

NOBLE CHAFER BEETLES IN COLWALL

Introduction

The Noble chafer is a beautiful, big, iridescent green beetle, about 2cm long. Its body is metallic green with a slight crinkly appearance and small white speckles. It is found on old traditional orchards, where it lays its eggs in the hollow trees, usually cherry, plum and apple. The grubs live on dead wood inside the trees for 2-3 years before pupating and emerging as adult beetles.



Finding noble chafer beetles

There are 2 ways of finding the noble chafer beetle:

You can look for evidence of the grubs living in dead wood. As the grubs eat through the wood, they produce characteristic droppings, called frass. You can find this frass in hollows and crevices in the trees, because it rises to the top of the wood debris.



Noble chafer frass in hollow tree

Close up of frass in a hollow branch

You can also hunt for adult beetles in the early summer, when they emerge from the trees to mate and lay eggs. The peak flight season is from late-June through to July and August, with the adults living for 4-6 weeks. You can find the adults resting and feeding on sturdy flowers such as hogweed, elder and meadowsweet .

Finding noble chafer in Colwall

We did a survey for noble chafer beetle in the winter of 2007/08, as part of a national survey by the people's trust for endangered species. Fortunately, Anita Burroughs of ptes came over to train us. She told us how to find noble chafer, how to use the ptes recording form and how to grade an orchard for its suitability for noble chafers. This involves looking for suitable habitat within the orchard, such as large old trees with hollows, dead wood in the canopy and on the ground and looking for evidence of beetle activity, such as the holes left by adults emerging from the wood.

We started the survey by trying to identify all the orchards in the parish using old maps and aerial photographs. Originally we expected to find about 25 orchards, but poring over the maps and photos, we found 39 potential sites for checking. Of these 39 sites, we were refused access permission for 3 and 6 turned out to be gone or too delapidated to qualify as orchards any more (defined as 6 trees remaining with canopies within 20m).

We surveyed 29 of the remaining 30 sites and these are our findings:

Grading for noble chafer	Number of orchards in Colwall
1	8
1 or 2	2
2	10
3	9

We found possible beetle frass in 4 sites, but only 1 of these turned out to be noble chafer – so we have only 1 confirmed site in Colwall, in this tree and 2 others in the same orchard:



We have been looking in all the tree hollows we can check ever since, but have not managed to find any more, although many orchards seem to have lots of suitable habitat.

However, we have had reports of sightings of the adult beetles, one from a house next to one of the oldest orchards and another from someone who had been cutting up a large fallen pear tree. We hope to organise a hunt for adults one sunny day this summer.

Noble chafer in Herefordshire

Herefordshire is part of one of the 2 main strongholds of noble chafer in England, in the main orcharding areas of the Three Counties (Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire) and Somerset.

The noble chafer is a 'priority' Biodiversity Action Plan species with its own Species Action Plan in Herefordshire. This includes actions to:

- Collate existing datasets and identify current strongholds (known sites and populations)
- Maintain suitable habitat for noble chafer in the orchards, by encouraging sympathetic management (through revised guidance, training etc)
- Identify and restore relict sites
- Identify sites which may become suitable for noble chafer in due course
- Expand the range of noble chafer around current strongholds (increase the number of suitable sites/expand the size of suitable sites)
- Protect important sites from development
- Raise awareness of noble chafer

Colwall Orchard Group is helping to achieve these targets by:

- Carrying out surveys for the noble chafer
- Advising owners on orchard management
- Doing rescue pruning of old trees to stop them collapsing
- Planting new trees to extend the life of the traditional orchards
- Raising awareness of noble chafer and other orchard wildlife