

REMINISCENCES OF AN ELDERLY ENTOMOLOGIST

By R. P. DEMUTH*

(Continued from Vol. 96 p.272)

In the autumn of 1929 I started working in London, living in digs in Holland Park and I did not like it at all. No car meant very restricted collecting and miles of built-up suburbs in every direction but I got over it with my bicycle. On Friday morning I would bicycle to the office in the City and in the evening put it on a train and I would be in time for sugaring at Wicken or Castor Hanglands (for *oo*) or Bedford Purlieus (for *concolor*). If my destination was only thirty miles away I would bicycle all the way and thank God when I got beyond the tramlines. All roads out south of the Thames had trams for miles out to the outer suburbs and these trams had no overhead wires but collected their electricity through a slot in the road between the lines and this slot neatly fitted a bicycle tyre and off one came, killing bottle, chip boxes, treacle and all!

On June 6 (1930) I was luckier as I met Kettlewell with his car at Bath and we drove together to Branscombe near Seaton in South Devon. The drive alone in an open Lagonda was in itself a thrill which the modern generation, used to going everywhere by car, has no conception of. The undercliff at Branscombe has also changed completely. I understand that now it is a dense thicket of thorn and bramble but then it was cultivated in little fields growing violets, strawberries and new potatoes, each field separated by an evergreen hedge to keep the wind out. Very steep paths linked the fields to the top and donkeys with pannier baskets brought up the produce. It was a manmade sun trap and butterflies swarmed. June 7 was a marvellous fine day and Bernard and I made a list of the butterfly species we saw. Twenty-seven species in one day at one spot! *Sinapis* was the speciality and was abundant fluttering along the narrow donkey paths but was only in moderate condition. *Bellargus* was equally abundant, *edusa* and *atalanta* had arrived from abroad and the fritillaries were represented by *euphrosyne*, *selene* and *aurinea*. *Minima* was also present and so were all the common southern butterflies that might be out at that time.

On the Beer side of Branscombe the cliff is an outcrop of chalk and growing along its crest was a mixture of coarse grass and Nottingham Catchfly and here we decided to dusk and caught *albimacula* and *hellmanii* (now *fluxa*). Bernard had one of each in the net at the same time. I would have thought that the type of habitat and the emergence dates would have made this impossible.

June 15 (1930). Very fine again and I went to Ventnor in the Isle of Wight. I found *cinxia* in just the places I imagined but most of

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them were over or had been thumbed (i.e. some scales had been removed either to preserve them from collectors or by a variety searcher so that he need not catch the same insect twice). However I managed to catch a number of fresh ones. They look lovely when they are first out and sit about on birdsfoot trefoil with their wings half open and generally speaking are rather sluggish. Their favourite spots seem to be the sheltered lower slopes of the undercliff often only just above the sea. I walked all the way from Ventnor nearly to St. Catherines but they were commonest nearest Ventnor. In one or two places they swarmed.

On June 21 I went to West Blean Wood hoping to find *athalia* but my diary says I was too early, anyhow I found none but I was sorry to see small pines being planted in the clearing. On June 27 I went to Kenmare in County Kerry and bicycled round the Kerry coast. Each diary entry begins the same way: "It rained most of the day!" I got very wet and had few insects to show for my energy but how energetic one was when young and enthusiastic! At dawn July 7, I left Cahirdaniel on the extreme western tip of Kerry and by bicycle, train, boat and train reached Peterborough in the evening of the 8th, took a bus to Wansford and walked the three miles to Bedford Purlieus, sugared for *extrema* and then walked the three miles back to the Haycock Inn at Wansford. My diary says that after putting on a lot of sugar I was too tired to look at it properly and I only caught a few *hellmanii* (*fluxa*).

1930 was the year I first went to the Broads. Barton Staithe is today in summer full of pleasure boats and people but then it was an isolated hamlet spreading up a green from the water where the reed cutters kept their quants (a sort of glorified punt) and these I could borrow for my night expeditions. A sheet laid on the bottom, a paraffin lamp on the sheet and one had a mobile moth trap to be poled very slowly up the narrow waterways between the reeds, reedmace and bullrush. On August 16, I was there with Kettlewell staying in one of the cottages but the weather was foul and we got very little except for *haworthii* and a few *cannae* pupae. On August 24, I was there again. My diary reads "I went to a swampy field up Stalham way and found *urticae* in amazing numbers. Quite a few were feeding but hundreds were to be found merely by parting tufts of grass when they could be seen hiding at the roots." In the following years I paid more visits. Across the broad from Barton there was an area of sallow and alder carr which fringed the wet land. Others had discovered that sugaring the spindly trunks could, on suitable nights, produce great numbers of *muscerda* (500 on a single patch must have been an exaggeration!) but I too caught a lot. This was all rather fun, poling ones quant across the broad at dusk and up a little narrow waterway to firmer ground and then pushing on into the almost impenetrable carr and reversing it in the dark on ones return and praying ones light would not go out. On one

night a thick mist blotted out everything which when I got into the open broad was no fun at all but with luck I came across a landmark and found my way back to the staithe.

