On the Trail of the Hairy Caterpillars

Interest in moths has grown rapidly in recent years and most of our information on their regional diversity and distribution is obtained from moth trapping. Although moth trapping can take place throughout most of the year, it tends to be localised and is not a very efficient way of mapping species distribution in remote rural areas. However, some of the more adventurous recorders will use the more portable battery powered traps to investigate the moths in the wider countryside. It should also be remembered that not all moths are attracted to light, so we have to use a range of other methods to provide a wider view of the moth fauna. This can include direct observations in the field of both adults, larvae and pupae, catching adults by using insect nets or sugaring, or searching for the larvae of moths which form leaf mines (trails or blotches in leaves caused by larvae feeding within the leaf or stem).

Searching for caterpillars is a very accessible way of recording moth distribution. In 2023 we were encouraged by the number of observations of moth and butterfly larvae posted on the Curracag and OHBR Facebook group pages, and it seemed to be a good idea to launch a small recording project to help us fill in some of the gaps in our distribution map. We have chosen four species with very distinctive hairy caterpillars – the drinker, fox moth, northern eggar and garden tiger, which are fairly easy to identify. We have very few records of the caterpillars of these species from Harris, Lewis and Barra, but you can still take part if you like on other islands – all records are important. All you have to do is post your observations on the Facebook group, together with the date and locations (OS map reference, what3words, latitude/longitude or location name and post code). If you get very enthusiastic and collect lots of records, you can use the OHBR recording form (full details on the OHBR website (https://www.ohbr.org.uk/submitting-records.php).

This simple guide contains photographs and descriptions of four target species, distribution maps and a calendar to show when they are most abundant. If you need help or information, just ask and we will do our best.

Recommended identification guide:
Henwood, B, & P. Sterling. Field Guide to the Caterpillars of Great Britain and Ireland. Bloomsbury Publishing 2020.

Website: Outer Hebrides Lepidoptera (https://www.outerhebrideslepidoptera.co.uk/)

Drinker *Euthorix potatoria*

Grey body covered in brown hairs with yellow speckles. As the caterpillars mature they produce two horn-like tufts of hair at either end. A row of white hairs runs down each side of the body.

Size: up to 75mm in length when fully grown.

Fox moth *Macrothylacia rubi*

Immature caterpillars have a black body, covered in long brown hairs with orange stripes between the segments. As they mature, they develop long black hairs along the side of the body with orange hairs on the top. The orange stripes between the segments are reduced to dots on a black background.

Size: up to 70mm in length when mature

Northern eggar *Lasiocampa quercus*

The mature caterpillars found in the spring are large and covered in long brown hairs. There are black bands between the segments, with a lateral stripe of white dashes.

The small immature caterpillars found in the late summer and autumn have a bluish body with brown hairs and diamond shaped orange markings outlined in black along the back.

Size: up to 80mm in length when fully grown.

The northern eggar, found in moorland habitats in norther England, Wales and Scotland, is a subspecies of the oak eggar.

Garden tiger *Arctia caja*

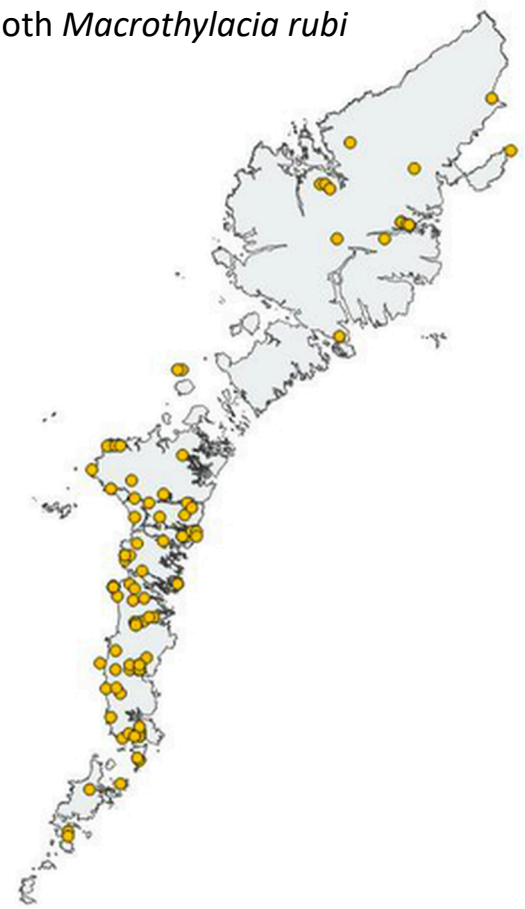
This particularly hairy caterpillar is commonly known as the woolly bear. The head and body are black with contrasting white spots. It is covered with a dense coat of hairs which are chestnut brown on the sides, white or pale grey along the back, and black closer to the body.

