

St Mark's Fly

Bibio marci

The largest and most distinctive and conspicuous of the bibionid flies. They have hairy black bodies, and clear wings with a brown front margin (wingspan about 20mm). The males fly slowly above vegetation in loose swarms, settling readily on flowers, leaves or posts.

Habitat Many rough unimproved habitats, especially scrub, hedgerows and woodland edges. Larvae mostly live in the soil.

Status and distribution Widespread and common throughout.

Season 4–5 (St Mark's Day is 25 April).

Similar species

B. hortulanus is less hairy, more slender, and reddish-brown. Widespread and common.

Soldier-fly

Stratiomys chameleon

The English name refers to the whole family (Stratiomyidae), but others are less conspicuous. This species is one of the largest (wingspan 20–23mm) with a broad abdomen boldly marked black and yellow. Soldier-flies resemble some hoverflies (see p.216), but have longer antennae and more flattened bodies, and hold their wings rather stiffly over the bodies, with wing-edges parallel.

Habitat Fens and marshes, especially with open water. Larvae are aquatic though some species emerge and travel some distance on land before pupating.

Status and distribution Local and southern in UK. More frequent and widespread on the Continent.

Season 5–9.

Similar species

S. potamida is similar in size, but has unbroken narrower yellow bands across the abdomen; similar habitats and distribution. *Odontomyia ornata* is slightly smaller, with the markings deeper yellow, and antennae not bent in the middle (as they are in *Stratiomys* species). Widespread but local in damp places.

Snipe-fly

Rhagio scolopacea

Distinctive fly, with a wingspan of 20–24mm. They have long narrow abdomens, marked with yellow and black, though this is not a very noticeable characteristic in the field. This species has wings with brownish marbling. They usually rest head-down on posts or other support, making quick darting flights.

Habitat Damp grassy and wooded places.

Status and distribution Widespread and moderately common throughout.

Season 5–8.

Similar species

There are several other slightly smaller species.

R. tringaria is similar but has clear unmarked wings. Widespread but local.

Horse-flies, Family Tabanidae

Robust flies, usually with large, brightly coloured iridescent eyes; females are blood-suckers, and have powerful blade-like mouthparts for piercing skin.

Horse-fly

Tabanus sudeticus

A large and fearsome-looking horse-fly, with a wingspan of 50–60mm. The body is broad, brown with dull yellow markings, including triangles down the centre line; wings clear except for the front margin.

Habitat Damp pastures, especially near woodland.

Status and distribution Widespread but local and mainly western in the UK; more generally distributed on the Continent.

Season 6–8.

Similar species

T. bovinus is smaller, paler brown in colour, with paler, narrower abdominal triangles. Similar habitats, especially frequent near rivers and ditches; mainly southern in the UK.

T. bromius is smaller again, dull greyish in colour, though variable. Frequent in damp pastures, mainly southern in the UK.



St Mark's Fly



Soldier-fly, *Stratiomys chameleon*



Snipe-fly



Horse-fly, *Tabanus sudeticus*

Cleg

Haematopota pluvialis

A familiar insect, which settles on the skin all too quietly (the larger horse-flies are clearly audible!). Wingspan about 20mm; body dull greyish-brown, with mottled wings. The females are very adept at finding people (or other animals) to bite.

Habitat Damp grassy places, woodland clearings, and even dry grassland.

Status and distribution Widespread and common throughout.

Season 5–9.

Similar species

H. crassicornis differs in having darker wings and wholly black antennae. More frequent in upland areas, in similar habitats.

Chrysops relictus

Members of this genus of horse-flies alight with their wings held out at an angle forming a triangle, and are often not recognized as horse-flies until they bite! Wingspan 20–24mm. Body dark with yellow patches; wings marbled with brown.

Habitat Open woodland, grassy clearings, usually near water.

Status and distribution Rather uncommon in the UK except in the New Forest; widespread but local on the Continent.

Season 5–9.

Similar species

C. caecutiens has an 'X'-shaped mark on the abdomen; males have almost black abdomens. Widespread and moderately common. There are several other very similar species of *Chrysops*, hard to separate in the field.

C. pictus is similar, but has a paler abdomen with dark markings and marbled wings. Uncommon, mainly southern.

Bee-fly

Bombylius major

A distinctive fly, resembling a small furry bumble bee, but with a long straight proboscis at the front. Wingspan about 20mm. Wings have dark markings towards the front edges. The females lay eggs close to the nests of mining bees, and the larvae enter and parasitize the bee larvae. Adults feed at flowers, hovering in front of them.

Habitat Flowery, warm, unspoilt places, such as woodland rides.

