

## THE 2001 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS—PART 2

### A CELEBRATION OF URBAN ENTOMOLOGY

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The study of insects, like many natural history pursuits, is predominantly a rural pastime<sup>1</sup>. Insects, as inhabitants of the natural world, are thought of mainly in terms of being denizens of 'wild' habitats like fields and forests, moors and marshes, heaths and dunes. The idea of looking for insects in the grey-brown drabness of towns and cities is merely an afterthought, given the same significance as finding the odd moth attracted to some far distant off-shore light-ship—they might turn up occasionally, but they are not really at home.

But, as we all know, insects can occur everywhere. Nevertheless, urban entomology is a stilted topic and usually considers insects solely from the point of view of them being troublesome domestic pests. True, insects do occur in the home, and hardly any house in Britain over 25 years old will be free of woodworm in some quiet corner or other. And gardeners apparently wage a constant war against would-be pests destroying their prize blooms and treasured crops. Nevertheless, an appreciation of urban wildlife, including insects, is on the ascendant, not just in academic circles, but in the population at large. And it begins in our parks and gardens.

Parks, gardens and open spaces have been an important part of urban planning for centuries. The grandeur of the great architecture that characterizes our cities is softened and enhanced by these open spaces. Depending on the history of the land and the fashions of the day, these green spaces may be the large formal ornamental gardens of palaces or royal parks or the small varied plots attached to individual private dwellings. They may contain remnant pockets of countryside enveloped by urban expansion or they may be newly created nature parks on previously derelict land.

Whatever their history, these green places echo, for urban dwellers at least, the 'wild' nature in which humans have long found solace. However, they are also being increasingly recognized, not just for their aesthetic form and setting, but for their potential as valuable wildlife habitat (Anon, 2002 and endless gardening for wildlife books).

#### SECLUDED SPOTS AND QUIET CORNERS

During the past years I have exhibited many odd and unusual insects at meetings of this society. I must admit that, rather tongue-in-cheek, I have denigrated most of the urban sites that I have visited, emphasizing the mundane or scruffy nature of the localities. There is a stereotype image of urban green spaces as being dull utility

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when it looked as though the Government might bring in a ban on the hunting of animals using nets, there was some concern that entomologists might be vilified and prosecuted under this new legislation. However, the answers to gentle enquiries to various departments of the Civil Service indicated that collecting insects would probably be considered a 'traditional country pursuit'.



grassland for people to walk their dogs and children to kick about with footballs. They may be punctuated with elegant trees, but these are often the ecologically sterile London Plane. Many parks and ornamental gardens do fall into this category, but around the edges, or in secret corners, there are often pockets of useful and interesting habitat left to run a little bit wild and which are abuzz with insect life.

Unfortunately, wild corners are not often appreciated by their corporate or local government owners or by portions of the general public. Uncontrolled growth is apt to be tidied up; land left too unmanaged can become clogged with litter and, worse, seemingly abandoned plots left to really run riot are too often illegally fly-tipped by rogue builders. It is a truly difficult balancing act trying to manage an urban green-space for both human users and natural wildlife.

One of the great strengths of the urban environment is its fragmentation into a myriad disparate tiny zones. Living in south-east London, I am more or less equidistant from both Heathrow and Gatwick Airports, and I have flown from both on foreign holidays and business trips. When I fly from Gatwick I take great pleasure in peering out from the aeroplane's windows as it takes off over what I think is one of the great landscapes of the world—the Weald of Sussex and Kent—with its intricate mosaic of woods, meadows, hedgerows and winding streams. And yet, a take-off from Heathrow offers a remarkably similar vista below—but this time the intricate mosaic is one of individual tiny urban and suburban gardens. Some are manicured, some are left untended, but the complex mixture of underlying geology, open or shaded aspects, fenced or hedged shelter and the diversity of planting of trees, shrubs and herbs, give urban gardens a tremendous opportunity for a wide array of wild plant and animal species to make their homes.

