



Anglian Lepidopterist Supplies

Specialising in
moth traps and
related equipment

SUGAR AND WINE ROPES

Another approach to the capture of moths is the use of sugar traps and wine roping. In this approach, a strong, sweet mixture is painted onto posts, fences or trees, or an impregnated rope is draped over suitable supports. Moths will visit the 'trap' to feed, and can then be potted for examination. Light traps will attract the greatest variety of moths, but some species, which are very rare at light, can be found more frequently by sugaring e.g. Old Lady.

The simplest form of sugaring consists of the use of rotting fruit as an attractant. A netting bag can be suspended over the bait, and the moths will be attracted to the fruit by scent, will feed, and then be captured in the trap. This is the classic method of trapping some tropical butterflies but can also be used for moths in this country.

Alternatively 'sugaring' can be tried and there are many different or secret recipes that have been tried over many years but the standard recipe seems to be the following:

Place approximately ½ a pint of beer (stout works well) in a saucepan together with about 1kg of brown sugar (unrefined sugar is good, and dark molasses sugar is even better) and about 0.5kg of dark treacle. Bring the mixture to the boil stirring continuously to dissolve the sugar and treacle into the mixture. Simmer for about five minutes, and then remove from the heat and allow to cool. While the mixture cools, a scum will form on the surface. This is sugar crystallizing out of the solution and it should be stirred back into the mixture. When completely cold, the mixture can be transferred to a suitable storage jar (old coffee jars are good).



Orache Moth at sugar solution

It is then applied to fence posts, tree stumps or other convenient surfaces via an old paint brush (keep the brush wrapped in silver foil after use otherwise it will stiffen and become useless for future use) This should then be checked for feeding moths throughout the night.

The principle problem with sugaring is that the mixture leaves sticky residues on the treated surfaces. These can be a problem if trapping in areas popular with the general public. If a visitor leans against a sugared post it will create a nasty stain. Instead of sugaring you may therefore wish to try wine ropes. A similar mixture is made, substituting the ½ pint of beer for a bottle of cheap red wine. This will produce a runnier mixture which should be transferred into a sealable bucket. Paint kettles available from most DIY shops are ideal. A few short (couple of feet) lengths of clean cotton rope or even better, the rope used in mop heads can be used; this will soak up more of the solution. This is then immersed into the liquid and left to become impregnated with the solution. The use of honey can also be beneficial, this soaking into the rope and seeming to last longer.

To use the wine ropes, the lengths of rope are removed from the bucket, given a quick shake to remove excess, and then draped over tree branches, fence wire etc. Rubber gloves are recommended as this is a messy process. Moths will alight on the rope to feed during the night. When the session is finished the ropes are collected up and returned to the paint kettle leaving very little mess behind.

Both sugaring and wine ropes will attract moths in roughly equal numbers. However, the success of the technique is very variable. Some nights will produce lots of specimens while on others the sugar will be ignored. It seems that warm humid nights with a light wind are best for sugaring (as they are for most forms of moth trapping), but the technique will also work on far from ideal nights, and not work on nights that seems good for no apparent reason. To further increase the effectiveness of both sugar and wine ropes a secret solution is added just before use, this usually being a few drops of rum and/or amyl acetate (smells like pear drops) to the solution. Banana or vanilla essence used for baking cakes also seems to be effective.

Late summer seems to be the best time in England for sugaring, this being when our ‘natural nectar source’ is on the decrease. In Scotland it can be effective through most of the season, in Shetland (where the author spent five years in the early 1990’s) many moths can be lured to the sugar solution, over 100 Great Brocade were seen on some nights. In September 2010 upto 77 Red Sword Grass were attracted on several nights to sugared fence posts along the western shores of Loch Linnhe.

Check rotting blackberries and ivy blossom in late autumn or sallow blossom in spring, both these can be very effective for seeing moths and don’t forget a torch!



Old Lady at wine ropes



Red Sword Grass in Scotland



Several Delicate at sugar

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Photographs by Jon Clifton & Neil Sherman