I have previously mentioned that I found *ocellaris* commonly in the Brecks and how this had annoyed the great *ocellaris* expert Worsley-Wood. I was coming back from the Broads by train and beyond Brandon I noticed groups of poplars in the hedgerows and thought of *ocellaris* and returned on September 20 to try my luck. Unfortunately it was very windy and a heavy shower ruined everything but the only moth on sugared leaves was an *ocellaris*. These poplars being in hedgrows were difficult to work so I cast about for easier trees and with the help of Mr. Mallinson the schoolmaster at Fordham found the magnificent row on the Barton Mills to Brandon road. These trees have all gone now but there were huge specimens, about twenty of them with clear working space around them and plenty of low branches to sugar but best of all they dropped big branches and if these had their leaves still on, they were the finest lure and *ocellaris* was the commonest moth and I got enough for myself and all my friends and there was considerable variation. Like most autumn moths, *ocellaris* prefers its sugar to be spread on leaves and twigs.

May 10 (1931). Kettlewell and I went to Ventnor. *Cinxia* larvae were extremely abundant and full fed, crawling about all over the cliffs. We found one or two pupae in cocoons, in crevices in the rocks and also one puparium, a large silk cocoon about the size of a plover's egg containing two pupae and three larvae about to pupate; it was deep in the grass. (This does not seem to square with South's description of the pupal state.)

May 23. I was visiting Mullion Cove in Cornwall. I found larvae of *trifolii* along the crest of the cliff. They were of various sizes up to last skin, and very easy to see and I found 28 in all. While searching for them I spotted a female *livornica* sitting low in the herbage. Lots of people have found the rarer hawkmoths either on window sills, lamp posts and other unnatural resting places. To look down into the long grass and see one resting naturally was a great thrill and I suspect a rare experience.

May 29. Kettlewell and I went to Wye in Kent and sugared to the east of the Devil's Kneading Trough. There was hardly anything on sugar other than *leucophaea* of which I caught 28 including 3 on grasses and 2 in flight. And now it is extinct in England! Was I one of the guilty parties? I suppose so. Some of my diary entries make me blush with shame. For instance next day's: "We went to some large woods near Ham Street. *Fuciformis* was very common over the flowers of bugle and we must have caught nearly 80 between us, also 4 *tityus*. They were ludicrously easy to catch and I only missed one. *Euphrosyne* and *selene* were both abundant and *cardui* very common too." This was my first visit to England's most distin-

guished wood and next weekend (June 5, 1931) I went to Dungeness without really realizing what a collector's treasure-ground it was. In those days the railway line from Lydd to the lighthouse was complete with the double line of fencing posts all the way and of course I soon found *albimacula* at rest on them. "*Cardui* was abundant and at one spot I came across a vast quantity of *trifolii* larvae. They were about everywhere, on the posts and wire, on the shingle and eating all sorts of plants; broom, viper's bugloss, sorrell and foxglove." Next day's entry is again embarrassing: "I collected approximately 130 full fed *trifolii* larvae leaving ten times as many little ones."

June 26. I took the evening train to Peterborough and then on by bus to Wansford and walked to Bedford Purlieus and got one *extrema* on sugar, 4 in flight and one pair and one single at rest on its grass. Heavy dew prevented the dawn flight and I myself got back to Wansford at 4.30 in broad daylight having walked about 20 miles since 8. Next night I was back again and this time there was a dawn flight. The flight started suddenly at 1.15 and continued right through till daylight. In between these two all night expeditions I seemed to have got to Warboys and found *pruni* flying in hundreds but very worn. They were flying about bushes of sloe, privet and maple and feeding on the privet blossom.

