

In the Tops of the Trees.

By Phil Boggis – Cornwall Butterfly Conservation Moth Officer.

For several years now there have been more numerous reports of the **Orange Underwing**, especially from the east of the region. (See article in *The Butterfly Observer*, no.37, p.10). This day-flying moth inhabits birch woods and is fond of flying friskily, high in the tops of



Orange Underwing F Cabilla Wood, Bodmin, 21st March 2009, Photo © P. Saunders.



Orange Underwing, Dorset. Photo © Paul Harris by kind permission.

birch trees in bright sunshine. Not surprisingly, the larval food-plant is Silver Birch and sometimes Rowan. During the afternoon, this pretty orange-coloured moth comes down to bask on the ground where it is often disturbed. Occasionally it is found nectaring on Sallow blossom. The moth is single-brooded flying in March and April. The larvae first feed on the catkins of Birch in April and afterwards are found in spun birch leaves by day, and feeding at night. They pupate in soft bark.



I received a report from Leon Truscott that Paddy Saunders had witnessed an orange-coloured moth which he had photographed and sent to Leon for identification whilst he was walking in Cabilla Wood, Bodmin (see photo above). Spurred on by this, I arranged to meet up with Leon a week or so later after a spell of cold, wet weather, hoping to still see the moth at an extensive birch wood lying adjacent to the

river Lynher in east Cornwall.

At first Leon and I saw nothing as we approached a ride on the edge of the wood where there were extensive stands of Silver Birch, but after meeting up with Doris Turner and Ted Griffiths, we soon 'got our eye in' and saw at least 12 flying in the tops, and around the edges of the birch trees. These three pictures show how difficult it was to get a decent shot of these quick flying moths as they flitted amongst the tree tops at least 25 yards away. The photo right, which is a 'blown-up' version of the one above,



indicates how difficult it was without a 600 mm. zoom lens costing several thousands of pounds; a lens way beyond my budget! Note how the camera captures this one flying upside down.

What was of equal interest to me however, was the discovery, in the same wood, of a small moth also in the habit of flying in the tops of trees, this time mature willows, and often stopping to visit the flowers. The photographs below were taken when Leon and I noticed a pair in cop right in front of our eyes. The moth is called ***Adela cuprella*** (it doesn't have an English name).

The antenna of the male is striking in the fact that it is at least two and a half times the length of the forewing but in the female only one and a quarter times the length of the forewing. They are silvery white with black scales on each segment.

The female moth has a ferruginous head whereas the male is black, so you can tell which is the male and which is the female in these two photographs! As can be seen, the forewings are bronzy golden and depending on the way the light catches them and the wings show a purplish hue towards the apex. The eggs are laid on the catkins of willow and upon hatching the larva drops to the ground where it feeds amongst the leaf litter. It constructs a portable case from leaf fragments and pupates within this larval case. The moth is single brooded

and is said to be very local in mainland Britain but probably overlooked. (Indeed Ted and Doris can be forgiven for thinking that they were some kind of fly). Apparently, in some years, the moth occurs in abundance but is very scarce or absent in successive years. This must be a good year for them as they were seen also at Cabilla Wood on the 2nd of April as well as several other localities.

Finally, I have included the **Orange Underwing** records from Leon Truscott. I am indebted to Leon for informing me of the whereabouts of this moth without which this article could not have been written.



Orange Underwing Records, 2009

Thu 19th March	Cadson Bury	1	Leon Truscott & John Nicholls
Fri 20th March	Herod Wood	6	Ted Griffiths
Sat 21st March	Herod Wood	15	L. Truscott, J. Nicholls, Dave & Mandy Allan. Paddy Saunders
Sat 21st March	Cabilla Wood	1	Ted Griffiths
Sun 22nd March	Herod Wood	125 approx.	J. Nicholls
Sun 22nd March	Cabilla Wood	2	J. Nicholls
Sun 22nd March	Middle Drift (SX1364)	1	P. H. Boggis & L..Truscott
Wed 1st April	Herod Wood	12	

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