#### RELICS OF A PAST TIME

About 20% of London open space is garden (Anon, 2002). Private gardens are difficult to visit and difficult to study, but nestling between them are a whole series of much more approachable habitats.

Some of the most important urban sites are those which reflect an ancient past; small islands cut off when the Victorian housing boom enveloped them. Sydenham and Dulwich Woods are reckoned to be part of the Great North Wood, a series of copses and wooded commons that once extended from Selsdon to Brockley. Not much remains now, but there are a few tantalizing place names like Forest Hill, Norwood and Wood Vale. The 'ancient' nature of the woods was first noted over 40 years ago when surveys of the flora showed a number of typically ancient woodland plants occurred there (Lousley, 1959, 1960).

Numerous nationally rare and nationally scarce insects are recorded from the woods, including Stag beetle, Purple Hairstreak and Silver-washed Fritillary—it is the innermost London locality for any of our fritillaries (Plant, 1987). Recent surveys in the woods, notably those of the saproxylic beetles (those breeding in dead and decaying timber) confirm that many species found there are indicators of ancient woodland. In fact, comparison of the species list with other sites nationwide shows that the woods rank respectably high in a published league table of ancient woodlands in Britain (Jones, 2002). Of the 164 beetles found to date, 52 are acknowledged old woodland species including the Spotted Jewel beetle *Agrilus pannonicus* (Pill. & Mitt.) (Buprestidae), *Aderus oculatus* (Payk.) (Aderidae), *Phymatodes testaceus* (L.) (Cerambycidae), *Notolaemus unifasciatus* (Latr.) (Cucujidae), *Melasis buprestoides* (L.) (Eucnemidae), *Conopalpus testaceus* (Olivier) and *Hallomenus binotatus* (Quensel) (both Melandryidae).





Fig. 1. Downham Woodland Walk, near Bromley, August 1999. The narrow tarmac path has a few metres of woodland surviving either side. This oak tree is under heavy attack from the wood-boring beetles *Platypus cylindrus*—so much so that sawdust is cascading from the scores of holes being dug.

A much more unusual fragment of similarly ancient wood exists along Downham Woodland Walk, near Bromley. This multiple dog-leg footpath, picking its way between a dense 1930s housing estate also has a promising list of ancient woodland indicator species (Jones, 2003 in press). These include *Steganostus villosus* (Fourc.) (Elateridae), *Phloiotrya vaudouri* Muls. (Melandryidae), *Platypus cylindrus* (Fab.) (Platypodidae) and *Prionychus ater* (Fab.) (Tenebrionidae). And it is the best site I know of for the Stag beetle.

A map of 1805 clearly shows a narrow linear wood hereabouts, surrounded by open fields. It is remarkable that it survived, to be incorporated into the development scheme at a time when urban sprawl was burgeoning. In places it is only a few metres wide, but still contains some old oak trees and pollards that obviously predate the 20th century buildings.

Nearby, Forster Memorial Park has a well-documented history and is thought to be the site of a double assart, a clearing made in woodland for agriculture whilst the wooded edges are retained for shelter. Its two open spaces are bounded by narrow strips of woodland that also contain beetles known to favour ancient woods including *Abdera quadrifasciata* (Curt.) (Melandryidae), *Ctesias serra* (Fab.) (Dermestidae), the Stag beetle (of course) and the hoverfly *Didea fasciata* Macq. (Syrphidae).

Another unusual relic is Dacres Wood, in Lewisham. It is the overgrown remains of the garden of a large house, long since demolished, and now run as a local nature reserve. Although less than 1 hectare in extent and surrounded by dense housing, it is



home to the Stag beetle and Purple Hairstreak, and was the locality for one of the bee-beetles, *Trichius zonatus* (Germ.) (Scarabaeidae), which breed in dusty, crumbling, fungoid wood, rediscovered in Britain after a gap of nearly 40 years.

