

The Hummingbird Hawk-moth

It has been a really good year for Hummingbird Hawk-moths. Many people who have never seen one before have seen one this year. We have had one or more in our garden throughout most of August and September feeding on buddleia, verbenas, fuchsia, ceratostigma, phlox and valerian. There is nothing in the surrounding countryside for them as they like tubular flowers and the only things in flower “out there” are fleabane and ragwort. So gardens are a real haven for them.



Picture by Howard Burt

They feed by hovering in front of a flower and inserting their long proboscis into the flower. If you look carefully you can see a pale-coloured tongue popping out from the end of the proboscis. I have always wondered how they can accurately control such a long proboscis as it presumably is too narrow to have muscles. Apparently, while hovering, the moth can make very fine adjustments to its position and guide the proboscis accurately into the flower to reach the nectar. They can also coil the proboscis up into a resting position.

Hummingbird Hawk-moths are quite small for a Hawk-moth - about one inch long with a 1.7 inch wingspan - but easy to identify. When they are hovering the bright orange hindwings show clearly, as do the black and white patterns on the rear end. However, caution is required as not all hovering moths are Hummingbird Hawk-moths – another common hover-feeding moth is the Silver Y. It looks mostly dull brown in flight and the key identifying feature is indeed the pale Y mark in the centre of the forewing.

Many other moths hover-feed during the night but these are obviously harder to see. An expedition in June 2015 to the “red valerian wall” in Dale to see a reported Bordered Straw moth did indeed find the moth, plus many others either hovering or crawling on the flowers. Perhaps the most impressive hoverer is the Convolvulus Hawk-moth – a really big beast which loves to feed on Nicotiana. With its 3½ inch wingspan it is an amazing sight when hovering. Unfortunately this only happens in the pitch dark!



Barred Straw hovering

Incidentally the smallest actual hummingbird, the Bee Hummingbird, which is the smallest bird in the world, and indeed the smallest warm-blooded animal, is about 2.2 inches long and weighs only 2 grams, so it is quite a lot bigger than the Hummingbird Hawk-moth. Confusion is also unlikely as the Bee Humming-bird lives only in Cuba!

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