

A Horsehair worm

Andy Harris

On a sunny morning at 10 a.m. on 28th May 2016 I noticed the rapid movements of this worm like creature (01) on a daffodil leaf in my garden at Fernhill Heath, near Worcester. The leaf was wet with dew. The worm's head was moving rapidly rather like a cobra in motion. The rest of its body wriggled and coiled. The soil immediately around the plant is heavy clay and has been saturated all winter. Interestingly the daffodil was at the edge of one of the few drier spots, near the rain drip edge of a large Mahonia.

There is an artificial one metre square pond 10 metres away, separated by a path and building. I am not aware of puddles regularly forming or pools in the immediate vicinity or in neighbouring gardens.

From the size of the table slats I photographed it on I estimate it to be 10cm long.



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Editor's note

A Horsehair Worm Nematomorpha: Gordiidea. There are probably four species in Britain, all parasites on insects. Identification is tricky depending on the structure of forked tails in males and body surface patterns and is not possible from the photograph (01). The long adult worms appear in freshwater from puddles to ponds to moving water, in wet soil or on wet plants and range from 10-70 cm in length. The adults do not have an alimentary tract and absorb food through the skin. They are the reproductive phase of a complex life cycle. After mating, when many worms may gather is a writhing tangle – a Gordian knot, the female lays very large numbers of eggs placed in ribbons on aquatic vegetation. Very small larva may hatch and be eaten by an insect, or snail, or fish or the eggs may be directly eaten by any of these animals. They may be the final host or be a carrier host that is in turn eaten by other insects (ground beetles, cockroaches, crickets) in which the larva develops into an adult worm. Eventually the worm emerges, usually into water or amongst wet plants. In agricultural areas they are called cabbage worms.

Information on British species is scarce but the following provide an introduction and internet searches will lead you to European and North American studies:

Fitter, R. & Manuel, R. 1986. *Collins Field Guide to Freshwater Life*. Collins, London.

Marren, P. & Mabey, R. 2010. *Bugs Britannica*. Chatto & Windus, London.

Poinar, G. & Chandler, C.M. 2004. Synopsis and identification of North American hairworms (Gordioidea: Nematomorpha. *Journal of the Tennessee Academy of Science* 79(1):1-7.

Image

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