

## The Argent & Sable in Staffordshire

John Bryan



According to the latest literature, Waring et al. (2003), Argent & Sable *Rheumaptera hastata* had, at one time, a widespread distribution across the United Kingdom. However, like so many other species, this is no longer the case. In 2004 Butterfly Conservation received records from only eight sites in Scotland and six in England. With this rate of decline, its present classification of Nationally Scarce B (recorded in 31-100 hectads) would suggest that even Nationally Scarce A (16-30 hectads) is no longer apt and that the Argent & Sable is rapidly heading towards the pages of the Red Data Book.

Of the six sites recorded in 2004 one, Whixall Moss in Shropshire, is very close to Staffordshire, and there are unconfirmed records from Wem Moss in Shropshire and Wybunbury Moss in Cheshire, suggesting that the contraction of Argent & Sable's range may leave it hanging on, only in the West Midlands.

Surveys carried out in 'The Woodland Quarter' of Staffordshire in 2005 have revealed the presence of this moth in good numbers and surviving in woods relatively close to each other. Argent & Sable is a highly mobile insect, a true day-flyer in the sense that it flies with great dexterity and is as graceful as a butterfly, unlike other so-called day-fliers such as Mother Shipton and Burnet Companion. In Staffordshire, Argent & Sable was found in

Burnt Wood, Big Bishop's Wood, Maer Hills, Hanchurch Hills and Chartley Moss, with unconfirmed sightings at Coombes Valley and Consall. Unlike Shropshire, Staffordshire has only one colony on a moss whilst the other colonies are found in ancient woodland, most of which are under Forestry Enterprise's management. These sites are classified as Plantations in Ancient Woodland (PAWS) or Semi-natural Ancient Woodland Sites (SNAWS). As the names suggest, they are old woodland sites with conifer belts which receive regular woodland management, and this has proved invaluable for the Argent & Sable's survival.

The woods themselves are all between 250-350 hectares and, on a regular basis, have had large areas clear-felled of conifer. This has provided the moth with an abundant supply of its larval foodplant; young birch. Argent & Sable was found, through the survey work, to prefer Silver Birch *Betula pendula* over Downy Birch *Betula pubescens* and for the first time in this country, two sites recorded Argent & Sable using willow *Salix* as a larval foodplant. On the Shropshire Mosses the moth also uses (as do the Scottish populations) Bog-myrtle *Myrica gale*. Chartley Moss only has a solitary plant and it isn't used!

The young larvae use silk to spin two leaves together to form a protective 'tent' in which they then feed on the upper dermis of the leaf. Once the available leaf surface has been exhausted, the larvae move to another leaf to carry on their development. On average, from egg to final instar, the caterpillar will make three spinnings before migrating to the bottom of the plant and pupating in the leaf litter.



Spinning on Willow



Typical spinning with feeding damage

Surveys for the adults are carried out between late May-early July and, although described as day-flying, it does a lot of roosting in trees. So, if looking for it on a site, it is necessary to shake large saplings or branches. Sites that have had adults recorded must also have larval searches carried out to confirm that breeding on the site is taking place, rather than adults just moving through. Larval searches are carried out from the end of June to early September. The moth has a protracted emergence period of  $\pm 5$  weeks and therefore larval development will also have the same spread.



Second instar larva



Final instar larva

As a result of these searches, it is considered that Big Bishop's Wood (opposite) has the largest known colony of this striking moth in the country.

With the confirmation of these five sites having Argent & Sable, Staffordshire has approximately a third of the known populations in the United Kingdom and could be, in years to come, the last bastion for this moth.

Forestry Enterprise are at present, drawing up their Forest Plan for the woodland complex in this area with sister agencies including Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, English Nature and Butterfly Conservation, part of their management strategy will include provision for Argent & Sable. A meeting with Forestry Enterprise concerning this woodland complex and managerial provision for the moth will be held in late March 2006, the outcome of which will be published the Staffordshire Moth Group [Website](#).



To assist recognition of adult moths, there is a work party at Big Bishop's Wood on Saturday June 17. Meet at 10.30am at 'The Hostels' SJ745 309.

A larval workshop will be held at the same location on Saturday July 29 commencing 10.30am

Anyone who wishes to get involved in surveying for this moth please contact, [johnpbryan15@aol.com](mailto:johnpbryan15@aol.com)

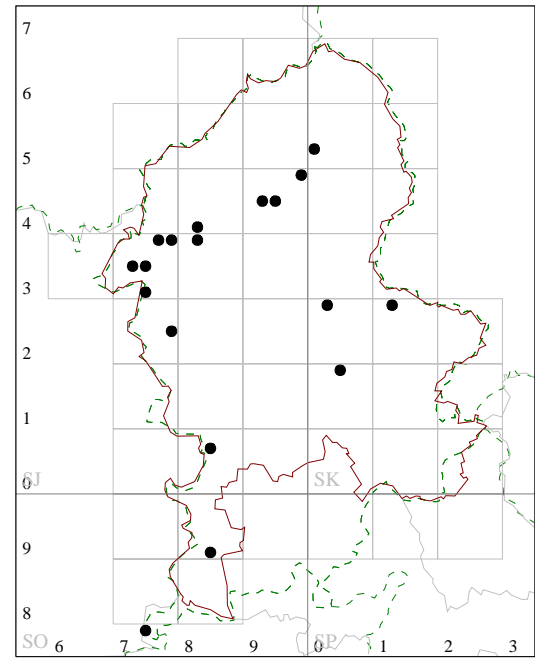
## Addendum

The map shows all the records of Argent & Sable. Some of these are now very old and the habitat may no longer be viable, However, the sites need checking and to help, they are listed below with grid references where known.

**NOTE** : Some of these sites are private, others nature reserves. Permission should be sought before visiting.

Cannock Chase	
Chillington Park	(SJ8506)
Coombes Valley	
Consall	
Craddocks Moss	(SJ7748)
Creswell Piece	(SJ9545)
Highgate Common	(SO8490)
Kinlet	(SO7579)
Loynton Moss	(SJ7824)
Needwood Forest	
Park Hall CP	(SJ9344)

Argent and Sable (*Rheumaptera hastata*)



All Records of Argent & Sable

## Reference

Waring et al, 2003. *Field Guide to the Moths of Great Britain and Ireland*.