The widespread occurrence of species like the Stag beetle, not only in these enveloped relics of 'real' old woodland, but also in urban gardens generally throughout south London, reflects an important historical process that took place in the area. Even though very large numbers of houses were built in this part of London between 1830 and 1930, they were erected in an age before widespread mechanization—more importantly, before JCBs and bulldozers. Today, a housing developer razes the ground before building begins. Virtually all trace of wildlife is eradicated so that construction can begin on a blank site. Only at the end of building work is some topsoil returned and landscape gardening with bland plantings undertaken.

However, in Victorian building schemes, everything was done by hand, so when houses were built, on the whole, the area allocated for gardens went relatively untouched until the incoming householders started gardening. For something like the Stag beetle, which is primarily a breeder in subterranean tree stumps and roots, it meant that fragments of original habitat were inadvertently incorporated into the garden landscapes and remained hidden, long after building work was completed. To some extent many of these Victorian gardens still contain tiny relics from a time before the suburban building development. Some of these relics are tangible—I know of Victorian cast-iron boundary posts, originally situated around open fields, in hedges or on ditch banks, still surviving in urban gardens to this day.

#### SYCAMORE—AN ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT URBAN PHENOMENON

Nunhead Cemetery was the first south London site that I regularly visited. It was laid out in 1840, about 50 years before it was engulfed in the continuing urban expansion of the Victorian house building boom. Originally designed to resemble a rather pastoral scene, it was laid out befitting the fashions of the time as a meadow-style cemetery, with gently rolling grasslands blending with the open fields and hedgerows around it. But the cemetery declined dramatically during the first half of the 20th century. With changes in burial practice and social attitudes to death it became more and more unkempt until, abandoned in the 1950s, it became overrun by sycamore and ash saplings. Acquired by the local authority by compulsory purchase in 1975, it is now run as a local nature reserve and 'open' space although it is mostly wooded.

It was at Nunhead that I first observed what I think is an especially urban London phenomenon—the sooty bark disease, a fungus *Cryptostoma corticale* (Elle. & Ev.), which attacks and usually kills sycamore trees. It appears to have originated in Canada where it was first found in the 1880s as a harmless saprophyte growing on sugar maple. It was discovered in Britain, in Wanstead Park, north London, in 1945, again growing harmlessly on the remains of a broken sycamore stem. Three years later it had become the virulent disease that continues to kill sycamore trees (Young, 1978).

Associated with the fungus are a group of beetles, previously thought to be scarce, but which are now seemingly commonplace in the capital. At one time regarded as rare, *Enicmus brevicornis* (Mann.) (Lathridiidae), *Diplocoelus fagi* Guér.-Méné. (Biphyllidae), *Cicones undatus* (Guér.-Méné.), and *Synchita separanda* Reit. (both Colydiidae) are all, to varying extents, widespread in the London area and are species which I now regard as being typically urban in distribution (Jones, 1993, 1996).



