

ANOTHER RECORD OF *AGLAIS URTICAE* (LINNAEUS, 1758) (LEPIDOPTERA: NYMPHALIDAE) IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

Another specimen of *Aglais urticae* (Linnaeus, 1758) in the Maltese Islands is reported in this work. Such a specimen represents the third Maltese record, and it is presumed to be a casual immigrant species. All previous records are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Aglais urticae*, Lepidoptera, Nymphalidae, Malta.

INTRODUCTION

In the Maltese archipelago the Nymphalidae family is represented by six species; only two of these, namely *Vanessa cardui* (Linnaeus, 1758) and *Vanessa atalanta* (Linnaeus, 1758), are regular migrants and sometimes resident. Both of these species also breed locally. *V. cardui*, the commonest nymphalid species on the islands, migrates by the thousands and this phenomenon is well documented (Valletta, 1952, 1972; Sammut, 1989, 2000; Falzon, 2003). Some very rare species occasionally arrive in the archipelago along *V. cardui*. However, rare species are capable of migrating solitarily (Sciberras, 2004a). *V. atalanta* is also common, but much less so than *V. cardui* (Sciberras 2006). *Polygonia egea* (Cramer, 1775) is represented by only two records (Valletta, 1948 a, b, 1980; Sammut, 2000; Sciberras & Schembri, 2005a). *Nymphalis polychlorus* (Linnaeus, 1758) is represented by a single record (Schembri, 1986; Sammut, 2000; Sciberras & Schembri, 2005a). *Inachis io* (Linnaeus, 1758) was recorded from four specimens which are all regarded as accidentals (Aquilina, 1980; Valletta, 1981; Sammut 2000; Sciberras & Schembri, 2005a; Cachia & Sciberras, 2010).

PREVIOUS RECORDS

Aglais urticae was mentioned the first time in literature for the Maltese islands by Fletcher (1904-1905, 1905). He mentions that Matthew informed him (*in litt.*) that he noticed one specimen on March 23rd 1892. Caruana Gatto (1925) in his work repeats the same observation. Borg [P.] (1932) lists it as rare and Borg [J.] (1939) mentions that among other very rare species, some specimens of the latter were found locally in a battered condition and presumed that they arrived by strong winds. Both De Lucca (1950) and Valletta (1966, 1972) mention that in their long years of collecting, they never encountered this species. Sammut (2000) simply omits this species from the local list and presumed, due to the lack of findings, that this species was probably included in the Maltese list as a misidentification. On May 14th 1985 Emanuel Cardona captured a specimen of *Aglais urticae* at Wied Hanzir, Qormi and in his collection it was misidentified as another species. It was in late 2002 that the specimen was identified correctly by Sammut as the latter. On November 23rd 2003 the author was collecting a number of *Vanessa cardui* specimens on a *Lantana camara* at Marsa (Malta racing course) for reference collection and while the specimens were on the setting boards Jeffrey Sciberras noted the different specimen. When deposited in the collection box it became obvious that the specimen belonged to *Aglais urticae*. The 1985 and the 2003 specimens are the only confirmed specimens to date (Sciberras, 2004b; Sciberras & Schembri, 2005 b).

The new record of *Aglais urticae*

Information for the third record for Malta: Malta: 23 August 2011. An almost complete specimen was collected by the author from an electric fly killer machine in a factory, limits of I-Imriehel.

DISCUSSION

Following the 2003 record every *Vanessa cardui* and *Pieris* spp. migration was followed carefully by the author because the rare species records seemed always to link with these migrations. From November 13th to December 4th 2003 there was the possibility that more specimens of this species might have arrived with the migration, but since

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these are not fully confirmed, they were not listed (Sciberras & Schembri, 2005 b). Since then, except for this record, no specimens were ever found. The remains of the specimen (Figure 1) were collected carefully due to its battered state. Along the butterfly specimen in question, specimens of *Musca domestica*, Cercopidae sp., Chrysopidae sp. specimens were also collected being attracted to this UV light trap. Although in such a battered state, this species was easily identifiable when compared to other local species. A search was also made in the nearby vegetation surrounding the establishment on the *Urtica* spp., but proved fruitless in finding any other specimens, larvae or eggs of the latter species. On the same day of the find, including the whole previous week, many *Vanessa cardui* specimens were noticed and when counting their numbers in various localities, this indicated that another migration of this species was about to take place.



Figure 1 : *Aglais urticae* from I-Imriehel, 23/viii/2011.(Left): as found, and (right) as assembled sideways.
Photographs by A. Sciberras, 2011.

DISTRIBUTION AND TAXONOMY

This species is widespread from the Atlantic coast of Europe through to the Pacific coast of Asia. The distribution in Europe is stable. The wingspan is generally 45-62mm. The sexes look very similar but males are often smaller than females. The upper side is dark red with black and yellow stain-like markings. The slightly scalloped wings have a series of blue spots close to the side and hind margins. The undersides are less colourful, the pattern on the forewing being a duller reflection of the upper-side. In this species eggs are laid in large clusters with numbers ranging from 30 to 200. These are pale, glassy-green with 8 or 9 ribs running from top to base. These can be found on young tender nettle leaves, sometimes hidden deep within the main clump. The eggs will hatch within 12 days. The caterpillars feed on *Urtica dioica* and *U. urens*. As a result of this, *Aglais urticae* inhabits a huge range of habitats, wherever the food plant occurs (Gooden, 1971).

CONCLUSION

It is very difficult to assess the presence of this species locally. It is more probable that the specimen arrived with a *V. cardui* migration as in the case of other previous records, rather than considering it a rare resident species. It is quite a large species to go unnoticed for such long periods of time. It is unlikely that the specimen arrived by human intervention, however, especially, that nowadays many species of ornamental plants are being imported in considerable quantities, one cannot exclude that introduction is a possibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Esther Sciberras, Jeffrey Sciberras and Romario Sciberras for their assistance in literature research and comments on the initial draft of the work. FORT PEST CONTROL is acknowledged for supporting this work.

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