

Fisher's Estuarine Moth: European Protected Species

NATURAL
ENGLAND

UK Distribution

Distribution

Fisher's estuarine moth *Gortyna borelii lunata* is a rare moth with its known distribution in the UK restricted mainly to low-lying areas on the north Essex Coast near Walton-on-the-Naze. This is an area of sea-walls and coastal grassland. Within the area there are a number of semi-isolated sub-populations. The future of the moth is threatened, as sites where it is found are at risk of inundation by the sea. The total population has been estimated at 1000-5000 adult moths. It has been listed within the British Red Data Book as vulnerable.



Courtesy of JNCC

Habitat and Lifecycle

The species is reliant on Hog's Fennel (*Peucedanum officinale*) as its sole caterpillar food plant and uses long, coarse grasses for egg laying. The species over-winters as eggs and the larvae hatch in late spring. Young larvae feed in the stems of hog's fennel, later boring into the roots. The number of larvae and affected plants declines over the summer and it is likely that no plant ultimately supports more than a single larva. After pupation, the adult moths emerge in autumn, and are nocturnal, with a wingspan of 24-60mm. The species is largely sedentary – only a handful of moths have ever been found more than 10 metres from a food plant.

Legislation

The Fisher's estuarine moth has been protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act since 1998. From 1 October 2008 the Fisher's estuarine moth is also protected under the Conservation (Natural Habitats &C.) Regulations 1994 (as amended). As a European protected species the deliberate capturing, disturbing, injuring or killing of Fisher's estuarine moth is prohibited, as is damage or destruction of their breeding sites or resting places (note that this is a simplified summary of the legislation, which can be viewed in full at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1994/Uksi_19942716_en_1.htm)

Land management

The main threats to the species in Britain are sea-level rise and inappropriate management of its habitat. All the existing native areas where the Fisher's estuarine moth is found will be lost over time due to sea level rise and managed retreat. A two year partnership project has recently been conducted to create a sustainable landscape-scale network of new interconnected sites for Fisher's estuarine moth. The programme has enabled farmers/landowners with suitable land on the north Essex coast to receive support and prescriptive management instructions via agri-environment schemes, particularly Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), for the creation of habitat for the moth.

At these sites hog fennel plugs have been planted and seed sown. Eggs have subsequently been introduced via a captive breeding programme under licence from Natural England. These areas of habitat have been created through HLS agreements under option HK15, HK16 and HK17 and through the amendment of other agreements. A total of 10 new areas of habitat have been created, either within areas of established grassland or on land reverted from arable. An agreed management regime is followed that involves cutting the grass late in autumn, which is a beneficial time for the moth. To date the project has been successful and the moth is becoming established in these new areas.

It is important that prescribed management practices are followed otherwise an offence may be committed. Cutting hog's fennel at other times of year may result in larvae or moths being killed, which will be an offence under the Habitat Regulations 1994.

Further Details

For further details regarding land management in areas containing Fisher's estuarine moth contact Zoe Ringwood at Natural England's Colchester Office 01206 796666

For questions regarding Wildlife Licensing please telephone 0845 6014523 (local rate) or email wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk

Natural England Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: www.naturalengland.org.uk