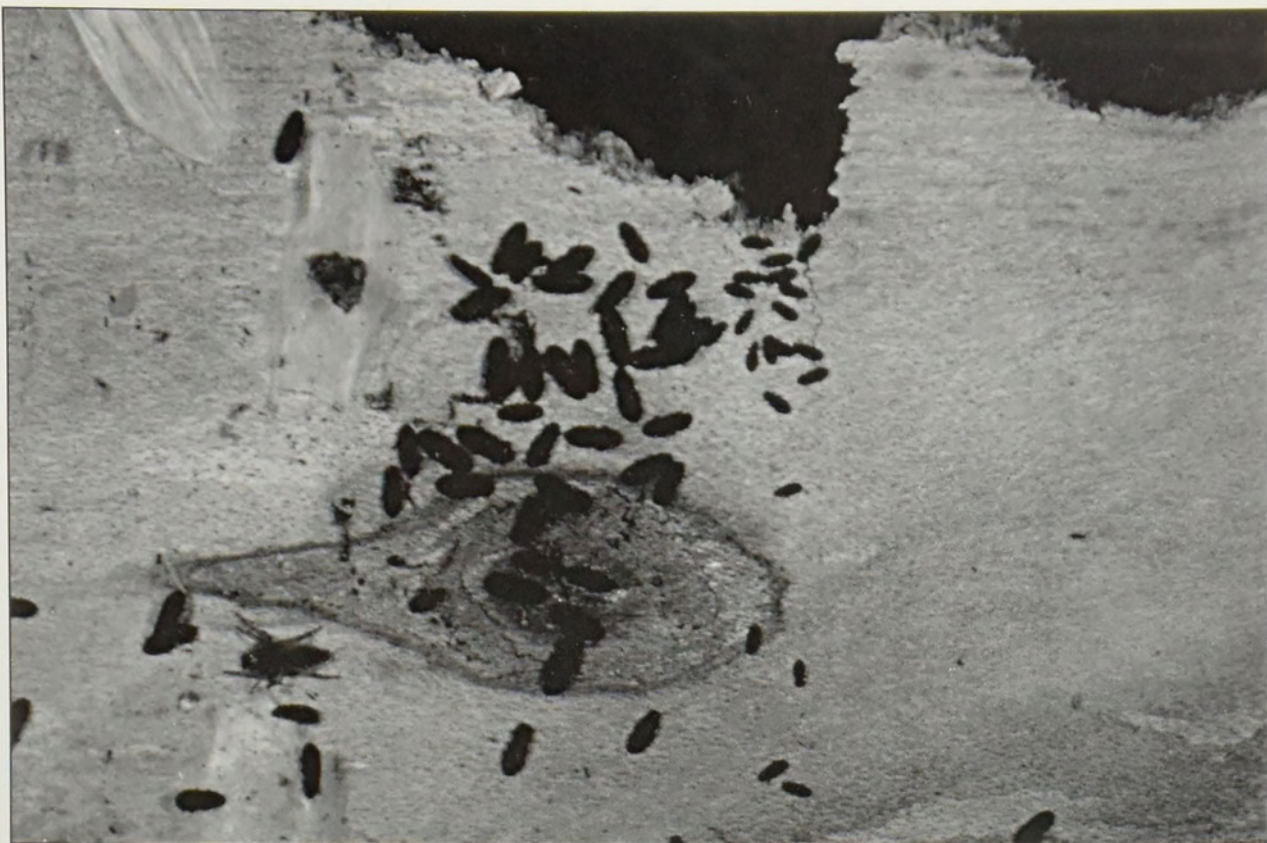


Fig. 2. About 50 specimens of the mottled *Cicones undatus* together with about 25 specimens of the smaller black *Enicmus brevicornis*, under dead sycamore bark in Nunhead Cemetery, January 1997. When first discovered in Windsor in 1983 *Cicones* was thought to be an extremely rare old forest relic associated with maples, but it is now widespread, and often abundant, in urban London on sycamores attacked by the sooty bark disease.

Perhaps the main reason they all occur so widely in London is climatic. London has the highest mean temperature of anywhere in Britain and also has one of the lowest rainfalls leading, it is suggested, to an increasing likelihood of water stress in the sycamore trees, a factor which is known to increase the voracity of the fungal attack (Dickenson & Wheeler, 1981).

The orange ladybird, *Halyzia sedecimguttata* (L.), is also exceptionally common in London; at one time it was regarded as a scarce insect, until it was realized that it too is associated with sycamore where it grazes on mildews growing on the leaves. And the recently discovered leafbug, *Deraeocoris flavilinea* (Costa), a sycamore feeder, first found in the Lee Valley in north-east London (Miller, 2001, Nau & Brooke, 2003), is now spreading throughout the London area.

#### A CROSS-SECTION OF LONDON

Studying insects in towns and cities is fraught with difficulties, problems of access being not the least. It is one thing knocking on the doors of private houses asking the bemused occupants whether one can look for bugs in their back garden, but many commercially owned areas deliberately exclude the public for health and safety reasons and access is virtually impossible. Railway embankments fall into this category. These partly glimpsed stretches of trees, scrub and grass form an intricate green network throughout London, extending from the Greenbelt right into the



heart of the city. Intuitively they seem fascinating green corridors up and down which wildlife can spread. But these, some of the most important wildlife sites in London, are ordinarily inaccessible.