Status and distribution Common in Britain, rarer to the north; widespread on the Continent.

Season 3–6.

Similar species

There are about 15 other *Bombylius* species in the area, mostly smaller and/or less common.

Thyridanthrax fenestratus

A medium-sized fly, with a wingspan of about 12–14mm. Distinctive by the conspicuous dark marbling which clouds the lower half of the wings. They are related to bee-flies, and behave similarly, but have a short retractable proboscis.

Habitat Dry flowery places, especially on sandy soils.

Status and distribution Local and southern in the UK; more widespread in Europe, though not common.

Season 6–8.

Similar species

* *Anthrax anthrax* is more bulky, darker-looking, and with about three-quarters of the wing area dark. Local in dry heathy places.

* *Villa hottentotus* is slightly larger than *Thyridanthrax*, but has wings clear except for the front margin. Like a less furry bee-fly with a short proboscis. Widespread and frequent on the Continent.

V. modesta is darker and less furry still. Local on dunes and heaths.



Chrysops relictus



Chrysops caecutiens



Chrysops pictus



Bee-fly

Thyridanthrax fenestratus



Robber-flies, Family Asilidae

Powerfully built predatory flies, usually very bristly, with dagger-like mouthparts. The Empid Flies (Empidae) are similar in habits, but less robust, and usually rest with the abdomen more raised.

Asilus crabroniformis

A very large and impressive fly, with a body length of up to 30mm, and powerfully built. Body black and yellow, face heavily bearded. Waits on a log or other perch, and attacks prey from there. It can deal with almost any size of insect, including wasps. Larvae feed in dung.

Habitat Open flowery places such as downs, heaths and warm woodland glades.
Status and distribution Very local and strongly southern in UK; more widespread on the Continent.

Season 7–10.

Laphria flava

Another large and robust robber-fly, with a body length of up to 25mm. The body is broad, hairy and yellowish-brown. The flies rest on logs in sunny clearings, attacking passing insects of all types.

Habitat Woodland clearings, especially in coniferous woods.

Status and distribution Very rare in UK, in Caledonian pinewoods only; widespread throughout the Continent, though local.

Season 6–9.

Similar species

L. gilva is slightly smaller and less furry. Local in deciduous woodland, rare in UK.

L. marginata is smaller and less robust than *L. flava*, with yellowish bristly hairs on the legs. Local in deciduous woodland.

Machimus atricapillus

A smaller robber-fly, though still with the fierce predatory appearance of the group.

Habitat Chalk and limestone grassland and scrub.

Status and distribution Local in southern UK, more widespread on the Continent.

Season 6–8.

Similar species

Epitriptus cingulatus is slightly smaller, with a body length of 11–12mm (compared to 12–15mm in *Machimus*), making it the smallest robber-fly in the area. It is paler, more yellowish, than *Machimus*, with pale hairs on the forehead (all black in the above species). Widespread and common in rough grassy and heathy places, throughout. On the wing through June and July.

Pamponerus germanicus

A medium-sized robber-fly with a body length of about 18mm. Wings with brown marbling, legs partly orange or yellow.

Habitat Most frequent in sand-dunes and other dry coastal habitats.

Status and distribution Local throughout southern UK; widespread but local on the Continent.

Season 6–8.

Dioctria rufipes

A relatively small robber-fly; body length about 10mm. Rests on vegetation, and preys on passing Ichneumonids and other insects, especially Hymenopterans.

Habitat Rough flowery places of various sorts.

Status and distribution Widespread and common almost throughout.

Season 5–8.

Similar species

D. oelandica is larger, to 15mm, and differs in having darkened wings with a greenish-purple sheen. It is a local species of wood margins and scrub, confined to southern Britain; more widespread on the Continent.



Asilus crabroniformis



Lophria marginata, mating



Laphria flava



Machimus atricapillus
Pamponerus germanicus



Dioctria rufipes, with prey

Empis tessellata

The most frequent and noticeable of the empid flies, which resemble robber-flies but are more slightly built and have a downward-pointing proboscis. This species has a body length of about 12mm, brownish wings, and a rather hairy body. Like most empids, it is predatory on insects but also feeds on nectar.

Habitat A wide variety of flowery habitats such as wood borders, scrub, woodland rides.

Status and distribution Widespread and frequent throughout.

Season 5-8.

Similar species

E. stercorea is similar in size and habits, but has a yellowish body with a black stripe, and clearer wings. Widespread throughout. *Hilara maura* is dark-bodied, slightly smaller; the males have enlarged front tarsi, which are quite conspicuous. Frequent throughout, particularly near water.

