

Mistletoe Tortrix moth in Colwall

This small, but pretty, moth lives exclusively on mistletoe. Also known as the Mistletoe Marble moth, up close the adult moth is beautifully patterned in buff, blue-grey and black on a white background, but from a distance it looks like a small and inconspicuous bird dropping.

Life cycle of the Mistletoe Tortrix moth

The moth lays its eggs on mistletoe and when it hatches, the caterpillar burrows into, and lives inside, the mistletoe leaf. As it moves around inside in the leaf, it leaves a feeding trail known as a leaf mine. The caterpillar, which is bright green like the mistletoe, spends the winter inside the leaf and starts growing in earnest when the weather warms up the following spring. It emerges from the mistletoe in June to pupate in a loosely spun silk tent, on mistletoe leaves or under bark etc. It emerges from its cocoon in July.



Larval leaf mine on a mistletoe leaf.



The caterpillar is bright green.



Pupal case and protective silk tent in mistletoe leaf.



Adult mistletoe tortrix moth.

UK status of the moth

The moth is very rare, and has been given Priority status in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. For more information on the UK status of this species, you can visit the Butterfly Conservation website and view their [Mistletoe Marble factsheet](#).

Most sightings are from the orcharding areas of Somerset and the Three Counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. It is generally found at very low density, and does seem to be genuinely very rare (rather than overlooked or under-recorded).

Mistletoe tortrix moth in Colwall

We have a lot of mistletoe here in Colwall, and in some neglected orchards the weight of mistletoe can cause the trees to topple over, so we have been thinning it out. We reduce it gradually to avoid shocking the tree and to sustain the mistletoe, and the rare species that live on it. We do not want to put any populations of Mistletoe Tortrix at risk, so we have brought in some moth experts to see if we have any Mistletoe Tortrix here in Colwall.

There are two ways of finding the Mistletoe Tortrix - the first is to look for the leaf mines early in the year. The second is to look for the adults once the moths emerge in July.

In 2009, several moth experts kindly agreed to come and look for leaf mines in our orchards. A February visit was snowed off, but they managed to visit in March and again in May. They searched extensively in 7 orchards (Maybole, Sunfold, Broadwood, Snatford, Stamps and Oldcastle), but found only one leaf mine in mistletoe on an apple tree in Snatford orchard. We have also been checking through the mistletoe we thin out and have not found any leaf mines either.



Leaf mine on Snatford mistletoe

from this apple tree

The moth experts gained more experience at spotting the leaf mines during 2009, finding them easier to spot when the caterpillars are close to emerging, despite having to view the mistletoe through leaves and blossom. So they returned in May 2010 to survey 5 orchards. They drew a blank in 2 of these, but found leaf mines on 12 trees in the other 3 orchards. We also tried (without success) to look for adults moths during their flight season in July.