

The Gloucester Mecopteran

Incorporating the **Germanica Zeitung**, **Cognata Courier** and **Communis Worker**

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Not so scarce?

A second site for *P. cognata*

Editorial:

It is a sad reflection on our times that neither the Citizen nor the Echo carries a column dedicated to the fascinating winged scorpionflies that populate the meadows, woodlands and hillsides of our local countryside. National publications such as Dragonfly News and the Hoverfly Newsletter cover some of our more extensive hexapod groups but, as is all too often the case with minority populations, the scorpionflies suffer unjust neglect, and are totally ignored, by both the communications industry and the entomological establishment.

The Gloucester Mecopteran intends to rectify this position, albeit on a modest scale and with a limited, regional focus.

All three of the winged scorpionfly species recorded in the British Isles (*Panorpa cognata*, *P. communis* and *P. germanica*) are found within the county boundaries of Gloucestershire and they surely deserve at least as much deference and recognition as other, less ancient, lineages such as those to be found inhabiting Badminton House, Cirencester and Gatcombe Parks and Frampton Court.

So, welcome to this glossy new venture which may, who knows, even stretch to a second issue in due course.

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A male scarce scorpionfly at the Cleeve Hill site

The September 2012 edition of GNS News included an item on the discovery of *Panorpa cognata* (the scarce scorpionfly) in Butterfly Conservation's Masts Reserve on Cleeve Hill. This seems to have been the first county record of our most elusive winged scorpionfly.

By chance, Martin Matthews saw a male of this species on 21 June 2013 while he was on a Cotswold walk with friends. There are now, therefore, two known sites for the scarce scorpionfly in Gloucestershire. It is presumably a coincidence that the second site at Rough Bank is, like the first, a Butterfly Conservation reserve. Perhaps it is more relevant that in both cases the insects were found on sunny limestone grassland slopes, and in the vicinity of bramble patches.

On 4 July 2013 scarce scorpionflies were seen again on the Masts Reserve, around the same bramble patch that yielded the first record in 2012.

There are probably more sites for the scarce scorpionfly awaiting discovery in the county, along the Cotswold scarp and perhaps elsewhere. Seeking them out could provide a good excuse for a few midsummer rambles.

Identifying your scorpionfly

Check out those calipers



Panorpa germanica, caliper shape - ii



Panorpa cognata, caliper shape - V



Panorpa communis, caliper shape - ()

The experts insist that scorpionflies should only be identified by examination of the calipers on the male genital capsule (that's the red scorpion-like tail end of the abdomen) or by dissection of the female genitalia. In the field, and perhaps at home too, identification of males is likely to be your preferred option.

The calipers are on the underside of the genital capsule but they are visible from above when a male is curling his tail up over the rest of his abdomen. A x10 hand lens helps to check out this feature. Males of the three species are illustrated above.

In *P. germanica* the calipers look like a pair of parallel clubs, broadening slightly at their ends. These can usually be seen fairly easily, making *P. germanica* the most readily identifiable species. In *P. cognata* the calipers are straight and form a V-shape; in *P. communis* they are slightly curved, turning in towards each other at their ends like a pair of typists' brackets.

A captive scorpionfly will continually wave his tail as a distraction and defence, so examining the calipers may require patience and persistence.

Where are Gloucestershire's scorpionflies?

Scorpionflies forage in tangled vegetation, such as bramble patches, nettle beds, long grass and dense herbage. As the three species share this broad habitat preference, they may all occur at the same site, but it is possible that they occupy different ecological niches. There is some evidence, from limited observations, that within the county each species is most likely to be found in a particular type of countryside. Adults are usually seen from May to July. Late sightings in the autumn will almost certainly be of *P. germanica*.

The **common scorpionfly** (*P. communis*) is, perhaps, the species most likely to be encountered at damper lowland sites where lush grass is growing close to neglected hedgerows. Among the places where the common scorpionfly has been recorded are Severn valley flood meadows, the banks of the Wye and a Forest of Dean bog. However, it can also be found at drier grassland sites in the Cotswolds and, occasionally, in woodlands.

The **saxon scorpionfly** (*P. germanica*) is found at some of the same lowland sites as the common scorpionfly but, more typically, it appears to be the most common species at Cotswold grassland sites. It has also been found under woodland tree cover, unprotected by long grass or hedgerow shrubbery.



Panorpa cognata female - Cleeve Hill

Both known sites for the **scarce scorpionfly** (*P. cognata*) are rough grasslands on the Cotswold scarp.