Mothing in the rain

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Not every night chosen for a mothing session stays warm and dry. Inevitably there are times when it rains, even in the Portuguese summer. If you are putting a light or light trap out in the garden for checking in the morning, it is not too troublesome. You may have drowned moths in the water in the trap or egg boxes filled with water, or at worst a broken light bulb. But there is always another night.

If, like me, you only have a few nights available for fieldwork during a week-long visit, there is pressure to put out lights every night, but sometimes this has to be aborted. Occasionally I have spent an hour or more surveying a site for the best spots to place two or three lights, putting all the equipment in place, then having a quick bite to eat before the night's activity begins, only to have a thunderstorm arrive at dusk, so that all the equipment must be gathered in before it gets too wet.

In spring and summer rain in late afternoon or at dusk rarely results in many moths flying, even if the rain stops. But in the autumn it is different. Many Noctuidae species emerge in October and November or even later. Often these species will come to light in heavy rain. This may be because clear dry nights can be significantly colder than wet nights and perhaps heavy rain presents more problems for bats than for moths.

When out in the field away from the place where I am staying, I run two or three lights from a generator, each light on a stand over a white sheet with egg boxes below the light. Long wires allow the lights to be quite far apart and in different microhabitats. During the night I progress from light to light noting what species arrive and collecting moths that cannot be immediately identified or are unfamiliar.

I remember occasions on visits to Portugal in October and November when it was evident that the rain falling during the day was unlikely to stop at night. My equipment had to be deployed in the rain and later collected up thoroughly wet.

In October 1997 my wife and I planned three nights out of our week in Algarve to go north to Serra de São Mamede. We had been making an inventory of the moths of the Parque Natural on short visits since September 1995, but this was the latest date chosen. Long before reaching Portalegre on the afternoon of 19 October, we could see there was rain over the mountains. On our arrival at our usual place of stay in Escusa, between Castelo de Vide and Marvão, I set up a light under a back porch which provided a little shelter, then, leaving my wife in the dry, I took lights to Galegos, a site east of Marvão, with Cork Oaks (*Quercus suber*). Among the moths I recorded, *Aporophyla chioleuca* (Fig. 1(a)) and *Agrochola meridionalis* (Fig. 1(b)) were new to me. Besides moths, I was rewarded with seeing a Salamander for the first time. On my return to Escusa I checked the light under the porch which had attracted *Cymatophorina diluta*.