I was more than a little pleased, therefore, to be invited in 1999 to take part in a survey of trackside habitats for London Underground. Though also known as 'The Tube', the London Underground system of tracks extends a great distance from the centre of London, stretching from the underground hub of the Circle Line out to such exotic-sounding locations as Cockfosters, Theydon Bois, Dagenham Heathway, Osterley and Perivale. The central area of track is wholly subterranean and inaccessible, but the many over-ground tracks leading out into the suburbs have many areas available for study. An invertebrate survey of these tracksides reads like a series of transects through the capital, each line a radiating spoke from the city out into the surrounding countryside.

The survey was organized by the London Ecology Unit, originally the wildlife and conservation body which advised the Greater London Council, and now incorporated into the Greater London Authority. The team comprised about half-a-dozen—botanists, ornithologists, general ecologists, and myself. Our first task was to attend a special safety training course to learn how not to get electrocuted by the several thousand volts passing through the live rails and how not to get hit by trains weighing hundreds of tonnes and travelling at 40 miles an hour. After a day-long training session and having successfully passed a written test and medical



Fig. 3. Broad embankment of the Metropolitan Line near Moore Park, surrounded by open grazing meadows, hedgerows and woods. This site, the first of my field visits for the London Underground survey on 21 June 1999, yielded a specimen of the very local longhorn beetle, *Agapanthia villosoviridescens* (Deg.), a large mottled grey species that breeds in the stems of herbaceous plants, mainly thistles and hogweed. It is found in central England and northern East Anglia and this locality is right on the very south-eastern edge of the beetle's known range in Britain.





Fig. 4. Embankment of the Metropolitan and Jubilee Lines just north of Neasden Station, which is just visible in the distance. The Guernsey fleabane, *Conyza sumatrensis* is a prominent part of the flora and on it were large numbers of the lygaeid 'ground' bug *Nysius senecionis*. The 'protection master', my escort up and down the track, waits patiently whilst I thrash around in the tall herb layer.

examination, we were issued with our track passes, travel documents, standard high-visibility reflective jackets and released. We were not exactly allowed to wander at will, but were constantly accompanied by one or more 'protection masters' whose job it was to lead us by the safest route up the tracks and warn at the approach of any trains.

Three days a week, during the period from 21 June to 26 October, we trudged up many scores of miles of railway track, to visit 103 different trackside sites. These were chosen from aerial photographs, and 'spotted' from the train cabs, to represent a range of the different habitats available along the lines. Some of the most impressive were relatively large areas of woodland, marsh or rough grassland on the embankments or between junctions where lines met each other. At the other extreme, there were several ragged bits of derelict land behind the stations including some demolished buildings and lengths of disused track.

It was a truly fascinating year. We were able to visit areas unseen by naturalists for many decades and there was always something new to find. Constraints on time meant that a visit to each site was brief and time given to working up the identifications later in the year was also limited. Nevertheless, a final list totalled a respectable 535 invertebrate species. Many still remain to be identified, if I ever get the time.

Amongst the most impressive finds were 40 nationally rare and nationally scarce species and many others that are very local. Among my favourite finds was the third British specimen of *Otiorhynchus setosulus* Stierlin, a Sicilian endemic weevil, beaten



off a cherry tree on a narrow grassy embankment at Elm Park. *Anthrenus sarnicus* Mroczkowski (Dermestidae) is a museum beetle more or less limited to the Natural History Museum and other buildings in the South Kensington area where, since its discovery in Britain in 1963, it has become a minor domestic pest. I swept it from ragwort and aster flowers four stops down the District Line at Baron's Court. The juniper leaf-bug *Dichroscytus gustavi* Josifov was known from only a handful of chalk downland sites in south-east England, and I was astonished to find it at Chalfont, beaten from cypress trees, a new foodplant for what was previously regarded a monophagous insect.

