

# The Gloucester Mecopteran

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

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## Editorial:

Spring is in the air, and it is time for *The Gloucester Mecopteran* to come out of hibernation and refresh readers' interest in the county's common, saxon and scarce scorpionflies.

The first edition was greeted with unexpected rapture and attracted attention from as far afield as Gwent and Worcestershire. It also stimulated some helpful correspondence, which included details of a third county record for the scarce scorpionfly (see page 2). Encouraged by this reception, the editor is already planning a third, perhaps even a fourth, edition...

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Two picture stories in this issue draw attention to the intimate relationship between our favourite insects and the fierce, predatory spiders who share their space in the green, labyrinthine undergrowth. Do wings have the advantage over sticky silk and extra legs in their covert evolutionary arms race?

## A late record

An item in our previous issue headed 'Where are Gloucestershire's scorpionflies?' foolishly stated that: 'Late sightings in the autumn will almost certainly be of *P. germanica*'.

However, on 28 September 2013 Martin Matthews took a male *P. communis* in grassland on the northern side of Bredon Hill, just across the vice-county boundary in Worcestershire.

Such a late date implies that a partial second generation of the common scorpionfly may have occurred as a result of last year's exceptional summer.

## Confrontation: Drama in Welshbury Wood



Scorpionfly and spider in a tense stand-off

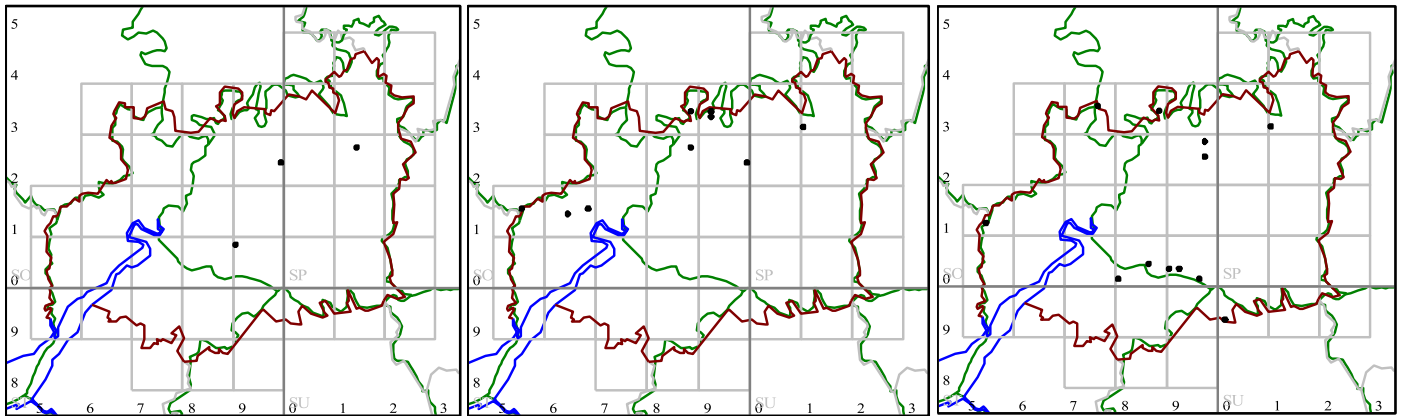
A harmless mecopterist wandering through Welshbury Wood one day in June 2013 witnessed this confrontation between a male common scorpionfly (*P. communis*) and a spider (believed to be a female *Pisaura mirabilis*). Both of the participants were on a large leaf (*dock?* - Ed.) among ground vegetation in the main track through the wood.

The scorpionfly was continually rotating its whole body with sudden, jerky movements, as if it was performing a dance in front of the spider. After remaining relatively motionless for a while, the spider was provoked into making a run at the scorpionfly, which instantly took off and flew away.

We can only guess at what was going on in the tiny minds of the two antagonists. As the scorpionfly could have taken to the air at any time, its behaviour appears to have been deliberate. Perhaps the scorpionfly was hoping to distract the spider into dropping her egg sac. It seems unlikely that the scorpionfly would have seen the spider herself as a potential lunch, but her eggs might have made a satisfying and nutritious meal.

The jerking dance of the scorpionfly may have triggered a very specific instinctive response in the spider, possibly a territorial reaction to an intruder rather than a lunge at a potential prey item. Perhaps the arachnological community could clarify what was happening that day in Welshbury Wood.

## Mapping Gloucestershire's scorpionflies



***Panorpa cognata* (3)**

***Panorpa communis* (9)**

***Panorpa germanica* (12)**

The maps above display recent records of identified adult males of our three winged scorpionflies. They were compiled by *The Gloucester Mecopteran* at the start of 2014. The number of 1Km grid squares in which each species has been recorded is shown in brackets.

Don't be confused by the squiggly lines: the green ones mark vice-county boundaries, the brown one outlines the administrative county (nb this excludes South Gloucestershire), and the blue ones pick out the River Severn and the Bristol Avon.

In their current state, these maps should be seen as palimpsests (*nice one! - Ed.*) awaiting metamorphosis into matured, authoritative versions as the decades roll on by.

### The scarce scorpionfly - a third site

On 25 July 2013 David Scott-Langley was cutting a beech hedge in an isolated rural garden near Condicote when he noticed a scorpionfly crawling around on the cuttings. It was easily caught as one wing had been damaged by the hedgecutter. David noticed the sparseness of the insect's wing markings and later, at home, confirmed that it was a male *P. cognata*, our third county record for the scarce scorpionfly.

It's not clear where David's specimen might have come from before its unfortunate accident, as the garden is surrounded by arable fields and livestock grazing land, which are not typical habitats for scorpionflies.

## A matter of life and death

It looks as if this azure damselfly (*Coenagrion puella*) got caught on a strand of spider silk while flying through some tangled herbage. A foraging female panorpid (almost certainly a common scorpionfly) has taken advantage of the damselfly's misfortune to make a meal of it.

It seems unlikely that the damselfly could have broken off its own abdomen while struggling to escape. It was probably bitten off by the scorpionfly in its attempts to feed on the meaty interior of the victim's thorax.

This miniature scene of an opportunistic scavenger in action was photographed in a neglected meadow beside the River Severn near Tewkesbury.