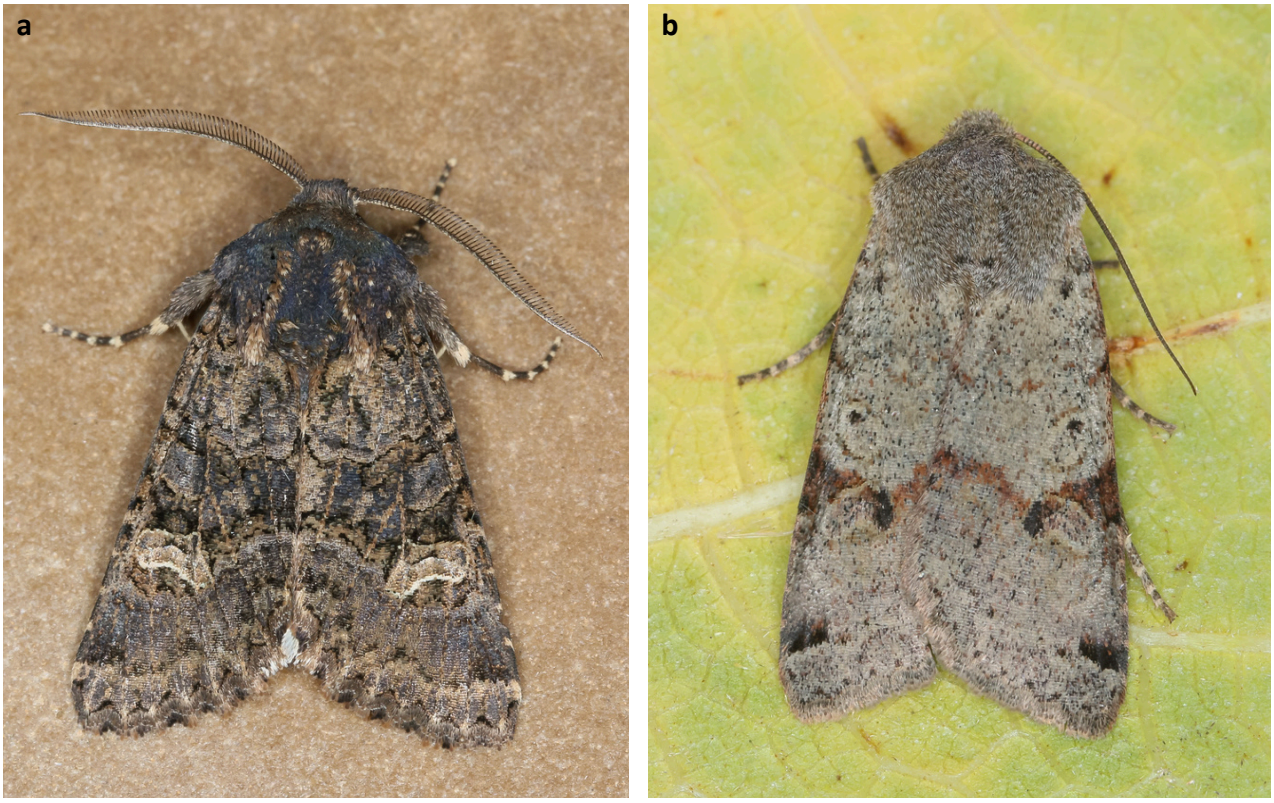

Figure 1. (a) *Aporophyla chioleuca*; (b) *Agrochola meridionalis.*
Species recorded in the municipality of Marvão.
(Photos: © Ana Valadares)

Figure 2. Marvão Castle and the surrounding landscape. The Minhota trapping site is located near the centre-left of the photograph, close to the small side road visible in the image.
(Photo: © Ana Valadares)

The following day there was no let up in the rain, but I took a light to the southernmost part of the Parque Natural at Hortas de Baixo, thinking that at the lower altitude it might not be raining. I was wrong. Nothing of great interest appeared, so I did not stay long. We had planned to stay for three nights, but after incessant rain all the next day we decided to pack up and return to Algarve. However, I decided that before leaving there was time to run a single light for a short time at Minhota, an area with Pyrenean Oak (*Quercus pyrenaica*) below the castle of Marvão (Fig. 2). This proved successful as I saw species not seen on previous nights including *Dryobotodes tenebrosa* (Fig. 3(a)) that was new to me as well as *Griposia aprilina* (Fig. 3(b)), a familiar species in England, but my first Portuguese record. Moths had to be boxed as soon as they arrived on the very wet sheet, because they mostly buzzed around on their backs, rapidly losing scales. After two hours, I returned to Escusa and we left for the Algarve. As soon as we were away from the mountains, the rain stopped. In total the trip produced 74 species of Macrolepidoptera, many of them new records for the Parque Natural.

