

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE NARROW-BORDERED BEE HAWK-MOTH

Muriel Rogers

Senses fully occupied, I wander along the bank of the river Ling. The extensive beds of bugles vie with the bluebells for aromatic supremacy whilst the birds and the bees join forces in trying to outdo the gentle murmuring of the river as it laughs its way over the rocky river bed in its final rush to reach the sea. I am fascinated by the flowers I see, some familiar but some new. I have recently moved to the Highlands from Suffolk and am eager to learn more about my new environment.

I stand watching the busyness of the bees as they work their way through the bugle flowers. The warmth of the sun on my back brings up memories of my garden in Suffolk where I used to sit in the sun watching small solitary bees slowly perforate my flint garden wall as they built their tiny burrows. My only other encounter with bees was in Assisi where I first met the elegant midnight blue giants which I later learnt were carpenter bees. I can tell the difference between a bumble bee and a honey bee but there my knowledge ends.

But what was that? Something about a bee caught my eye but it has gone, only staying for a few seconds before disappearing. I begin watching more intently, will it come back and will I recognise it if it does? I try hard to remember what it was that made me notice it. Bees fly in, wander around a flower humming while they work and then move on to the next. I wait and watch . . . there it is again . . . it flies silently to a flower, wings never stopping as it hovers for a few seconds and then is gone. That was it, it wasn't humming and it didn't stop. I wait and watch but it doesn't return.

I am intrigued so head off home to my books. Settling outside in the sun with a cup of tea, listening to my new neighbours, the birds who live on the marsh, my search begins . . . and gets nowhere. My mind wanders back to one particular day when my children were little and we lived in Derby. My son, who was about 7, fell in through the kitchen door too excited to talk coherently. He grabbed my hand and dragged me out into the garden. By this time I had deciphered the babble into, 'Mum, there's a humming bird in the garden'. It was the first time I had ever seen a hummingbird hawk moth, as that was what it was, but I recognised it straight away. I knew my mystery bee was not a hummingbird hawkmoth but maybe I had the wrong books out. My field guide to moths joined the pile.

I discover there is a bee hawkmoth, could that be it? The book says 'They do not alight to feed they fly mid May-June . . . are active in sunshine, particularly in late morning and early afternoon . . . feed at flowers such as bugle habitat includes wet acidic pasture' That describes my bee perfectly. But there are two species, narrow-bordered and broad-bordered. The next step is to contact the local moth recorder Brian Neath. No, he hasn't seen any there and has no record of them having been seen but would like to go and see for himself. Do I have a photo?

The moth doesn't put in an appearance for Brian so my next task is to try to capture its image and decide which of the two species it is. Once again by the bugle patch on a warm sunny afternoon, I stand and watch and wait . . .and wait . . .and wait. Disappointment sets in, maybe it was just passing through? I am about to give up when I see it, a large silent bee hovering and then it is gone, not there long enough for me to raise my camera but long enough to confirm it is a moth, not a bee. My

continued wait is rewarded as it arrives again, but look there's another one, so there are at least two of them. They are very camera shy not giving me anywhere near enough time to take their portraits but long enough for me to decide they are narrow-bordered.

I noticed that they flew off across the river to the plantation so maybe that is where I should explore next. Sadly the bugle flowers are almost over so I don't think I will see the moths again this year but maybe next year? Brian has used my description to add them to the West Ross Vice- County 105 database but wouldn't it be good if I could capture them on camera?

This time – this year!

Spring this year is very late and so far has been disappointing but the bluebells are beginning to show so maybe next week will see me down by the river trying to renew my acquaintance with the narrow bordered bee hawk moths, if the sun manages to shine that is, as the moths like to fly in the warmth of the sun. I quite like it too.



Photo taken by Jane Bowman in Glen Moriston