

Soldierflies and Allies Recording Scheme

Newsletter 2, autumn 2014

Edited by Martin C. Harvey
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Tree Snipefly, Chrysopilus laetus, Buckinghamshire
(© Martin Harvey) - see page 4

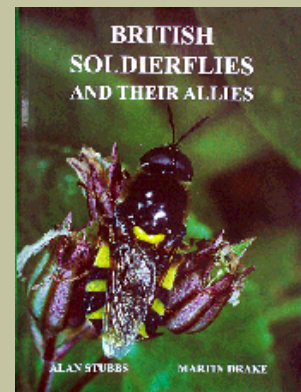
Welcome to the second newsletter for the Soldierflies and Allies Recording Scheme. The big news is that the long-awaited second edition of the soldierflies and allies 'bible' is now available – see the box below! Congratulations to the authors and the BENHS editorial team for their hard work in updating this and getting it back in print.

Further identification guides are available via the recording scheme website (see page 5) - there's never been a better time to take up identifying and recording this group! Thanks to all who have contributed articles and photos for this newsletter and records for the scheme.

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***British soldierflies and their allies*, by Alan Stubbs and Martin Drake**

The BENHS is pleased to announce that *British Soldierflies and their Allies* by Alan Stubbs and Martin Drake is now back in print as an enlarged second edition. The book includes all the families covered by the Recording Scheme. Strangely enough, no new species have been discovered in Britain during the twelve years that have elapsed since the first edition, so the plates are unaltered apart from two small corrections to the identification of the *Chrysops* specimens illustrated. There are also a few minor corrections to the keys here and there, and a more substantial improvement to the keys to Tabanidae (horseflies). The additional sixteen pages of the new edition arise mainly from incorporating many observations on the biology and distribution of the flies that have been made and published during the last twelve years.



The price to Dipterists Forum members remains at £20. The book will be on sale at the AES and BENHS Exhibitions, and at Dipterists Day. Copies may also be obtained by post from the BENHS Sales Secretary, subject to an additional charge for postage & packing. He is Dr M. Darby, Malthouse Books, The Old Malthouse, Sutton Mandeville, Wiltshire, SP3 5LZ (www.malthousebooks.co.uk). When ordering, please state if you are a member of DF and/or BENHS.

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Finding the Southern Silver-stiletto – *Cliorismia rustica* Enderlein, 1927 – Diptera: Therevidae

by Nigel Jones vc40insects@talktalk.net

Cliorismia rustica is regarded as a rare and enigmatic fly in Britain. Rightly so, for between its first discovery on the river Bollin in Cheshire in 1875 and 1999, it had only been recorded from twelve vice-counties in Britain (Breconshire, Cheshire, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Glamorgan, Herefordshire, Monmouthshire, North-east Yorkshire, Pembrokeshire, Surrey, West Sussex and Worcestershire). The Soldierflies and Allies Recording Scheme's database holds just 57 records for this 124 year period.



Two specimens caught in Wyre Forest by RC Bradley in 1889 and 1890 (Birmingham City Museum)

In the 21st Century, there have been more frequent records as techniques for finding this elusive species have been established. Post-1999, there are 69 records on the scheme's database, including three records from two new vice counties – North-west Yorkshire and South Northumberland. Even so, the overwhelming majority of records come from Monmouthshire, Cheshire and Cumbria, so that *Cliorismia* does appear to be a genuinely very scarce fly across Britain.

In 2008 Buglife commissioned Stephen Hewitt and John Parker to investigate the distribution of *C. rustica* on six Cheshire rivers and the River Eden in

Cumbria (Hewitt & Parker, 2008a and 2008b). These investigations found *C. rustica* at 14 sites on the rivers Bollin, Dane, Etherow, Tame and Goyt in Cheshire, greatly extending its known distribution in that county, whilst on the Rivers Eden and Irthing in Cumbria 12 sites were discovered that hosted *Cliorismia* larvae and pupae. Clearly this species is more frequent than historic records had indicated. That said, *C. rustica* is a very restricted fly along the rivers that it occurs on, being limited to a very specific niche habitat. Sand deposited by high level flood events, on the river bank, rather than within the fluvial channel itself, is where *C. rustica* can be found, particularly where some shade is present.