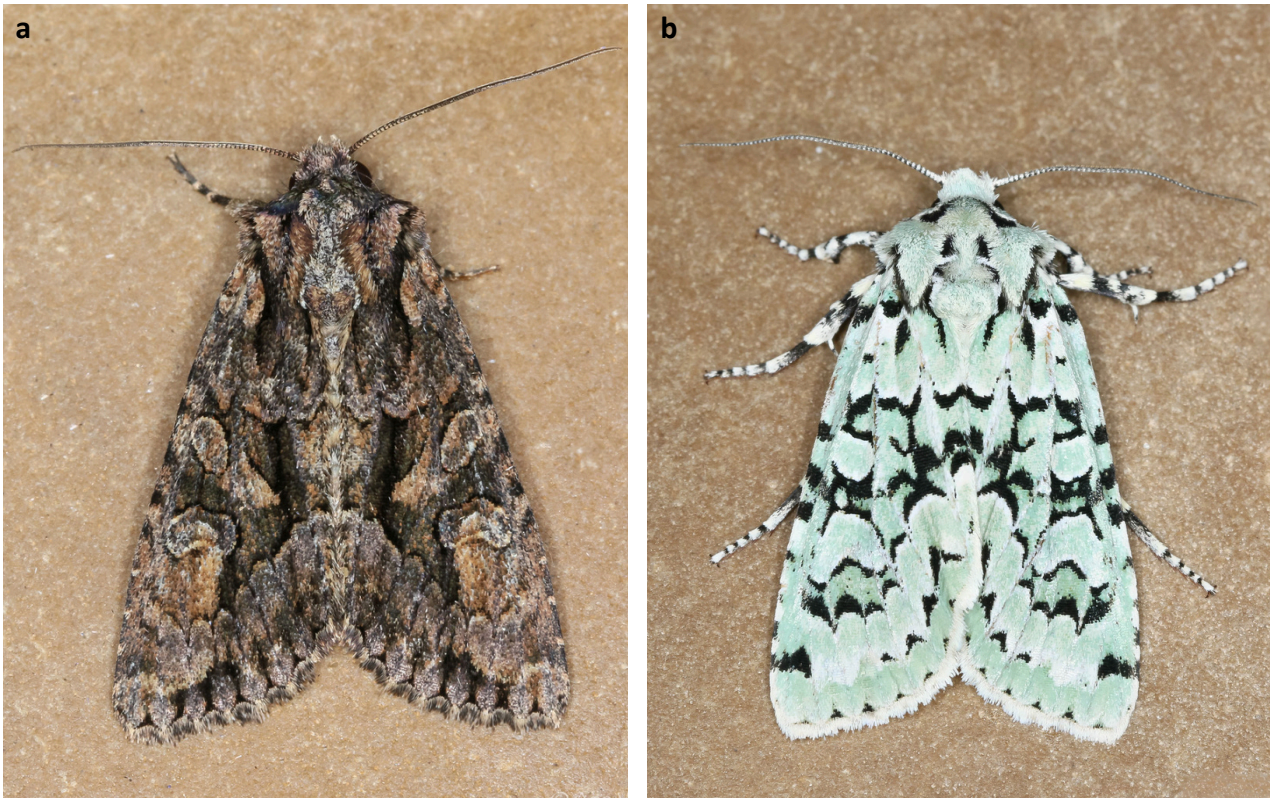

Figure 3. (a) *Dryobotodes tenebrosa*; (b) *Griposia aprilina*. Species recorded in the municipality of Marvão. (Photos: © Ana Valadares)

On 15 and 16 November 2009 I had two nights' fieldwork in the Tua valley where I was joined by Pedro Sousa, a colleague from CIBIO specialising in spiders. Rain set in during the second afternoon, so we decided we would not return to our accommodation in Carrazeda de Ansiães, but leave for Porto after a fairly brief field session at Amieiro (Fig. 4), which was always the most rewarding site in the Tua Valley. 33 species of Macrolepidoptera appeared, with *Agrochola blidaensis* new to me. After two hours in heavy rain with fair numbers of moths coming to the lights, the rain stopped. We soon realised that no more moths were flying, so we were glad to pack up.

Figure 4. Amieiro in the Tua Valley, the most productive trapping site visited during the November 2009 field trip. (Photo: © Martin Corley)

Among the many problems of trying to record moths in very wet conditions (being wet to the skin with cold fingers, trying to write in a wet notebook with a pen that doesn't write when wet, egg boxes full of water and liable to disintegrate) is that a generator running in heavy rain can sometimes become live, giving electric shocks when touched. The same problem has occurred with one of the long wires I use. After once receiving shocks when winding up the wire in rain, I was always careful to unplug this wire before winding it up.