

The Rise of the Scarlet Tiger Moth in a Thornton Garden

Dave Wright

2019

It all started on a warm evening in July 2019 as a friend and I were having a beer in his garden, which is five doors away from mine, with a 'flyby'! We observed an unidentified Lepidoptera species flying rather high over the garden, but as we were in an elevated position we did get an eye level view as it came lower and we caught sight of bright red colours amongst the otherwise dark tones, before it was lost to view. Someone more switched-on to the spread of this species may have cottoned-on to what it was there and then, but at that point my moth books still had Scarlet Tiger described as predominantly a species of the south-west of the country so it certainly wasn't on my radar.

2020

The penny dropped as to what the previous summers' individual had been when I made my first confirmed sighting of Scarlet Tiger on 19th June. The adult moth was resting on a Comfrey plant at the bottom of the garden. I quickly looked up the food plants used and saw that Comfrey was listed as the favourite. I hoped they had bred in the garden but at that point I wasn't certain. Overall, I saw 3 or 4 adults during June 2020.



Scarlet Tiger adult June 2020

2021



In 2021 I saw my Scarlet Tiger first caterpillar, a single individual, climbing a window pane on the rear of my house on the 6th May. I assumed this large individual was looking for somewhere to pupate. I took it in, and it pupated attached to a twig under a comfrey leaf and it hatched out on 8th June, perfectly formed after 25 days.



Scarlet Tiger larvae May 2021 and newly emerged adult June 2021

I counted around 10 adults over the flight period, between the 17th and 29th June 2021. At this point I decided to allow the Comfrey patch to expand, to around 4 square metres.

2022



The adults from the previous year had clearly been successful and in April 2022 I counted 9 caterpillars on the Comfrey plants in my garden and my neighbour counted 57 on some plants on an adjacent piece of land that he and the owner are managing sympathetically for wildlife.

This total of 66 caterpillars translated into around 15 adults seen over the June flight period, from 10th June to 5th July, with the highest count being 8 on one evening.

Mating pairs were observed on two occasions.

Mating adult Scarlet Tigers June 2022

2023

The first indication of the amazing year that 2023 would prove to be was the number of caterpillars in the spring. My highest count was 228 in late March, on my small garden Comfrey patch alone.

It's hard to estimate the numbers of adults seen over the summer, but the total ran well into three figures. At least two major emergences occurred, around the 14th June (unfortunately whilst I was away on holiday, but a text from my neighbour said "swarms of tigers over your garden!"). There was another emergence on 21st with circa 40-50 adults flying around the garden and high over nearby trees on the latter occasion. The photo below provides an accurate time indication!



15 adults all fluttering and clambering around a single small evergreen bush on 24th June, were presumably males being drawn to the scent of a receptive female(s) hidden within the bush.

Scarlet Tiger adult 'jewellery' June 2023 (left)

Scarlet Tiger adult males in courtship frenzy June 2023 (right)



As I write this 1cm long caterpillars are feeding on the Comfrey. Fingers crossed for 2024!

Dave Wright, Thornton, Leicestershire. August 2023P