike



## *News from the Supervisor's Trap*



### *Sugaring for Moths*

On 14<sup>th</sup> of September we will be holding a moth event in the park and on this occasion, we will be 'sugaring' for moths. Sugaring is an old method of catching moths, popular in Victorian times before the introduction of electric lights, and still widely practiced today. In some cases, certain species of moths will only come to sugar and not light. Sugaring can be unpredictable and the weather conditions need to be right – a warm and still evening with only a light breeze. When the conditions are good, catches can be spectacular, but on cool cloudless nights, hardly a moth will arrive at the sugar patch. Moths like butterflies, need nectar for food and they obtain this from flowers and over-ripe fruit and berries, especially blackberries. In late summer and autumn these sources of nectar are in good supply and if you search the blackberry hedges around the park on suitable nights with a torch, you will see moths feeding. Applying a sugar solution to tree trunks offers moths an even tastier meal.

Making the mixture is the first stage. In old times lepidopterists closely guarded their recipes as collecting moths was very competitive. The usual recipe is black treacle, molasses sugar and over-ripe bananas, all boiled up together. This needs close attention at all times as the mixture will quickly boil and rise. Do not do what I did, and answer the phone during cooking, only to return and see the mixture cascading down and through the cooker causing me several hours of hard scrubbing and a thick ear from the wife. Once the mixture is boiled, let it cool down before adding a drop of dark rum or even some brown ale. (This will make the moths slightly drunk). The noxious brew can then be poured into a jam jar and applied to tree trunks and branches with a small paint brush.

Choosing your location is also important. Never sugar in the middle of a wood, always establish a sugar round along the edges of woods. Fence posts are also a good choice. In the park, we are fortunate to have some good sites for sugaring, especially along the stream. This is where

we usually establish our round at moth events. Some spectacular moths have also arrived on past events. The two photos below of an Old Lady moth and Copper underwings were taken by the lake in September 2010. See how the moths are using their proboscis to drink the sugar. I have many, many stories about past sugaring trips but these would fill 10 newsletters. Children attending our moth events love putting out the sugar, and when the round is inspected every 20 minutes they can hardly contain their excitement. The favourite quarry at events is the beautiful Red underwing which appears on suitable nights. As previously mentioned, sugaring can be unpredictable, but it is an easy way of attracting moths and is great fun too. For those who want a go, come along to this month's moth event or during 2013.



**An old Lady moth at sugar in Stratford Park September 2010 (photo: Mike McCrea)**



**Copper underwing moths at sugar in Stratford Park September 2010 (photo: Mike McCrea)**



## *Creating new areas for wildflowers*

SDC together with the Landscape Group are working on creating new areas for wildflowers within Stratford Park. Already this year, a half hardy annual bed has been created by the outdoor pool which has been spectacular. In this bed a mixture of bright nectar bearing flowers has been attracting lots of insects throughout the summer. Continuing this theme, work has started on creating a 'wildflower meadow' effect in a glade above the park's pond. During August, staff sprayed and fenced off 3 sections of grass which will form the new flowering areas. These areas will be rotovated prior to the Festival of Nature, where after the public will be invited to assist in planting hundreds of miniature daffodil bulbs.

Following this, park staff will sow a special mix of hardy annuals which will bring a flush of colour next summer. The planting site provides perfect habitat for several of the park's butterflies including Orange-tip which breeds along the woodland edge. It is hoped that as well as providing some much needed colour to the banks, it will increase the availability of nectar for our butterflies.

We have also been sowing extra seeds at the orangery bed and along the wildflower bank to increase the number of nectar bearing flowers. Poppies, Cornflowers and Borage have all been sown. As part of our ongoing biodiversity development work, SDC is keen to open up other overgrown areas throughout the park and discussions are underway with Rozelle (Jachowicz) public spaces officer, to open up the area behind the orangery with some scrub clearance and new tree planting in the autumn. I will keep readers up to date with these developments in future newsletters.

## *Ragwort (from a scientific perspective)*

I don't know whether those reading this newsletter locally, have noticed the recent controversy in the local press regarding ragwort, but I would like to attempt to dispel some myths about the plant and mention why ragwort is important to wildlife. Firstly, it's been a good year for ragwort. As a very adaptable plant, it thrives on the poorest of soils. This summer has seen an increase in ragwort in Stratford Park, mainly on the wildflower bank where it has colonised many parts of the bank. You may be surprised to know that there are at least 30 species of invertebrates which are totally dependant on ragwort as a food source. There are many other species which require its nectar and pollen. As a common plant which is a good nectar source it is often a major and important source for many declining species. Ragwort is also the main food source for the Cinnabar moth (*Tyria jacobaeae*), a brightly coloured moth that flies during the day. The Cinnabar moth can use other members of the genus *senecio* as foodplants but for long term success larger plants that persist for a long time are necessary.

The caterpillars of the Cinnabar moth are very distinctive. They are striped black and orange-yellow. They absorb the bitter tasting alkaloids that make ragwort distasteful to animals and become distasteful to birds as a result. The bright colours are a warning to birds not to eat them.