The Buglife reports are copiously illustrated with photos of the sand deposits in which *C. rustica* larvae and pupae were found, such that on viewing these I was immediately struck by their similarity to a deposit I had seen some years ago on the Cound Brook in Shropshire. Inspired by that, I surveyed the length of the Cound Brook via Google Earth and identified a few likely looking places. I set out to survey one promising looking stretch on 22 June, spending a hot day sweeping through likely looking bankside vegetation and grubbing around in sand deposits out of reach of the summer flood horizon. I failed to find any larvae or pupae and after several hours of fruitless search I became despondent. My last act of the day was to sweep over some tall vegetation to see what other flies I could add to my general Diptera catch for the day. As I busily pooted up many dolichopodids and much small fry I noticed an unfamiliar therevid in the net! I was very soon on my way home to get the therevid under the microscope, where I found that I had indeed captured a female *Cliorismia rustica*. A great outcome to a hard day's field work.

Bank side sand deposit on the Cound Brook; larvae and pupae found in sand indicated by white arrow



Encouraged by this success, I visited the original sand deposit that I had recalled when I first read the Buglife reports. Here I found several promising looking deposits in and at the edge of woodland, where I was very pleased to find therevid larvae and pupae. It was surprisingly easy to locate these, once I had got my eye in for suitable sand deposits in partial, but not heavy, shade (my word, these flies are picky about their precise habitat needs). One merely needs to sift through the top 5cm or so of sand, emptying handfuls onto a white tray and spreading it out. The slim, clear white and eel-like larvae are quite easy to spot, as are the creamy coloured pupae. I also swept around over other sand deposits for other flies and was delighted to capture another adult female *C. rustica* on an area of sand in an open situation close by.



Therevid larvae found in sand alongside the Cound Brook, Shropshire

The next task was to rear the larvae and pupae through. For pupae this was easy. I left them on the surface of some sand collected on site and within a couple of weeks a further female *C. rustica* emerged, confirming that this enigmatic fly is established on the Cound Brook in Shropshire. Later a male and a female *Thereva nobilitata* also emerged.

At the time of writing, two of the larvae collected have pupated, but unfortunately one is misshapen and has died. Through difficulties with feeding, two other larvae have perished and two more survive, although they have still yet to feed. I've tried them on sawfly larvae, chopped up brandling worms (from the compost heap) and mealworm, but none has been taken. Stephen Hewitt has advised that maggots from an angling supplier are readily taken, so anyone wishing to search for and rear *C. rustica* should bear this in mind.

The Cound Brook flows through glacial deposits of sand and gravel. Other *Clorismia* rivers flow through sandstone geology, and suitable deposits along such rivers are often found by bridges and weirs – the Buglife reports provide plenty of helpful detail. Pure sand deposits, rather than those with gravel mixed in seem to be best. My guess is that *C. rustica* could be present on many more rivers where bank side sand deposits occur, so I would encourage anyone who knows of such places to investigate them during June and July, which seems to be the best time to find adults, late stage larvae or pupae.

Female Clorismia rustica swept from the Cound Brook, Shropshire in 2014



References

- Hewitt, S. & Parker, J. (2008a) Distribution of the stiletto-fly *Clorismia rustica* on Cheshire rivers. Report to Buglife. [[PDF download \(large file\).](#)]
- Hewitt, S. & Parker, J. (2008b) Distribution of the stiletto-fly *Clorismia rustica* on the River Eden in Cumbria. Report to Buglife.
- Stubbs, A.E & Drake, M. 2001. *British Soldierflies and their Allies*. British Entomological and Natural History Society, Reading.

Recent record highlights

Tree Snipefly *Chrysopilus laetus* continues to expand its range

This attractive orange snipefly has been showing a welcome expansion in range over the last two decades or so, with records from several counties around London, as well as Devon and Gloucestershire in the west. Jeremy Richardson has been seeing them regularly in north-east London (see his article in Dipterists Digest), and Bedfordshire can be added to the list. On 27 June 2014 Rosie Earwaker found a female Tree Snipefly flying round the RSPB's offices in Sandy (TL188478) (identification by James McGill). Another indoor record came from Martin Harvey's kitchen, mid-Buckinghamshire, on 12 July 2014 (see cover photo). This was also of a female, as were all of Jeremy's sightings in London - where are the males? Possibly they remain in the tree canopy, while the females disperse and come down to ground level looking for suitable decaying wood in which to lay their eggs.