July 7. I was staying at Rannoch on the way to Unst in the Shetland Isles. Having some energy to burn off I decided that collecting at high level on Schiehallion was the answer. "In the evening I went up Schiehallion. It was trying to rain but fairly warm. I sugared a row of posts at 2,000 feet and I then picked bunches of heather and stuck them into a wall which runs up to 2,800 feet and sugared them and lastly I sugared crowberry at about 3,000 feet. I was then above the clouds and saw a most marvellous sunset. As soon as the sun was down it began to rain steadily and washed all the sugar off the crowberry and I only saw three *adusta* on it. There were many more moths on the heather stuck into the wall, both *adusta* and *rectilinea*. The posts were quite good in spite of the rain and I took a large number of *rectilinea* and saw countless *adusta* though nothing else. I got back to the road just in time as the whole place was swallowed up in mist by 2 o'clock in the morning." Sticking sugared branches of heather into cracks in a dry stone wall was a good idea as the moths could sit on the underside of the branches protected from the weather.

July 9 (1931). I left Aberdeen for Lerwick this morning accompanied by Pennington and Poore, both keen collectors but probably not as keen as I was. Pennington was a complete Edwardian and a long since extinct species. I suppose he was in his late fifties and was getting bald and with a big black spade beard. In fact he looked very much like Edward VII. His father had been Liberal M.P. for Guildford and Pennington, a bachelor, though he slept near Lancaster

Gate, spent all day at the Reform Club where he was very difficult to dislodge. (I remember telephoning some exciting entomological news one evening. After a long wait a club servant replied "Mr. Pennington does not speak on the telephone during the dinner hour." so he never got the news!) When he collected he carried a large silver hip flask which contained a mixture of marsala and soda-water and the trouble was that Unst was dry. Unst had until recently been the centre of the herring fishery where herring were cleaned, salted and barrelled for the Polish trade. The fishing crews got so horribly drunk that it was decided to make the whole island dry. In 1931 all the crews had gone but the dryness remained and consequently a large case of mixed drinks had preceded Pennington to the Nord Hotel at Baltasound, the island capital. This was permitted for visitors but the locals were not so lucky. The steamer 'The Earl of Zetland', the 'Old Earl' to avoid confusion with the modern boat, called twice at Unst and real drinking enthusiasts would bicycle down to the first port of call and as soon as the boat cast off the ship's bar would be open and they would drink steadily for half an hour until Baltasound was reached when they would push their bicycles unsteadily ashore. Luckily the Earl did not run daily!

I think Poore then lived in Wiltshire where his family had an estate (*chryson* would fly into the house at night) and after his marriage, near Aberfeldy where he became an expert on the natural history of the Highlands and subsequently his son more so.

No entomologist had visited Unst since 1912 but luckily Pennington knew Bright of Bright's Stores on the south coast and he, a very rich man, had employed professional collectors and we were lent their letters to Bright which detailed all they had found. Apparently Bright paid them on a tariff of so much a particular insect and the letters were full of complaints about the going rate which I too thought very low: 3d each for x, 5d for y.

We sailed from Aberdeen in the morning and reached Lerwick next morning early where we had breakfast and then boarded the Earl of Zetland. This was the 'Old Earl', almost on its last legs and a very smelly old tub but the journey was one of the finest I have ever taken. It was dead calm. We called at most of the out islands often to collect sheep and as we passed near cliffs thousands and thousands of birds would fly out so that the sky looked like a snow storm and as far as the eye could see rafts of guillemot, razorbill, puffin and duck sat on the oily sea while gannet, great and arctic skua flew overhead.

My diary is worth reading as it quotes from Bright's letters.

"July 10 (1931). I got to Unst this evening. This is the most northern place in the British Isles and is about 11 miles from north to south and 4 east to west. I am staying at the Nord Hotel at Baltasound which is very comfortable and roughly in the middle of the island." (Very soon after this the Nord Hotel closed down.

Its most prominent feature was an enormous pyramid of empty spirit bottles, as high as the roof, left over from the drunken fishermen. With no refuse collection what does one do with several thousand empty bottles). "There are no trees, bushes or hedges and the ground is either bare or covered with coarse grass or stunted heather. There is crowberry and bilberry on Herma, Ness and Saxa Vord and some maritime campion on the cliffs and on the shingle at Haroldswick. *Humuli* in extraordinary forms is on all the low ground. *Exulis* was worked for by Cannon and Salvage who were sent over by Bright in 1908, 09 and 1912. They found it on the high ground west of Burra Firth between July 5 and August 5. There were two fences which crossed the peninsular here about a mile apart, one starting at Fiska Wick and the other to the south of it. They sugared both these every night and obtained up to 20 *exulis* a night but the average was about 4, one for every mile of sugared fence. They found wet nights best. The most southern of these two fences still exists (1931) but the grass has been cut away by peat diggers. The Fiska Wick fence is broken off about half-a-mile from the lighthouse shore station and then there is a new bit a mile long joining it to the southern fence. There is good grass here on the high ground."