The large hoverflies *Volucella zonaria* (Poda) and *V. inanis* (L.) are quite common in London parks and gardens, but I had never seen their close relative *V. inflata* (Fabricius) in the London area and last noted it when I lived in Sussex over 25 years ago, so I was very excited, in a nostalgic sort of way, when I saw it on a bramble flower near Chesham. There were glow-worms at Rickmansworth, Ringlets at Chorleywood, Marbled Whites at Chalfont & Latimer and a caterpillar of Blair's Shoulder Knot at Elm Park.

Another favourite insect was the Purple Hairstreak that landed, one blustery day, on the gravel ballast of the track at Ealing Broadway, just inches from the live rail. It remained there as I photographed it until, with the protection master visibly twitching with anxiety, I moved away as a District Line train came thundering past.

At the time of the survey, there was much talk of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) initiative, which had been suggested by the government to inject cash into an ageing track and train system. Privately, there ran a constant discussion amongst the ecologists surveying the tracksides. Was the survey proof that London Underground showed a genuine interest in the land that it owned and had started on a true quest after knowledge to better enable it to manage these areas with sympathy for wildlife? Or (the more cynical suggestion put forward) was it trying to quantify what, if any, wildlife interest might pose a financial liability, in terms of specialist management or extra upkeep, if it ever came to selling off the lines? Whatever the impetus to carry out the survey, there was mention that the ecological data we collected might have some commercial sensitivity and should remain confidential, so the final report has never been made public. With the knowledge and permission of London Underground I have published a few *ad-hoc* records of certain species and I hope that as time passes, any sensitivity will pass too, so that I can publish at least a general report of the work we did.

Insects were not all I found along the tracks. It was impossible to miss the activities of other animals. Every stretch of embankment seemed to have its own resident fox and the skeletons of those presumably hit by trains would often produce the odd carrion beetle. Rats were common and part of our training induction was to be aware of the danger of Weil's disease, a severe and sometimes fatal jaundice caused by a spirochaete passed in their urine. At Colindale, I saw a magpie with what looked like two large wriggling worms in its beak. When I got to the spot it had flown from, I found the autotomized tails of two slow-worms still writhing in the grass. Having made off with the larger portions of its prey, the bird came back a few minutes later to retrieve them.

There were plenty of unusual man-made artefacts to discover too. Victorian bottles, discarded railway ironwork, the remains of abandoned buildings that probably pre-dated the railway lines and sundry bits of broken pottery and wood were always examined with interest. It was often a mystery how these curious objects got to be where we found them. One rather damp day I stumbled over something protruding slightly from the wet soil. I bent down and picked out a small shallow



terracotta pot a few centimetres across. As I rubbed off the mud I began to make out some faint markings along its side... 'HAMSTER'.

Not all finds were quite so innocuous. Near the end of station platforms we had been warned to keep a careful eye open for hypodermic needles discarded by illegal drug-users, and there was often offensive litter and rubbish dropped over fences and from footbridges. Several times we found handbags and briefcases which appeared to have been dumped after being stolen. One contained obviously important documents, including medical cards and two passports. Thinking I should act the upright citizen and hand them in to be returned to their owners I took them with me back into Central London after the day's outing.

The British Transport Police were not very interested and, finding no record of any crime against the passport holders on their computer, they seemed unable to cope with lost property. So instead, I handed them in at the tube station manager's office at Victoria. She was a little surprised to find out that I had retrieved them from the trackside, but I was wearing my bright orange London Underground jacket to prove I was 'official'. She pored over the passports, which were slightly mouldy and had been partly nibbled by snails, only to exclaim when she saw a minute creature crawling across one of the pages. I immediately snapped it up and put it into a glass tube—*Chthonius ischnocheles* (Herm.) the only pseudoscorpion found during the survey.

I still remember fondly many of the site visits during the London Underground survey, not least for the company of other naturalists. Entomology is all too often a solitary study. I was able to share my enthusiasm for some of the smaller creatures we found, the others in the team were able to show me water vole droppings near Roding Valley, live field mice near Wembley Park, sparrowhawks at Edgware, a muntjac deer crossing the tracks near Chesham and cannabis growing from a freshly dug embankment near Barkingside.