Tree Snipefly in Bedfordshire
© Rosie Earwaker



Forest Silver-stiletto in Worcestershire
© Martin Skirrow

Forest Silver-stiletto *Pandivirilia melaleuca* in Worcestershire

On 14 July 2013 Martin Skirrow found a female of this rare species resting on a wall in a converted cowshed on a farm in Berrow, Worcestershire (SO777339). The farm has two old orchards with hollow trees, mostly apple and many blown down. There are no hollow oaks on the farm, but there is a large ancient hollow pear tree close to the building where the fly was found, as well as a huge heap of cut timber, some of it well rotted. Martin is using bottle traps to investigate the fauna of these old orchard trees further. Further details of the record have been published:

- Skirrow, Martin B. (2014). *Pandivirilia melaleuca* (Leow) Forest Silver-stiletto fly (Diptera: Therevidae) in Southwest Worcestershire. *Worcestershire Record* No 36: 16-17.

Downland Robberfly *Machimus rusticus* new to Berkshire

The Downland Robberfly is a large insect, most frequently seen on the southern English chalk downlands. Martin Harvey swept a male from a steep chalk bank during survey work at Sheepdrove Organic Farm, on 29 July 2014. This is the first record in the database for Berkshire (VC22).



Downland Robberfly in Berkshire
© Martin Harvey



Silver Colonel in Berkshire © Jason Gosling

Silver Colonel *Odontomyia argentata*: a new site in Berkshire

An interesting set of records from Jason Gosling includes a series of observations of Silver Colonel at a previously unrecorded site near Abingdon (Berkshire vice-county), in April and May 2014. This species has scattered records in south-east England, but is probably under-recorded due to its early flight period - one to look out for next spring.

Flecked General *Stratiomys singularior* has a good year

A good number of records have been received in 2014 for this species, including several from inland locations: Berkshire (Jason Gosling), Bedfordshire (John O'Sullivan) and Northamptonshire (Robin Gossage).



Flecked General in Berkshire © Jason Gosling

Recording scheme website and other online activity



The recording scheme now has its own website: www.brc.ac.uk/soldierflies-and-allies/

Many thanks to the Biological Records Centre for hosting the site, and in particular to Jim Bacon at BRC for help with setting it up. It includes information on identification resources, how to send in records, an archive of the scheme newsletters and other updates. Much more information

could be added of course, and I hope to continue developing the site over the coming winter – if anyone is interested in helping with this please let me know!

The [identification resources page](#) contains a number of recent additions, including a guide to the bee-flies in genus *Bombylius*, and links to some excellent photographic keys, produced by colleagues in the Netherlands, for soldierflies (by Menno Reemer) and bee-flies (by John Smit). These are in Dutch, but with the permission of the authors Jim Middleton and I have produced English translations of the text that can be used alongside the original photo guides.

Soldierflies and other Diptera are also getting popular on Facebook, with a group dedicated to [British Soldierflies](#) as well as a wider [UK Diptera](#) group. These groups are friendly and fun, and do an excellent job of sharing photos and news for those who are happy to use Facebook. Where I find Facebook less useful is in gathering record details. There has been some discussion about this on Facebook itself, with opinions differing. My own view is that Facebook is an excellent way of sharing photos and discussion, but I don't think it is very good for documenting records: the posts move past too quickly, are not archived and are not searchable. I would urge anyone who wants their records to be included in the recording scheme database to please send me the details if you possibly can, via one of the routes listed on the website.

I know that Roger Morris has been doing a fantastic job of picking up records for hoverflies (and other groups) from Facebook, but I'm afraid I'm not able to do that, and although Roger has in the past been willing to collate records for the soldierflies scheme as well, he is a very busy person and I would rather he didn't feel he had to do that! The recording schemes are run by volunteers with limited time available, and I don't think it is asking too much of individual recorders to keep track of their own records and send them in direct if they wish them to be included.

For the soldierflies and allies my preferred way of receiving records is via [iRecord](#), not least because it allows you to store the photo as part of the record, and is free to use. But I'm always happy to receive records via other routes as well, such as on a spreadsheet. See the [recording scheme website](#) for details on this. If you're looking for help with identification of photos you'll probably get a good response on Facebook, but don't forget that [iSpot](#) is also available (and on iSpot the photos are archived and searchable, and I can get the data as a download if needed).



