CATOCALA MOTHS: the red and blue underwings

By Margaret Tomsett

Roughly five years ago I decided I needed a new hobby and, having done butterfly transects, I decided on moth trapping. I have a large garden between the Haslemere and Chiddingfold areas, and it was hopefully a suitable moth site.

Now five years later I am hooked on moths. Every moth is beautiful, but one always has favourites: for me, these were the moths of the genus *Catocala*. This was brought about by two happenings. One night in 2019 our natural history society had set up moth traps for members in my garden, guided by an experienced moth enthusiast. At some point during the evening he came rushing up the garden and placed before us a huge moth of great beauty: the Clifden Nonpareil (*Catocala fraxini*), also known as the Blue Underwing. With the exception of our leader, I do not think anyone present had seen one before. It was a rare immigrant and occasional resident in the UK up until the 1960s when it became extinct as a breeding species, but then it recolonised and began breeding again around 2007. At the present time it is recognised as a rare but increasing species. Its flight season runs from late August to early October. This year (2026) I have only had two come to my trap; other Societies and moth groups have also reported seeing them.



My second interesting encounter was when I found a caterpillar in June 2021 that I could not identify. A photograph was sent to a Haslemere Natural History Society member for help. Great excitement: it looked like the Dark Crimson Underwing *Catocala sponsa*, and apparently the first caterpillar of this species ever found in Surrey! The UK status of this species was a rare immigrant and even rarer (Red Data Book listed) as a breeder: finding a caterpillar is of course proof of local breeding! Wouldn't it be wonderful if the following summer the caterpillar returned as the moth - highly unlikely? Amazingly, I did catch one in the trap later that summer. This species has now been recorded at various sites but in low numbers: it seemed to be increasing but this has stalled. So far in 2026 it has not appeared in my moth trap, but other moth groups have recorded a few. My nearest sighting this year so far for the Dark Crimson Underwing was part of its wing in the middle of the lane outside my house. It had most probably been caught by a bat.







The Light Crimson Underwing (*Catocala promissa*) first appeared here in 2022; it was previously as rare as the Dark Crimson but is more frequently seen now. In 2025 I found a caterpillar of this species at Witley Common, which may have been the first ever found in Surrey, although by this time it was no surprise that it was breeding here.





There are more species of *Catocala*. Just as the previous three species have increased in recent years, the Red Underwing (*Catocala nupta*) is declining: it was previously by far the most common of the set, but has been overtaken by the Light Crimson. The Rosy Underwing (*Catocala electa*) and the related but differently coloured Oak Yellow Underwing (*Catocala nymphagoga*) are both still extremely rare and waiting to be seen by me.

Some of these moths inhabit ancient oak woodland, as in the New Forest. Chiddingfold Forest in Surrey sits within the ancient heavily wooded area of the Weald, forming the largest continuous area of oak woodland on Weald clay: just the sort of habitat these moths need.

Catocala literally translates from the Greek meaning ‘beautiful behind’: referring to the underwing. To survive attempts at predation they rely on the contrast between their upper and under wings. Seen resting on a tree trunk they can look almost invisible; if a predator approaches the moth flashes its wings to show a vibrant colour and scares off the intruder.

Our weather conditions play a large part on moth movement. Sometimes moths have been blown up on southerly winds, then any resulting caterpillars are unable to tolerate our winters if there are long periods of wet weather or severe frosts. This year (2026) they may have found the summer drought hard to cope with. Perhaps this is why the Clifden Nonpareil has struggled to maintain itself in the past. How will these and other moths cope with our changing climate?