

***Myrmica schencki* (Viereck, 1903), Rifle Range, July 2020.**

Rosemary Winnall



01. A sandy bank at Devil's Spittleful. Ideal for sand wasps and other insects. Rosemary Winnall.

On 15th July 2020 Brett Westwood and I visited Devil's Spittleful and the Rifle Range, hoping to see the colourful Jewel Wasp *Hedychrum nobile*. This species has recently expanded its range from the south of England where it was first found in Surrey in 1998. The weather was overcast at the start of our visit but a few things were stirring. A few Bee Wolves *Philanthus triangulum* were warm enough to show their heads at their burrow entrances and parasitic Satellite Flies *Miltogramma punctata* were optimistically quartering the sand. Brett spotted a Denticulate Leatherbug *Coriomeris denticulatus* and the small Monoceros Beetle *Notoxus monocerus* and we netted a Heather Ladybird *Chilocorus bipustulatus*, Pine Scymnus *Scymnus suturalis* and a Pine Cone Bug *Gastrodes grossipes* for closer examination.

At around 3.00pm we reached a sandy bank, loosely vegetated with Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, Common Cat's-ear *Hypochaeris radicata* and dried moss and lichen (01). I recognised this partially compacted sand as being perfect for the nests of *Ammophila* sand wasps, and we caught sight of one wasp briefly before it retreated to wait for the sun. We stopped to look carefully for their covered nest holes.

It was then that I spotted a small chimney about 1.5cm high made of pieces of dead vegetation (02 & 03).



02. *Myrmica schencki* nest site 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Nests circled. Rosemary Winnall.



03. *Myrmica schencki* nest entrance 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Rosemary Winnall.

As we watched a few red ants emerged from the chimney (04) and ventured off across the sand. Neither of us had observed this chimney structure before and so two ants were collected for identification. They keyed out as *Myrmica schencki* and this was verified from photographs of the ant and nest chimneys via iRecord by Mike Fox from BWARS (Bees, Wasp and Ants Recording Scheme) who was pleased to receive the record.



04. *Myrmica schencki* worker ant leaving nest. Rosemary Winnall.

The NBN (National Biodiversity Network) atlas shows a scattering of records south of Nottingham which probably says more about where myrmecologists have recorded rather than indicating the true distribution of the ant.

In 1927 Donisthorpe described the first discovery of *Myrmica schencki* in Britain. On 30th May 1915 H.M. Hallett found what he thought was a colony of *Myrmica lobicornis* at Sully in Glamorgan, but he noted that they had unusually developed transverse ridges on the antennae. When Donisthorpe eventually examined these ants on 25th October 1915 he recognised them immediately as *M. schencki* which he had in his collection from Switzerland and Belgium. The second British record, he notes, was found by Mr A.W. Stelfox in County Wicklow on 2nd May 1926.

There is one historical record from Wyre. Collingwood (1955) writes “one single worker...taken by W. E. Hammond and K. G. V. Smith in a part of the Wyre Forest (Chamberline Wood) in 1946 and sent to me to name.....since then repeated visits to the Wyre Forest and examination of hundreds of *Myrmica* ants from the region as a whole has failed to reveal further specimens. The species is evidently very rare and this specimen is the only one so far recorded for England.”

Chamberline Wood is in the Shropshire vice-county 40, so our record from the Rifle Range is the first for Worcestershire. The ants are likely to be present in other sandy habitats and the distinctive nest chimneys are characteristic features to look out for.

Brett and I returned to the Devil’s Spittleful on 30th July 2020, a sunnier day, and found two more nest chimneys close to the original site (05), but no ants were visible on that occasion.



05. Distinctive nest chimneys of *Myrmica schencki*. 30th July 2020. Rosemary Winnall.

We were able to watch a female Red-banded Sand Wasp *Ammophilus sabulosa* provisioning her nest and found *Astate boops* wasps and the attractive bug *Alydus calceratum*. Brett pointed out Annual Knawel *Scleranthus annuus*, Smooth Cat’s-ear *Hypochaeris glabra* and Hoary Cinquefoil *Potentilla argentea* growing out of the sand to add more interest to the day. And when we arrived at a colony of Sand Tailed Digger Wasps *Cerceris arenaria* we were delighted to see several Jewel Wasps *Hedychrum nobile* – our target species for the site, and our first in Worcestershire (06)!



06. Jewel Wasp *Hedychrum nobile* 30th July 2020. Rosemary Winnall.

#### Acknowledgements

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#### References

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#### Images

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06. *Hedychrum nobile* 30th July 2020. Rosemary Winnall.