

## THE RHODODENDRON LACEBUG, *STEPHANITIS RHODODENDRI* HORVATH, REDISCOVERED IN SOUTH-EAST LONDON

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Charged with obtaining some live specimens of the brightly coloured rhododendron leafhopper, *Graphocephala fennahi* Young, for a BBC television programme, I was initially at a loss to know where some suitable rhododendron bushes might be growing in the immediate neighbourhood. Mr Peter Sibley, Southwark Council's borough ecologist, helpfully suggested the aptly named 'Rhododendron Garden' in Dulwich Park, London SE21 (vice-county 17, 'Surrey').

On a visit to the park on 23.vii.1993, *Graphocephala fennahi* was present in thousands, every sweep of the net disturbing a great cloud of them to circle round and land back on the plants nearby. As one part of a bush was disturbed, the jumping of the insects could be heard distinctly, a soft 'tick' as each leapt into the air; the vast numbers combining to produce a rustling series of clicks. However, the most interesting find of the day was the discovery of several specimens of the rhododendron lacebug *Stephanitis rhododendri*, swept from the first bush examined.

A further visit to Dulwich Park on 9.ix.1993, with Mr Peter Hodge, proved the insect to be still present, and quite common on several bushes. It might be interesting to report that the bug was difficult to find using a beating tray, but could be swept from some of the higher branches using a net (the rhododendron bushes in the park are very large, many being over 5 metres tall). Whether this reflects the preferred position of the insect, almost out of reach on the upper limbs of the bushes, is difficult to determine; certainly *Graphocephala* seldom landed on the beating tray, because it took to the air almost immediately as it fell, to fly off without being seen. It seems unlikely that the lacebugs were flying off quickly; they moved slowly and delicately on their long legs.

*Graphocephala fennahi* and *Stephanitis rhododendri* are introduced species, both being native to North America. But whereas *Graphocephala* is now almost ubiquitous on British rhododendrons (Dolling, 1991), *Stephanitis* has had different fortunes. After it was first recorded as British (Distant, 1910), *Stephanitis* became quite common and widespread over much of England and Wales (Blair, 1948). This initial spread led to some fears from nurserymen, but in recent years it has declined, leading some to suggest that it may even have died out (Dolling, 1991; Judd & Rotherham, 1992). Southwood (1985) commented on the dramatic disappearance of this species, as did Kirby (1987), and since Allen found it in Blackheath in 1960 (Allen, 1962), no recent records have been reported until this year when the bug turned up in an Oxfordshire garden (Campbell, 1993).

Two other introduced rhododendron bugs were also present in Dulwich Park. *Kleidocerys resedae* (Panz.) (Lygaeidae) was very common. Although it is a native British species, the rhododendron-feeding form, first recorded in 1952, is thought to be an introduced North American subspecies (Southwood & Leston, 1959). A few specimens of the introduced European leafhopper *Placotettix taeniatifrons* (Kirschb.) (Cicadellidae) were also present on 9.ix.1993.

The Rhododendron Garden in Dulwich Park was laid out at the end of the 19th century and contained thousands of bushes of many species, varieties and races. At present the park is being surveyed in an attempt to identify the species surviving 100 years later and to compare these with the planting lists from the inception of the gardens. This (unpublished) survey by Mr Brian Wurzell suggests



that many bushes are likely to be *Rhododendron ponticum* L. in their original form, likewise *R. augustini* L., but many appear to be hybrids.

It is interesting that the garden has sometimes been referred to as the 'American Garden', because of the large number of North American plants laid out there. Documents in the Greater London Record Office contain planting lists of many thousands of plants, including, for example, a consignment of 'American plants' received on 4.xii.1890 from Messrs W. Cutbush & Son of Highgate Nurseries: "3200 rhododendron seedlings in various colours 1½–2 feet, 1000 azaleas—hardy in various colours . . ." and so on, detailing over 10,000 specimens of herbaceous plants, bushes and trees. Is it any wonder that American insect species such as *Graphocephala fennahi* and *Stephanitis rhododendri* became established in Britain at this time?

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### ANNOUNCEMENT

**A new book offer—The butterflies of Kent.**—Just over ten years ago, the Kent Field Club, the natural history society of Kent, published *An atlas of the Kent flora* giving detailed distribution maps of 2000 or so flowering plants and ferns to be found in Kent. The Society subsequently decided to embark on a similar scheme to map the distribution of the county's butterflies.

The results have now just been published in the Society's journal in the form of a book entitled *The butterflies of Kent, an atlas of their distribution* written by Eric Philp. The book (60 pp) contains colour photographs, black and white illustrations, accounts and detailed "dot" distribution maps of the various species to be found in Kent.

The book is now on sale at £6 a copy but is available at a special price of £5.00 including post & packaging until 28 February 1994 (payable to the Kent Field Club, c/o The Hon. Secretary, Mr K. Palmer, 62 Judd Road, Tonbridge, Kent TN9 2NJ).



Jones, Richard. 1993. "The rhododendron lacebug, *Stephanitis rhododendri* Horvath, rediscovered in south-east London." *British journal of entomology and natural history* 6, 139–140.

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