It is about seven miles by road from the Nord Hotel to Fiska Wick and we hired the only car to take us there and the driver would then wait until 1 am. In early July it did not get darker than deep twilight and it was possible to read at midnight. All night great quantities of kittiwake would fly back and forth between the cliffs and the freshwater Loch of Cliffe and the arctic skuas which nested on the *exulis* ground would viciously dive bomb the otherwise absorbed entomologist. This was no laughing matter as one skua cut a furrow in my already slightly balding head so that the blood ran down the back of my neck. The noise from the sea birds never ceased for one moment. The great seascape spread out to the north and the only sign of man (apart from the posts) was the flick of the lighthouse on the distant rock of Muckle Flugga. Some would think it was the most exciting collecting ground in Britain, others the most terrible. Arnold Hughes who came with me on a later expedition, after ten nights of the mist and the skuas and the peat hag and loneliness never collected again and took up photography as an alternative interest!

First night. Nothing.

Second night. I got three *exulis* on my sugar between 1.30 and 2.30. The others did not wait and drove off in the car leaving me to walk back which I reduced to five miles by cutting across the hills. But what did I care! I had taken my first *exulis*.

Third night. Fiendish weather. Nothing.

Fourth night. Thick sea fog. Nothing.

Fifth night. Foggier still. 1 *exulis* (Poore).

Sixth night. Mist started to drop at 10 pm but then lifted again. 4 *exulis* in all. *Furva*.

Seventh night. A little bit better in the evening as the wind had changed to N. W. and there was no mist but it was cold. I took 4 *exulis* and *furva*.

Eighth night. A very strong N. W. wind and it was bitterly cold. My hands were so numb I could hardly hold a net. Nothing.

Return home.

My diary reads "The most curious thing is the lateness of insects on sugar. We sugared at 11 pm and did the first round about 12.20 am and the earliest *exulis* taken was at 1.10 am but this was exceptional and it was rare to find one before 2.15 and one one occasion I got 2 at 2.45 when it was almost broad daylight. All the other insects were the same and *conflua* (*festiva*) was commonest on the posts from 2.30 to 3 am (when the sun was up)."

Exulis is one of those insects (*C. tridens* is another) which look so much better alive than set. They seem very big on sugar and stand out from everything else particularly because they have little iridescent specks of gold and violet along the main veins of the forewing and these shine in the torchlight. *Assimilis* is a smaller and much duller creature.

(To be continued)

ARENOSTOLA PHRAGMITIDIS HB. (LEP.: NOCTUIDAE) IN SOMERSET. — A flourishing colony of this moth was discovered in 1984 in a marshy locality on the Mendip Hills near Cheddar. This would seem to be an extension of range westward for this species, and the first confirmed record of its occurrence in Somerset, since Turner (*Lepidoptera of Somerset*, p.15) includes it only on the basis of one record of many years ago which he considered very doubtful. — C. S. H. BLATHWAYT, Amalfi, 27 South Road, Weston-super-Mare, Somerset.

LAMPROPTERYX OTREGIATA METC.: METCALFE'S CARPET IN DERBYSHIRE. — On the night of the 5th September 1984 Archie Braddock of Long Eaton and I led a joint Derbyshire Entomological Society/Derbyshire Naturalists Trust field meeting to a wood just south of Ashbourne in Derbyshire. To our very great surprise we took a female *Lampropteryx otregiata* Metc. The site at which it was taken consists of an unmanaged piece of mixed woodland on heavy soil with a sluggish stream running through it, next to a grazing meadow which would appear to flood each winter.

The occurrence of this species in a small piece of woodland in the middle of farming country and some 150 miles from the nearest known site for it, which must either be Borth Bog in Wales or the New Forest in Hampshire, suggests that it is much more widely distributed in this country than the previous pattern of records indicated. — MARK STERLING, Department of Law, University Park, Nottingham.



Demuth, R P. 1985. "Reminiscences of an elderly entomologist. (To be continued)." *The entomologist's record and journal of variation* 97, 13–19.

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