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SHORT COMMUNICATION

Forthampton Oaks, Gloucestershire: a site of major importance for saproxylic invertebrates—I first brought Forthampton Oaks—near Tewkesbury (SO83)—to the notice of readers nearly ten years ago when I discovered *Trinodes hirtus* (Fab.) on one of the ancient oak pollards (Alexander, 1992). This was an addition to the county beetle list at that time. The site was ear-marked for further recording but the opportunity to carry out a more extended investigation did not arise for some time.

Contact was established with the tenant farmer early in 1999 and a visit by members of the Gloucestershire Invertebrate Group followed on 14 August. The finds from that one visit were outstanding (see below) and a follow-up visit was made on 22 April the following year.

Amongst the more significant finds are:

Coleoptera:

Ampedus cardinalis (Schiödte): single elytron suspected as belonging to this species, 1999; live adults and larvae in red-rotten oaks, 2000; a new county record—albeit with a second locality discovered in 2000;

Procræus tibialis (Boisduval & Lacordaire): elytra frequent in debris in hollow oaks, 1999; live adult in oak, 2000, coll. John Harper—a fairly widespread species in the north of the county, although rare nationally;

Globicornis rufitarsis (Panzer): one dead adult amongst debris in old oak, 2000—last recorded in the county over 100 years ago;

Trinodes hirtus (Fab.): larvae numerous under webby bark on ancient oak pollard, 20.x.1991, adult reared; larvae on most of the trees sampled, 1999 & 2000—one of only two localities known in the county;

Opilo mollis (L.): fragments in debris in hollow oaks, 1999; live adults beneath dead bark on oak trunks, 2000—one of only two sites in the county where it has been seen in recent years;

Prionychus melanarius (Germar): elytron under loose oak bark, 1999—one of about four areas where it is known in the county.

Pseudoscorpiones:

Dendrochernes cyrneus (L. Koch): under trunk bark on ancient oak, 1999—one of four known areas in the county for this species.

All of the above currently have British Red Data Book or Nationally Scarce status. The species combination reads more like a combination of Windsor Great Park and Sherwood Forest than an obscure backwater along the Severn Vale. However, this general area is proving to be truly remarkable for saproxylics—the equally amazing Bredon Hill (Whitehead, 1996) and Croome Park (Lott *et al.*, 1999) are still very new to entomology.

The site comprises some 30 to 40 ancient oaks within an area of commercially farmed land—partly under rye-grass ley and partly sweet corn. About one-third of

the oaks are already dead and others are in severe decline—a consequence of modern intensive farming. While the owner is interested in finding more sympathetic ways of management—subject to finance—his tenant is only interested in modern commercial farming. It seems likely therefore that this site will be lost fairly soon—despite the best efforts of local conservationists.

In addition to the important saproxylic invertebrates, the trees are also of interest for some of their other inhabitants. Both the silverfish *Lepisma saccharina* L. and its predator, the fly-bug *Reduvius personatus* (L.), are generally regarded as synanthropic in Britain, but it is a measure of the impact that “global warming” is already having that both species have established viable populations on these old oaks. Silverfish are remarkably frequent beneath loose bark on the old hollow trunks, and single full-grown fly-bugs were also found beneath loose bark on both visits. Whitehead (1992) has previously reported *Lepisma* from an old pear at Broadway, Worcestershire. Dead adult beetles of *Alphitobius diaperinus* (Panzer) have also been found in these oaks—the presence of this typically synanthropic beetle in old open-grown trees in the county has been reported previously (Alexander, 1998).

Assessing the conservation importance of sites like this is problematic. The current list of saproxylic Coleoptera stands at only sixteen species after two visits, and yet a very high proportion of them have conservation status. Application of the two systems available results in wildly contradictory results. The Index of Ecological Continuity (Alexander, 1988; Harding & Alexander, 1994) currently stands at 20, a figure which suggests regional importance or perhaps, with more recording, national importance. Site Quality Index (Fowles *et al.*, 1999) should not really be applied as it is suggested that a minimum of forty species is needed. However, finding that many can be difficult in a site like this. If we ignore the recommended restriction, the SQI calculates at 1100—a figure which far exceeds the quality of Windsor Great Park and Forest and would indicate high European importance! Presumably the answer is somewhere in between. Thanks to Rosie Cliffe of the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust for facilitating access and to the various members of the Gloucestershire Invertebrate Group.

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