Poecilobothrus nobilitatus

Though very small, with a wingspan of 12-14mm, this is an attractive and quite conspicuous little fly. Large numbers congregate on mud and around water; both sexes have mottled brown wings, but males have white tips, and they constantly court females or fight other males. Body metallic greenish.

Habitat Around still and slow-moving water-bodies.

Status and distribution Very common in S Britain, less common northwards; widespread and common on the Continent.

Season 5-9.

Similar species

There are many other flies in this group (the Long-headed Flies *Dolichopodidae*), though none are as easily identifiable as this species.

Hoverflies, Family Syrphidae

Although there are several hundred species in this important group, many are identifiable from superficial examination, thanks to their bright colours in reasonably stable patterns. They are attractive, harmless insects, sharing the habit of hovering readily then darting. All feed at flowers, on nectar or pollen particularly favouring the flowers of the Umbelliferae such as Hogweed or Angelica. Some mimic bees and wasps. The larvae vary considerably in form and life-style, many, such as *Episyrphus balteatus* are active carnivores, feeding especially on aphids. Other feeding habits include dung-feeding, wood-feeding and preying upon aquatic larvae. Hoverflies are covered more fully here than most other groups of flies because of their popularity with naturalists and relative ease of identification (pp.216-32).

Platycheirus podagratus

A smallish hoverfly, with a wingspan of about 12-15mm. One of a group of rather similar hoverflies with narrow bodies, black and yellow markings and a black stripe down the back.

Habitat Bogs, moorland and acid wet places.

Status and distribution Frequent in N Britain, widespread though local on the Continent, mainly in hilly areas.

Season 5-7.

Similar species

P. clypeatus is slightly more robust, with smaller yellow spots at the base of the abdomen; widespread and common, especially in the south.



Empis tessellata



Poecilobothrus nobilitatus



Platycheirus podagratus

Chrysotoxum bicinctum

An attractive and distinctive hoverfly, with a wingspan of about 25mm. The body is black, with 2 distinctive bands of yellow (hence the Latin name *bicinctum*) and 2 tiny yellow spots between them. The antennae are relatively long, and straight.

Habitat Grassland and scrub, especially on calcareous soils.

Status and distribution Widespread, locally common in the south, rarer in the north in UK; widespread and frequent on the Continent.

Season 5–9.

Chrysotoxum festivum

Slightly larger than *C. bicinctum*, but with similar antennae. Body black, with 3 interrupted yellow bands. Thorax black, with yellow edges.

Habitat Sheltered flowery places, such as woodland edges and scrub.

Status and distribution Widespread and moderately common northwards to S Scotland; throughout N Europe.

Season 6–10.

Similar species

C. vernale is very similar in size and markings, but the yellow bars are more evenly curved, not kinked. Rare in SW England only; more frequent, though southern, on the Continent.

Dasysyrphus tricinctus

A medium-sized hoverfly, with a wingspan of about 22mm. Thorax black, unmarked; abdomen black, rather diamond-shaped, with 3 yellow rings, the central one largest and usually uninterrupted, the other 2 thin and broken.

Habitat Woodland rides and margins.

Status and distribution Local and mainly southern in the UK. More widespread on the Continent.

Season 4–9.

Similar species

D. albostrigatus has broader, curved yellow stripes, with the lowest one unbroken. Widespread through most of the UK and N Europe.

D. lunulatus has hooked yellow lunules rather than bars. Mainly northern in the UK, especially in woods. Widespread on the Continent.

Didea fasciata

A small to medium hoverfly, with a wingspan of about 20mm. Antennae shorter than in the above species. Abdomen black, with 1 interrupted yellow stripe and 2 complete ones.

Habitat Mainly in and around old woodland, but moving into flowery habitats (including gardens) to feed at flowers.

Status and distribution Widespread throughout, but very local in the UK, more frequent in wooded parts of the Continent.

Season 5–10.

Similar species

D. intermedia is very similar and hard to separate; it is slightly smaller, and has all-black halteres (part yellow in *D. fasciata*). Widespread but local, probably under-recorded.

Doros conopseus

A large distinctive species, with a wingspan of over 30mm. Body narrow, black with a 'waisted' appearance, a thin yellow band near the waist, and brown front margins to the wings.

Habitat Woodland edges and glades, or sheltered grassland.

Status and distribution Rare and local in Britain, confined to England; more widespread on the Continent.

Season 6–8.

Similar species

No other hoverfly resembles it, but it is similar to some solitary wasps, or conopid flies (see p.232).



Chrysotoxum bicinctum



Dasysyrphus tricinctus



Didea fasciata



Chrysotoxum festivum



Doros conopseus