On 11 August 1999 we visited what was possibly the most mundane site, less interesting even than the demolished buildings behind Shoreditch station in central London. There at least a few plants of Oxford ragwort, *Senecio squalidus* L. and Guernsey fleabane, *Conyza sumatrensis* (Retz.), were sprouting up between the broken concrete floors. On these I found the uncommon hoverfly *Sphaerophoria rueppellii* (Wiedemann) and the lygaeid bug *Nysius senecionis* (Schilling) recently found in Britain and now spreading quickly through the London area. On that auspicious day in August we visited the narrow trackside at Surrey Quays, only to find that almost the entire stretch had apparently been mown a few days before.

The day was not a complete waste of time though—we were able to sit and have lunch whilst watching the eclipse. One of the other members of the survey team had left London for the West Country that day to best view Britain's first total eclipse of the sun for many decades. He later reported how a thick blanket of cloud had completely obscured their view of the sun. But at Surrey Quays a few light wisps of high cirrus added to the drama of the darkening sky and quietening world. And when the sun came out again I managed to find a small patch of bracken, complete with bracken leaf-bug, *Monalocoris filicis* (L.).

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL COLOUR

During the last few years, I have also had the opportunity to visit many other odd and unusual sites in London. They may not be very prepossessing, indeed many of





Fig. 5. The flowery edge of Mast Pond Wharf on the Thames at Woolwich, looking upriver to the Thames Barrier, Millennium Dome and Canary Wharf. This is not everyone's idea of a beautiful locality, much of the rest of the wharf was covered with broken concrete and bulldozed heaps of soil, rubble and rubbish. Nevertheless, this typical brownfield site produced the bug *Stictopleurus abutilon*, the parasitic fly *Gymnosoma nitens*, Clouded Yellow caterpillars and the Adonis ladybird, species all very scarce, but often found on these half-derelict post-industrial sites.

them are stark and gaunt in their bleak ugliness, but their rude appearance belies their ecological interest.

The trouble is that whatever we call them, brownfield sites have an image problem. Brown is not a cool colour—it is the colour of dirt, the colour of excrement. Ruderal, for those that understand its etymology, means growing out of rubble, with all its associations of decay and dereliction. Wasteland just means land that is wasted, i.e. has no agricultural or commercial value, and half-derelict buildings surrounded by bare earth, piles of crushed brick and heaps of soil supporting a scanty growth of stunted weeds is hardly anyone's idea of a rural idyll. To most people, brownfields



are dirty, drear, dull, wastelands—fly-tipped, full of litter, syringes and burnt-out cars—empty plots just aching to be built on.

On the other hand, greenfield sites have all the positive associations that brownfields lack. Ecologists, environmental agitators, rural lobbyists, politicians and the public at large all want to see building schemes limited in our green and pleasant land. However, building more homes on brownfield sites is now official Government policy. Whilst parks, commons, relic woods and ponds encircled by urbanization are, to some extent, valued and protected against further degradation, brownfield plots, often disused, abandoned, derelict eyesores are seen as ecologically worthless, and thus with a value only in terms of future development revenue.

But these sites are not all biologically dull and worthless. An estimated 12–15% of all 'nationally rare' (Red Data Book) and 'nationally scarce' (Notable) insects are recorded from brownfield sites (Gibson, 1998). Very often, these part-bulldozed plots are more florally diverse than the best 'natural' wild flower meadows. A typical 2-hectare plot of rubble and soil heaps next to London's Woolwich Ferry Terminal produced a list of 185 plant species—a wild flower meadow in the countryside would be considered rich if it held just 50 species.