***Solva marginata* (Meigen, 1820) and *Neopachygaster meromelas* (Dufour, 1841) in a Reigate garden**

by Jeremy Early



The storm just before Christmas damaged a number of trees in, and adjacent to, my garden in Reigate in Surrey. A large Grey Poplar (*Populus canescens*) came down and a smaller one measuring 12 metres in a neighbour's property ended up hanging over my top lawn. Unfortunately my tree was not in a position to permit the wood to be salvaged for conservation, but the neighbour's was. Consequently when that was felled on 15 May the tree surgeons were able to pile up the resulting logs for me, around 20 of them with a maximum diameter of 30cm.

The tree had been healthy, albeit with some softening of the central core in the bottom two or three metres.

I had no great expectation of anything exciting turning up on the logs but on 21 June a fly settled on the front of one of them. I managed to take a photograph and confirmed the subject as *Solva marginata* (Drab Wood-soldierfly), a nationally scarce species which has been recorded at getting on for 30 locations in Surrey. The markings on this specimen gave the lie to the English name, presumably given to the species as a negative comparison with *Xylomya maculata*. There were brilliant yellow marks along the whole of the side of the thorax (rather than just a small yellow spot on the humeri, Stubbs & Drake, 2001) and on most of the tergites.



Solva marginata © Jeremy Early

Understandably I looked at the Poplar logs regularly from then on and for the best part of three weeks there was at least one *Solva marginata* visible every day. The species seems always to be on the go and the greatest action usually occurred after the sun had started to go off the logs at 2.30pm up until 5.30pm. The maximum count was four on 22 June – none of the other three specimens had as much yellow on the thorax as the first one.

On 22 June the quartet seemed to be looking for sites in which to oviposit, focussing on the gap between the bark and the wood and on noticeable gaps in the bark where the wood was accessible. This fitted Stubbs & Drake (2001) regarding where eggs are laid. The fact that all the specimens I saw seemed to be female also fitted the theory, first given in Sharp (1907), that males perhaps tend to stay up in tree tops, although the downing of the two Poplars has left a distinct shortage of living samples of this particular tree in the immediate vicinity. Given that *Solva marginata* is believed also to use dead bark in live trees for breeding, the supposition is that the species is not new to the area, especially given the numbers involved on the logs.

Poplar is also probably the most frequent source of larvae for a tiny soldierfly, *Neopachygaster meromelas* (Silver-strips Black), and at 2.20pm on 25 June I found a female running down the front of one of the logs.



Neopachygaster meromelas © Jeremy Early

This is also a nationally scarce species, having been found at only three places in Surrey previously, including RHS Wisley and Richmond Park. It is one of the smallest of the Pachygastrinae, with black femora, clear wings and silver strips by the inner orbits. Females also seem to have a violet band across the eyes. Having identified the fly, I let her go and in the middle of the afternoon of 27 June I was able to watch a female wandering over one of the logs from the bottom of the tree for half an hour ovipositing in the bark. The chosen sites were all open to the elements.

The section of the garden where both these species were found is edged with Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*), a plant which has come in for justified criticism by many people for many years. Oddly, though, mine has proved a treasure trove for soldierflies and their allies in 2013 and 2014, with 11 new



Rhagio lineola, one of 11 species new to the garden and found on Cherry Laurel © Jeremy Early

species. The highlights in 2013 were the nationally scarce *Chorisops nagatomii* (Bright Four-spined Legionnaire) and, a first record for Surrey determined by Graham Collins, *Eupachygaster tarsalis* (Scarce Black), both sexes of which have been seen this year as well. Most of the ten were taken by looking on the under side of the leaves – not a part of the foliage I had ever studied before – and on 6 July I found two female *Neopachygaster meromelas* in that position within 30cm of each other close to the 1.5 metre stump of my Grey Poplar.

These two specimens looked smaller than the original female, and one of the pair was in the same location the next day. Both were back at 1.45pm on 8 July and I collected them; they

References

- Sharp, D. 1907. *Xylomyia marginata*, Mg., at Cambridge. *Entomologist's mon. Mag.* 43:14.
- Stubbs, A.E & Drake, M. 2001. *British Soldierflies and their Allies*. British Entomological and Natural History Society, Reading.

