

2024, a good year for the ermines

Gary Farmer



01. Spindle Ermine webs at Stoke Prior 18.05.24. Gary Farmer.

Ermine moths, especially Spindle Ermine *Yponomeuta cagnagella* make headlines every year, with images of their caterpillars' ghostly webs covering hedges and bushes of Spindle *Euonymus europaeus*. 2024 was no exception, and some particularly impressive examples were on show in Worcestershire including one colony in Stoke Prior. Here the caterpillars had not only covered the foodplant but also adjacent planters and a wall (01 & 02).



02. Spindle Ermine caterpillars covering a wall with their silken webbing. Stoke Prior 18.05.24. Gary Farmer.

Apple trees were also plagued by ermine caterpillars, turning whole trees brown with skeletal leaves shrouded in webbing and frass (03). It appeared that every unsprayed apple orchard around the Vale of Evesham was affected this year, causing concerns for the apple crop.

Most of the mature trees seemed to be able to cope with this and were producing new leaves. But in newly planted orchards some young trees had been completely defoliated and it remains to be seen if they will survive.

By late June hundreds of pupae were found in webbing at North Littleton Community Orchard (04), and by early July clouds of

Apple Ermine moths (08) could be shaken from the trees of Stocken Orchard.



03. Apple Ermine webbing at North Littleton Community Orchard 26.06.24. Gary Farmer.



04. Apple Ermine pupae at North Littleton Community Orchard 26.06.24. Gary Farmer.

Another, slightly more discreet species has been spreading in Worcestershire and has now been found along the Avon corridor through the Vale of Evesham in recent years. 2024 saw a huge increase in the number of silken hammocks in willows, particularly Crack Willow *Salix fragilis*. These were the work of the caterpillars of Willow Ermine *Yponomeuta rorrella* (05), with pupae and adult moths visible at the end of June (06 & 07). This species was known as an occasional migrant species until its webs were discovered on willows along the Severn and Teme river corridors from 2009 for the first time (Simpson 2022), providing evidence that it had now become a breeding species in the county.



05. Willow Ermine is spreading along the Avon corridor and increasing in abundance. Avon corridor June 2024. Gary Farmer.



06. Willow Ermine pupae at Avon Meadows 29.06.24. Nicki Farmer.



07. Willow Ermine moth on webbing at Avon Meadows 29.06.24. Nicki Farmer.

Reports for Worcestershire show we are in a time of real change for our moth fauna, with declines in overall abundance, and species being lost. But many species are appearing in the county for the first time (e.g. Simpson & Wadsworth 2021 and Simpson 2022), mirroring national observations that the overall abundance of moths has decreased by 33% since 1968 (Butterfly Conservation) and many species have become extinct.

So, what is driving the increase in these species of ermine moths? Is it the changing climate or the dramatic reduction in the number of small insectivorous birds? Or will the mass-webbing events be cyclical, with predators and parasites catching up with the caterpillars and populations going through highs and lows in response? As with the changes across all of our flora, fauna and fungi, only time will tell.

The adult moths of these three species, along with Orchard Ermine *Yponomeuta padella*, are so similar (compare 07 & 08) that some recording schemes request that they are now recorded as *Yponomeuta* agg., unless recording an occupied larval web on a stated foodplant, or if adults are reared from these webs (e.g. NatureSpot website).



08. Apple Ermine reared from pupa collected from webbing on apple at Hanbury Hall 30.06.24. Gary Farmer.

Reference

Simpson, T. & Wadsworth, O. 2021. New species and significant moth records for VC37 Worcestershire in 2020. *Worcestershire Record* **48**:18-20.
Simpson, T. 2022. Times are certainly-a-changing among moth populations in Worcestershire. *Worcestershire Record* **50**:65-71. Butterfly Conservation. Available at: <https://butterfly-conservation.org/moths/why-moths-matter/moths-in-decline> [Accessed 08.07.24].
NatureSpot. Available at: <https://www.naturespot.org.uk/species/ermine-moth-agg.> [Accessed 08.07.24].

Images

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