

Appendix 6-4

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**CONFIRMATION OF THE PRESENCE OF THE SMALL SKIPPER BUTTERFLY
THYMELICUS SYLVESTRIS (PODA, 1761) (LEPIDOPTERA: HESPERIIDAE) IN
IRELAND**

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Abstract

Thymelicus sylvestris (Poda, 1761) is confirmed to be present in Ireland.

Key words: *Thymelicus sylvestris*, Lepidoptera, small skipper, Ireland.

Introduction

In July 2011, while on a field trip of The Dublin Naturalists' Field Club to peatlands in the Timahoe-Drehid area of Co. Kildare, a single orange-coloured lepidopteran was observed by one of us (NL) and photographed in proximity to an abandoned Bord na Móna (BNM) industrial railway formerly used for the transport of peat as fuel for the Allenwood electricity generating station. Later in the year, analysis of the single photograph taken, led to the conclusion that the insect was a skipper, either *Thymelicus lineola* (Ochsenheimer, 1808) or *T. sylvestris* (Poda, 1761), with a very high probability that it was the latter (Nash *et al.*, 2012). It was decided to carry out further investigations in 2012 to confirm its identity.

Methods

In 2012, from early July, approximately weekly visits were made to the BNM railway corridor in search of skippers. On 10 August, *circa* 30 were observed both north and south of the road between Drehid Cross and Timahoe Cross at Drumachon (Irish Grid Reference N748330). Close examination of netted insects confirmed that all of the butterflies seen were

indeed the small skipper. The two key confirmatory features are the brown colour of the underside of the tips of the antennae and the extent and the position of the dark sex brand on the forewing of males relative to the veins. Males and females were seen in approximately equal numbers. Visits were made to the general area with a view to ascertaining the extent of colonisation and to investigate other branches of the abandoned rail network. Smaller numbers of skippers were observed on subsequent visits up to 26 August.

Conclusion and discussion

It was concluded that the small skipper was present at low density along the railway corridor for a distance of approximately 2.5km, generally in open sunny areas. The railway was elevated above the surrounding bog in places by the addition of gravel, and ash from a peat power station. Subsequently, part of the neighbouring bog surface was lowered by peat extraction. In some areas on the edge of the bog, a substantial amount of marl had been deposited resulting in soil suitable for a diversity of calcicole vascular plants. The main grasses present included: *Holcus lanatus* Linnaeus, 1753; *Arrhenatherum elatius* (Linnaeus, 1753) P. Beauvois ex J. Presl and C. Presl, 1819; *Dactylis glomerata* Linnaeus, 1753; *Festuca rubra* Linnaeus, 1753; *Agrostis stolonifera* Linnaeus, 1753; *Anthoxanthum odoratum* Linnaeus, 1753; with lesser amounts of *Phleum pratense* Linnaeus, 1753. *H. lanatus* is said to be the major larval food plant of this skipper. The skippers were generally found in areas where nectar sources such as *Trifolium pratense* Linnaeus, 1753; *Cirisium palustre* (Linnaeus) Scopoli, 1772; *Centaurea nigra* Linnaeus, 1753; *Vicia sepium* Linnaeus, 1753 and *Epilobium hirsutum* Linnaeus, 1753 were in abundance.

The origin and arrival of the small skipper in Ireland is currently obscure and it is not known whether its introduction was deliberate or accidental but the amount of potentially suitable habitat in this part of Co. Kildare suggests that it should be capable of being widely distributed. This skipper is plentiful in southern Britain but it is considered unlikely that it was self-propelled to Ireland. The Essex skipper may have arrived in Ireland in hay imported for equine

purposes, paralleling its spread across North America in the early twentieth century. However, there have been no reports of a similar mode for the dispersal of the small skipper. The two skipper species are not readily distinguishable in the field.

Previously, the small skipper was reported in error from Co. Wexford (Wilson *et al.*, 2009). Harding (2008) declared its presence in Co. Kildare since 2005 and subsequently (pers. comm. 2010) revealed that the site was “sensitive” and was in the north of the county.

Voucher specimens (NMINH:2012.85.1 male; NMINH:2012.85.2 female) have been lodged in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

References

- Harding, J. M. (2008) *Discovering Irish butterflies and their habitats*. Privately published: Jesmond Harding, Kildare.
- Nash, D., Boyd, T. and Hardiman, D. (2012) *Ireland's butterflies a review*. The Dublin Naturalists' Field Club, Dublin.
- Wilson, C. J., Goodwin, J. and Bond, K. (2009) Addition of Essex Skipper butterfly (*Thymelicus lineola* (Ochsenheimer, 1808)) (Lepidoptera: HesperIIDae), to the Irish list and deletion of previously reported occurrence of Small Skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris* (Poda, 1761)) in Ireland. *Irish Naturalists' Journal* **29**: 133-134.