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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Why collect Hoverflies?*

There is no doubt that Syrphidology is one of Britain's fastest growing hobbies. It has been estimated that Hoverfly freaks are even beginning to catch up with coleopterists, and that they will actually outnumber the total number of British species by 1985. Even in Sheffield, the number of enthusiasts has grown from one in 1976 to 26 at the time of writing. In 1981 the mind-boggling total of 22 adult students attended a University day school on "Hoverfly Identification" held at Sheffield Museum (and paid for the privilege!). Good news indeed!

Apart from their intrinsic beauty, Hoverflies are one of the most useful groups of insects to handle, collect or study. Biology curators with an interest in building up new collections, or adding to existing collections, or just involved in recording their regional fauna and flora, might consider looking at Hoverflies for next year's field project. In particular, the group is most suitable for desk-bound curators who rely on volunteer assistants, M.S.C. staff, local naturalists or assistant keepers to do the field-work. The skills involved in capturing, finding and preserving these beasties can be quickly acquired by novices.

Field Techniques

Reference should be made to the relevant chapters of the Dipterist's Handbook by Stubbs and Chandler (1978), but the following notes should serve as an initial guide to collecting.

- Season. Late March to September, with several species around well into November. May and June seem to be the most productive months and should not be missed.
- Sweeping. A large net is useful to sweep through grass, tall aquatic marginal vegetation, foliage, flower meadows, hedgerows, bogs etc. Try to visit and sweep as many different vegetation communities as possible. Extract flies with a pooter. Kill, if required, using ethyl acetate and pin the same day or store in laurel tubes.
- Hand netting. A smaller net is useful for picking individuals off flowers, rotting trees, old stumps, foliage. Remember to visit as many flowers as possible, not only umbellifers but smaller plants such as Tormentil and bedstraws can be very good.
- Passive collecting. Water traps and Malaise traps (see the Handbook) are very good for catching hoverflies.

* with apologies to Peter Skidmore

Preservation.

Direct pinning through one side of the thorax. Most dipterists now prefer to use stainless steel headless micropins, and pin insects directly onto Plastazote-lined perspex boxes. Wings are held at right angles with further micropins. After sorting and identification, specimens intended for permanent storage are mounted onto Plastazote or Polyporus stages and labelled. With a little practice the initial process takes a matter of seconds per specimen.

Identification.

A number of keys have been used, mainly out of print or out of date, but 1983 will see an end to all our difficulties, when Hoverflies will be the subject of a new book by Alan Stubbs, including identification keys, colour plates and notes on ecology, distribution etc. (it seems likely that the British Entomological & Natural History Society will be the publishers).

Uses.

- a) Reference Collection - as already mentioned a useful museum reference collection can be quickly acquired simply from field collecting. For example, the bulk of the Sheffield Museum collection was donated by Mr. Austin Brackenbury, a railway signalman with no previous experience of Diptera, who has now found 102 species in an area of eleven metres square. In addition, a number of expert dipterists are always happy to deal out one or two spare unusual "goodies" to good homes. So, now would be a good time to sort out your collection. Be prepared for the onslaught of the amateur syrphidologists!
- b) Education. Some of the larger species make very attractive display material for exhibition, or boxed sets for school loans, either on their own or as fine examples of Batesian Mimicry. In fact you can play around all day matching up different species of hoverfly with various Social Wasps, Sphecids, Bumble Bees, Sawflies and even Hymenoptera Parasitica.....yuk!
- c) Site Assessment. Because of the great diversity of larval behaviour within the compass of quite a small group of species (n 250) they make a conveniently handled ecological indicator group. For example several species are first rate indicators of old woodland, others of good wetlands etc. At Sheffield we have used this group,

together with various families of wood-boring beetles to assess the comparative merits of a number of local woodlands and parklands.

The national Hoverfly Recording Scheme

A scheme has been operating for several years, but "records of even the commonest species are genuinely still required, especially for the less populated areas of the country". A selection of very provisional distribution maps has been kindly supplied by the scheme organiser, Philip Entwistle, and some are reproduced here. Not all are fully up to date, but at least they give a fairly accurate picture of the species concerned. If you have a museum collection with data applicable to (a) 10 km. square(s) please contact Philip in the near future, and/or extract the information using the standard record card.

Scheme Organiser:- Dr. P. F. Entwistle, Institute of Virology,
Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3SR

If you feel that your collection requires checking, it may be possible for a local enthusiast to visit your museum. If you write to me, I shall attempt to play cupid! (No promises though!)(D.W.)

Reference

Stubbs A. E. and Chandler P. (eds.) 1978 A Dipterist's
Handbook. Amateur
Entomological Society.

(An excellent handbook and invaluable reference - warmly
recommended to all museums with an interest in entomology)

Derek Whiteley

