Size: up to 60mm in length when fully grown.

Distribution maps of larvae based on records in the OHBR database

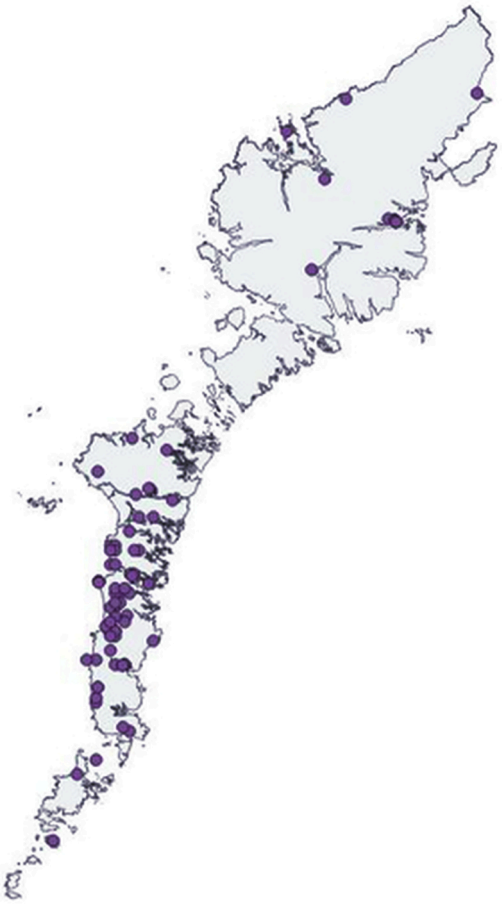
Drinker *Euthorix potatoria*

Fox moth *Macrothylacia rubi*

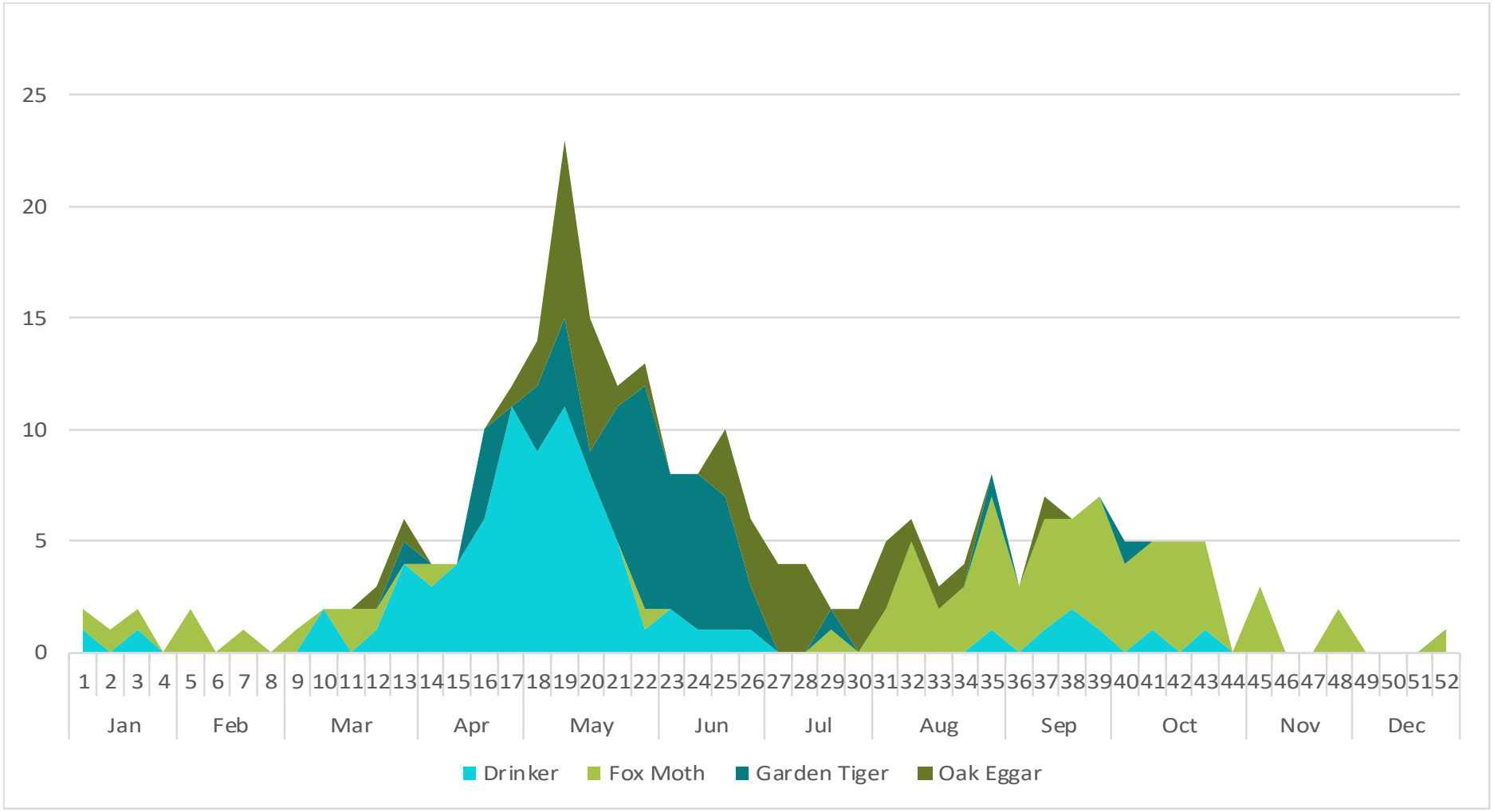


Northern eggar *Lasiocampa quercus*

Garden tiger *Arctia caja*



Seasonal records of larvae of drinker, fox moth, northern eggar and garden tiger



Total records of adult or larvae for each week

Month	Jan				Feb				Mar					Apr				May					Jun				Jul				Aug					Sep				Oct					Nov				Dec			
Week number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52
Drinker																																																				
caterpillar	1		1							2		1	4	3	4	6	11	9	11	8	5	1	2	1	1	1								1		1	2	1		1		1									
adult															3		5	3	1	1	3	1	10	13	32	51	43	43	42	28	11	5	2	1								1										
Fox Moth																																																			
caterpillar	1	1	1		2		1		1		2	1		1								1							1		2	5	2	3	6	3	5	4	6	4	4	5	4		3			2			1
adult																				2	10	13	20	18	11	13	4	3	4		1	1		2					1												
Garden Tiger																																																			
caterpillar													1			4		3	4	1	6	10	6	7	6	2			1						1					1												
adult																					2		2	2	2	2	5	30	69	77	87	65	60	47	19	13	6	1	1	1											
Oak Eggar																																																			
caterpillar												1	1				1	2	8	6	1	1			3	3	4	4		2	3	1	1	1			1															
adult										1									1				1		6	13	8	3	1		1			1																		