

The quest for the Convolvulus Hawk-moth

The Convolvulus Hawkmoth has an almost mythical status amongst moth enthusiasts. I started “mothing” in 2011 and by 2017 I had not seen one. Plenty of other people had – Mark Burton had caught a couple in his trap in Marloes, a friend of a friend had seen one on a fence post, then in 2016 a total of 9 were reported on Skokholm. I was definitely miffed.

These apparent random sightings are due to the fact the Convolvulus Hawkmoth is a migrant and tends to turn up on southerly winds in the autumn. It can appear anywhere – in fact this article was triggered by the fact that Chris Jessop had just found one on a telegraph pole opposite his house in Marloes. They are often found during the day perched on vertical surfaces, favourites being posts, poles, rocks and washing. This latter became something of a feature – it was reckoned that the moths were attracted the scent of fabric conditioners on the washing. No good to me as I use an unscented one!

So how do you recognise a Convolvulus Hawkmoth when you see it? Easy really – they are huge. The largest moth you are likely to see in the UK* though not particularly well patterned, being a greyish brown with darker streaks. The picture above is pretty well life size. They have a wingspan of about 110 mm (4½ inches) and when they spread their wings you can see their pink and black striped bodies as in the picture below.



There are several techniques for trying to attract Convolvulus Hawkmoths to your garden. Apart from the “scented washing” mentioned above, they are attracted by strongly scented, white, tubular flowers especially nicotiana – they are one of the few moths with a proboscis long enough to reach the nectar in these flowers. So all over the UK moth-lovers plant nicotiana each year, including me, in the hope of attracting one of these beasts. It presumably works as you do see reports of Convolvulus Hawkmoths seen nectaring at nicotiana at dusk – it must be a fantastic sight as these moths are bigger than many

hummingbirds.

On 23rd August 2017 I eventually managed to attract one to my trap. It was a rather tatty individual but at least I had now seen one. Well, I don't know what I did right this year but on the night of 1st September I found I had attracted no fewer than FOUR Convolvulus Hawkmoths to my moth trap by the back door. Only one was in the trap, the other three were on the wall and on the sheet over the table as you might expect. They were all in good condition. I was very chuffed, and as far as I know I am the only person in the UK this year to have recorded so many at one time. And, by the way, they were a long way from the nicotiana!

Rosemary Royle

* The Death's Head Hawkmoth is a bit bigger but very rare.