



The Welsh Apollo Butterfly



British butterfly records are not limited to those resident in these islands, and the regular summer migrants like the Painted Lady. A small number, such as the Purple Edged and Large Coppers, have become extinct since records began. The Camberwell Beauty and Queen of Spain Fritillary are rare non-breeding vagrants from the continent. With butterfly houses becoming popular over the past 40 years a number of exotics have been sighted on the wing, having escaped; but they never breed or survive long. And there are accidental introductions via eggs or larvae on plants intended for sale. Attempts to introduce new species have been attempted and failed.

Then there are what may be termed phantom butterflies; those whose existence cannot be confirmed or is tentative. The most famous of these being the Arran Brown, *Erbeia ligea*, first recorded as two specimens collected on that island in 1804 amid a large haul of Scotch Argus. Apart from a couple of other verified specimens, that is the limit to its known existence in Britain. Ruling out fraud, it may be that this species which has a wide range across Europe was on its last legs here. And then there is the Welsh Apollo Butterfly, *Parnassius ystwythii*.

The Apollo butterfly is widespread across mountainous parts of Europe in a bewildering array of sub-species and forms. It likes cold winters and warm summers, and high open ground without trees or even scrub. The occasional sighting in Britain has been put down to rare vagrants blown off course, or accidental importation of eggs or larvae on *Sedums* and *Saxifraga*; but is that the case? Victorian butterfly collectors roamed the British countryside catching whatever they could and amassing vast collections. Many of these inevitably fell prey to tick or accidental damage, and it was in these there were said to be a few examples of what were termed Welsh Whites, identified by their red spots. This can only apply to butterflies such as the Apollo. These came too late to be included in Sowerby's *British Miscellany*, but one was alleged to have been illustrated in a page said to have been excluded from Stevens' *Illustrations of British Entomology* from 1837. George Borrow's notebook written during his Welsh travels refer to "a flittering of exceeding beauty I experienced along that road (he was heading for Tregaron at the time); the red dragon came alive to me that day". This quote is significant for it is the red dragon that sets the Welsh Apollo apart from its continental cousins.

The Apollos are largish white butterflies with dark spots on the fore wings and notable red spots on the hind wings. These wings wonderfully are shiny and semi-transparent giving the butterfly a somewhat ethereal appearance. The larger red spot on the Welsh Apollo has been likened to resembling the red Welsh dragon in shape. What is more, while the forewings remain white, the hind wings are of a distinct greenish hue caused by the dappling of that colour on the underside. This had led some to claim that this butterfly is thus the inspiration for the Welsh flag. Others dismiss this as coincidence or imagination. One wild claim, by the Welsh

Cryptozoological Society no less, was that it had evolved to mimic the Welsh flag! Its Latin name is not official, as not one specimen has been retained for scientific description, yet it has stuck. One may presume its species name came from the valley of that name, but in fact it was named after Meibion Ystwyth of Ystbytty Ystwyth, who grew market vegetables in his small holding. The Victorian naturalists heard him cursing "the bloody white butterfleas" and assumed here meant the red spots on the wings of the Welsh Apollo, instead of those regular butterflies whose caterpillars have a taste for cabbages.

All sightings or records have come from beyond the upper reaches of Afon Ystwyth, in the ironically named 'Welsh Desert', a large relatively flattish, treeless and boggy area in the West Welsh hinterland, where Wellington boots or waders are often needed to keep the feet and legs dry. It is for this reason we know so little about the Welsh Apollo. There are a few illustrations available, the earliest from *Fauna Cambriensis* published in 1854. Here it is shown with its alleged larval food plant, the Corgi Violet, a local species resembling the common Dog Violet, but growing much closer to the ground. Other illustrations exist, but are believed to be based on that of 1854, and written descriptions, rather than actual specimens or first hand sightings.

So why am I telling you all this? Some publicity Cinderella stamps appeared last year showing the Welsh Apollo, and were issued by Parnassius yswythii - Diogelu Rhywogaeth Ucheldir (PYDRU), Parnassius yswythii - Protect Highland Species. This group claims to have located a small breeding colony of the butterfly, but are keeping its location a really big secret. They have backed up their claims by publishing a photograph of an adult feeding on a thistle. Their aim is to ensure the colony survives and expands. Patches of moorland will be seeded with the larval food plant allowing the establishment of more colonies.

These stamps show both the historical illustrations of the species, the published photograph, and another highlighting it as the only indigenous Welsh butterfly. Though they have a nominal £1 value, when I obtained these I was told that that was optional, and I was welcome to have some stamps in order to spread the word. Not only do they need to give the Apollos a helping hand, but also need local support for anything that may threaten the colony's existence. Additionally they want this butterfly to not only be scientifically recognised, but also as a distinct species. Good luck folks!