Editor's note: Jeremy Early's latest book has recently been published: "*My Side of the Fence - The Natural History of a Surrey Garden*" is an enjoyable account of the wealth of wildlife that Jeremy has recorded in his garden, illustrated through with his superb photos. For details see:

www.natureconservationimaging.com/Pages/nature_conservation_imaging_book.htm

Mass emergence of *Leptarthrus breviostris* at Lochawe, Argyll

by David Fotheringham

The Scottish Biodiversity List robberfly *Leptarthrus breviostris* has been recorded annually in small numbers at a study site north of the village of Lochawe, Argyll, during survey work commissioned by ScottishPower. On 6 June 2014, an 8am visit to a boulder-studded area of acid grassland and heath at NN111265, north of the Coille Leitire SSSI oakwood, at about 100m above sea level, encountered an apparent mass emergence of the robberfly. It was thought perhaps hundreds of individuals were involved, with groups of flies perched on every rock and boulder, apparently warming up in the morning sunshine.

On closer inspection, these were groups of males clustered around females and, as the morning progressed, males began actively displaying – starting by hovering in front of the larger females, their hind legs extended and dangling, then moving in an arc to line up behind the females who would open their wings and pump their abdomens vertically by pushing up on their hind legs – Stubbs & Drake (2001) suggest this perhaps dispersed a pheromonal attractant. Nevertheless, none of perhaps six such encounters witnessed at Lochawe resulted in mating taking place in the immediate aftermath.



Copulating pairs were, however, found on a return visit to the site at 3pm, with pairs lined up tail-to-tail on rocks and dead wood at the site and spare males waiting in the wings. Females were also observed hunting and feeding on a small beetle and what was thought to be an Empididae sp. fly – even when dining, the females were still being attended to by courting males.

None was seen elsewhere the same day in the adjacent Ben Cruachan area and just two *L. breviostris* were present at the Lochawe site on June 14 2014, suggesting the presence of such large numbers was a localised and shortlived phenomenon.

Reference

- Stubbs, A.E & Drake, M. 2001. *British Soldierflies and their Allies*. British Entomological and Natural History Society, Reading.

Courtship behaviour of *Leptarthrus breviostris* on calcareous grassland at Millington Pastures, East Yorkshire

by Ian Andrews

Leptarthrus breviostris is an abundant species on an area of the Yorkshire Wolds at Millington Pastures SE843529 and it is not uncommon to sweep specimens from the grassy slopes every few yards in early June each year.

On 1 June 2014 at about 10.00hrs there were unusually large numbers visible, with females perched prominently on anything which would elevate them above the grass, especially along a wooded hedgerow at the bottom of the grassy slope, adjacent to a marshy, spring-fed valley bottom. An old, large Ash tree (*Fraxinus excelsior*) with dead lower branches was favoured and the ends of several such branches had a female at rest, surrounded by up to four males.

Watching one such group over the space of an hour, one male would fly up and spend some time hovering a little behind the female with his abdomen pointing down and his long, flattened rear tarsi dangling

down. Gradually, he would approach closer and hover above the female, who would raise her abdomen up towards him, with her wings open, and sometimes also raise one leg up above her abdomen. Occasionally, the male's tarsi would brush against the female's abdomen or her leg. After a couple of minutes, that male would retire and sit back on the branch and before long another would perform the same courtship dance above the female. On a couple of occasions, three males were attempting to hover above the female at the same time. At no time did the behaviour change and eventually the female flew off, with no copulation having taken place.



I later watched the same courtship with two males around a female, all three resting on the dead stem of a fallen Hogweed plant beside a stream lower down. The process was exactly the same, and again ended with the female flying off before any copulation.

It would be interesting to see how this courtship eventually leads on to copulation, as the females seemed to fly off some distance each time.

***Leptogaster cylindrica* at Musselburgh Lagoons, East Lothian – a first Scottish record**

by David Fotheringham

On 1 July 2014, while undertaking biodiversity recording at Musselburgh Lagoons, East Lothian, on behalf of East Lothian Council/ScottishPower, I discovered two male slender-type robberflies, *Leptogaster* sp. These were apparently holding territory low down in an area of tall grassland with a herb-rich ground layer at NT364733, a site that included an extensive patch of Red Clover *Trifolium pratense*.