Two rhopalid ground bugs, *Stictopleurus abutilon* (Rossi) and *Stictopleurus punctatonevrosus* (Goeze), both thought to be extinct after not having been seen in Britain for over 50 and 125 years respectively, are now turning out to be widespread on brownfield sites in south-east England and London. An endangered parasitic fly, *Gymnosoma nitens* Meigen, is virtually confined to Thames brownfield sites, its only other known locality being the ancient grazed chalk downs of Surrey's famous Box Hill. Two curious plant-hoppers, *Asiraca clavicornis* (Fab.) (Delphacidae) and *Oliarus panzeri* Low (Cixiidae) are widespread on London brownfields and sometimes occur in their hundreds. The Adonis ladybird, *Hippodamia* (= *Adonia*) *variegata* (Goeze) is usually quoted as being a mainly coastal species, but it turns up commonly every year on London's post-industrial sites. The list goes on.

Many of these scarce and unusual plants and insects (and other animals) that occur on brownfield sites are predominantly Mediterranean or central European species, right at the edges of their distribution ranges in Britain. They favour the warm, sunny, well-drained, sparsely vegetated habitats that are the first stages of biological succession. They are species often associated with similar warm dry habitats such as dunes, heaths and chalk downs, all of which have (or had!) extensive areas of bare ground and short grass or herb growth. These semi-natural habitats, valued by everyone, are now under threat in the countryside, not just from loss to development or farming, but also because they are becoming overgrown and scrubbed up after changing land management and the loss of traditional grazing regimes. The Thames Estuary brownfield sites are the new lowland heaths and flower-rich meadows.

In the writings of Thomas Hardy, the intricate character-rich stories are interwoven throughout with a fear and awe of the desolate 'wastes' of the Wessex heaths and bogs, now 95% destroyed. In the 19th century they were seen as unproductive for agriculture and therefore regarded as worthless. How sadly ironic that heathland today is prized so highly for its distinctive flora and fauna. Today's waste places are regarded as unproductive for wildlife and therefore worthless in a world where 'green' has become a byword for natural (and spiritual) value. But look close and the brown land is alive with an uncommon diversity of strange plants and stranger creatures.

The real world, however, is both brown and green, but not black and white. It has been interesting to visit some of London's brownfield sites, treading warily through





Fig. 6. The true celebration of urban entomology—sharing the fascination of an urban insect, the Stag beetle, with eager children.

broken concrete and twisted metal to find Clouded Yellows visiting the hawkweeds and Roesel's bush-crickets singing in the long grass. However, it is all very well finding what I think are interesting insects living in these unusual habitats; it is another convincing owners, developers and planners that there is true natural worth in these unnatural places. We struggle on.

#### THE PRESS OF PEOPLE

One of the most striking differences I can think of between studying insects in the wider countryside and studying them in a city, is the response of the people I meet. I used to be staggered, when I lived and collected in Sussex, that I could spend hours traipsing the byways and footpaths of the Weald, or the South Downs and see barely a single other living soul all day long. Despite being one of the most populous parts of the country, south-east England remains remarkably empty really. Whenever I did



meet someone, be they rambling, walking the dog, on horseback or driving a tractor, there would almost inevitably be the courteous nod of the head and a short exchanged greeting of "good morning" or "good afternoon". They may have looked askance at my sweep net, but never queried what I was doing. Maybe they knew, or thought they knew, that I was one of those mildly eccentric people who go around chasing butterflies. In London, however, the case is entirely different.

Now, wherever I go looking for insects I meet people all the time and I am beset with questions. "What are you doing? Why are you doing it? Can I have a look what you've found? Are those tiny grey things in the collecting tubes really beetles and flies?" It is a privilege to be able talk to these curious people and to try and explain just what it is about insects that is fascinating, and why studying them in their environment and understanding their ecology is important.

Very often it is the children who are the most inquisitive, and more than once I have been offered instant assistant bugman help, then and there, in the field, by some keen young individuals wanting to have a go at looking for minibeasts themselves. It is through this regular contact with members of the public, and with children especially, that I really get a feeling of celebrating entomology. There is no greater feeling of achievement than seeing the look of enchanted glee on a child's face when they are presented with a furry caterpillar in a jam-jar, or a green shield-bug held in cupped hands, or a huge Stag beetle crawling across the school desk.

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