Although the Cinnabar moth is still relatively common, research has shown that their numbers have declined by 80%. The moth is present in Stratford Park (McCrea.M.2010) but despite a good presence of ragwort during 2012, no caterpillars have been recorded. Moth numbers have declined by over a third over the last 30 years and a major cause of this is habitat loss. This has knock on effects on other wildlife such as bats and birds which use the insects as food. I am no scientist but I know that ragwort can be toxic to animals. The various alkaloids contained within the plants are poisonous to most vertebrates, but surprisingly these alkaloids are contained in 3% of the world's flora. Inside the plant they occur in a 'non-toxic form', and it is only after it is broken down in the intestines and liver that it becomes toxic, (this is why it is not dangerous for humans to handle ragwort).

Fatalities among horses and other livestock are surprisingly rare. A significant amount of the plant needs to be ingested before poisoning occurs. 5% to 25% of the body weight of horses or cattle needs to be consumed before becoming poisonous. Cattle in general will avoid the plant except where it is dried in hay. In the case of Stratford Park, this does not come into the equation as no livestock is grazed within its grounds, so there is no threat posed to people using the park. As previously stated, I am no scientist, but as an entomologist, especially working within the park, I welcome the presence of ragwort as an important plant within the park's ecosystem.



**Cinnabar moth**



**Cinnabar caterpillars**

### *Another good year for Green Woodpeckers*

Green woodpeckers have again nested in the large oak on the main field. This summer a total of 3 young birds were raised. Last year the birds were very elusive in their nesting habits, and the present nest site was not used. In recent weeks the young woodpeckers have been seen feeding by the play area and visiting gardens adjacent to the park. The wildflower bank is an important feeding site, as the ant hills provide the birds with their favourite food. In comparison Great-spotted woodpeckers have not been as successful this year. Despite the availability of

suitable nest sites throughout the woodland, only 1 active nest was located in June. Sharon Tucker managed to capture one of our young Green woodpeckers on camera whilst visiting her garden next to the park on September 6<sup>th</sup>.



(Young Green woodpecker Photo: Sharon Tucker)

### *Moth event at the Orangery 14<sup>th</sup> September 2012*

Over 30 members of the public turned up for our last moth event of the year. We were once again met by cool conditions and a clear sky which was not encouraging for a productive night. This did not detract the enthusiastic gathering who assembled with children and torches in tow, followed by ever bubbly Ann (Taylor) from the Museum in the Park, now a regular perennial in her high-viz waistcoat. I had arrived at the park earlier to establish a sugar round due to the encroaching dark, and this was applied to trees around the pond. After a short introduction to those present about the park's moths, everyone set off to inspect the sugar round. Unfortunately this proved a complete blank no doubt due to the plummeting temperature. The moth trap, this time set up by the mansion house was bringing in a small but consistent number of moths, mainly common species such as Large and lesser yellow underwing, Square-spot rustic and Setaceous Hebrew character, but also some interesting ones – Shaded broad-bar and Garden carpet. The flower bed at the orangery became the focus of attention as many moths were feeding on the flowers there. We also found some larvae of the Angleshades moth feeding on Greater Sea Kale and a few butterflies were closing their wings for the night. Despite the cool conditions and low numbers of moths, everyone had an enjoyable night. 2012 will be remembered for its unpropitious weather on moth events, and as these are scheduled months in advance, one can never be assured of a 'good catch'. I can only hope that next year

we experience the dizzy heights of 2009 when hot weather produced large numbers of moths at most of the events. My thanks as usual to Ann for her assistance on the night. My final comment on the night must be for little Brandon who came along with his dad. This little boy 6 or 7 years of age is surely an entomologist of the future. Not only was he identifying the moths from my field guide, but potting the moths in containers to show everyone else. Took me back to my early years!



(Moth event at the orangery 14<sup>th</sup> September Photo taken with smart phone: Mike McCrea)

### *Wildlife to see now at Stratford Park*

**BIRDS:** A Raven was spotted in the park for the first time on 7<sup>th</sup> September. Jackdaw (huge numbers of birds are roosting in the arboretum before dusk). Green woodpecker the adults and young birds can be seen most mornings on grass banks by the play area. Little owl (still in the walnut tree), Buzzard and Sparrowhawk (both frequent over the park and in the woodland), Nuthatch, Treecreeper and Coal tit (all present this month in the woodland), mixed gulls on the top fields, Pied wagtail (large numbers above the play area), kingfisher (on the lake). Small groups of finches are starting to flock along the park's perimeters, mainly Goldfinch and Greenfinch. Look out also for the first Redwings to arrive later this month.

**BUTTERFLIES:** As summer draws to a close, the main species to see in the park are Speckled wood (along the woodland edge), Comma, Small tortoiseshell, Red Admiral (all feeding around the orangery and walled garden). A Small copper was seen on the wildflower bank on the 9<sup>th</sup> September. Wherever ivy is in blossom throughout the park is the best place to see butterflies this month and into early October.

**OTHER INSECTS:** September and October are the best months to see hoverflies which feed on ivy blossom. Bees, wasps and many other insects can be seen at the orangery flower bed and on heather blossom by the Bowling Green. Hummingbird hawk moths may turn up in suitable weather at these locations.

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[www.stroudnature.co.uk](http://www.stroudnature.co.uk) [www.theaes.org](http://www.theaes.org)



This brilliant picture shows our Sparrowhawk unperturbed by a Magpie whilst visiting a garden next to the park. (Photo: Sharon Tucker)