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## Book Reviews

### *British and Irish Pug Moths: A guide to their identification and biology*

Reviewed by Paul A Brown

The Pugs comprise the most enigmatic group of the Geometrid macrolepidoptera (Geometridae, Larentiinae, Eupitheciini) consisting of four genera *Eupithecia* Curtis, *Chloroclystis* Hübner, *Pasiphyla* Meyrick and *Gymnoscelis* Mabille, totalling 52 species recorded in Britain & Ireland. This user friendly and well-illustrated book will greatly help curators and recorders identify those un-named and misidentified 'little-brown-jobs'.

Adrian Riley alone finished this long awaited and completely updated work after the sad death of Gaston Prior in 1994. This book greatly increases our knowledge of the group and replaces the slim soft-back '*An Identification Guide to the British Pugs*' by David Agassiz et al., of 1981, published by the British Entomological & Natural History Society. The work also greatly develops the coverage of Pugs in Bernard Skinner's '*Colour Identification Guide to Moths of the British Isles*', 1984, better reflecting the true extent of infraspecific variation. Riley & Prior dispense with the need for a dichotomous key (as used by Agassiz et al. and by A. C. Johnson, 2002, *Atropos* 17:29-32.) because of the difficulty in interpreting colour and identifying worn specimens. They instead propose the procedure of comparing your specimens with:

1. the colour plates
2. with the text descriptions
3. with similar species
4. with illustrations of abdominal plate and/or genitalia
5. appropriate geographic range, flight period, preferred habitat and presence of preferred food-plant. It is presumed that the reader knows how to dissect the genitalia.

The Photographic illustrations consist of eight colour plates of life-size, set specimens by David Wilson, three plates organised by taxonomic relationship and five plates usefully organised by similarity of wing pattern. One criticism is that the set specimens photos are at life size, a little small. In Vladimir Mironov's recently published book, '*The Geometrid Moths of Europe, Volume 4*' (Apollo Books, Stenstrup, Denmark 2003, 463 pp), covering the 138 European Eupithesiini, his Pug plates are 1.5 times life size and show more detail, albeit on a larger page size of 240 x 170 mm. Why waste space, with large amounts of empty page in the smaller Riley & Prior, when you could have the space filled with larger and finer detailed illustrations, as in the Mironov volume.

There are also four excellent colour plates of living imagos photographed by Jim Porter, Ulrich Ratzel, Robert Thompson and Paul Waring. Most of the text figures occur at the back of the book although useful thumbnail drawings of differences in wing pattern are distributed through the text. The line drawings of the dorsal aspects of final instar larvae are very good and show more detail than the small colour photographs of pug larvae in Jim Porter's '*Colour Guide to Caterpillars of the British Isles*' (1997, Viking). Drawings of the isolated male abdominal plates and aedeagi (showing the important ornamentation), and female bursa copulatrix, are mostly clearer than those in Agassiz, (e.g. The aedeagi of Sloe and Green Pugs) but not quite as good as the complete genitalia illustrations of Mironov, showing relative shapes and sizes of the complete genitalia. Riley & Prior's

thumbnail impressions of isolated male valvae are relatively poorly illustrated.

Distribution maps (not found in Agassiz) are by vice-county and not by more detailed 10km and are based on records from Rothamsted Insect Survey, Biology Records Centre, county recorders, museums, and published and private sources. [A brief look through the maps shows that *E. pusillata* is not recorded for the Burren in Ireland where it has been/is common.] There is a glossary, a table of phenology (stating what stage of the life cycle is expected in which month of the year), ten pages of comprehensive larval host-plant records, 21 pages of References and Bibliography, with a useful brief note on subject matter, and eight pages of index with Latin and English name synonymies.

The text includes a systematic checklist and a checklist of subspecies and aberrations and an historical review. Another useful short chapter covers breeding and rearing. The species accounts consist of a brief British Isles history of records, descriptions of the imago, genitalia, infraspecific variation, comparison with similar species, life histories with descriptions of ovum, larvae and pupae and discussion of flight period, habitat, distribution, collecting and rearing. Eleven species are listed and discussed as erroneous identifications and a further two species discussed as being likely to occur, although the other seven species described by Agassiz et al, as being in this category, have not turned up since 1981 and are not therefore discussed. This is a little short sighted as who can tell what might turn up during the next hot summer and on the next southerly airflow from Europe!

I recommend Riley & Prior as a must for British & Irish lepidopterists', curators and recorders, as it covers all that most would wish to know about our Pug fauna and at £29.50 it is also very good value. Mironov is the other good Pug book of 2003 but at circa £68 is the better choice for 'Pug fanatics' with a broader European Interest.

*A Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson*

*Reviewed by Steve Thompson*

I very recently heard this described by a friend of mine, himself a science teacher, as the best book he'd ever read. I wouldn't quite go that far, but having now read it twice, I can say that it is well worth a read, and actually better the second time round.

There are, I suspect, many people who don't like, even can't stand, Bill Bryson's books. On the other hand, he was voted by one national paper (The Observer?) a couple of years ago as an honorary national treasure. Their reason was "Ok, so it took a foreigner to show us what we were really like". Well quite so, and in as witty and deeply affectionate way as you could hope for. I suspect that one of the reasons for disliking him is that his style of writing is seen as being rather "downmarket", even childish. I would suggest that it is deceptively colloquial, and that it is this style that also makes him as popular as he is. Furthermore, it allows him to be unashamedly personal in his observations, and to let his enthusiasm, disgust and other feelings show through.

It is a style that lends itself well to the project he undertook with this current book, being as he freely admits, a complete ignoramus about the world of science. All too often, science is interpreted by people who are too familiar with their subject for people who are