Aware of the significance of the record, a number of photographs were taken of both individuals, from which their identity was ascertained as *Leptogaster cylindrica*. The photos show clearly the yellow bristles on the occiput and an unbroken dark brown stripe on the mid-line of the tergites, as highlighted by Stubbs & Drake (2001). Recording scheme organiser Martin Harvey subsequently verified the observation and intimated that these constituted the first records of this species for Scotland.

Musselburgh Lagoons is a former disposal site for pulverised fuel ash arising from coal combustion at the former Cockenzie Power Station but is now being operated by the local authority as a site for leisure and biodiversity. Two other slender robberflies were seen at NT367734 on tall grasses growing on an ash



embankment – but these were not so approachable, given the unstable terrain, and therefore their identity and sex could not be confirmed.

Another southern colonist was found in the same area of the lagoons on 16 June – the cuckoo bumblebee *Bombus vestalis*. This has been determined by Mike Edwards of BWARS and confirmed as the first Scottish record.

Reference

- Stubbs, A.E & Drake, M. 2001. *British Soldierflies and their Allies*. British Entomological and Natural History Society, Reading.

Large Marsh Horsefly *Tabanus autumnalis* new to Mid-west Yorkshire

by Paul Brothers and Andy Grayson

A lone male of *Tabanus autumnalis* was sighted by Paul Brothers at RSPB Fairburn Ings Nature Reserve, near Castleford, Mid-west Yorkshire on the 14 July 2014, the first record for vice-county 64.

RSPB Fairburn Ings Nature Reserve comprises an area of wet meadows, and is part of the River Aire flood plain. The fly was seen in close proximity to the Visitor Centre in an area of scrubby woodland which is



always wet and marshy. The main trees in the locale are hawthorns, blackthorns, willows, sallows, birches and alders which can survive periods of submergence during the winter, when the river overflows its banks and floods the surrounding meadows.

The site has been extensively open cast coal mined. The worked land is full of spoil heaps and stacks. Areas have since been reworked and landscaped with limited tree planting and wild flower seed mix introduced. Since this was carried out the site has

naturalised, though some land management and water level management is ongoing by the RSPB team on the reserve. Parts of the site have been grazed by Highland Cattle for several years. They were introduced to keep the grass in check, in order to improve conditions for the ground-nesting birds that form an important part of the wildlife on the reserve.

In recent years the site has flooded to a depth of around 5 feet (1.5m). Thus only in very dry years or exceptional conditions does the area around the Visitor Centre actually dry out completely. There are still a few ponds, made primarily for pond dipping and the construction of these may have improved conditions for *Tabanus autumnalis*. This individual was found sitting on the top of the plastic fencing adjacent to one of these small ponds.

Several other flies have been found sitting on the plastic railings. Presumably they emerge from their pupal casings, from the pond, soil or vegetation and climb up the posts to reach the sunny and warm areas above most of the surrounding vegetation. The black plastic warms up much quicker than the surrounding habitat and assists them with becoming flight ready. It is assumed that this male specimen had done just that. It flew off when disturbed by the flash when a second picture was taken.

Andy Grayson kindly provided the following information via Facebook:

"I've been expecting *Tabanus autumnalis* to turn up in Yorkshire, as it appears to have been extending its British range northwards over recent years, and has been found in counties where it was not known historically, nor in modern times. I have found it in North Lincolnshire and Lancashire over the past three years, and I'm also aware it has been found in Cheshire.

"In my experience, its usual habitats are lowland marshes dominated by reed *Phragmites*, particularly the extensive ones which occur around the mouths of major rivers and large lakes. In coastal areas, its usual habitat centres on ditches.

"Fairburn Ings is a very suitable site for its ecological requirements, but there are many such suitable sites in lowland parts of southern Yorkshire. *T. autumnalis* is a conspicuous species which is unlikely to have been overlooked by past naturalists in northern England. I could find no evidence of it when I investigated highly suitable coastal and inland Yorkshire sites for Tabanidae in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Neither could I find any evidence of it in neighbouring northern counties until very recent years, so it has apparently extended its British range northwards. There were several old records of *T. autumnalis* from Durham, published in Wingate's Durham Diptera, but the specimens in his collection are *T. cordiger*."